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## Assessment and Learning Together in Higher Education

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## ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING TOGETHER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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### Introduction

Assessment policies and practices in higher education can be contentious areas for student and staff alike, in part because the process is highly influential in what learning areas students attend to, and often the assessment task is not necessarily related to authentic tasks in preparation for the ‘real world.’ Given that the assessment process is neither an exact science nor a particular source of student satisfaction (Deeley & Bovill, 2017; Rust, O’Donovan, & Price, 2005), it is important to reconceptualise both assessment and learning in higher education. This essay presents a case study of the experiences of staff and students exploring assessment practices to align student learning to their workplace settings, and to give greater control to the students in the assessment process. Three specific initiatives are highlighted: (1) using ePortfolios; (2) students developing criteria for assessment; and (3) the use of self-assessment. From the perspectives of a faculty member (Roseanna) and two students who were intern psychologists at the time (Claire and Veerle), we identify some of the issues we faced and the promising practices to grow the partnership process.

### Background

Higher education should be an opportunity for students to learn, grow, and understand themselves and their learning in new ways. Increasingly students in partnership within higher education have called into account some of the traditional practices and policies within the sector. As noted by Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014), “Engaging students in partnership means seeing students as active participants in their own learning...Engaging students as teachers and assessors in the learning process is a particularly effective form of partnership” (p. 8). Assessment practices are often problematic with regards student learning within the Higher Education sector (Bourke, 2017). Given that assessment practices influence how and what students learn, it is critical that students themselves are partners in the process where feasible. The summative assessment practices, typically described as ‘assessment *of* learning’ is largely the experience of many students, rather than more formative approaches ‘assessment *for* or *as* learning’ in Higher Education. Therefore, many students are often motivated to ‘get the grades,’ especially in highly competitive select-entry programmes. Increasingly, as we forge new ways to ensure student autonomy and control through more partnership approaches in their learning, assessment practices must also change. Yet innovative partnerships in assessment challenge the university system, staff, and students in different ways. If we take the starting point that “partnerships are based on respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility between students and faculty” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, p. 1), then the assessment practices must also reflect this.

However, assessment practices in higher education can unintentionally encourage students to engage in surface approaches to learning as there can be high stakes related to their ‘measured’ performance. For example, when individual results contribute to decisions around access to courses, to scholarships, and to further study, the imperative to ‘get it right’ or to ‘obtain an A’ foregrounds the learning approach students adopt. We identify the tensions and

promises of assessment partnerships from a teacher perspective (Roseanna) and the student voice/perspective (Veerle and Claire). We explore the impact of three initiatives developed in an Educational Psychology internship programme.

### **An Aotearoa New Zealand example**

Students who gain access to a postgraduate internship programme for educational psychologists in New Zealand have already spent at least 5 years studying to gain a Bachelor degree, a Masters in Educational Psychology, and often have additional teaching or service experience. Therefore, by the time these students gain entry into the internship programme, it is their sixth year of academic study and they have already demonstrated high academic capability and are motivated to support the learning of others. The internship programme is a post-graduate qualification and is accredited with the New Zealand Psychologists Board that also has the requirement of 1500 hours supervised professional psychological practice in an educational context. The placement is typically the Ministry of Education, who employs educational psychologists and provides additional support through intern scholarships. The internship year is therefore an intense, complex, and challenging year for these young people.

As the director of the internship programme at the university where this example took place, I (Roseanna) wanted to explore new ways of assessing student learning outcomes that involved students more in the assessment process. Part of the rationale for this came from my increasing awareness of three aspects of the interns' learning. First, they had come through a university system where grades and marks 'defined' them, rather than their learning (i.e. they wanted to be 'A' grade students, and felt the need to be in order to gain entry into the programme); second, the developed criteria for assessment encouraged interns to take a step-by-step approach to cover the stipulated criteria (to get the grades) and this started to remind me of painting by numbers. A third and most critical point was that I was working with creative, intelligent, and interested learners who were not being encouraged to 'think outside the box' when adhering to the formalized assessment system. As a result, three aspects of assessment were gradually introduced over three years, and I started to notice an exciting difference in how students engaged with their learning, and with each other. In a conversation with two interns we tried to explore this from our different perspectives: myself as a teacher, and Veerle and Claire as students or interns in the programme. Some interesting perspectives emerged, and as Claire observed, "I have more autonomy over my learning."

