

## Integrating Empathy into Classroom Assessment Design

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### ABSTRACT

Traditional assessment design focuses on outcomes and often disregards how students perceive their abilities, process emotions, or self-express. This indifference can undermine assessment outcomes and evaluation reliability (Hattie, 2023; Nilson, 2023; Reibel 2022). This paper introduces *empathetic assessment design* (EAD), a framework that reframes assessment as an event to simultaneously understand the student while evaluating their abilities to provide more precise grading and improved support. EAD integrates cognitive (self-evaluation), emotional (appraisal of emotional reactions and mindsets), and relational (self-expression) dimensions, enriching assessments with experiential insights. The information resulting from the EAD design provides context for outcomes and helps teachers assess the adequacy of student thinking, affective reactions, and needs. Despite concerns about workload and rigor, EAD builds on established theories—Bandura’s *social cognitive theory* (1997), Joe Feldman’s *Grading for Equity* (2018), and *funds of knowledge* and *culturally responsive pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021; Moll, 2015, 2019)—to create more insightful assessments. EAD complements equitable grading practices, gathering students’ real-time experiential information (Blum, 2020; Colby, 2019; Clark & Talbert, 2023; Feldman, 2018). While experts (Hattie, 2023, 2018; Schimmer, 2016; Wiliam, 2011) advocate for self-assessment and reflection, they often position these outside the assessment itself. But EAD embeds them within assessments, capturing in-the-moment insights to make evaluation more meaningful and illuminating.

**Keywords:** empathetic assessment, equity in education, agency, student agency, self-efficacy, alternative grading, grading for equity, relational assessment

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Traditional assessments prioritize knowledge evaluation, often treating academic outcomes as separate from cognitive and affective development (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Guskey, 2014, 2022; Hasinoff et al., 2024; O’Connor, 2017). However, research shows that outcomes-focused assessments limit teachers’ understanding of student learning (Adie et al., 2018; Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2018; Guskey, 2014, 2022; Reibel, 2022; Schimmer, 2016).

Stommel (2023) calls for overdue assessment reform: “Most important to the work of ungrading is that we start by asking hard questions of our traditional approaches to assessment” (p.16). The increasing demand for equitable assessment necessitates a shift toward prioritizing the whole student—abilities, agency, identity, and self-regulation (Feldman, 2018; Nilson, 2023; Reibel, 2022, 2024; Stommel, 2023).

### A Shift Toward Empathy

Educators often overlook empathy in assessment design (Erkens et al., 2017). Without it, assessments prioritize results over understanding students—potentially leading to misconceptions and outcome assumptions (Chappius & Stiggins 2014; Reibel, 2022, 2025).

*Empathetic assessment design* (EAD) addresses this absence, integrating cognitive (adequacy of thinking), emotional (affective reactions), and relational (self-expression) dimensions directly into assessments. Rather than being peripheral, EAD incorporates self-evaluation, self-appraisal, and self-expression as elements *in* assessments. For example, prompts like, “How do you think you did on that last section?” or “Was that last question easy or hard?” capture real-time experiential

information, in-the-moment thinking, mindsets and emotions, and self-perspectives (Doménech-Betoret et al., 2017; Heath & Heath, 2017; Kahneman & Tversky, 1996), providing context for outcomes. In other words, EAD prevents misleading assumptions about students’ abilities (Blum, 2020; Clark & Talbert, 2023).

### **Building on Existing Models**

EAD builds on the work of Stommel (2023), Chappuis & Stiggins (2014), Wiliam (2011), and Hattie (2023) to improve assessment design and function. Table 1 illustrates how EAD builds on relevant grading and assessment models.

