

## Equity and Assessments

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## What is Equity in Assessments?

An assessment is a tool or process to evaluate and document a student's academic readiness, knowledge, skills, and learning progress. Equity in assessments refers to fair and impartial opportunities for students to learn, be evaluated, coached, graded, advanced and graduate. This approach recognizes that not all students have the same starting point or access to resources to succeed in traditional assessment systems. It emphasizes the need to identify and address systemic gaps in students' educational outcomes and respond to the needs of historically marginalized or disadvantaged students in education systems. Students can be disadvantaged due to their socioeconomic background, experiences of trauma, language barriers, racism, ableism, and other forms of oppression. An equitable approach requires instructors to reflect on our biases and how we understand our students. We may give students the same content and opportunity to be assessed; however, we cannot assume they will all be at the same level or approach an assessment the same way. Rather equitable assessments enable both majority and minority learners to learn more and learn better.

Reframing assessments through an equity lens means that every student has multiple and varied opportunities to show what they know, what they understand, what they can do, and where they need support. This requires instructors to provide clear learning expectations to ensure all students know what to do to succeed in a course. Equity in assessments also requires students' results to be evaluated in ways that do not discriminate against or disadvantage students but instead inform instruction and support their learning and growth. When designed equitably, assessments can help reduce achievement gaps between different and increasingly diverse student populations.

## Why Do We Need Equitable Assessments?

Assessments are essential to the educational process because they help identify student progress, strengths and improvement areas and enable instructors to provide targeted feedback and support. However, assessment practices like grading have historically disadvantaged students and do not accurately reflect their understanding of the material or ability to apply it in

real-world situations. Grading in education is rooted in **colonial** and eugenic practices used to deem which students were “worthy” of advancing to higher levels of education or obtaining jobs (Beeghley & Butler, 1974; Houts, 1976; Milsom, 2021). This practice has had significant social and racial implications for marginalized groups (Hounsell, 2007; Kellaghan & Greaney, 2019), who were often excluded or relegated to lower-level tracks based on assumptions about their abilities and potential. Today, the implications of grading persist and can reinforce existing social and economic hierarchies but also perpetuate negative stereotypes and biases about certain groups of students. For example, Black, Indigenous, and students of colour (BIPOC) are disproportionately affected by grading practices.

In addition, grading can cause undue stress and pressure on students, leading to a focus on performance rather than learning. This can limit opportunities for students to engage in self-directed and creative forms of learning. Moreover, the types of assessments used to grade students play a significant role in their learning experiences. For example, traditional and high-stakes assessments such as essays and exams create stress and inequity among student groups. When students feel stressed or anxious, their ability to perform well on assessments can be negatively impacted, resulting in unfair evaluations.

To address these issues, instructors should consider multiple approaches to grading and assessments. A stress-to-success approach emphasizes reducing stress levels, promoting a positive learning environment by adapting or using alternative assessments, and evaluating a student’s progress and learning. For example, self-assessments, un-grading, feedback, peer feedback, and specification grading are alternative evaluation methods (Khon, 2011; Stommel, 2018; Stančić, 2021; Taylor, 2022). These methods move away from emphasizing grades for multiple tasks to focusing on feedback, giving multiple opportunities for submission, and involving students in determining their grades. Strategies for feedback and alternative assessments are discussed below.

## Providing Feedback

Feedback is a powerful form of providing students with information about their learning relative to their goals or outcomes of the course. Meaningful feedback redirects or refocuses the learner's actions to achieve a goal by identifying strengths and areas of improvement that promote further learning. To provide equitable feedback, instructors should ensure this information is:

- Clear.
- Easy to understand for every language level.
- Free of cultural or gender-based content.
- Useful and usable by the student to make improvements and succeed.

Instructors can pair feedback with alternative assessments to support student learning and growth. These assessments can be more engaging for students as they provide opportunities for creativity and critical thinking. In addition, instructors can provide ongoing feedback throughout the assessment process focusing on the quality of work, areas for improvement, and specific strategies or resources to support learning.

## Alternative Assessments

Alternative assessments differ from traditional assessments, such as multiple-choice tests, exams, or essays and often require students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in multiple ways. Alternative assessments can be more flexible and personalized to better align with students' strengths and abilities. These assessments are:

- **Accessible**, e.g., are considerate of students' diverse learning needs.
- **Authentic**, e.g., are related to student life and work environments (Villarroel et al., 2018).
- **Co-created** through a partnership with the instructor and student (O'Neill, 2011).
- **Continuous**, e.g., not limited to one high stake assessment.
- **Culturally Responsive**, e.g., are based on student groups, who they are, and what matters to them (Ebe, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Snow et al., 2021).

- **Engaging**, e.g., cater to students' learning interests.
- **Have Multiple Forms**, e.g., allow students to demonstrate their learning in different ways.
- **Flexible**, e.g., offer choice of assessment styles or types to support diverse student groups (Garside et al., 2009; Moge et al., 2019; O'Neill, 2017).
- **Interdisciplinary**, e.g., connect students to learning to other courses, disciplines, and the real world.
- **Renewable**, e.g., add value to a student's personal or professional experience, such as a portfolio of their work, art, or other forms of learning.

