

Encouraging Diversity and Inclusion in South African Higher Education: Suggestions for Decolonizing Assessment in Business Education

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Keywords

Business simulation;
Business education;
Assessment;
Decolonisation;
Instructional design.

Abstract

Decolonising assessment within the context of South African education represents a multifaceted endeavour. The objective is to dismantle the vestiges of colonial influence and establish an educational environment that places high value on competence, cultural diversity, and holistic comprehension. This paper advocates for the integration of knowledge creation and practical application approaches, such as simulations, problem-based (PBA), and project-based assessments (PjBA), to achieve this transformation. The paper provides evidence-based insights for reforming assessment practices from an instructional systems designer's (ISD) perspective. It emphasises the role of ISDs, learner-centricity, empowering HEIs and students to use Learning Management Systems (LMS) effectively, and creating assessments that promote the use of local and Indigenous knowledge rather than relying solely on Western worldviews.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

At the time of this paper, it has been around two decades since Apartheid ended, and surprisingly, the education systems that exist in South Africa are still mainly Eurocentric from that time. The decolonisation of assessment in South African education is a multifaceted process aimed at dismantling the remnants of colonial influence and fostering a learning environment that values competence, cultural diversity, and holistic understanding. The aim of the education system should be to recognise the nation's diverse cultural heritage and Indigenous knowledge systems, a body of knowledge that sustained the country prior to colonisation, and invest in and grow that knowledge (Khumalo & Blaoyi, 2017).

This paper advocates for the integration of knowledge creation and practical application approaches, such as simulations, problem-based (PBA), and project-based (PjBA) assessments, as a means to achieve these goals. By allowing for more open-ended and work-relevant assessments, students are not only developing practical skills that are necessary for the workplace but also being able to apply theory rather than regurgitate it.

The contribution and objective of this paper is to suggest evidence-based ways to decolonise assessment in South Africa from the point of view of an instructional systems designer (ISD). According to Schutte (2019), the need to decolonise our curriculum, in general, is paramount to address the deeply ingrained inequities and cultural biases that persist within our educational system. Many papers have highlighted the need for this transformation, but tangible steps and frameworks are still needed. To start the conversation on the next steps, this paper will focus on assessment in South Africa by encouraging the use of a more inclusive and representative assessment framework and exploring possible solutions from current research and available technology.

This paper will be structured in the following way: Section 2 will go through the historical context and literature and explain the issue around the current assessment design process; Section 3 will introduce the current research on possible solutions and considerations; Section 4 will explain the relevance of taking these steps as they align with development goals; Finally, section 5 will conclude the paper and suggest further research.

1.2. Context

The historical context of colonialism and apartheid has left an indelible mark on South African education. The remnants of old Eurocentric assessment methods and content continue to marginalise non-Western perspectives and maintain power imbalances. The education system was originally designed to serve the needs of the white minority, while black South Africans were denied access to quality education. This legacy of colonialism and apartheid continues to shape assessment practices in South Africa today. This leads to the question of why South Africa continues to use such practices when many European countries shifted to better andragogical practices.

Several South African researchers have looked at the problem, but there is still a lack of actionable steps and who the responsibility falls to. Du Plessis (2021) recognises the need for change in the educational structures but only briefly mentions the particular skill set that is missing. They placed the responsibility on the leadership to be open to curriculum change. However, the issue is that the leadership mentioned in this paper may not have the necessary perspectives to create this transformation. Of course, leaders are necessary to push this change, but the lack of emphasis on instructional designers is an urgent issue to address. The symbiotic relationship between curriculum developers - who develop the “what” needs to be learned, the subject matter experts (SMEs) - who contribute content to the curriculum, and ISDs - who develop the “how” content is delivered - is not being supported to push this decolonisation that Encouraging Diversity and Inclusion in South African Higher Education: Suggestions for Decolonizing Assessment in Business Education. Govender, T. *Future X*, 2(1), 1-10.

exists in the system. ISDs should be equally key members in discussions around decolonisation since they are experts at understanding the learner and their educational journey. Curriculum developers are the experts who understand the outcomes needed to satisfy the degree requirements, SMEs are the experts who create the content that will give students the appropriate knowledge and work-ready skills necessary, and ISDs are the educational experts who are well-versed in current technology that ensure the delivery methods align with modern pedagogical practices, fostering an engaging and effective learning experience for students – in this case, a decolonised delivery framework.

