

Culturally Responsive Assessment 2.0 through Faculty and Students' Voices

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Abstract

The field of higher education has recently started to explore more authentic evaluations of student learning, after decades of facing the shortcomings of standardized indicators. Through a case study approach, I illustrate how assessment can evaluate and increase the extent to which faculty integrate inclusive and diverse practices to improve student achievement. The Grounded Theory methodology draws from the Universal Design for Learning model (UDL) to analyze both faculty and students' voices, namely assessment-specific reports as well as generic campus-wide activities, surveys, and focus groups. The conceptual framework builds on the paradigms of Culturally Responsive Assessment and Assessment 2.0. This study confirms that assessment data bloom naturally across campus, can be gathered in numerous manners, and can be examined through an equity lens in order to support student variability. The six sets of data suggest that both faculty and students value flexible and diverse assessments, including in the close collaboration between academic affairs and support services. Future directions need to expand the students' autonomy in choosing how to be assessed and the students' role as partners in enhancing the learning experience.

Keywords: Equity, diversity, inclusion, Universal Design for Learning, UDL, assessment, qualitative research.

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This chapter examines how assessment can be a vital ally with equity in the field of higher education. For decades, graduation rates, achievement gaps, and other numerical benchmarks have been the uncontested indicators of success. Recently, attention has started to shift towards inclusive initiatives that support learning of all students. Through a case study approach, this chapter illustrates how assessment can evaluate and increase the extent to which faculty integrate diverse practices to improve student achievement. Ultimately, the study demonstrates the relevance of diversity theories and diversified methodologies for assessment.

The conceptual framework builds on two paradigms—Culturally Responsive Assessment and Assessment 2.0. Culturally Responsive Assessment concerns matters of equity, such as shaping evaluation tools through diversity-based strategies and using results to enrich learning of all students (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Assessment 2.0 refers to flexible and yet robust practices, including bottom-up processes and collective meaning-making (Metzler & Kurz, 2018). I combine the two paradigms because assessment in the 21st century requires culture-based considerations, which can only exist within adaptable approaches as Assessment 2.0. Equity goes hand-in-hand with flexibility.

The Grounded Theory methodology expands from a previous pilot study around faculty experiences by adding student's perspectives (Logli, 2020). It maps faculty and students' surveys, activities, and focus groups to the Universal Design for Learning model (UDL) (Hehir, 2009; Rao, 2019; Rose & Gravel, 2009). It represents a further attempt to bring existing data sources about student learning in conversation with one another with a close look on diversity.

This study confirms that assessment data bloom naturally across campus, can be gathered in numerous manners, and can be examined through an equity lens in order to support student

variability. Results show that faculty members are implementing inclusive strategies in their instruction and assessment, and closely collaborate with support services to engage all learners. Students also value diverse pedagogy but tend to focus on the logistical facets of their educational experience, such as facilities and finances, rather than on learning preferences.

Conceptual framework: Assessment as Quality and Diversity Assurance

Quality assurance refers to embedding quality in all aspects of higher education, from student learning to administrative processes, rather than inspecting systems that have already been established (Ryan, 2015). Quality has historically been one of the most difficult specifications to measure and globalization has complicated it even further (Neubauer, 2018, 2019). Reductionist approaches have established quantitative tactics, such as the ranking phenomenon. Yet, the Fourth Industrial Revolution is revealing more complex progressions, due to students' mobility, interdisciplinary demands, and need for learning that is autonomous, immersive, and interactive.

Student variability is possibly the most complex feature in the 21st century classroom. Globalization is not only an “intensifier of interdependence, it is a multiplier and magnifier of differences” (Hershock, 2010, p. 30). Each individual identity holds both cosmopolitan (i.e., humanist and global) and grounded (i.e., local and national) affiliations (Kahn, 2004; Nilan & Feixa, 2006). Within education, variety tends to relate to gender, ethnicity, religion, and social class as well as learning styles (Hershock, 2010). Concerns of access, survival, output, and outcome that relate to minority students are widespread (Farrell, 2007). Underrepresented students' probability of getting into college, completing a degree, learning the same knowledge, and experiencing similar post-graduation lives is slimmer compared to traditional learners.

