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Assessment and Learning

Assessment is part of every teacher's job. But there's more to it than just finding out how much learning has taken place. Dr Jonathan Goh provides us with a broader perspective of assessment.



"Why is assessment needed?" asks Jonathan Goh, who is Associate Professor and Associate Dean (Research Support) in the Office of Education Research.

"Knowing how to do it is crucial to helping us know how well we have taught and how well the students have learned in school," he says. "It is paramount that teachers know how to assess students properly."

Proper assessment will let teachers have a clear picture of their students' true abilities and how much they have progressed over time. "There are, however, a lot of issues that teachers need to be aware of," adds Jonathan.

He guides us through the basics of assessment that every teacher must know.

The Role of Assessment in Learning

If we think of teaching and learning visually as a triangle, made up of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, it often looks like a lop-sided one, notes Jonathan. This is because assessment is often given less attention than the other two components.

"Part of the reason, I suspect, is that people fear numbers," he says. "They think of it as statistics. As soon as you mention Means and Standard Deviations, they get really uncomfortable! Well, we need to understand that numbers are just numerical representations of qualitative meanings."

Assessment does indeed involve statistics. But it's not all about the numbers, as some teachers may fear.

More importantly, Jonathan asks us to consider these: What is assessment? Why do we need it? And how do we know how much our students have learned based on their test results?

Key Aspects of Assessment

Many people see assessment primarily as a way to *evaluate* skills or knowledge of our students. Jonathan believes assessment can do more than that.

"For a start, it's an opportunity for *enhancing* knowledge and skills through various modes of assessment, for instance, through projects, tests, assignments and presentations."

He lists the three key issues of assessment that teachers need to think about:

1. How to plan for assessment
2. How to develop the test questions or instruments for testing
3. How to interpret the test results

Planning for assessment

To start things off, teachers should sit down together to draw up a curriculum plan. Almost like drawing up a map, they need to ask themselves what they want to achieve with the assessment.

They then need to align the assessment with the curriculum. Looking at the curriculum, they then decide on the spread of topics and difficulty levels that should be covered, and also what constructs they're really trying to test. All these would also help them in assessing the validity of their test.

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“We can measure almost anything meaningfully” says Jonathan. “We just need to ‘unpack’ what (the variable) we are trying to measure, and ask questions on what we want to measure. In so doing, it will really help us better understand what we are trying to measure.”

Is your test valid?

Test validity is a fundamental to the design of a good test. The three types of validity that teachers should look out for are:

1. *Face validity*: “If it’s a Science test, we had better be sure that we have questions related to Science and nothing else!”
2. *Content validity*: “Test questions must be in accordance to what we have taught in the curriculum. It is also important to have a good spread of questions across the range of topics taught in class. Teachers need to also take into account of the difficulty levels of the questions asked in tests and exams.
3. *Construct validity*: “It is important that our test questions measure the psychological construct we intent to measure. I have come across many examples where the psychological constructs shift. Here is a common one: often, teachers use complicated or bombastic language in a Math problem-solving question. The child may get the answer wrong not because he or she didn’t know the Math but rather, the student was confused by the language used. Are we testing for English language or Math ability?”

Find out more about test validity in “[A Good Test](#)” in this issue.

Developing test questions

“Tests questions should not be convoluted,” cautions Jonathan. “We should avoid words that are misleading or vocabulary that the students do not even understand.”

But tests shouldn’t be too easy either.

“You must have sufficient items and they should vary in terms of difficulty levels so that you have a good idea how the child is performing,” he advises. Don’t be afraid to “have questions that are difficult to really ‘stretch’ them”. Only then can you know their true ability.

If we remember that the aim is to evaluate and enhance knowledge, we can develop test questions that enable further learning.

Interpreting the results

When it comes to interpreting results, invariably, the bell curve gets mentioned.

It does serve a purpose, says Jonathan. However, teachers need to understand three basic statistical concepts (Mean, Standard Deviations and Standard Errors) to better understand how their students have performed.

Without a good grasp of these concepts, teachers may erroneously think that students are underperforming when their marks fall below the Mean, or celebrate when the class Mean for a particular subject is 80 out of 100.

Interpretation of test results gets more complicated when we make comparisons, either across time or levels, or between different students.

The scores alone do not tell us the full story. A student who scored 85 marks in Test 1 and then 75 marks in Test 2 may seem to be falling behind. But perhaps Test 2 was much harder than the first test.

Breaking It Down for Assessment

Setting a diverse range of questions with different difficulty levels – that sounds do-able for subjects like Math or Science. But what about assessing, say, English Language essays? Or something even more abstract, such as critical thinking?

“It is important to know what we are measuring. We need to see if you can unpack it (the variable) into its components,” says Jonathan. For an essay, for example, you can look for transitions, for creativity, for language use, and so on. Each component can be allocated a certain number of points out of 100. You can include weights if you feel one component is more important than another.

“When you break it down further, it begins to be more meaningful,” he explains. This is also the approach he would use to assess skills such as critical thinking.

“There are aspects or dimensions of critical thinking that we’re trying to assess. If I were to develop a test of 30 MCQs on critical thinking, I would develop the questions around these aspects or dimensions, and ensuring that there are enough questions for each dimension.”

The Formative Role of Assessment



Grades do matter, especially in high-stakes national exams, but educators also place much emphasis on formative assessment.

