**EDITORIAL**

**Assessment for Learning Revisited: an Asia-Pacific perspective**

In March of this year the Third International Conference on Assessment for Learning was held in Dunedin, New Zealand. Colleagues from Australia (4), Canada (6), Europe (5), New Zealand (7), United Kingdom (5) and the United States of America (4) met to advance the understanding and practices of assessment for learning at all levels of education. An important outcome of this meeting was a position paper on 'Assessment for Learning' (AfL) that has been reproduced with permission in this editorial because of its significance to a recurrent theme of the majority of the articles published in this special Asia-Pacific issue of the journal. The text of this statement is set out in italics below.

*'Assessment for Learning' and 'formative assessment' are phrases that are widely used in educational discourse not only in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Europe but also in Asian Pacific countries including New Zealand and Australia. A number of definitions of Assessment for Learning prevail in these contexts[i]. Some of these definitions originated from members of the two earlier 'Assessment for Learning' conferences. "However, the ways in which the words [of these definitions] are interpreted and made manifest in educational policy and practice often reveal misunderstanding of the principles, and distortion of the practices, that the original ideals sought to promote. Some of these misunderstandings and challenges derive from residual ambiguity in the definitions. Others have stemmed from a desire to be seen to be embracing the concept – but in reality implementing a set of practices that are mechanical or superficial without the teacher's, and, most importantly, the students', active engagement with learning as the focal point. While observing the letter of AfL, this does violence to its spirit. Yet others have arisen from deliberate appropriation, for political ends, of principles that have won significant support from educators.*
*For example, 'deciding where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there', has sometimes been (mis)interpreted as an exhortation to teachers to (summatively) test their students frequently to assess the levels they attain on prescribed national/state scales in order to fix their failings and target the next level. In this scenario, scores, which are intended to be indicators of, or proxies for, learning, become the goals themselves. Real and sustained learning is sacrificed to performance on a test.*

*In contrast, the primary aim of Assessment for Learning (AFL) is to contribute to learning itself. This follows from the logic that when true learning has occurred, it will manifest itself in performance. The converse does not hold: mere performance on a test does not necessarily mean that learning has occurred. Learners can be taught how to score well on tests without much underlying learning.*

*Assessment for Learning is the process of identifying aspects of learning as it is developing, using whatever informal and formal processes best help that identification, primarily so that learning itself can be enhanced. This focuses directly on the learner's developing capabilities, while these are in the process of being developed. Assessment for learning seeks out, analyses and reflects on information from students themselves, teachers and the learner's peers as it is expressed in dialogue, learner responses to tasks and questions, and observation. Assessment for learning is part of everyday teaching, in*

*everyday classrooms. A great deal of it occurs in real time, but some of it is derived through more formal assessment events or episodes. What is distinctive about assessment for learning is not the form of the information or the circumstances in which it is generated, but the positive effect it has for the learner. Properly embedded into teaching-learning contexts, assessment for learning sets learners up for wide, lifelong learning.*

*These ideas are summed up in a short second-generation definition of Assessment for Learning generated by the Conference in March 2009. This is intended to make clear the central focus on learning by students. The definition is followed by some elaboration of it.*

*Definition*

**Assessment for Learning is part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning.**

*Elaboration*

1. *'everyday practice' – this refers to teaching and learning, pedagogy and instruction (different terms are used in different regions of the world but the emphasis is on the interactive, dialogic, contingent relationships of teaching and learning).*
2. *'by students, teachers and peers' – students are deliberately listed first because only learners can learn. Assessment for learning should be student centred. All AFL practices carried out by teachers (such as giving feedback, clarifying criteria, rich questioning) can eventually be 'given away' to students so that they take on these practices to help themselves, and one another, become autonomous learners. This should be a prime objective.*
3. *'seeks, reflects upon and responds to' – these words emphasise the nature of AFL as an enquiry process involving the active search for evidence of capability and understanding, making sense of such evidence, and exercising judgement for wise decision-making about next steps for students and teachers.*
4. *'information from dialogue, demonstration and observation' – verbal (oral and written) and non-verbal behaviours during both planned and unplanned events can be sources of evidence. Observation of these during on-going teaching and learning activity is an important basis for AFL. Special assessment tasks and tests can be used formatively but are not essential; there is a risk of them becoming frequent mini-summative assessments. Everyday learning tasks and activities, as well as routine observation and dialogue are equally, if not more, appropriate for the formative purpose.*
5. *'in ways that enhance ongoing learning' – Sources of evidence are formative if, and only if, students and teachers <u>use</u> the information they provide to enhance learning. Providing students with the help they need to know what to do next is vital; it is not sufficient to tell them only that they need to do better. However, such help does not need to provide a complete solution. Research suggests that what works best is an indication of how to improve, so that students engage in mindful problem solving." (Third Assessment for Learning Conference, 2009)*