Hershock (2010) makes a key distinction between variety and diversity. Variety is “a

quantitative index of simple multiplicity that connotes things simply being-different” (Hershock, 2010, p. 35). Campuses can be like zoos, where variety is externally imposed—varied populations and programs merely coexist. By contrast, diversity is “a qualitative index of self-sustaining and difference-enriching patterns of mutual contribution to shared welfare” (Hershock, 2010, p. 35). Universities can be like ecosystems, where diversity rises from within—diverse populations and programs focus on how they “best differ-for one another,” rather than how they “differ-from each other” (Hershock, 2010, p. 38).

This theory of diversity can find two entryways into the assessment domain. On one hand, Assessment 2.0 is designed to “supplement the assessment work already being done” and to be “organic”—growing naturally from faculty and staff’s expertise, rather than from over-imposed, linear, and standardized structures (Metzler & Kurz, 2018, p. 4). It infuses assessment with bottom-up processes, collective meaning-making within departments, and flexible opportunities to provide data, whether via formative, summative, quantitative, or qualitative approaches. Its premise is that assessment must lead to action—assessment should not be done unless there is readiness for instructional and institutional change in the students’ best interest. Campuses are filled with data, but data without rigorous analysis and usage are useless (Baker, Jankowski, Provezis, & Kinzie, 2012; Kuh et al., 2014).

On the other hand, “Culturally Responsive Assessment” involves students throughout the entire assessment process, develops evaluation tools that are appropriate for different learners, uses results to improve the academic experience of all students, and disaggregates the data to understand the student population (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Where one assessment approach is dominant, it will sacrifice many individual learning preferences (O’Neill & Maguire, 2017). Equity-based strategies do not benefit underrepresented students only, but all students

(Finley & McNair, 2013).

For example, some campuses frame assessment within social justice principles, such as inclusion and collaboration (Desiree, Hernández, & Berumen, 2018). Other universities develop local assessment instruments and give students options to choose among presentation, poster, debate, or exam (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Allowing students to select how they are evaluated improves their engagement, achievement, and the quality of the learning experience while addressing student variability (Gosselin & Gagné, 2014).

The UDL approach provides a useful application of Culturally Responsive Assessment. It is based on the premise that variability among learners is the norm and individuals can become expert learners in varied ways—there is no one path to mastery (Hehir, 2009; Rao, 2019; Rose & Gravel, 2009). To design for variability, instructors can begin by identifying common barriers to students' learning, preferences, and needs for supports. The UDL model comprises three main principles—representation, action and expression, and engagement. Each principle has three guidelines (nine in total) and each guideline has a series of checkpoints (31 in total) that proactively build in flexibility, choice, and scaffolds as well as other pedagogical tools to facilitate the learning experience for all.

Several assessment scholars suggest similar methods, such as incorporating (a) global learning, collaborative assignments, research opportunities, and service-learning (Kuh, O'Donnell, & Reed, 2013); (b) group work, application of knowledge, interaction with peers, and real-life connection (Ewell, 2009); (c) information in alternative formats, including theory and practice (Halpern & Hakel, 2003); (d) scaffoldings, such as sequenced lesson plans, rubrics, students' self-reflection, and assignments that culminate in a final demonstration (Hutchings, Jankowski, & Ewell, 2014).

Methodology: Grounded Theory meets Universal Design for Learning

In this chapter, I illustrate how assessment can evaluate and amplify the extent to which faculty incorporate diverse practices to enhance student performance. This case study took place at the Honolulu Community College in Hawaii (HonCC). Around 100 faculty members offer both vocational and liberal arts programs to approximately 3,000 students, comprising 43% Asian, 28% Hawaiian, and 12% mixed ethnicities (Arbuckle, 2020). The five pillars of the university are student-focus, Hawaiian values, diversity, sustainability, and community partnerships. I encompassed a variety of methods, because a robust assessment program draws on multiple sources of evidence at multiple levels within the institution (Metzler & Kurz, 2018).

