

EDITORIAL

What We Make of What Students Make

—Riley McGuire and Cassandra Xavier

Signs are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable...

—George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871–72)

Dear *Currents in Teaching and Learning* readers,

If hallway chats among instructors are any indicator, anxieties about how to assess learning are eclipsing considerations about what to teach. The first quarter of the twenty-first century witnessed a surge in the development and adoption of so-called “alternative” grading practices—labor-based grading, specifications grading, ungrading—that interrogated the utility and equity of “traditional” assessment strategies. More recently, however, that momentum has not stalled so much as dispersed across a host of pedagogical concerns both familiar and novel: grade inflation, academic integrity, the use of generative artificial intelligence, workplace preparation—not to mention the *raison d’être* of higher education.

The resulting cross-disciplinary furor over assessment has prompted a flurry of course redesigns. At its finest, this work has entailed interrogating what we want students to gain from our respective fields and how best to reflect those aims in our methods of evaluation. Is our goal to impart information? Cultivate skills? Shepherd research? Ready them for the professional world? Help them grow as individuals and community members? Some combination? At its most realistic, our contemporary assessment reckoning has involved tweaking pre-existing assignments to either lean into or retreat from technology, to opt for LLMs or blue books. Other times, it has simply meant trying something new and hoping for the best.

Unsurprisingly, neither revising nor experimenting are without their challenges.

For one, a renewed emphasis on process and routine in-class writing and testing has shown promise in making authentic student thinking palpable, but also risks establishing a culture of over-assessment (Rowse, 2025), one that increases the workload for students and faculty alike. For another, many instructors are finding themselves assigning work they have neither experience nor training in evaluating. In some cases, as we seek to revamp our teaching, we are grading experiential learning or oral examinations or other assessments that we never encountered as students.

Of course, this is only the latest drop on the roller coaster of assessment familiar to all educators. I still remember the exhilaration I felt over eight years ago while reviewing a student submission for an open-ended final project in the first class I taught, a literature seminar focused on disability studies. The student wrote and illustrated an original children’s book called *Can I Play? A Book about Inclusion and Access (and Cats)*. It lived up to its subtitle, telling the story of a colorful cast of felines learning to respect each other’s different ways of moving, communicating, and thinking. The narrative was written in the Roman alphabet and embossed in braille. The student provided image descriptions of each illustration. She included both an audio recording of the story and a video of her signing it in American Sign Language. The book itself featured a built-in mini sandbox, a key location in the story, for sensory engagement. The goal was to ensure there were multiple ways to interact with the narrative: visually, aurally, and haptically. In short, it was an accessible book about accessibility. I remember, too, a few markedly less thoughtful submissions that tempered the joy of reading *Can I Play?* And so the ride continues. Whenever demoralizing student assignments begin to outweigh thrilling ones, the scholarship of teaching and learning

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offers both solidarity and suggestions for how to tip the balance toward the latter.

This ebb and flow reflects assessment's central difficulty. At its core, assessment is an act of translation: of rendering effort, knowledge, skill, and other qualities into abstracted numbers and letters. As such, it is a durably imperfect practice in need of routine reconsideration. There are productive insights about student evaluation within the following seven articles, including those not explicitly focused on assessment. Collectively, they remind us that assessment is also a triadic relationship among instructor, student, and course materials, a relationship buoyed by the important though challenging care work performed by faculty (Kimmel & Krile) and nuanced by strategies that invite students to co-curate their learning (Dwivedi). These relationships can also extend beyond the immediate classroom, as some of the most meaningful assignments emerge when students are invited to engage in research projects (Nelsen et al.) or work with international collaborators (Szecsi et al.).

Such outward-facing forms of assessment are especially timely in light of a report released just days ago by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on AI use in higher education. The report guides faculty away from the often-futile pursuit of "AI-proof" assignments and instead toward other strategies, including the recommendation that "instructors need to increase the role of experiential and project-based learning" in their courses (Ad Hoc Committee on AI Use, 2026, p. 12). Those seeking models of how to do this work well in the classroom, on campus, and within the broader community can find instructive examples in the pages that follow (Nielsen; Caola & Jenkins; Waity & Vanderminden). Taken together, the contributors remind us that assessment is only a piece, albeit a crucial one, of the holistic project of teaching; as Clay Shirky (2025) puts it, "While the output of any given *course* is student assignments—papers, exams, research projects, and so on—the *product* of that course is student experience."

Issue 18.1 begins with Krista M. Kimmel and Mary Jo Krile's "Caring after COVID: Faculty Perceptions of Care Toward Students in the Post-Pandemic Climate," which uses interviews with faculty across disciplines to investigate their perspectives on the practice of caring for students. Kimmel and Krile examine how instructors recognize care as essential to building relationships with students and, in turn, helping them achieve their learning goals. They find that faculty view these relationships as necessarily reciprocal: it is professors' responsibility to make themselves accessible and curious, and students' job to communicate and put in the work. Interviewees note that after the COVID-19 pandemic, students seem to have greater needs than before, both emotionally and academically—and that it can be difficult for faculty to meet those needs while also caring for themselves. Kimmel and Krile conclude that institutions need to provide instructors with more support, including professional development and other resources, to address these and related challenges.