Changes made in the assessment activities were premised on the five principles identified by Boud and Falchikov (2005) to consider when developing assessment practices of course content at higher level. Essentially, the principles focus on: (1) reflecting the intended outcome of the programme; (2) measuring achievement, although consequences for student learning are prioritised; (3) demystifying assessment and ensuring that it is accessible and understood by the students who are to use it; (4) enabling students to practice skills of self-assessment; and (5) integrating the assessment and learning tasks. These principles incorporate a formative process, in addition to any summative function. Given that assessment practices are well known to influence how and what students choose to attend to and learn, changing assessment practices might encourage students to reflect on their learning. Therefore, how we frame assessment practices becomes an issue for higher educators, rather than focusing on why students approach learning in the way they do!

## Student voice and partnership in higher education

A partnership requires an underlying relationship of mutual trust and respect, and as Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014, p. 7) argue, “partnership is essentially a process of engagement, not a product. It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself. All partnership is student engagement, but not all student engagement is partnership.” Through the process of finding ways to include students in their own learning, as partners, the teacher will necessarily need to *enable* typically ‘teacher-led’ initiatives to be more ‘student centred.’ As argued by Deeley and Bovill (2017) this also requires students to take responsibility in their empowered status as partners in the classroom, and it is this aspect of the Healey et al. (2014) student engagement model (learning, teaching, and assessment) that is the focus of this essay (see Figure 1). Given that learning and teaching in higher education do not occur in a vacuum, and that graduating students enter a complex dynamic world of work, social activity, and civic engagement, as teachers in higher education we ask: “What educational practices are needed now in order to form and sustain learners who will be able to operate effectively in a complex society?” (Boud & Soler, 2016, p. 400). In order to answer this question, partnership assessment initiatives that encourage students to think beyond the assessment of course requirements and that engage them in their own assessment can be a starting point.

