

HomeWork-School: Deconstructing Assessment, Fairness and Future Learning in Ontario K-12 Spaces

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The COVID-19 pandemic exposed an array of inequities in education and called into question the meaning of fairness within current grading systems. It provoked Ontario educators to critically reflect and deconstruct practices in assessment for, as, and of learning in K-12 digital spaces. Navigating the tension between students engaging in homework and students learning from home sparked inquiry into assessment practices. Educators soon faced an assessment dilemma: How might we authentically triangulate student learning through observation, conversation and products in online platforms? The boundaries were blurred regarding when, where and how student work could be assessed fairly. The traditional focus on student products, translated into letter and/or numerical grades, continues to dominate discussions about measuring academic achievement since products, such as tests and exams, are perceived as more reliable evidence than communication about learning through observation and conversation. Existing inequities in the K-12 schooling experience are at greater risk of being amplified in digital learning spaces where the social nuance of observation and conversation becomes highly complex. This essay critically analyzes assessment and evaluation policy in Ontario's publicly funded schools. Through examination of a policy in effect since 2010, initially designed for in-person learning and e-learning contexts, this essay suggests that non-evaluative protocols (i.e., assessment for and as learning) are fundamental in reshaping equitable assessment practice for future learning.

Keywords: Assessment, Gradeless, Equity, Triangulation, Digital learning, Pedagogical documentation, Ontario education policy

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Introduction

It is worth noting, right from the start, that assessment is a human process, conducted by and with human beings, and subject inevitably to the frailties of human judgement. However crisp and objective we might try to make it, and however neatly quantifiable may be our “results”,

assessment is closer to an art than a science. It is, after all, an exercise in human communication. (Sutton, 1991)

With the sudden onset of COVID-19, assessment and evaluation protocols for Ontario K-12 schools were called into question, particularly how to *grade fairly* in digital spaces. In early 2020, teachers grappled with the new realities of remote learning - learning that occurs when classes are taught at a distance and when students and educators are not in a conventional classroom setting (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020) and the immense inequalities the pandemic revealed about the lives of students and their families (Westheimer, 2022). It was vital to consider the vast differences in students' and families' situations, as well as the fundamental importance of supporting students' health and well-being (People for Education, 2020). During this time of uncertainty, the educational landscape broadened, specifically in the questioning of what 'counts' as learning. With the implementation of de-streaming policy in Ontario secondary schools in September 2021 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020), along with discussions about *going gradeless, grading-less* and *UNgrading* (Blum, 2017), assessment discourse as an equitable practice continues to take shape.

Assessment and evaluation in Ontario's K-12 learning spaces is an iterative endeavour. How one comes to *know* something, and how that *knowing* is to be communicated and evaluated based on teachers' professional judgment, is both multifaceted and nuanced. With the rise and continuous changes in digital technology, educators are called to reflect on the complexities of assessment by examining what the pandemic *exposed* about grading inequities and "raise an eyebrow at grades as a systemic practice" (Stommel, 2021) by exploring other ways of knowing.

Background

The pandemic signalled an emergency response to assessment and evaluation in Ontario's schools. As staff and students faced an immediate halt to in-person learning and moved to 'emergency remote learning,' questions emerged about formative assessment (assessment *for* and *as* learning) and evaluation (assessment *of* learning). Students who were on the path to graduation by June 2020, specifically those planning to attend postsecondary school in the fall, were particularly in a state of flux as final grades related to admission requirements, scholarship, etc., mattered. An underlying tension permeated between the 'business as usual' perspective (i.e., *how do we measure the ability of students to "perform" in a crisis?*) and a critical stance (i.e., *what do we want grading to do (or not do) in our classes (for students or teachers)?*) (Stommel, 2021).