“If you think about it, assessment is mainly formative because it’s developmental,” notes Jonathan. “Formative assessment is useful for both teachers and students in modifying their practices to improve learning, often through qualitative feedback.”

Assessment reveals more than how much the students know. “It’s also for us as teachers, how we’re seeing growth and seeing how the students are learning the concepts we’re teaching.”

Assessment benefits not just students. It’s also an opportunity for teachers to improve on their own pedagogies.

“We may look at the students’ performances and reflect on how we teach. Then we adjust accordingly to make sure that these concepts are well understood by the students.”

With the focus shifting towards 21st century competencies, the challenge for teachers today is not just to impart knowledge, but to create opportunities for students to show how well they have understood the concepts.

This may require teachers to create assessments that simulate real-life situations so that students can demonstrate learning through application. Seen in this broader perspective, assessment can be formative for both students and teachers. Jonathan certainly thinks so.

“If teachers can see assessment as part of the whole teaching–learning process and continue to improve their assessment practices, it would certainly take our education system to new heights and the teachers to a new level of professionalism.”

Formative assessment is useful for both teachers and students in modifying their practices to improve learning, often through qualitative feedback.

- Jonathan on why formative assessment is needed

Jonathan Goh is the Guest Editor of this issue. He is an Associate Dean (Research Support) with the Office of Education Research (OER) and Associate Professor with the Policy and Leadership Studies Academic Group in NIE. His research interests include educational measurement, school leadership and management, student learning approaches and intercultural communication competence.

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Learning Beyond Assessments

As teachers, you put a lot of effort into preparing students for exams and in grading them. But in the process, learning may inadvertently take a back seat. Does assessment spell the end of learning?

Assessments are often equated with tests and exams. These are useful for ranking and placement purposes, when we need a practical way to make critical decisions.

However, a second – and perhaps more critical – purpose of assessment is to support and enhance learning. “In contrast to the regulatory approach, it’s the educational purpose of assessment,” says Assistant Professor Kelvin Tan.

The danger is when the regulatory functions dominate the educative benefits of assessment. “Once the assessment stops, the learning stops. Sometimes it signals the end of learning,” he notes.

But this need not be the case. For Kelvin, it starts with a healthy view of assessment.

Assessment for Learning



“Mentally, everyone knows teachers cannot do the learning for the students. But in reality teachers act the opposite way,” observes Kelvin.

“They are teaching and assessing in a way as if it’s all dependent on them.”

So we labour over each test paper and exam script, making annotations and suggesting corrections. All that feedback was meant to help students improve on their learning. It was meant to feed back into their learning.

But more often than not, it doesn’t. It doesn’t get a chance to.

In order not to let all that effort go to waste, Kelvin believes teachers should start passing the baton of learning back to the students.

We need to think more about what assessment should do for students’ learning, and less about what students should be learning for assessment.

Assessment for learning prompts and enhances the quality of learning. “It happens when teachers introduce a notion of assessment that is integral to the students’ learning, and not something that concludes learning.”

Teachers’ Conceptions of Alternative Assessment

This has prompted many teachers to think about an alternative to the current practices of assessment. But an alternative assessment practice may not always be a meaningful departure or an improvement from traditional assessment. Much depends on how teachers understand and use it in schools.

From his research, Kelvin found that most teachers are either conservative or pragmatic in their use of what they understand to be “alternative assessment”.

Conservative teachers would rather not divert from the current practice. If there is spare curriculum space, they may provide an additional worksheet or task. But this doesn’t interfere with or distract from the existing traditional assessment.

Pragmatic teachers are also happy to abide within the existing curriculum boundaries and structures. If they find an alternative assessment practice to be effective, such as a learning journey project, they may give it 1 or 2 weeks within curriculum time.

*Once the assessment stops,
the learning stops.
Sometimes it signals the end
of learning.*

*- Kelvin Tan, Curriculum,
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Kelvin recommends taking a more progressive view of assessment, one that is integral to learning. It's about sustainable learning – beyond assessment, beyond their academic lives.

"Teachers who have this conception have a broad view of education," he says. "They are able to satisfy imminent pragmatic educational needs – scoring well in exams – and yet go beyond that."

A Progressive View of Assessment

Improving the quality of learning may require a paradigm shift, but it need not entail a drastic change in practices. The question Kelvin asks are: What is alternative assessment an alternative to? What purpose do you want it to achieve?



The best assessments generate feedback that students can use. They are told how well they have done and what else they can do to improve their learning. This means giving students opportunities to act on that feedback.

For assessment to be effective, it must have an imminent impact on learning. This means students should act on the feedback sooner than later. This can be done by giving them a similar task soon after the previous task. Teachers can then track the progress of the students.

"The underlying issue is how the curriculum is designed and understood. It's not so much the assessment," notes Kelvin.

The underlying issue is how the curriculum is designed and understood. It's not so much the assessment.

- Kelvin on a progressive view of assessment

Teachers can design the sequence of assessments to create a coherent series of assessment tasks over a period of time, instead of a one-off task, such that each assessment task works in relation with the rest and they feed into each other.

"Design an assessment that generates feedback and provides a subsequent context for the feedback to be used," advises Kelvin. "This will create a dialogue between teachers and students on how and what to understand."

