

# Culturally Responsive Assessment: A Missed Call for Italy?

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Montenegro & Jankowski's (2017) paper *Equity and Assessment: Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Assessment* sounds like a manifesto to radically change and improve assessment in the higher education field. On the one hand, I found a reinforcement on how I think about assessment, on the other hand, I started to ask myself: "Does assessment really assure diversity, equity, and inclusion? How is it possible to implement a responsive assessment?" Suddenly, I shifted my attention to practice and I realized how challenging trying to translate in vivo the proposal of an equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive assessment is in some contexts, like my country (Italy); traditionally "allergic" to changes.

Moving from Montenegro & Jankowski's framework, in the following, I will explain the reasons why the proposal of culturally responsive assessment is so far away to becoming a reality in Italy. Based on my previous studies realized at the University of Bari, I conclude highlighting main improvement areas in order to assure a meaningful innovation process within the Italian higher education system.

As Montenegro and Jankowski point out in their Occasional Paper, testing and assessment procedures within the higher education field have been deeply reconsidered in order to determine student learning progression, measure student learning outcomes, and provide robust information to different stakeholders (e.g. faculty members, students, policy-makers and administrators, families, etc.). The strong influence exerted by the standards-based movement, as well as accountability pressures, have led to an assessment more responsive not only to validity and reliability requests but also to cultural and contextual demands. The need for an alternative assessment practice more student-centered and focused on students' active participation and collaboration (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Carless, 2015; Wiliam, 2011) have been reinforced by the recognition of the inadequacy of assessment methods used for student learning (e.g. traditional oral exams or written tests). The proposal of a culturally responsive assessment aimed to foster student learning led to the reinforcement of alternative methods such as portfolios, capstone projects, and self- and peer-assessment.

The strong drive for a new assessment culture has become more evident in the lively debate on principle and practice guidelines in the teaching-learning process (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). The enthusiasm and the interest in a new assessment culture have been acknowledged by the Italian higher education system, but only in an idealistic and formal way.

Following international trends, assessment practices become more complex and considerably different from the past because they should serve different purposes, for different stakeholders, and with different strategies and tools. However, in Italy, this alignment is only superficial. The perspective of culturally responsive assessment is not widely recognized and practiced. The

attempts to change the assessment culture and practices within this higher education system that is traditional and bureaucratic can be traced back to the early 80s. Over the years, in order to reply to social, policy, and economic transformations, assessment and evaluation processes become more evident, and have been recognized as a key for the innovation in the higher education system. The required alignment to the European Guidelines led to the last University Reform (Law n. 240/2010) aimed to outline and practice a different, more sustainable assessment; and to guarantee the active participation of students as full members of the academic community (Jungblat, Vukasovic, & Stensaker, 2015). All these aims require the active involvement of students in the assessment process. At the same time, teachers and university staff are called to incorporate a wide range of assessment practices that can reply both to accountability requirements and to student learning needs. The rationale is clearly stated. However, the practice is so far away from this new idea of assessment.

During the implementation of the reform, the Italian teachers demonstrated strong opposition to the new assessment principles and practices. The traditional self-referential status of the academic professors and the freedom of teaching sanctioned by the Italian Constitution have been used as a shield against change. As a result, assessment is not perceived as a participated process aimed to support and foster student learning. The request of a new assessment as it has been designed by the reform has been rejected by teachers who still continue to practise assessment in a traditional way, with oral and written exams at the end of a course or a module. Furthermore, the lack of transparency in the assessment criteria has made the assessment process a mere bureaucratic ritual, a power exercise, and a means for social selection.

The reform has been conceived as a set of complex rules not necessary for the real improvement of the higher education system. Teachers started a silent boycott of the reform continuing to reiterate traditional practices in the assessment domain. The new, alternative assessment processes such as those called for by Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) are largely unknown. As a consequence, the reply to different student needs is not always effective, and equity is still perceived only in economic terms (e.g. student aids).

While current studies, especially at an international level, are moving towards the revision of traditional modalities of testing, the individuation of alternative forms of assessment, the analysis of representations and conceptions teachers and students have of assessment, Italy is in urgent need of a critical re-look of its assessment practices. More specifically, in my perspective, there are three main areas to be considered in order to ensure a real and meaningful innovation in the Italian higher education assessment domain:

1. *Assessment literacy.* The most recent reform encourages teachers to incorporate a range of assessment practices that can not only be positioned in a context of accountability and quality assurance, but also responsive to student learning needs: it is in teachers' best interest, and also the students', that teachers develop a level of understanding in assessment. However, despite demands for teachers' assessment literacy in the higher education context, the term assessment literacy "is still in its infancy" (Price, Rust, O'Donovan, Handley, & Bryant, 2012, p. 9). Assessment literacy, as a core teaching construct, indicates teachers' understanding of key dimensions of a sound assessment process surrounding the phases of collection, interpretation, use of evidence, and communication of feedback (Price et al., 2012). Educational research is necessary to understand how teachers design, select, interpret and use data in the assessment process in an effective way. At the same time, due to the effect of teachers' competence not only on measurement of student achievement but also on the quality of student learning, it is crucial to reply to the question: Are professional development paths on assessment literacy leading to improved students' learning outcomes?
2. *Alternative assessment.* The need to introduce and disseminate the principles of assessment for learning and try to integrate them in a more coherent and cohesive process of assessment practices within the quality assurance system, is urgent. With the IDEA

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project (Improving Feedback Developing Effective Assessment in Higher Education) I have tried to implement an assessment model that, on one hand, can enhance the role of feedback for the improvement of the teaching-learning process, and, on the other hand, can produce valid and useful evidence within the higher education quality assurance system (Pastore et al., 2019). Research results have been helpful to better understand incongruences and criticalities in the Italian higher education system. What results show is the persistence of a traditional way of conceptualizing assessment by teachers and students. A consistent gap has been identified between assessment theory and practice, as well as between the rationale of the legislative innovations and how actors (in this case, teachers and students) think about assessment and experience it.

3. *Responsive assessment practices for different students.* On the backdrop of the European policies, the principles of dignity, autonomy, active citizenship, self-attainment, social inclusion, and employability deeply impacted the concept of learning and led to a consistent recognition of the role and value of the experience of learning. The renewed interest in non-formal and informal learning, considered for a long time as a neglected kind of learning becomes relevant, especially with a specific target of students: migrants, refugees, or in general students who are beneficiaries of international protection. In this perspective the Italian higher education system has been called to:

- Define the prerequisites for recognition and validation of competencies in credentialed learning;
- Align learning outcomes in terms of competencies and professional standards; and
- Reconsider the validity criterion and deal with issues of coherence, plausibility, and social consequences of assessment practices.

Scant suggestions have been provided until now by educational research and improvements have not been the cultural shift for a more responsive assessment, equitable and valid is so far away to come. Dealing only with legislative aspects, as happened in Italy, demonstrate how it is difficult to realize a culturally responsive assessment in (traditional) higher education systems.

Educational research and international comparison are crucial. The chance offered by Montenegro and Jankowski to reflect on main criticalities and improvement areas, and to compare and contrast good (and bad) practices, in my view, is a relevant part of the innovation process.

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Research shows the persistence of traditional assessment approaches by teachers and students. There is a consistent gap between assessment theory and practice, and between the rationale of legislative innovations and how teachers and students think about assessment and experience it.

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