

Assessment of Online Learners

Foundations and Applications for Teacher Education

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Chapter 17

Ubuntu at a Distance

Online Assessment for Care,
Justice, and Community

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Ubuntu at a Distance

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Online Assessment for Care, Justice, and Community

Sarah Elizabeth Barrett

In early 2020, when schools adopted emergency remote teaching (ERT) due to the COVID-19 pandemic and teachers struggled to adjust their face-to-face teaching practices to remote or online environments, teachers' ability to assess students' academic progress and social and psychological well-being were negatively affected (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Using the sub-Saharan ethic of *ubuntu* as a conceptual lens, described in detail below, this chapter focuses on the experiences of 50 kindergarten to Grade 12 (K–12) teachers interviewed in the summer of 2020. Specifically, I explore what the teachers' experiences indicate about the nature of online assessment and how these experiences could inform teacher education in the future.

During ERT, students did not necessarily have equipment, devices, or home circumstances conducive to effectively participating in online learning and many people, including teachers, lived in communities where the internet was unreliable or nonexistent (Barrett, 2021). Teachers did not have adequate time to plan for the new platforms, resulting in the use of a narrower group of pedagogical tools than might otherwise be present in online learning (Tartavulea et al., 2020). In Ontario, Canada (the jurisdiction in which this study was done), as in many regions, rather than focusing on academic progress, the priority in ERT was for teachers to support their students emotionally (Bozkurt et al., 2020). However, teachers in Ontario were still expected to assess their students' academic progress and assign grades. This chapter provides an analysis of how teachers experienced assessing their students during ERT.

Conceptions of Assessment

Assessment is typically defined as any act a teacher takes to determine a student's level of understanding, knowledge, or skill (Unal & Unal, 2019). In Canada, provincial policies mandate that assessment should be both accurate and equitable (e.g., British Columbia Ministry of Education and Training, 2022; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Nunavut Department of Education, 2008). To be accurate, assessments must give students multiple and varied opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and skills (British Columbia Ministry of Education and Training, 2022; Nunavut Department of Education, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). For assessments to be equitable, teachers must recognize students' circumstances and accommodate their needs, constantly adjusting the pace of and approach to lessons (Nunavut Department of Education, 2008). In Ontario, the policy for assessment in K–12 is outlined in the document *Growing Success* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), which mandates that teachers use procedures that “are fair, transparent, and equitable for all students [and] support all students, including those with special education needs” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 6). In this chapter, however, I expand on this notion of assessment beyond being equitable and accurate to explicitly include well-being. Ideally, as part of their custodial function, K–12 teachers are caring adults in students' lives who are constantly assessing the well-being of their students (Gay, 2021). In other words, I define assessment as any act a teacher takes to determine a student's level of knowledge, understanding, skill, or well-being.

Moorhouse and Tiet (2021) described how many teachers struggled with providing a satisfactory level of care to their students during ERT and how teachers were feeling disconnected from their students—not knowing if their attempts to create a caring community online were effective. Moorhouse and Tiet, however, did not connect a pedagogy of care to assessment per se. Indeed, in my review of the literature, I saw almost no reference to assessment as a component of caring for students and ascertaining their well-being. And yet, I would argue that the well-being of students is an important aspect of assessment practices.

Ubuntu as a Conceptual Lens

The starting point for this study was not theory but experience (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; Rose & Adams, 2014). I needed a way to make sense of what

teachers said about their experiences. I sought a theory that could encompass the three aspects of assessment described earlier: accuracy, equity, and well-being. To that end, I used ubuntu, an Indigenous sub-Saharan African ethical framework, to examine the data. Known by various names in African languages (ubuntu being the Xhosa term), ubuntu does not map neatly onto any one of the four commonly known Western ethical frameworks of deontology, virtue, utilitarian, or caring (Bonn, 2007) but rather represents a conception of ethical character and conduct rooted in community. Ubuntu is so ingrained in sub-Saharan African cultures that it can be difficult to provide a clear definition (Bonn, 2007), but it boils down to the idea that “a person depends on others to be a person” (Bonn, 2007, p. 863) or “I am because we are” (Brock-Utne, 2016, p. 31). Specifically, ubuntu espouses a balance between three domains of ethical action: justice, care, and community (Letseka, 2012; Metz & Gaie, 2010).