**Table 1**  
*How EAD Expands on Existing Alternative Assessment Models*

Model	Primary Goal	Key Practices	EAD Elaboration
Ungrading (Blum, 2020)	Removing grades to promote intrinsic motivation.	Portfolio model, narrative feedback, no points/letters. Utilizes self-reflection during the learning process.	Includes self-reflection during assessments to gather experiential information to inform grading.
Equitable Grading (Feldman, 2018)	Ensuring grading is fair and not based on privilege and grades reflect actual student learning, not other factors like behavior.	No zeros, uses reassessment, only grades summative exams to minimize biases.	Adds segments where students record their emotional reactions to the assessment to provide context for outcomes and mitigate bias in grading.
Mastery Learning (Guskey, 2022)	Students must demonstrate proficiency in skills and standards.	Standards-based grading, reassessment cycles, and scoring on proficiency scales.	Includes empathetic elements during assessments to study if other factors may impact proficiency development.
Assessment for Learning Chappuis & Stiggins (2014) and Wiliam (2011)	Advocates for student reflection and self-evaluation throughout the formative assessment process.	Formative assessments are a learning tool; students use a rubric to reflect on learning.	Self-reflections are included in the assessment, which asks students to rate their work and talk about their proficiency in real time to get a more realistic view of student self-perceptions (Kahneman, 2011, 2013).

EAD builds on these models’ principles to enhance assessment of student ability, develop more reliable interventions, and increase student self-awareness (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; Reibel, 2022, 2025).

### **EAD FRAMEWORK**

There are several dimensions and elements to empathetic assessment design. The three EAD dimensions are:

1. *Cognitive Dimension*: Segments where students assess their abilities and review the adequacy of their thinking, fostering self-awareness and metacognition.
2. *Affective Dimension*: Segments where students record emotional reactions, such as confidence and mindset.

3. *Relational Dimension*: Segments where students demonstrate their knowledge freely while sharing about themselves.

Teachers incorporate these EAD dimensions into assessment by including specific design elements that gather students’ experiential information to provide context for assessment results:

- Self-Evaluation (Cognitive): Students assess their levels of understanding and ability, developing the capability to perceive their competence realistically.
- Self-Appraisal (Affective): Students record their emotional reactions, helping teachers see their confidence levels and self-efficacy.
- Self-Expression (Relational): Students demonstrate their knowledge freely or express themselves.

Table 2 presents these EAD dimensions and elements with a sample prompt that describes each element’s essence.

**Table 2**

*Integrating Empathy into Assessment*

Empathetic Assessment Design		
Dimension	Element	Sample Prompt
Cognitive	Self-Evaluation	“How well do I know or can do it?”
Affective	Self-Appraisal	“How do I feel about what I know and can do?”
Relational	Self-Expression	“How else can I show I know or can do it?”

In her book *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, Susan Blum (2020) provides a student’s assessment experience with an EAD design.

So, going into the first test, I thought it was helpful to start by rating my confidence level in the question while I came up with the answer. This allowed me to go back over my test and quickly identify questions I knew I needed to think more carefully about and even use other questions I was sure about to help with questions I wasn’t sure about (p. 157).

Teachers can create this same experience by using EAD. Table 3 summarizes the EAD framework.

**Table 3**

*Summary of the EAD Framework*

Explicit Knowledge	Experiential Information			
	Cognitive Element:	Affective Element:	Relational Element:	
	Self-Evaluation	Self-Appraisal	Self-Expression	
Segments that verify rooted content knowledge and skill proficiency.	Segments that ask students to build perspective about the level of their skill proficiency and content knowledge.	Segments that ask students to investigate self-reactions during the assessment experience (thinking, mindsets, reactions, self-talk).	Segments that ask students to share lived experiences (non-academic related).	Segments that ask students to share openly about the assessed content or topic.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

EAD is grounded in theories that address traditional assessment design, emphasizing agency, efficacy, equity, and socio-emotional development. The following theoretical frameworks inform EAD.

**Empathy**

Empathy enhances engagement, motivation, and performance by creating attunement (Cuff et al., 2016; Hall & Schwartz, 2019; Maté & Maté). When students feel understood, they engage more in the classroom (Noddings, 2019). Empathetic teaching cultivates self-efficacy, motivation, and academic success (Godwin & Silk, 2022; Martin & Collie, 2019; Wolcott, 2019). However, traditional assessment design often neglects empathy (Erkens et al., 2017; Reibel, 2022). Clark and Talbert (2023) argue in *Grading for Growth* that “only in school . . . it seems, are individuals evaluated by

‘traditional’ assessments, even though these are rarely seen in the real world for which we supposedly prepare students” (pp. 26-27). Research shows empathy elements on assessments can reduce test anxiety, improve performance, and offer a more nuanced view of ability (Doménech-Betoret et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2019). EAD transforms assessment into a tool for learning and growth (Bailey & Jakicic, 2023; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Chappuis & Stiggins, 2014).

