

# Using Your Sphere of Influence to Impact Culturally Responsive Assessment

---

April 2021

Bridget G. Trogden, Ph.D.  
Clemson University

What is my responsibility for culturally responsive assessment? As I reflect on this statement for myself and my colleagues, it is a beautiful winter day. Millions of college students across the U.S. are preparing to start the 2021 term amid uncertainty and hope. Others are unable to enroll due to financial, psychological, and health-related fallouts related to the COVID pandemic. Two months ago, Americans turned out in record numbers to vote in an unprecedented election, and the country is still in the midst of a health crisis, economic insecurity, and reckoning with ongoing and systemic racism. On one hand, we are all struggling with burnout and stress. On the other, if there were ever a time to analyze our institutional practices, this is it.

The excellent occasional paper by Erick Montenegro and Natasha A. Jankowski on *Equity and Assessment: Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Assessment* establishes the rhetoric and how-to's of change, as do the other guest responses. To address the collective work of better understanding our students, disaggregating our data, and exploring policy changes (p. 4), we first need to examine our own roles and spheres of influence at our institutions. While this is collectively 'our work', it is also fundamentally 'my work'. We cannot expect to change the assessment ecosystem without also examining our own complicity in the structures of inequality.

## **Sphere of influence: At the course or section level**

---

I was teaching a course a few years ago for first-year engineering students who were placed into pre-calculus, needing a boost in mathematics proficiency. The purpose of the course was to serve as a just-in-time support mechanism to reinforce evidence-based learning tactics through metacognitive strategies and activities. The course enrolled many unique learners, but I wish to recount a vignette concerning one young man who identified as a first-generation college student from a rural, low-resource area. For the first part of the semester, I would frequently ask students to perform reflective

journaling activities. This student would pull out his laptop, navigate to the learning management system textbox, type one sentence for each prompt, and submit. In giving him feedback, I would routinely ask him to elaborate on his thoughts in order to become a deeper learner.

After a few weeks of no progress, we both came to realize that he had such anxiety about academic writing - even informal writing - that he felt crippled when it came to expressing his ideas. The purpose of the assignment was to ignite metacognition, not prove one's writing prowess. Accordingly, I had always provided students with choice in how to submit their assignments (text document, Adobe Spark page, video, website, drawing, etc.), but because he did not frequently see his classmates deviate from the written word, he did not think he could do so. I finally worked with him on typing each prompt onto his computer screen, hitting record on a voice app, and just talking his way through them. Wow. What a difference it made in terms of his ability to articulate his learning journey and my ability to provide useful feedback, not to mention alleviate frustration on both of our parts. In grading his final assignment at the end of the term, I had to put my computer aside and wipe a few tears, as his depiction of his developing sense of autonomy for his own education was quite powerful. Providing the means for students to deviate from one-size-fits-all assessments is a necessary step for all instructors seeking to improve equity and student success. Through my experience teaching this course, I learned that just stating alternatives is not enough. Students often need guidance and reassurance as they take agency, especially when grades are involved.

Both the story above and the Montenegro & Jankowski paper beg the question: how do we ask students to demonstrate their learning? Submitting tests, papers, quizzes, projects, and reports is not the purpose of education, and the socially distanced Zoom room is not the purpose of a course. Rather, they are the enablers of communication back and forth between students and instructors as the former demonstrates and the latter provides feedback upon learning milestones. The assessments are thus a means to an end, not an end in and of themselves.

I fundamentally believe that focusing on inclusive aspects of assignment design is an avenue for providing students with choice and for providing faculty with tools to evolve their courses over time. Montenegro & Jankowski make an excellent point in their writing that there is a difference between assessing all students in the same way in relation to a specific outcome of interest and making sure assessments are appropriate and inclusive of all students (p. 5). Individual faculty members do not always have full control over each course making up a curriculum, but assessment techniques are frequently within their sphere of influence. No two sections of any course are exactly alike in how instructors deliver them, so why would we ask our students to demonstrate their learning in identical ways?

Static assessments also rob our learners of opportunities for individualized sense-making. We prevent them from incorporating their full selves and breadth of

No institution of higher learning is immune to the need for improvement, and no one's sphere of influence is inconsequential.

personal life experiences into demonstrations of their understanding of content. It is these unique qualities that give rise to imaginative ways in which shared knowledge can be used to shape the future within and outside of the classroom.

Any attempts to create culturally responsive assessment needs to start with faculty thinking about the role of class assignments - the what, the when, the why, and the how. Biology is not preordained to be delivered in five-week blocks punctuated by common exams. Introductory sociology does not have to be structured with a midterm test and a sociobiography final paper. In the COVID era - the period that introduced lockdown browser into the common educational lexicon - we see many instructors fighting a losing battle with the summative assessment status quo and the rise in academic dishonesty. Furthermore, formative assessments are an important tool. Without them, we are often just going through the motions of grading rather than giving direction to students on how to improve.

I frequently work with my professional development colleagues at Clemson University in the Office of Teaching Effectiveness and Innovation (OTEI). We have been using a learner-focused assignment design heuristic (Palmer, Gravett, & LaFleur, 2018) for working with faculty on assignment design and for incorporation into courses enrolling graduate students interested in the professoriate. The option of student choice is a new concept for many instructors, as we were often not given such consideration in our own formal education. In our Clemson trainings, we often start with the tenets of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and discuss how offering choice for unique learners actually benefits all learners. The workshop series we created asks faculty to consider for each assignment the purpose, tasks, criteria, and student choice aspects, making them transparent for student learners. In the ensuing discussions and redesign, we talk a lot about pulling back the curtain, explicitly sharing with students the purpose of each assignment and how they are meant to shape their learning trajectories.

