

**Student self-assessment: Assessment, learning and empowerment**, Kelvin Heng-Kiat Tan (2012)

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The best way to define the reading of *Student self-assessment: Assessment, learning and empowerment* is as a learning experience, even for scholars who have conducted research in self-assessment. The goal of the research reported in this volume was to analyse the conceptions of university teachers about self-assessment (SAS), which surprisingly is a relatively under-explored area. In the first four chapters out of the nine, Kelvin Tan presents the most important themes about self-assessment in higher education: the conceptual tensions around it; a historical development of the field through the most important empirical articles; and an analysis of the literature around the three central themes that have been researched - assessment, learning and power. In the fifth chapter, the phenomenographic research method used is presented in great detail: all the decisions taken while conducting the research are made visible so that readers will find it easier to make their own interpretations. Finally, in the three remaining chapters, the results are presented: the five categories of teachers' conceptions about self-assessment that were found; the three levels in which these teachers' conceptions can be categorised (teacher-driven SAS, program-driven SAS and future-driven SAS); and an analysis of these categories in the light of the three central themes of SAS: assessment, learning and power.

There are two outstanding features of this book: first the insightful critique that Tan presents of the self-assessment field and second his own empirical research. With regard to the critique, Tan provides an in-depth review of the available body of research. As an example, regarding self-assessment for summative purposes, he found that the relevant research has two central themes. Firstly, are students' reliably self-assessing? And secondly, does the teacher grade or score represent a close similarity with the students' self-score? With respect to the first, Tan's conclusion is that no clear direction can be extracted due to contradictory results. For the second issue, taking the teachers' grade as the yardstick does not seem to be the only option: three other methods suggested by Regehr et al., (2002) also are open to debate: (1) a professional who has been practising in the field, (2) other students, and (3) the students themselves at an earlier point in the learning process. Especially, no studies are cited comparing the use of the teacher grade against other three methods which would be crucial to establish the importance and validity of using different yardsticks. So again, no clear directions can be found in the existent research.

Accordingly, Tan moves to a central point in his work: learning from self-assessing is more important than being reliably accurate when compared to the teacher's grade. Immediately, Tan explains

his critical point of view on the relationship between SAS and learning. He confronts what has been studied so far and how many of the SAS assumptions still need to be tested. This way, he presents evidence for the view that SAS equates with enhancing student learning, especially a list of eight positive learning effects of self-, peer- and co-assessment from Dochy, Segers and Sluijsmans (1999). Further, he argues that the field has been reluctant to explore SAS interventions that may not be successful for enhancing learning and to explore comparisons among different SAS interventions. His point is that the lack of this kind of research may lead one to an erroneous conclusion that student SAS is seldom designed or practiced ineffectively. He could, however, have outlined some features that might make an SAS intervention effective or ineffective. Tan's critical argumentation about the SAS state of the art continues through chapter four regarding SAS research and issues of power, a chapter that evidences the writer's expertise at the crossroads of power and SAS. In sum, the first outstanding feature of the book is the critique of the existing knowledge-base of the SAS field (and the broader fields of research on evaluation and assessment) that should bring fresh lines of research which cast light on the limitations which Tan has discussed.

The second salient feature of the book is the original research conducted by Tan about teachers' self-assessment conceptions. The process is carefully explained and the reader can have a clear understanding of the challenges in conducting such research. Even more important are the results. The taxonomies of the participants' conceptions about SAS are helpful in casting light on how self-assessment is understood by different teachers; why there are different definitions and understandings of SAS; and what areas are important to change in teachers' who hold less sophisticated conceptions of SAS. Knowing how teachers conceptualise SAS is crucial as they are the ones that give ground for their students to develop self-assessment in a formal way in their classrooms.

Nevertheless there are a few further issues to consider when reading this book. Its publication dates from 2012 and there have been three recently published pieces of work that provide further evidence on aspects that Tan discusses and that future readers of the book might consider. The first is work conducted by Boud, Lawson and Thompson (2013, 2014) in which it was found that 'average' students were the ones with the most to gain from the use of self-assessment. Secondly, Panadero and Jonsson (2013) in a review of the use of rubrics for formative purposes pointed out the potential of such tools to enhance self-assessment especially in combination with other meta-cognitive and self-regulatory strategies. Thirdly, Brown and Harris (2013) provide an insightful review of self-assessment and its

relationship to academic achievement, self-regulation and accuracy, setting new ground for future research in the field.

In conclusion, *Student self-assessment: Assessment, learning and empowerment* is key reading for any scholar interested on formative assessment since the three central themes are relevant for formative activities. The book is also of interest to those teachers and researchers interested in phenomenography as a research method. Kelvin Tan has written an outstanding state of the art piece, with a critical view of the field of SAS but with deep understanding of the issues presented.

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