

# TRUSTWORTHY ASSESSMENT IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

**Assessment is an important part of education. It helps us discern where someone is on their journey of theological education (i.e., assessment for learning). Most important, perhaps, is the fact that it is a powerful tool for helping people move to deeper levels of learning (i.e., assessment as learning).**

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*Written by Greg Henson, CEO Kairos University; President of Sioux Falls Seminary*

# ASSESSMENT AS LEARNING

The work of assessment is intimately tied to learning. It is the topic of countless books, articles, conference workshops, and more. Having engaged in and even led some of those conversations over the years, I am constantly reminded how helpful it is to have deep and thoughtful conversations around the topic. My hope is that we can engage in some of those reflections on assessment. We will do so by taking a look at how we envision and practice the work of assessment in Kairos. Let's begin by taking a look at assessment as learning.

Perhaps you have heard people use terms such as diagnostic, formative, and summative to describe various types of assessment. A diagnostic assessment might be something that helps to identify where a learner is at a certain point in time while a formative assessment is meant to help the learner move in a particular direction or develop particular knowledge. Summative assessments may tend to happen toward the end of a course, outcome, or learning experience and they tend to look back over a period of time. While those are helpful words, I tend to appreciate the phrases "assessment for learning, assessment as learning, and assessment of learning." Many people have used these phrases. I often go back to this resource developed by the Ontario government because it provides a few helpful examples.

In particular, section four of the document pays close attention to assessment for learning and assessment as learning. The authors spend time making a case for the role of feedback in assessment and note, "Ongoing descriptive feedback linked specifically to the learning goals and success criteria is a powerful tool for improving student learning."

This feedback process is an important feature of assessment in the context of Kairos. We strive to take a [developmental](#) approach to learning. Getting a passing grade on an individual assignment is not the goal (for the student, mentor, or professor). Instead, assignments, activities, conversations, and learning artifacts serve as opportunities to provide feedback as the student discerns, develops, and demonstrates proficiency and [integrated knowing](#) within a learning outcome.

This is why assessment as learning is such an important lens for everyone in the Kairos community. The [resource](#) I mentioned above defines assessment as learning as:

The process of developing and supporting student metacognition. Students are actively engaged in this assessment process: that is, they monitor their own learning; use assessment feedback from teacher, self, and peers to determine next steps; and set individual learning goals. Assessment as learning requires students to have a clear understanding of the learning goals and the success criteria. Assessment as learning focuses on the role of the student as the critical connector between assessment and learning. (Adapted from Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Education, 2006, p. 41)."

In my opinion, the most salient point of that definition is the level of student involvement. We need to ensure that our practices of assessment include, involve, and enliven the students God has placed in our care. It is

through this kind of work that we steward followers of Jesus who flourish in their vocations. If we default to assessment of learning, that is assessment for the purpose of assigning a value or grade, we miss the opportunity to help people grow in their own ability to discern, develop, and demonstrate proficiency and integrated knowing. There is room for several types of assessment, and all are needed at some point in time. My encouragement for the Kairos community is that we spend a lot of time and energy on assessment as learning.

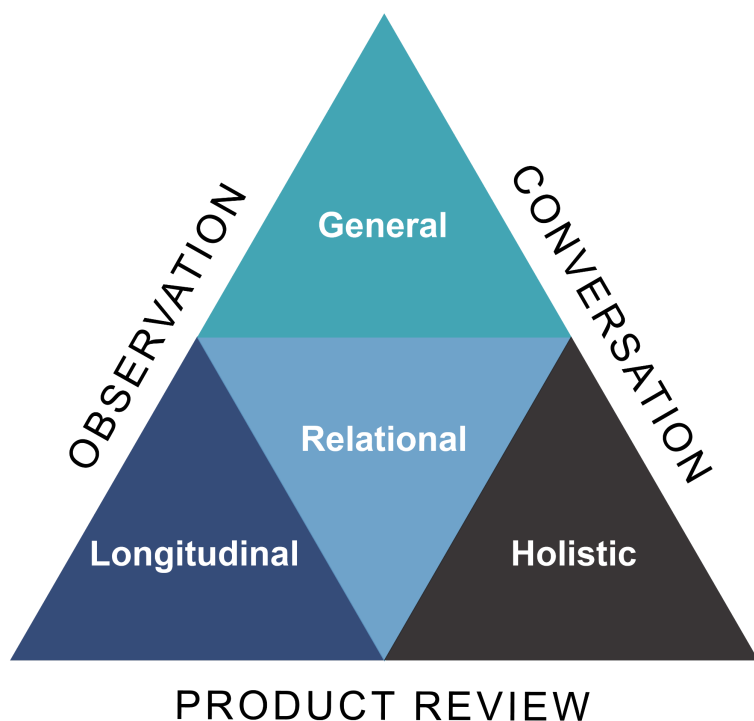
Next, we are going to continue learning from our friends in Ontario's Ministry of Education by talking about various assessment activities. We will also introduce an image we use to describe assessment within Kairos.