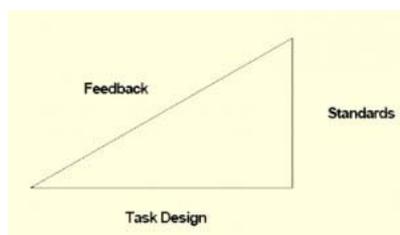
Alternative assessment need not mean additional work. "You decide what you have time for," says Kelvin. "How can students benefit from you? Once teachers can understand and appreciate that, they will rethink their teaching–assessment–feedback cycle."

Supporting Learning with Feedback

Feedback is key to effective assessment that supports learning. But when it comes to providing feedback, we need to recognize that the student is the key person who can change their own learning.

"If the students don't understand the feedback, they can't help themselves. So what can the teacher do to support or force the students to help their own learning?"

To help teachers provide feedback that would enhance their students' learning, Kelvin suggests thinking in terms of a triangle of practices.



"If the student gets a grade C and he should go to a grade B next, the gap is a grade C to a grade B. Teachers should give the feedback according to the student's gap. You have to pitch the feedback."

The horizontal axis represents the time between the giving of feedback and the next opportunity to use it.

"The slope indicates the ambition level of your feedback and the progress your students are supposed to make in that period of time," explains Kelvin. "If you have a short period of time and very high gap, the slope is very steep. It means intense last-minute work."

So, what's your triangle like?

Reference

Tan, K. H. K. (2012). Variation in teachers' conceptions of alternative assessment in Singapore primary schools. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1007/s10671-012-9130-4

Kelvin Tan is Assistant Professor with NIE's **Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Academic Group**. He lectures in the Management and Leadership in Schools (MLS) programme in NIE for Heads of Department. His research interest is in assessment for learning.

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Diagnosing Misconceptions through Assessment

Like a doctor finding out why a patient has fallen ill, teachers look out for signs of their students not understanding what was taught and why. But with so many “patients” to be diagnosed in a class, the teacher is going to need some help.

When students get an answer wrong, it is common for teachers to go, “Let me show you what to do,” and then proceed to demonstrate how they can arrive at the correct answer.

If the students still don't get it, they'll demonstrate it again and again. However, this may not address the underlying misconceptions that caused the students to get the answer wrong.

Assessment can show whether the students understood a concept correctly, but also reveal why they got it wrong.

But such a tool does not currently exist – at least, not in a form that is easy for teachers to use. This is why Dr Cheng Yuanshan, Dr Nie Youyan and Ms Helen Hong decided to develop one, based on the current Math curriculum.

Cognitive Diagnostic Assessment

The team is working with teachers in a primary school to explore the use of cognitive diagnostic assessment (CDA) to diagnose problems in student learning.

Diagnostic assessment has been around for years and is mostly used to evaluate problems in learning. It's usually administered as a standard battery of test questions that covers a wide range of topics, such as an intelligence test.

CDA is a little different, explains Yuanshan.

It can help to pinpoint the exact misconceptions that a student has. Teachers can then follow up with the right remediation.

“It's like a doctor diagnosing a patient,” says Helen, “to find out what kind of illnesses a patient has and then help the patient achieve recovery.”

Using a Diagnostic Tool

Helen used to teach in a primary school and recounts her own experiences. “I think every good teacher would already be doing some sort of diagnosing in class. They would do it on the fly, as and when, through interactions with the students or marking their answers.”

But such attempts are often ad hoc and may not be systematic enough to identify the student's exact problems. And with so many students in a class, teachers are hard-pressed to come up with an accurate diagnosis for every one.

“Some teachers really have the motivation to teach students to do better. But the problem is, they may spend a long time just figuring out what the problem is,” says Yuanshan. “That's why if you know what the misconception is, you can really focus on it.”

“The purpose in having CDA is to give quick feedback to the teacher so that the teacher would know where the students are at and immediately do remediation,” says Helen.



Dr Cheng Yuanshan (left) and Helen Hong

The purpose in having CDA is to give quick feedback to the teacher so that the teacher would know where the students are at and immediately do remediation.

- Helen Hong, Office of Education Research

CDA Questions: An Example

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Helen gives an example of an MCQ on fractions to show us how CDA works.

Calculate $1/5 + 2/5$.

- (a) $3/5$
- (b) $3/10$
- (c) $2/25$
- (d) $2/5$

The correct answer is (a). Students who choose this answer show that they have understood how to add fractions.

If (b) is chosen, the student has confused addition of numerals with addition of fractions. If (c) is chosen, the student has made the mistake of multiplying both the numerators and denominators. If (d) is chosen, the student knows that the denominator should not be changed, but has made the mistake of multiplying the numerators.

One Test, Multiple Diagnoses

The great thing about CDA is that it helps teachers to diagnose all 40 students at one go. The doctors would be envious! But how is it done?

Starting with a Primary 3 class, Yuanshan, Youyan and Helen want to develop a series of MCQ items on specific Math topics that teachers can use as a CDA tool in the classroom.

Teachers can get students to answer MCQs and then look at the answers they choose.

Each answer is carefully constructed to represent the common misconceptions students may have on a particular concept or topic.

These tests can be given during class time or even as homework. It can also be used before or after teaching a concept, to see if students have understood the specific concept.

In this way, teachers can easily and quickly differentiate their instruction to address the misconceptions among different groups of students. They can then spend more time explaining a particular concept, or conduct remedial classes for specific students.