### **Sphere of influence: At the program and institutional levels**

---

Whereas individual instructors often have much sway over design of assessments at the course or section level, it is also important to telescope out to better examine programmatic assessments and outcomes. As Montenegro & Jankowski write, assessment should also be mindful of the student populations the institution serves (p. 10). Intentionally disaggregating programmatic data allows us to analyze subpopulations of students and their intersectional identities. For instance, Andrew W. Koch points out in his 2017 piece for the American Historical Association that disaggregation of DFWI data (i.e. - students earning the grade of D or F, withdrawing from the course, or earning an incomplete grade) in introductory US history shows that groups historically marginalized in American society (African American/Black, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native) perform in the course at much worse rates than students from non-marginalized identities. As Koch and many others

Formative assessments are an important tool. Without them, we are often just going through the motions of grading rather than giving direction to students on how to improve.

point out across disciplines, this trend has nothing to do with ability and everything to do with often colonialist-minded course content, pedagogy, assessment, inclusion, and belonging relative to our disciplines and courses.

Similar analyses are necessary across institutions and programs as a key driver of culturally responsive assessment. Most assessment measures were not designed with non-traditional or underserved students in mind (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017, p. 6), and we cannot address inequities without such examination.

Student learning outcomes serve as programmatic beacons for both students and faculty in terms of what knowledge, skills, and aptitudes are essential. Montenegro & Jankowski also challenge institutions to include students in the development, data collection, interpretation, and use of results (p. 10). My own institution is not immune to any of the recent racial unrest and calls for justice accordingly, we are working on the creation of an institution-wide set of diversity student learning outcomes. The intention at Clemson University is to use the outcomes across multiple programs and curricula rather than the often 'one and done' approach of a required course in the general education curriculum. Creating and vetting the curricular student learning outcomes for diversity will be done in conjunction with an upper division writing course, where the students in the course develop the research question for outcome development, create a survey, collect data from broad groups of stakeholders, and make recommendations. Our goal is to include students at the table of programmatic influence and culturally responsive assessment, as they co-create opportunities to acquire and validate the experiences and educational needs of the student population.

Our goal is to include students at the table of programmatic influence and culturally responsive assessment, as they co-create opportunities to acquire and validate the experiences and educational needs of the student population.

### **Bridging the spheres of influence and enabling institutional transformation**

---

The recent book *From Equity Talk to Equity Walk* provides resources for and challenges institutions to explicitly undertake the necessary work to improve student educational outcomes (McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020). They confront common biases in educational equity work and explain that shrinking educational achievement gaps to null levels is the only acceptable result.

Creating the structures for such an institutional analysis via culturally responsive assessment is difficult at a large institution such as my own, but not insurmountable. Let's consider the following scenarios that are underway:

- Faculty in an advanced manufacturing undergraduate program notice that Pell grant eligible students are not succeeding in the courses with expensive textbooks and homework portals. As a result, the instructors across the program work with the open resources librarian on creating and/or adopting open educational resources. Instead of a multiple-choice-based homework system, they develop one based on case studies, fusing technical skill development with intercultural competencies.

- Faculty and departmental assessment liaisons recognize that new transfer students are having to repeat calculus 2 at much higher rates than non-transfer students. They start to examine the calculus 1 pipeline to work on curricular alignment and improved assessment strategies across institutions.
- Institutional data shows that students in certain major courses of study are less likely to participate in high-impact educational practices. To identify and mitigate barriers to engagement, a faculty and staff team works to create a faculty development portfolio to improve curricular and assignment design, explicitly incorporating course-embedded undergraduate research, client-based writing and community-engaged learning, and international virtual exchange so that all students can learn about themselves and others in culturally responsive ways.

The road to inclusivity is possible to build. It involves the integration of assessment practices and data with faculty, staff, students, community members, and other stakeholders as drivers at course-, program-, and institutional-levels. No institution of higher learning is immune to the need for improvement, and no one's sphere of influence is inconsequential.

## References

- Koch, A. (2017). Many Thousands Failed: A Wakeup Call to History Educators. *Perspectives on History*, 55(5). <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2017/many-thousands-failed-a-wakeup-call-to-history-educators>
- McNair, T. B., Bensimon, E. M., & Malcom-Piqueux, L. (2020). *From equity talk to equity walk: Expanding practitioner knowledge for racial justice in higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Palmer, M. S., Gravett, E. O., & LaFleur, J. (2018). Measuring Transparency: A Learning-Focused Assignment Rubric. *To Improve the Academy*, 37(2), 173–187. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tia2.20083>

### Please Cite As:

---

Trodden, B. (2021, April). *Using your sphere of influence to impact culturally responsive assessment*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.

---

Follow us on social media:



@NILOA\_web



@LearningOutcomesAssessment

Sign up to receive our monthly **NILOA Newsletter** and stay up to date with our research and publications.



# Equity Response

[www.learningoutcomesassessment.org](http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org)