

## Foreword

This book contributes to, and documents, a profound and ongoing shift in the dominant paradigm for educational assessment. The emerging movement in assessment illustrated in these pages is most effectively named “ecological assessment” or “organic assessment culture.” The relevant meaning of “culture” in this construction is not, however, the current standard meaning of “the distinctive ideas, customs, social behaviour, products, or way of life of a particular society, people, or period.” The most relevant use is rather the older, original, agricultural meaning: “cultivation of land” (OED online).

Key expressions used in this book, such as “a culture of peer assessment,” are useful and appropriate ways of pointing to how assessment can take on a productively ecological dynamic in an educational setting. Yet, there is more history and theory to this metaphor of culture and cultivation. Classical psychometric evaluation cast assessment as a laboratory science, stripping away complicating variables, applying blinders of various kinds to provide a clear focus on the isolated variable to be studied. By contrast to the laboratory, assessment in the new paradigm evident in these chapters can be helpfully metaphorized as small-scale, local, and organic agriculture (“culture of the soil”). Assessment in this framework depends upon ecology, relationships, interdependence, reciprocal modification, and evolution. The scientific laboratory gives way to the garden and the family farm.

Assessment-as-agriculture invokes a rich array of connotations and subsidiary analogies, most of which resonate with us as distinctly humanistic. To embrace humanistic assessment does not, however, mean that we spurn data or analysis; it means instead that we gather and process our data using a more context-aware and systemic approach. We do our work with heightened sensitivity to relationships among variables, including (and perhaps especially) those variables and relationships of which we may not have been aware when we began our inquiry. The assessment technology that most directly enacts ecological assessment is the portfolio, where our most important judgments consider various aspects of the student’s work in relation to each other, thus evaluating a diverse and multi-dimensional whole. The assessment principle that most directly enacts ecological assessment is consequential validity (see Cronbach, Messick, Moss).

The chapters found here actively pursue assessment phenomena and predicaments that are “difficult to assess,” those that traditional educational evaluation purposefully avoids. Projects develop methods for assessing dynamics more complex than what “traditional forms of assessment” can handle. A number of these chapters examine intricate relationships, exploring what happens when assessment and curriculum or instruction shape each other. For example, we read of institutions where creativity is studied and assessed through collaborative and consensual processes.

In two chapters, the relationship between assessment and the category of “race” is the prime focus. Another section emphasizes assessing students’ understandings of diversity. On a similar openly political path of inquiry, some authors call for open resistance to standardized assessments of important aspects of higher education, particularly critical and creative thinking and, at a broader level, the core mission

of liberal education. This willingness to engage controversial issues extends to claims for the value of authentic assessment, a phrase which rather audaciously begs the question: “authentic as opposed to what?”

Some of these contributors emphasize the value of multiple, mixed, and complementary methods for assessment. In an inquiry reminiscent of Barry Alford’s comments on “fractal assessment,” one contributor discovers how some evaluative methods can function at classroom, program, and institution-wide levels. Another kind of complementarity celebrated in this volume consists of unusual coalitions of stakeholders working together: students with faculty, faculty with administrators, evaluators with subject experts.

Also note the prevalence of such key terms as transformation, evolution, reflection, inversion, and other fluid and intricate dynamics. More than one chapter here investigates how assessment projects can better engage faculty and serve the values of shared governance. Overcoming administrative hierarchies is offered as a positive goal in the name of democratizing assessment and, by implication, the institutions that pursue such a re-configured politics of assessment.

In keeping with the agricultural and ecological metaphors of the new paradigm, we find calls in this book for locally validated criteria and methods for assessment, for defining and designing assessment “on our own terms.” Also note the high value placed on “local opportunities to discover native needs.”

But perhaps the ultimate distinction between traditional approaches to assessment and what we find in this volume is the seemingly simple determination for our assessment actions to *make a positive difference*. For example, one team of co-authors establishes as its goal “to positively impact development of preservice teachers” and “to overcome the structured isolation” of teaching. The principles of consequential validity appear to have worked their way far enough into mainstream evaluative discourse that assessment researchers no longer feel limited to “measurement” as their highest goal; in fact, they feel called to find ways to make assessment serve, support, and sustain their most cherished educational values and goals.

Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Princeton anymore.

## REFERENCES

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