Urgent Need for a Diagnostic Tool

In a large-scale survey of teachers in the US, 80% of those interviewed said that such an assessment tool is urgently needed. The Singapore school that the team is working with is also very interested to have such a tool customized for their teachers' needs.

Some teachers really have the motivation to teach students to do better. But the problem is, they may spend a long time just figuring out what the problem is.

- Cheng Yuanshan, Psychological Studies Academic Group

Yuanshan, Youyan and Helen will be working closely with the teachers to come up with the tests, and also equip them with the know-how of CDA. In this way, the teachers can design their own CDA tests for other topics or even subjects.

They also hope to develop materials to help teachers correct students' misconceptions once they have been diagnosed.

It takes a lot of planning, but Yuanshan believes it's worth the while. "I want to use it to help teachers," he says. If developed well, the CDA tool will save teachers' time and enable them to assess *and* teach more effectively.

About the research team

A trained cognitive psychologist, **Cheng Yuanshan** is a Lecturer with NIE's **Psychological Studies Academic Group** (PS AG). He is working together with Assistant Professor **Nie Youyan**, also from the PS AG, and Teaching Fellow **Helen Hong** from the **Office of Education**

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Where Anonymous Feedback is Welcome

Read, review and edit 40 essays on the same topic – this is familiar to language teachers. These steps are essential for a good piece of writing, but it sure is a lot of work. What if the students are the ones doing it – and enjoying it?

Classmates as Peer Reviewers

Imagine an English classroom where the students take on the role of the teacher and assess each other's work.

For every piece of writing they do, they receive four to five reviews from their classmates. Each piece of constructive feedback is anonymous. With the feedback, they revise and then rewrite a second draft.

At the same time, they also provide feedback for an article they are assigned to read. And they don't know who the author is.

This is made possible by a Web-based peer review system, called *SWoRD* (Scaffolded Writing and Rewriting in the Discipline), which allows students to upload and review articles anonymously.

The key to this is the anonymity of it all. It gives students the opportunity to think and write both as a writer and a reviewer. And it sure makes the writing process a lot of fun.



(From left) Cho Young Hoan, Anita Devi Pillai, Daphnee Lee, Mary Ellis and Mimi Shin

"Students write from the perspective of a writer," explains Research Scientist and Principal Investigator Dr Cho Young Hoan. "But by reviewing other people's papers, they can also get the perspectives of the reviewers and use it on their own paper."

Benefits of Peer Assessments

With four other researchers, Young tested *SWoRD* in a few classes at NIE with the intent to introduce it to secondary schools in 2013. They found that this new method of assessment reaps several benefits, mainly in promoting critical thinking and constructive learning among students.

While a typical peer assessment process may see students writing feedback just because they have to, students using *SWoRD* were seen to be more motivated to give quality feedback.

Centred around the idea of anonymity, the peer review procedure turns into a constructive process that takes away the element of "mutual gratitude" where friends tend to give each other good reviews without much thought.

"It is not just an 'I pat your back, you pat mine' kind of thing," says Dr Mary Ellis, one of the Co-Principal Investigators (Co-PIs). This is because of the anonymity of the whole process.

Where previously students were more concerned about not hurting their friend's feelings, the anonymity in *SWoRD* allows students to give and receive more open and constructive feedback.

The students who authored the paper are also able to score the feedback they receive based on its quality. Known as back-review, this encourages students to put a lot more thought and effort into constructing their feedback.

As students consider how to respond to the reviews they receive – what to use, what not to use, and why – they also learn to think critically and to be flexible in their writing and thinking.

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Students have greater autonomy in terms of what they learn through peer assessment.

- **Daphnee Lee**, Office of Education Research

“Students find it useful because they may not notice the gaps in their own writings so they learn through reviewing others’ work,” notes Co-PI Dr Anitha Devi Pillai.

“Students have greater autonomy in terms of what they learn through peer assessment,” adds Co-PI Dr Daphnee Lee.

Scaffolded Writing and Rewriting in the Discipline (SWoRD)

SWoRD is a web-based reciprocal peer evaluation tool developed by the University of Pittsburgh. Young and his team have found several benefits from the use of this application in classrooms. Some of its features include:

- *Anonymity*: Users are able to upload their articles under a pseudonym to maintain anonymity throughout the reviewing process.
- *Auto-assignment*: The system is able to assign reviewers automatically.
- *Rubrics*: Reviews are given based on evaluation dimensions (e.g., stand, supporting arguments, counter arguments, and language use of the article).
- *Back-review*: The system allows authors to rate their reviewers based on a seven-point rating scale.
- *Review accuracy*: The system provides information of review accuracy by comparing a reviewer’s ratings with other reviewers’ ratings on same papers.

Perceptions of Peer Assessments

For SWoRD to succeed, “The perceptions of peer assessment are crucial,” says Young.

They found that students who perceive the concept of peer assessment positively showed active participation in giving and receiving peer feedback. Likewise for teachers, they have to welcome the concept in order to confidently facilitate the entire peer assessment process.

Am I competent enough to facilitate peer assessment? Will the students be able to handle it? These are some doubts that teachers who are new to this idea tend to have.

We want to see the improvements in the writing quality, not so much the scores of the feedback.

- Cho Young Hoan, Office of Education Research

To help teachers ease into the new pedagogy, Young and his team will conduct training sessions in schools. Teachers will be trained in how to identify key features of a quality review and to help students integrate the feedback into their final articles.

