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Why Fix What Isn't Broken? Challenging Longstanding Assessment Practices in Higher Education Teacher-Training Institutions



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It's a question many seasoned educators ask when the topic of alternative or differentiated assessments comes up: "Why fix what isn't broken?" After years—perhaps decades—of successful teaching, faculty might wonder why they should rethink their assessment practices. After all, they've seen student-teachers earn good grades, complete their teaching practicum, and graduate. But is it enough for students to merely 'get by'? Or is there room for a shift toward more meaningful, equitable assessments that truly measure learning in ways that empower future educators?

For many professionals, changing long-standing habits is no easy feat. These practices have been honed over years and often become a source of pride for teacher-educators who have developed their own rhythm. But what if some of these practices - like an over-reliance on standardized testing, the narrow focus on grades, or the neglect of important 'soft skills' - fail to give the full picture of our learners' abilities? What if assessments could not only evaluate but also promote deeper, more meaningful learning that transcends the classroom?

Seasoned educators are therefore in a prime position to challenge the status quo. At its core, the push for alternative forms of assessment is about equity.

Rethinking Faculty Professional Development in Teacher Training Institutions

Experienced educators have been through countless professional development (PD) sessions. Many have seen trends come and go. New strategies are often presented in theoretical ways, only to fizzle out by the time they return to their classrooms. It's not that these PDs are useless, but they often miss the mark when it comes to practical application. Research shows that PD programs tend to focus on presenting strategies without much follow-up or support for implementation (Putman et al., 2009). As a result, the impact is often short-lived.

For teacher training institutions, professional development needs to be rethought. PD should acknowledge the experiences of career educators, challenge their assumptions, and empower them to design practical tools to use in their own practice. Notice that I said 'empower', rather than simply 'equipping' them. Traditional PD models often focus on "equipping" educators—giving them new tools, strategies, and techniques to implement in their classrooms. While this approach provides valuable resources, it can sometimes reduce educators to passive recipients of knowledge, assuming that if they are given the right methods, their practice will improve.

However, seasoned educators have already honed their craft through lived practice. What they need is not just more tools but the autonomy and authority to reflect on, adapt, and co-create strategies that are meaningful to their unique contexts. This is where empowerment comes into play. This shift from equipping to empowering places educators in an active role, where they aren't just applying ready-made solutions but are driving change themselves. In the area of assessment, this means helping educators move from simply implementing new rubrics or tests to developing a deeper understanding of how assessments can be reimaged to foster equity and inclusivity. Empowerment also encourages them to experiment with these ideas, share insights with their peers, and engage in communities of practice, where their experiences and reflections can lead to continual growth and innovation.

Bearing all this in mind, effective PD must then be grounded in Jack Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory, which suggests that real change happens when we critically reflect on our assumptions and beliefs. Transformational learning involves challenging deeply held beliefs about what makes an assessment "good" or "fair." For educators in higher education, particularly in cases where standardised tests are heavily used, this reflection is crucial. Are we truly assessing what future teachers know, or just what they can memorize for a test? Are we providing multiple pathways for student-teachers to demonstrate their understanding, or sticking to rigid, one-size-fits-all methods?

Of course, it's one thing to reflect—it's another to put new ideas into practice. Real change also requires the learning to be grounded in real-world contexts. PD is most effective when it's embedded in daily work, when we're part of a community of practice where we can share, reflect, and refine our approaches over time. Experienced educators already have a foundation of years of classroom practice, now, it's about adapting that expertise to new, more equitable methods of assessment.



Equity-Centered Assessment in Teacher-Training

So, what does equity-centered assessments 'look like' in the context of teacher-training? It starts with acknowledging that traditional assessment practices may not serve all learners equally. Consider the following:

1. Teacher-educators must critically examine their assessments to ensure they do not perpetuate biases related to language, culture, or prior experience. For instance, while academics often take pride in their mastery of English and their ability to switch between language registers, a grading rubric that heavily weights grammar can inadvertently disadvantage students.

