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As a prospective teacher in primary schools, how would you go about establishing an “assessment for learning” culture in your classroom?

The purposes of this essay are to review the concepts and definitions of “assessment”. The main three forms of assessment are “formative assessment”, “summative assessment”, and “authentic assessment”. This paper investigates how those assessments can establish an “assessment for learning” culture in the classroom. Some important principles and beliefs in classroom assessment will also be discussed in this paper.

The term “assessment” generally refers to “the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving learning and development” (Paloma and Banta, 1999, p. 4). Most definitions of “assessment” seem to be related to “measurement” and “evaluation” as it is commonly regarded as “summative assessment”. However, the term “assessment” nowadays is primarily used to “modify teaching and learning activities” (Black and Wiliam, 1998) that is called “formative assessment”. While standing in contrast to summative assessment, the purpose of it is to improve quality of student learning by providing feedback and correcting learning problems without grading the students. Formative assessment is important to contribute to a more comprehensive assessment indeed. Teachers need sufficient knowledge of the meaning of “assessment” in order to build relevant pedagogical content knowledge and skill to make adjustments to classroom practice, so it is important to explore the variety of meanings of assessment. The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) defines assessment of student learning as follows:

Assessment of student learning is a participatory, iterative process that:

Provides data/information you need on your students’ learning

Engages you and others in analyzing and using this data/information to confirm and improve teaching and learning

Produces evidence that students are learning the outcomes you intended

Guides you in making educational and institutional improvements

Evaluates whether changes made improve/impact student learning, and documents the learning and your efforts.

(The Higher Learning Commission, 2006)

As a prospective teacher in primary or secondary schools, assessments serve as

important reference for them. According to the Higher Learning Commission (2006), assessment is the data-collection system of gathering information of students' learning progress. The collected data and information on student learning are particularly useful for the beginning teachers. The information provided them an explicit frame of a detailed analysis of a particular level of students' learning needs. On the other hand, the assessment information can also be useful for instructional modifications, teaching practices and professional inquiry. Research has shown that it is teacher, who takes the very crucial and initial role to influence students learning outcomes (Bransford, Darling-Hammond and LePage, 2005; Nye, Konstantanopoulos and Hedges. 2004; Scheerens, Vermeulen and Pelgrum, 1989); however, improving student's learning cannot only rely on teacher alone. Thus, teachers need a broad range of ways of both formal and informal assessments to create reliable assessment information on both daily and annual basis.

“Assessment for learning” culture is that students can continue to learn at productive levels despite of learning frustration” (Stiggins, 2002) in the classroom, teachers have to assure assessment can improve student learning. Several key elements on improving student's learning through assessment have been discussed by Black and Wiliam, including the effectiveness of feedback provided to students, the involvement and engagement of students in their learning, and relevant adjustment of pedagogical practice etc. Therefore, it is also essential to establish the “assessment for learning” culture with student self-assessment.

Student self-assessment has been a crucial element to raise student's achievement and build student ownership of their own learning (Rolheiser and Ross 2001). The increase in student ownership does not indicate the reduction of teachers' responsibility of improving quality of student learning, but the addition of trust between teachers and students (Gipps, 1999). Students need to strive for clarity, accuracy, and significance as reflective step of self assessment in order to build ownership of their learning. For example, in language learning, students may have to write recommendations for improvement with peers in assessing their writing; students may also have to write and ask basic questions in order to give explanation and seek clarification in learning critical listening; students have to help, learn and correct each other's oral speaking in assessing their articulation and pronunciation; last but not least, students may also have to read aloud to peers by explaining the sentence of the reading materials in assessing the level of proficiency of students' critical reading. Student self-assessment and self-regulation focus on the students' ability of understanding both learning objectives and criteria, reflecting the learning

process, and acting on feedbacks given by teachers and peers. Effective student self assessment occurs because students have “greater awareness and understanding of himself or herself as a learner.” (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 3). On the other hand, it also serves as a growth continuum for teacher reflection as teacher may provide comprehensive feedback that is closely linked to the stated criteria to students to justify their self-assessment

