

## **Assessment for Learning in a Confucian-influenced culture: beyond the summative/formative binary**

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### **Abstract**

Assessment for Learning (AfL) describes the powerful role assessment plays in shaping how and what students learn. AfL is associated with formative assessment, and is placed in contrast to the summative role of certification. This article, however, focuses on AfL in Confucian-influenced cultures and finds that this summative/formative binary does not hold. While in western countries the embrace of AfL is associated with challenging the former dominance of examinations, this is not true of a place such as Hong Kong. This article explores this paradox of a commitment to AfL and a continuing belief in examinations. By qualitatively investigating the perceptions and attitudes towards AfL of students, educators and managers, we find that their expansive understanding of the educational merits of examinations explains this paradox. The lessons that arise, including how to further enhance AfL through practical frameworks and/or policies, have relevance in both Confucian-influenced and non-Confucian-influenced contexts.

## **Keywords**

Assessment for learning, Learning-oriented assessment, Summative assessment, Formative assessment, Assessment literacy, Confucian-influenced cultures

## **Introduction**

Assessment for Learning (AfL) has become firmly established as a concept within western higher education research and educational development (Strauss and Mooney 2017, Reimann 2016), if not actually within all teaching practice. AfL describes the powerful role assessment plays in shaping how and what students learn (Boud 1995, Boud and Falchikov 2007, Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2013, Bloxham and Carver 2014, Carless 2017, Tai et al. 2018). Assessment ceases to be solely about evaluating learning that *has* occurred, and is equally about shaping the learning that *will* occur. AfL is sometimes seen as representing the formative role of assessment, and this is placed in contrast to the summative role of certification, however, in this article we challenge this binary. Rather than criticising student pre-occupation with assessment, the AfL movement believes this is neither negative nor instrumental, but rather a legitimate way of understanding the knowledge and skills valued by their teachers and/or within their future professions. In this article, we take AfL to include any use of assessment strategies to support and enhance student learning. We further take learning within higher education to involve transformative engagement with complex and structured forms of knowledge (Ashwin 2020).

When Black and William (1998) published their systematic review on assessment it prompted considerable attention to the benefits of formative assessment, and this

extended to Confucian-influenced places. This interest in formative assessment included new initiatives within primary and secondary school levels in Hong Kong (EMB 2004; Berry 2011) and other Confucian-influenced countries (Pham and Renshaw 2014, Ratnam-Lim and Tan 2015). However, not all initiatives have been successful, and there are recognised barriers to AfL in this context (Lee and Coniam 2013). Such problems may be due to inadequate consideration of historical and culturally-ingrained factors (Pham 2011). This is one of the issues this study seeks to explore.

In countries such as the UK or Australia, AfL has also been associated with increased criticism of traditional, time-restricted examinations (Medland 2016, Bearman et al. 2017) because these are regarded as having little educational purpose and indeed their high-stakes nature is often regarded as an impediment to learning (Knight 2002). Although, to be fair, such criticism is made more by educational and assessment researchers than by other academics, many of whom remain convinced about the utility of this assessment method. In contrast, most Confucian-influenced countries/regions retain a general sense of agreement about the importance of summative assessment, and particularly traditional examinations, which are generally seen as at the heart of approaches to learning (Wicking 2020). We suggest that the strength of this commitment to examinations may be why some people – generally in other countries looking in – believe that Confucian-influenced countries/regions are inhospitable places for AfL.

A number of previous studies, however, demonstrate the complex yet achievable relationship between AfL and education in Confucian-influenced countries/regions. Writing about Japan, Wicking (2020) identifies several paths to greater formative use of assessment

and challenges unitary stereo-types of Confucian-influenced cultures. Pham and Renshaw (2015) situate their study in Vietnam and acknowledge the difficulty of implementing AfL in what they call Asian countries. Such difficulty again goes back to a learning culture dominated by traditional examinations, however, in the initiative they report on the possibilities for transcending this are also apparent. Importantly, Pham and Renshaw highlight the potential mismatch between policy recognition for AfL and the traditional learning cultures. Finally Carless (2011) writing about Hong Kong, as this article does, gives a range of examples of successful formative assessment within this context.

