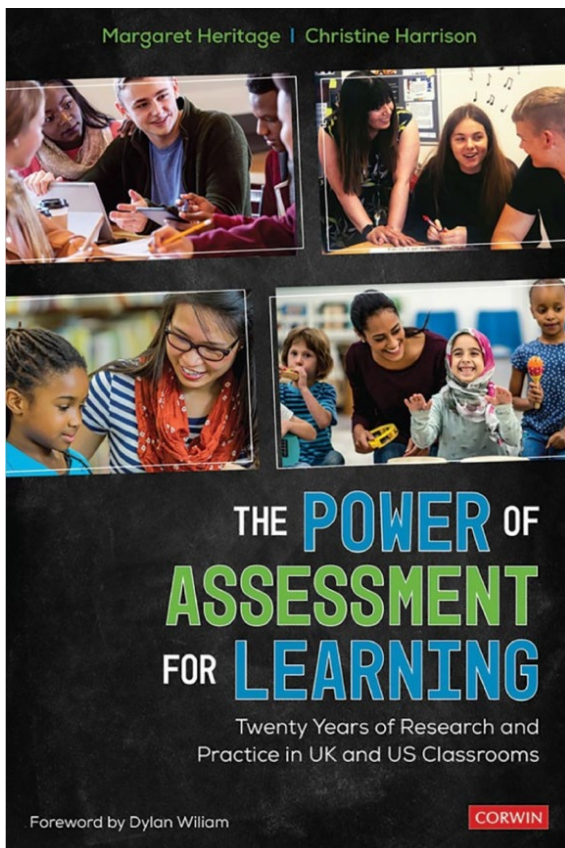




Book Review

The power of assessment for learning: Twenty years of research and practice in UK and US classrooms, by Christine A. Harrison and Margaret Heritage, Sage, 2019, 144 pp., \$31.95 (Paperback), ISBN: 9781544361468



Ever since the seminal work of *Inside the Black Box* by Black and Wiliam was published in 1998, researchers in the educational testing community have had a growing interest in Assessment for Learning (AfL). Differing from the traditional summative assessment, AfL offers an alternative perspective towards assessment, focusing on improving students' learning through teacher-student interactions, involvement of students in the process of assessment, and provision of constructive feedback. Similar theoretical conceptualisation of AfL appears in the frameworks of LOA (Carless, 2007; Jones & Saville, 2016; Turner & Purpura, 2016) and formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Although AfL, LOA, and formative assessment have simulated heated discussions in the assessment community, the practical implementation of AfL has not been satisfactory and at times failed to live up to key stakeholders' expectations. Against this backdrop, *The power of assessment for learning: Twenty years of research and practice in UK and US classrooms* by Margaret Heritage and Christine Harrison is a timely volume that could provide stakeholders with practical examples and guidance for implementing AfL in genuine teaching and learning contexts.

The book, which has six chapters in total, sets the scene in the UK and US. It first brings attention to AfL (Chapter 1), then discusses and compares key AfL practices in two countries (Chapter 2), explains the key principles of AfL with substantial evidence (Chapters 3, 4, and 5), and concludes with future research directions for advancing AfL (Chapter 6).

Chapter 1 revisits the key ideas in *Inside the Black Box* and the concept of AfL to explain when and how AfL originated in the UK and the US. It starts a rich discussion on AfL by first defining it. According to the authors, "AfL is a range of practices that encourages both teachers and learners to seek evidence of the ways in which students are developing their knowledge, skills, and understanding with the intention of using the evidence to



inform learning (p. 1)”. As summarised, key principles of AfL mainly include informing learning goals, looking for learning evidence, assessing through ongoing activities and classroom interactions, and offering timely as well as forward-looking feedback on learning. The authors further commented on the milestone works of Black and Wiliam (1998a, 1998b), recognising the fundamental role of AfL in countering accountability issues at that time. From explaining what the black box is (analogous to the classroom) to the details of how to implement AfL inside the classroom, and to the effect of AfL in improving both standards and learning, the classic works provided guiding principles of AfL implementation, which brought stakeholders to rethink the role of assessment. Examples from the King’s–Medway–Oxfordshire Formative Assessment Project (KMOFAP, 1999-2001) provided practical evidence for the effectiveness of AfL.

