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**When Fair Isn't Fair: Rethinking Higher
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When Fair Isn't Fair: Rethinking Higher Education Assessment for Greater Inclusion

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Years ago, I had my first real encounter with inclusion. It began with an email from a first-year student informing me that she was visually impaired and would be taking one of my classes. At first, I was not overly concerned. I assumed she had low vision and that a few adjustments, such as enlarging my PowerPoint slides, would be sufficient. It never occurred to me that she was completely blind.

My first class was humbling. I had carefully planned an image-analysis activity as the lesson introduction, only to realize she could not participate. Throughout the semester, I redesigned my teaching materials, prepared accessible PDF handouts, increased whole-class discussions, and relied more heavily on verbal descriptions. Despite these adjustments, I still felt she was experiencing the course differently than I had intended. Much of the learning relied on images, diagrams, demonstrations, and videos, and I questioned whether my adaptations were enough to provide meaningful access.

I was equally concerned about the rest of the class. Many students appeared unsure of how to interact with their classmate, often tiptoeing around her, uncertain whether to offer assistance or simply carry on as usual. Seeking guidance, I consulted colleagues in the Special Education Department. Their advice was practical but while their recommendations were helpful, I left the conversation wondering whether inclusion could really be reduced to a checklist of accommodations. Even with these adjustments, I questioned whether any of us truly understood what inclusion looked like in practice.

The experience that fundamentally changed my thinking came at the end of the semester. The final assessment for the course was a written Growth and Development Portfolio. A few days before the due date, the student approached me and asked whether she could complete the assessment through an oral interview instead. She explained that she was still waiting for the Jamaica Society for the Blind to assign a scribe to assist with typing the portfolio.

It was not a request for sympathy or special treatment. It was simply an explanation of a barrier I had never considered. As I reflected on that conversation, an uncomfortable question surfaced: *Had I really been inclusive, or had I simply expected her to fit into a system designed for everyone else?* Initially, I saw it as a question about disability. Over time, however, and through subsequent experiences with students whose learning was shaped by diverse abilities, personal circumstances, and competing responsibilities, I came to realize that it was really a question about assessment. It challenged me to examine not only how I assessed students but also the assumptions underpinning my assessment practices. Like many lecturers, I believed I was being fair because I treated every student the same. Yet, fairness and inclusion are not always synonymous.

In teacher education, we devote considerable attention to designing assessments that are rigorous, authentic, and aligned with programme outcomes. We refine rubrics, debate marking criteria, and strive for consistency in our judgements. Despite these good intentions, our assessment practices may inadvertently privilege some students while disadvantaging others, not because of differences in academic ability, but because of differences in circumstances.

As teacher educators, this should prompt us to pause and reflect. For decades, fairness has largely been

equated with treating every student identically: the same assignment, the same deadline, the same assessment format, and the same examination conditions. Such consistency is often viewed as evidence of academic integrity. However, as higher education has become increasingly diverse, it has become equally apparent that equal treatment does not always produce equitable opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning. This changing landscape invites us to rethink what fairness means and to consider whether our assessment practices are designed for the diversity that now characterizes our classrooms.

Rethinking Fairness in Assessment

Today's higher education classrooms bear little resemblance to those of previous generations. Alongside recent high school graduates sit mature students returning to education after years in the workforce. Some travel long distances from rural communities, while others balance study with full-time employment, caregiving responsibilities, or financial hardship. Many are the first in their families to attend university, while others navigate physical, emotional, sensory, or learning disabilities, sometimes without formally disclosing them. Diversity, therefore, extends far beyond visible characteristics. It reflects the varied experiences, identities, responsibilities, and opportunities that shape how students engage with learning.

This diversity enriches the higher education experience, but it also challenges long-held assumptions about fairness in assessment. Increasingly, assessment scholars argue that when students underperform, we should not automatically attribute their performance to a lack of ability or effort. Instead, we should also ask whether our assessment practices create unnecessary barriers that prevent students from demonstrating what they genuinely know and can do (McArthur, 2016; Tai et al., 2022).

This represents a subtle but important shift in thinking. Traditionally, inclusion in higher education has been addressed through accommodations implemented after barriers have been identified, such as granting additional examination time or modifying assessment arrangements for students who disclose disabilities. While these accommodations remain essential, they often assume that the assessment itself is inherently fair. Contemporary perspectives on inclusive assessment challenge this assumption by arguing that inclusion should begin during the assessment design process rather than after barriers emerge (Hockings, 2010; Tai et al., 2022).