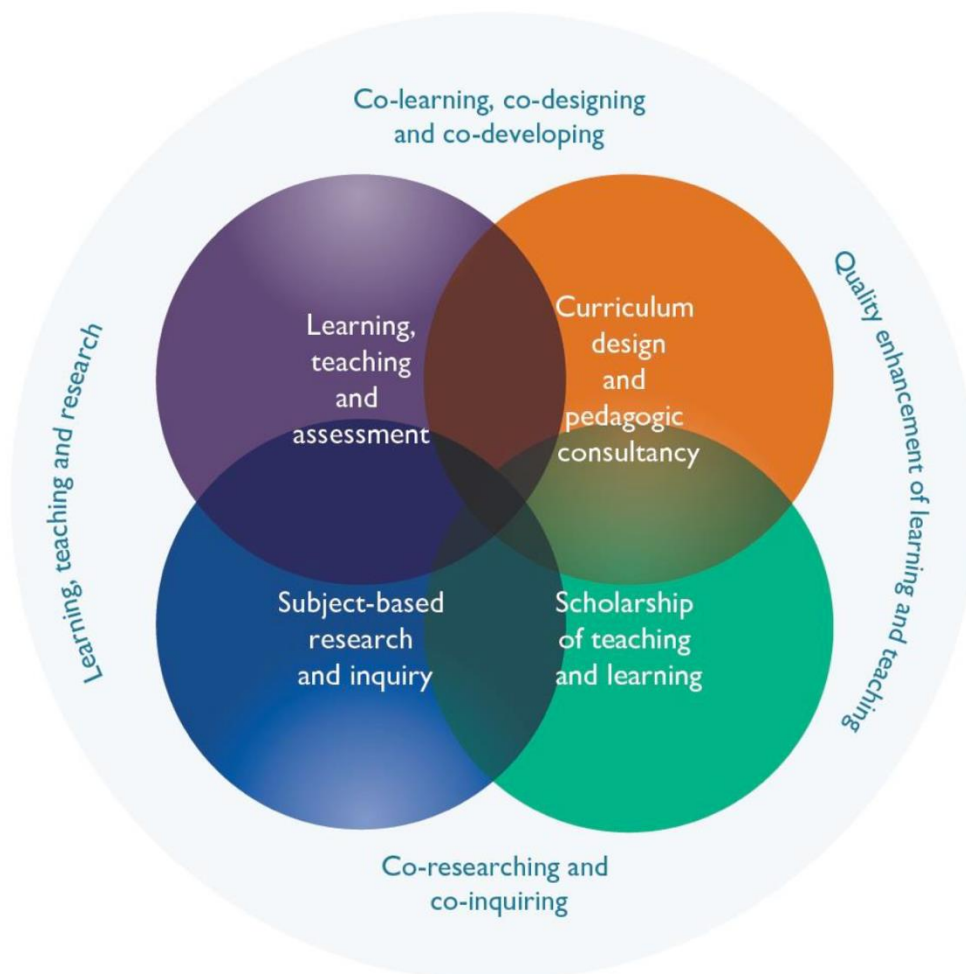


Figure 1. Ways of engaging students as partners in higher education (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014, p. 25).

### Three partnership assessment initiatives using student voice

The three partnership initiatives in assessment discussed here are ways to begin to ensure that assessment practices can be shared with the learner and to provide more autonomy and control over what they attend to and how they want to respond to the assessment task. These activities balance how the university can be ‘accountable for their student learning’ while also enabling students to ‘account for their own learning.’ The three initiatives, all completed online, are explored in the following sections: ePortfolios, developing assessment criteria, and a specific focus on self-assessment.

#### ePortfolios

*The ePortfolio is about what I think is important. It's about my own autonomy of my own assessment. (Claire)*

The four university courses used an integrated Blackboard site and combined this with online ePortfolio system, *Mahara*, which is an online learning environment that allows for social networking. It enables students to collect, reflect on, and share their assignments and professional practice within one space. The ePortfolio system created the opportunity for each intern to present their work in quite different ways.

While there was a template of psychology competencies (as outlined by the New Zealand Psychologist Board), and of university assessment designated tasks, the choice interns had in terms of submitting examples and evidence of their professional work to be assessed was theirs. As one example, all interns were required to undertake a specific interview with a client or stakeholder (child, parent, teacher, other specialist) as part of their work. They then needed to transcribe, analyse, and critique their interview in terms of their questioning techniques, manner and focus, and how their interactions elicited or inhibited information from the person they interviewed. Ethical approval was sought to enable aspects of the audio clip, transcription, and the critique to be uploaded into their ePortfolio, and part of this work could also be discussed alongside the competencies (such as knowledge or communication). As Veerle identifies below, this enables the system to feel as if it is in their control, and their ownership is far greater as a result. In reference to the ePortfolio system, she notes:

An online environment that is ‘ours’ as students, that we control and that we can upload anything we like and then decide what we share. It provides a structure but then we decide what the structure looks like.

#### Developing quality criteria

*I didn't want to do the wrong thing. Then I realized there was no wrong, it was what I wanted to do. (Claire)*

Another approach identified to include students more intentionally in assessment was enabling them to develop the quality criteria for the marking of their submissions. This approach was developed to avoid interns being encouraged to think there was a ‘right

answer' or right approach to the task. Deriving from the work of Torrance and Pryor (2001) who make the distinction between 'task criteria' and 'quality criteria,' I (Roseanna) initiated one of the assessment tasks where students could submit their own quality criteria alongside the stipulated task criteria. Task criteria involve the learner understanding the purpose of the task and what constitutes the task, and quality criteria involves developing criteria that would represent effective completion of the task. Initially Claire found that developing criteria challenged her as a student around the issue of getting it 'right,' but she realized it was actually a liberating experience:

Once I had done everything on the assignment I developed the quality criteria. If I am *told* what the criteria are, I want it at the beginning. When I am coming up with the quality criteria I want to think about my work more deeply. I ask myself 'are you developing the criteria at the end because you want to match it?' In my thinking it was more about 'what have I learned from the whole process, what I have learned?' What have I learned and reflecting on what I am doing. What was I aiming to do?' In the process of doing the assignment, you're learning on the way so it changes the way you think about the assignment at the beginning. It was difficult developing quality criteria, but so worthwhile. It meant you really had to think about what you were doing and you couldn't follow a prescribed path.

