

Okamura, K. 'A. HN, Ka'aloa, R. P. H., & Long, K. S. (2026). E ALA: Awakening the Mo'olelo (Story) of Culturally Relevant Assessment. *Intersection: A journal at the intersection of assessment and learning, Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education Conference Proceedings*, 7(4), 2–9. <https://doi.org/10.61669/001c.169456>

E ALA: Awakening the Mo'olelo (Story) of Culturally Relevant Assessment

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We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning

AALHE Conference Proceedings 2026, Volume 7, Issue 4

Abstract: Traditional higher education assessment often relies on extractive, Western-centric paradigms that marginalize Indigenous epistemologies. This article explores the decolonization of graduate program assessment by centering *mo'olelo* (story) and the *Kūlana Noi'i* framework of *Pono* research principles. We examine the Engaging Advanced Learner Outcomes (E ALA) workshop series at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, where faculty across 38 disciplines engaged in an in-person culturally responsive assessment workshop series. Utilizing *mo'olelo* (story), *lōina* (values), and *lawena* (behaviors), the intervention transformed assessment from a rigid compliance mandate into reciprocal, community-collaborative work sessions. Results demonstrate significant increases in faculty knowledge and a paradigm shift toward equitable evaluation and knowledge reciprocity (*a'o aku, a'o mai*). Ultimately, integrating these Indigenous frameworks offers a transformative model for institutions to foster culturally valid, ethically grounded, and holistic student assessment.

Keywords: *culturally-responsive, equitable assessment, institutional learning outcomes*

Introduction

Assessment has long been recognized as a tool that is utilized in higher educational settings to extract evidence of learning. However, viewing assessment through a decolonial lens asserts the dismantling of epistemic extractivism (Tuck & Yang, 2012), validating indigenous knowledge assessment systems (Smith, 2021), and empowerment of assessment for epistemic justice (Godsell et al., 2024). Decolonized assessment can be seen as a praxis that actively disrupts the "coloniality of knowledge and being" by honoring ways of knowing, positionality, and experiences (Godsell et al., 2024, p.3). In this definition assessment moves away from the standardization and extractive nature, and towards relationality, community-collaboration, protocol, and voice.

Graduate education increasingly recognizes the need for assessment practices that honor diverse ways of knowing and align with ethical research principles. *Mo'olelo* serves as a methodology specific to the Hawaiian context, emphasizing the reciprocal sharing of stories between participants and researchers (Balutski et al., 2015). When integrated with *Pono* Research principles from the *Kūlana Noi'i* framework (Kūlana Noi'i Working Group, 2021), which establishes reciprocal, non-extractive research partnerships with *Kanaka 'Ōiwi*, Native Hawaiian, Indigenous communities, this approach offers transformative possibilities for graduate program assessment. *Mo'olelo* encompasses both history and story in the

ancestral Hawaiian worldview, representing intertwined concepts that Western methodology often views problematically (Balutski et al., 2015). This holistic approach to knowledge transmission differs fundamentally from conventional Western research paradigms. Traditional *mo'olelo* feature *kaona*, a rhetorical device involving allusion and metaphor for conveying underlying meanings, and all *mo'olelo* are set in specific, identifiable locations (Pukui & Elbert, 1986). This place-based nature connects knowledge to physical landscapes and cultural contexts, making it particularly relevant for program assessment that values contextual understanding. The methodological significance of *mo'olelo* extends beyond data collection. Researchers ground their interviews in understandings of *mo'olelo*, metaphor, and place that shape education and educators' lives in Hawai'i. This grounding ensures that assessment practices emerge from cultural frameworks rather than imposing external structures onto Indigenous contexts (Trumbull & Nelson-Barber, 2019).

This practice-based article reflects on the design and outcomes of a professional development workshop series using workshop evaluation data, participant reflections, and the experiences shared during a recent panel presentation. Below, the authors examine how *mo'olelo* and selected *Pono* Research principles supported faculty members in developing culturally responsive approaches to graduate program assessment.