This article adds to these previous studies by further exploring the ways in which AfL can be integrated in Confucian-heritage settings, despite these ideas originally emerging in seemingly very different cultural, and learning contexts. In Wittgenstein's (2001) terms, the concept of Confucian-influenced culture can be regarded as a 'family resemblance' idea: these countries/regions share some features but also have their own individual identities. Thus we acknowledge that Hong Kong is different from mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Korea, Japan or Vietnam, especially because Hong Kong was once a colony of the U.K. and this history is unique in itself because it is instilled by both the Eastern and Western cultures. Yet we believe that in these family resemblances we can learn from the educational experiences in these different places.

As Carless (2011) has shown, Confucian-influenced cultures often approach questions of learning and assessment in particular ways, which include a strong emphasis on examination practices. But Carless's work also demonstrated that this need not mean that AfL has no place or relevance in such cultures. Indeed, he shows that non-traditional

assessment task designs and activities, such as authentic assessment and feedback mechanisms, have been advocated and shown to be effective in facilitating learning within the framework of assessment in Hong Kong (Carless 2015, Chong et al. 2020).

This article builds on Carless's work to explore perceptions and attitudes to AfL within the Confucian-influenced setting of Hong Kong. The study, however, has broader implications because it highlights a gap that can exist between the aspirations of AfL and its realisation in practice. Even in countries where the concept of AfL is well established within higher education research and development circles, its realisation in widespread practice in order to positively improve student learning remains patchy. Noting too the considerable diversity within academic staff in these countries and the influences of different diasporic groups that form part of them.

Key to our argument is a challenge to the assumed binary. Such a binary has reinforced perceptions that Confucian-influenced cultures are oriented towards summative assessment (Berry 2011). But let's consider the summative/formative binary itself. With the scholarship on AfL we have also had a broader reconsideration of the nature and purposes of assessment. For example, Boud (2007) has clearly outlined that assessment can have different purposes and for each purpose take on a different form: it can be for certification (associated with summative); for learning (associated with formative); or for future learning (which Boud has termed sustainable assessment). And yet, increasingly there is also a break down in the traditional summative/formative binary. Indeed, Hounsell (2007) has referred to the summative/formative distinction as 'familiar but rather shop-worn' (103). While Taras (2008) highlights the pitfalls of positioning formative assessment

as the only 'ethical face of assessment', with summative assessment deemed its 'evil counterpart' (393). Boud and Soler (2015) describe it as an 'unhelpful binary division' (402) and McArthur (2018) arguing from a social justice perspective, questions whether we can consider any assessment activity to be unrelated to learning in some way. The true promise of AfL lies not in hiving off assessment into discrete categories, but recognising the rich interconnections between assessment and learning in different contexts and different assessment tasks. In addition, teachers should not be deskilled to only teach for the test but rather, professionally trained on assessment autonomy (Tierney 1998).

While qualitative and small in scale, this research offers a unique and in-depth insight into how teachers, students and middle managers understand the purposes of assessment, its relationship to learning and the conceptual foundations of AfL. Results suggest that the link between assessment and learning is both welcome and understood in this setting, but challenges remain in terms of strengthening the required assessment literacy (of teachers and students) in order to fulfil the potential of AfL and ensure appropriate institutional support to effect change. This seven-part article first provides a short overview of Confucian-influenced higher education and discusses the importance of assessment literacy to the development of AfL. It then goes into discussing the findings as stated above, and finally concludes with a discussion of the implications of this work for local and global higher education contexts.

### **Confucian-influenced Higher Education**

It is possible to identify some broad differences between Confucian-influenced and other educational approaches, while avoiding essentialising either or falling into stereotypical descriptions, particularly ones that are shaped by unacknowledged cultural bias. Take for example the common distinction between western student-centred approaches and Confucian-influenced teacher-centred approaches. There is some truth in this and certainly the roles adopted by students and teachers in western and Confucian-influenced cultures can broadly differ. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that all teachers in the west were genuinely student-focused. Unfortunately that is simply not the case. Equally, it would be wrong to suggest that Confucian-influenced teachers do not care about their students, simply because their relationship does not conform to a western model.