One common theme that arises from the literature is the issue regarding the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge. The colonial education system in South Africa was based on the European curriculum and did not value Indigenous knowledge. This marginalisation has continued in the post-apartheid era, with many assessment practices still favouring Western knowledge and skills. UNESCO (2018) even has an acronym for this concept, “LINKS,” which stands for Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. UNESCO promotes that LINKS are a vital part of society and “encompasses language, systems of classification, resource use practices, social interactions, ritual and spirituality”. These elements should not be neglected in business assessment frameworks, where, for example, customers will be living and working in these LINKS communities. Therefore, assessments meant to provide authentic opportunities to demonstrate business skills and knowledge should be centred around LINKS while providing international context. The systematic review by Chikoko (2021) puts emphasis on curriculum developers and found that there are those who agree with curricula having a degree of glocality – a term coined by Akio Morita that suggests looking at and acting upon local systems with an understanding of international contexts and methods (Visser, 2011).

Overall, to address these challenges, there is a need to reform assessment practices in South Africa. This reform should focus on the following:

- Inclusion of Indigenous knowledge: Assessment practices should be inclusive of Indigenous knowledge and skills. This will help to ensure that all learners have the opportunity to demonstrate their learning and achieve their full potential.
- Assessment practices should emphasise critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This will help learners develop the skills they need to succeed in the 21st century.
- Use of multiple assessment methods: Assessment practices should use multiple methods, such as portfolios, projects, and presentations. This will allow learners to demonstrate their learning in various ways and will help reduce the bias of traditional assessment methods.

By reforming assessment practices in South Africa, we can help to create a more equitable and inclusive education system that prepares all learners for success. Decolonising assessment in South Africa holds the potential to promote cultural revitalisation, enhance learning outcomes, and contribute to national

reconciliation and unity. However, this is only possible if we also increase the quality of the delivery method so that it is more in line with what students want, which Fomunyam (2018) found is currently not the case. Fomunyam also notes that many learners place the responsibility on the faculty for the quality of delivery, where SMEs should only be one part of the course creation process; frustratingly, with better instructional design and consulting and coaching from ISDs, many of these problems are easily mitigated or negated altogether.

2. Strategies for decolonising assessment in South Africa

In this section, the discussion will centre around strategies that could be used to promote decolonisation in assessment from an ISD perspective. The points are backed by research that shows the potential to be beneficial in bolstering student involvement in their learning journey. Many Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in South Africa have moved away from purely paper-based assessment and into the online space. Although this transition has been a substantial technological improvement in the education system, the fact is that we see that similar content and structures that were previously used have just been converted into a digital format.

2.1 Moving away from high-stakes summative assessment

Online testing has created more opportunities to assess students automatically, asynchronously, and more regularly; however, high-risk summative assessments still take centre stage in South Africa. This is no longer the norm worldwide, according to Heil and Ifenthaler (2023), who found that formative assessment research has started to take the lead. Other interesting points in the study point towards the increased adoption of self-assessment and peer assessment. Their review of online assessments shows that learner-centred assessment is being taken very seriously in the academic research community. It also means that it is time for South African institutes to mindfully evaluate the pros of continuing with high-risk summative assessments in business education in a world where competence and relevancy are more valued than theoretical knowledge (Rosenbaum et al., 2021).

The use of negative marking also falls into this category. Educators understand that there is already stress associated with test-taking, and for many students, this stress can be amplified for those going into a final exam who struggled to attain sufficient grades on their other assessments. Romm et al. (2019) found evidence suggesting negative marking created systematic bias among South African business education students. This bias could lead to underestimating the performance of risk-averse students, who become more hesitant compared to those who are more willing to take risks and guess answers, even if they might guess correctly less often.

2.2 Learning Management System utilisation

There is a known issue of learning management system (LMS) underutilisation in South Africa due to various factors from both the student and institute sides (Gamede et al., 2021). There is evidence to suggest that effective usage is an engagement factor in South African education (Swart, 2016). Therefore, these issues must be addressed since an LMS can be an incredible tool for promoting flipped classrooms, peer learning and self-directed (autonomous) learning. It is also a core component when implementing gameful approaches such as gamification elements, simulations, or serious games. These educational, evidence-based practices can only be accessed at scale with the proper use and execution of an LMS.

