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Assessment design through co-design: reimagining assessment design practices in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Assessment design in higher education is often approached with a focus on assessment tasks and the processes of designing them, with instructors making decisions in isolation. Drawing on assessment design, co-design and practice theory as a conceptual framing, we recast assessment design as a relational, situated practice and examine co-design as a way to come to practise assessment differently. In a business school, 102 stakeholders participated across three courses through four interconnected interventions: Connect:In workshops, weekly student reflections, academic capacity-building workshops and student testimonial videos. Using practitioner inquiry and the Theory of Practice Architectures, we analysed how sayings, doings and relatings shaped changes to assessment practices. Co-design produced more inclusive and relational assessment practices, strengthened instructor design literacies, surfaced students' lived experiences and agency, and supported shared ownership of design choices. This led to changes to assessment practice within the courses. Challenges centred on time, role clarity and negotiating divergent views, yet structured facilitation and distributed responsibilities enabled progress. The article offers three provocations that serve as implications for practice: (1) reposition assessment design as an ongoing educational practice; (2) embed relationality and distributed responsibility into assessment design and (3) institutionalise assessment design as a supported and shared professional practice.

KEYWORDS

Assessment design;
co-design; practice
theory;
students-as-partners

Introduction

Assessment design in higher education is often a solitary responsibility where individual decision-makers, primarily instructors, design assessments in isolation. This is despite assessment design being complex, context-dependent and often contested. Tensions exist between formative and summative assessment purposes, workload pressures and fairness concerns (Medland 2016) which can arise from institutional

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and cultural ‘decision architectures’ that shape and, at times, restrict educators’ capacity for meaningful change (Joughin, Dawson, and Boud 2017).

The emphasis on individual decision-making neglects the broader ecology in which assessments are conceived and enacted. Assessment design impacts not only students but also educators, policy makers, industry partners and increasingly third space professionals (Whitchurch 2015), that is, staff whose roles span academic and professional domains to support and shape teaching and learning, for example, educational developers, learning designers and educational technologists. Yet these groups are rarely part of the design process. Students, for instance, have valuable insights into how assessments shape their learning, yet their perspectives are often only sought once assessments have concluded, limiting opportunities for timely improvement and design refinement. Even when positioned as ‘partners’, their roles are usually confined to task-level engagement such as co-developing rubrics (King, Brundiers, and Fischer 2024) or peer-assessing (Smith et al. 2025). While students-as-partners approaches can improve transparency and engagement (Casey 2024), they unintentionally privilege one group’s perspective while neglecting contributions from other stakeholders (Kehler, Verwood, and Smith 2017).

Engaging educators, students and other stakeholders in shared decision-making around assessment design remains rare and challenging (Smith et al. 2025) as it requires institutional commitment, time and a willingness to redistribute authority. Redesigning decision architectures can support more reflective and participatory assessment choices (Joughin, Dawson, and Boud 2017). Co-design, where the ‘co-’ emphasises a collaborative ethos (Sanders and Stappers 2008), provides one way to achieve this. Co-design creates conditions for structured dialogue, negotiation and collective ownership of assessment practices. By involving students, educators, and other stakeholders, co-design reframes assessment design as a relational practice rather than a purely technical process (Gravett 2025; Smith et al. 2025).

Adopting a practice perspective further extends this shift whereby assessment design moves beyond simply the production of artefacts or procedures to a socially situated activity involving sayings, doings and relatings (Boud et al. 2018; Kemmis 2021). This perspective recognises that assessment design is performed within particular contexts of meaning and power, mediated by artefacts, tools and policy frameworks. It highlights that the way educators, students and other stakeholders interact is as critical as what they produce (Kemmis et al. 2014).

This paper explores how co-design can serve as an epistemological and ontological means of reimagining assessment design. Conceptualising assessment design as a practice allows movement beyond binary framings (e.g. individual versus collective or educator versus student), foregrounding the multiplicity of voices that influence assessment. The study draws on a project conducted in a business school, where 102 stakeholders (educators, students, educational developers, learning designers and industry partners) participated in assessment co-design across three courses (two large undergraduate and one postgraduate) throughout two semesters. Four interconnected assessment design interventions structured the project: Connect:In workshops that engaged past and current students, educators and stakeholders in assessment redesign; weekly student reflections capturing lived experiences of assessment; academic capacity-building workshops to enhance design

literacies and student testimonial videos that facilitated peer-to-peer learning across cohorts.

