

Preface

There is a tide in the affairs of men.
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

from Julius Caesar, by William Shakespeare

The tide is turning for assessment. After several thousand years, the Confucian heritage of competitive examinations in Asia is being challenged by the need for assessment approaches that meet today's educational imperatives. After many decades of a testing culture in the United States centered on comparing students' scores, the tide is turning in favor of learning-oriented assessment. Around the world, the relatively novel idea that the primary goal of assessment might be to encourage learning is rapidly becoming a flood—inundating teachers and students, policy makers and teacher-trainers with new enthusiasms, new insights and new challenges about ways of using assessment designed to promote, rather than measure, student learning. Building on the relatively well-established foundations of 'formative assessment', the tidal wave of interest in 'assessment for learning' (AfL) has become a global phenomenon. The clear message of empirical research that, used skilfully, such assessment can significantly enhance student learning and performance, has elevated AfL into something of a 'holy grail' for governments desperate to raise student achievement across the board in an increasingly competitive world. In their contribution to this book, for example, Earl and Timperley (Chapter 20) quote powerful research evidence from an earlier study by Popham (2011, p. 25):

Recent reviews of more than 4,000 research investigations show clearly that when [formative assessment] is well implemented in the classroom, it can essentially double the speed of student learning...it is clear that the process works, it can produce whopping gains in students' achievement, and it is sufficiently robust so that different teachers can use it in diverse ways, yet still get great results with their students.

Tides are powerful and difficult to control; their impact can be unpredictable as they re-shape the landscape and re-direct existing streams. If 20 years ago no-one could

have imagined quite how powerful this latest stream of assessment thinking would be, then, no-one today can properly predict where it will take us in 20 years' time. One thing we can be sure of, however, as Shakespeare suggested, is unless we take advantage of this tide while it is, as now, at the flood, unless we 'take the current when it serves', we will 'lose our ventures' and find ourselves 'bound in shallows and miseries'. Put more prosaically, the clear message here with regard to assessment is that the door to significant change is currently open; there is at the present time an opportunity to re-think the ways in which we conceive the purposes of assessment, the choices we make about our assessment priorities and the techniques that we have developed over the years to do it.

However, as Shakespeare also warns us, it is all too easy to fail to take advantage of this portentous tide. Lack of genuine commitment, inadequate understanding, contradictory policies, a failure to prepare teachers with the necessary skills—even simple inertia—all have the potential to leave us bound 'in shallows and in miseries', continuing to be wedded to discredited assessment paradigms, unwilling to give up increasingly outmoded approaches and condemned to watch helplessly as the opportunity to adopt new approaches that have potentially enormous educational benefit, trickles away.

For anyone tempted to think of the above as dramatic hyperbole written for effect rather than substance, I refer you to this unusually radical collection of chapters. Ably summed up by Jim Popham in his chapter, who speaks for us all in asserting that:

... for nearly an entire century educators have been regarding educational assessment in a way that provides little, if any, benefit to students' learning. Because the dominant function of educational testing, historically, has been to provide comparative interpretations of students' test scores, educational tests have never been required to show how they contribute either to teachers' instructional decision-making or, ultimately, to students' learning.

For Popham, it is time now that 'a hundred years of acquiescence' in this respect should be replaced by a focus for testing and assessment on 'instructional actionability':

... that is, seeing it [assessment] chiefly in relation to its contribution to students' learning... and that therefore... many of the time-honored tools for evaluating the worth of educational tests are simply irrelevant if our mission is truly to help students learn better.

So what is the nature of this new 'flood' of assessment thinking? What are its implications for practice, and what do we need to do as an educational community to ensure that we do indeed 'take it at the flood so that it leads on to fortune' and do not, to stretch the metaphor a little further, miss the boat?

The collection of studies in this book provides a range of answers to these questions. Perhaps the most important of all is the repeated call in many of the contributions for greater assessment literacy; for a much more sophisticated understanding of how assessment works in practice, as this has been illuminated through extensive research. Chapters 6–11, for example, describe a range of ways in which school principals, teachers and students themselves can be helped to understand the

sociocultural theory of learning upon which AfL is based and can be helped to develop the skills to implement it effectively in practice, regardless of which of the above groups they belong to.

These various contributions demonstrate the potential of a range of research methods to help us understand the power and potential of educational assessment more clearly. Narrative studies, historical analyzes, case studies, research syntheses and experiments provide the data that underpin the creation of the new theoretical insights pertaining to assessment, which are presented in this book. These data and insights can in turn inform the development of innovative new assessment practices designed to support learning.

The book makes clear that the recognition that students themselves are key partners in this sort of assessment enterprise is central to such innovation. Students must be helped to see assessment as an integral part of effective learning, along with the hurdles and occasional failures it presents, as a necessary part of building resilience and making progress. The extensive review of relevant research in this respect presented by Tillema in Chapter 3 makes clear that this is a *sine qua non* of effective AfL. For, as Care and colleagues argue in Chapter 4 in their evaluation of an assessment project in schools in Queensland, AfL is much more:

than a series of techniques or strategies . . . [it is] part of a dialectical and cultural process of increasing understanding and control of the learning process by the learner—that is, exercising agency.

Detailed ‘micro’ classroom studies such as that presented by Willis and Cowie in Chapter 2 demonstrate how important it is for the educational community as a whole to recognize the centrality of learner agency in this respect; to develop its understanding of how classroom relations in general and assessment practice in particular are negotiated in the social behavior of students.

