Integrating assessment for learning in the classrooms of higher education institutions in Hong Kong

於大專院校推行促進學習的評估

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Abstract

This article, intended for teachers of Hong Kong Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) who are interested in Assessment for Learning (AfL), discusses the main AfL strategies by consulting some of the available literature. This paper also gives concrete examples and points to note when teachers integrate these strategies specifically in the context of daily classroom practices in Hong Kong HEIs. Finally, in the latter part of this article, some obstacles that could hinder AfL development in HEI classrooms are also discussed. It is hoped that this article, might, in a small way, help teachers who want to re-examine and improve on their own teaching methods. Consequently, students would benefit in their own learning.

Keywords

assessment for learning, teaching strategies in higher education, higher education in Hong Kong

摘要

本文專為對促進學習評估（AfL）有興趣的大專院校教師而設，內容包括評估方式分析，在香港實踐 AfL 所遇到的困難等。本文希望藉著各項解說，幫助教師反思，以及改進自己的教學模式，使學生從學習中有所得著。

關鍵詞

促進學習的評估，高等教育的教學策略，香港高等教育

1. Introduction

In Hong Kong, colleges, institutes, universities, and other HEIs are inclined to either evaluate learning by Assessment of Learning (AoL), through one-off examinations, or by Assessment for Learning (AfL), through an on-going process during the semester in which quality feedback is given to students on how to improve on their work. More development of AfL in Hong Kong HEIs is to be expected, following the global trend to change the nature of assessment as part of teaching and learning (Brown, 2004). In keeping with this transition, the new Hong Kong 4-year undergraduate curriculum will be launched in 2012. Formerly, the higher educational policy favoured the elite. Soon, the new education policy will favour the masses. This transition implies that students who previously had few opportunities to receive higher education can now also have access to Hong Kong HEIs. The varying academic levels of performance of the first cohort of students in 2012 will necessitate a call for change in teaching methodologies. This change will involve less direct knowledge transmission to a more student-focused approach that can effectively lead students to achieve the expected learning outcomes (Rust, 2002). AfL, in this regard, may be a panacea for schools to enhance teaching and learning in the classroom.

This article begins by expounding on the potential of AfL and some of the features of AfL strategies through a review of some of the available literature. Following these explanations, examples of research studies as well as the author's personal experience in the classroom illustrate how to integrate AfL into daily classrooms practices. Hopefully, by sharing these examples, teachers who are curious about AfL will become more aware of the importance of consistently collecting learning evidence and giving constructive comments to students so that the latter can take more responsibility for their own learning with greater motivation.

2. Integrating Assessment for Learning in Hong Kong HEIs

This section looks at some major AfL strategies, including effective questioning, providing constructive feedback, sharing Learning Objectives (LOs) and Assessment Criteria (AC) with students, and finally, self-reflection and peer review (Black et al., 1998, 2002). Examples are shown on how teachers can apply these strategies to transition learning into the realm of the student's own personal responsibility for acquiring skills and knowledge (Harris, 2007). By this means, the teacher devolves power to students in their own learning (Glover & Thomas, 1999).

2.1 Sharing Learning Objectives and Assessment Criteria with Students

Sharing LOs and ACs with students is a fundamental principle of AfL. Thanks to the adoption of the educational policy "Outcome-Based Education (OBE)", the sharing of LOs and AC with students, as part of the requirements of OBE, has become the norm in Hong Kong schools. In most Hong Kong HEIs, at the beginning of the semester, students are provided with a teaching plan, which includes

a list of LOs and expected outcomes, as well as the criteria for each assessment task. Such practices are highly appraised by many scholars since LOs are what students are expected to do during the course. With clear ideas about what is expected of them, students should therefore be more focused on their learning, and should also have a better understanding of their own performance (Black and Wiliam, 1999; Sadler, 1989). Consequently, they would be more likely to achieve the expected outcomes (Harris, 2007).

Students need to apply these criteria to their own work and to understand what these objectives mean. Therefore, ARG (2002) made an additional suggestion that teachers could discuss the objectives and criteria with students using terms that they could understand, so that learners could become aware of "how" to do it and "what" to do for each assessment. ARG added that in some cases, teachers' might allow students to play a part in deciding on goals and identifying criteria for assessing progress, or even develop Student-initiated Criteria (SiC). It is believed that through the process of formulating SiC, students' awareness of the assessment criteria would be enhanced, and therefore students could adjust their methods of learning and achieve these outcomes accordingly.

