BOOK REVIEW

Title: **Ipsative Assessment:
Motivation Through Marking Progress**

Author: **Gwyneth Hughes**

Publisher: **London UK: Palgrave Macmillan.**

Year of Publication: **2014**

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In this book, Hughes makes a case for the use of ipsative (self-referenced) assessment, either in place of or in addition to the current regimen of norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessment predominant in higher education. Hughes offers insights into the current practice of competitive assessment and social selection that characterizes assessment across higher education. In her book, Hughes demonstrates the linkages among ipsative assessment, student feedback, and formative assessment. Hughes has worked extensively in the area of ipsative assessment and clearly has a broad understanding of the topic.

The book comprises two parts: The first six chapters present Hughes's argument for ipsative assessment, while the last five chapters offer some limited evidence of ipsative assessment practices, and a discussion of the obstacles to initiating and inculcating educational innovation and change, particularly changes in assessment practices.

Hughes defines ipsative assessment as involving comparisons between past and current work to identify a learner's growth over time, rather than progress toward an external set of criteria. Therefore, ipsative assessment is an internal or self-referenced assessment. The use of ipsative assessment requires knowledge of a learner's prior accomplishments to make a comparison with current work. In practice, such comparisons may be difficult, because the assessor needs access to a student's work history. Hughes points out that ipsative assessment is compatible with self-assessment as students have the most knowledge about their respective prior levels of knowledge. However, the author argues that accurate self-assessment requires the student to be trained in assessment. Hughes recognizes that a lack of training in this area may entail reduced reliability, which is an issue for institutional assessment policies.

Hughes points out that the current competitive assessment regimen values reliability and objectivity, as the primary perceived function of education is social selection, i.e. a major role for higher education is to identify those who, based on merit, should benefit from the scarce resources of the academy and the better employment opportunities that follow. Education is utilized for certification and credentialing, therefore educational benchmarks for success must possess a functionality recognized by society as being universally accepted and replicable.

Ipsative assessment occurs in other venues outside education. Hughes gives the example personal best which is common in sports, where a competitor strives to improve against his/her previous best effort. Sports combines all three assessment regimens: Winning is clearly norm-referenced; attaining a qualifying standard is criterion-referenced; and attaining a personal best is

ipsative, and by far the most common attainment in sports. This is a rare example of harmony across the three assessment regimens, although not all three are equally valued by society.

Hughes states that there is confusion and conflict in the current education system. She points out that the current system emphasizes a deficit rather than attribute model (Hughes, 2014a). Under the deficit model, attention is focused on what students lack or cannot do rather than the attribute model, which identifies what students know or can do. Competitive assessment also: conflicts with research demonstrating the effectiveness of assessment for learning; is often demotivating, especially for low-achieving students; tends to focus on summative assessments, thus limiting feedback's usefulness to students; usually involves one-off snapshots of student achievement, rather than viewing assessment as longitudinal and progressive; and promotes an entity rather than fixed theory of intelligence (Dweck, 1999, 2006). Hughes claims that ipsative assessment models address all the issues discussed above.

A major strength of Hughes' book is her argument that ipsative assessment is more congruent with assessment for learning, as well as congruent with giving and utilizing quality feedback, compared to other assessment regimens.

Assessment for learning is based on the theory of social constructivism, whereby learners engage with others to construct and refine their knowledge. Hughes notes that "Assessment for learning ... draws on the discourse of learner empowerment, self-respect, self-reliance and lifelong learning that challenge the ideology of meritocracy" (p. 31). She argues that ipsative assessment supports all the above dimensions. Hughes supports her argument with a summary of research by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) as well as Hughes' own previous work. Assessment for learning is an important strategy. In a synthesis of more than 8,000 meta-analyses, Hattie (2009) found that assessment for learning (formative assessment) has a very significant effect size of 0.90 with respect to student achievement.

Hughes also makes a persuasive case for the relationship between ipsative assessment and the provision of feedback. In the same study cited above, Hattie (2009) found an effect size of 0.73 for feedback with respect to student achievement, without differentiating for the quality of the feedback. Hughes comments that feedback is often seen as a gift that instructors give to students, as part of a one-way transmission of information. Research shows that this method of providing feedback is of limited value (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Rather, Hughes indicates that feedback should be a dialogue between student and assessor, and that ipsative assessment is very well suited to this dialogue. She states that feedback involves recognition of a baseline starting point for students' knowledge, progress in their understanding, and discussion concerning next steps.

A particular strength of Hughes' book is her discussion of three dimensions to assessor's responses: *feed up*, which allows students to answer questions about goals; *feed back*, which lets students respond based on their current level of knowledge; and *feed forward*, which provides students with the ability to answer questions about where they need to or wish to go next (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hughes, 2011, 2014a). Hughes argues for a model for effective feedback by Hattie and Timperley (2007) that identifies four levels of feedback: task level, process level, self-regulation level, and self level. Hughes describes the Hattie and Timperley hierarchy of effective feedback, with the most effective levels being task and process and argues convincingly that these levels are particularly addressed in ipsative feedback.

Hughes provides an interesting example of ipsative assessment in the second section of her book. In discussing the possibility of a dual assessment regimen—whereby formative assessment

is ipsative but summative assessment is criterion-referenced—she describes a typical doctoral program. In most doctoral programs, candidates first develop their skills and knowledge. This portion of the doctorate is typically ipsative, with supervisors identifying areas of strength (and gains), areas requiring further development, and progress toward PhD candidates' goal of beginning their doctoral research. The dissertation and defense are criterion-referenced, with objective standards that must be met to attain the degree. Since this is a common assessment format in many doctoral programs, Hughes cites doctoral programs as an example of an assessment regimen in which ipsative assessment is already in place.

Hughes limits evidence supporting ipsative assessment in practice to her own research. She provides two small case studies of fully ipsative assessment regimens, both structured and investigated by Hughes herself. The book would have benefited from the inclusion of studies of ipsative assessment by other researchers. Hughes is pragmatic when discussing the potential for fully ipsative assessment regimens in higher education. She recognizes that the goals of education are typically at odds with completely ipsative assessment, since this violates the requirements for reliability and replicability necessary for the goal of social selection and credentialing.

Additionally, Hughes' claim that ipsative assessment promotes a holistic rather than fragmented view of curriculum is questionable. While this claim may have merit, Hughes offers insufficient supporting evidence or argument for the claim. Hughes also claims that ipsative assessment is low stakes relative to the high stakes competitive assessments that dominate higher education. This point needs more justification and seems at odds with her description of ipsative assessment as part of assessment in a doctoral program. Finally, Hughes discussion of whether ipsative assessment might in fact cause other assessment issues to arise is relegated to a brief half page near the end of the book. This point should be explored more fully.

The major attribute of ipsative feedback is the view of assessment as a longitudinal process that involves a dialogue between assessor and assessed. This stance is based on a social constructivism theory of learning coherent with assessment for learning. Moreover, such an attitude towards assessment has positive implications for learners' intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, incremental theory of intelligence, and propensity to view learning as a life-long process. Hughes's book offers an excellent discussion of the attributes of ipsative assessment, while recognizing the limitations of a fully ipsative assessment paradigm. Substantial additional research is needed to more fully investigate how ipsative assessment might be implemented in education. Nonetheless, Hughes's book identifies a potentially beneficial strategy for assessment, and raises awareness of a concept that certainly belongs in the assessment discussion.

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