Literature Review

The practice of *mo'olelo* (Hawaiian storytelling and narrative methodology) as a decolonizing practice (Balutski et al., 2015), integrated with *Pono* Research principles from the *Kūlana Noi'i* framework (Kūlana Noi'i Working Group, 2021), can strengthen culturally responsive and equitable graduate program assessment. Drawing from decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 2021) and ethical research frameworks (Kūlana Noi'i Working Group, 2021), *mo'olelo* reshapes the traditional hierarchical relationship between assessor and assessed.

The *Kūlana Noi'i* framework (Kūlana Noi'i Working Group, 2021) emerged from place-based stewards' expressed need for guidelines ensuring equitable and reciprocal research partnerships in the *He'eia ahupua'a* (land division). Rather than functioning as a compliance checklist, this document serves as a starting point for deeper conversation, laying out ideas, values, and behaviors that build more just and generative relationships. The framework encompasses eight *kūlana* (standards) organized around two themes: building and nurturing *pilina* (relationships) by understanding history, people, and place and knowledge stewardship. These standards provide concrete guidance for conducting research that respects Indigenous sovereignty and ways of knowing. *Kūlana Noi'i* stresses the importance of Indigenist ethics (Kovach, 2009), distinguishing it from diversity approaches that merely accommodate differences to fundamentally restructuring power relations. The framework's practical application extends beyond research design building *pilina* (relationships) and practicing knowledge reciprocity, demonstrating its scalability and relevance across contexts.

Kānaka 'Ōiwi worldviews emphasize being *pono* (righteous and just) and maintaining *lōkahi* (balance) to promote *mauli ola* (optimal health and wellbeing). This understanding positions ethics not as abstract principles but as lived practices maintaining relationships across multiple dimensions (Archibald et al., 2019). Establishing relationships, protocols, and procedures for *Pono* Research

represents a common theme across Indigenous methodologies, alongside identifying community-based health priorities and solutions while navigating multiple stakeholder worlds (Archibald et al., 2019). This multi-dimensional navigation reflects the complex skills graduate students must develop to conduct ethical research.

Culturally responsive assessment practices (Ezeh & Kehinde, 2026) must keep pace with culturally responsive educational practices to improve assessment validity and maintain constructive alignment between learning, teaching, and assessment (Trumbull & Nelson-Barber, 2019). This alignment ensures that assessment methods honor the same cultural values embedded in curriculum and instruction. Assessment based on Indigenous knowledge systems and teaching methods has been mounted wherever Indigenous peoples live, yet Western-style education often continues to dominate to the detriment of Indigenous students' engagement and completion (Castillo-Montoya & Madriaga, 2025). This persistent dominance underscores the urgent need for alternative assessment paradigms. The concept of cultural validity in assessment requires accounting for students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, epistemologies, educational experiences, communication styles, and socioeconomic situations throughout assessment development and implementation (Shahjahan et al., 2022). This comprehensive consideration transforms assessment from a seemingly neutral measurement tool into a culturally situated practice.

Decolonizing Assessment - E ALA Series

In response to campus learning assessment goals challenging programs across the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa campus to be more explicit in their practices and to center themselves within a Native Hawaiian Place of Learning, the Engaging Advanced Learner Outcomes, [E ALA Series](#), was developed as a culturally relevant, equity-minded intervention. This innovative in-person workshop series engaged graduate programs by utilizing the *Kūlana Noi'i* framework and *Pono* Research principles to connect ethical, culturally responsive research practices with the university's [Advanced Degree Institutional Learning Outcomes](#) #6: Conduct research or projects as a responsible and ethical professional, including consideration of and respect for other cultural perspectives, and #7: Interact professionally with others. By centering *Aloha 'Āina* (love of the land or one's country) alongside local *lōina* (values) and *lawena* (behaviors), the workshops built a pedagogical foundation through rich, culturally appropriate metaphors—specifically laulau making, honoring a *pua kaulana* (flower), the collaborative weaving of a *lei* (garland), and the foundational strength of an *'ōhi'a* (kind of flower) rubric—to help faculty articulate their program's *mo'olelo* (story) and connect their assessment practices directly to place, identity, culture, and program relevancy. *Lōina* (Hawaiian values) and *lawena* (Hawaiian behavioral expectations) were introduced to support discourse on creating learner outcomes that are place- and culture-based. Armed with these usable strategies to take back to their departments, participants experienced a transformative shift, moving from viewing assessment as an intimidating, "scary" compliance task to embracing it as a vital program asset. Ultimately, the series connected practitioners to their data in an evolving and living way, guiding them to view student success not as a rigid hierarchy, but as a developmental journey that grants permission for continuous, holistic student learning throughout their programs and beyond.