I use ubuntu as a conceptual lens with the recognition that it is not a monolithic and essentialist feature of sub-Saharan African perspectives (Waghid & Smeyers, 2012). Rather, ubuntu is a constellation of perspectives revolving around community and human dignity which, through my own African and Caribbean roots, forms the basis of the ethical framework I brought to this research. Similar to other scholars (Letseka, 2012), I do not argue here that ubuntu is the only ethical framework that espouses a balance between justice, caring, and community norms (Metz & Gaie, 2010), but rather that it is the conceptual lens through which I undertook the analysis of the data from this study.

Context

In Ontario, school buildings closed on March 12, 2020, and ERT began on April 6, 2020, with most school districts opting for online platforms. However, there were delays getting devices to students who did not have them, and good quality internet access was either unavailable or financially unattainable for many. School boards did send cellular internet hubs out to students, but this process delayed the participation of many students who were often already marginalized (Barrett, 2021). Further, the emotional load students were carrying during the pandemic was exacerbated by disrupted routines and their separation from friends (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

In response to these extraordinary circumstances, the Ontario Ministry of Education mandated that, although teachers were still expected to

assess and assign grades to students' work, final grades should not be negatively affected by ERT (Lecce, 2020). All Ontario school boards took this instruction to mean that grades could not drop below where they stood when the school closures began. This policy protected students whose circumstances prevented them from participating fully in ERT from immediate academic penalty; however, it also meant that any student who was satisfied with the grades they had earned up until March 12 could opt out. Many older students chose to work instead of attending school and, as the school closures continued into the spring, many families chose to opt out, as well (Barrett, 2021).

Methods

Conducted in the late spring and summer of 2020, this study involved a survey and in-depth interviews. Participants were Ontario K–12 classroom teachers who had been teaching in person and had had to switch to ERT. Although they ranged in experience from novice to semi-retired, the majority had more than 10 years' experience teaching, with an almost even split between elementary and secondary teachers. Three hundred of the 762 survey participants volunteered to be interviewed, and the 50 interviewees were purposefully sampled (Creswell, 2013) to approximately match the demographics of the survey participants (age, years of experience, elementary or secondary panel, gender) and provide variety in geographic location (north; southwest; east; rural, urban, or suburban; and Greater Toronto and Hamilton Areas). The one-hour (on average) interviews conducted by videoconference included questions about how the ERT affected their ability to assess students' academic progress and their relationships with students. I examined the full transcripts of interviews for themes through a process of decontextualization and recontextualization (Tesch, 1990). Decontextualization involved open coding of the transcribed interviews and collapsing the codes into larger themes. Recontextualization involved analyzing these larger themes through an ubuntu lens and relating the themes to the three aspects of ubuntu: justice, caring, and community. I related assessing students' academic needs to justice, accurate and equitable assessment to community, and assessment of well-being to caring.

The qualitative analysis reported in this chapter focuses on interview data and was guided by the following questions: How did teachers experience assessment during ERT? What can these experiences tell educators

about how best to approach assessment in online environments? Validity was established through the large number of participants and member checking: Towards the end of each interview, I shared initial impressions with interviewees, and the research report was shared with participants for feedback before its release.