Understanding and agency are also key for teachers if they are to be able to use assessment effectively to support learning. The contribution by Allal and Mottier Lopez in Chapter 10 on how teachers can build communities to support effective summative teacher assessment makes clear that ‘teachers’ professional judgment is both an individual cognitive act and a socially situated practice’.

The keynote, here, is that in order to meet educational goals assessment must be of high quality. It must represent a well-thought through and research-informed match of means and ends in which fitness for purpose is central. Happily, this book provides many new insights in this respect. To the question posed by Smith and Smith in Chapter 8:

How can teachers and other educational professionals develop assessment tasks that engage, inform and enhance the learning process for students and the teachers who work with them?

the various contributions to this collection provide a range of clear and constructive answers.

Nevertheless, it is not going to be easy to bring about genuine and profound change in learning settings in which traditional assessment practices have held sway for many decades. Even if it is the case that ‘hurricane winds sweep across the sea

tossing up twenty foot waves' in assessment policy, and even if 'a fathom below the surface turbulent waters swirl' among professional leaders, it is still likely to be the case that 'on the ocean floor [of the classroom] there is unruffled calm' (Cuban 1984, p. 2, cited by Timperley in Chapter 9).

Unfortunately, the challenging task of raising the level of teachers' and students' assessment literacy and encouraging them to embed learning-centered assessment into the daily routines of the classroom is made even harder by the mixed assessment messages coming from many national governments. In many countries, contemporary assessment policies appear to be acting against each other. Despite the desire to implement AfL, prevailing 'high-stakes' accountability practices emphasize summative and external assessment at the expense of formative and classroom-based teacher assessment. As Engelsen and Smith observe in their discussion of the importance of assessment literacy in Chapter 6:

The problem is that the policy makers propagate two conflicting messages: they increase the intensity of national testing of all students and appear to be obsessed with international rankings, while at the same time they talk about the importance of caring for diversity and individuality, also in assessment.

Koh makes a similar point in Chapter 16, referring to recent assessment policy initiatives in Singapore, where:

... new assessment policy initiatives have been introduced to schools, and millions of dollars have been invested into in-service professional development workshops to improve teachers' assessment literacy. However, the required/desired changes and improvements in teachers' assessment practices are hindered by a strong performative culture, which places a great emphasis on high-stakes examinations, standardization, objectivity in scoring and norm-referenced reporting.

Such policies can be designed to be complementary rather than contradictory she suggests, but only where there is a good level of 'assessment literacy':

The enabling power of authentic assessment as a school-based assessment, to assist with students' learning and mastering of twenty-first century learning outcomes can only be realized when Singaporean teachers are equipped with a high level of assessment literacy. This includes their competence and confidence in executing their judgment of students' work for both accountability and learning demands.

It would appear that three elements are crucial to successfully riding the current wave of interest in new assessment priorities and capturing its momentum to effect change. The first of these is a willingness to let learners themselves into the 'secret garden' of assessment practice: to equip them with the understanding, the skills and the opportunities to take greater charge of their own learning, to become more empowered to judge success or failure for themselves, and more motivated to do so. The second element follows from the first—that teachers and professionals of all kinds also need to be enabled to change deeply embedded professional practices, which are inimical to such student empowerment, and that they also need support to develop the necessary understanding, skills and opportunities to create an assessment partnership with their students. Thirdly, a key element in successful change will require close attention to understanding how students and teachers, whole institutions

and even governments, can be helped genuinely to change their frame of reference through policies and practices that build on the clear messages from research in this area.

The rapid pace of change in contemporary society means that such change is becoming ever more urgent. A highly mobile, digitally connected and globally competitive world calls for a profound re-balancing in the center of gravity of the educational project itself. There is a pressing need for the students of today to be empowered as learners in order that they can take full advantage of the new opportunities for study now widely available, both for their own benefit and for that of society. As well as being a brake of the development of AfL, traditional forms of assessment are now also increasingly out of step with the skills and attitudes that will be needed by the learners of the future. Tried and tested as they are, most current assessment practices are acting as a brake on educational progress, both conceptually and practically. The contributions that make up this collection represent the international cutting edge of assessment thinking and practice. As such, the collection explicitly recognizes the exciting opportunities that digital technologies are beginning to open up for new assessment approaches to be developed. The ‘priorities and enablers’ for the design of ‘next-generation assessment’, which Kimber and Wyatt-Smith describe in Chapter 22, and the enabling power of ‘technology-enhanced assessment (TEA)’ described in the research review by Broadfoot and colleagues in Chapter 23 both offer an exciting new horizon for assessment development, which at present we can barely begin to imagine.

The research presented in this collection of chapters is drawn from a wide range of cultural settings and countries—the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Norway, Canada, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Ireland, Singapore, the United States and Israel. It documents the strength of the current international tide of support for a new set of assessment priorities. It makes clear the nature of the emerging consensus concerning the re-balancing that needs to be done if assessment is to play its full potential part in supporting learning. It makes clear, too, the scale of the challenge that confronts the educational community internationally if teachers and students are to be equipped to use the tools of AfL effectively. The contributions in this book also provide the navigational tools to enable all those who espouse this purpose to ride the prevailing tide and to take the current that will ‘lead on to fortune’.

This is an optimistic and radical book that leaves no room for doubt concerning the ‘enabling power’ of assessment. The only doubt is whether there is sufficient vision ‘to take the current when it serves’ and not ‘to lose our ventures’ in an outmoded orthodoxy.

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Designing Assessment for Quality Learning

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