At the end of the day, it’s really about the students. “We want to see the improvements in the writing quality, not so much the scores of the feedback,” says Young.

Think Like a Reviewer, Write Like a Writer

“It gets the students to be more motivated to give quality reviews, not just good or bad reviews.” – Anitha

“The anonymity of it was attractive to me. It makes learning more authentic.” – Mary

“Peer assessment is in line with the new education trend in Singapore, which is towards formative assessment, instead of summative assessment.” – Daphnee

“It is going to be much easier for teachers – it saves a lot of marking time.” – Mimi

“In our research, we find that the average students’ reviews are very similar to experts’.” – Young



About the research team

Research Scientist Cho Young Hoan is the Principal Investigator for the project, "**Teacher and Student Perception of Peer Assessment for English Writing**". Working together with him are Co-Principal Investigators **Anitha Devi Pillai**, **Mary Ellis**, **Daphnee Lee** and collaborator Mimi Shin.

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Using Feedback to Enhance Learning

Students, parents, as well as teachers, place great importance on grades and marks. However, these numbers can be interpreted in different ways. What if a student achieves 90 marks? What is the meaning of 90 marks?

The Impact of Feedback

Feedback is an important part of the learning process. We all know from experience that the manner in which feedback is given affects the way it is received. The impact of teachers' feedback can go both ways, that is, positive or negative.

In the learning context, feedback usually follows a test or an assessment. Often, teachers look at the raw scores alone to tell how well their students did. But different teachers may interpret the numbers differently. This, in turn, affects the kind of feedback they give to students.

Feedback has powerful influences on students' learning because it serves as a basis for self-evaluation of ability and self-regulation of learning behaviour, thereby affecting achievement.

A research team made up of Dr Nie Youyan, Dr Zhou Mingming and Ms Chua Bee Leng from NIE's Psychological Studies Academic Group is currently studying the consequences of feedback on students' learning. We asked them to give us an overview of the different types of feedback.



(From left) Chua Bee Leng, Nie Youyan and Zhou Mingming

Types of Feedback

To provide feedback, we must first try to make sense of the students' test performance.

"The accurate interpretation of marks needs a reference point. Teachers can select different reference points and interpret the meaning of these marks to students in different ways," says Youyan.

The reference point could be others, a criterion, or self. There are three types of feedback: norm-referenced feedback, criterion-referenced feedback, and self-referenced feedback, depending on what the reference point is.

- *Norm-referenced* feedback provides information on the relative comparison of student achievement with others.
- *Criterion-referenced* feedback provides information by comparing student achievement with a learning target or standard.
- *Self-referenced* feedback provides information on how much students have improved by comparing their achievement with their past achievements.

For the student who scores 90 marks, for example, norm-referenced feedback could be: "Very good, you are the top student in the class."

When giving criterion-referenced feedback, you might say, "Very good, you have mastered nearly all that I have taught." Or it could be self-referenced feedback: "Very good, you have achieved better results as compared to the last test."

Feeding Back into Learning

Norm-referenced feedback is a common classroom practice, especially in Asian countries with highly competitive education systems. Most high-stakes standardized assessments use norm-referencing.

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If applied prudently, norm-referenced feedback allows students to accurately gauge how they did compared to their peers. This helps them and their teachers to judge and steer their further learning and development.

However, norm-referenced feedback can also negatively affect students' motivation to learn, and should thus be used with caution. Especially for low-ability students, it may increase their test anxiety and avoidance in learning.

Promoting Learning

Teachers should be mindful when giving feedback to their students in order to protect and enhance, rather than decrease, students' motivation and engagement in learning.

- Nie Youyan, Psychological Studies Academic Group

The project that the research team is doing now will look at how criterion-referenced and self-referenced feedback can be used to promote learning as well as to create enjoyable learning experiences for students.

"Teachers should be mindful when giving feedback to their students in order to protect and enhance, rather than decrease, students' motivation and engagement in learning," says Youyan.

Their research has just begun, but they hope that in time to come, their work will raise teachers' awareness of how feedback can have on students' learning. By learning how to buffer the side effects of norm-referenced feedback, and being able to use other effective feedback strategies, teachers can positively impact students' motivation and achievement.

So the next time you look at your students' grades and want to comment on how they've done, pause for just for a while to consider the impact you want to have on their learning.

About the research team

Nie Youyan, Zhou Mingming and Chua Bee Leng are from NIE's Psychological Studies Academic Group. Their project is entitled "Norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, and self-referenced feedback: Their effects on motivation and achievement".

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Using Performance Tasks to Assess Learning

Testing for knowledge recall is easy, but how can we tell if our students have really achieved deep understanding? This was what led the teachers at Raffles Girls' School (Secondary) to search for alternative assessment modes. They believe Performance Tasks provide this information.

With the introduction of the Raffles Programme, a 6-year Integrated Programme, at Raffles Girls' School (Secondary) (RGS) in 2006, the high-stakes O-level exams were done away with. With the traditional benchmark of academic performance gone, they looked for other measures to gauge learning.

"If you ask us what the goal of assessment is, we'll say it's mainly to gain evidence of learning," notes Mrs Mary George Cheriyan, Director of the RGS Pedagogical Research Lab (PeRL).



RGS teachers (from left) Ms Choo Li Lin, Ms Lucille Yap and Mrs Mary George Cheriyan

"It's not just the end product, or summative assessment. In order to use assessment to inform learning, formative assessment becomes important as well." Performance Tasks were one such assessment.