Implications for Practice

The E ALA series brought together program assessment coordinators, and other faculty assessment leaders across 38 disciplines to strengthen culturally responsive and equitable learning assessments for graduate programs. In our panel presentation, workshop participants reflected on how integrating *mo'olelo* (story) (Benham, 2007; Ho'omanawanui, 2004; Kamakau, 1991; Pukui & Elbert, 1986) with the *Pono* Research principles of the *Kūlana Noi'i* framework (Kūlana Noi'i Working Group, 2021) connected assessment leaders and supported the continued development of their program assessment practices. The panel discussion focused on the following key topics: 1) Explain the practice of *mo'olelo* and the relationship to culturally responsive and equitable assessment, 2) Describe one *Pono* Research principle from *Kūlana Noi'i* and the application into student and program learning assessment, and 3) Share from your participation in the event series, reflections or takeaways that faculty shared regarding strengthening their individual program learning assessment through *mo'olelo*.

The practice of *mo'olelo*

Mo'olelo allowed the workshops to focus on reflection, narrative and conversation which allowed for reciprocal relationships between the participants and served as a firm foundation to strengthen assessment practices. Centering the workshops on *mo'olelo* served as a safe entry point for any participant to be confident to share their work in assessment and empowered participation in the workshop activities supported by their specific program assessment experiences. One panelist described the importance of the process of *mo'olelo* to assessment:

Everyone has a different story to tell, and in this series of workshops we grounded the experiences around *mo'olelo* (story, tale, history, tradition). This approach allowed the participants to disconnect from their fears or anxiety of assessment reporting and center their work on first telling their story to other faculty participants that were experiencing similar struggles, and then work on ways to take that story back to their programs to share with their faculty and students.

Mo'olelo allowed the shift from a one directional workshop to a reciprocal workshop, in which all participants' contributions and story were valued and included in their collaborations as they worked to align their assessments with the Advanced Institutional Learning Outcomes and with their specific Program Learning Outcomes.

Pono Research principles from *Kūlana Noi'i* and application

Three *Pono* Research principles from *Kūlana Noi'i* immediately manifested out of the group participants:

- Community Engagement and Co-Review: Promote co-learning and co-development of methods, strategies, goals/objectives, and outputs/outcomes to be adaptable to local place, people, climate, resources, and needs.
- Self-Awareness and Capacity: Be aware of and address your place, intentions, power, and value to the place both as an individual and a representative of a group or institution (such as a community organization, university, or government agency).
- Communication: Pursue inclusive, transparent, and open communication throughout the research process.

As these principles emerged in group conversation and exchange among workshop participants, it was observed that *mo'olelo* accelerated the conversations toward a common ground to start rich engagement around current assessment practices in these areas, which quickly shifted to a shared group reflection. This introspection started with *mo'olelo* around their current assessment practices and then turned to strategies, activities, and hopes on how to strengthen their existing practices through the incorporation of these *Pono* Research principles. These principles were a catalyst for the participants to begin a paradigm shift to examine their prior knowledge with culturally responsive assessment while engaging in a reflective practice, *mo'olelo*, that simultaneously cultivated emerging culturally responsive assessment applications. One panelist described the importance of the process of the practice of community engagement and co-review aligned with *a'o aku, a'o mai*, reciprocal nature of teaching and learning (Pukui, 1983):

One practice that has resonated with my assessment work is the practice of *a'o aku, a'o mai*, which implies to teach and to learn, in a reciprocal manner. When as you teach, you also learn, as you learn, then you can teach. This shows up in our assessments when we incorporate community engagement and co-review. As we assess our students and their research against our Program Learning Outcomes, we work to strive for the incorporation of this way of knowing, building and nurturing community collaboration and accountability to ensure the approaches and research feed both the community and the student. This reciprocal relationship is one foundational aspect that strengthens the application of this culturally-responsive assessment approach in my program assessments.

