

## “WHO’S THE TOPPER IN YOUR CLASS?” PHILOSOPHIES OF LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT AT CFL, BANGALORE

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Amy Chua’s 2011 book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, raised outraged protest in the US when it was published. The book is about a culture or style of parenting (the author, a law professor at a prestigious American university, calls it the “Chinese” style) which consists of pushing your children to achieve perfection in a field by insisting on hours of work a day, not giving them any choice in their interests or work patterns. The author’s two daughters are musical prodigies, and they spend several hours a day practising the piano and the violin. This is also a style of parenting that demands straight As in all subjects, complete respect and obedience to parental authority, and an utter dedication to “excellence” in all aspects of daily life.

The author contrasts the “Chinese” style of parenting with the “Western” style. This latter is characterised by parents who praise their children for getting Bs (“I’m really proud of you! You tried hard!”) and who do not insist upon an ethic of hard work (we now begin to see the seeds of the outrage that the book evoked!). Western parents are also afraid of hurting children’s self esteem by telling them that they did not perform up to expectations. The Western way, the author tells us, is based on assuming the fragility of the child in the face of assessment and critique, while the Chinese way, which is to offer brutally honest critical assessment, assumes strength, and also assumes that the child will use the criticism to improve. Interestingly for our context, the author characterises other immigrant cultures, including “Indian” and “Pakistani,” as very similar to the “Chinese” way.

*Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* is a wonderfully funny, ironic and (often) tongue-in-cheek read. The main theme of the book, as I had mentioned, is about different cultures of parenting. But what stands out in Chua’s description of both cultures are very powerful assumptions regarding (i) learning and assessment, both in the school and in the home, and (ii) how assessment feeds back to the child to impact further learning. For all the irony and humour and power of the book, it does very very little to question these assumptions.

I teach at a small non-formal school, Centre For Learning (CFL), near Bangalore. Many of our assumptions about learning and assessment are somewhat different from those of the author of *Battle Hymn*! I will try to articulate our ideas about learning and assessing (both formal and informal), and the reasons we follow the ideas and practices we do.

Classes at CFL are small in number, typically fewer than ten students in a class. Students get feedback during classtime (and homeworktime—we are a residential school) from the teacher regarding their understanding of a concept, or of the manner in which they have attempted an assignment. Students also express the difficulties they have in understanding particular concepts, and teachers respond to these specific difficulties. Teachers are in contact with parents regarding how the child is doing in school, across many dimensions: intellectual, emotional and physical. At the end of the year, in addition to the more-or-less continuous feedback described above, each student gets a comprehensive written report for all subjects and activities in school.

Some of our features of assessment are a little different from those of other schools. For instance, we do not have tests or exams until the tenth grade, when students appear for board exams and have to practise for them. Our reports tend to be more qualitative and in-depth than quantitative. People who hear of this are then curious as to how the student is actually assessed and how teachers judge progress. This is a point I will try to clarify later on.

A very central philosophical notion of the school, indeed one might say its driving idea, is that what we call “learning” is not just subject-based or “activity” (meaning “extra-curricular”)-based. The field of what we can call “learning” is very wide, and could also encompass, for instance, learning about our attitudes to various situations. Do I resist particular kinds of activities, such as hard physical work? What happens when I notice such a resistance? Is it always fixed in intensity or duration or is there space for it to dissolve and for me to plunge into the activity? Learning could be about our particular emotional responses to particular situations; is a child habitually frightened of mathematics? How can we help her see the roots and reasons for her fear? Is there anything in the learning environment that needs to be altered? Very crucially, learning could be about the ways in which we relate to each other, both adults and students. Do we have very fixed pictures about our peers? In what ways do we reach out to others? What are the power structures, the patterns of inclusion and exclusion, in our groups? Such learning is not cumulative, in the sense that learning about mathematics is; it is more to do with being sensitive to these emotional currents in the present moment. Thus we as teachers do not look at students only from the “subject” point of view; we also consider the emotional well being of the student (and the adult). Many of these aspects I have described above can also find their way into an overall assessment of the child, both on a daily basis

and at the end of the year. Of course “assessing” emotional well-being is quite different from assessing progress in physics or history!

