

# Chapter 10

## Provocation 1: Towards More Radical Assessment Systems



Christopher DeLuca 

**Abstract** In Provocation 1, DeLuca proposes that the COVID-19 pandemic has provided the opportunity to pause and experience deep reflexivity to reimagine a fundamental new future for education. He suggests that in this re-imagining, the focus should turn to well-being, connections and understanding of self. DeLuca notes the imperative of socially orientated curriculum and assessment in which students work collaboratively, responding to challenge and building compassion. He asks, “How can assessment support a curriculum of care?”. His call is to empower teachers to imagine new assessment possibilities by radically rethinking assessment theories and practices. He suggests education systems need to provide opportunities for teachers’ professional learning that will equip them with the capacity to experiment and think radically to innovate assessment and to respond to the social consequences of assessments that consider students’ well-being.

Last year, I attended a faculty research summit where one of my colleagues presented her work on education’s response to the melting arctic polar ice caps and the global climate emergency. She poignantly argued that it was time for radical change in education: time to rethink our historic patterns of relating to one another and the planet, time to redesign curriculum to support collective sustainability, and time for radical truth about the state and outcomes of our educational systems. That was before COVID-19, before George Floyd, and before the hyper-partisan 2020 US election, events which have only intensified calls for change—often, it seems—at warp speed. And yet, as I sat and listened in that not-too-distant ‘before time’, I could not help feeling as though much educational assessment research fell painfully short of addressing the pressing challenges before us; that much of our research reinforced the status quo, feeding past architectures of education and perpetuating systemic structures of reward, exclusion, and inequity. Global calls for change affect all sectors, but to echo my colleague, they are particularly pointed at education, for education is

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C. DeLuca (✉)  
Queen’s University, Kingston, Canada  
e-mail: [cdeluca@queensu.ca](mailto:cdeluca@queensu.ca)

the site where radical truth has the capacity to be translated into radical hope, radical imagining, and radical teaching (McGregor et al., 2020).

As I write this provocation, we are in the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools are, once again, threatening to close, with several cities in my corner of the world entering a period of heightened restrictions and quarantine measures. While the world slows, and school rhythms change their pace and space of learning, many fear that students will lose precious learning time and equivalent gains in achievement. On the contrary, this global pause provides an opportunity for deep reflexivity. I deliberately use the term *reflexivity* here, rather than *reflection*, because reflexivity refers to the action of turning back on oneself, to invert experience onto understanding and reconsider where we now stand: to engage in radical truth-telling. The challenge, however, with reflexivity is our capacity for self-critique (Lather, 1993); our capacity to be products of the education system and yet, simultaneously, critical of it. For reflexivity to work effectively, we must position ourselves both *within* and *outside* the system. But does COVID-19 not allow precisely for this positionality?

If we take on the opportunity afforded to us and use this time for critical reflexivity—for what could be the most important learning yet—we can reimagine a radical new future for education. We can take a careful step forward, mindful of the very clear and present dangers: student wellness, community resilience and sustainability, machine–human interactions, and rising inequities and gaps in achievement across marginalised groups. Each of these dangers, and others, has been well documented and marked in relation to the short- and long-term outcomes of COVID-19 (Schleicher, 2020; United Nations, 2020), and arguably as outcomes of our pre-COVID educational system too. Strikingly, underpinning all of these dangers is an unequivocal priority to focus on human beings and their wellness, connection, and understanding of self, other, community, and environment. While disciplinary content may remain important in a future vision of education, what COVID-19 and other global challenges have called to our attention is that our education system must now focus on human wellness relationships: we must teach our children how to care for themselves, each other, and our world.

In my view, our education systems must pivot curriculum *and assessment* to enhance its focus on collective well-being and care; to purposefully engage socially oriented curriculum and assessment. We must ask ourselves: How can assessment support a curriculum of care? Such a socially oriented curriculum would require students to engage actively with projects that build compassion and empathy, as well as critical, historical and sustainable thinking capacities. This curricular focus emphasises learning by working together through collaboration with others and communities, local and global, to effect social and environmental changes—to learn to care for one another, ourselves, and the world, and to collectively work for a common good. Such a vision aligns squarely with the OECD’s *Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030* that articulates a commitment to “[help] every learner develop as a whole person, fulfil his or her potential and help shape a shared future built on the well-being of individuals, communities and the planet” (2018, p. 3). The challenge is that implementing this vision of education requires a dramatic shift in the widely

used test-based assessment practices and large-scale accountability mechanisms that have gripped many educational systems.

Assessment scholars are called to action. If we are to take seriously the challenge presented before us, then we must rethink assessment theories to yield practices that truly embrace a socially oriented curriculum. As assessments amplify our priorities, the continued reliance on individualistic test-based assessment systems, which remain profuse across countries, will forever undermine the required collective orientation necessary to support our sustainable future. More dangerous, it signals to students and societies that individual gains are the best measures of success in our societies, rather than collective well-being, collective thinking, or collective work. This signal, in my view, points in the wrong direction for our future goals.

As the principal driver of classroom activities, there remains little hope for reforms in pedagogy, curriculum, or learning unless radical changes are made to assessment systems. For me, this change means dramatically dislodging educational assessment from quantifying learning, and instead building new theoretical foundations for educational assessment that align with the complex, interconnected, and collective learning goals and processes we now have for our children; a project in which several assessment scholars throughout the world are deeply engaged. Rather than retrofitting measurement principles for classroom use or adapting large-scale test items to inauthentic 'real-world' problems, we are called to generate assessment theories and practices that authenticate students' collaborative learning, and importantly, the impact of their learning on social, environmental and personal change, to more validly support, report, and honour the kind of learning that is important for today and tomorrow. In many ways, this means positioning each student and community at the centre of our assessment designs, diminishing our preoccupation with comparisons of students, one to another, and instead focusing on priorities of equity, fairness, and validity.

In calling for radical assessment theories and practices, we must do so in tandem with teachers' voices and by empowering teachers to take risks in their assessment work: to envisage assessment possibilities that pair with a new curricular vision that breaks from the structures of the past. By listening to, learning from, and supporting teachers and students as they experiment with assessment in this new curricular space offers the best chance at moving towards more radical assessment systems. In supporting teachers' assessment experimentation, there is a need to reorient assessment literacy theories to ensure teachers have three critical capacities. First is the capacity to innovate in assessment. This capacity involves both granting teachers the permission and stimulating the creativity to think differently about assessment in practice. Second is the capacity to respond to the social consequences that result from assessment, to attend to the negative impacts of assessments that currently diminish well-being for many students and adjust assessments in ways that maximise positive consequences for learning, student wellness, and collective gain. And finally is the capacity for professional learning; the capacity to drive assessment plans forward, to seek out the resources, supports, community members, and colleagues that will bring to life new forms of assessment in schools. Thus, to move forward in our assessment systems we must give teachers both the opportunity to experiment with assessment

and equip them with a set of capacities to *think radically* about assessment in schools. Radical change in education, and thus our response to the global challenges before us, largely rests on the assessment systems we are prepared to endorse over the coming years. How radical are we prepared to be?

## References

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**Professor Christopher DeLuca** is an Associate Dean at the School of Graduate Studies and Professor in Educational Assessment at the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University, Canada. He leads the Classroom Assessment Research Team and is a director of the Queen’s Assessment and Evaluation Group. His research examines the complex intersection of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment as operating within frameworks of school accountability and standards-based education while focusing on supporting teachers in negotiating these critical areas of practice.