Discussions with both student peers and teachers are not only common, but believed to be actively encouraged within western cultures. In contrast, students within Confucian-influenced cultures are often positioned as more passive. Teachers are seen as the authoritative figures delivering knowledge. Questioning may be perceived as disrespectful and the authority of teachers is commonly accepted (Carless 2011). The emphasis of learning is on effort and diligence. Harmony is highly valued in these cultures (even if unevenly realised) and this explains why little communication is encouraged between teachers and students because the avoidance of conflict is primary. But none of this means that these students are necessarily passive, and we reject this as a Eurocentric stereotype. It may be, however, that we are simply seeing a different form of active engagement with knowledge (Chanock 2010, Yan 2013).

Yet it is broadly fair to say that in the Confucian-influenced culture, learning favours collectivism rather than individualism (Carless 2011), even if this makes strange bedfellows

with the focus on traditional examinations, because the purpose of those examinations is seen as contributing to broader social wellbeing, even though this takes place within a competitive environment. Indeed, this point is reinforced by Shim (2018) who argues it is a common misconception that Confucian culture is all about knowledge transmission and good grades. In fact, the purpose behind the attention given to either of these is the fostering of good character and the development of the whole-person. Further nuance is introduced if we consider Zhang and Yin's (2020) recent finding of rising individualism in Chinese college students: so the situation may indeed be a changing one.

In a similar way, while examinations play a dominant role in Confucian-influenced settings, it is equally important to note that for teachers and students these are seen as a productive approach for learning (Brown et al. 2009, Carless 2011), and linked to improving social wellbeing. Examinations might not actually be popular, in the sense that they are not enjoyed, but they are positively associated with encouraging studying. This Confucian-influenced culture has its historical origins in the ancient Chinese empire. Success in the imperial examination system of various Chinese dynasties was an important step to achieving status, income and power in society (Carless 2011, Berry 2011). This system lays the foundation for the emphasis on the results of examination within these cultures. Various researchers (Berry 2011, Wang and Brown 2014) believe that this historical view shapes how students and teachers position and signify assessment in Hong Kong. Berry (2011) analyses the situation in the school system while Wang and Brown (2014) specifically investigate students' views in higher education. Despite taking place in different education sectors, both studies reveal that the association of learning with examinations in Hong Kong is significant and complex enough to limit assessment reform. However, the by-products of



this system are described as building competition, stressing memorisation, as well as putting a heavy focus on the utilitarian nature of education, on examination success, book knowledge and final assessment (Carless 2011). These impacts promote the perception that examination is the main goal of education, the ultimate pathway for career advancement and for moving up in status in society (Carless 2011). As negative as they may sound to a western ear, these impacts are described as culturally accepted in many Confucian-influenced countries (Brown et al. 2009, Pham and Renshaw 2014) and examinations remain highly valued (Carless 2011). It is also worth noting, though outside the main focus of this article, that in places such as China or Vietnam, these perspectives may have been further reinforced by the very different influence of Soviet-era educational approaches (Tao, Berci and He n.d.). Thus to return to Wittgenstein's (2001) family resemblances: Confucian-influenced cultures share some features but are equally distinct and individual due to the mix of influences upon any culture or place.

### **Assessment for Learning and the importance of assessment literacy**

Fundamental to our argument, is the relationship between assessment literacy and AfL. Indeed, we go so far as to say that assessment literacy is foundational for AfL and a lack of this literacy can be a major factor in failure to realise the potential of AfL. According to Price et al (2012), being assessment-literate means that the individual possesses a *conceptual understanding* of assessment as well as skills and intellectual abilities in self- and peer-assessment using technical approaches. What it means is that the stakeholders understand the goals of assessment and how assessment is being actualised to reach the goals. They may not use the same language as assessment specialists, but that is not the main issue.

It is also important to note that the problem of cultural factors constraining progress towards AfL can be a feature of both western and Confucian-influenced settings. We should not forget that traditional examinations remain commonplace in western higher education, despite the scholarship on AfL and the work of educational developers in this field. The *certification* function of assessment is deeply rooted in many teachers' psyche because it is what most of them experienced as students. Teachers are familiar with this focus and may not be aware of other functions of assessment. Boud (2007) states that the connection between assessment and learning is "not sufficiently well located within the dominant discourse of assessment" (14). Thus, it is not surprising that teachers lack information and knowledge of other assessment functions and effects. What they are lacking in effect is a developed sense of assessment literacy.

