

Holistic Assessment: Definition, Rationale, and Scholarly Foundations

Introduction

This document provides a more detailed articulation of holistic assessment for the Undergraduate Education Committee (UEC), grounding the definition in Indigenous knowledge systems and relevant scholarly literature in assessment, higher education, and decolonizing pedagogy. It is intended to support policy alignment, curriculum review, and institutional clarity.

Definition

Holistic assessment is a reflective and relational approach to evaluating student learning that attends to the intellectual, emotional, physical, relational, and spiritual dimensions of the learner. Rather than treating knowledge as discrete and decontextualized, holistic assessment recognizes learning as embedded in relationships, lived experience, community, and place (Battiste, 2013; Canadian Council on Learning, 2007).

Holistic assessment takes place in the context of holistic teaching and learning opportunities such as storytelling, land-based learning, experiential, dialogic, and community-engaged pedagogies—within classrooms where instructors hold a critical and holistic understanding of their own ongoing learning processes (Battiste, 2013). Learning occurs collaboratively, with students and instructors co-creating meaning in ways that respect individual and diverse lived experiences, consistent with relational and formative approaches to assessment for learning (Stiggins, 2005).

At UFV, holistic assessment is grounded in Indigenous conceptions of wholeness often articulated through the interrelated domains of spirit, heart, mind, and body and is aligned with Stó:lō traditions and the laws of Stó:lō Temexw. While rooted in Indigenous epistemologies, holistic assessment is not exclusive to Indigenous learners; it benefits all students by broadening what counts as knowledge and evidence of learning.

Indigenous Foundations of Holistic Assessment

Indigenous education frameworks consistently understand learning as holistic and lifelong, grounded in experiential, relational, and community-based ways of knowing. Learning is not confined to cognitive development alone but is understood as an integrated process that attends to spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual dimensions of the learner. The Medicine Wheel is often used to represent this integrated understanding of human development, emphasizing balance and interconnectedness across these domains. From this perspective, assessment is not merely evaluative or judgment-based but formative and restorative, supporting learners in developing an understanding of who they are, where they come from, and how they are accountable to their relationships, communities, and responsibilities (Hunter & Randhawa, 1996).

Building on this foundation, Battiste (2013) argues that Indigenous education seeks to “nourish the learning spirit,” positioning assessment as a process that affirms learners’ identities, capacities, and purposes rather than ranking or sorting individuals. Similarly, the Canadian Council on Learning (2007) emphasizes that success in learning cannot be meaningfully captured through standardized or exclusively cognitive measures, and instead calls for approaches that reflect the holistic, relational, and contextual nature of Indigenous learning.

Holistic Assessment as Pedagogically Situated Practice

Holistic assessment is not an isolated evaluative technique but a pedagogically situated practice that emerges from intentional teaching and learning environments. In such contexts, instructors do not function solely as assessors of student performance, but as reflective practitioners who are attentive to their own learning, positionality, and responsibilities within the learning relationship.

Learning is understood as a collaborative process of meaning-making, shaped by students’ diverse lived experiences, identities, and social locations. As a result, holistic assessment prioritizes alignment between pedagogy and evaluation, ensuring that students are assessed in ways that are consistent with how learning is cultivated (through dialogue, reflection, experiential engagement, and relational accountability) rather than through decontextualized or purely summative measures.

Key Principles of Holistic Assessment

Across Indigenous and scholarly literatures, holistic assessment is characterized by the following principles:

1. Developmental – Learning is assessed over time rather than at a single endpoint.
2. Relationality – Assessment occurs within relationships of trust, respect, and accountability.
3. Reflection – Learners are supported to make meaning of their learning experiences.
4. Integration – Cognitive learning is integrated with emotional, ethical, embodied, and spiritual dimensions.
5. Strengths-based orientation – Emphasis is placed on growth, capacity, and contribution rather than deficit.
6. Contextual validity – Learning is evaluated in relation to students’ social, cultural, and disciplinary contexts.

Examples of Holistic Assessment in Higher Education

In postsecondary contexts, holistic assessment may take the form of:

- Reflective journals or learning narratives
- Portfolios demonstrating growth and integration
- Community-engaged or land-based projects
- Autoethnographic or positionality-based assignments

- Dialogic assessments (e.g., circles, peer feedback, mentorship)
- Holistic or circular rubrics that visualize integrated learning

Importantly, holistic assessment can coexist with grades and institutional requirements when transparency, alignment with learning outcomes, and clear criteria are maintained.

Addressing Common Concerns

Holistic assessment does not imply reduced rigor or subjective grading. Rather, rigor is maintained through:

- Clearly articulated learning outcomes
- Transparent criteria and expectations
- Alignment between pedagogy and assessment
- Ethical boundaries that avoid evaluating students' beliefs or identities

When implemented thoughtfully, holistic assessment enhances academic integrity by making learning processes visible and meaningful.

Implications for UEC and Curriculum Policy

For UEC, adopting a shared definition of holistic assessment supports consistency in course outline language, enables innovation while maintaining academic standards, aligns assessment practices with UFV's commitments to Indigenization and equity, and provides guidance for curriculum review and approval processes

Conclusion

Holistic assessment represents a principled, research-informed approach to evaluating student learning that honours wholeness, relationality, and growth. Rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems and supported by contemporary assessment scholarship, it offers UFV a coherent framework for assessment practices that are inclusive, rigorous, and transformative.

References

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