

Culturally Responsive Assessment is Just *Good* Assessment

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In her now classic article, “But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” Ladson-Billings (1995) provides a compelling analysis for teaching that committed to student academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Therein, she indicates that considerations of equity and culture are not anathema to, but rather emblematic of high-quality teaching. Ladson-Billings’ titular exclamatory statement and the concomitant research and practice considerations raised may be found throughout subsequent multicultural education scholarship (see Banks, 2015; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017; Sleeter & Flores Carmona, 2017).

In *Equity and Assessment: Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Assessment* (2017), Montenegro and Jankowski are, in effect, making a similar claim: “But That’s Just Good Assessment!” The authors make a strong case to integrate equity and culture considerations in higher education student assessment. Montenegro and Jankowski make an explicit recognition that ideology, bias, and positionality affect the assessment process. Akin to Harding’s (1993) notion of *strong objectivity*, how we frame, practice, and interpret phenomena—including research and assessment data—may be influenced by our preconceived ideas about:

1. different social identity groups,
2. reasons for inequitable outcomes, and
3. the process and practice of assessment itself.

The authors address how a strict adherence to positivist assessment strategies maintain inequitable status quos. Failure to consider our own biases, perspectives, and subjectivities in the interest of fairness perpetuates unfairness, such as when minoritized students receive negative classroom participation grades based on normative cultural assumptions and expectations about what that should look like. For culturally diverse and minoritized students, with the intrinsic systemization of what and who is considered “normal” and “other”, coupled with the extrinsic systemization of poorer grades and their relationship to external outcomes (e.g., job and graduate school opportunities), standard assessment approaches legitimate a vicious, oppressive cycle, under the guise of objectivity and fairness (Hanesworth, Bracken, & Elkington, 2018; McArthur, 2015).

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Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) rightfully assert that considerations of equity and culture may help disrupt such inequitable assessment practices and outcomes. Critical self-reflection regarding one's assumptions, worldviews, biases, theoretical orientation, and relationships are essential to assessment considerations. Addressing and making meaning of implicit bias, for example, can lead to developing more critically conscious and equity-minded assessment strategies (Witham, Malcom Piqueux, Dowd, & Bensimon, 2015).

Moreover, Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) ask the reader to consider the possibilities when the cultural diversity of students and larger patterns of social inequalities are recognized and leveraged, including how such approaches may benefit *all* students. Culture affects learning. All students have culture. Rather than ignoring this truth (a move that, would be anything but “objective”), assessment should align with and respond to all of who our students are: “Students have different ways to demonstrate their knowledge and we need to use assessment metrics that appropriately elicit demonstrations of what students know” (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017, p. 15). Incorporating diverse assessment strategies (e.g. the use of portfolios) that can gauge achievement while accounting for cultural differences and lead to enacting practices that actually foster achievement (e.g., valuing cultural and critical inquiry), is just good assessment.

Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) ask the reader to reconsider the very purpose of assessment. Is the purpose of assessment to “prove” that due diligence measures of accountability and fairness are occurring, or to “improve” the educational experiences and outcomes of students? If the former, then what does that reveal about the true purpose and function of higher education? If the latter, then what might we do differently?

While this paper focuses on instantiating equity and culture for student assessment, we might also consider their role in other forms of higher education assessment; for example, the impact of course evaluations on the faculty tenure process, and the weight of student bias (Basow & Martin, 2012; Huston, 2005). When contextual factors of equity and culture are not considered, “universal” or utilitarian assessment processes often lead to disproportionate professor evaluations based in part on social identities (e.g., a woman faculty member who does not meet some preconceived criteria for being “motherly” consistently receives poor teaching evaluations).

An enduring challenge in doing the work of culture and equity is that we are often up against discourse. Misunderstanding of potential volatile and complex terminology, coupled with socialization practices that discourage us from thinking, feeling, or discussing matters of culture or equity (see Bonilla-Silva, 2017), often lead to resistance, misunderstanding, and conflict. Culturally responsive assessment efforts should correlate with culturally responsive professional development efforts on key concepts such as implicit bias and equity literacy (Gorski, 2014).

Overall, Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) provide a necessary roadmap to the what, why, and how for faculty moving towards culturally responsive assessment. Assessments efforts that recognize and minimize implicit bias while maximizing student-centered, critically and culturally conscious teaching and learning, will empower diverse voices, increase student engagement, and generate more equitable academic outcomes.

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