Assessment literacy is the term that describes understanding of the multivariate aims of assessment and the many ways in which these can be enacted in order to evaluate students' achievements in the best possible ways (Smith et al. 2013, Xu and Brown 2016). These authors are referring to the assessment literacy of students, however, we believe the same point can be extended to include the literacy of educators. This conceptual understanding of assessment is essential for appreciating the significance of learning-oriented assessment which is at the heart of AfL. Also key is that once one has this conceptual understanding of the possibilities and purposes of assessment then one is both more knowledgeable about alternative assessment approaches, and more likely to accept change.

Medland (2015) builds on Price's idea of the conceptual basis of assessment literacy to identify six elements that characterise assessment literacy. Here the focus is on external examiners, but again the points are valid across all stakeholders in assessment:

- A community sharing standardised assessment practice.
- A dialogue between all stakeholders when building assessment practice.
- Knowledge and understanding of effective feedback.
- A programme-wide approach that looks at the alignment of assessment.
- Outcome, adoption of assessment that builds self-regulation.
- A shared understanding of assessment standards.

Medland (2019) reviewed the six elements and identified that standards and dialogues are most developed, while the rest of the elements need more explicit attention. It is a shared language of assessment that can be applied across different groups/contexts that is crucial, as compared to familiar with the concept. The ideal operation would be that stakeholders can effectively execute various assessment practices to facilitate learning. This current research bases on the Price's and Medland's descriptions to define assessment literacy in the research context. Insufficient assessment literacy has been reported among both higher education teachers and students worldwide. For example, teachers from a large U.K. university can be inconsistent in their use of assessment terminology, which may suggest misunderstandings, and they are committed to follow conventional assessment practice (Forsyth et al. 2015): there is pressure to take the seemingly safer path of no change. Levels of, and familiarity with, assessment literacy vary greatly among university academics in the U.K. and Malaysia (Medland 2015, 2019, Rezvani Kalajahi and Abdullah 2016). Students in a veterinary medicine programme also possess variable levels of ability to grade others' work

(Rhind and Paterson 2015) and despite increasing prominence being given to the importance of students developing assessment literacy, the opportunities for them to do so are often missing or insufficient in a crowded curriculum. The implication of suboptimal assessment literacy is that it limits how all stakeholders perceive and engage in assessment for learning. Indeed Reimann (2016) has demonstrated the value of a formal course on AfL in which the conceptual principles are explained, leading to greater uptake of this educational approach. She goes so far as to describe AfL as a threshold concept, which once understood conceptually, transforms teaching.

### **Methodology and Methods**

This study is based in a single Hong Kong university which specialises in applied subjects. It adopts an interpretivist stance and employs a phenomenology methodology to investigate students', educators' and managers' lived experience of assessment and the meaning they ascribe to AfL. Using both semi-structured interviews and focus groups as forms of narrative interview, we were also keen to enable participants' conversations to be at the core of our interactions with them, thus having the benefit of empowering participants (Elliott 2012) as they tell their stories.

### **Methods**

As noted, this study sought to elicit narrative conversations with educators, educator-managers (both by semi-structured interviews) and students (using focus groups). Purposive sampling, based on the first author's belief in participants' unique contributions and diverse experience with assessment practice, was used to recruit all participants, who came from a variety of applied disciplines (health science, business, engineering, communication) within

this university. Educator and educator-manager participants were invited by email through professional connections. Students were recruited based on educators' suggestions of who may be willing (which we accept may be a potential limitation of the study). All participants gave informed, formal consent and the whole research project on which this work is based received institutional ethical approval.

During the sampling process, participants' demographic backgrounds were also taken into consideration; efforts were made to balance out participants' ages, gender, discipline/academic departments and years of experience in higher education. That said, the invitation was not restricted to only educators and educator-managers with expertise in assessment practice, but rather to any people with some experience with assessment.

