

# thinkpoint

## Four assessment capabilities: What they are and why our children would want their teachers to have them

By Jill Willis, Christopher DeLuca, Christine Harrison, Bronwen Cowie

Graduating teachers often feel underprepared for the current contexts of assessment they will face as beginning teachers. Even experienced teachers can feel uncertain when it comes to assessing student learning (Bennett, 2011; Herppich et al., 2018; Looney et al., 2018). The diverse needs of students and rapidly changing assessment technologies challenge every teacher to be ready to engage with assessment that is, and what might be. Instead of generating longer and longer lists of assessment skills and knowledge for teachers to learn, we wondered whether there might be a different approach. A four-country research project was born, and from it, we propose four assessment capabilities as a way forward.



### The study

*Preparing Assessment Capable Teachers* was a 4-year study (2017 – 2021) across four countries—Australia, Canada, England and New Zealand—funded by a Social Sciences

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and Humanities Research Council grant ((SSHRC – Canada). It is led by Professor Christopher DeLuca from Queens University, Canada and country leaders Professor Bronwen Cowie from Waikato University, New Zealand; Professor Christine Harrison from Kings College, England; and Associate Professor Jill Willis from Queensland University of Technology in Australia. The research teams compared four data sources in a process of constant comparison and drawing on sociocultural assessment theory:

1. Public documents—Assessment policies and University assessment course overviews
2. Preservice teachers' perceptions of assessment using the ACAI survey
3. Online Reflections from preservice teachers as they studied assessment courses

4. Insights from teacher educators and assessment researchers.

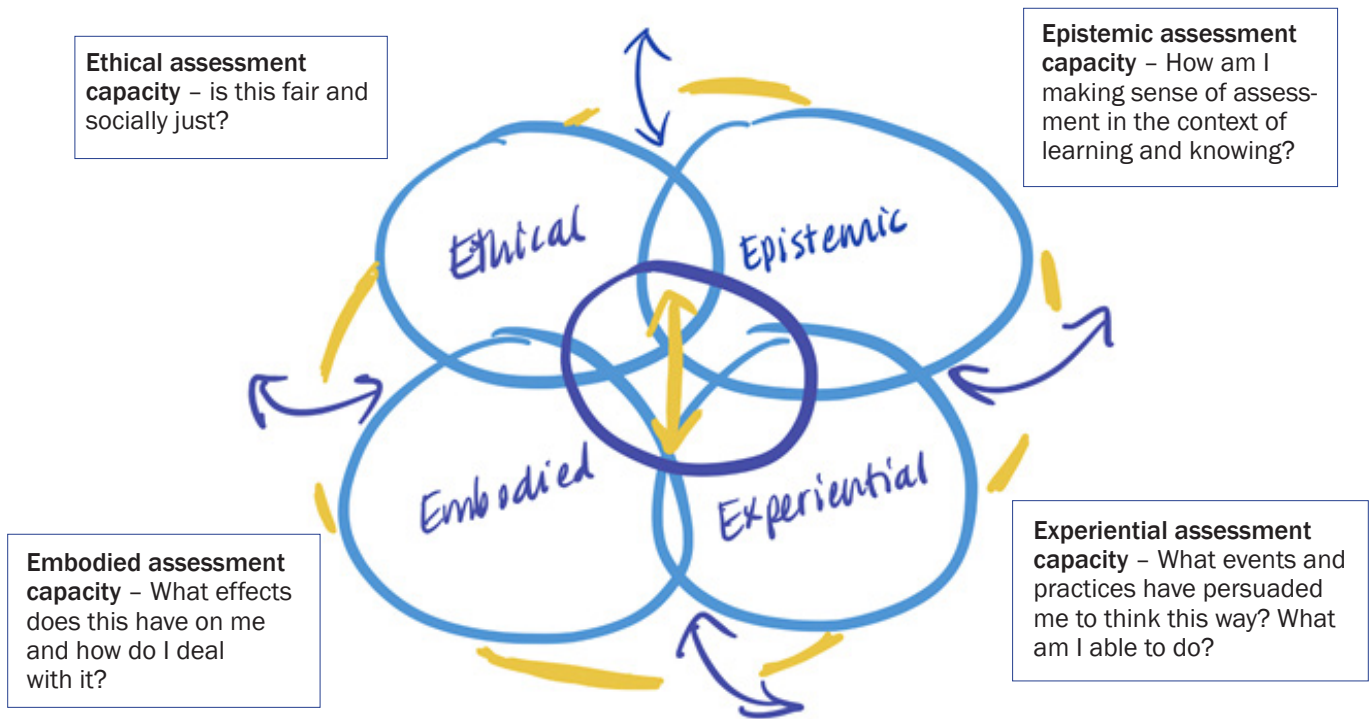
The study made it clear that assessment systems are always in responsive flux, with assessment education being influenced by changes in government policy, schooling changes, and local and global trends (DeLuca et al, 2019). Through teacher education programs, the various policies are recontextualised into coherent local stories of practice. Identifying similarities and differences in these cultural stories confirmed that beginning teachers need to be prepared for assessment that was, that is, and that is to come. Stories from the pre-service teachers as they learned to become assessors also made it clear where some rich assessment learning was occurring and where they experienced some of their major challenges, which led to the four capabilities.

*Being an assessment capable teacher means always having a learning orientation.*

## Four capabilities - what are they?

The four assessment capabilities shown in Figure 1 are dimensions that underpin a beginning teacher's assessment decision making. They are interrelated and inform one another. Yet they are different enough from one another to provide a new perspective for reflection and assessment learning.