Evidence of Learning

RGS has been using Performance Tasks as an alternative form of assessment since 2006. As the name suggests, students are required to perform a task to demonstrate their understanding. All tasks have a real-world context.

As a form of alternative assessment, Performance Tasks provide evidence of learning in unconventional ways. Unlike traditional pen-and-paper tests, such tasks allow students to apply their learning in very practical ways.

For example, for an English Language task, students were asked to identify shop signs with linguistic errors. They then had to write a letter to the shop owner, to suggest how it can be improved.

Often, students are also given free rein as to how they can present their answers. One may choose to write a poem, another may produce a visual piece, while yet others may perform a skit. It's really up to them.

"When we give students the option to create the products in any form, they will go according to their preferred learning style," notes Mary. And this is exactly what they intended. "The reason why we went for alternative assessment is so that we can have multiple modes of learning."

Using Performance Tasks

The RGS teachers discovered Performance Tasks when they went for a workshop on assessment principles conducted by the Alberta Assessment Consortium for teachers.

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The appeal of Performance Tasks was enhanced by the fact that it is similarly emphasized in the Understanding by Design framework (UbD) framework, which RGS had already adapted for the school's curriculum design.

Performance Tasks have been implemented school-wide and has worked well for them.

"It is very important thing that you have custodians in the school. You must have that one person with oversight," says Mary.

At RGS, it is the Director of Academic Studies who vets all assessments and unit plans, a role Mary played until recently. All new teachers are also trained in how to design Performance Tasks.

Here are some examples of Performance Tasks in [History](#) and [Biology](#), and the accompany rubrics.

Relying on a Rubric

Alternative modes of learning require alternative modes of assessment. Assessing the quality of learning is not an arbitrary process.

Performance Tasks rely on a carefully crafted rubric. For each task, the outcomes, criteria and the task itself are clearly detailed. Each task, regardless of subject, follows a fixed format.

This rubric guides the process of learning – it's not a one-off activity. Teachers spend time explaining the criteria, to ensure that students are clear about the expectations.

"It's transparent so the students are aware of how they are going to be assessed even before they actually attempt the task," explains Ms Choo Li Lin, who was herself a student at RGS and returned as an English Language teacher 5 years ago.

She adds, "With the traditional pen-and-paper assessment, what you see is a summative snapshot of the students' works. But with a performance task, we can structure it such that we see how the students progress over the whole learning process for that project."

In the English Language classroom, for example, this could mean giving them the opportunity to do multiple drafts. With each draft, the teachers can use the rubric to help them focus on particular areas that need improvement.



Mary believes Performance Tasks can help learning

Designing the Task Rubric

Designing the rubric can be challenging, even for the more seasoned teachers, especially when the products of learning are so varied.

"Students are going to come up with all kinds of responses. Yet, the rubric needs to be able to capture these responses in a way that is quantifiable," says Mary. "How clear can you be? If you're so specific, then how can it be real-world?"

"The key challenge was the description," recalls Ms Lucille Yap, Head of Consultancy at PeRL. "How do we describe each standard with precision, so that we know what we are looking for and the students know what we are expecting from them?"

"We will always look through the perspective of the student: How would they understand what we've written?" explains Lucille, who teaches Geography. "We also check with one another frequently."

Li Lin believes the rubric adds to the learning process, and makes learning meaningful for the learners.

"Students are able to understand what they have done well, what they have not. It makes learning that much more quantifiable, and something they can also qualify; not just getting an A but why I got it."

The teachers at RGS have found that Performance Tasks help them to know if their students are really learning. It also helps students know how well they are learning.

"That comes back to the whole idea that assessment should also come with feedback," adds Mary. "Even in normal pen-and-paper testing, it's supposed to be used as a platform for feedback."



High Aspirations

If you're wondering where to begin, Mary recommends that you first ask yourself: What are your aspirations for your students?

For the teachers at RGS, they want their students to be competent and ready for real life. They believe that Performance Tasks help to achieve this learning outcome.

Students are able to understand what they have done well, what they have not. It makes learning that much more quantifiable, and something they can also qualify; not just getting an A but why I got it.

- Ms Choo Li Lin on the rubric they designed

Looking at the evidence of learning in her classrooms, Lucille observes, "It is not the mere acquisition of knowledge and skills. They really can apply it to a higher level just through that performance task."

Mary also notes that the students are more engaged when they are able to learn in their preferred way. "I could see that it was meaningful to them because they are articulating their understanding in a way that they would want to."

"It was really very challenging when I first embarked on this," recalls Lucille. But a strong belief in the value of Performance Tasks keeps them going. "It's a journey," says Lucille, "I'm still learning."

Informing Practice through Pedagogical Research

The RGS **Pedagogical Research Lab** (PeRL) is a school-based research centre set up in January 2010. They aim to "engender a culture of informed practice by nurturing the reflective practitioner who constantly seeks to refine his or her craft".

Mary hopes to collaborative with other schools and educational organizations, for them to join in the research efforts. In the long term, she hopes to be able to tell the story of the Singapore school.

"The people who are different here are the students, but the teachers are the same. We could be in any school," says Mary. "What we're really talking about is the creation of a pedagogical discourse in a Singapore school."

If you are interested in partnering with them, please [contact Mary](#).