Fifteen educators were recruited, one of whom served as a pilot to test and ensure the quality of the data collection process. Out of the remaining fourteen educator participants (female=5, male=9), five also performed a concurrent management role at either department or faculty level, and these we refer to as educator-managers. These participants came from 11 departments and had academic experience ranging from 5 to 30 years, in a number of capacities from Instructor to Professor. Educator-managers had 2.5 to 20 years management experience and held roles such as Associate/Head Director and Associate Dean. As is typical of Hong Kong universities, most educator and educator-manager participants identified as from Confucian-influenced culture, but there were also some participants from other backgrounds. Among the Confucian-influenced staff, several had some experience teaching or learning in a western context, thus reflecting the permeable borders between these different educational cultures. For the student participants, two

groups of students (n=5) from two different academic departments were invited to participate. One group of students was in Year 2 of their study and the other group was in Years 3 and 4. All students identified as Confucian-influenced, although specifics about whether they had exposure to western education were not asked. The pseudonyms in the quotes are set to convey appropriate participants' information, e.g. students begin with "S", educators begin with "E" and managers begin with "M". We have also used names that reflect the ethnicity, e.g. Mary for non-Asians, Mun for Asians.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect qualitative data from educator and educator-manager participants, as they allowed participants to share their views privately and in-depth, without the influence of others (Saldana 2011). The participants with dual roles were interviewed with additional questions sharing their experience and perceptions as managers.

On the other hand, the focus group was most suitable for collecting data from the student participants, where students knew each other and went through similar experiences of assessment at around the same time in their educational journey. This created a group dynamic which allowed for a collective construction of meaning (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2005). The group interactive synergies may even cultivate new interpretations among the group and shed new insights beyond what one's memory or perception confined (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2005).

Each semi-structured interview and each focus group lasted for about 60 and 75 minutes respectively. All interviews were audio-recorded using a portable recording device. Some

semi-structured interviews were conducted in Cantonese while some were conducted in English, depending on the participant's preference. One focus group was conducted in English while the other one was conducted in Cantonese. Again, this was because of the language preference within the group. The first author is fluent in both Cantonese and English, and can analyse findings across both languages for translation of relevant quotes. The interviews were transcribed either by the first author or by external transcribers. In the case of an external transcriber being used, a transcriber confidentiality agreement was signed.

### ***Data Analysis***

This study adopted the five steps approach to data collection and analysis: "collection of verbal data; reading of the data; breaking of the data into some kind of parts; organisation and expression of the data from a disciplinary perspective; and synthesis or summary of the data for purposes of communication to the scholarly community" (Giorgi 1997, 245) to outline the themes. Reading of data in the form of transcript was thoroughly done to gather a big picture of the story relevant to the research questions. Repeated reading of transcriptions allows for ongoing analyses if necessary, providing details and accuracy (Hammersley 2012). As reading continued, data were divided into parts named 'meaning units'. Meaning units "signified a certain meaning, relevant for the study, and to be clarified further, is contained within the segregated unit" (Giorgi 1997, 246). These individual meaning units were later systematically organised into codes and categories to link them together (Starks and Brown Trinidad 2007). Lastly, the categories were further reduced or synthesised into structures or themes for an explicit communication answering the research questions.

The first author of this study is influenced by both the Confucian and the western culture from previous education and work experiences. Her previous exposure and relativism ontology has inspired her interest and belief in AfL. Reflexivity, such as reflecting on the nuances of both cultures, is constantly practiced during the data analyse process to avoid biasing one culture in assessment. In addition, there are constant dialogues between the two authors to discuss interpretations of findings. This process enhances the credibility of this research. In the following sections we discuss these emergent themes.

### **Understandings of Assessment and Assessment for Learning**

This study demonstrates a dominant view among stakeholders in both the merits of traditional examinations and in AfL. Hence, the summative/formative binary of assessment simply does not translate into their experiences or perceptions.

When initially asked about the purposes of assessment, our respondents nearly all responded in terms of its evaluative function – that is, assessment *of* learning. This is what we would have expected and what is commonly thought about assessment in Confucian-influenced cultures, and equally still in many other contexts. Most participants in this study naturally think of assessment as evaluating students' study progress, learning, and outcomes. Assessment is something needed in the education system to know if students have met a pre-set standard or competency.