### **Equitable Grading Principles**

EAD also supports equitable grading (Feldman, 2018; Blum, 2020; Vatterott, 2015; Wormeli, 2023), emphasizing fairness and that grading reform begins with rethinking assessment. Feldman (2018) underscores this point when he says, “We see the synergy between equitable grading and [a] new paradigm of assessment.” (2018, p.152). EAD attempts to create this new paradigm by designing assessments for more than just academic outcomes—specifically by collecting experiential information to help teachers grade more equitably. (Berns & East, 2020; Feldman, 2018; Reibel, 2022, 2024, 2025).

### **Bias-resistance**

Traditional assessments are susceptible to biases that can distort outcome evaluation (Brown & Robbins, 2023; Feldman, 2018; Grainger & Weir, 2016). Focusing solely on academic results overlooks other factors that influence performance, distorting an evaluation of students’ abilities and reducing fairness (Brown & Robbins, 2023). Bandura (1997) highlights this issue: “Performance alone does not provide sufficient information to judge one’s level of capability because many factors that have little to do with ability can affect performance.” (p. 81). Integrating empathy into assessments allows students to reflect on their abilities and emotions during the assessment. The resulting experiential data helps teachers distinguish knowledge gaps from confidence issues, frustrations, or performance anxiety.

### **Psychological Insights**

The peak-end rule (Heath & Heath, 2017; Kahneman et al., 1993) suggests that people recall experiences based on their most intense cognitive or emotional moment, often at the end (Kahneman, 2000; Kahneman & Tversky, 1996). To address this, EAD embeds reflective prompts within assessments, helping teachers differentiate between knowledge gaps and socio-emotional factors that influence performance. Pre- and post-assessment reflections are too far removed to provide reliable insights about assessment outcomes.

Additionally, expectancy-value theory (Loh, 2019; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012) highlight that motivation stems from perceived competence and personal values. Traditional assessments, which focus on outcomes, miss these experiential insights and are limited in their ability to fully capture what students think about their performance and how they feel during the assessment.

### **Agency and Self-Efficacy**

Agency, self-perceptions, and self-efficacy are factors in achievement (Bandura, 2023; Matusov et al., 2016; Waddington, 2023). Traditional assessments focus only on what students know, reducing assessment to an evaluation rather than a learning opportunity (Chappuis et al., 2004). EAD transforms assessment into learning moments by prompting students to assess their abilities and record their affective reactions in real-time (Bandura et al., 1997; Martin et al., 2019; Nasir & Iqbal, 2019; Stenalt & Lasseen, 2022).

### **Constructivist and Sociocultural Theories**

Constructivist theories (Vygotsky, 1978) prioritize active meaning-making over passive knowledge reception (Kushnir et al., 2012), aligning with the EAD approach. These theories emphasize assessing other components of meaning-making, such as thought processes, mental states, emotional reactions, and self-expression. EAD embeds its empathetic elements to capture these components and turn assessments into opportunities to actively create knowledge, not just evaluate it.

### **Alternative Grading Models**

Alternative grading models incorporate various assessment practices, including formative assessment, student self-assessment, and portfolios, to evaluate learning (Clark & Talbert, 2023; Nilson, 2014, 2023; Stommel, 2023; Townsley,

2022). Stranford (2024) found that graduate courses that eliminated numeric grades in favor of reflective self-assessments saw students report enhanced creativity and reduced stress. Research by Hasinoff et al. (2024) found improved student relationships and engagement in “ungraded” courses. These models highlight the need for EAD.