Mrs **Mary George Cheriyan** is Director of the RGS **Pedagogical Research Lab** (PeRL). Ms **Lucille Yap** is Head of Consultancy. Ms **Choo Li Lin**, who is a Teacher Specialist, is the newest addition to their research team.

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A Good Test

You've set the tests and graded the scripts. What next? Dr Lee Ong Kim explains the finer points of assessment and tells us what to look out for when testing our students.

Q: Why is it important to have a proper assessment system in schools?

We all know that the whole idea of teaching and learning in schools is for students' holistic development. This means that students should be assessed in all three domains – cognitive, affective and physical. Let's talk about cognitive assessment, since that is the main focus of schools.



Assessments should effectively inform teachers of students' progress, of their strengths, and of areas that are still not clearly understood. The assessment must therefore validly indicate to the teacher each student's problems in conceptual understanding of the material taught, so that a plan for remedial action may be made.

Also, students will have additional learning through the assessment itself, even if they do not perform well on it. Many talk about assessment of learning, for learning and as learning. But in schools, it is mainly for learning because it is invariably a formative assessment.

So a proper assessment system is needed to safeguard test integrity and validity in order to enhance the teaching-learning process.

Q: What is assessment validity?

There are several types of test validity – namely, face validity, content validity, construct validity, and criterion-related validity. *Face validity* is simple. As long as a test consists of questions on the subject it is claiming to be testing, then it has face validity. However, this is clearly not sufficient. There has to be content validity as well.

A test has *content validity* if the questions are on topics already taught to the students and on areas required by the curriculum. In addition, the levels of difficulty of the questions should be according to the test plan, that is, it must reflect the proportion of the number of questions planned for each level of the cognitive taxonomy.

Thirdly, the test must also have *construct validity*. This means that the questions must elicit the psychological constructs that they are purported to be testing. For example, if the test is to measure students' ability to use proper grammar in the English Language, then the questions must be on their grammatical skills. Test questions must not deviate from the intended purpose.

Sometimes we may find a question on a Math test that is based on a baseball game. The teacher must ensure that the question can be answered based on knowledge and ability on the mathematical construct intended and not based on knowledge of baseball games. Likewise, the language used on the Math test must not be at such a high level that the test construct shifts from math ability to language ability. This will make the test lose its construct validity.

Criterion-related validity is not so crucial for classrooms. In short, there are two types of criterion-related validity – concurrent validity and predictive validity. *Concurrent validity* means that if the test is said to be able to show how skilful the students are on one criterion, then performance on the test must also reflect the level of ability on the second, related criterion. *Predictive validity* would be the ability of the test to predict future success of the students, either on a job or at a higher level of study.

Q: How then should classroom tests be planned?

Classroom tests are usually planned through the drawing up of a "test blueprint", sometimes also referred to as the "table of specifications". The essential ingredients of the blueprint are the topics and sub-topics to be tested, the proportion of the number of questions on each sub-topic, the proportion

Assessments should effectively inform teachers of students' progress, of their strengths, and of areas that

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of the number of questions at each level of the cognitive taxonomy for each topic and sub-topic, and the stated objective of each question.

A test blueprint is also very useful because if the teacher who is supposed to construct the test is unable to do so for some reason, another teacher will be able to take over the task without deviating much from what the first teacher would have set.

are still not clearly understood.

- Lee Ong Kim, Vice-President, World Educational Research Association

Q: What else is important in the assessment process for teaching and learning?

A test, no matter how well planned and prepared, will be rendered useless if the scores obtained by students cannot be properly interpreted. Testing is a measurement process where we measure the status of the students' learning at the time of testing. Measurement is always for the purpose of comparison.

Comparisons require an understanding of distributions with their Means and Standard Deviations, which can tell teachers the group status of their class compared to other classes, and how their students are spread out in their ability compared to other classes. Likewise, it is to compare how an individual student performs in comparison to others who took the test with him. Such interpretations of performance through comparisons are also termed *norm-referenced* interpretations.

Another form of performance interpretation is the *criterion-referenced* interpretation. This form of interpretation is like answering the question, "Is the student able to add two double-digit numbers that involves regrouping?" and other such questions. As long as the answer to such questions is "Yes", the student has made the grade. Hence, a good teacher will be able to make all (that is, 100%) of his or her students learn so well as to achieve a grade A. This is in contrast to using each student cohort as its own norm group, where even a group of A students will be spread out in order to get a certain percentage to be graded below A.

Q: What are some common errors teachers make when making comparisons?

Teachers are more likely to take test scores as "absolute", and conclude that a student who scored 86 marks is better than the one who scored 84 marks. This is a flawed interpretation if the Standard Error of the test is, say, 3 raw score points. Sometimes we even hear of students with an average of 92.5 marks being given the book prize on a school's speech day and the student with an average of 92.3 is not awarded anything, being interpreted as falling into "second" place. If we think about Standard Errors, it could well be that the so-called second place is in reality in first place and vice versa.

A test, no matter how well planned and prepared, will be rendered useless if the scores obtained by students cannot be properly interpreted.

- Ong Kim on how teachers should interpret results carefully

Another common wrong conclusion made by some teachers is to think that two classes with equal Mean scores are two equal groups. This is not necessarily the case because in one class the students may be more homogeneous while the other class may have a bigger spread of abilities about the same Mean. The class with the bigger spread has some weak students to be helped. The Mean of the class is the same simply because there are some better students who have "balanced off" the poor performances of the weaker students.