Amitabh Vikram Dwivedi discusses one route for establishing reciprocally beneficial relationships between faculty and students: curricular collaboration. In "The Negative Space Syllabus: Inverting Course Design to Promote Autonomy and Collaborative Learning," he presents a method for organizing courses via the Negative Space Syllabus (NSS). Dwivedi aims to reinvigorate student investment in learning by leaving negative space in a syllabus, thereby granting students the agency to decide collaboratively on certain readings, assignments, activities, and assessments. He discusses the challenges and opportunities presented by the NSS, wherein time constraints and the need for administrative buy-in are counterbalanced by enhanced learning outcomes and student engagement. Dwivedi also provides tools and resources for facilitating students' democratic selection process, as well as guidance on implementation across disciplines.

Bolstering student engagement is also central to "Librarians Igniting Research Journeys: A First-Year Experience Course on Undergraduate

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Research” by Kat Nelsen, Stephanie Sparrow, Molly Bostrom, Kate Peterson, Lacie McMillin, and Kim Clarke. The authors outline an existing first-year course focused on giving students an early start with faculty-sponsored research. Designed and taught by librarians at their institution, the course is meant to both teach students research skills in the process of designing a project (identifying a topic, narrowing its scope, formulating effective research questions, and presenting findings) and to encourage them to reach out to faculty to sponsor these projects. The authors argue that librarian instruction helps students and faculty make otherwise elusive connections while demystifying the research process for first-year students.

Tunde Szecsi, Debra Giambo, Marianela Rivera, and Flavia Stara move us from intracampus to intercampus partnerships in their investigation of collaborative online international learning (COIL). Their article “Meaning-Making about a Sustainable Society through Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) Projects in Higher Education” discusses a COIL project that connected students in Florida, United States, with students in Marche, Italy. The project paired students from the two countries and asked them to create a shared presentation discussing a social issue important to each partner. The authors found that hearing their partners’ perspectives deepened and broadened students’ understanding of cross-cultural social issues, while the use of narrative, visual, and auditory modalities further enriched their learning.

In her article “Synthesizing Project-Based Learning and Universal Design for Learning to Enhance Student Success: A Review and Reflection,” Danielle Nielsen discusses how the combination of project-based learning (PjBL) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can enable active learning, build metacognition, and empower students by involving them in the project-design process. As an example, Nielsen offers an open-ended final assignment for a literature course in which students choose their own project format rather than follow a prescribed one. Among the student-designed

projects were a comparison of course texts with various musicals, a fantasy baseball team composed of characters from the texts, and a role-play legal defense of “misunderstood characters.” Nielsen notes that the connection between students’ interests and course material is central to the effective synthesis of PjBL and UDL.

Branching out into their campus community, Lindsey Caola and Isabelle Jenkins designed a community-based learning model described in “Cultivating Connection: On-Campus Community-Based Learning (CBL) Projects.” They sought to address two things students often report lacking: job readiness and a sense of belonging. By working with their own college as a community partner, Caola and Jenkins argue that students are able to make a tangible impact while engaging more deeply with their institution and preparing for life after graduation. The project paired students with campus offices ranging from Student Wellness to the AI Task Force and asked them to perform meaningful work, including collecting student feedback on various initiatives, providing their own input, and assisting understaffed departments. Students and campus partners found the project mutually beneficial, and Caola and Jenkins provide a range of materials for others to craft CBL projects on their own campuses.

In a related vein, “Community-Engaged Learning for Student Success: Strategies for Implementation” closes the issue by positioning community-engaged learning (CEL) as a method to empower students academically and professionally. Approaching CEL as a combination of undergraduate research and community engagement, Julia Waity and Jennifer Vanderminde describe three different avenues for implementation: in an individual course, throughout the curriculum, and in a lab setting. They helpfully enumerate the affordances and limitations of each so instructors can determine which model best suits their circumstances based on time constraints, scale and duration of potential projects, relationships with off-campus partners, administrative support, student interest, and other factors. Across the three

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models, Waity and Vanderminden found that CEL opportunities allowed students to develop research skills, work with faculty and community partners, and join cohorts grappling with shared projects.

I'd be remiss not to acknowledge my fantastic collaborators who make editing *Currents* both possible and pleasurable. Julie Habjan Boisselle's administrative dexterity and interpersonal generosity are boundless; thank you, in particular, for the recent walk and talk and for surfacing assessment as this editorial's focus. The behind-the-scenes support of Drs. Hank Theriault, Jamie Remillard, Noah Dion, and the members of the *Currents* Operations Advisory Committee is much appreciated. Shawn Needham not only designed this issue but also ensured it would be accessible to folks using assistive technologies to read it. Our peer reviewers continue to enrich the journal through their acuity. My thanks to the dynamic duo of recent WSU graduates, Caroline Lacy and Andrew Winston, for their help. It's been a particular joy working with student intern Cassandra Xavier over the last several months: to enumerate her talents fully would require a bonus issue of the journal. Lastly, I'm immensely grateful to have Dr. Hardeep Sidhu as a colleague. He was an invaluable partner in completing this issue and, luckily for *Currents*, will serve as interim editor while I'm on sabbatical. I look forward to seeing the journal thrive under his deft guidance.

Happy reading,



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