However, the dominance of scoring tests system in classroom assessment has shaped the beliefs of students: assessments are not isomorphic with student’s learning and assessments are unfair and inaccurate. Nowadays, students see assessments as “guessing games” which are not rewarding and not motivating because the knowledge learnt in the class is so different from the knowledge emphasized on the examination. On the other hand, teachers concern so much the confidentiality and security of the exam content. This also creates the mistrust between teachers and students (Guskey, 2000a). For the principles of fairness, students see examinations as a “down-to-luck piece of work” as they often find frustration and hopelessness that they have no influence on the results even they have strived for improvement. The reason of this perception is that teachers only use particular type of assessment for assessing students. In addition, students may consider the examination checked only the quality of student’s writing as unfair evaluation of learning. The two shaped beliefs indicate the adoption of diverse assessment methods and approaches, and the provision of explicit assessment criteria, more importantly, teacher have to bear in mind that assessment should be an integral part of student learning. In today’s education it is necessary, for teachers to ensure the principle of fairness and the transparency of classroom assessments in order to establish the “assessment for learning” culture.

To ensure effect classroom assessment, teachers need to provide explicit criteria and maximize opportunities to learning practice in the classroom. Teachers may use rubrics to provide clear description and illustration of different levels of performance. Then, teachers may need to ensure assessments are formative enough to ensure students can apply the required knowledge, skills and understanding in the rubrics that finally can help students to improve their overall performance. The term *transparency* (Frederiksen and Collins , 1989) is particularly important to ensure the understanding of the criteria by which the assignment or examination that will be assessed. Teachers perhaps may use samples of student work and student-friendly language when using the rubrics as guides because rubrics provides students background information, developmental stages about a familiar topic, it becomes

more important when students have a relatively complex assignment such as year-project, drama performance or research paper. Thus, Creighton confirms the importance of rubrics:

Without careful instruction, rubrics can become the students' destination rather than a road map for helping them reach that destination. Rubrics are tools designed to provide constructive feedback for students through self-, peer, or teacher assessment in order to further develop skills or knowledge.

(Creighton, 2000, p. 38)

For the principle of fairness, teachers have to adopt a broader range of assessment tools to assess student's knowledge, skills and understanding. To ensure fairness, it is necessary for teachers to provide opportunities for student's improvement; and to allow students for demonstrating their learnt knowledge and skill across a range on contexts by using a diversification of assessment methods. For instance, one of the increased use of assessment types is authentic assessment as it requires students' practical knowledge, problem-solving skills, social skills, and attitudes that are required in society. The alternative assessment tools include role play and drama, student portfolios, reflective journal, group-based work, and concept maps (Morries, 2001). According to Sambell *et al.*, "Alternative assessment was fair because it was perceived as rewarding those who consistently make the effort to learn rather than those who rely on cramming or a last-minute effort." (1997, p. 362). However, teachers have to note that students will also be graded in authentic assessment as summative assessment, but only focused on deeper understanding and specific skills, so formative assessment should be carried out to facilitate student learning with provision of corrective and immediate feedback on students' strengths and weaknesses. Under a balanced assessment program, student learning needs can be identified in a relatively easy way. Therefore, a balance of formative and summative assessment can maximize students' learning outcomes.

Modifying the teaching practice, demonstrating an explicit criteria and selecting a balanced assessment program are important but not sufficient to ensure the "assessment for learning" culture will be established. The major concern here will be the general perception of the social meaning of evaluation. The interpretation of its meaning is over simplistic. Many students perceived assessment and evaluation as negative because they do not contribute to effective student learning in long term. The perception itself has a strong influence on student learning outcome that teachers should pay attention on (Entwistle, 1991).

In conclusion, teachers have to make assessment more transparent, more informative, and more isomorphic with student's learning, but more importantly, it is to change the social meaning of assessment so that teachers, students and parents may treat assessment as a tool for learning improvement rather than learning evaluation. Besides, the use of assessment information, the adoption of diverse assessment methods and approaches, the provision of explicit criteria, and the adoption of student self-assessment are all key elements to ensure the principle of fairness and establish "assessment for learning" culture in classroom. In a more meaningful way, the "assessment for learning" culture enables students to learn with independence, reflection, and initiative. Therefore, the culture helps contribute to the idea of lifelong learning of students. (1657 words)

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