As a faculty member, initially I (Roseanna) had asked interns to submit their development of quality criteria *before* they commenced their assessment activity. In the first year it became apparent that many developed the criteria *after* having been engaged in the work, and really learning from their engagement in it. Therefore, in subsequent years the interns submitted their quality criteria at the time of submitting their work on ePortfolio. Both Claire and Veerle helped me to understand why this was so important to them, and it really challenges the traditional assessment protocols of identifying the stated criteria for marking from the beginning of the task. It is a timely reminder that criteria drive what students attend to if presented to them, but if we enter into a more partnership approach and get them to develop their criteria as a process of engaging in their learning, the 'paint-by-numbers' effect is minimized. A challenge from Veerle must be considered:

I do think this contributes to the practice that you look back at the work you've done, pick something that went well, and mention that as your quality criterion, so that you do 'get it right.' You're not going to pick a quality criterion that you did not do well on.

On the surface, this might seem that students will ensure that they get a good grade simply by identifying something they have done well, and thus create a tension for grading. When considered more carefully, though, this is exactly what we are trying to achieve in higher education: a focus on an individual's strengths and learning, and through this students themselves come to see what they also need to continue to learn, or to develop.

### **Self-assessment**

*Thinking about learning is important—because that is something we don't talk about that much. We don't talk a lot about learning so I like seeing the parallels of our learning, and the learning of children in schools we work with. (Veerle)*

A third example of involving students in the assessment process, and enhancing a partnership pedagogical approach involves self-assessment. Self-assessment is a critical component of a student-faculty assessment partnership, in part because it involves allowing students to assess an aspect of their learning that *only they know*. Self-assessment can include “the involvement of students in identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work, and making judgements about the extent to which they have met these criteria and standards” (Boud, 1991, p. 5). Taking the work of Tan (2007; 2009) as a starting point, self-assessment was introduced into all four courses of the internship to enable interns to develop their critical reflective thinking, and to make explicit links between their learning and their emerging professional practice as educational psychologists. Tan (2007) identified the use of self-assessment where students can engage with their learning as ‘future-driven’ when the self-assessment tasks enabled students to think about their present and future self-assessment skills for their lifelong learning.

As with other more traditional assessment tasks used in higher education, the way self-assessment activities are introduced to students will influence how they approach the task. Within the higher education context, we need to consider what and how we want students to learn and attend to, and how self-assessment can contribute to the learners’ future focused learning. These activities help the interns *become* psychologists rather than learning content knowledge specifically. Therefore, the self-assessment activities were designed for developing ontological knowledge as distinct from epistemological knowledge, or understanding the discipline domain. Transitioning from a student role, to an intern role, and into an educational psychologist role can be problematic, made more so when assessment tasks encourage interns ‘to think like students’ rather than as psychologists. Every year the self-assessment activities change, depending on the need of the cohort. I (Roseanna) developed the self-assessment tasks throughout the year based on students’ needs and where there might be an important link to be made.

One of the tensions of academic marking and assessment is often that faculty/staff spend a lot of time providing formative feedback, and written feedback, that students engage with to varying degrees. On one of the longer written submissions, each intern was challenged by an aspect of the work with feedback that ended with ‘what do you think?’ Typically we would not expect an answer, but in a subsequent self-assessment activity, the students were asked to go back to the earlier assignment and find this specific question, and then answer it *in relation to the area they were challenged on*. Given that the main assessment tasks in the programme required extensive case-study write-ups, report writing, reviews of the literature, and exploring ethical dilemmas in practice and so on, the self-assessment tasks were short, focused, and centred on a specific aspect of learning. Therefore, they were never over a 250-word limit and received 5% of the final grade.

However, these are a new approach for some students, and no doubt Claire represents other students as well when she says:

I find them a little jarring to be completely blunt. A lot of the time you do assignments that you just want to forget about. But it does make you think about the assignments. In earlier study you do not go back to assignments. You get to the end and think ‘phew I’m finished.’ Whereas self-assessment means it’s an ongoing process, which is exactly what we need.

We now look at two self-assessment examples that were used this year, which Claire and Veerle completed. The first example shows how they were asked to link their learning within a placement context to their understanding of learning.

### **Self-assessment example 1**

Thinking specifically about your community placement, reconceptualise an aspect of your understanding of ‘learning.’ You can do this for either yourself and how you are learning, or those you work with. The point of this exercise is to rethink the meaning and complexity of learning. Explain another dimension of learning you are focusing on, or want to understand, or describe.