I analyzed three sets of faculty data that address gains and gaps in student learning:

- Assessment reports from 654 course learning outcomes, across 210 classes, between 2014 and 2018, including narratives about strategies that support student mastery of the outcome.
- 233 index cards from a campus-wide activity that was held at commencement in 2018, when 145 faculty and staff members wrote down how they purposefully engaged students.
- Field notes that I took at approximately 20 campus-wide meetings, such as assessment workshops and faculty development series, where faculty discussed barriers and supports to learning. These dialogues also became a space to validate the findings from the previous two methods—the results looked like “a typical day in the classroom,” according to the participants.

I also analyzed campus-wide documents on student experience:

- Three surveys—2017 Campus-wide Student Survey (233 respondents), 2018 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) (322 respondents), 2020 Purposeful Engagement Survey (312 respondents).

- 2018 “I wish my teacher knew” activity, where 154 students completed the sentence on a post-it at different stations across campus (Abeshima & Cassandra, 2018).
- 2015 focus group on student success with approximately 20 students.

With the exception of the course-level assessment reports, all other methods emerged organically outside preconceived assessment plans.

The methodology follows Grounded Theory principles, including two cycles of coding and saturation point (Charmaz, 2010). Through the first coding cycle, the emerging patterns resonated with the UDL model (Rao, 2019). Therefore, the second coding cycle mapped the six sets of data to UDL checkpoints. My student assistant also coded the data, providing a learner’s perspective in the study (Desiree et al., 2018; O’Neill & Maguire, 2017). We stopped adding sets of data when we reached a saturation point—no more new information surfaced.

With regard to qualitative data, I coded all sets of data, with the exception of the CCSSE, which contains numerical values only. With regard to quantitative data, I coded all available descriptive statistics, namely across the student’s CCSSE, and faculty’s assessment reports and index cards. Within the CCSSE analysis, I pointed out any differences between HonCC and the other 536 institutions in the 2018 cohort, regardless of their statistical significance.

Culturally Responsive Assessment 2.0: A Case Study

HonCC uses a variety of approaches to get a holistic picture of student learning, including quantitative and qualitative tools as recommended by Metzler and Kurz (2018). These sets of data indicate that faculty members are mindful of culture-based considerations and use assessment results to further the learning of all students (Finley & McNair, 2013; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). This case study adds the students’ voice to a previous study (Logli, 2020), and helped confirm most of the patterns that had surfaced from the faculty experience.

The additional three sets of data from students are a testimony of student variability. Students juggle college, work, and family, often with no help. They may suffer from anxiety, depression, and a range of medical conditions. They sometimes struggle with new foster families, homeless shelters, language barriers, or just being a learner—“this is my first class in a very long time.” In some cases, they catch multiple buses from the other side of the island, which takes hours and often involves delays. Compared to the 2018 CCSSE cohort, students at HonCC are more likely to withdraw from college due to lack of finances (75% vs. 67%) and work full-time (68% vs. 60%). Students also validate HonCC’s commitment to diversity. They agree that HonCC is a student-centered campus (82%), maintains an equitable multicultural environment (85%), promotes appreciation of diversity (93%), and has faculty and staff who are accessible, caring, and helpful (93%).

Yet, students’ voices also generated new evidence around learning that can steer future assessment endeavors. Students value inclusive teaching strategies, but mainly focus on the logistical supporters and barriers of their educational experience. Although they touch upon their learning preferences, their comments generally target facilities (e.g., parking), communication (e.g., resource finder), food (e.g., healthy and reasonably priced options), customer service (e.g., extended hours during night classes), and finances (e.g., scholarships).