Chapter 2 presents the evolution stories of AfL in both the UK and the US since 1998. It compares and contrasts changes in AfL conceptions and practices between the two countries and evaluates the improved benefits of teaching and learning in each country. This chapter provides a rich and nuanced discussion of how the implications, legacy, and opportunities afforded and inhibited by policy and competing priorities affected how teachers in the two contexts took up AfL and adapted their daily routines in classrooms with their students. In general, the tales suggest that both similarities of and differences in AfL implementation existed in the two countries. The authors first explained the dominating summative assessment culture and the difficulties in implementing AfL in the UK. Following this, the efforts of AfL policy as well as implementation in the UK are also elaborated when the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) became well-known. Although positive achievements were made to some extent, the AfL implementation also encountered challenges. The US had a different story. Although assessment expert Rick Stiggins had advocated AfL since 1990s, it only entered the public scene in 2000 along with Lorrie Shepard’s American Educational Research Association (AERA) address and National Research Council (NRC) reports. Although the importance of AfL was noticed, it was misused at that time and little efforts were made by the US government to promote AfL.

Chapter 3 entitled “Student Role in Assessment for Learning” begins with thought-provoking questions to seek evidence for how expanded conceptions of AfL have embraced existing theories about learning from three theoretical perspectives of sociocultural theory, self-regulated learning, and growth mindset. At the beginning of this chapter, the authors clearly stated the role of students in AfL, that is, they should be responsible for their own learning and engage actively in the learning process. Although widely recognised in the literature, this role has been largely neglected in practice (Heitink et al., 2016). As such, existing studies seldom consider exploring students’ role in promoting learning in AfL. From a sociocultural viewpoint, learning happens in a wider social community when students actively participate in the learning and assessment process. As for the self-regulation perspective, students could achieve self-regulated skills in ways of self-assessment, peer assessment, and learner autonomy. Teachers could help students build their self-regulation skills by creating a positive environment, making clear expectations, and giving instructions on study skills in class. Furthermore, a growth mindset requires students’ resilience, confidence, and task completion. It also requires teachers to pay attention to their praise practice, especially how to give feedback that can feed forward. Encouraged to cultivate growth mindsets, students are able to identify their own strengths and weaknesses instead of focusing on their performance and ability. The inclusion of these three theoretical perspectives expands the conceptualisation of AfL and helps shift the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students to a collaborative relationship in which students work with teachers and their peers to improve learning.

In Chapter 4 “Planning for Learning”, the authors try to bring readers’ attention to AfL in disciplinary contexts and provide practical examples of planning for disciplinary learning and protocols for teachers, such as a well-designed AfL lesson planning template (p. 74). The chapter is concise but insightful since it can guide teachers’ instructional planning and disciplinary-based AfL. As emphasised, developing teachers’ AfL literacy is key to its implementation. To help teachers shift from a traditional transmission teaching model to the AfL approaches, the authors offered real examples from the UK and the US contexts, including useful lesson planning tools, professional learning opportunities, and teacher learning communities where teachers can “learn-practice-reflect-

revise” (p. 82) with their peers. Although the professional learning for AfL in the UK and the US differ, they both focus on helping teachers mediate and adapt teaching to improve learning.

