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Advancing Equity in Student Learning Assessment: Culturally Responsive Practices for Indigenous Student Success

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Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning

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Abstract: Assessment practices in higher education have historically been grounded in Western epistemological assumptions about what counts as valid knowledge and how learning should be demonstrated. Such approaches may fail to recognize Indigenous ways of knowing that are oral, relational, land-based, multilingual, and community-centered. This practitioner-oriented, research-informed paper explores culturally responsive student learning assessment through two institutional contexts serving Indigenous students: the State University of Londrina (Universidade Estadual de Londrina; UEL) in Brazil and the University of Hawai'i–West O'ahu (UHWO) in the United States. Drawing on the author's 2024–2025 Fulbright Scholar project, the paper describes culturally responsive assessment practices, including oral and narrative demonstrations of learning, formative and dialogic assessment, multilingual assessment, place- and community-based assignments, and reflective approaches that honor Indigenous epistemologies while maintaining academic rigor. Cross-institutional themes illustrate how culturally responsive assessment can affirm Indigenous identities, strengthen students' sense of belonging, and broaden conceptions of rigor, validity, and evidence of learning. The paper also discusses implications for institutional leaders and assessment professionals, including institutional assessment structures, faculty development, and partnerships with Indigenous communities. The paper concludes with guiding principles that assessment professionals, faculty, and institutional leaders can adapt to design assessment practices that recognize multiple ways of knowing and better support Indigenous student success.

Keywords: *Indigenous populations, Culturally responsive assessment, Equity, Indigenous-serving institutions, Student success*

Introduction

Assessment practices in higher education have historically been grounded in Western epistemological assumptions about what counts as valid knowledge, how learning should be demonstrated, and what constitutes academic rigor. These assumptions often privilege written, individual, decontextualized performance and position standardized measures as neutral. For

Indigenous learners, such expectations can misrepresent or devalue deeply rooted ways of knowing that are oral, relational, land-based, communal, and spiritually grounded (Henning et al., 2022; Smith, 2022). When assessment practices fail to recognize these epistemologies, they risk functioning as mechanisms of exclusion rather than as tools for learning and equity.

This paper offers a practitioner-oriented yet research-informed exploration of culturally responsive student learning assessment. It draws on two institutional contexts that serve Indigenous student populations in distinct ways: the State University of Londrina (Universidade Estadual de Londrina; UEL) in Brazil, and the University of Hawai'i–West O'ahu (UHWO) in Hawai'i. The analysis is grounded in the author's 2024–2025 Fulbright Scholar project hosted at UEL and on ongoing institutional work at UHWO.

The paper builds on a book chapter, *Culturally Responsive Leadership and Community Values: Pathways to Indigenous Student Success in Brazil and Hawai'i* (Miranda et al., 2026), which provides a broader comparative case study of leadership, pedagogy, and Indigenous higher education. Here, the focus is narrowed to student learning assessment practices: how they are designed, how they embody Indigenous epistemologies, and how they contribute to student success. This assessment-focused work was shared at the 2026 Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) Conference through a poster presentation highlighting culturally responsive assessment practices at UEL and UHWO, cross-institutional themes across the two contexts, and guiding principles for assessment professionals. This paper expands on the conference presentation by providing additional context, examples, and implications for assessment practice.

The goals of this paper are to (a) describe culturally responsive assessment practices at UEL and UHWO; (b) identify cross-institutional themes and implications for equity; and (c) provide concrete guiding principles that assessment professionals can adapt in their own contexts.

Historical and Cultural Context for Indigenous Assessment

Indigenous students' experiences in higher education are inseparable from the histories of colonization, linguistic suppression, and systemic inequities that shaped educational systems in both Brazil and Hawai'i (Amaral et al., 2024; Kana'iaupuni et al., 2021; Smith, 2022). These histories matter for assessment because they have long defined whose knowledge and ways of knowing are recognized in academic spaces (Amaral et al., 2024; Smith, 2022).