Inclusive assessment therefore asks a different set of questions. Rather than asking, *How can this assessment be modified for individual students?* It asks, *How can this assessment be designed to minimize unnecessary barriers from the outset while maintaining rigorous academic standards?* This perspective aligns closely with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2024), which encourage educators to anticipate learner variability during the design process rather than responding to it retrospectively.

For teacher educators, this distinction is particularly important because we are not only assessing what future teachers know—we are modelling how they will eventually assess others. Every assessment we design communicates implicit messages about fairness, inclusion, and what we value as evidence of learning. If student teachers experience assessment as rigid, compliance-driven, and centered on uniformity, they may replicate those practices in their own classrooms. Conversely, when they experience assessment that is transparent, flexible, authentic, and intentionally inclusive, they begin to appreciate that maintaining high academic standards and promoting equity are complementary rather than competing goals.

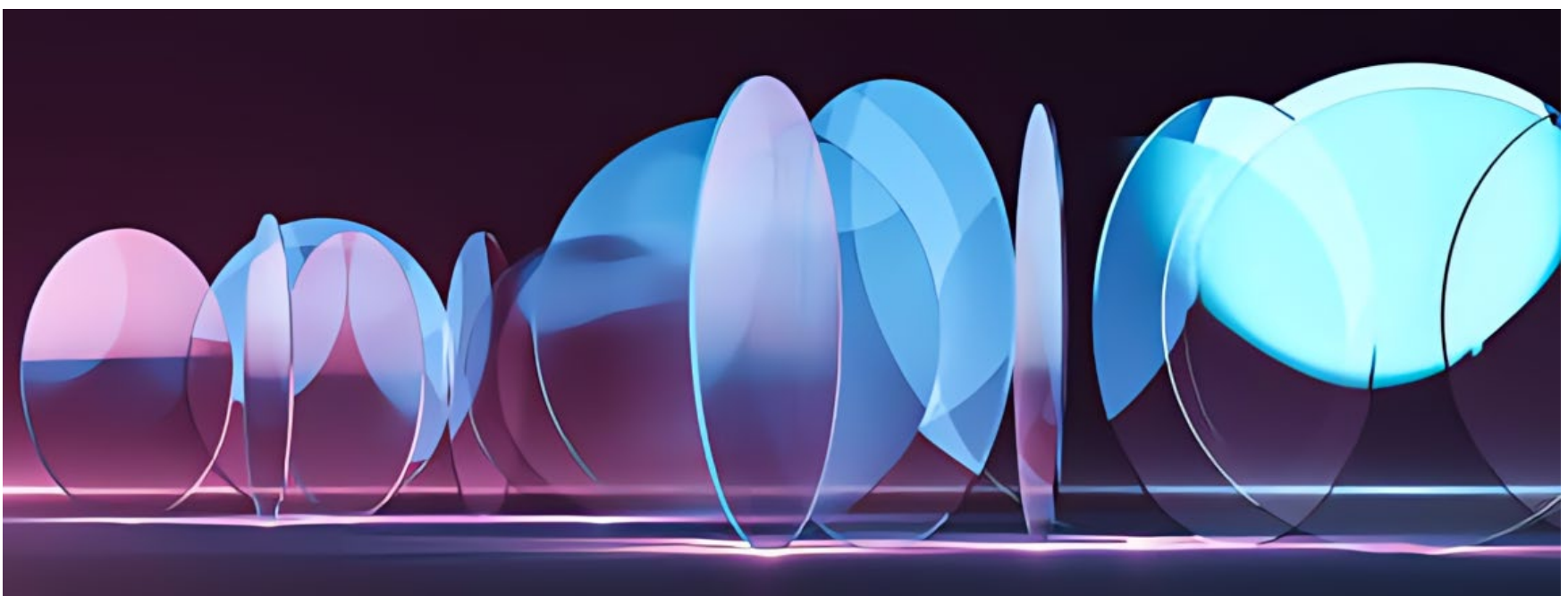
Reflecting on my earlier experiences, I have become much more attentive to the invisible stories students bring into my classroom: the mature student caring for aging parents, the student travelling three hours each day to attend lectures, the student working night shifts to pay tuition, and the first-generation university student navigating unfamiliar academic expectations. None of these realities excuse poor performance, but they inevitably influence how students engage with learning and assessment. They challenge me to ask whether my assessments truly measure the intended learning outcomes or whether they inadvertently reward factors such as financial resources, technological access, prior educational privilege, or familiarity with particular assessment formats. As McArthur (2016) reminded us, fairness is not simply about treating everyone identically; it is about creating meaningful opportunities for every student to demonstrate their learning.