Sometimes, students who experience strong Creole interference or come from backgrounds with less emphasis on formal grammar instruction may be penalized more severely than their peers. As a result, students with strong grasp of subject matter but weaker grammatical skills may receive lower grades, not because they lack knowledge, but because they struggle with conventions of formal English.

Therefore, assessments should be designed to recognize and accommodate diverse linguistic backgrounds and prioritize the assessment of content knowledge and critical thinking *alongside* grammar.

2. Educators can benefit from treating student-teachers as experts in their own experience, especially those who are already teaching. Many student-teachers, particularly in-service educators, bring valuable classroom experience to their studies. Equity-centered assessments respect and integrate this expertise.
3. Another good way to promote equity in assessments is for educators to give student-teachers the opportunity to aid in defining their learning goals. Rather than rigidly imposing standardized outcomes [though necessary at times], equity-centered assessments empower student-teachers to personalize their learning objectives based on their professional aspirations. For example, I frequently ask in-service part-time teachers how I can tailor course content to better align with their job functions, particularly when they serve dual roles as teacher-leaders in their schools. This approach allows them to integrate their unique experiences and goals into the learning process, ensuring that the assessment is relevant and applicable to their professional development.

4. No educator likes to do assessment data analysis as it can be time-consuming. However, it should be noted that aggregated assessment data often masks specific challenges faced by different subgroups of learners. One year, as I reflected on the disaggregated data for my classes I discovered that the aggregated assessment data masked specific challenges faced by student-athletes. While the overall class average was high, a closer look at the disaggregated data revealed that student-athletes, who juggle intense training schedules and academic responsibilities, were consistently performing lower academically and was always on a trajectory of failing or borderline passing the course. Recognizing this, I had to implement targeted academic support and tailored academic advising for student-athletes who I later facilitated, seeking to help them balance their academic and athletic responsibilities, ultimately promoting more equitable learning outcomes.
5. Equity centered assessments also include critically examining how exam results are interpreted and utilized. It is essential to ask whether traditional grades and test scores accurately reflect student-teachers' growth and learning. For instance, are the grades from written exams or course work assignments providing a comprehensive view of their capabilities, or do they overlook important aspects of their development? Often, there can be a noticeable disparity between scores in coursework and performance in practical experiences. For example, a student-teacher might excel in theoretical knowledge and achieve high grades in written assessments but struggle with practical application during their practicum. This discrepancy can highlight potential biases in how assessment results are used, revealing that traditional grading may not fully capture the nuanced skills and competencies that are crucial for teaching.

Moving from Reflection to Action

The bottom line is, transforming assessment practices requires more than just reflection—it demands action. Lave and Wenger's (1991) perspectives complements the reflection process by emphasizing the importance of social interaction and contextual learning. Learning is most effective when it takes place within communities of practice, where educators can share experiences and apply new knowledge in real-world settings. For career-long educators in higher education, PD should not be a one-off event. Instead, it must be a continuous process *embedded in their work*, allowing them to test new assessment strategies, share feedback, and refine their approaches *over time*.

Seasoned educators are therefore in a prime position to challenge the status quo. At its core, the push for alternative forms of assessment is about equity. Standardized tests and traditional grading systems often fail to capture the full range of skills and knowledge that diverse learners bring to the classroom. In teacher training institutions, this is especially important because the way we assess future educators shapes their beliefs about assessment—and, ultimately, their teaching practices. Equity-centered assessment, therefore, becomes a powerful tool for preparing future teachers to create more inclusive and just learning environments for their own students.

The challenge is clear: don't be afraid to fix what seems to be working. Sometimes, the most meaningful changes come when we question practices we have relied on for years. Professional development in higher education is not just about attending another workshop—it's about transforming one's mind-set, challenging long-held assumptions, and creating more inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students. Isn't that why we became educators in the first place?

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