In Brazil, Indigenous communities endured centuries of displacement, violence, and attempts at forced assimilation. Portuguese became the dominant language of schooling, while Indigenous languages and epistemologies were frequently marginalized or excluded from formal education. In the early 2000s, the state of Paraná implemented an Indigenous-specific university entrance exam and mandated that public state universities reserve admission spots for Indigenous students (Amaral, 2010). These policies dramatically improved access to higher education, but early data revealed severe challenges with persistence: dropout rates for Indigenous undergraduates at UEL exceeded 50% during the first decade of implementation.

Conversations with Indigenous students and faculty pointed to a mismatch between mainstream academic structures, including assessment practices, and Indigenous ways of knowing, communicating, and relating to community.

In Hawai'i, Native Hawaiian learners have also navigated a long history of educational injustice. Following the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893, the government installed by the overthrowers instituted English-only schooling policies, including the 1896 ban on 'Ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian language) in public schools. These policies, later maintained after the U.S. annexation of Hawai'i in 1898, contributed to the near extinction of the Hawaiian language (Wilson & Kamanā, 2001). Over the last five decades, Hawaiian language revitalization and Hawaiian culture-based education have reasserted Indigenous epistemologies in K-12 and higher education. Yet assessment systems in higher education often still reflect Euro-American norms. UHWO, located on the Leeward (West) Coast of O'ahu, serves a high proportion of Native Hawaiian and first-generation students and has an explicit mission commitment to Indigenous and local communities. Assessment practices are gradually being reshaped to align more closely with Hawaiian values, language, and ways of learning.

Across both contexts, a key focus is not simply access, but whether educational and assessment systems are structured in ways that value and uphold Indigenous students' knowledge, identities, and commitments to their communities.

Conceptual Framework for Culturally Responsive Assessment

Culturally responsive assessment in this paper is informed by culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), Indigenous and critical methodologies (Smith, 2022), and emerging scholarship on equity-centered assessment (Henning et al., 2022). Rather than treating culture as an "add-on," these frameworks position culture and community at the heart of teaching and assessment.

Several core principles guide the conceptualization of culturally responsive assessment:

1. **Epistemological pluralism.** Culturally responsive assessment begins from the premise that there are multiple, equally valid ways of knowing. For Indigenous students, knowledge may be carried in oral traditions, ceremony, land-based practice, and relational responsibilities. Assessment practices must therefore be flexible enough to recognize and evaluate learning expressed in these forms.
2. **Relational accountability.** Indigenous epistemologies emphasize relationality, among people, land, ancestors, and spiritual dimensions. Assessment informed by these epistemologies asks not only what students know, but how they use knowledge in ways that are accountable to land, community, and their own genealogies.
3. **Linguistic sovereignty.** Indigenous languages are not simply "supports" or "accommodations;" they are central to thought, identity, and epistemology. Validating Indigenous languages as legitimate academic languages for teaching and assessment affirms linguistic rights and strengthens students' sense of belonging (Kana'iaupuni et al., 2021).

4. **Narrative and reflective depth.** Culturally sustaining assessment values narrative, reflection, and identity work as important components of learning. Deep reflective writing, oral narratives, and digital storytelling can provide rich evidence of conceptual understanding and critical thinking.
5. **Community-engaged evaluation.** When possible, assessment design and interpretation involve community knowledge holders, cultural practitioners, and elders. Their participation can guide what is assessed, how it is assessed, and how results are interpreted in culturally grounded ways.

These principles do not constitute a rigid model, but they provide a lens through which to understand the assessment practices described in the next sections and to imagine how those practices might be adapted in other institutions.