Through these interventions, the study examines changes in course assessment practices resulting from the co-design interventions. The analysis uses practitioner inquiry (Wall 2018), guided by the Theory of Practice Architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014), to explore how sayings, doings and relatings shape the participants' assessment practices. In doing so, the paper contributes to two key gaps. First, it provides empirical evidence of how co-design can be operationalised beyond discrete, task-level activities to influence pedagogical and institutional practices. Second, it presents assessment design as an ecology of practices – negotiated, relational and context-dependent. Findings demonstrate how co-design can foster more inclusive and dialogic forms of assessment practice and how practitioner inquiry can support educators in coming to practise assessment differently (Kemmis 2021; Zeivots et al. 2025a).

Assessment design

Assessment design is a multifaceted concept referring to both the processes of designing assessment tasks and the artefacts and workflows produced through those processes (Bearman et al. 2017, Bearman, Nieminen, and Ajjawi 2023). It encompasses the initial formulation, development and subsequent modifications of assessment tasks, as well as feedback mechanisms and grading strategies. Assessment design serves multiple purposes, including generating feedback and grades, supporting learning and fostering future capabilities (Boud and Soler 2016). While often linked to specific assessment tasks, assessment design operates within a sequence of learning activities that form part of broader institutional and social contexts (Bearman et al. 2016; Boud and Soler 2016; Huber et al. 2024). Bearman et al. (2016) demonstrated that assessment design decisions rarely follow a linear process but instead revolve around six recurring considerations: purpose, context, learner outcomes, tasks, feedback and interactions. Educators navigate multiple parameters of assessment quality such as equity, authenticity, integrity and student experience (Huber et al. 2024) as well as specific considerations, such as digital technology (Nieminen, Bearman, and Ajjawi 2023; Timmis et al. 2016), collaborative learning (Boud and Bearman 2024; Meijer et al. 2020), work-integrated learning (Ajjawi et al. 2020) and inclusive assessment (Ajjawi et al. 2023).

Traditionally, assessment design was regarded as an individual endeavour, however, it is increasingly recognised as relational and collective (Bearman et al. 2016; Gravett 2025). Boud et al. (2018) describe assessment design as a set of interconnected practices characterised by embodiment, context-dependence and relationality. More specifically, assessment 'consists not just of particular assessment events, but includes the ecology of which they are part. Its worth is to be judged not only in terms of suitable portrayal of achievements, but in terms of the effects that this has on the players involved – students, teachers, peers, consumers' (Boud et al. 2018, p. 1109). Within this framing, assessment design includes both the development of tasks and the interactions, artefacts and arrangements that enable them. It blurs the distinction

between ‘designing’ and ‘doing’ assessments, acknowledging that both are shaped by and shape design practices.

Understanding assessment design as practice highlights its relational and contextual nature. Designing assessments involves creating the conditions for meaningful implementation: developing materials, aligning resources, communicating expectations and coordinating stakeholders. Yet the literature offers limited understanding and empirical insight into how students and other stakeholders participate in these practices. Examining assessment design as practice opens a space for inquiry about how collaborative approaches may enhance assessment design inclusivity.

Co-design and assessment design

In response to increasing demands for more inclusive and authentic approaches to assessment design, co-design has gained traction as an approach for reimagining curriculum and assessment. Co-design involves multiple stakeholders, including students, educators, educational developers, learning designers and industry partners, working together to design or refine learning and assessment (Sanders and Stappers 2008; Zeivots et al. 2025a). Co-design treats curriculum work as relational and dialogic (Cook-Sather and Matthews 2021), recognising the pedagogical value of shared ownership, and as a way to integrate social, collaborative learning (Boud and Bearman 2024).