2.2 Effective Questioning and Giving Constructive Feedback

Effective questioning on both the teacher's and the students' part as well as giving constructive feedback to students and to the teacher, is a second fundamental principle

of AfL. On one hand, questioning students is a strategy commonly used by teachers in classrooms as a tool to check students' current state of understanding on an issue (James, 2006). On the other hand, responses to students' answers, often termed as feedback, is also essential in promoting learning. In fact, questions and feedback are often indispensable, since questions are considered to be "effective" only if answering them requires different levels of cognitive thinking (Sachdeva, 1996).

Giving constructive feedback, no matter whether to solicit answers from students', to answer students' questions, to respond to students' answers to questions, or to comment on students' work, is considered to be equally important in enhancing learning, as it helps students better understand their progress. They can especially recognize their advancement in how and why they have achieved a goal, as well as what they would require to improve their progress (Sadler, 1989). In other words, constructive feedback helps students to identify what steps they should take in order to achieve the learning goals. Harris (2007) also offers a similar view: to be effective, feedback needs to help students identify the action necessary to close the gap between their current level of knowledge or ability and their desired level.

Moreover, creating a favorable environment for conducting questions and feedback in, is equally important. The small-class sessions in Hong Kong HEIs, in this regard, could be an ideal place to facilitate questions and answers. These sessions, which are usually in many forms – tutorials, seminars, workshops – permits the teacher to allow

more time for each student when answering the questions he or she has been asked. For example, in the Community College at which the author works, many group presentations are given in tutorial sessions. After the students have completed their presentations in groups, they need to lead a discussion with the whole class. The audience is encouraged to discuss each presenter's performance, by raising questions and giving feedback to the presenters in order to review the issues that have been discussed in the presentation, to challenge the ideas brought forth by the student presenters, or to constructively criticize the presenters' performance. The teacher, on the other hand, has changed roles, from a traditional question-raiser to a facilitator who continuously checks if the questions raised by the audience are appropriate, and if the words they used, the embedded concepts, and the meanings implied are conducive to learning. From what the author has observed, both the student presenters and their audiences tend to be very energetic in raising questions, answering questions, and giving and receiving feedback. The reason for such a response is partly due to the small class size in which the student audience has many opportunities to raise questions.

Yet, as a reminder for teachers, educators need to be cautious when raising questions or giving feedback. For example, as stated by Sachdeva (1996) and Black (Black, et al., 2002), teachers need to allow more time before students respond to questions, since the so-called "wait time", is very critical to learning. This delay allows students enough time to organize their thoughts or discuss the matter with their group before they respond to the questions (Ibid.). Similarly, Harris (2007) reminded teachers that the nature of their feedback should stress the positive aspects rather than any failure, because the purpose of feedback should be to foster motivation.

Black and Wiliam (1998) further pointed out even if feedback is positive, students' learning motivation could also be damaged when the feedback is accompanied with grades, since grades could pressure students into comparing themselves with others. In Hong Kong, this phenomenon of comparison is often a problem for most HEI teachers because Hong Kong is a highly competitive place where higher academic places are scarce. Nonetheless, grades are needed for select purposes, which would directly affect whether the students can successfully be promoted to a higher level. In order to minimize the negative motivational effects brought by comparison between students (Black & Wiliam, 1998), in Hong Kong some HEIs tend to offer comment-only feedback (marking) to students on their performance in a particular task. Students are only informed about their final grades after they have finished all assessment tasks in the semester. In other HEIs, the teacher gives marks on each assessed task, and does not tell students what weighting the marks have toward the final grade. At the end of the semester, the teacher works out a "mark-to-grade" table which determines the specific mark range system that falls into a particular grade level. Again, students are only informed of their final grade at the end of the semester when all learning activities in that course are completed.

2.3 Self-Reflection and Peer Review

Self-reflection and peer review are a third important element of AfL. Many forms of self-assessment exist, and self-reflection is one of the common ways that has been adopted by HEI teachers. Some teachers may ask students to chronicle their self-reflections in their portfolios. One example comes from a case study done by Klenowski (Klenowski et al., 2006): he and his colleagues asked students to keep their reflective journals in a portfolio. At the end of the semester, most student participants agreed that a portfolio helped them to structure their learning by putting order into their thoughts which were previously chaotic or confused. Furthermore, this exercise allowed them to identify gaps in their thinking.