For Veerle, this helped her explore her learning through experience:

Throughout my years of studying psychology, I have learned so much knowledge and theory from books and research. But nothing compares to learning through experience. For example, I have learned about strategies for children with ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder] in the past. But having a chance to actually apply those strategies in my work with children at [school], gives me a whole new level of understanding how this makes a difference for these children.

In contrast, Claire could explore behavioural issues using the same self-assessment:

I work closely with parents who want and need to learn more about their parenting and what their children require. Behavioural tools are modelled and parents are coached through them, with role playing. They copy the behaviours that the social workers model to them, learning through repetition and behavioural rehearsal. They are given DVDs and pamphlets; they refer to these and they continue practicing the tools between sessions. Repeated behavioural rehearsal embeds the tools into their parenting and gives them the confidence they need.

In the second example, interns were asked to reflect on and self-assess their learning after completing a clinical interview with a person and submitted an in-depth analysis of this.

### **Self-assessment example 2**

You have recently completed an interview and analysis of the process. Identify one aspect you would do differently if you were to commence this interview again. If you did this, explain what effect this change might have (1) for the person you interviewed and (2) for you as an EdPsych.

Claire’s response to this shows that she explored her interviewing techniques and the effects these have on the person she was interviewing. In her response, she weighs up whether a more direct approach would be more effective, or whether she should focus on the rapport through ‘chat.’ Although neither she, nor I (Roseanna), see a one-right answer, her ability to critique what she did, why she did it and how, reflects her learning.



Reflecting on the interview, the one aspect that I would do differently if I were to do the interview again, would be asking more directive questions, cutting down the “chat” that developed during the interview and redirecting the flow of information. By doing this I may be able to gain more information that would specifically add to my assessment data, as opposed to adding to the rapport building. In being more directive, the interviewee might feel that I was being more professional and that I had specific answers I was looking for; however, they might also feel that perhaps I wasn’t that interested in their story, in how they feel and see the problems going on around them. It seems a double-edged sword. As an intern, asking more directive questions may have given me more of the answers I was looking for, cutting down the level of chat and decreasing the time the interview had taken. Being directive and getting specific information may have also increased my confidence to continue being directive. However, being directive in my line of questioning seems more clinical to me than what I want to come across, forming a barrier within my identity as an EdPsych. In retrospect, I viewed the interview as mostly informal and comfortable, and by being more directive, I am not sure if that rapport and comfort would have been as easily built between me and the interviewees.

Veerle’s response to the same activity saw her identify specific techniques she would employ in the future, and she finishes her self-assessment with a goal.

If I could do this interview again, I would try to give more of a summary at the end. During the interview I found that there were so many pieces of information discussed, making it difficult to give a brief summary of all of it. So I didn’t try this although there were summaries throughout, and my interviewee summarised a lot himself. I think that what I would do is based on all the pieces of information, describe a bit of an image of what kind of person the student is who we are discussing. I would try to describe his main strengths and challenges as I’ve heard the teacher describe. By doing that, the teacher could see that I have listened to him and understood him well, and feel that his information was valuable to my assessment. He would be able to understand that I am focusing on the student as a person and be confident that I will make decisions in his best interest. For me as an EdPsych it would give me the opportunity to check for any misunderstandings on my part. It would also show that I am able as an EdPsych to extract the relevant conclusions from an abundance of information. It would confirm whether we have a shared understanding of the situation. And it could lead to the interviewee adding extra information, which would be valuable for my assessment. This will be a good goal for my next interview.

As a staff member I (Roseanna) always wondered whether I should provide feedback on the actual student self-assessments. I had been able to provide input into the university assessment policy to ensure self-assessment could receive a legitimate grade, and subsequently gave an overall 5% for submission. Although questions are asked about the students that ‘don’t submit’ a self-assessment, I have never experienced this. In my view, students have a lot to share about their learning and are interested in their own learning. Given that it always felt a little strange to comment on or *judge* students’ assessment of their own learning, students submitted their self-assessments onto the University Course Blackboard Discussion site where I entered the actual task. It meant two things: (1) the self-assessments were public within the cohort of interns (all interns

could see and read their peers' self-assessments); and (2) students could respond to their peers' self-assessments if they chose. Given that all interns could (and did) respond quite differently to a self-assessment task because they were involved in a diverse range of professional practice casework, it was valuable that they could read about the learning of their peers.