Co-design interventions can draw on students-as-partners literature, which generally focusses on task-level engagement (e.g. designing content, peer-assessing or co-creating rubrics) (Chan and Chen 2023; Smith et al. 2025). This literature finds that students often enact multiple partnership roles including co-designers, assessors and consultants, and their contributions can help improve understanding of academic standards and promote agency and critical thinking (Casey 2024; Chan and Chen 2023; Deeley and Bovill 2017). Effective partnerships depend on equitable collaboration and trust, and third space professionals (e.g. learning designers and educational developers) can bridge staff and student perspectives, mediate institutional requirements and ensure different voices are integrated into pedagogical design decisions (Dunbar-Morris 2022; Webster 2022; Whitchurch 2015). This bridging role is particularly valuable in mitigating power imbalances where students are simultaneously enrolled in a course and engaged as partners in assessment design.

Co-design approaches are credited with democratising assessment and enhancing pedagogical quality, student engagement, assessment authenticity and creating diverse perspectives and epistemologies (Mackelprang et al. 2025). Co-design helps stakeholders, particularly students, develop critical thinking and metacognitive awareness by seeing how their ideas inform assessment outcomes (Dollinger and D’Angelo 2020). Collaboration fosters students’ evaluative judgement, negotiation and teamwork skills – competencies valued in professional contexts (King, Brundiers, and Fischer 2024; Smith et al. 2025). Despite its promise, co-design is not straightforward. Sharing design authority disrupts established hierarchies and requires trust and facilitation. Educators may perceive challenges to expertise with a shift from a ‘power over’ to a ‘power to empower’ orientation. Students may feel uncertain about their role or contribution as stakeholders who jointly have agency and voice (Higgins

et al. 2019). Institutional constraints such as time, workload, policies and reward systems further complicate sustained collaboration (Dollinger and D'Angelo 2020). Co-design is inherently situated and shaped by disciplinary dynamics that emerge through a fluid network of human and non-human actors (Wardak, Wilson, and Zeivots 2024). Its success depends on how participants negotiate meaning, manage power differences and adapt processes in local settings.

While co-design is increasingly recognised in curriculum development, its systematic application to assessment design remains under-examined. This study contributes empirical evidence by exploring how co-design practices influence assessment design across different stakeholder groups. Practitioner inquiry complements co-design as a mode of structured sense-making that foregrounds insider perspectives and everyday design practice (Cochran-Smith and Donnell 2006). We argue that co-design is not a plug-and-play solution but a relational practice that requires facilitation and sensitivity to context. When well supported, it can make assessment design a collaborative, iterative learning process for stakeholders as they navigate and re-negotiate meaning and assessment practices 'coming to practice differently' (Zeivots et al. 2025a, p. 780).

Assessment design, co-design and students-as-partners literature collectively point to the need for assessment to be understood as a relational, distributed practice rather than an isolated act of design. While each body of work offers valuable insights, little empirical research examines how these perspectives intersect in practice and how multi-stakeholder co-design can influence assessment design decisions. This study addresses this gap by investigating: *How can co-design practices influence assessment design decisions in higher education?*

Research design and approach

This study was conducted in a Group of Eight (Go8) Business School in Australia, focusing on three courses across disciplines: Corporate Finance, Marketing Insights, and Cross-Cultural Management. The courses were selected for their large enrolments, ongoing redesign processes and/or complex assessment designs to be part of a project that reimaged assessment design through a co-design process (Zeivots et al. 2025b).

The study adopted practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith and Donnell 2006; Wall 2018) to enable collaborative reflection among educators, students and third space professionals on how assessment design is negotiated and enacted. Practitioner inquiry positions participants as co-researchers, supporting iterative cycles of action, reflection and sense-making. This orientation aligned with the Theory of Practice Architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014; Mahon et al. 2017), which conceptualises (assessment design) practices as shaped through cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements. Analysis and intervention design were guided by attention to doings, sayings, and relatings – how participants talk about, act within, and relate through assessment design (Kemmis 2022). Together, these frameworks positioned assessment design as an enacted, situated practice that could be examined through iterative dialogue and collaboration.

Across the project, 102 stakeholders (instructors (referred to in other contexts as 'course coordinators'), tutors, educational developers, learning designers, students

(current and former) and industry partners) contributed to co-design and data generation. Ethics approval was obtained from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary and consented, with protocols to ensure confidentiality and protection of students against perceived influence on grades. Educational developers, not teaching staff, facilitated engagement with student reflections to maintain anonymity and equitable participation.