The ongoing changes prompted 'on the fly' directives from the Ontario Ministry of Education. After it was officially announced in May 2020 that schools would remain closed for the remainder of the academic year, secondary school graduation requirements were altered (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). This included a 'freeze' on students' grades (as determined by mid-March) but did not preclude a teacher from exercising their professional judgement to grant a higher grade if there was evidence of improved learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). Additionally, both the literacy and community service requirements were waived (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). The intent was to recognize students' level of achievement *pre-pandemic*, not penalize any student academically due to the unprecedented conditions, nor jeopardize any student's secondary or post-secondary plans moving forward. This was an act of 'emergency assessment' in response to 'emergency remote' conditions.

Policy: Changes and Perspectives

‘Synchronous’ learning (learning that happens in real-time) and ‘asynchronous’ learning (learning that is not delivered in real-time) soon became part of the daily education lexicon, and by August 2020, these terms were officially defined through MOE policy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). *Requirements for Remote Learning*, Policy/Program Memorandum 164 (PPM 164) was issued in response to the ongoing uncertainty. This ‘new’ policy was to assist school boards in navigating instruction and assessment for the upcoming school year and to provide further direction on remote learning protocols (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). Regardless of ‘location’, PPM 164 directed educators to adhere to the assessment protocols outlined in *Growing Success* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) and *Growing Success: The Kindergarten Addendum* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). The policy reiterated that evidence of student achievement for evaluation was to be collected over time from three different sources and teachers’ strategies for assessment should be triangulated to include observation, student-teacher conversations, and student products (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). School closures continued to fluctuate throughout the school year, and conditions for triangulating assessment remained, at best, an ‘emergency response’ rather than authentic professional judgments about student thinking and learning.

HomeWork-School: Blurring the Lines in Digital Spaces

The publication of *Growing Success* in 2010 motioned a significant change to traditional standards and methods for evaluation, including the compartmentalizing of academic achievement in a subject-specific curriculum, set apart from the *Learning Skills* (Responsibility, Organization, Independent Work, Collaboration, Initiative, Self-regulation). It depicts academics and social-emotional learning as separate entities and suggests how learning skills may influence but should *not determine* achievement outcomes. One notable change applied to homework.

Homework was newly classified under the *Learning Skills*, which brought to a halt, by policy standards, traditional methods of ‘grading’ homework. Assignments for evaluation could no longer include “ongoing homework that students completed in order to consolidate their knowledge and skills or to prepare for the next class” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

As an equitable approach to assessment, educators could now exercise their professional judgement in evaluating a student’s level of achievement, which is now solely based on work in the *presence* of students - work observed during the instructional day - and *quantify* the demonstration of learning in alpha-numeric form. During school closures, the dissonance between this policy and *all* work completed or uncompleted ‘at home’ was palpable. This raised questions about authenticity, fairness in evaluation, students’ context and lived experience, in addition to the overwhelming concerns about privacy in the realm of digital learning (i.e., cameras ‘on or off’). The entanglement of *home-work* and *school-work* - that which *should* be counted as *observable* work - was further complicated by how it was to be ‘measured’ along the school-home time continuum.

Although the eventual return to in-person learning began to stabilize daily routines, what lingered was an underlying struggle between yearning for ‘back to normal’ and an awakening to question instructional and assessment practices moving forward critically. The current homework policy aligns with the purpose of assessment: to improve student learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). It helps to mitigate conditions *outside* of school that may impact a student's achievement *level*, whereby teachers can make better judgments of student learning. As educators reflect on experiences throughout ‘emergency learning,’ we can begin to *untangle* an array of assessment inequities, predominantly in the realm of evaluation, and reimagine better ways to leverage the use of digital tools for future learning.

Pedagogical Documentation: A Way Forward

Pedagogical documentation is a “process for making pedagogical (or other) work visible and subject to dialogue, interpretation, contestation, and transformation” (Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G., 2012). It builds on “engagement and inquisitiveness in the here-and-now event” (Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G., 2012) and has the potential to view learning in new ways, to assess flexibly with particular needs in mind, and to individualize and differentiate response by engaging students as active participants in their learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). A learner-centred environment is one that emphasizes assessment *for* learning, the process of seeking and interpreting evidence to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go, and how best to get there (Assessment Reform Group, 2002) and *as* learning, the explicit fostering of students’ capacity over time to be their own best assessors (Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Education, 2006).