### **Relational and Emotional Engagement**

Nel Noddings’ (1995, 2019) pedagogy of care highlights empathy’s role in developing meaningful teacher-student relationships that enhance learning. Research shows that relationships improve motivation, performance, and well-being (Hickey & Riddle, 2024; Martin & Collie, 2019; Noddings, 1995, 2012, 2019). EAD strengthens these relationships by encouraging students to reflect on confidence, emotions, and thinking during the assessment. This helps teachers better attune to students (Reibel, 2022); greater attunement leads to increased trust, respect, and a sense of belonging (Maté & Maté, 2022).

Additionally, as students solve assessment problems, they are “emotionally evaluating whether each cognitive step is likely to bring [them] closer to a useful solution or whether it seems to be leading [them] astray” (Immordino-Yang, 2016, p. 86). EAD creates attention to this emotional processing and helps capture this information to improve teaching and supporting students.

### **Funds of Knowledge**

Culturally responsive pedagogies (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021) and funds of knowledge (FoK) (Moll, 2019) value students’ cultural backgrounds and experiences in learning. Traditional assessments often dismiss this as irrelevant, leaving results without context (Rodriguez, 2013). Cultural knowledge can influence outcomes (Butler & Miretzky, 2020; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014), and recognizing lived experiences affirms student identity and respect (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Moll, 2015, 2019).

EAD embeds self-evaluation, self-appraisal, and self-expression into assessments, allowing students to contextualize performances with their funds of knowledge, leading to more equitable evaluations (McIntyre et al., 2001; Muhammad, 2020; Ramos & Kiyama, 2021). Simple prompts like “Before you turn in your assessment, I would love to hear about your day” demonstrate that students’ lives matter as much as what they know (Cohen, 2022).

## **RELEVANT RESEARCH STUDIES**

Research on similar approaches to EAD shows that when students reflect on performance and emotions in real time, they adjust and improve (Bandura, 2023; Karaman, 2021; Martin et al., 2019). The following case studies illustrate the impact of EAD principles.

### **The Impact of Self-Assessment on Academic Performance: A Meta-Analysis Study**

A meta-analysis by Karaman (2021) found that self-assessment enhances academic outcomes, resilience, and knowledge retention. The analysis of over 40 effect sizes and 7,500 participants across education levels found a small but positive impact of self-assessment on academic performance, with self-assessment having a greater effect when conducted without external feedback (e.g., teacher input). EAD includes structured self-evaluation prompts directly into the assessments, making self-assessment an integral part of learning rather than an afterthought.

### **“I Just Kind of Guessed”: Student Constructions of Knowledge in AP Microeconomics**

Gurleat et al. (2023) studied the alignment between instruction, assessment, and learning in an AP Microeconomics course. Their qualitative case study analyzed how an inquiry-based curriculum interacted with an AP-modeled exam, revealing that classroom performance did not translate to assessment results. The study calls for improved assessments that capture transferable competence—classroom learning translates to exam performance. EAD addresses this by gathering real-time experiential information during assessments, helping teachers identify any deficient ability carried over from instruction.

## What Happens When Students Reflect on Their Self-Efficacy During a Test? Exploring Test Experience and Test Outcome in Science

Martin et al. (2019) investigated how real-time self-efficacy influences performance and achievement. 160 Australian high school science students were asked to rate their self-efficacy mid-assessment to see if mid-assessment reflection correlated with performance. Their findings were:

- Early success boosted mid-test self-efficacy (skill development dimension).
- Higher mid-test efficacy improved later performance (self-enhancement dimensions).
- A mutual reinforcement of confidence and achievement (self-sustaining dimension).

These findings reinforce EAD's emphasis on incorporating brief prompts to gauge self-perceptions, affect, and reflect on past performances, reinforcing confidence and metacognitive engagement to improve outcomes.

### EXAMPLES OF EMPATHETIC ASSESSMENT DESIGN

EAD integrates empathetic self-evaluation, reflection, and personal expression segments alongside explicit knowledge segments into assessments. The following examples show how to embed them.