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## ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IN KAIROS

Previously, we discussed the topic of assessment as learning. Now, we begin describing the framework we use for assessment at Kairos University. The image below provides a visual for how we envision trustworthy assessment. As you can see, there are three practices, each of which exhibits four characteristics. Let's begin by addressing the three practices of trustworthy assessment.



We learned that the Ministry of Education of Ontario developed a resource in 2010 entitled *Growing Success* that provides helpful descriptions of the nature of assessment. The practices we identify in our framework are derived from their descriptions of assessment strategies like observation, conversation, and product. Our adaptations of them are most evident in the characteristics we outline and in the fact that we describe them as practices.

We focus on three practices because they form mentor teams, students, and one's experience of one's journey through Kairos. They are Observation, Conversation, and Product Review.

### Observation

As the authors of [Growing Success](#) write,

observation involves, “Watching, listening, and being attuned to students’ behaviour, emotional state, interests and abilities, patterns of development, and progress in learning.” We describe this as a practice because it is a particular way of interacting with those God places in our care. Through attentive observation, we are better able to walk with students on their journey of [Spirit-led excellence](#) and better positioned to ask good questions. In addition, [the educational philosophy of CBTE](#) is rooted in the fact that proficiency is something that can be observed. Through our observations, we are assessing the behaviors, attitudes, skills, dispositions, and cognitive abilities of students.

## **Conversation**

One way to dig deeper into those behaviors, attitudes, skills, dispositions, and cognitive abilities is through the practice of conversation. Through conversations, we can experience how students articulate what they are thinking and ask questions to foster deeper levels of engagement. While conversations with a mentor or a team of mentors are useful in assessment, it can equally be helpful to engineer conversations in which the student is talking with peers or small groups of people. In those situations, we might be observing the student as she is participating in the conversation. If that conversation is connected to a project or assignment (e.g., a Bible study she developed and is now leading), we may be engaging in the third practice as well.

## **Product Review**

In this practice, we are reviewing something the student has produced. It could be a paper, song, website, video, sermon, strategic plan, budget, reflection journal, blog post, software, Bible study, dance, coaching plan – the possibilities are almost endless. In this practice, we are providing feedback on whatever was produced by the student.

As noted above, it is possible to engage in all three practices simultaneously. For example, a student may develop a strategic plan (a product) and you, as the vocational mentor, observed the process by which she developed that plan because it happened in the midst of her day-to-day work (observations). Then, you facilitated a conversation with the student and the rest of the mentor team to hear how the student articulated and reflected on the process as a whole (conversation).

I find it helpful to name and be aware of these practices of assessment because they help us take a broader view of assessment as learning. They also give us ample opportunities to be a sojourner with the student as she walks through her time in Kairos. Next, we will take a look at the various characteristics of assessment which provide windows into how the practices can be lived out in the context of an educational journey.

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# CHARACTERISTICS OF ASSESSMENT

Assessment is an important part of education. Many of us are familiar with how assessment is used to determine when someone has completed a certain step in their learning journey (i.e., assessment of learning). It also helps us discern where someone is on their journey of theological education (i.e., assessment for learning). Most important, perhaps, is the fact that it is a powerful tool for helping people move to deeper levels of learning (i.e., assessment as learning).