Findings

Teachers reported a hampered ability to respond to students' academic needs; expressed concerns about equity and accuracy in evaluation of academic skills, knowledge, and understanding; and struggled with monitoring students' well-being. All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

Difficulties Responding to Students' Academic Needs

The participants in this study were concerned with the extent to which they could respond to and account for students' academic needs, noting that, in normal circumstances, a lot of the assessment they did was in the moment, with the purpose of constantly adjusting their teaching to suit the class (e.g., changing the pace of instruction, adding clarification). These adjustments were challenging to make in online platforms. Once ERT was underway, as teachers attempted to engage their students and assess the success of the lesson or how to pace instruction, they were faced with what many described as a brick wall. For example, Stacey, a high school social sciences teacher, said,

I don't know what the kids are thinking. I can't look at their faces and say, "OK, you're confused right now." Because I know I can recognize those faces . . . when kids either are drifting off because they're bored, or they're confused, or they just don't know what's going on.

This feedback was integral to Stacey's teaching; therefore, the absence of it in the moment led to students being left behind. Lexie, a middle school French teacher, said,

A lot of my students did not want to have their video or microphone on, which I completely understand, . . . [but it] became hard to tell if students were actually on the call or if they logged in and

then were doing something in another window or walked away from the computer.

Without the information provided by body language, student engagement was a major concern for teachers in this study. They might have known students needed something different, but because of the brick wall of ERT, teachers did not have the information they needed to make the right adjustments. All reported precipitous drops in the number of students logging in as the term progressed, but they did not have enough information to determine the cause. For example, Blake, a high school special education resource teacher, noted that low participation rates became a main topic of conversation with his colleagues as, over time, one by one, students disappeared from their online classrooms:

[I was] venting to other staff members, [saying], “Am I the only one in this position? Am I doing something wrong? . . . Am I doing too much? Am I inadvertently pushing my students away?” There was a lot of questions about it. “Are they not engaging because of me? Or are they not engaging because that’s just their choice in general?” And there was always that question, “Am I doing enough?”

Such questions were impossible for teachers to answer. Further, they could not know what gaps they needed to fill or account for in students’ home circumstances. Kurt, a K–5 teacher, noted,

I think some students went to their parents for clarifications and had parents who kind of filled the teacher’s role. Some, you could tell they were getting coaching and editing and ideas from parents. Some, you could tell, were getting none of that.

What Kurt described is a recognition that when teaching in person, teachers could provide equitable resources and supports to all students, but in ERT they could not know the students’ circumstances and therefore could not easily compensate or account for students’ academic needs.

Concerns About Accuracy and Equity

The participants in this study aimed to enact equitable and accurate assessment practices, but doing so was challenging given the combination

of the grading mandate, poor attendance, and the timing of school closures. Further, many participants noted that plagiarism was rampant. One high school French teacher stated that plagiarism severely undermined the integrity of the grades he would assign because he believed that, in ERT, there was no reliable way to ascertain student authorship:

Losing [academic integrity] makes you feel like you're losing everything. Why should we be assessing and giving marks or grades to the student? We could, for example, be saying, "OK, I'll give you a participation mark, if you participate." But assessing or giving marks to tests and quizzes, we don't feel is right. [Under normal circumstances], teachers are in control of tests and quizzes. We know how to conduct a quiz or test in class. We take all the precautions. . . . We want to have certain integrity in the assessment process. So, [right now, with ERT], we are not in control of that. So, we don't feel it's right. (Frank)

Frank expressed a feeling that his professional integrity was compromised by a situation which required him to assign grades when he was certain students were cheating but was not in a position to prove it. In normal circumstances, cheating online is not necessarily more prevalent than it is face-to-face (Peled et al., 2019). During the pandemic, there was an increase in plagiarism in some jurisdictions, but it was still less than what the teachers thought it was (Yazici et al., 2022). In this study, teachers expressed a feeling of not being in control of academic integrity because of the brick wall mentioned earlier.

The brick wall and the teachers' inability to see body language got in the way of determining students' levels of knowledge, skills, and understanding. Participants stated that, in person, they endeavoured to get to know students well enough to evaluate them accurately and equitably. David, a middle school teacher, had prided himself on these perceptions:

In a classroom, I can tell. "OK, that kid's having a bad day. I'll chat with them quietly. We'll put this [class work] aside for now." [With ERT], I couldn't get that personal feel. I couldn't get that personal touch. And so [I would ask myself], "Was this child really producing D work or is this child having some struggles?" "Is this student

giving me C work when normally they produce, at the very least, B? Or is this that they're demoralized, and they just don't care?" As in, they don't see the point in all this right now.