Another research was done at the University of Hong Kong by Tang and Biggs (1998) in which students in the third year of the four-year part-time evening Bachelor of Education programme were asked to submit a portfolio which provided evidence on how they could progressively meet the assessment criteria. They were required to keep a journal in order to record critical learning related incidents, and subsequently reflect upon them. At the end of the unit, most students were positive about the use of portfolios. Quotes included: "It (the PA) really works!"; "Now I do not see the portfolio as an assignment to be handed in. It's rather a powerful learning tool for the learner himself."; "What (we are expected) to prepare for the portfolio undoubtedly provides me a chance to reflect on my daily teaching."

Alternatively, peers could also be a source to provide feedback on student work which could, in turn, also help greatly in the development of students' cognitive thinking. Vygotsky refers to peer review as the "zone of proximal development (ZPD)": ZPD denotes "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.202).

Based on Vygotsky's idea (Vvgotsky, 1978, p.202), the author has done a simple collaborative activity in her Community College. Students were asked to upload their writing task to the CMS for peer review one week before they submitted it to the teacher. Special training on how to review an article had been given in advance. After a one week peer review period, the author noticed that the language used in students' work was more proficient, had been carefully proofread, and more precise vocabulary was used. In fact, the author also noticed that students tended to more easily accept feedback from their peers rather than from the teacher. Sadler (1989) believes that with careful planning, peer review can make students become more proactive in their learning, which is an essential element of genuine learning.

3. Further Elaboration: Obstacles and Challenges

With the implementation of OBE, the use of tutorial sessions or other discussion sessions, and the availability of electronic resources, the impression seems to be that Hong Kong HEIs are attempting to implement AfL in the

classroom. However, in reality, the author feels that there are still many obstacles in carrying out the above strategies.

3.1 Challenge Number 1 – Grade Distribution: A Bell Curve in Hong Kong HEIs?

Firstly, the ACs shared might not be an effective one to enhance students' learning. ACs are the rules of the game. Explanations of these rules are therefore be necessary; players can't win a game if they don't know the rules of the game. However, this strategy could be challenging to HEI teachers since students' performances are sometimes difficult to predict. Designing a rubric that fits all situations is a difficult task, not to mention that different teachers might have different standards in marking. Therefore, what teachers could do is to share general standards with students rather than precise ones. Next, teachers might adjust the rubric after the assessment. This is quite common among HEIs, especially in assessment involving a massive number of students. As individual teachers might have variation in interpreting the rubric, discussion meetings are normally arranged to finalize the marks distributed to all small tasks in an assessment. The last reason has to do with the distribution of grades: for selective purposes, what is considered to be an abnormal distribution of students' grades, such as a large number of distinctions in one class, is seldom accepted in institutions. In this light, sharing ACs with students in the beginning of the semester does not seem practical because their grades may be modified even if they successfully meet the ACs.

3.2 Challenge Number 2 – Pure AfL and an AfL / AoL Mix

Secondly, there are often two major parts in assessing students' performance in a HEI course, namely "coursework" and "examinations". The former is comprised of several (usually four to five) assessment tasks during the semester, while the latter is a one-off examination which is usually organized at the end of the term. Some teachers may not notice that tasks designed in the coursework, such as an objective test, group projects, students' presentations, might not be interrelated with each other. In other words, what students learnt from Task A may not be possible for them to use in task B. A negative result of such a disassociation may be that students are prevented from identifying any necessary actions for further improvement.

As already mentioned, most Hong Kong HEIs are using coursework and examination assessment systems in order to assess student performance. Under the "coursework-and-examination" mode, different weightings are assigned to different assignment tasks of a particular subject so as to reflect their respective importance. The overall performance is obtained by calculating the weighting of each coursework and examination with little place for holistic judgment. The method of "weighted averages", however, is neither formative nor summative. Harlen and James (1997) argue that the blurring of the lines between using AfL and AoL together in the same course negates the value of AfL. For example, a students' achievement of the learning outcomes of a particular task cannot be reflected directly in the overall measurement of

performance through the final grade.