#### Explicit Knowledge

EAD seeks to determine whether proficient performance is as it appears. For instance, explicit knowledge questions in EAD include explicit or procedural prompts but are designed to uncover whether it is actual proficiency or just an illusion (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

#### *Example Expanded Explicit Knowledge Question*

***Original Question***

What is the definition of [x]?

- A. [Answer 1]
- B. [Answer 2]
- C. [Answer 3]
- D. [Answer 4]

***Expanded Explicit Knowledge Question***

Based on your chosen answer, explain why you did not choose the other answers.

#### Experiential Information

In addition to enhancing explicit knowledge questions, EAD embeds the following empathetic elements to capture what EAD calls experiential information.

#### *Self-Evaluation*

Students rate their proficiency during assessments to gain awareness of ability levels, which helps them align their self-perception with actual competence (Bandura, 2023; Karaman, 2021; Reibel, 2022, 2024). An example is shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

***Example Self-Evaluation Question***

<b><i>Original Question</i></b> How did the printing press change the world? A. People could do crosswords together for the first time. B. More information reached more people more efficiently. C. The world started to have fewer trees. D. Free speech began.			
<b><i>Self-Evaluation Addition</i></b> Rate your level of [proficiency] on the standard associated with [this question(s)].			
Exceeds	Meets	Approaching	Developing

Seeing a student’s perception of their abilities can help teachers provide more reliable evaluations, feedback, and support (Hattie, 2023; Reibel, 2022, 2025).

***Self-Appraisal***

Students record their mindsets and emotional reactions during assessments, helping teachers understand whether factors other than knowledge levels affect performance (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

***Example Self-Appraisal Addition***

<b><i>Original Question</i></b> What are the parts of an atom? A. Neutrons, protons, and electrons B. Protons, negatrons, and electrons C. Neutrons, protons, and megatrons D. Glowtrons, neutrons, and electrons			
<b><i>Self-Appraisal Addition</i></b> Were you sure or unsure, or did you guess your answer to the previous question?			

Without self-appraisal questions, the teacher must assume whether or not a student knows the material, but what if students answered correctly and said they guessed?

***Self-Expression***

Self-expression prompts encourage students to share their knowledge and themselves freely. Through these prompts, students might reveal unique perspectives about their learning beyond the confines of formatted questions (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

***Example Self-Expression (Knowledge) Addition***

***Original Question***

What is the central topic of [text]?

- A. Deforestation
- B. Greed
- C. Manufacturing
- D. Climate change

***Self-Expression (Knowledge) Addition***

What was your second choice and why?

Allowing students to share their knowledge freely might reveal that they know the material.

Another function of self-expression is that students share about themselves, their interests, and their lives. These prompts, rooted in funds of knowledge, can make students feel seen and acknowledged (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

***Example Self-Expression (Personal) Addition***

***Original Question***

How many sides does a hexagon have?

- A. 9
- B. 7
- C. 6
- D. 10

***Self-Expression (Personal) Addition***

Take a pause. I would like to know how your week is going. Write a few words.

EAD encourages self-expression, signaling to the student that assessment is not just the teacher measuring their knowledge, but also an opportunity to get to know them.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS**

EAD offers several potential benefits worth discussing. They are explained further below.

**Increasing Engagement and Motivation**

Empathetic prompts make assessments feel like conversations by capturing experiential information (Doménech-Betoret et al., 2017). This “dialogue” fosters attunement, which has been shown to increase engagement and shift motivation from extrinsic to intrinsic (Bandura, 1997, 2023; Deci & Ryan, 2012). Motivation and performance improve when students feel heard and acknowledged (Bandura, 1997; Maté & Maté, 2022).

**Increasing Awareness of Competence**

The experiential information captured by EAD prompts is a key factor in motivation and achievement (Bandura, 1997, 2023). This information uncovers the adequacy of students’ thinking and, if validated by the teacher, can strengthen belief in their abilities (Martin et al., 2019; Nasir & Iqbal, 2019). Through empathetic prompts, EAD provides regular opportunities for students to reflect on their understanding, confidence, and competence—and this consistent reflection can build agency and self-efficacy (Karaman, 2021).