Culturally Grounded Assessment Practices at UEL (Brazil)

The State University of Londrina is a large public university in Paraná, Brazil, that enrolls Indigenous students from Kaingang, Guarani, and other Indigenous communities through state-level affirmative action policies. As Indigenous enrollment grew, the institution recognized the need to redesign academic structures to better support Indigenous epistemologies, linguistic diversity, and community relationships. UEL's Intercultural Cycle of Academic Initiation was created as a one-year preparatory program for incoming Indigenous students across disciplines. The program emerged in response to the high attrition rates among Indigenous students, and it was designed in collaboration with Indigenous leaders and faculty. Assessment is not a separate, technical layer; it is woven through the program's structure and pedagogical approach.

Oral and Narrative Demonstrations of Learning

In the Intercultural Cycle, students frequently demonstrate learning through oral presentations, storytelling, and dialogue. For example, students may narrate the histories of their communities, analyze land conflicts, or present on health practices using Indigenous conceptual frameworks. These tasks require advanced conceptual understanding but allow students to express that understanding in ways that align with Indigenous communicative norms rather than exclusively through academic essays in Portuguese.

Formative, Dialogic Evaluation

Assessment in the Intercultural Cycle is largely formative and dialogic. Faculty provide ongoing feedback in conversation with students rather than relying primarily on high-stakes exams. Students are encouraged to reflect on their learning trajectories, identify areas of growth, and connect their academic development to responsibilities within their communities. Assessment thus functions as a shared process rather than a one-time judgment.

Multilingual Assessment and Language Revitalization

Students are encouraged to use Kaingang, Guarani, or other Indigenous languages as appropriate in their projects, presentations, and discussions. This multilingual approach

recognizes that some concepts are most accurately expressed in Indigenous languages and that language is central to cultural survival. While Portuguese remains the primary language of the institution, assessment practices within the Intercultural Cycle affirm linguistic sovereignty by treating Indigenous languages as intellectual, not merely informal.

Community-Engaged Assessment Tasks

Many assessment tasks require engagement with villages, elders, and community organizations. Students may conduct interviews with community leaders, document traditional knowledge, or develop projects that respond to local priorities. These assessments are evaluated not only for academic content but also for their grounding in community contexts and responsibilities.

Evidence of Impact

Since the Intercultural Cycle was implemented, dropout rates among Indigenous undergraduates at UEL have decreased dramatically from over 50% in earlier cohorts to approximately 9% (Universidade Estadual de Londrina [UEL], 2021). Qualitative feedback from students highlights increased confidence, stronger identity, and a greater sense that the university is a place where their knowledge matters. While multiple factors contribute to these outcomes, culturally aligned assessment practices are a central component of the program's success.

Culturally Responsive Assessment Practices at UHWO (Hawai'i)

The University of Hawai'i–West O'ahu is a four-year public university on O'ahu that serves a high proportion of Native Hawaiian, first-generation, and adult learners. Its mission emphasizes Indigenous knowledge, local communities, and social justice. Culturally responsive assessment practices have emerged in multiple programs through faculty innovation, grant-funded initiatives, and institutional support for Indigenous-centered pedagogy.

'Āina-Based and Identity-Based Assessment

In courses related to Hawaiian-Pacific studies, education, and other disciplines, students complete projects that require engagement with 'āina (land), local communities, and their own genealogies. For instance, students might analyze environmental issues affecting their home ahupua'a (traditional land division), conduct community-based research, or develop projects that connect course content to the needs of Native Hawaiian communities. These assignments are assessed for content knowledge, critical thinking, and application, while also honoring Indigenous relationships to place and community.

Oral Knowledge Demonstration and Digital Storytelling

Faculty integrate mo'olelo (storytelling), oral presentations, and digital storytelling as key forms of assessment. Students may create digital narratives that weave together family history, community experiences, and academic concepts. These assessments allow students to demonstrate learning in multimodal ways and can be especially powerful for Indigenous and

local students who express themselves more fully through story than through traditional research papers.