From Principles to Practice: Designing Inclusive Assessments

Recognizing the need for more inclusive assessment is only the first step. The greater challenge lies in translating that understanding into assessments that are rigorous, equitable, and meaningful. Inclusive assessment is not a different form of assessment; rather, it represents good assessment practice viewed through the lens of learner diversity. As Tai et al. (2022) argued, it challenges educators to question assumptions that may unintentionally disadvantage some learners while still maintaining the integrity of academic standards.

My own experiences have convinced me that inclusive assessment is not achieved through isolated accommodations or individual adjustments. Instead, it emerges through intentional assessment design. In my own practice, two principles have come to guide the way I design assessments. First, assessments should be transparent, supportive, and flexible, enabling all students to understand expectations and demonstrate their learning in meaningful ways. Second, assessments should be authentic and culturally relevant, connecting learning to students' lived experiences while modeling the assessment practices we hope future teachers will adopt. These principles have gradually transformed not only how I design assessments but also how I think about fairness in higher education.



Transparency and Feedback

One of the first lessons I learned was that accessibility begins long before students submit an assignment. Several years after my experience with the student who was visually impaired, I noticed that students repeatedly asked the same questions about an assignment despite receiving detailed written instructions. Initially, I attributed the issue to students not carefully reading the assessment brief. While that was undoubtedly true for some, I eventually realized that the more significant issue was clarity. Consequently, I redesigned the assessment by simplifying the instructions, unpacking the rubric during class, and sharing exemplars of previous assignments. The difference was immediate. Students approached the task with greater confidence, submitted higher-quality work, and required significantly fewer clarification via email. Looking back, I realized that it was not simply the exemplars nor the rubrics themselves that made the difference, but the conversations surrounding them. Discussing exemplars, clarifying expectations, and inviting students to interrogate the assessment criteria helped make the often-tacit standards of quality more explicit - a process that research suggests strengthens students' understanding of assessment expectations, increases confidence, and supports higher-quality work (Carless & Chan, 2016; Nicol, 2010).

That experience reminded me that transparency is one of the simplest, yet most overlooked, features of inclusive assessment. Students cannot demonstrate what they know if they do not fully understand what is expected of them. Making expectations explicit makes assessment fairer.

Transparency alone, however, is insufficient. Inclusive assessment recognizes that assessment should support learning, not simply measure it (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Similarly, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) argued that feedback should help students become self-regulated learners. Consequently, I now incorporate structured progress check-ins into authentic assessments, enabling students to receive formative feedback and refine their work before submission. Students also complete a self-assessment checklist aligned with the rubric. Together, these strategies have improved students' confidence and the quality of their work by making assessment a part of the learning process rather than merely its endpoint.

This philosophy also shapes my methodology courses. Before students undertake graded microteaching lessons, they participate in rehearsal sessions during which peers provide structured feedback using the same rubric that will later guide the summative assessment. These rehearsals enable students to refine their questioning techniques, strengthen lesson delivery, and improve classroom interactions before their performance is formally evaluated. The assessment itself has not become easier; rather, students have been given a meaningful opportunity to learn before being judged.

Flexibility Without Compromising Standards

Contemporary perspectives on inclusive assessment emphasize that fairness is achieved not by requiring every student to demonstrate learning in the same way, but by ensuring that all students have equitable opportunities to demonstrate achievement of the intended learning outcomes. This requires designing assessments that offer multiple means for students to express their learning while maintaining common academic standards (Carless, 2015; CAST, 2024; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Tai et al., 2022). Flexibility, therefore, is not about lowering expectations; it is about removing unnecessary barriers by focusing on *how* students demonstrate learning rather than *what* they are expected to learn.

This principle guides my Adult Facilitation Methodology course, where students develop a profile of themselves as adult learners. Rather than requiring a traditional written autobiography, I invite them to choose the format that best communicates their learning. Over the years, students have submitted podcasts, documentary-style videos, animated presentations, digital autobiographies, infographics, and letters to their future selves as educators. Although the formats vary considerably, every submission is assessed against the same learning outcomes using the same rubric. The emphasis remains on critical reflection, the application of theory, and demonstrated learning, rather than the medium through which that learning is communicated.