## **Promoting Equity**

EAD elements reduce grading inequities by providing teachers with deeper context on student performance—capturing thoughts, reflections, and self-expression (Brookhart, 2020; Hattie, 2008, 2023; Hibbs, 2023; Erkins et al., 2017; O'Connor, 2017; Reibel, 2022, 2025).

Empathetic prompts make the assessments more accessible by being more relational (Reibel, 2022). For example, asking, *Before you turn in the assessment, is there anything you want me to know that might affect my evaluation?* allows students to share their realities, acknowledging that other circumstances can impact performance. This insight leads to fairer and more informed evaluations (Kahneman et al., 2021; Kang & Furtak, 2021).

## **Strengthening Teacher-Student Relationships**

Trust-based teacher-student relationships enhance learning (Danielson, 2022; Hickey & Riddle, 2024; Martin & Collie, 2019; Reibel, 2022). EAD builds trust by creating a space for expression and reflection on assessments (Martin & Collie, 2019; Reibel, 2022, 2024). Teachers can respond to students more authentically by embedding these self-expression moments into assessments, thereby improving classroom relationships.

## **Improved Student Supports**

EAD gives educators insights into student learning, enabling more targeted, practical support. Without EAD's experiential information—self-evaluations, emotional reactions, mindsets, and self-concept (Bandura, 2023)—teachers may make assumptions about student deficits and provide ineffective interventions (Reibel et al., 2024, 2025; Schinske & Tanner, 2014).

## **ADDRESSING COMMON CONCERNS**

Traditional assessment—knowledge-focused design, percentage-based scoring, and cumulative exams—is deeply ingrained in school culture, teacher beliefs, and policy. Grading is one of education's most contentious issues, and it often inhibits assessment reform. Educators often consider changes to assessment as threats to tradition, teaching identity, and accountability (Schimmer, 2016). EAD enhances traditional assessment models, but its implementation is challenging. The following concerns may impact EAD's adoption.

### **Time**

Educators may fear that EAD increases grading time. Teachers can implement EAD with structured, efficient prompts to ease this concern. Instead of open-ended responses, teachers can use concise prompts. For example, they may provide a four-level self-evaluation scale for students to quickly assess their abilities or direct students to answer the self-expression prompts in a single sentence. This guidance can make assessments more insightful without increasing workload.

### **Maintaining Rigor**

Some fear empathetic prompts weaken rigor, shifting focus from knowledge to socio-emotional development. However, EAD enhances evaluation without lowering performance standards. It maintains academic rigor while acknowledging the influence of self-concept, mindset, and emotions on performance. EAD balances rigorous assessment with a deeper understanding of students by integrating empathetic prompts alongside academic questions,

Scholars like Pondiscio (2019) and Lemov (2021) argue that helping students achieve high academic outcomes is an act of empathy. However, they do agree that empathetic, experiential information is needed to improve academic outcomes.

### **Usefulness of Experiential Information**

Skeptics may question whether empathy dimensions provide meaningful information—seeing EAD as unnecessary, less rigorous, or overly subjective. However, teachers do not use the information from EAD prompts to determine scores; they use it to provide context to the score and determine support. Without the context of the student's experiences during an assessment, assumptions about abilities and misguided support are more likely.

**IMPLEMENTATION**

Addressing these concerns helps educators understand how EAD can enhance assessment design and evaluation rather than detract from them. The following actions aim to alleviate these concerns and support the implementation of EAD.

**Enhancing Traditional and Standards-based Grading Models**

Adopting EAD means understanding how EAD enhances grading models and how an empathetic assessment design can work within existing grading structures. Table 4 illustrates how EAD enhances standards-based and traditional grading models.