Thus, David wanted to ascertain the meaning of a student's performance in order to assess it accurately and also to determine what that student needed. However, it is more than the teachers wanting to assess equitably. It is also the students wanting to show their best work. As Mary, an elementary teacher, put it,

[During ERT, students] can't show you whatever they wanted to show you. They can't grab me by the hand and pull me over. And so, they don't engage in the same way. . . . [Kids are] going to play and be interested with sharing with people who are around them. I think that the big one is that nonverbal body language, that proximity. They pick up on that so strongly, and you just can't do that online.

Mary's statement is a direct example of assessment being dialogical and dependent on building relationships. Students want teachers to see their best work and may be the ones to initiate an instance of assessment. Further, if criteria for success are explicitly provided by the teacher or developed within the classroom community, then students know when they have reached them. Marco had used this strategy in his high school mathematics classes:

[The students and I] always create a rubric for observations and conversations. . . . It's not an easy thing to do, but we do it collectively. And during the course of the course, we are often gathering evidence [through] the observations that I make for the work or conversations we have with them in addition to assignments.

An approach like Marco's helps students to reflect on their own learning and serves to build community because it creates conversations around a shared purpose within the course (Rovai, 2002). Unfortunately, Marco was not able to continue this ongoing conversation online. With sporadic attendance and lack of participation in synchronous classes, students were not engaged enough to do so.

Concerns About Students' Well-Being

I have discussed how teachers wanted to understand students' mental state in order to be equitable and accurate with assigning grades but, here, I want to discuss assessing student well-being for its own sake. As mentioned earlier, due to the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic, care was prioritized for students, from kindergarten through to higher education (Moorhouse & Tiet, 2021). In the case of K–12 in Ontario, prioritizing students' mental health over academic achievement was an explicit policy (Lecce, 2020). None of the teachers interviewed disagreed with this emphasis but all struggled with implementing it. As Lexie, a middle school French teacher, said,

It was so hard to be away from them and know that they were having their own struggles that we couldn't really deal with, or having the students that wouldn't show up for anything, and you didn't really know what was going on.

Lexie described the disruption of established relationships through the sudden shift to ERT. This feeling of detachment from students, where teachers were unable to provide the care they could have in person, was a dominant theme in interviews. Participants highlighted the custodial nature of K–12 teaching, where, as noted earlier, educators are caring adults in students' lives. Thus, the brick wall that many of the participants described, not only made it difficult to assess students' academic progress but also their well-being. Kate, an English teacher in a private school, said, “The sad thing is that you just don't know what's happening with those families and in those houses and you just hope for the best—that they're doing all right [and] that they're coping with it.”

This desire to care for students was not confined to the elementary level. High school teachers were equally worried about their students. The most vulnerable students tended to be the hardest to reach; therefore, their well-being was most threatened by ERT. Indeed, teachers who worked primarily with vulnerable students were the most concerned (Barrett, 2021) because programs specifically designed to be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of vulnerable students were dependent on teachers being able to assess those needs on a day-to-day, moment-to-moment basis. Willis, a teacher in a program designed for

high school students with chronic absenteeism, expressed frustration about his inability to meet his students' emotional needs once ERT began:

There's no way that I can do what I do or achieve the results that I've achieved with the digital format. . . . The connection is severed for many of them completely, and for others we can't engage in the same way. I can't read their facial expressions as well because we're on the phone. They're not doing video chats. . . . They're not having peer to peer conversations that I can overhear, [and] say, "Hey, I notice you're talking to so-and-so about this. . . . Let's see if we can figure some of this out because it sounds like you're struggling." That doesn't happen.

Here, body language was referenced again, being used not just to gauge the pace and effectiveness of a lesson or to ascertain if a student was performing at their optimal level academically, but also to determine the student's psychological and social well-being for its own sake. Further, Willis referred to ongoing assessment of students' social interactions and how they indicated well-being and areas of concern.