Co-design interventions

Four interconnected interventions were implemented to examine how co-design practices influence assessment design. Each intervention was designed to illuminate different aspects of the practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014; Mahon et al. 2017) that enable or constrain assessment work. The interventions were interdependent rather than sequential, providing a layered understanding of assessment as a relational practice.

Connect:In workshops

Connect:In workshops (Zeivots, Cram, and Wardak 2023) were structured spaces for multi-stakeholder dialogue around assessment. Each course hosted two workshops: the first invited past students to share reflections on existing assessments, while the second involved current students providing feedback on revised designs. Participants included 27 students, 18 educators and educational developers, 7 learning designers and 4 industry partners. Using design-thinking activities and LEGO Serious Play, workshops fostered open dialogue, collaborative problem-solving and negotiation of meaning. Facilitators employed reflective prompts and structured visual mapping to elicit how assessment tasks, purposes and expectations were experienced. The workshops exemplified the relational dimension of assessment design (Gravett 2025), foregrounding how relatings, the quality of interactions and mutual understanding, shape design decisions. Insights from these sessions informed subsequent changes and framed the co-design ethos for the remaining interventions.

Weekly student reflections

Student reflections captured the lived experience of assessment throughout a 13-week semester. Twelve students (four per course) were employed as students-as-partners and completed structured reflections generating 171 detailed narratives. An open call at the beginning of the semester attracted 142 expressions of interest, from which students were selected to ensure diversity (background, gender and achievement level). Educational developers facilitated five debrief sessions to support reflective practice and ensure consistency. Students responded to prompts about their actions, challenges and interactions, reflecting the sayings, doings, and relatings (Kemmis 2022; Kemmis et al. 2014) of their assessment experience. Educators reviewed the anonymised reflections, using them to identify emerging issues, clarify assessment rationale and adjust scaffolding activities. This intervention operationalised co-design as ongoing sense-making as students became active participants in

interpreting and shaping assessment practice. The reflections also served as real-time data illustrating how assessment design is experienced and enacted by learners.

Academic capacity-building workshops

Four academic capacity-building workshops were developed to strengthen educators' design literacies and create conditions for sustained reflection. The three instructors participated in collaboration with two educational developers. Each session centred on a thematic focus: (1) assessment frameworks and theory; (2) assessment design literacies; (3) Generative AI in assessment and (4) professional learning and reflection. The workshops used participatory methods (peer feedback, dialogue and practical experimentation) to encourage instructors to examine their assessment philosophies and assumptions. Instructors engaged with student reflection data and used structured design tools to rework aspects of their assessments. These sessions cultivated sayings (shared professional language around assessment), doings (new design actions and experiments) and relatings (trust, collegiality and safe dialogue). They enabled instructors to articulate shifts in their pedagogical rationale, moving from inherited assessments towards intentionally designed, student-centred practices.

Student testimonial videos

Student testimonial videos emerged as an unplanned but integral co-design element. Six previous students from one of the courses volunteered to create videos offering peer-to-peer advice about assessment expectations and strategies for success. Supported by educational developers and offered a small honorarium, students produced reflective commentaries on what helped them learn and how assessments connected to real-world contexts. While initially conceived as a communication tool for new cohorts, these videos also provided valuable insights into how students interpret assessments. They exemplified how doings (producing and sharing videos) and sayings (articulating advice and understanding) interact to strengthen the relational dimension of learning.

Data analysis

15 interviews were conducted at the end of the project with the 3 instructors and the 12 students who completed the reflective journals, prompting them to analyse and reflect on their experiences in the project. The interviews were conducted prior to the student testimonial videos being completed. The interview transcripts, along with other artefacts (e.g. workshop notes, 171 student reflection logs, and educator-produced artefacts), formed the database. The authors conducted repeated readings and sense-making of data to trace how co-design activities influenced assessment practices. Analysis was manual, iterative and collaborative, consistent with practitioner inquiry (Wall 2018). Rather than coding through software, insights were discussed through collective sense-making sessions. Data excerpts were organised around sayings, doings and relatings (Kemmis 2022), allowing the author team to identify recurring patterns such as expanded educator design literacy, enhanced student agency and evolving collaboration among stakeholders. Divergent

interpretations were discussed until consensus was reached and triangulation across artefacts and perspectives enhanced credibility.