**Figure 1: Four Assessment Capabilities (Willis, DeLuca, Harrison, Cowie, 2021)**



## Four Capabilities proposed as a framework for ongoing inquiry into assessment

Preservice teachers are learning to assess long before they enroll in a tertiary education degree, and they continue to learn to assess as they practice as teachers. Assessment education is therefore an ongoing process of learning that is shaped by the contexts, cultures, and resources of where the learning is occurring. When inevitable assessment dilemmas and uncertainties arise, our new teachers were often asking themselves these kinds of questions as they worked out how to be assessors:

**Embodied assessment capacity** – What effects does this have on me and how do I deal with it? Assessment is an emotional activity for teachers and students. It involves wonder and worry. Where traditional concepts of assessment have empha-

sised rational, emotion-free measures of knowing, acknowledging that learning and assessment involves the whole person and their environment can enable a teacher to accept or question the discomforts alongside the joys.

**Ethical assessment capacity** – Is this fair and socially just? Assessment should do no harm. This foundational principle has become an increasing focus around the world as teachers come to understand more about the diversity of learners, and how assessment systems have excluded many students from opportunities to learn and demonstrate their learning through assessment. This question opens possibilities for reshaping assessment at local and system levels.

**Epistemic assessment capacity** – How am I making sense of assessment in the context of learning and knowing? Assessment will always reflect assumptions about what is

valued knowledge and how that knowledge can be expressed and evaluated. Disciplinary differences influence assessment practices. So too cultural knowledges and ways of learning are reflected or are not reflected in assessment, and so can be reconsidered or introduced.

**Experiential assessment capacity** – What events and practices have persuaded me to think this way? What am I able to do? New teachers are often confronted by classroom assessment events that don't fit with their ideals and having to learn a new assessment technology with little help. Being able to identify experiences that have created some expectations, habits and assumptions can help teachers to evaluate whether these ideas are still fit for purpose, and from there to plan next steps for action.

We propose that these interrelated dimensions enable the new teach-

er to think through and articulate their reasoning. Similar to the three dimensions of assessment literacy proposed by Pastore and Andrade (2018) of conceptual, praxeological, and socio-emotional dimensions, they emphasise the additional ethical dimension of being an assessor.

As the preservice teacher learns to be an assessor at university and in their practical placement, assessment situations can be examined through all of these dimensions. The multiple perspectives can then encourage the teacher to become more perceptive and exploratory in what they do with assessment rather than just accepting and implementing the status quo.

For example, a common dilemma like this can be understood through all of the four capacities:

“One notable challenge I faced was remaining objective and consistent in my grading: doing so through 25 submissions proved more difficult than I had imagined.”

Grading a class worth of papers takes a toll on the body and on concentration, and importantly this embodied aspect of assessment is often not acknowledged. The recognition that

an ideal was not being met is also evident through embodied emotional cues like “challenge” and “difficulty” and “imagined.” Epistemic expectations are indicated in the statement that teachers are objective and consistent, which reflect a traditional orientation to assessment. Questioning the experiential expectations of the individual teacher being responsible for grading may raise possibilities for considering grading alongside a colleague or mentor. Similarly, recog-

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nition that this teacher’s underlying concern is for ethical outcomes for students may lead to practices that are more sustainable for the teacher, such as a feedback letter to the class (Chiaravalli, 2018), or prioritising early feedback for some learners.

### **Why our children would want teachers to have these capacities**

Children have the right to expect fair and inclusive assessment practices; however, they often don’t have the power or the experience to articulate how assessment may be being experienced as unfair. Their teachers who are inquiring into their assessment practice can be powerful advocates and decision makers. However, while teachers may have the desire to make assessment decisions in the best interest of student learning, they may not have a shared language to articulate why one decision may be better than another or to advocate for fair practices. Children want to learn from teachers and administrators who recognize that assessment is adaptive within contexts, so their interests can be acknowledged.

A simple framework for inquiry such as these four capacities is proposed to support teachers and therefore their students.

### **Implications for initial and ongoing teacher education for assessment capability**

Too often teachers or teacher preparation programs are blamed for poor assessment outcomes.

This study of just four countries showed that in each context complex sets of educational contexts and policies had incompatibilities and friction between accountability and equity demands, assessment ideals and schooling practices. Acknowledging that assessment can be messy and difficult to navigate means that we

can move beyond blaming individual teachers. The four assessment capabilities provide an orientation beyond a focus on skills and knowledge to recognize the situated aspects of being an assessor.

Teacher educators and mentors can equip preservice teachers with principles and opportunities for inquiry and principled action that can help beginning teachers to understand assessment in practice. Knowing why they experience an assessment dilemma is a first step to finding ways forward. This is an especially urgent priority as digital disruptions and an overdue focus on equity in assessment is requiring teachers to find new assessment pathways.

More than ever, beginning teachers need opportunities to workshop assessment dilemmas, contradictions, and possibilities with colleagues. Collaboration communities like the Michigan Assessment Consortium (MAC), where insightful assessment thinkers challenge each other with ideas and put them into practice, are essential for supporting assessment capability.



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## Reflection Points

- 1 Think of an assessment decision where the response was not clear cut. What alternatives for action do these capacities raise for you?
- 2 Which of the four capacities would be the most challenging to apply to assessment decisions? What would need to change to address this dimension?
- 3 In what contexts can teachers talk about their dilemmas and hopes around assessment and what they mean for students? What would be needed for this language of assessment capacities to inform conversations of practice or policy?
- 4 How could the capacities inform meaningful teacher education in assessment? How could they inform preservice teacher education about assessment?

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## To learn more

The Michigan Assessment Consortium website contains a rich library filled with sharable assessment resources as well as online learning modules designed to increase assessment literacy among all education stakeholders. Explore these resources, then spread the word!

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