A complex web of consequence, emotion, and agency: Hong Kong tertiary students’ drawings of assessment.

Gavin T L Brown (gt.brown@auckland.ac.nz)  
The University of Auckland  
Zhenlin Wang (zlwang@ied.edu.hk)  
The Hong Kong Institute of Education

Paper presented to the Symposium on Assessment and Learner Outcomes, September 2011, Wellington, NZ
Issue

- Reforms in assessment in higher education are being mooted in HK
  - Less examination, more informal-interactive assessments
  - These require more student involvement in assessment
- Many studies have examined Chinese student conceptions of teaching and learning, but few have specifically examined their conceptions of assessment
- Their beliefs about assessment may affect implementation of assessment reforms
Conceptions of Assessment

- Linked to purposes or intentions for assessment activities rather than formats
- Western studies have identified students are aware of 4 purposes (Brown, 2008)
  1. assessment leads to improved teaching and learning;
  2. assessment evaluates schools and students
  3. assessment has a positive emotional impact on students;
  4. assessment is irrelevant and students respond negatively to it.
- However, existence & endorsement of conceptions ought to reflect ecological realities
- Different policy & social pressures should lead to different conceptions
Theoretical Rationale for Study

- Increasing pressure of accountability (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999) implemented through the assessment system may lead to ecologically rational responses (Rieskamp & Reimer, 2007).
  - Since the risks of doing poorly on high-stakes examinations are powerful, it seems rational, and possibly even self-regulating, to have less enjoyment in the process and to view the highly selective consequences as fundamentally unfair.
Chinese culture has a long history of:

- Using examinations and tests to select and reward talent (China Civilisation Centre, 2007);
- Regarding high academic performance on high-stakes examinations as a legitimate, meritocratic basis for upward social mobility regardless of social background (Cheung, 2008; Lee, 1996).
- Considering the person with high academic success as morally virtuous (Li, 2002; 2009; Pong & Chow, 2002)

Hong Kong has a relatively low university enrolment rate compared to other regions in East Asia.

- Approximately 20% of students have the opportunity of securing a place in one of the University Grants Council funded higher education institutions (Choi, 1999),
Study

- 6 focus group discussions (Cantonese) on 6 tertiary campuses after 26 students drew pictures of assessment
- Thematic analysis of transcribed discussions
  - In Cantonese, translated into English, creation of mind-map of relationships, member checking
Results

- 18 themes grouped into 5 major categories
  - *Nature of Assessment*: Examinations, Life-long, high-stakes consequences
  - *Assessment determines Value*: Personal Value/Worth, Family Obligation
  - *Assessment is Selective & Controlling*: Legitimate Selection, Social Mobility, Societal Surveillance & Control, Escape
  - *Assessment elicits Negative Emotions & Evaluations*: Negative, Negative Emotions, Validity Concerns, Academic Content Only
Key Differences to Western Studies

- The sense of personal value or worth within family as well as society contingent on academic success

Importance of personal effort
Discussion

- The Chinese learner is seen as persistent, effortful, and internally attributive (Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Watkins & Biggs, 2001).
- However, assessment elicits responses consistent with the powerful consequences of assessment practices in Hong Kong.
  - Being monitored by assessment engenders a sense of powerlessness, in contrast to a sense of empowerment in response to learning.
  - In contrast to the life changing social mobility associated with scholarly learning, assessment is associated with life changing negative consequences in the event of failure.
  - The evaluation of an individual’s worth as a consequence of assessment is a characteristic associated with even contemporary Chinese societies.
- Students’ conception of assessment seen in this study revealed a much darker side of the Chinese learner that seems to have been ignored by research into the Chinese learner.
Discussion

- Western ideology promotes strong individualistic values of self-esteem and intrinsic motivation in education.
- Hong Kong students’ beliefs about assessment are more other-oriented, filial piety fulfilling commonly found in cultures with Confucius heritage (Kim & Park, 2008).
  - Students feel controlled by the assessment system and regulated under the high pressure to conform to societal expectations and fulfil familial obligations,
  - Hence, motivation mainly comes from external approval of their teachers and families, and from societal rewards, such as educational opportunities and better jobs.
  - Instead of boosting self-esteem like Western studies suggest, Hong Kong students are most concerned about the damaging effect of assessments on self-esteem.
- Simply—reforms to involve students do not address this psychological make-up.
Discussion

- Students were resilient in their responses to assessment
  - students strive to keep their heads up and fight the oppressive assessment system through diligent study, cramming, tutoring, etc.
  - They cast doubts on the legitimacy of the system despite being successful enough to enter higher education; an incipient sense of rejecting the total system
  - It remains to be seen whether this critical response to assessment will result in resistance to the public examination regime of Hong Kong by the time this group and its generation of students become parents.
Discussion

- However, probability of changing the system does not appear to be high.
- current Hong Kong policy on assessment for learning is a soft policy unlikely to subvert the strong policy of selective examinations (Kennedy, Chan, & Fok, 2011).
- Indeed, the assessment systems and careers of China and Hong Kong contribute to extremely high average performance on international tests like PISA, TIMSS, and PIRLS; hence, there may be little motivation by the system or even families to change.
- Perhaps future generations of Hong Kong parents will resist the system by:
  - enrolling children in international schools or migrating to western countries for greater educational opportunities.
Discussion

- International students from Chinese societies will probably have had very different assessment careers from Western young people and this will still create some tension between families and schools/institutions. Dialogue about the differing roles and functions of assessment will certainly be required.

- Low academic achieving students in Chinese societies will probably have even more negative views of assessment or perhaps such students would rationalize their failure in terms of lack of effort or personal worth, rather than to deficiencies of the teachers, schools, or assessment system.
The future for HK?

Individuality

A Better Life Chance?
More individuality within a less pressured society

Conformity

More of the same?
Continuing pressure to conform regardless of preference or ability

Individuality
References

- China Civilisation Centre. (2007). *China: Five thousand years of history and civilization*. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press.
References