Community-Engaged and Relational Assessment

UHWO's strong partnerships with local organizations create opportunities for community-connected learning that informs culturally responsive assessment. In Sustainable Community Food Systems, for example, students complete a practicum in a partner organization, where applied projects and reflective analysis serve as key demonstrations of learning. In the Hawaiian and Indigenous Health and Healing program, assessments such as lomilomi (Native Hawaiian massage) or ho'oponopono (Native Hawaiian conflict-resolution practice) hō'ike (demonstrations) and oral presentations reflect Indigenous ways of knowing and emphasize relational accountability. These approaches support culturally grounded assessment while maintaining clear expectations for academic rigor.

Faculty Professional Development and Support

The Nāulu Center for Culture, Engagement, and Wellbeing provides professional learning opportunities focused on Indigenous and culturally responsive practices, including assessment. Workshops address topics such as designing assignments that reflect Hawaiian values, integrating 'Ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian language) in class, or using reflective journaling and na'au (gut/heart/mind) check-ins as part of formative assessment. This professional development work acknowledges that faculty require time, support, and community to shift their assessment practices.

Collectively, these practices move assessment beyond narrow academic benchmarks and toward a more relational, culturally grounded understanding of student learning and success.

Cross-Institutional Themes and Insights

Although UEL and UHWO operate in very different socio-political and cultural contexts, several cross-cutting themes emerge that are instructive for assessment professionals.

Reframing Academic Rigor

Both institutions challenge the assumption that rigor is synonymous with standardized, written, or purely individual performance. Instead, rigor is redefined as deep engagement with community knowledge, critical reflection on identity and history, and the ability to apply learning in culturally meaningful contexts. Oral presentations, land-based projects, and community-based assignments are assessed with clear criteria and high expectations, demonstrating that culturally responsive forms of assessment can be both challenging and rigorous.

Assessment as Identity and Belonging Work

At UEL and UHWO, assessment is not only a measure of knowledge; it is also a space where students negotiate and affirm their identities. Evidence from both cases supports this:

qualitative feedback from UEL students highlights that culturally aligned assessment fosters stronger identity and a sense that their knowledge matters, while UHWO faculty observe that narrative assessments empower Indigenous students to express themselves authentically. When students see their languages, communities, and histories reflected in assessment tasks and criteria, they are more likely to perceive the institution as a place where they belong. Conversely, when assessment requires them to bracket or downplay their cultural identities, it can reinforce feelings of marginalization (Henning et al., 2022; Paris & Alim, 2017; Smith, 2022).

Relational and Dialogic Assessment

Both institutions emphasize assessment as a relational process rather than an isolated, one-way judgment. Students engage in dialogue with faculty, peers, and community members about their learning. As seen at UEL, a focus on conversational and formative feedback increases student confidence, while UHWO's integration of culturally grounded practices emphasizes reciprocal trust and accountability. This approach reduces fear of failure and frames assessment as an opportunity for growth rather than merely as a mechanism for sorting or exclusion (Henning et al., 2022; Smith, 2022).

Institutional Culture and Leadership

In both contexts, culturally responsive assessment practices are supported by leadership that values Indigenous knowledge, allocates resources, and creates spaces for collaboration with Indigenous communities. Without supportive institutional culture and leadership, such practices risk remaining isolated within individual classrooms and are unlikely to be sustained or scaled.

Persistent Challenges

Despite notable progress, significant challenges remain. As observed at UHWO, faculty require dedicated time, support, and community to shift their practices, as they may feel uncertain about how to design and evaluate nontraditional assessment tasks or worry that alternative forms of assessment might not align with the expectations of accrediting bodies or external stakeholders. Furthermore, conversations at UEL highlighted a persistent mismatch between Indigenous ways of knowing and mainstream academic structures. Within these mainstream structures, traditional academic norms and established assessment practices can favor standardized forms of assessment, risking that culturally responsive practices remain isolated within individual classrooms. These challenges underscore the need for systemic rather than superficial change (Henning et al., 2022; Smith, 2022).