**Table 4**

*Comparison of Traditional Grading, Standards-Based Grading (SBG), and EAD principles*

Framework	Traditional Grading	Standards-Based Grading (SBG)	Empathetic Assessment Design (EAD)
Assessment Purpose	Measures outcomes through points/percentages.	Measures proficiency on learning standards.	Measures knowledge and proficiency while observing student self-evaluation, self-appraisal, and self-regulation capacities.
Focus of Evaluation	Knowledge acquisition and application	Proficiency in learning standards	Both knowledge proficiency and monitoring a student’s cognitive, affective, and relational dimensions.
Bias Resistance	Focuses only on performance outcomes. No other factors that affect learning are investigated.	Focuses only on performance standards. No other factors that affect learning are investigated.	Focuses on performance outcomes but seeks a more nuanced understanding by integrating student self-evaluation and self-appraisal prompts to help students better understand their learning.
Student Agency	No student voice in assessment; grades are determined solely by the teacher.	No student voice in assessment; grades are determined solely by the teacher.	Students actively contribute to their assessment experience via empathetic dimensions such as self-evaluation and self-expression.
Emotional & Relational Engagement	Often neglected. Assessment is a detached process of knowledge verification.	Acknowledges they are important for growth, but remains focused on knowledge verification.	Includes prompts that collect affective data (confidence, anxiety, emotional reactions) to provide more context for performance outcomes.

**Professional Development**

Workshops on empathy and assessment literacy help teachers understand EAD’s purpose. Professional development can highlight successful EAD implementations, demonstrating how empathetic elements seamlessly integrate into teachers’ current assessments. Practical, incremental strategies allow educators to test EAD on a small scale, revealing its impact on student learning. Sample assessments with embedded EAD elements provide teachers with insight to refine their assessments collaboratively. Aligning EAD with a school’s assessment policies emphasizing equity, transparency, and student agency can strengthen its adoption.

## Piloting

Schools can identify early adopters to pilot EAD in specific assessments. This begins with embedding EAD prompts in a single formative assessment or unit test. Teachers can include short reflections after challenging segments, or summative assessments can feature prompts like, “What did you learn about yourself on this assessment?” or “How well do you know the material now that you have finished?” Collecting information from these questions can help teachers examine the function and value of EAD before adopting it more widely.

## Effectiveness Data

Schools can use data to showcase EAD’s effects on learning, grading, and intervention. Assessing its effectiveness requires quantitative (performance outcomes) and qualitative (experiential information) measures. Reviewing student assessment scores and responses to EAD prompts helps evaluate the impact of EAD. Teacher testimonials from pilot cadres can provide insight and address concerns. Regular analysis of student outcomes, teacher perceptions, and experiential information offers ongoing evidence of EAD’s effectiveness.

## Suggestions for Future Research

A challenge in adopting EAD is the lack of long-term research on outcomes. While case studies show that empathy-type practices around assessment boost engagement and self-efficacy, broader studies are needed to examine their direct impact when embedded in assessments. Future research should explore how self-evaluation, self-appraisal, and self-expression influence academic performance and motivation. Studies should examine how EAD affects instruction, intervention strategies, grading practices, and administrative barriers. Additionally, research should assess the impact of EAD on grading workload. Further investigations should test EAD across subjects, grade levels, and school systems, including its integration into technology-driven assessments.

## CONCLUSION

Empathetic assessment design (EAD) improves traditional assessment design by integrating empathetic elements with academic evaluation. This design evaluates academic achievement while capturing other factors influencing performance, such as self-evaluation, self-concept, life situations, and affective reactions.

EAD aligns with assessment and grading models like ungrading (Blum, 2020), portfolio grading (O’Brien et al., 2016), competency-based grading (Colby, 2019), and mastery grading (Guskey, 2022). While these movements emphasize empathy-related practices, EAD blends cognitive, affective, and relational dimensions into assessments, providing real-time experiential information for more precise scoring, feedback, and intervention.

Despite its promise, EAD faces resistance due to limited research and entrenched assessment traditions—grading (and assessment) is a “third rail” in education, deeply tied to traditional notions (Feldman, 2018). This tradition makes widespread EAD adoption difficult. Implementation requires communicating its potential benefits to stakeholders, gradual integration, training, and collecting evidence of its impact. By integrating empathy into assessment design to gather experiential information, EAD offers a transformative approach to assessment—leading to more equitable grading, precise feedback, and improved interventions.

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