As stated previously, the issue is present on both sides. Even if the LMS is being properly utilised by the institute, there is another stakeholder that needs support: the learner. The digital divide in South Africa is severe, and many learners struggle with computer and digital literacy skills (Faloye & Ajayi, 2022). This is a critical area that needs to be addressed so that the advances in LMS functionality and plug-in applications can be received without complicating a learner's journey and causing unnecessary anxiety. Pre-emptive and supportive measures for mitigating and overcoming the effects of the digital divide are essential and need to be included in educational strategies at HEIs. These skills will not only narrow the disparity arising from the digital divide but also furnish learners with tangible proficiencies that improve their self-efficacy and readiness for the workforce.

2.3 Adopting evidence-based educational assessment practices to promote LINKS, competency, authenticity, and relevance

While there are many approaches that can be implemented, the following list can be used individually or all at once. The suggestions focus on giving learners a space to apply LINKS while not completely changing the structure of a course. There is an urgency for the decolonisation of assessment, and these approaches can be used to augment an existing course design.

2.4 Flipped classrooms

While not an assessment method, the adoption of flipped classrooms has created the opportunity to use class time for development, discussion, and guidance. Since the learners review the "lectured" class material independently, the SME can use this time to answer questions, increase curiosity, and engage learners where they need help. This time can also be used for inquiry-based learning, which is the exploration of topics through questions and research. Additionally, with sufficient planning, flipped classrooms can also be used to place a more considerable emphasis on real case studies, which has the potential to improve business skills and peer engagement (Büchler et al., 2021). The reason behind this is simple: relevance. The application of knowledge connects learners to theory (which is self-studied in the case of flipped classrooms) and encourages deeper learning to take place (while being mentored by

the facilitator). Adult learning theories show that if content is relevant, it is more likely to be engaging to and retained by the students.

2.5 Project-based assessment (PjBA) and problem-based assessment (PBA)

Both inquiry and case-based learning can lead to implementing PjBA and PBA. PBA is different from PjBA in that PBA aims to solve a complex problem that exists rather than create an output for a specific purpose. The decolonisation of assessment comes through creating projects that allow for individual interpretation and application of LINKS – especially where the assessments can strengthen and increase local research in business topics. Furthermore, using paragogical (peer learning) and connectivist (using technology to create learning opportunities outside of the institute via social networks, search engines, or generative artificial intelligence) principles, these types of assessment create pools of knowledge among peers which further reinforces understanding problems from a South African perspective – with the potential of finding solutions.

2.6 Simulations

The goal of any higher education learning journey should be to ensure work readiness in that field. For many students, the scholastic environment is separated from the work environment. Health science often handles this well by placing students in hospital settings to help students acclimate and encourage authentic learning. If placement is not possible, many companies, such as NurseSim (ETRAIN Interactive, n.d.), provide high-quality simulations that can be delivered virtually. However, this is not the case for all fields and subject areas. Business education is one of those areas that still relies heavily on traditional practices in South Africa. However, business is at an advantage over health sciences since it does not rely on skeuomorphic simulations to be relevant.

The benefit of using simulations is that they can be used to create authentic learning experiences that allow students to apply their knowledge and skills in a safe and controlled environment. Using simulations in business education to reduce the fear of failure can help facilitate experimentation, encourage peer discussion, demonstrate feedback as consequences, and promote self-reflection (Govender et al., 2023). Simulations can be used as an assessment tool, or they can be used in conjunction with PjBAs and PBAs (Chow, 2021) to engage students in real-world problem-solving and to assess their ability to think critically and creatively. Simulation-based assessments will become increasingly important in the years to come. As the world becomes more complex and interconnected, it will be essential for students to have the skills to think critically, solve problems, and collaborate effectively.

2.7 Community Engagement

Another element that could drastically improve the quality of business education, especially at the postgraduate level, is implementing more community engagement activities. For example, South Africa Encouraging Diversity and Inclusion in South African Higher Education: Suggestions for Decolonizing Assessment in Business Education. Govender, T. *Future X*, 2(1), 1-10.

has many small businesses that could use help. Working together with the Small Business Development departments of the South African government (South African Government, n.d.) could lead to more opportunities for PBA and PjBA, as well as building resumes, business connections, and work portfolios. Building these partnerships with local communities also adds to and ensures assessments align with cultural norms and learner aspirations, and increases LINKS inclusivity in competency-based assessments.