Having set out the background to our educational philosophy, perhaps I could begin with the reasons why we do not administer tests and exams at CFL. Such an explanation needs to begin with some of the limitations of the testing process, conventionally understood.

Whatever the testing styles, however comprehensive tests may or may not be, test results need to be interpreted carefully. Certainly, a mark does reveal something. But what it reveals will reflect the structure and content of the test itself, rather than a fixed, intrinsic quality of “intelligence” in the student. An exam testing rote learning merely tests that. A complex IIT entrance exam may test the student’s ability to manipulate equations, but may not reveal much about his or her understanding of the conceptual depth of physics or mathematics. Each educational environment seems to have its own climate, its own understanding, of intelligence, and a cumulative series of tests builds up a cumulative picture of the student’s “intelligence”, thoroughly and narrowly circumscribed by the assumptions of the testing system itself. And we are not even getting into the fact that there are so many kinds of abilities that standard testing may not even be able to assess, such as the ability to deal with complex real life situations. Just to accept grades as a clear indication of “intelligence” is obviously a narrow view, and this is one reason to be wary of the conventional testing process. (All of this obviously does not preclude the fact that well thought out tests that stress conceptual understanding and open ended thinking can clearly reveal understanding and also can guide the teacher in improving the student’s understanding)

Then why not just go with the best testing material currently available: the “good” tests that are

open-ended, creative and so on? Why exclude tests and exams altogether? One answer is that giving tests and exams and grades inevitable opens up a minefield: students begin comparing their performance with that of others, and this has various implications, both for their learning and for their emotional well-being.

It seems a very ingrained assumption in our educational culture that only through comparison can we assess. Comparison gives us a target to aim for (“You can be as smart as she is”); it is assumed to be a major motivational factor in the lives of students.

We often see students motivated by beating the competition, but such students seem more interested in getting ahead than in actually understanding the subject deeply or appreciating its beauty. As a teacher, my goal is definitely the latter: to help students enjoy schooling, to help them see the depth and power of a discipline, which will (hopefully) motivate them to explore the subject for themselves, come up with new questions, new ways of looking at a problem and so on. It is this intellectual curiosity and emotional engagement that is the promise of an educational endeavour and that will build creative and mature responses to the world around us. To narrow this potential down to a mark and a ranking system seems such a wasted opportunity.

Students are not, in my view, really motivated by competition and comparison. For the few who come out “on top,” there are thousands for whom the whole experience of education is demoralizing and ridden with anxiety. The impact of such a mind-frame on learning must surely be tremendous. We need to begin questioning the competitive approach at a very deep level in order to be able to impact the lives of students on the ground. Fortunately, excellent research has been done in the areas of cooperative learning and other alternatives to rigid and individualistic ranking systems (please see the reference at

the end of this article). Whether we are able to implement these alternatives at a societal level is of course another question.

Comparative assessment in a classroom by a teacher is often casual: “See how well he’s working! Can you work like he does?” Often explicit rewards and punishments are tied into class performance (the role of reward and punishment on student learning is obviously a vast and problematic area, too big to go into here. Suffice it to say that students seem on the surface motivated by reward and punishment but in reality the situation is far more complex). It seems to make sense to us at CFL to avoid such comparative references: not in a rule-bound, obsessive way, or as a “motto,” but simply with the awareness of the impact of such a culture of comparison on the overall learning environment as well as on the intellectual and emotional well being of a particular student. Written reports too do not contain comparative evaluation, for the same reason.

Of course, students will compare themselves with each other whether or not we give tests. They may, for instance, compare their relative speed of working, or on the number of tick marks on a particular assignment! Simply removing exams does not seem to remove this very powerful drive to feel better (or worse) about oneself by looking at another. As educators, we can point out this drive to students, discuss its impact, and help them to look at the roots of emotional security and insecurity as expressed in the need to find self-validation through comparison. More importantly, as educators, we need not institutionalise comparison, with all the fear and anxiety that it brings, as a motivational factor in our system. Children learn, and learn well, even without exams and tests.