In the following sections, this chapter presents the findings according to emerging themes by summarizing the faculty’s contributions that were featured in Logli’s (2020) previous study and complementing them with students’ feedback. For easier readability, results are reported in an aggregate manner without specifying the exact data source. All direct quotes are from the participants’ voices.

Diversified Assessment Methods

Students' comments demonstrate the variability of learning preferences as well as assessment methods on campus (Hehir, 2009; Rao, 2019; Rose & Gravel, 2009). Some learners find the homework difficult while others struggle with final exams, class presentations, or speaking up. Faculty respond to different cognitive styles by integrating a multiplicity of embedded assessments:

- Exams (29%)
- Embedded questions (21%)
- Lab tasks (18%)
- Activities (9%)
- Presentations (8%)
- Projects (7%)
- Papers (4%)
- Practica (3%)

These formative and summative approaches supplement the assignments already being done and draw from faculty's expertise, rather than over-imposed standardized assessment requirements (Metzler & Kurz, 2018). Faculty members diversify and contextualize their assessment methods, by integrating mainstream measures with locally developed instruments that are better suited to gauge learning (Gosselin & Gagné, 2014; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017; O'Neill & Maguire, 2017).

For instance, a faculty member developed the "About You Questionnaire," which allows her to better identify her students' barriers to learning and to design assessment from the outset for a broader range of learners (Hartline, 2018). As a result, she accepts hand-written, digital, or audio submissions to accommodate students who do not have a computer, a printer, or have

dyslexia. She also replaces class presentations with group work to support students with anxiety and chooses the timing of her assessments carefully in consideration of students' cognitive and logistical needs (e.g., bus schedule).

Another department approaches assessment from two angles. A student self-assessment focuses on content areas, while embedded assessments targets students' analytical skills, such as inclusion of primary sources, supporting examples, and vocabulary taught (Patterson, 2018). The faculty found that Knowledge Surveys provide a valid overview of what students are learning, because in the cultural context of Hawaii students appear to be modest in their self-reporting.

However, only a few faculty members across campus give students a choice on how to be assessed. During the discussions, faculty expressed interest in exploring new assessment approaches that honor student diversity and maintain rigor. The main challenge is how to expand student autonomy while also complying with standardized job certifications and ensuring that students demonstrate learning through various modalities.

Teaching for Student Variability

With regard to UDL, and any other diverse and inclusive models, the expectation for a campus is to employ all three principles over time and across courses. Each faculty member should employ a couple of checkpoints per class; addressing all 31 checkpoints all the time would be impracticable (Hehir, 2009; Rao, 2019; Rose & Gravel, 2009). As a result, a UDL map looks different in each university, with different weights across the nine guidelines based on learners' characteristics, content matters, and pedagogical priorities of the moment.

On our campus, both faculty and students value inclusive practices to enhance learning, especially in support of content understanding (UDL guideline 3), instructional and non-instructional ties (UDL guideline 6), student persistence (UDL guideline 8), and optimizing

students' motivation and coping skills (UDL guideline 9). These findings emerge from the combined numerical data of faculty's assessment reports and index cards, and are further validated by all other sets of data. They also echo the campus's recent emphasis on student retention and completion, mainly by highlighting subject matters, a caring environment, and collaboration between academic and student affairs.

Principle I: Multiple Means of Representation

First, providing options for comprehension (UDL guideline 3) is at the forefront of faculty and students' concerns. Faculty members mention it 25 percent of the time across the assessment reports and index cards. They explain "stories behind place names," "replace textbook examples with local examples," and use familiar images like a rainbow to familiarize learners to salient scientific characteristics. They include hands-on activities to "help students make connections with class content" and to "show that what they are learning is practical, important, and related to both local and global perspectives" (e.g., Mālama 'Āina, or Take Care of the Land, days).

Students value hands-on experiences and readings with faculty's highlights on the salient points. Compared to the 2018 CCSSE cohort, more HonCC students indicate that they learned to (a) form a new understanding from various pieces of information (97% vs. 95%); (b) make judgements about the soundness of information, arguments, or methods (93% vs. 89%); and (c) think critically and analytically (99% vs. 94%).