2.8 Main considerations

The overall considerations when decolonising assessment in South Africa include:

- Reframing the purpose of assessment, especially high-risk summative assessment, to focus on learning, exchanging knowledge, and growth rather than on grading and ranking students. An education that creates competent, work-ready students.
- Using a variety of assessment methods that reflect the different ways that students learn and demonstrate their local and Indigenous knowledge and skills instead of prescriptive assessments that rely on rote learning or choice limitations.
- Implementing more authentic and engaging assessments than the traditional paper-and-pencil tests. They allow students to apply their knowledge in real-world contexts and provide opportunities to collaborate and problem-solve.
- Involving students in the assessment design process so that they have a voice in how they are evaluated – to remove bias and create a more inclusive education system. Adult students have the ability to articulate the weaknesses in their learning journey. Their input will lead to a higher quality and more decolonised assessment framework.
- HEIs need to include ISDs in strategic planning for course delivery as experts in learning and teaching. Additionally, HEIs should work with ISDs to create a way to empower staff and learners to properly use the LMS and other instructional technology to bridge the digital divide created by colonisation.

3. Synergies with UN Goals

Simulation-based assessments, PjBA, and PBA can align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)(United Nations, 2015):

- SDG 4: Quality Education. Assessments could help students develop the skills essential for success in education. These skills include critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and creativity. Using more technology will also help bridge the digital divide in South Africa. By decolonising assessments, students are also more likely to experience fair evaluation no

matter their backgrounds, as they do not rely on prior knowledge or test-taking skills. (target 4.4 and 4.7)

- **SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth.** The assessment approaches should be structured to develop the skills they need in the workforce. Higher work readiness means more opportunities to succeed and create wealth in the economy. (target 8.3)

In addition to developing these competencies, simulation-based and project-based assessments can help students become more socially conscious and culturally aware. Learners are forced to consider the needs of others and to think about how their actions can impact the world around them. Soft skills like empathy can also be developed in this manner - adding to the holistic nature of such assessments, which creates teachable moments out of assessment. This stems from having the opportunity to learn about different cultures and perspectives.

In addition to these specific SDGs, these assessments can contribute to the overall goal of sustainable development. The contexts provided in assessments can help students understand the challenges facing the world today and develop the skills they need to be part of the solution. For example, a simulation-based assessment could be used to teach students about the effects of climate change on the agricultural industry (an essential part of the South African economy). Students could be given the opportunity to manage a plantation that is facing the challenges of climate change. They would need to make decisions about how to allocate resources, mitigate the effects of climate change, and adapt to the changing climate (PBA). This scenario could be part of a larger PjBA where learners manage a city and its resources. Situating learning in this way could help students understand the complex challenges that business managers face, creating a space for pseudo job experience – while experiencing the consequences and being mentored through individualised feedback.

4. Conclusion

Decolonisation of summative assessment in South African education is a vital step toward rectifying historical injustices and nurturing an educational environment that celebrates diversity, empowers learners, and paves the way for a socially just and harmonious society. By prioritising culturally relevant and inclusive assessment practices, South Africa can embark on a transformative journey toward a more equitable future. The approaches suggested in this paper are PjBA, PBA, and simulations, along with other considerations when strategising the decolonisation of assessments in business education. Some notable points that will help propel this transformation are understanding the role of ISDs, listening to what the learners want, empowering HEIs and their learners to utilise the LMS at a higher level, and creating assessments that encourage the use of LINKS.

5. Further research

This paper goes through assessment approaches, but providing professional development for educators on decolonising assessment practices is equally important. Traditional educational approaches and long-standing methods may have caused a gap in understanding the purpose of assessment. Is the issue that memorisation is still seen as a valid outcome over practical skills? Or are there other, more challenging problems to address, such as political elements, auditing concerns, or infrastructural weaknesses? Further research should also be done on understanding the role of instructional designers in South Africa as a catalyst for change. This research could include understanding the acceptance rate of instructional design interventions and consultation with regard to curriculum developers and subject matter experts in South Africa.

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