Comparisons also have to be made using proper scaling, which needs an understanding of scale linearization and measurement errors. But teachers need only know the basics of such issues – the basic statistics of Means, Standard Deviations and Standard Errors.

Q: How can a teacher tell if a student has improved over time?

This appears to be much harder for teachers to do in schools. This is because to be able to compare students' performances across different tests at different levels or different time points, the tests will first have to be equated. Equating is required because the tests may not be of the same difficulty levels and hence equal scores on them do not reflect equal abilities.

Equating means putting the tests on a single common scale. We all know that to compare the lengths of two pieces of strings, we should measure them on the same scale, the meter rule, for example. It would be really great if school teachers are taught how to equate tests so that their interpretations of students' growth may be made more accurately.

In fact, if teachers are to do research, such as to see which teaching method is better for a given subject or topic, the outcome variable being students' growth, it becomes all the more important that the tests be equated. Otherwise, the research conclusions will not be defensible.

Q: What assessment skills should teachers develop?

Teachers should develop skills in test planning, test-item construction, and interpretation of students' performance on the tests, in order to be able to take the next step in their lesson planning.

We should remember that the teacher's job consists of three main aspects – the curriculum, the pedagogy, and the assessment. It is not sufficient just to be able to interpret, plan and implement a curriculum, or to be excellent pedagogically. Without excellent skills in assessment, the teacher will not know how well the students have learned, and they will also not know how well they have taught.

Strength in all three aspects will increase the teacher's professionalism tremendously.

About the interviewee

Lee Ong Kim is Vice-President of the [World Educational Research Association](#) (WERA). A former Associate Professor at the National Institute of Education, his areas of expertise include measurement, evaluation, testing and quantitative research methods.

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Learning in a Changing World

John Seely Brown calls himself the “Chief of Confusion”. In a world of constant change, he says, we need new ways to learn. We ask him what this means for schools and teachers today.



Q: What do you think is the most distinctive feature of learning today?

I think the most distinctive part of learning *to be* is to recognize that what enables us to do things in the world are the practices we develop, not the knowledge we hold in our head.

It's a difference between knowledge and skills. Skills are something that have as much a tacit component to them as explicit component, and tacit knowledge is acquired through doing and often collaborative reflection.

So learning to be is fundamentally social and fundamentally collaborative. You find that when you do things together, you actually learn with and from each other. And that ability to learn with and from each other, I think, is a key aspect of learning to be.

In a world of constant change, most of the learning is going to be *outside* school. Because you will be inventing five different careers in your lifetime – minimum! That means, four of those five careers don't even exist today.

Q: What is the role of the teacher in this world of constant change?

I think that the role of the teacher in many ways has become more important than ever. Because the teacher becomes a mentor; not just conveyor of expert knowledge, but rather the ability to cultivate in students the spirit of deep awe, in terms of appreciating the wonder around us, and to be able to cultivate their imagination – to be able to imagine what could be better, that then propel them to invent, innovate and move ahead, in terms of even inventing new careers that don't yet exist.

Q: How can we cultivate imagination in our students?

My sense of how to start looking at the issue of cultivating imagination has as much to do with rethinking the role of the arts and the humanities, maybe especially important for those of us in the sciences.

It's a completely counter-intuitive notion. You have to be able to ask yourself the “what if” questions: What if something was completely different? What if, for example, there were no O-level exams? How would Singapore actually work? What kinds of people would actually excel that now don't excel? And so on and so forth.

It's the ability to kind of push the boundaries a little bit through the “what if”s, and then to be able to imagine what that world might be like. And the world of imagination is basically unlimited!

You can look at a kid who is 1 year old, 2 years old, 3 years old – *incredibly* curious. They see something new and they're all over it! They're in awe of what this is, and they're trying desperately to figure it out. They are engaging in imaginary exploration of what this thing is that they just got. I can turn this stick into a locomotive, and run around the track with it although there's no track there; it doesn't matter – I imagine!

That sense of being profoundly playful and in awe of the world around us leads to certain kinds of joy and unpredictability.

- Professor John Seely Brown on imagination

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That sense of being profoundly playful and in awe of the world around us leads to certain kinds of joy and unpredictability. Instead of worrying that there's so much knowledge happening today that we have to train our kids in, maybe we should think about how sometimes less is more.

Q: So what is the place of assessments and exams in this mode of learning?

I would ask, what's the role of assessment versus what's the role of assessment *through exams*? And I think that the catch today is how would we assess a system, how would we assess a student, if it's based solely on the portfolio of what these kids have actually done.

Show me what you have done in 5 years in school. Show me what you think is unique. Show me what is unique about your *persona* as revealed through the problems.

Yes, that's more labour-intensive. It's more subjective, it can't necessarily be reduced to a simple score. But maybe it gets at a way to encourage each kid to explore their own uniqueness and to start thinking about where are their passions. Because if a kid has a passion, you can't stop the kid from learning.

We ask Professor Brown about the teacher's role in the new learning culture. Check out his response in this video:

About the interviewee

Professor John Seely Brown was invited to speak in Singapore in November 2012 under NIE's CJ Koh Professorship in Education programme. He shared insights from his latest book, *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change*, which he co-authored with Douglas Thomas and was published in 2011. More information about him and his works are found on his website: <http://www.johnseelybrown.com>

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