It was also clear, however, that this immediate association of assessment with its summative role did not preclude appreciation of it also being formative, in the sense of assessment *for* learning. While it is true that they may not explicitly use the term AfL, some



of the basic principles appear known and understood. This was evidenced when educator/manager participants talked about concepts such as authenticity, feedback, reflection and curriculum mapping, and is also suggestive of the breakdown in the formative/summative divide discussed earlier:

It is [my] hope that students could apply, could translate efficiently if they encounter similar situations, it (assessment) needs application. (Ming)

There are actually activities where you have to reflect on certain tasks, and then you get confronted with some others....they had to post two comments on other posts. The activity was such that you post your own reflection but then you gave two [pieces of] feedback to two other posts, so that it was not just ending with posting it but it was actually being retaken. (Ellen)

...you need to take a whole-program view...can have a look at the proportion of assessment that comes from exams and assignments ...so you could actually do a map of that to see where it's [learning] happening....we're asking the question 'is this assessment really valid? (Mary)

The above quotes from the educator/manager participants illustrate some of the key functions they wish to see in assessment, and it is obvious that these functions are beyond their first impression of assessment in terms of evaluation alone. This suggests that they value both the formative and summative aspects of assessment, and do not see these as mutually exclusive. The AfL dimensions are particularly clear when these educator/manager participants consider how assessment helps students to reflect on and apply knowledge.

From the students' perspectives, evidence of their understanding of AfL is evident in the importance they accord to what they gain through feedback on assessment tasks:

...even if our responses [in assessment] did not match his/her [teachers'] answers, he/she would still give us constructive feedback and insights of his/her thinking behind....to guide us. (Sau)

...even if watching [our own] videos [in this assignment], we could know what we did good and bad. (Sze)

In contrast to some assumptions that students in the Confucian-influenced culture only care about grades, these quotes show how much these students value the feedback they get from assessment, and the ways in which feedback can provide them with guidance for future improvement.

It is also clear that student participants value assessments that facilitate learning, and not simply rote or recall. In support of this key principle of AfL, educator participants discussed the importance of the realignment of assessment tasks with learning objectives, as well as the use of non-traditional assessments:

...assessment to me is just like, get your hands in there, dig in and get an evaluation out of it. The way that I want to interpret assessment is not a one snapshot thing, which is our biggest failure at the moment. Our assessment is a one snapshot thing in terms of a test, examination and assignment. I would like to support, if possible, an ongoing assessment where there are multiple dips and beyond a semester. (En)

The assessment has to be valid. It also has to be reliable. It's not just about assessing, it's about the right kind of assessment to give students opportunities to demonstrate achievement of learning goals. (Mary)

Another important feature of AfL that is evident in our participants' responses is the active role it demands students to take in respect of their own learning through assessment. This sense of agency is apparent in this quote from a student:

it's very different because it's open book [exam], open internet, it's up to you...you actually you can apply the concept to the questions...you have to analyse what is the concept and evaluate so that you can apply...( Sun)

Similarly, educator/manager participants demonstrate an understanding of the need to bring students into the assessment process as active agents, shaping their own engagement with the assessment tasks:

...if students know what the assessment contents are and how they are link with the course design, it will help them grasp which kind of learning outcomes they should achieve...the clearer the relationship is defined, the higher the chance the teaching/learning activities would fulfil the course objectives (Man)

...I would give them evaluation and feedback, to let them know whether they are on the right track, if they are aligning with what I am thinking of or the message I am delivering. Once they have this experience, they move on to do their own research...they will take this opportunity to make improvement as they have this 'redo' process. (Mo)

The quotes clearly illustrate that educators do not only teach for the test but for learning, which again reinforces the point made in our introduction, that in this context examinations are positively associated with learning. One reason for this level of understanding of core features of AfL lies, we suggest, in the participants' applied science backgrounds which places a strong emphasis on the practical application of knowledge using authentic assessment. The institution in this study is an applied-discipline university where effective application of knowledge is the ultimate goal for most of its programmes. Compared to pure arts and science disciplines, applied-disciplines commonly use case-based, scenario-based or skill-based assessment. In addition, many applied disciplines mandate internships in their curricula and these involve applying knowledge and skills in real work settings under the supervision of industrial professionals. These internships usually last for a few weeks and are normally graded; professional teachers often give feedback continuously in this period of time to facilitate students to perform at a job-required standard.

