

Carless, D. (2005). Prospects for the Implementation of Assessment for Learning. *Assessment in Education*, v12 n1, p39-54.

Main points made in the article

1. Hong Kong has ongoing attempts to reform teaching, learning and assessment through meta-cognitive approach – ‘Learning to Learn’. Of all reforms that have been attempted, assessment reform has been more strongly resisted than any of others.
2. Target-Oriented Curriculum (TOC) was a form of outcome-based education which turned out a failure because of:
 - i) the teachers’ resistance;
 - ii) the incorrectly explained and/or interpreted focus;
 - iii) the parents’ opposition; and
 - iv) the deep-rooted examination culture in Hong Kong which still produces quite positive results.
3. The Government again pushed a reform on Assessment – Assessment for Learning (AfL). For committing to the reform, a list of actions has been taken:
 - i) Re-branding of Hong Kong Examinations Authority to Hong Kong Examinations & Assessment Authority which highlights the new role of the authority.
 - ii) Reduction of external tests and examinations in primary and secondary education.
 - iii) Development of Basic Competence Assessments.
 - iv) Standardizing year of education in secondary school and university.
4. AfL is actually the Formative Assessment under TOC. The Government pours old wine into new bottles in the hope that a new label may distract from the effectiveness or unpopularity of the policy.

My comments on or reactions to the articles

By and large, I agree with the author’s point of view on the failure of TOC, and AfL

is of the Formative Assessment under TOC. However, I question if an unsuccessful reform would always be a failure. I consider the factors causing the failure can actually be resolved. AfL is proved effective in a number of countries, particularly in the UK and Australia. As Hong Kong was a colony of England, from where our education system was inherited, I take the successful implementation of AfL in the UK as a positive sign for the prospect of the reform in Hong Kong. It is obvious that examination culture is deep-rooted in Hong Kong and it creates positive results, but I question whether students learning under this system learn the whole subject or merely become skilled in passing examinations. As a result of tests and examinations, students may be high in score but low in knowledge and ability. I am of the firm believed that passing examinations and knowing the subject fully are often two very different things. Therefore, I believe both formative and summative assessments should be adopted for impartially assessing the students' learning and performance.

The implications for classroom/ school practice

Alteration of Teaching Approach in School

Traditionally, the teaching approach in Hong Kong is teacher-controlled style in which the teachers tend to focus on content. They feel responsible for providing and controlling the flow of the content and the students are expected to receive the content which may not be digested. The main purpose of teaching and learning is tailored to enable students to cope with examinations. Under this teaching style, relationship building is not a concern between teachers and students or among students. Students' participation in class is not usually required, but their quiet presence in the class is appreciated which demonstrates the typical one-way communication. Students learn the content by rote without truly absorbing the knowledge, and this can result in their achieving a high score but not necessary knowing the whole subject.

In view of the shortcomings of the teacher-controlled approach, teaching should focus more on the students, placing them in the centre of learning. The effective methods include, but are not limited to:

i) Active Learning

Students formulate questions, discuss, brainstorm, answer questions and solve problems during class.

ii) Cooperative Learning

Students work in groups or teams on projects or solving problems under circumstances that ensure both interdependent and individual accountability.

iii) Inductive Teaching and Learning

Students are presented with challenges. They then learn the course material and/or do research on their own in the context of addressing the challenges.

The purpose of those methods is getting the students actively involved in the learning process. Quoted from Benjamin Franklin – ‘Tell me and I Forget. Teach me and I Remember. Involve me and I Learn.’ The last part of the statement is the essence of student-centred learning. However, the chalk-and-talk teaching method can be very effective in certain situations. Therefore, traditional teaching methods should not be eliminated completely.

Combination of both Formative and Summative Assessments

Summative assessment - examination and test - plays a vital role in the Hong Kong education system because it measures what students have learned comparative to the content standards at a particular point in time. It helps to evaluate the effectiveness of programmes. It is relatively easy for schools in terms of assessment, as there are only two examinations in an academic year. It also satisfies the need of the parents with performance goal because the scores and grades on the report cards explain their children’s achievement and failure in subjects and the overall result. Nevertheless, summative assessment creates pressure to students even though they have prepared for the examination. Furthermore, whether the learned content is successfully transformed as knowledge to the students is questionable. The purpose and effort for learning seems solely for examinations.

Formative assessment notifies both teachers and students about the students’ understanding at a point when timely adjustments can be made. It ensures students achieve targeted learning goals within a set timeframe. Instead of merely giving a grade or score at the academic year end, ongoing descriptive feedback is given to students, letting them know what they are doing well and guiding them to complete an assigned task, as well as gaining knowledge from it. It also helps teachers determine

the following steps during the learning process.

Formative classroom instructional strategies which can be used include:

- i) Engaging students in instruction and the learning process via setting criteria and goal and creating clear expectations.
- ii) Walking around the classroom to observe if students need assistance or clarification.
- iii) Using questions to help students to think thoroughly, in order to gain deeper understanding of the topic or issue.
- iv) Adopting self and peer assessment help to create a learning community within a classroom.

Formative assessment is student-involved. If students are not involved in the assessment process, formative assessment is not practised or implemented to its optimal effectiveness.

I believe that formative and summative assessments are complementary to one another: formative assessment is a guiding light during the learning process while summative assessment concludes the overall performance of students. Ideally, both assessments should be adopted at schools, with an adjustment to the level of usage according to the specific needs and the available resources.