3.3 Challenge Number 3 – Time Stops for No Teacher

An additional important consideration is time. How useful the teacher's feedback is, largely, depends on how deep the teacher knows the students. Such an understanding usually takes time. In reality, teachers not knowing enough about their pupils is one of the common inhibiting factors in successfully implementing AfL (Black & Wiliam, 1999). Most HEIs courses last for one semester, which is about 13-15 weeks – a rather short period of time for observing and understanding a student, not to mention making a judgment on what the student should do to improve his or her learning.

The use of electronic systems in this regard is also considered to be a new cutting-edge channel for teachers to understand their students' ability. For example, the Course Management System (CMS), which is widely adopted in Hong Kong HEIs, possesses many interactive tools that help the teacher collect students' assignments more systematically. This system also allows the teacher to understand his or her students from different aspects such as through their postings on the forum, or their activity log.

Besides CMS, the use of the electronic portfolio (ePortfolio) is another alternative. In the College where the author works, a 2-year Quality Enhancement Grant Scheme project named "Implementation of an Open Source ePortfolio for Sub-degree Students" was awarded to provide Post Secondary School students with interactive online tools

to showcase their accomplishments during their studies in the College. This system also helps teachers to understand their students' work better since the teachers can refer to tasks students completed during the previous semester.   In the past decade, local universities, such as the University of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and the City University of Hong Kong, have developed their own ePortfolio systems to enhance teaching and learning.

3.4 Challenge Number 4 – All for One, and One for All

Finally, the acceptance of AfL by all the stake players in an HEI is crucial to the success implementation of AfL. Currently, most Hong Kong HEI students have received at least 5 years of secondary schooling. Their education was generally traditional – examination and textbook oriented. This orientation has been reinforced by the conservative views on the part of their parents. Students, parents or even teachers may believe that exam-based education is successful in formal secondary schooling via summative techniques, so not many of them know about or are interested in knowing about the nature of AfL. At the same time, many teachers, students and even parents are legitimately concerned about the validity and reliability of self- and peer-assessment. If AfL is going to succeed, teachers would have to break established traditional classroom habits (Harris, 2007) which would imply a change of mentality in the whole institution: such a transition could not be done by individual effort. Therefore, for AfL to be successful overall, strong support

from management is absolutely necessary. Additionally, time would be required to support and nurture the commitment of the participants.

3.5 Challenge Number 5: More Time Again Please

For some Hong Kong HEI teachers, AfL may be a rather new concept and they may not have the time, the skills, nor the support to give formative feedback to students. As Black et al. (2002) point out, assessment can be regarded as formative only if the evaluation leads to concrete actions by teachers and/or students, which improve student learning and teaching. However, an extra hurdle to overcome is the common practice for Hong Kong HEIs to have regular subject rotation amongst teachers. Teachers in charge of a course may be different every year and sometimes they will only be informed of what course they will teach 2 weeks before the start of the term. Early preparation is therefore almost impossible. Without good preparation, flexibility in teaching methods is difficult to implement, an element which is obviously necessary in AfL.

4. Conclusion

This article has given a brief explanation of some AfL strategies for teachers who are interested in re-examining their teaching practices and improving on their teaching methodology. In AfL, students have to understand the learning objectives and assessment criteria and are encouraged to express their views. They are helped hereby articulating these views with their peers in a secure and open learning environment. While

questioning is used in AfL to examine students' learning states, on-going constructive feedback, which is based on development and learning needs, is also given by both teachers and students to assist learning progress whenever possible. Self- and peer-assessment are also crucial in AfL to create a progressive learning environment because of the autonomy learners can subsequently develop. The use of the ePortfolio was also suggested, so that learning evidence could be collected more systematically so as to allow students, teachers, or other educational leaders to monitor their students' strengths and needs in order to track and assist in their progress.

Finally, there are some hurdles to overcome in the implementation of AfL in the context of the Hong Kong HEI classrooms. Firstly, the correlation of different assessment tasks may not be stressed. Students might find it difficult in making use of the experience they have learnt from a previous task and applying that knowledge to the next task. Secondly, most HEIs tend to assess students' performance by a "weighted average" system, which can hardly show their progressive improvement in the course. Also, since students, parents, and even teachers have grown up under the culture of intensive examinations or testing, they might be skeptical about the power of AfL to be able to enhance teaching and learning. Last but not least, the subject rotation or other administrative practices in HEIs might affect the degree to which the teacher is able to devolve responsibility to the students due to preparation time constraints, which would in turn constrain the preparation of the course.

Acknowledgement

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