Through these methods, the study generated a multi-perspectival account of assessment design through co-design as an enacted practice. The methodology reflected the project's ethos: assessment design as something collaboratively constructed, reflexively examined and continually reshaped through shared inquiry (Cochran-Smith and Donnell 2006).

Findings

Our findings are presented in line with the four co-design interventions, focusing on how each contributed to assessment design decisions and practice. Consistent with practitioner inquiry (Wall 2018) and the Theory of Practice Architectures (Kemmis 2022; Kemmis et al. 2014; Mahon et al. 2017), we describe shifts in sayings, doings and relatings as they appeared in the co-design interventions.

Insights from connect:In workshops

Connect:In workshops created structured sessions for stakeholders who rarely meet to speak candidly about assessment experiences and co-imagine future alternatives. Instructors reported that students were 'generous in their feedback' and that it was 'really helpful' to hear how assessment tasks landed. One instructor commented that while academics often 'make changes based upon what they think', the workshops made it possible 'to get feedback from [past] students' and to hear from current students 'how those changes had actually made a difference in a positive way'. Students described the process as their 'first ever experience having this kind of initiative' and 'a valuable experience'. They emphasised the inclusivity of the discussion and the sense that their input would be taken seriously.

Workshops identified design issues and helped instructors rethink assumptions. Instructors said they were 'impressed by how students actually think about the learning activities and assessments' and that students 'shared really interesting ideas'. The discussions exposed gaps in explanation and alignment, including places where assessment purpose needed clearer articulation. One instructor observed that hearing student reasoning would help them 'sell this assessment better' signalling a shift towards explaining assessment intent as part of assessment design.

The sessions also made disagreement discussable. Instructors noted they sometimes did 'not really agree' with students' suggestions, however, rather than shutting down debate, the facilitation helped the group negotiate differences. This balance was important for legitimacy. Students could see how their input mattered without the expectation that every suggestion would be enacted. One instructor reflected that they had 'never really thought about including students in assessment design' as typically 'they are the ones being assessed', but the process made the benefits visible and practical.

In practice architecture terms, the workshops shifted relatings by building trust and normalising shared deliberation. They also shifted sayings through a common vocabulary about purposes, criteria and workload, and doings through the adoption

of concrete changes. Instructors clarified assessment rationales and sequences, refined group formation processes and adjusted communication after the workshops. These changes emerged from dialogue and were feasible within existing constraints, which increased their likelihood of persistence beyond the project.

Insights from student weekly reflections

The reflections offered detailed accounts of how assessments were experienced across the semester. Instructors described the utility of seeing ‘how things are working in action’, ‘how students are transiting throughout their weekly journey with the course’ and ‘whether your assessment design works or not’. Reviewing the reflections became a new teaching routine. An instructor explained: ‘I can go through their journey week-by-week’ and think about, ‘for this week what can I do more just to support them with a better experience?’ Others noted that the reflections would inform future offerings: ‘Drawing from the students’ reflections from week-to-week, we can see where we can further improve.’ Reflections triggered immediate adjustments. Instructors clarified assessment rationales which ‘helped students feel like they now understand the design of the assessment’ better. The reflections also identified points of overload, prompting micro-changes to timing and communication. Importantly, the practice travelled: one instructor introduced a reflection in another course, which was less frequent but strategically timed to gather ‘a sense of how this can support their [group] project’ and to prompt end-of-course reflection on ‘whether it works or not’.

Instructors acknowledged limitations of reflections such as some being ‘overly positive’, limiting their usefulness for identifying improvement. There were occasional misinterpretations of prompts, leading to variable depth. Instructors also noted that ‘four students’ are ‘quite biased in terms of their experiences’. These constraints were mitigated through five debrief sessions led by educational developers to clarify expectations and invite in-depth reflections.

Students reported that weekly reflection ‘enhance[d] my ability to reflect on myself and communicate more clearly in writing’, helped them ‘notice stuff that I wouldn’t have noticed’, and because it was regular, ‘I can literally remember every week’s content... It just gives a lot of clarity’. Students also described deeper insights into the course rationale and structure: reflections ‘helped me to realise why the course is structured this way and how things are connected’, and prompted thinking about ‘how I was kind of approaching the course as a whole’. Several reported practical benefits for planning and motivation. Reflections helped them ‘keep track of what’s going on’, ‘schedule my stuff and know how things are going’, and ‘study more and remember what I’ve learned in that week’.

