

Commentary

Relationship-Rich Assessment: Centering Trust in the Pursuit of Rigor and Equity

Why deep instructor–student relationships make “rigor and equity” possible—and how to build them into your assessment practice.

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A Trust Problem, not a Standards Problem

A faculty member once told me, “I want to challenge my students, but whenever I raise expectations, I worry I’m being too inflexible. And when I try to be more flexible, I’m afraid I’m lowering the bar.” I’ve heard variations of this concern many times in my work, first as an assessment practitioner and now as an educational developer.

Rigor is commonly equated with harshness and equity with leniency, flattening both concepts and limiting their shared potential. But what often goes unspoken is that both collapse without trust. Students will stretch when they believe the challenge is purposeful and their instructors are invested in their success. Faculty will adapt when they trust that flexibility does not erode academic standards.

This piece contributes to the broader discourse on rigor and equity by centering trust and the relational conditions that make both possible. As educational developers, we are uniquely positioned to lead the nuanced conversations this work requires. We can help faculty move beyond binary thinking and toward assessment practices that integrate rigor and equity through intentional and trust-centered design.

Focusing on Relationship-Rich Assessment

My most meaningful assessment conversations occur when we move beyond binaries and engage complexity. Drawing on Felten and Lambert’s (2020) *Relationship-Rich Education*, I argue that meaningful interactions between instructors and students are just as important in assessment as they are across the broader educational experience. Grounded in this approach, I’ve worked with instructors to reimagine assessment practices that both stretch and support students (Northwestern University, 2024). This work requires knowing our students well enough to design assessments that are not only valid and reliable but also responsive to their identities and lived experiences. Whether deepening how we think about assessment or strengthening how we carry it out, partnering with students is essential to moving the work forward.

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Establishing a Shared Understanding

When I talk about assessment, I mean the systematic collection, analysis, and reflection on evidence to inform decisions that improve student learning.

- **Rigor** isn't about making learning harder; it's about designing assessments with intentionality to deepen learning (Hess, 2023). Rigorous assessments are valid and reliable—they measure what matters and yield consistent, dependable results (Suskie, 2018). As Schneider and Shulman (2007) explain, assessments should be sufficiently truthful to confidently inform decision-making. Beyond technical concerns, invalid assessments can lead to misguided decisions that ultimately disadvantage students (Jankowski & Lundquist, 2022).
- **Equity** isn't about lowering standards; it's about ensuring that all students—regardless of background—have the clarity, support, and opportunities they need to succeed. Hart and Germaine-Watts (1996) define equity as “an operational principle for shaping policies and practices that provide high expectations and appropriate resources, so that all students can achieve at the same rigorous standard—with minimal variance due to race, income, language, or gender” (p. xx). Ultimately, equity is about “access, achievement, identity, and power” (Gutiérrez, 2009).
- **Relationship-rich assessment** is about assessment practices that center trust-based dialogue, feedback, co-creation, and responsiveness. Trust creates the foundation for both challenge and support to flourish.

Supporting Instructor-Student Connections

Pairing rigor and equity in assessment may seem daunting, especially when they're seen as opposites. Yet in my experience, integrating the two is both possible and sustainable when grounded in a relationship-rich approach (Artze-Vega et al., 2023). Relationship-rich assessment helps students believe that rigorous tasks are worth doing—and that their instructors are invested in their success.

While not exhaustive of an entire assessment cycle—such as articulating learning outcomes, designing methods, mapping, analyzing data, and using findings to improve student learning—the following practices offer a scaffolded starting point for designing assessments that are rigorous, equitable, and built on trust.

1. **Start with Transparency.** Transparency is a well-documented equitable practice that helps clarify complex learning outcomes for students. The TILT framework shows that small shifts—like clarifying purpose, tasks, and criteria—can significantly improve success, especially for first-generation and historically underrepresented students (Winkelmes et al., 2016). Even asking students if expectations are clear, or co-creating them when possible, can build trust and maximize success (Cook-Sather, 2022).
2. **Design Compassionate Challenges.** Transparency isn't enough. Assessments should stretch students while supporting them in their growth. Cavanagh (2023) calls these “compassionate challenges”—rigorous tasks paired with care. Low-stakes assessments, scaffolded assignments, and grading contracts allow students to engage with feedback without fear. These strategies reflect the art of teaching, where the goal is not simply mastery, but meaningful progress—fostered in trusting relationships.
3. **Diversify Methods.** To honor the complexity of learning, we must diversify assessment through a strengths-based approach. Triangulating evidence through multiple methods—such as written work, reflections, presentations, or peer feedback—allows students to demonstrate what they know and can do in varied ways (CAST, 2024). This promotes authenticity and communicates to students that their individual strengths and voices are seen and valued.

Assessing student learning is complex and iterative, and most impactful when students are engaged as active partners. But this work must also be sustainable. Practices like co-created rubrics and peer review not only uphold rigor and amplify student voice—they promote shared responsibility, strengthen trust, and deepen learning. These small, intentional shifts bring rigor and equity together as mutually reinforcing forces.

When assessment is relationship-rich, rigor ceases to be harsh and equity ceases to be lenient; both become acts of trust that propel learning forward. As educational developers, we are uniquely positioned to support and shape assessment by elevating evidence-informed practices that challenge assumptions and expand possibilities.

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