All of the above are ideas and possibilities within school frameworks. The debate takes a very different shape for other contexts such as entry

examinations for college (though many of the points above may still be applicable).

At CFL, as I mentioned earlier, we do not administer tests and exams until the tenth grade (when children have to prepare for board exams). How then can we actually assess children's performance? Since there are clear curricular goals (drawn up fairly widely, to accommodate a range of abilities), each piece of work that the child does is itself a pointer to her level of overall understanding. The skill of the teacher thus lies in seeing what the child needs to be practising or what lacunae are present in her understanding and then to take further measures. The homework the child does may be quite closely linked to these factors, and the intervention of the teacher in fine tuning homework generally yields results. Multi-disciplinary project work (which the students at CFL routinely engage with) in one sense complicates narrow assessment but may reveal many dimensions of a child's understanding, again depending on the skill of the teacher in formulating criteria and learning outcomes in the first place.

A "report" on the child at CFL will thus not just be a grade on a card, or the dreaded "can do better/fair/poor," but a qualitative description of where the child stands according to various criteria, some clearly defined (the uses of the comma, two digit multiplication) and others somewhat more intangible (the ability to write richly descriptive pieces, or the ability to "see into" a math problem). Even the "intangible" criteria are often broken down and assessed by rubrics that the teacher body has discussed and agreed upon together. Of course, the report will only highlight essential features as judged by the teacher, which may be a subjective call (a general criticism of qualitative reporting anyway, which needs further exploration).

The teacher's assessment of the student's learning can be deepened by the self assessment

of the student herself, again based on skilful criteria that educators can draw up. Simple questions that we can ask children in an English class, for example: Was your essay divided into paragraphs? Was each paragraph about a separate and clear point? Did the sentences within a paragraph flow smoothly, or did they jump around? Did you give examples to illustrate your main idea? Students' self assessment often indicates something clear about their capacity to learn, and this is tremendously valuable in the way a teacher assesses a student's learning. Such self assessment often finds its way into the report a teacher writes for a student.

Small class sizes (we have typically less than ten children per class) may facilitate some of the above processes. Certainly it is difficult to write qualitative reports for each child as numbers per class go up. I wonder whether it is possible to retain an overall curricular assessment of the child's progress, both in an ongoing manner as well as a final assessment, rather than making the test/exam model and the marks themselves the hallmark of understanding. In theory, is it possible to create rubrics of assessment that do not exclusively rely on examinations, even for larger classes in the Indian context? To me, this seems to be one of the most challenging (and most fruitful) area of investigation in the Indian educational context.

Earlier in this article, I described one of the keystones of the educational philosophy of the school, which can be briefly summarised as "learning about oneself." As a colleague of mine put it, we try to understand everything that is normally brushed under the carpet in educational contexts. If a student is afraid or distracted in a classroom, we need to understand why, and we can only begin to understand in an dialogue with the student. We see this kind of learning about oneself as undertaken as an important human activity, rather than just a trick to help the child

learn academics better or succeed at a project!

Thus a subject report will also include some perceptions on the part of the teacher as to the “emotional temperature” of the student. What are her motivational levels? Is she just anxious to please the teacher or can she patiently understand the demands of the subject? Is she easily distracted? Are peer dynamics playing havoc with her emotions? How can we loosen the grip of this powerful force (again, not so she can concentrate better in class, but because having a sense of inner freedom is important in itself)? Is she emotionally well, or unhappy?

While these perceptions are necessarily somewhat subjective, they are not totally so. Teachers usually read each others’ reports, and the perceptions of one teacher may be modified in the light of a colleague’s experience with the

student. Teachers frequently discuss students’ state of being, sometimes on a daily basis. In this sense, report writing at CFL is a collective enterprise, not completely subject to individual idiosyncrasy.

I have tried to give a sense of the philosophy and practise of assessment at CFL. It is important to us teachers that such a process is not based on a blueprint but rather upon our questions about education and well-being, and upon our very close observations of students. A report is also not intended as a final document, frozen in stone, on the student’s life situation. Rather, it may be viewed as the beginning of a conversation with the student, the parents, and among the teachers themselves, on the shifting complex reality that is the student in school.

**References:**

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