Insights from academic capacity-building workshops

The academic capacity-building workshops prompted instructors to reflect on their teaching philosophies and assessment rationale. Instructors said the sessions ‘[gave] a lens to look at assessments’ and helped them reconsider ‘what [their] current approach is’. Exposure to assessment theories, including an assessment-as-learning

approach (Yan and Boud 2021), made them question inherited formats and align tasks more explicitly with learning. One participant noted that they had relied on ‘traditional assessments that [have] been passed down’, while another said the workshops provided ‘a bigger picture perspective’ that supported them to ‘think more about the rationale of a new assessment’ and to ‘design assessments that [help] students learn’.

Peer learning was critical. A guest lecturer shared their design journey, and an instructor identified this as ‘really insightful’. Concrete examples helped demystify change, including the notion that ‘it takes three iterations of a [course] unit to get it right’. This normalised experimentation and reframed missteps as part of learning. For more experienced educators, the sessions functioned more as a sounding board – discussing ideas with colleagues offered affirmation that ‘this is something that might work in your [course] unit’, providing confidence to proceed.

The sessions catalysed new doings. Instructors reported actions to ‘get them [students] on board’ by communicating the rationale for assessments and providing additional scaffolding, such as feedback on earlier components and clearer milestones. Instructors redesigned assessments responding to insights gained from the interventions and to strengthen professional practice. These moves aligned with shifts in sayings (shared language about purpose, communication and pacing) and relatings (collegial trust that enabled critique and support).

Insights from student testimonial videos

The testimonial videos created by former students served as a resource for current students to get advice on how to tackle assessments and associated course activities. They helped normalise common challenges and offered concrete strategies. The videos were distributed early in the semester to support orientation and clarify expectations for a new cohort, and also served as a resource for educators to see how students construed the intent behind the tasks.

In the videos, students described why tasks mattered and how they navigated assessments across the semester. This helped incoming cohorts make sense of the assessment structure and supported a more humane tone, as hearing peers explain experiencing challenges conveyed that learning is iterative and that help-seeking is legitimate. For instructors, the videos offered evidence about sayings, the words students use to explain purpose and value, alongside visible doings, the strategies students enact when approaching assessments. These insights fed back into learning materials and into how instructors framed assessment tasks. In this way, the student videos acted as connective tissue between intention and experience, strengthening relatings by cultivating peer learning and a sense of belonging.

Discussion

This study examined how co-design practices influence assessment design in higher education, focusing on four interconnected interventions. It demonstrates that co-design extends impact beyond modifying assessment tasks, enabling participants to reshape how assessment design is conceptualised and enacted. Stakeholders

engaged in assessment design as a shared, relational practice, moving away from product-oriented approaches. This allowed instructors to adopt new assessment design and evaluation practices, e.g. engaging with the pre- and post-semester co-design workshops and students' reflective logs to gain timely understanding of students' actual learning experiences and identify actionable improvements through synthesis of ideas from multiple perspectives. The interventions fostered a dialogic, responsive and feedback-rich environment for assessment innovation. Greater design capacity and intentionality emerged for educators, while students experienced a stronger sense of agency and belonging. Both groups viewed assessment design as a shared practice – a form of learning in itself. This reflects practitioner inquiry as a practical means of coming to practise assessment differently within local practice architectures (Kemmis 2021; Wall 2018).