We think that assessment as learning is extremely important in Kairos. It sets the stage for a robust journey toward [Spirit-led excellence](#). As we participate in this work, we engage in three practices: Observation, Conversation, and Product Review. Each of those is animated by a set of what we call characteristics of assessment. These characteristics provide windows into how the practices can be lived out in the context of an educational journey. The characteristics of assessment are: 1) longitudinal, 2) holistic, 3) general, and 4) relational. Let's take a look at each one.



## Longitudinal

Assessment produces the best and most reliable results when it happens over a period of time that aligns with 1) the vocational goals of the student, 2) the pace the student wishes to move, and 3) the credential being pursued by the student. In some cases, this may happen over several years and, in other cases, it may happen over several months. In all cases, it must be done in the context of a community that can observe one's learning and development over time. It is this point that requires the development, training, and empowerment of mentor teams. With a view into the life of a student from multiple angles, the mentor team can watch students make progress over time as they develop toward proficiency.

## Holistic

When assessment practices are holistic, they are integrative or comprehensive and invite students to integrate learning across domains (i.e., learning outcomes) and [dimensions of knowing](#) (i.e., content, character, and craft). This type of assessment invites students to demonstrate not only proficiency of content, character, and craft within a particular domain but also provides the ability to integrate each of those dimensions within an

outcome and across multiple domains. Lack of character can nullify one's proficiency of content or the quality of one's craft. Even students of exceptional character need to gain the necessary skills. It is hard to imagine any competence in craft could be achieved without the requisite grasp of content or practice of character. An effective assessment system must integrate all three.

## **General**

When coupled with longitudinal engagement, generalized assessment not only encourages deeper but also more integrated learning. Task-specific and analytical rubrics have their place, but they are not useful tools for assessing integrated outcomes. Generalized rubrics create space for a diverse learning community. Whereas task-specific and analytical rubrics impose one way of viewing a particular task or concept, generalized rubrics provide space for students and mentor teams to develop the personal, communal, and theological identity required of them in their context. Customized proficiency and contextualized discipleship are not possible without generalized rubrics that guide the assessment of integrated outcomes.

Alasdair MacIntyre's argument that traditions only grow as they face a crisis is instructive for us in how learning is always about solving problems that arise in the context of community. General assessment practices invite students to identify problems that arise in the context of their communities, to address those problems through a generative action-reflection process, and to assess learning related to that process in the context of a diverse community. Task-specific assessment, on the other hand, forces students to solve a problem that may not even exist in their context, to address that problem using language that meets a particular theology which may also be foreign, and often assumes that assessment of learning does not require a relationship with the student.

## **Relational**

The very nature of the triune God is relational. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that God works in and through relationships. We must do the same. Human beings are designed to be in relationship with God and others. It is in and through these relationships that one is formed into the likeness of Christ, made aware of who God is and what God wants to do through her or him. It is also through these relationships that we are invited to reflect God's wise stewardship into this world.

In Kairos, the primary relationship is the one students have with their mentor teams. Because mentors are in relationship with a student over a period of years, they develop a well-rounded view of the student and earn the privilege to provide feedback to the student as they develop competency within a given program's outcomes. The relational fabric that connects mentors and students strengthens positive feedback and opens the door to authentic and deep constructive feedback. If a faculty mentor first builds a relationship with a student, when the time comes to give feedback that might be difficult for a student to hear, the faculty mentor's voice will be heard through the filter of relational trust rather than through the filter of positional power. In short, mentors can speak the truth because they have earned trust through a relationship and not because they have been given power through a particular role.

Assessment practices that exhibit these characteristics is a lot to ask. The student and mentors, clearly, will need to adopt a submissive spirit, showing a willingness to be assessed to a degree that might not be possible or even appropriate without consent. We engage in ongoing and integrative assessment because we are always attentive to what we are being called into. Spirit-led excellence begins with humility – with knowing that God has something in store for students, mentors, faculty, and the entire community. Integrated assessment is a wonderful tool for helping us in that work.

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