Students consistently produce work that is more creative, authentic, and reflective than when restricted to a single assessment format. More importantly, this experience has demonstrated that providing meaningful assessment choices does not compromise academic standards. Instead, it exemplifies the principles of inclusive assessment by enabling students to demonstrate achievement through approaches that reflect their strengths while ensuring that every learner is assessed against the same transparent criteria and learning outcomes.

Authentic Assessment for Inclusive Practice

While transparency, feedback, and flexibility help remove unnecessary barriers to learning, inclusive assessment also requires students to see value and relevance in what they are being asked to do. Emerging scholarship suggests that assessment is not simply a mechanism for measuring learning; it also shapes students' identities, sense of belonging, and participation within higher education. McArthur (2022) argued that authentic assessment should promote well-being, participation, and social contribution rather than merely prepare students for employment. Similarly, Nieminen (2025) and Nieminen and Boud (2025) contended that assessment becomes more inclusive when students can connect learning to their identities, lived experiences, and future aspirations. Viewed collectively, this scholarship suggests that inclusive assessment is strengthened when students can recognize themselves, their experiences, and their future professional identities within assessment tasks.

This understanding has significantly influenced how I design assessment across my courses. Rather than relying on decontextualized or hypothetical scenarios, I intentionally create assessment tasks that invite students to draw upon their own experiences, cultural knowledge, and professional aspirations as they demonstrate achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

In my Curriculum Studies course, for example, students explore the national conversation surrounding the phrase “fully dunce” following the widespread discussion generated by the dancehall song *Dunce Cheque*, a popular Jamaican song that celebrates financial success while using the term *dunce* (traditionally meaning unintelligent) in ways that sparked public debate about education, literacy, and social values. Rather than treating it as simply another media controversy, students analyze the issue through the lens of curriculum theory by asking two questions:

What does this reveal about the relationship between society and curriculum? and *What messages are learners receiving through the hidden and phantom curriculum?* Given that the issue is familiar and culturally situated, students enter the discussion from different perspectives and experiences while engaging with the same theoretical concepts and assessment criteria. The assessment does not lower expectations; instead, it provides multiple entry points into complex curriculum theory by allowing students to connect academic ideas to individualized social and cultural realities.

I adopt a similar approach in my Assessment in Education course. Rather than critiquing hypothetical assessments from textbooks, students evaluate authentic teacher-developed classroom assessments and recommend practical improvements using recognized principles of quality and inclusive assessment. Many adopt observations from their practicum placements, prior teaching experiences, or their personal schooling to justify their recommendations. Although students bring different experiences to the task, they are all assessed against the same learning outcomes and rubric. The assessment therefore values the diversity of students' experiences as a resource for learning while maintaining consistent academic expectations.

These experiences have reshaped how I think about inclusive assessment. Educators do not achieve inclusion simply by providing accommodations or offering assessment choices. It requires designing assessments that enable students to recognize the relevance of learning to who they are, where they come from, and the teachers they aspire to become. In teacher education, making this connection carries particular significance because every assessment serves a dual purpose: it evaluates today's student teachers while modeling the kinds of inclusive assessment practices they will one day design for their learners.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my journey as a teacher educator, I have come to realize that inclusive assessment is not achieved through a single strategy or accommodation. Rather, it emerges through a series of intentional design decisions that shape how students experience learning long before assessment is submitted or graded. These decisions create assessment environments in which students have equitable opportunities to demonstrate what they know, understand, and can do while maintaining rigorous academic expectations.

For teacher educators, this responsibility is especially significant because assessment serves a dual purpose. It evaluates today's student teachers while modeling the assessment practices they will carry into tomorrow's classrooms. Every assessment we design communicates what we believe about learning, fairness, and success.

Perhaps the next time we design an assessment, we should pause and ask ourselves three simple questions:

Am I assessing the intended learning outcomes or something else?

Have I removed unnecessary barriers before students begin?

Does this assessment model the kind of inclusive practice I hope future teachers will adopt?

These questions remind us that inclusive assessment is not about lowering standards or treating learners differently. It is about intentionally designing assessments that enable every student to demonstrate their achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

If we continue to equate fairness with sameness, our graduates may do likewise. If, however, we embrace assessments that are transparent, supportive, flexible, authentic, and relevant, we prepare teachers who understand that equity is achieved not by treating every learner identically, but by ensuring every learner has a meaningful opportunity to succeed. Ultimately, if teacher education is to prepare graduates who can create more equitable classrooms, we must first reconsider the assessments we design today.



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