When Claire and Veerle discussed this aspect, both mentioned learning from their peers, which provided a partnership aspect to this assessment approach that I (Roseanna) had not imagined. As Claire noted:

I think when we started them I wanted feedback, but then that fits in with my old idea of study – you hand something in – you get feedback. I read everyone else's and find them interesting – so that IS my feedback and I'm quite content to go through and see 'oh that's cool.' I'm learning different things and noticing different things to them but...reading others, that IS our feedback. I really like that because you can turn it into a discussion if you wish.

Veerle also found it useful to read others. She noted that:

I find it inspirational to see the other ones. If I don't have an idea of what to write about, reading others [submissions] can give me ideas. I can see the link of learning about learning. They are 'different' and get you thinking in a different way. Your thinking goes well beyond the 250 words – it takes the pressures off the assignment. I found it lovely to see people commenting on each other's [submissions]. Thinking about learning is important – because that is something we don't talk about that much. We don't talk a lot about learning so I like seeing the parallels of our learning, and the learning of children in schools we work with.

### **What did we learn from this partnership?**

Changing the way we view assessment at higher education level also impacts the way students perceive learning and success. In the traditional system while undergoing her masterate qualifications, Veerle identifies that, "If I know what is expected of me, and I don't meet all the expectations I feel really bad. Even an A- meant I did something wrong because it wasn't an A or A+." However, her view has changed when she had more 'choice' over what she submitted and why. Her interest became more focused on her learning, and although she remained an 'A' grade student, this was no longer her motivation.

As a starting point, there is more partnership in the assessment through opening the space for students to take back some control over what they choose to present for assessment (ePortfolio), how they focus on an aspect of their assignment (quality criteria), and how they assess their own learning (self-assessment). As Veerle says, "It's already much more than I've been used to. I do like that. For some students it creates a bit of anxiety or uncertainty. They want 'just tell me what to do and I'll do it.'" For Veerle it also runs deeper:

It is about that switch from being a student to a psychologist. And when we are ready for that, we're no longer focusing on passing a course or meeting expectations of our university assessors, but we are focusing on becoming the

kind of psychologist we want to be. While the assessors make sure the quality of our work is sufficient to become registered psychologists, each psychologist is going to be different, and this way we celebrate our diversity and each can become the best version of ourselves, as psychologists, rather than all trying to become the same practitioner. This partnership contributes to the interns becoming ready for that switch.

Clearly for all of us, staff and students, there is still a long way to go, but the possibilities allow for greater partnerships to develop in order to sustain student learning in the long term, and to encourage students to assess their own learning, long after the course has finished. When Claire thought about the partnership aspect, she thought about percentages, and compared her undergraduate studies (100% university 0% you), to her studies in the internship (shifting to 60% university, 40% you), and in cases where students developed quality criteria, it became more 50/50. Interestingly, this is a unique way of looking at what partnership might mean. As a student, how much of *you* is visible? For Claire, for example, she identified the importance of *knowing yourself*, and it is through assessment partnerships that we can go some way to achieving this. As Claire explains:

Handing in assignments I never really knew where I sat with marking, so I would get assignments back and I wouldn't get a good grade. Whereas as interns we have a lot of autonomy of what is important to us—as opposed to undergrad and masterate where you have to do what the markers want you to. We can show we are learning, as opposed to showing that we are able to learn exactly what they [the university] want you to learn.

If educators within Higher Education are motivated to allow students to learn what they need to learn within a course, and recognize that the diversity of students may not have the same learning needs, then the assessment practices will become more flexible. Partnership in the assessment process allows us to *know* our students and to provide them with a range of means to show what they understand. Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) have identified the essence of what we need to do: “In an increasingly interconnected world, when educational institutions sometimes seem to be more interested in income and endowments than learning, we need to reimagine higher education in ways that are more rooted in principles of respect, reciprocity and responsibility” (p. 203). For assessment to be sustainable it will serve the purposes of the university requirements but also “prepares students to meet their own future learning needs” (Boud, 2000, p. 151). The three examples of assessment practices presented here highlight that through partnership and student voice, teachers in higher education can learn and work together with students to create meaningful experiences of assessment and learning for ‘the real world.’

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