Principle II: Multiple Means of Action and Expression

Second, providing options for executive functions (UDL guideline 6) is important for both faculty and students. Faculty members mention it 19 percent of the time across the assessment reports and index cards. They guide appropriate goal setting by organizing the

syllabus thoroughly, emailing e-newsletters to students before the start of the semester, and adjusting the course pace—they either “set quick turnaround time” or “allow more time” depending on the circumstances. In addition, they support planning and strategy development by connecting students to campus resources “that can help overcoming their challenge.” They invite guest speakers from support services in their classrooms, send students on scavenger hunts to key offices, and refer students to a variety of available aids.

They also facilitate managing information by “putting great thought” into structuring mind mapping, practice sheets, and transition projects. Furthermore, they enhance the capacity for monitoring progress by “having an assignment where students plot a course outline to reach their end goal,” “keeping students accurately updated,” and “correcting each deficiency before moving on to the next project” through outside-of-class optional review sessions, in-class practice exams with samples, and graded pre-quizzes.

Students appreciate when a teacher breaks down information, slows down, answers all their questions, ensures they understand the material before proceeding, and spaces assignments apart. For example, 78% of the CCSSE respondents mention that they prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in. Among the support services in the CCSSE, students primarily use Academic Advising (79%), Library (76%), and Computer Lab (55%), which are also their favorite units (on average 95% of the respondents are satisfied with them). The Children’s Center is also praised across the other student-based datasets. Compared to the 2018 CCSSE cohort, more students indicate that HonCC (a) contacts them if they are struggling with their studies to assist them (58% vs. 50%); (b) provides the support they need to succeed in college (99% vs. 96%) and thrive socially (82% vs. 75%); and (c) helps them cope with non-academic responsibilities, such as work and family (73% vs. 64%).

Across all sets of data, students consistently advocate for removal of barriers in the curriculum map. For example, they recommend that courses are properly aligned, career-relevant, scheduled across semesters, and actually offered to ensure timely degree completion. They suggest departments be careful in combining courses at an accelerated pace, reclassifying classes at a more advanced level, and obliging students to wait a semester to retake a course. They call for simplified prerequisites and transfer processes across universities, especially within a state system.

Principle III: Multiple Means of Engagement

Third, providing options for persistence (UDL guideline 8) is another priority for faculty and students. Faculty members mention it 20 percent of the time across the assessment reports and index cards. They heighten the salience of objectives by engaging students in activities that are relevant for their lives (e.g., field studies, guest speakers, analyses of current events). In addition, they vary demands and resources to optimize challenges—“I diversify my teaching strategies, I switch mode every 10 minutes to support each learning preference.” They also foster collaboration by engaging families when appropriate and integrating group activities (e.g., ice breakers, partnering in problem solving) so students “get to know one another—who they are and what their interests are—and make discoveries, so they are happy to return to class because their friends are there.”

Faculty encourage student participation in campus life (e.g., student clubs, social projects, leadership opportunities) so “they experience values like community and compassion, and can be the positive change that ripples around.” Moreover, they increase mastery-oriented feedback by using comments like “the essay would be better with punctuation,” rather than “you need to work on punctuation,” through lab follow-up, discussions on assignments, well-defined rubrics, peer

mentorships, and learning communities where students “share their mistakes, discoveries, and learn from each other.”

Students value being part of unique programs that are not offered in other system campuses and that are relevant in the job market. They praise the opportunity to practice certification tests, rather than generic exams, and to be “ready, prepared for the field.” Compared to the 2018 CCSSE cohort, more HonCC students (a) acquire job-related knowledge and skills (85% vs. 79%); (b) receive prompt feedback from instructors (96% vs. 93%); (c) apply theories to practical problems (95% vs. 91%); and (d) use information to perform a new skill (94% vs. 92%).