In the Asia-Pacific Region, the interest in assessment for learning has grown in recent years. For example, there has been a particular interest in the positive effect of 'Assessment for Learning' on the learner. This is the case in Singapore where the government recently announced the recommendations of the Primary Education Review and Implementation (PERI) Committee (April, 2009) that called for the end to exams for Primary 1 and 2 and the introduction of holistic assessment to support learning. It was proposed that in these early years, too much emphasis on semestral examinations might not be the best way to build pupils' confidence and desire to learn, a better approach it was suggested might be to use assessment to support and improve learning. What is worrisome is that in this recommendation there is also reference to the use of "'bite-sized' modes of assessment, such as topical tests, to provide regular feedback on pupils' learning to parents" (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2009, 2). There is a possibility that this could lead to the issue discussed earlier of performance- orientated learning to the detriment of sustained and real learning.

Anne Hume and Richard Coll report on some unintended consequences of assessment change at policy level in their article "Assessment of learning, for learning, and as learning: New Zealand case studies". Specifically, they found that AfL had been (mis)interpreted and made manifest in practice by some teachers who were implementing a narrow interpretation of formative assessment in classrooms using techniques that focus on assessment procedures and practices to assure students comply with criteria and achieve awards for external qualifications. They studied two secondary schools where students were learning how to perform science investigations under direction. This study was particularly focused on how the curriculum standard of a New Zealand national-standards based qualification was used in the context of classroom-based assessment. A key finding was the instrumental approach of formative assessment that resulted in restricted and undesirable practice. These authors align their argument with that of Torrance (2007) and the notion that 'assessment for learning has become *assessment as learning'*. They found evidence that teachers' strategies for formative assessment had resulted in 'procedural compliance' rather than sustained learning or as they express this by citing Sadler (2007, p. 388) assessment that 'masquerades as, or substitutes for learning itself'. Some strategies to redress these limitations were identified.

Seeking to expand pedagogy and student outcomes beyond a focus on factual and rote knowledge Kim Koh and Allan Luke in their article "Authentic and conventional assessment in Singapore Schools: An empirical study of teacher assignments and student work**"** report on a study that examined the quality of teacher assignments and student work in Singapore. They found that teacher professional development in authentic intellectual assessment task design can contribute to the improvement of student learning and performance. Two sets of criteria and scoring rubrics were used in the training of expert teachers to judge the quality of teacher assignments and student work. The teachers engaged in rigorous training to achieve high inter-rater reliability of scoring. Samples of student work and teacher assignments were collected in English, Social Studies, Mathematics and Science from a random stratified sample of 30 elementary schools and 29 high schools. Where teachers set more intellectually demanding tasks, students were more likely to generate work or artifacts judged to be of higher quality.

The grammar-translation method of teaching English that is popular with most of the teachers and students in Taiwan has trained students to be good at memorising vocabulary and grammatical rules for tests but has led them to lack both creativity and

communicative competence.  Yau Tsai and Chia-Hsiu Tsou  in their article "Standardised English Language Proficiency tests as the graduation benchmark: Students' perspectives on their application in higher education" recommend that English Language Proficiency (ELP) Tests should become an optional assessment tool allowing more students to take them voluntarily for graduation.  Their study focused on the views of undergraduate students in Taiwan.  One of their key assumptions is that assessment includes activities, procedures that encourage students' active involvement in reflection, peer feedback and self-evaluation.  The importance of assessment of tasks in real-life contexts or authentic tasks is also acknowledged.  This study found that the ELP tests were inadequate in their capacity to reflect what is taught and learnt in foreign language classrooms.  They suggest that the continued use of ELP tests is likely to impact on English teaching towards a more test-driven orientation.  They conclude that the adoption of standardised ELP tests should be determined, on the basis of the individual student's English competence and learning situation, and that implementation should be on the basis of needs analysis and the curriculum-planning context.