Chapter 5 entitled “Transforming Classrooms” discusses the transformations that teachers made in the classroom to further elaborate on how to incorporate AfL into their everyday teaching, a widely acknowledged challenge among teachers and teacher educators. To incorporate AfL, teachers need to move from grasping the “letter” (superficial level) to acquiring the “spirit” (deeper incorporation) of AfL. Concrete examples are provided for teachers to develop their AfL practices and pedagogies. For example, obtaining quality evidence to decide on the next teaching step in class, crafting feedback comments that encourage students to revisit their ideas and improve their answers, strengthening classroom talk and questioning, promoting thinking, focusing on dialogic teaching, and transforming the role of students from passive intake to active engagement. Further, students can take part in the co-construction of success criteria with teachers and deeply engage with self-assessment, peer assessment, and feedback. In addition to practical suggestions about how to embed AfL in teaching and learning, the chapter also provides strategies such as the “traffic lighting” self-assessment strategy, the “Put up – Question – Suggestion (PQS)” peer feedback model, and the “green pen marking” feedback approach.

The final chapter entitled “What Still Needs to Be Explored” summarises AfL achievements in practice as well as its working mechanism in various teaching contexts, and highlights the future research and development of AfL. Continuously seeking evidence-based practice in relevant studies has made AfL a valuable research perspective and further developed it into a pragmatic teaching as well as learning approach that is meaningful in the classroom context. For teachers, being vigilant for evidence is crucial in AfL teaching because of the hidden characteristics of AfL evidence. They must have a sensitivity to the learning potential of student ideas, actions, and interactions. For instance, they can listen to classroom conversations and observe students while they undertake tasks. Further, teachers can use more open approaches in the class to improve student learning to move forward to more purposeful interactions. For example, they can change the language and way of questioning to elicit more critical thinking and discussions. However, relevant research has mainly focused on teachers and their literacy as well as the implementation of AfL, the learner perspective has been largely neglected. As such, both learner identity and identity-safe environments need further exploration to disclose how learners learn and how classroom culture influences learner identity. Other topics such as how teachers leverage students’ funds of knowledge (i.e., the prior knowledge students have acquired from their homes and communities) to promote learning and the contribution of teachers’ disciplinary knowledge to effective AfL implementation should also be investigated.

In general, this book not only summarises and elaborates the theoretical foundation of AfL but also provides a practical guide for teachers to make use of AfL in genuine teaching contexts. First of all, it provides substantial knowledge for readers to comprehensively understand the origin and evolution of AfL in the UK and the US (in Chapters 1 and 2). Then, it further elaborates on the key principles for AfL implementation by using real examples that could shed light on genuine teaching (in Chapters 3, 4, and 5). Moreover, the book probes into valuable topics that need massive attention both in practice and in theory (in Chapter 6). As such, this volume brings the most pragmatic contribution regarding AfL implementation to relevant stakeholders. For teachers and educational practitioners, the examples of AfL implementation are across a wide range of disciplines and study stages. For colleagues in the educational testing community, the book provides abundant research topics for further AfL exploration such as recognising learning identity in AfL studies and finding ways to create identity-safe environments. Most importantly, perhaps, the volume also provides examples on government support in fostering relevant policies in the two countries. Making use of “Learning Community” standards, for instance, can provide impetus for improving teachers’ AfL literacy.

Nonetheless, the book is not without flaws. The peculiar focus of the volume on formative assessment constrains its capacity to help readers understand the wholeness of AfL as AfL is applicable to both formative and summative assessment (Carless, 2007). In addition, the book sets its major contexts in the UK and the US, which, while making the book more focused, also restricts its application to other contexts where teachers’ and students’ language backgrounds are not as homogeneous. Consequently, the fact that AfL may demonstrate different formats

in regions with the presence of diverse languages such as the Asia-Pacific seems to be neglected (Klenowski, 2009). Furthermore, an inclusion of practical examples from higher education would have added to the depth of AfL discussion in this book. Despite the aforementioned shortcomings, the book holds the promise of facilitating and enhancing a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, encompassing both theoretical AfL underpinnings and practical AfL implications. It is thus highly recommended for language teachers, teacher educators, policymakers, and researchers.

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