Pedagogical documentation, as an iterative process of examining and responding to the interplay between learning, the educator’s pedagogical decisions, and the student’s role and voice in the learning process (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015), enables educators to reimagine equitable assessment as a way of bringing assessment *for* and *as* learning to life (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). This requires a *shift* in practice, from “telling to listening” and wondering about student thinking (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Intentionally designed assessments, guided by curiosity and wonder, can be used to determine what students know and gain insight into how, when, and whether students *use* what they know. This can allow teachers to assess and evaluate differently, and to streamline and target instruction and resources (Earl, 2010). In digital spaces, where the boundaries between home and school become blurred - where an appreciation for nuance and social-emotional development may be at risk - pedagogical

documentation can help educators “develop a greater understanding of how students at various ages can be supported in their learning, academically as well as socially and emotionally” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). By dipping into the phases of pedagogical documentation, educators can exercise their professional judgment to contemplate and navigate a variety of ways in which students can demonstrate their learning. Pedagogical documentation empowers educators to create learning conditions that can transform assessment by moving beyond the transactional ‘*I teach, you do, I mark*’ and to center formative assessment over traditional grading systems.

Documentation in the Digital Age

The use of digital technology to support assessment not only serves to improve efficiency but can ‘reboot’ assessment by seeing deeply into students’ thinking, promoting self and peer assessment, maximizing time for assessment, and preserving evidence of learning (Cooper & Catania, 2022). With an assortment of digital tools available, reimagining equitable assessment through pedagogical documentation must be approached with ethical consideration. Respect for human dignity, privacy and confidentiality, respect for vulnerable persons, and free and informed consent ensures the goal of minimizing harm and maximizing benefits to the community (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Educators and students need to negotiate their way through ethical dilemmas that may arise when working with visual and/or audio artifacts intended to bring visibility to the lives of children in ways that include their voices in a collaborative endeavour (Tarr, 2011). As the digital landscape evolves, documentation of learning must begin from a place of curiosity and care. Pedagogical documentation, as a way to build an understanding of student learning across the grade,s conveys that *presence* in learning can better humanize experiences regardless of these ongoing changes (Ontario Ministry of

Education, 2015). Pedagogical documentation can transcend the ‘digital’ to the ‘relational’ and serve as an integral part of equitable assessment moving forward.

Future Learning: Policy, Pedagogy, Promise

As educators envision a post-pandemic world - one where assessment *for* and *as* learning is valued over assessment *of* learning - it signals, perhaps, a need to recalibrate and challenge ‘traditional’ methods of assessment and evaluation by shifting the focus away from grades. Educators can move from a “culture of teaching” to a “culture of learning” and discover that *presence* in learning, through pedagogical documentation, builds on students’ individual strengths and abilities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). It can redefine how learning is *measured*. This entails a reimagining of school - a place where educators and students co-construct experiences that honour critical questions over answers, relationship-building over transactional evaluation, responsiveness over reactivity, and flexibility over *fixed* frameworks - to better seize moments that amplify process over product.

Fairness in all learning spaces can only be illuminated with an intentional *shift* to assess differently. Focusing on assessment *for* and *as* learning (i.e., more feedback, grading-*less*) and where ethical consideration is given to ways of maximizing *observation* and *conversation* will strengthen a shared vision of equity and inclusion. It will empower educators to understand each student’s lived experience, how the interconnectedness of their strengths, struggles and abilities shapes their learning, and how future assessment practice can honour infinite ways of knowing. Imagining future learning evokes a reimagining of *presence* in learning where we must first position ourselves *differently* in the world; business ought not to go on as usual (Harste, 2001, p. 15).

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