

Preface

“How do I know what my students have learned and what they have to learn further?” asked Li Min, a math intern, as she chatted with Teacher Wang Wen at the Green Middle School (GMS), a rural school in northeast China, during the lunch break on a sunny Tuesday. I was doing my field study at GMS then and sat beside them to have the casual conversation as we did during lunch every day. This question immediately caught my attention as it had been raised repeatedly, a couple of years before, by the pre-service teachers I worked with as a field instructor for their teaching practicum in Michigan, United States. They had to work with students from diverse backgrounds, including immigrants and refugees. They kept wondering about what their students had learned in their classrooms. This question later comes back as I work as the supervisor for the practicum students in Singapore now, when they struggle to understand how to tailor their teaching to the high ability students and lower ability students in the academic streaming system. How do they know that different students have learned? How do they know that their knowing of students’ learning is accurate and useful enough to lead their students to learn more? What are the answers they could get in contexts of high-stakes testing and increasing accountability? These are questions that probably concern many student teachers and teacher educators all over the world.

What was the answer Li Min obtained from Teacher Wang then? In her mid-50s, Teacher Wang was very outgoing and well-liked by her students. She had taught math for more than ten years at this rural school. Although she was not Li Min’s official mentor, she enjoyed talking with this young woman, as she thought that this pre-service teacher was serious about working with her pupils.

“We have to assess them. Every teacher here has a notebook full of practice test items from previous standardized tests,” Teacher Wang said as she showed Li Min her own set of three one-inch-thick notebooks that contained the past ten years of High School Entrance Math Examination items, annotated with the key concepts needed to figure out the solutions, several ways of tackling the problem, and possible misconceptions that students may have when solving each test item. “You need to retrieve the test items relevant to your current topic and use them for the weekly

quizzes to test how your students have grasped the concepts. The items should not be too difficult or too easy for them. You have to know what misconceptions they may have and use the chosen items to find out if they are experiencing difficulties in learning particular concepts. You will also have to go through the solution with them! In this way, you can know where they are and prepare your students to tackle similar test items in the future.”

Here it is. The simple answer given by Teacher Wang was assessment. In her account, two acts of assessment existed in teaching and learning to teach, which constitute the main ideas of this book. There was a *technical act of assessment*, obviously. The pre-service teachers needed to learn how to study the standardized test papers, adapt the good items from these standardized tests for a formative use in the classroom, and provide feedback by “going through the solution” with the students. The other act of assessment was more implicit. The *evaluative act of assessment* started before and throughout the technical process of assessment. As elaborated in Chap. 4, this *evaluative act* of assessment has been discussed in sociological studies on the *boundary work* (Anagnostopoulos 2006; Lamont and Molnar 2002; Jiang 2012), a set of evaluative criteria embedded in the cultural beliefs that people use to differentiate others in daily interactions. The pre-service teachers had to make judgments on students’ abilities in learning and craft the classroom quizzes (out of the collected standardized test items) that are “not too difficult or too easy for them”. They should also obtain a proper expectation of misconceptions on certain curriculum knowledge that different students may have. They had to make decisions on how to “go through the solutions” and provide appropriate feedback to different students. Although they can have a sense of how students have learned by reading their test results, these judgments, expectations, and decisions are probably often generated informally from their daily teaching practices and evaluating students’ competences and potentials almost all the time, as it is shown in detail later in this book. Such informal forms of assessment, *evaluative act of assessment*, are based on the symbolic evaluative criteria, such as whether they look intelligent, talk in a logical way, or work hard enough. These informal assessment turn into varied expectations, and yield powerful forms of tacit feedback between teachers and pupils. It is the terrain including both *technical act of assessment* and the *evaluative act of assessment* that this study is situated to discuss the pre-service teachers’ learn-to-teach experiences.

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A Student Teaching Experience in China

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