Examples of alternative assessments can include projects requiring students to apply what they have learned creatively, portfolios demonstrating student growth and learning over time, and interactive activities allowing students to apply their learning in a realistic context. In addition, problem-based assessments can engage students with real-world problems that they work to solve, or performance-based assessments require students to demonstrate their skills and knowledge in real-world settings.

### Addressing Biases in the Classroom

To ensure instructors effectively develop equitable assessments and teaching practices, we must take steps to recognize and address our biases. This includes identifying how biases play a role in our assessments. For example, instructors may unconsciously stereotype students based on their race, gender, ethnicity, disability, or other characteristics, leading them to make assumptions about a student's abilities. They can also be influenced by a student's previous academic performance or background. In addition, instructors may design assessments that reflect their cultural norms and values, which may disadvantage students from different cultural backgrounds. For example, there are often unconscious biases in:

- **Language** used for assessment, e.g., questions, examples, or events.
- **Mediums** used for assessment, e.g., multiple choice questions, 3 hours exams, essay writing, and presentations.

- **Grading**, e.g., how grading takes place, the percentage assigned to certain assessments.
- **Feedback**, e.g., the language feedback is provided in, the timing and type of feedback.

To minimize bias in assessments, instructors can take the following steps:

1. Monitor their biases and reflect on how their personal experiences and values may impact their assessment practices.
2. Use a variety of assessment methods that reflect different learning styles and abilities.
3. Clearly define the learning objectives and criteria for success in assessments.
4. Use rubrics or scoring guides that are based on objective criteria.
5. Seek feedback from students and colleagues to identify and address any assessment biases.

### From Power to Partnership & Empowerment

In addition to addressing biases, instructors should reflect on who holds power in their classrooms. What does this power afford instructors over students? Furthermore, how might we create a partnership to balance the power in the classroom? For example, partnerships in assessment involve students and instructors working together to co-create assessments and evaluation criteria. This practice empowers students by valuing their experiences and giving them a voice and a sense of ownership in their learning, and by enabling them to contribute to the assessment process in a meaningful way.

When students are involved in co-creating assessments and, or evaluation criteria, they can better understand the learning goals and expectations of the course and are more likely to be engaged and motivated in their learning. Instructors can also gain insights into students' learning processes and challenges, which can better inform their instructional practices and support student learning. Instructors can create student partnerships by engaging students as co-learners, co-researchers, co-inquirers, codevelopers and co-designers in their classrooms. In addition, they can involve students in developing and evaluating an assessment rather than

simply treating students as recipients of assessments. Examples of student partnerships can include:

- Co-deciding on grading schemes, medium of assessments, and deadlines.
- Gathering feedback on the syllabus.
- Class-constructed assessments (based on student interests) and rubrics.
- Reviewing the meaning and value of a rubric.
- Being transparent with students about how marks will be assigned.
- Empowering students by asking them to provide questions, examples, and content they are interested in and that is meaningful to them.
- Co-creating questions to help students practice and utilizing these questions in assessments such as exams.
- Asking students to develop questions for in-class presentations.
- Creating multiple opportunities for feedback, for example, in class, anonymous, and asynchronous opportunities.
  - Please note instructors should be mindful of which students are most likely to provide feedback (i.e., students who come into institutions with privilege) versus those who do not (i.e., students that may not have a language of entitlement).

### Instructor Perspectives

Several factors prevent the widespread of alternative assessments in higher education. One factor is a lack of awareness or understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which assessments occur. Instructors may not be familiar with their students' diverse backgrounds and experiences, or they may not be aware of how their biases and assumptions can influence their assessment practices.

Another factor is the pressure to conform to institutional ideas and practices of rigour, which often prioritize ableist and racist assessment forms such as standardized testing and quantitative metrics over more inclusive and equitable forms of assessment. This can create a culture where instructors feel pressured to prioritize content coverage and high-stakes testing over more



student-centred and inclusive forms of assessment. In other cases, institutions' learning platforms and systems may not readily support flexibility and variety in assessments, for example, offering flexible due dates. Despite these factors, instructors can still take steps to design more equitable assessment opportunities in their courses and make a difference in their student's learning.

Ensuring each student's success is an emotional and physical labour that requires time and acknowledgment that not all students will be successful at the end of a course. However, as an instructor, you can work toward developing equitable assessment practices by:

- Starting small!
- Remembering that developing and implementing equitable assessments is continuous and iterative work.
- Identifying what you can do and what applies to your classroom and discipline.
- Educating yourself about your student's social and cultural contexts, diverse backgrounds, and experiences.
- Engaging in ongoing reflection and dialogue about your biases and assumptions and how these may influence your assessment practices.
- Designing assessments aligned with the course learning goals and prioritizing student learning and growth over ranking and sorting.
- Using various assessment methods, including qualitative and narrative feedback, to provide a more comprehensive and inclusive picture of student learning.
- Creating opportunities for students to be involved in the assessment process, including co-creating assessment criteria and evaluating their learning.

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