Instructors redesigned assessments and their connections with weekly tutorials, and revised communication, feedback, collaboration and scaffolding practices. Changes to assessment practice were made in response to insights into students' learning practices and needs. For example, one instructor increased communication and resources on assessment rationale in the early weeks to strengthen student buy-in and appreciation of how to use assessment feedback to improve their learning within this course. In another course, weekly videos were created that demonstrated statistical analysis using the required software, to provide students with more opportunities to regularly practise and develop foundational skills that were essential for the major assessment (see Figure 1 for more examples of changes to assessment practices). This represented a shift from viewing assessment as something 'done to' students, as something practised with them moving beyond more traditional conceptions of assessment design (e.g. Bearman et al. 2017, Bearman, Nieminen, and Ajjawi 2023). The impact of co-design interventions presented in the study can be fully appreciated by considering the entangled social and material assessment practices (Boud et al. 2018; Fawns 2022) of educators, students and other stakeholders as situated in particular courses. Co-design operates as an educational practice that disrupts business-as-usual. The implications, while affecting individual courses, also speak to a rethinking of institutional arrangements and practice architectures that enable (and constrain) how assessment design shapes how we relate to learning, to each other, and to the broader purpose of higher education (Kemmis 2022; Mahon et al. 2017). Building on these findings, we present three provocations that reframe assessment design.

Provocation 1: repositioning assessment design as an educational practice

Contemporary understandings of assessment design typically focus on the product and process of developing assessment tasks (Bearman et al. 2017, Bearman, Nieminen, and Ajjawi 2023). This framing acknowledges that assessment design is shaped by complex social contexts but rarely accounts for how those contexts are reciprocally shaped by the act of designing. The study's interventions revealed that assessment improvement involves not only developing and revising tasks but also intentionally reshaping non-task aspects of the educational setting that are within an instructor's sphere of influence. In addition to refining their assessment tasks, the three instructors also strengthened communication with and between students, and enhanced

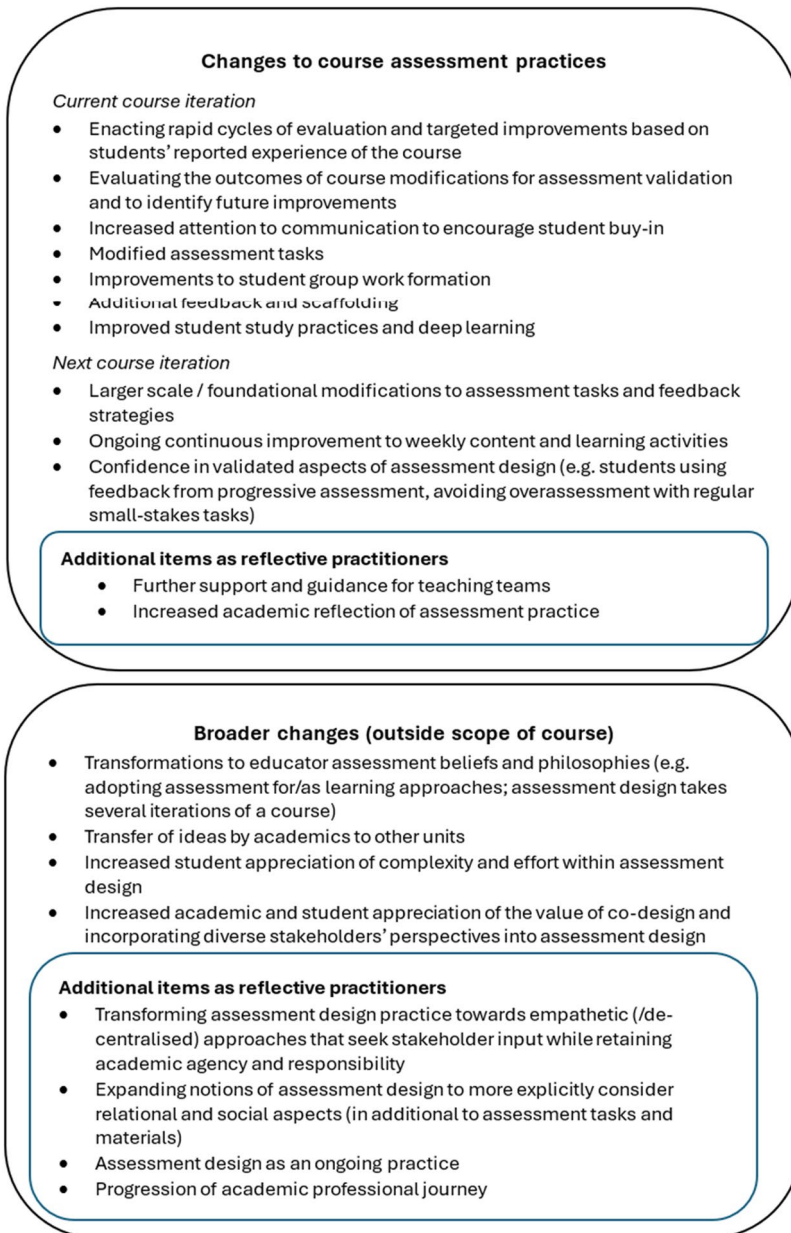


Figure 1. Influences of co-design on assessment design.