As such, concepts such as authentic assessment and feedback are familiar to teachers and students in this research context. The educator participants in this research are not only familiar with authentic assessment but they are also quite skilled at designing a variety of authentic assessment types, as described below in the interviews:

For example, there is a subject studying the management of medical devices in hospital, you need to report what is the problems of the machines, who checked the machines, when did it checked, which part may have chance of electrical leakage? Firstly, students need to know how to design the form, and the details included in the form, for example it must allow others to trace the person in charge and where is the test done. It must include the time and place or signature. These are the components that we need to assess them. (Eun)

We also have skill test, like the most fundamental part, take BP, turning, feed Ryle's tube, feed gastric tube, these skill test, we also have some OSCE test, like patient-role play, some scenario base, testing their decision making, their judgement, they have gone through different--, and also students' placement would have a set of assessment, but of course it's by our colleagues and our colleagues outside. Also, at the end, the graduate students need to take a case study test, how to handle a case, what they are planning, whether they understand what are the problems of the cases are , so we have different assessment throughout. (Eig)

As with the broader concept of AfL, educator participants display an understanding of authentic assessment, but lack a related understanding of the actual terminology or theories that underpin this practice. Most likely this is because of a lack of any formal training or education regarding assessment.

The educator participants' understanding of AfL is largely implicit relates to the associated concept of assessment literacy. Close examination of our narrative data reveals this lack of assessment literacy, whereby many participants could mention discrete aspects related to AfL, but lacked awareness of the unifying concept or how different elements would work together to support student learning. Certainly we found little awareness of Medland's

(2015) six elements of assessment literacy. This suggests a lack of conceptual understanding of assessment for learning, despite implicit appreciation of some of the core elements. That educator participants also continued to view the primary function of assessment as measurement is also suggestive of not having sufficient knowledge of the varied forms of assessment, which is also a feature of lacking assessment literacy.

It is also interesting that the manager participants mentioned curriculum mapping as a feature in AfL but without further elaboration of this terminology. Medland (2015) stipulates that effective curriculum mapping takes a programme-wide effort to align learning objectives, teaching activities and assessment tasks. In our study, the terminology of curriculum mapping may be present among the manager participants but conceptualisation and actualisation at a programme-wide level are far from happening.

Thus we are left with the sense that while all of our participants have an implicit understanding of ways in which assessment can support learning, they have insufficient exposure to the conceptual idea behind assessment for learning and do not necessarily see a conflict between traditional examinations and learning-oriented assessment. In order to more fully embrace AfL requires surmounting several barriers – and we consider this next.

### **Ways Forward to Enhance AfL in this Confucian-influenced context**

So far the insights from all participants suggest that AfL is better understood in this Confucian-influenced context than may have been expected by adhering to a rigid summative/formative binary. Participants believe in the importance of traditional examinations, while also embracing learning-oriented assessment. Such a position is clearly

held by all participants, but this does not mean it is entirely unproblematic. In this section we consider two ways to further strengthen AfL in this Confucian-influenced context: firstly through a critical exploration of some aspects of the traditional examination process and secondly by increasing assessment literacy. Indeed, the two are inter-twined as the latter will very much help inform the former.

Traditional examinations are not themselves the focus of criticism on one level, but any assessment which is more about memorisation than learning is found wanting, particularly among student participants:

I believe that most assessments in this university just stress the 'knowing' level where they just ask about your knowledge in the subject (Sun)

...the assessments we have is actually – ok if I do well, then I get a good grade, then I remember everything...somehow you only know how to work inside your classroom or work inside your lab, so it's not even knowing how to work...after the exam, just forget about it then that's over... (Shu)

And it is not just students making such observations, as one educator commented:

...I don't know if we are cultivating and assessing a student's ability to reason (which is important to my field and other fields). We just don't assess it...They (students) are not ask to think about how they reason, they just stand up and present or they will just give an exam answer. It's disjointed I think. (Eric)

Thus given there is this implicit awareness of AfL but also a continuing commitment to traditional examinations, what we seem to be witnessing is a mismatch stemming from multiple levels including teaching/learning tasks, assessment tasks and learning objectives which is amplified in the context of these applied disciplines. If this is so, it indicates that the current assessment practice may not be an accurate reflection of students' learning. In addition, even if some learning may be occurring within an assessment activity, the end

goals of learning do not meet the expectations of the current requirements of the applied disciplines. Indeed, the issue of validity resonates with all our stakeholder accounts, as well as with previous research. For example, Brown and Wang (2013) have previously reported concerns among university students in Hong Kong about the inaccuracy of assessment and some primary/secondary school teachers have gone so far as to suggest assessment is simply irrelevant to learning objectives (Brown et al. 2011). While stakeholders are questioning the very foundations of assessment we have a paradox whereby the need for assessment reform is even greater but the knowledge of how to reform is lacking. This resonates with Bearman et al (2016) that educators need to be nurtured on making sound assessment design decisions, in addition to understand the principles of assessment.