Students also express appreciation for the “Ohana style” (family style), which makes HonCC as a “second home.” They enjoy the small classes, which “allow faculty to get a close bond with the students.” They also find that “a strong relationship among students is beneficial,” and recommend more student mentorship and peer tutoring. Compared to the 2018 CCSSE cohort, more HonCC students (a) learn to work effectively with others (94% vs. 90%); (b) participate in a community-based project as part of a regular course (34% vs. 27%); and (c) work with instructors on activities other than coursework (47% vs. 35%).

Fourth, providing options for self-regulation (UDL guideline 9) was an important concern among faculty and students. Faculty members mention it 12 percent of the time across the assessment reports and index cards. They promote expectations that optimize motivation, by assisting students to solve issues instead of passing them along, taking the time to understand their needs, and “teaching them how to be students” (e.g., how to take notes, tackle quizzes, manage time). In addition, faculty facilitate personal coping skills by providing personal stories and professional mentorship around their passions and goals. For instance, faculty make an effort

to learn students' stories (e.g., show up early to class, create talk story time) and provide professional guidance (e.g., write letters of recommendation, share networking, revise job applications, organize mock interviews, encourage students to think about "goals within the industry"). They also develop self-assessment through one-minute surveys (e.g., What did you learn today? What did you have more questions about?), end-of-the-semester meetings, course evaluations, and involving them in rubric development.

Students appreciate that faculty have experience in the field, share personal testimonies, connect with students, "understand the hardship we [students] go through," and are helpful, organized, and prepared. Compared to the 2018 CCSSE cohort, more HonCC students are encouraged by faculty to (a) develop clearer career goals (90% vs. 85%); (b) spend significant amounts of time studying (98% vs. 96%); (c) gain information about career opportunities (88% vs. 81%); and (d) work harder than students thought they could to meet an instructor's expectations (95% vs. 90%). They also encourage faculty to offer a survey on why students drop a class, so the reasons can help faculty improve the course in the future.

Conclusion

Considerations of equity are leading forces in shaping the future of assessment. Accrediting agencies also encourage attention to diversity and leave room for flexibility in assessment schemes. Universities must make decisions that are equitable for students, otherwise they cannot gather meaningful evidence of their learning.

Despite its limited scale, this case study finds that as students learn in various ways, they also need to be assessed through assorted and contextualized approaches. Diverse teaching and assessment strategies are key, including collaborations between academic affairs and support services. The main challenge for faculty is to provide students a choice on how to be assessed.

While they support student autonomy, faculty must also comply with state certification and third party standards that remain quite standardized.

Any sets of data in higher education have the potential to be used as potent assessment instruments. Drawing from data sources that already exist minimizes the risk of social desirability biases, meaning providing information that is likely to be viewed favorably by assessment specialists. Data can be viewed as catalysts that move the institution forward, not sticks employed against constituents. Data should be approached safely and proactively, rather than left unexamined and unused. They should be explored from an equity angle so that their analyses can advance the learning and development of all students.

However, assessment studies about students' perspectives require more careful design and overt intent compared to faculty's feedback. Faculty tend to spontaneously frame broad educational queries within pedagogical insights. By contrast, students usually answer generic questions on their educational experience by focusing on logistical concerns, such as infrastructures and financial aid, rather than reflections on learning. Therefore, when including students' voices, assessment plans need explicit items around teaching strategies and reflections on learning. Learners can be a partner in finding solutions and enhancing learning; faculty and staff need to involve them, ask them direct questions, and use their responses as springboards towards effective change.

Establishing flexible and inclusive approaches to assessment is even more vital in the scenario of a crisis, such as natural disasters and pandemics, when all pre-existing issues of inequity exacerbate. Tackling unexpected challenges is more realistic with robust foundations already in place. For example, substantial experience and creativity is required when moving to online platforms the learning experiences around experiential learning activities, community-

based projects, and overall campus life. The threads of flexible culturally responsive assessments need to weave through the university fabric so it can always endure any adversities in the best interest of our students.

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