Implications for Leadership and Assessment Professionals

The experiences of UEL and UHWO suggest several implications for institutional leaders, assessment professionals, and faculty who wish to advance equity through assessment.

First, leaders should examine whether existing institutional assessment structures support or constrain culturally responsive practice. This may include considering whether institutional learning outcomes recognize relational, community-engaged, and culturally grounded

dimensions of learning; whether program-level assessment processes allow for multimodal evidence; and whether Indigenous perspectives are meaningfully represented in assessment review and reporting processes. Such attention can help ensure that culturally responsive assessment is supported institutionally rather than dependent solely on the practices of individual faculty.

Second, institutions should invest in sustained professional development for faculty and staff. Shifting assessment practices is not a one-time workshop; it requires ongoing learning, experimentation, reflection, and peer support. Professional development should highlight concrete examples, provide tools and templates, and create communities of practice where faculty can share challenges and successes.

Third, leaders (institutional, program, and/or assessment leaders) should formalize partnerships with Indigenous communities and organizations in the design and interpretation of assessment. Co-creating rubrics, assignments, and evaluation criteria with Indigenous educators and knowledge holders can help ensure that assessment practices are aligned with community values and aspirations rather than imposed from the outside.

Finally, assessment professionals should critically examine assumptions about what constitutes valid evidence of student learning. Modern validity theory defines validity in relation to the interpretations and uses of assessment evidence rather than as an inherent property of an assessment itself (American Educational Research Association et al., 2014; Jankowski & Lundquist, 2022). In culturally responsive and Indigenous assessment contexts, this means also examining whose knowledge and ways of knowing are recognized as legitimate evidence of learning. Validity judgments must account for epistemological diversity rather than universalizing Western standards as the only legitimate reference point (Baker & Henning, 2022).

Guiding Principles for Assessment Practitioners

Based on the practices and themes described above, the following guiding principles may support assessment practitioners seeking to advance equity for Indigenous and other marginalized student populations:

1. **Legitimize multiple forms of evidence.** Design assessment tasks that allow for oral, visual, land-based, and narrative demonstrations of learning, and develop clear criteria for evaluating these forms.
2. **Prioritize formative and dialogic assessment.** Incorporate frequent, low-stakes opportunities for students to receive and respond to feedback, and use dialogue as a core part of assessment processes.
3. **Support multilingual assessment.** Where appropriate, allow students to demonstrate learning in Indigenous or heritage languages and consider how rubrics and feedback can account for multilingual expression.

4. **Ground assessment in place and community.** Encourage projects that connect course content to local communities, lands, and histories, and assess students' ability to engage responsibly and critically in those contexts.
5. **Invest in faculty capacity.** Provide training, time, and recognition for faculty who are redesigning assessment practices. Include culturally responsive assessment in hiring, evaluation, and promotion criteria.
6. **Co-create with communities.** Partner with Indigenous communities, cultural practitioners, and students themselves in designing and refining assessment practices to ensure they remain accountable to those they are meant to serve.

Conclusion

Culturally responsive assessment is not a set of isolated techniques; it is a paradigm shift that requires transforming how institutions understand knowledge, learning, and success. The practices at UEL and UHWO illustrate that when assessment is grounded in Indigenous epistemologies, languages, and community relationships, it can serve as a powerful mechanism for equity. Students experience assessment not as a gatekeeping mechanism, but as a space for affirmation, reflection, and growth.

For assessment professionals, this shift entails rethinking assumptions about what constitutes rigor and valid evidence of student learning; examining whether institutional assessment structures support culturally responsive practice; and working in deep partnership with Indigenous and other marginalized communities. As institutions increasingly commit to equity and justice, culturally responsive assessment offers a concrete, practice-based avenue for realizing those commitments and for supporting Indigenous student success in meaningful and transformative ways.

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