Strengthening program learning assessment through *mo'olelo*

Utilizing the process of *mo'olelo* in the E ALA assessment series, program assessment coordinators, and other faculty assessment leaders reflected on individual program culturally responsive assessment practices. Participants indicated a 4.8 on a 5.0 scale of workshop effectiveness to cultivating culturally responsive assessment practices. Individual knowledge on culturally responsive assessment practices increased from an average of 2.54 (on a 5.0 scale) prior to the workshops, to 4.38, showing an increase of 1.84.

This learning marked a shift from viewing culturally responsive assessment as an aspirational commitment to understanding it as an actionable, ongoing practice. Through *mo'olelo*, participants considered how students and community partners could help define meaningful indicators of learning, while faculty in turn could examine the assumptions and power embedded in existing assessment tools. The increase from 2.54 to 4.38 thus reflects self-reported growth in both understanding and practical capacity, as participants left with a stronger grasp of culturally responsive assessment language, strategies for applying its principles within their programs, and a community of colleagues committed to supporting this work.

The in-person workshop series supported the Hawaiian concept of *He alo a he alo* (face to face) in creating a collective *mo'olelo*. Through small group and large group discussions, participants shared their interest and plans in creating culturally relevant assessments that capture the transformative experience of their programs that connect learning to Hawai'i as a place of learning. One participant commented:

The in-person format and the collaborative, group work structured around relevant assessment reflection and activities was a fertile environment for building a community of assessment colleagues. I was able to work with assessment leads across disciplines and hear about their challenges and their practices. This experience has built my confidence that there is a community of faculty working to embed culturally-responsive assessment practices that I can lean on to support my efforts when my faculty struggle to embrace these new approaches. I now have a working community of practice to turn to.

This reflection showcases how strengthening culturally responsive assessment requires more than introducing new concepts or tools; it also requires relationships that can sustain the work through and beyond workshop instances. Through *he alo a he alo* and the reciprocal exchange of *mo'olelo*, participants developed confidence and connections they could draw upon while working to shift assessment within their programs. In this way, the E ALA Series positioned assessment not as an isolated compliance task, but as collective and relational work grounded in ongoing learning and mutual support.

Summary

Through the combined efforts at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, program assessment coordinators alongside faculty engaged in a decolonized assessment approach, *mo'olelo*, as one embedded practice alongside *Pono* Research principles (Kūlana Noi'i Working Group, 2021) that advanced their work to strengthen program learning assessment across the campus to be more explicit in their practices and to center themselves within a Native Hawaiian Place of Learning. The E ALA series of workshops allowed participants to build genuine connections with programs across the campus, to allow for open conversation around culturally sustaining assessment practices, and to co-create and community-build with other fields of study around new approaches to embed in their individual program assessment work.

Reflection and feedback from the participants showed that the practice of *mo'olelo* alongside the examination of *loina* (values) and *lawena* (behaviors) increased their knowledge and use of culturally responsive assessment strategies and their confidence in their practice to apply these strategies in their program learning assessment work. The application of the *Pono* research principles of community engagement and co-review, self-awareness and capacity, and transparent communication aligned with their program assessments provided a practical starting point for the integration and application of culturally responsive assessment practices. The work to continue to strengthen program learning assessments through one culturally responsive assessment practice, *mo'olelo*, continues as workshop participants return to their programs as a change agent to shift their program's views on culturally responsive assessment to an actionable, ongoing practice. The successful decolonization of assessment begins in these types of culturally relevant, equity-minded interventions throughout higher education that fosters spaces for paradigm shifts that allows the integration of Indigenous frameworks through scalable culturally responsive assessment models that are culturally valid, ethically grounded, and engage in a holistic student assessment experience.

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