Discussion: Expanding Conceptions of Assessment

The teachers in this study expressed profound unease with the quality of assessment that they were able to enact during ERT. They faced difficulty ensuring that their assessments in the moment were sufficient to gauge student needs, that their grading was accurate (i.e., reflective of students' actual knowledge, skills, and understanding) and equitable (students' academic needs were being met), and that their determination of student well-being met their standards of care. These experiences are mirrored in the literature (Moorhouse & Tiet, 2021).

In my analysis, I draw parallels between the communitarian ethos of ubuntu and the participants' assessment experiences. Assessing students' academic needs is related to justice; accurate and equitable assessment is related to community; and assessment of well-being is related to caring. For example, whether teachers are in a position to respond to students' academic needs and adjust accordingly is a question of justice, where justice is defined as everyone having what they need to thrive. Ubuntu states that justice is a communal and positive endeavour (Viriri & Makaye,

2020). Justice is not merely a concept that applies to transgressions and punishments within a society. It is a reflection of the ethical structure of a social group (Le Roux, 2000). On a day-to-day basis, it represents an agreement between individuals on how they will treat each other so that every individual is included and given the means to contribute. Thus, from an ubuntu perspective, the assessment situation during ERT was unjust on several levels. First, the most vulnerable students were the most likely to stop attending or trying (Barrett, 2021), and their vulnerability fed into marginalization within the classroom community. Because the teachers could not reach these students once they stepped away, the teachers could not adjust to help them. Participants stated that numerous phone calls and emails to students and their parents went unanswered. It was also unjust for the teachers, whose *raison d'être* was severely undermined by the sudden separation from their students and lack of ability to assess their students' needs and adjust to them accordingly. Through their separation from the classroom community, neither teachers nor students could coordinate their efforts in the group project of learning together. Indeed, the declaration "I feel like I can't do my job" was repeated by many of the participating teachers.

With respect to accurate and equitable assessment, the teachers identified academic integrity as a major issue. From an ubuntu perspective, academic integrity is more than a reflection of students' good character; it is fundamental to community cohesion. Viriri and Makaye (2020) described ubuntu as a solution to widespread cheating in national exams in Zimbabwe and Nigeria. They noted that explicit teaching of ubuntu values would teach students the deleterious effects of cheating on themselves and the community: When students see colleagues getting grades they had not equitably earned or engage in plagiarism themselves, it corrodes the classroom community (Chaminuka & Ndudzo, 2014). When students and teachers are unable to communicate on an ongoing basis about the learning that is occurring, relationships are strained, and when the classroom community is no longer able to discuss shared goals, the community begins to drift and lose its centre (Rovai, 2002).

Finally, participants had difficulty assessing their students' well-being. From an ubuntu perspective, caring is integral to assessment. Beets and van Louw (2005) described ubuntu approaches to assessment well:

Humanness (warmth, tolerance, understanding, peace, humanity) and caring (empathy, sympathy, helpfulness, and friendliness) capture

the spirit in which assessment should be conducted . . . humanness towards and caring unconditionally for the learner constitutes the foundation for effective teaching and learning. Learners experience assessment as positive only when they are sure that the teacher who guides the learning process is a humane and caring person.

(p. 157)

Thus, caring relationships are fundamental to assessment. The purpose of relationships is to care for one another, and any circumstance which undermines the ability to do so needs to be corrected (Mayaka & Truell, 2021).

Ubuntu treats caring, justice, and community as inseparable and interdependent. Similarly, I argue that assessment practices that are equitable and accurate, and that incorporate an awareness of well-being, are dependent on the quality of the classroom community and vice versa. If teachers cannot or do not assess students' well-being and closely monitor students' academic progress in the moment, the grades that are assigned are unlikely to be reflective of students' actual knowledge, skills, and understanding. If teachers cannot ensure that all students have the same opportunities to learn, even if their assessments are accurate, the process was inequitable, which undermines not only the individual student's sense of belonging but the cohesion of the classroom community. Ubuntu highlights the role of assessment in creating and maintaining a healthy classroom community and the role of community in supporting caring, accurate, and equitable assessment. The usefulness of ubuntu lies in its fundamentally holistic approach. For assessment, I imagine care, justice, and community as fundamentally integrated and designed to maintain and enhance student and teacher learning individually and together.