While the integration and application of knowledge should be the ultimate goal of any education, students in our study reported that they lacked this experience within the current assessment system. And yet this must be contrasted with the fact that all stakeholder groups in this study also named a number of authentic assessment experiences, as seen in the previous section. Our analysis suggests that this is because for all participants there is an automatic and strong association of examinations with assessment, and other methods, perhaps less common or traditional, do not spring to mind so easily, but came out indirectly in our discussions. This illustrates why the summative/formative binary is problematic. It is obvious from participants in our study that they are always functioning somewhere in between rather than one or the other. But again we return to the problem of assessment literacy. While participants remain unaware of the conceptual foundations of different assessment purposes and approaches it remains difficult for them to operationalise their ideas about learning and assessment into real changes in practice. This

is consistent with findings from Reimann (2016) who demonstrated how assessment literacy could be taught through an educational development programme, resulting in a more complex understanding of assessment and its applications. The Assessment Design Decisions framework (Bearman et al 2016) can also be used as a first step for teaching educators assessment literacy.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

This study demonstrates that AfL requires a strong conceptual foundation in order to ensure that all the elements of assessment are aligned and consistent: and this is always about more than technique. This, therefore, is a lesson not just for Confucian-influenced cultures, but for other national or cultural contexts as well.

The ambivalence of our participants' views on assessment also suggests the problems in a sharp summative/formative binary. They are all seeking ways to talk about learning and learning for the longer term, even within a summative context. Thus rather than occupying an either/or position, the participants are acting in-between these two realms. Thus the Confucian-influenced emphasis on traditional examinations does not mean that educators or students do not also value learning, or see the limitations of achieving this in a traditional examination mode. But we should also not underestimate the power of tradition and cultural acceptance: of the view of traditional examinations as a 'gold standard' of assessment methods. This inevitably does constrain the ways in which participants can fully adopt the principles of AfL. There is in fact a paradox at play: participants appear aware of the limitations of examinations for learning and yet remain committed to their 'gold standard' position. While this belief holds it is hard for them to consider alternatives



assessment strategies more closely attuned to AfL. Indeed, they cannot consider such alternatives if they are unaware of them, and this is a crucial element of assessment literacy.

In order for AfL to thrive, it is critical for all stakeholders in higher education, both western and Confucian-influenced, to return to the fundamental concept of what assessment is. The myth that assessment equals examination hinders mindset changes despite the existence of good authentic assessment. Especially in the Confucian-influenced culture where many cultural biases shape the beliefs in how their assessment is and should be, the hurdle to scale-up assessment literacy is even bigger. Again, this is not only an issue in the Confucian-influenced culture but in western practices where formative assessments seem to be more understood but this may be confined to educational developers and researchers and not general academics. Key is to develop an understanding and a shared language (Medland 2019) where stakeholders can function easily along a complex continuum of summative and formative assessments.

We should be encouraged by the positive association of assessment with learning demonstrated by these participants. At the same time, we must note the barriers to assessment reform, which revolve around the twin issues of challenging the 'gold standard' image of traditional examinations and promoting opportunities to develop greater assessment literacy. The Assessment Design Decisions framework (Bearman et al 2016) can be used to facilitate assessment literacy because the framework is holistic and practical that goes beyond individual' understandings of assessment. Another practical way to scale up assessment literacy is for institutions to develop a holistic assessment policy that puts

learning as the focus, while takes into considerations the voices of teachers, students and managers (Chong 2020). This may sound ironic but policies appear to have the power to surface an important topic and catch stakeholders' attention. Such policies need to include nurturing activities such as workshops and learning communities in order to share good assessment practices and move away from traditional examinations.

Our finding may also be helpful to colleagues in western contexts, in which the benefits of AfL are represented strongly in educational literature and research, but actual assessment reform has lagged behind. If we keep just assuming that academics "know" about assessment and don't see it as a complex skill to be nurtured and developed over time – as represented by Eisner's (1985) concept of "connoisseurship" – then the potential for AfL to flourish will always be truncated.

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