Wai-Yin Poon, Carmel McNaught, Paul Lam and Hoi-Shan Kwan in "Improving assessment methods in university science education with negotiated self- and peer-assessment" explore how the use of self- and peer-assessment can support learning at university level to enable students to better understand their own strengths and weaknesses.  This study was conducted in Hong Kong and as these authors acknowledge these assessment practices are uncommon in this context.  A three-stage assessment strategy was employed in three science courses and involved student engagement in the development of criteria for assessment, self-assessment and peer-assessment.  While these researchers found that in this context there were challenges in implementing such strategies they concluded that students perceived these changes to assessment favourably if they were appropriately framed and implemented.

The final article in this issue again deals with a tension between what teachers feel is best for students compared with what is deemed necessary for accountability purposes.  Lois Harris and Gavin Brown explore the complexity of teachers' conceptions of assessment.  These researchers used a phenomenographic approach to examine the various purposes ascribed to assessment by a sample of 26 New Zealand teachers.  The purposes of compliance, external reporting, reporting to parents, extrinsically motivating students, organising group instruction, teacher use for individualising learning, and joint teacher-student use for individualising learning were discussed.  It was concluded that teachers have complex conceptions of assessment and use different forms of assessment to achieve different purposes.  The important influence of cultural, social and/or political contexts again impacted considerably on these teachers' assessment practice.  It was apparent that these teachers needed to consider various stakeholders' interests and demands when selecting assessments to best support students' learning.

Malaysia is a country where high-stakes examinations occur at the end of each level of schooling, with four external centrally devised examinations from primary through to post-secondary education. Ong Saw Lan in her assessment profile of Malaysia emphasises the dominance of these examinations but also raises the issue of growing dissatisfaction over some of the shortcomings.  There is again mention of attempts to introduce assessment for learning with more recognition of school-based assessment and a reduction of the number of subjects examined centrally.  It is acknowledged that the

success of the new assessment will be dependent on the efforts and support of the Malaysian Examination Syndicate and the Malaysian Ministry of Education for it is recognised that greater responsibility for assessment to teachers will require much professional development and support.

Finally, a book aimed at teachers in higher education written by David Carless and colleagues is entitled: *How assessment supports learning: Learning-oriented assessment in action* and is reviewed by Stephen Dobson. This book as claimed by the reviewer demonstrates *how* assessment for learning can be realised in 'a plural and multi-faceted manner'. The authors share a fundamental belief that there has been a shift in 'assessment thinking from a belief that assessment is just about measuring student performance to one that recognises that assessment is a powerful influence on learning and must be judged in terms of its influence'.

This brings this editorial back to the second-generation definition of Assessment for Learning and the importance of assessment to *'enhance ongoing learning'*. Given the current context of assessment reform in the Asia-Pacific region it is useful to be reminded of the fundamental principles of assessment design 'fitness for purpose' and the mode of assessment should impact positively on teaching and learning (Gipps, 1994).

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Torrance, H. (2007) Assessment as learning? How the use of explicit learning objectives, assessment criteria and feedback in post-secondary education and training can come to dominate learning. *Assessment in Education* 14, no. 3: 283-294.

i *For example:*

1. *'Assessment for Learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there'. In Assessment Reform Group (2002)Assessment is for Learning: 10 principles. Downloadable from http://www.assessment-reform-group.org*

2. *'Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited'. In Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (2009) Developing the theory of formative assessment, Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability (in press).*

3. *'Formative assessment is a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students' achievement of intended instructional outcomes.' State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards, Council of Chief State School Officers, USA . (Source: J.Popham (2008) Transformative Assessment, Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development)*

4. *'Formative assessment is a planned process in which assessment-elicited evidence of students' status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures or by students to adjust their current learning tactics.' In J.Popham (2008)Transformative Assessment, Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.*