Implications for Teacher Education

How can the experiences of the participants in this study inform teacher educators and assessment approaches in online environments? The assessment experiences of the participants in this study demonstrate that the collapse of classroom communities during ERT undermined teaching and learning, including assessment. The antidote to this collapse is community building. At the core of community building is care. The teacher must continually assess individual students' integration into the

classroom community. Participants indicated that in an in-person classroom, they assessed integration by reading body language and, in the case of students who were struggling, initiating informal conversations and keeping in touch with parents. This process was used in both elementary and secondary classes, and whether students were marginalized because of demographic categories, abilities, or circumstances (Barrett, 2021). Online, a pedagogy of care needs to be done deliberately and explicitly (Barrett, 2021; Rovai, 2002). Check-ins during synchronous classes, journal entries, and one-on-one encounters designed so that teachers can assess student well-being are possible strategies.

Teacher educators, then, can help teacher candidates to understand that online environments can be learning environments that are as rich as those in person. Specifically, in online environments, teachers want to be able to determine how the class is responding to synchronous or asynchronous lessons and assess individual students on what they need to progress in their learning. If a caring classroom community has been established, it may be easier to ask for feedback, determine as a classroom community how to demonstrate reactions to lessons online, or ask questions one-on-one with the teacher (Oviawe, 2016). Teachers can discuss with the class why establishing norms is important, and students can become active partners in this ongoing formative assessment. The teacher can assess the students' academic needs and how to adjust their approach to optimize student learning. Finally, once the caring classroom community has been established and the teacher has designed a plan for reinforcing norms, then the class can have an explicit conversation about authentic and equitable assessment and what constitutes fair play—specifically the role of collaboration and conceptions of academic integrity (Beets, 2012).

In ERT, teachers tended to focus on the content of the course rather than creating community (Bozkurt et al., 2020), even as they tried their best to connect with their students when they failed to log in, turn on their cameras, or show up to online classes and events. Despite knowing that care was fundamental, most of the participants in this study were unable to enact that care. It would be unfair to judge these participants because the situation was an emergency and the move to online teaching was involuntary. Families and school systems were not prepared for these circumstances, and most teachers were learning to teach online for the first time. However, studying this event does highlight the fact that the online classroom community that is conducive to accurate, equitable assessment, and that pays attention to

students' well-being, cannot happen by accident. Establishing norms for assessment—making criteria for success explicit; talking about what students should do if they need help; and negotiating how students can communicate with the teacher when they need them to slow down, reiterate, reframe, or review course content—should be part of an ongoing conversation throughout each course. The teacher needs to constantly endeavour to create and maintain the conditions to care for students and for students to care for one another. Teacher educators are in a position to help teacher candidates develop the skills to do this while emphasizing the reasoning behind it.

In conclusion, this study occurred at a particular time and place, where participants in the larger sample self-selected and interviewees were purposefully sampled; therefore, I hesitate to generalize these findings, but the participants' experiences are in alignment with extant literature on ERT (Barrett, 2021; Ferretti et al., 2021). Future research in the area of online assessment needs to expand to include the social conditions, policies, and skills necessary for it to be done well. For example, researchers could ask to what extent the quality of the classroom community influences the quality of assessment and vice versa. I also suggest exploring this topic using different conceptual frameworks (e.g., through Indigenous frameworks). In this chapter, the concept of ubuntu highlights the values underlying assessment—care, justice, and community—for all learning environments and recognizes their particular importance online, where community building and effective moment-to-moment pedagogical adjustments can be challenging to achieve.

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