the connections and scaffolding within learning activities and resources, while also developing new evaluative practices and their assessment literacy. In doing so, they developed an understanding of assessment design as a practice rather than a procedural event, reimagining assessment design as an intentional, iterative and evaluative practice that lives alongside broader teaching work.

This aligns with the Theory of Practice Architectures, which positions educational work within cultural-discursive (sayings), material-economic (doings) and

social-political (relatings) arrangements (Kemmis 2022). When educators engaged in co-design, they enacted new sayings (shared vocabularies around assessment purpose), new doings (revised design and evaluation actions), and new relatings (exploration and dialogue). As seen in the academic capacity-building workshops, instructors moved from asking ‘What do I assess?’ to what should students experience, understand and become – a shift that positioned assessment design as reflective professional inquiry.

The findings support a conceptual distinction within assessment design research between assessment task design and the design of assessment practices. The former focuses on the development and characterisation of assessment tasks. In contrast, the latter encompasses broader changes integral to achieving improvements to assessment quality and can be defined as ‘intentionally coming to practise assessment differently within a course’, aligning with the work of Kemmis (2021) and Zeivots et al. (2025a). This encompasses task design while also considering how other social, material and relational aspects of assessment may influence assessment quality. This accords with Boud et al. (2018) conceptualisation of assessment practices, and Bearman et al. (2016) research which found that assessment design decisions relate to context, learner outcomes, feedback processes and interactions, in addition to assessment tasks. We argue that combining assessment design and assessment practices can further illuminate the complexities of assessment design decisions and lead to deeper insight into how assessment design may lead to quality assessment.

Provocation 2: de-centring assessment design: towards a relational, negotiated practice

Assessment design in higher education remains largely an individualised activity emerging from constrained systems of design (Ajjawi et al. 2023; Deeley and Bovill 2017; Joughin, Dawson, and Boud 2017). These systems often limit opportunities for diverse input, transparency and responsiveness to stakeholder needs and contributions (see e.g. Zeivots et al. 2026). De-centring assessment design requires an ontological shift, from designing for students to co-designing with them and others. This study demonstrated that assessment design becomes more inclusive, responsive and contextually grounded when enacted as a relational, negotiated practice among educators, students, educational developers and industry partners.

Through the co-design interventions, a new sense-making practice emerged based on shared evaluation of assessment design. This went beyond formative adaptation of teaching approaches based on insights from students and their performances (Black and Wiliam 1998). Students’ accounts of their experiences in reflections were not treated as feedback to be ‘fixed’ but as data for collective inquiry. Educators retained academic judgement while acknowledging that assessment design benefits from distributed responsibility and multi-stakeholder dialogue.

This provocation highlights the need for universities to reconsider how assessment design is structured within their practice architectures. De-centring requires reconfiguring the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements that shape design work. Practically, this may involve providing recognition for collaborative assessment design, revising policy frameworks to encourage shared

ownership and embedding staff development and long-term support structures (Smith et al. 2025). It also requires creating safe spaces for disagreement and negotiation, that legitimise multiple perspectives rather than enforcing consensus.

Co-design reframes the ‘choice architecture’ of assessment design (Joughin, Dawson, and Boud 2017). It distributes agency while maintaining accountability, enabling educators to make informed design decisions supported by authentic stakeholder perspectives. This shift moves beyond adding more voices at the table but rather reimagines how the table is constructed. Institutions must consider not only what is designed, but who decides, who is affected and what values underpin those decisions. This requires challenging the practice architectures that keep assessment design detached from broader questions of learning, equity and purpose (Biesta 2013; Kemmis 2021).

Provocation 3: sustainability of assessment design practices

Despite decades of reform, assessment in higher education remains resistant to sustained change. Many educators inherit assessments with limited opportunity or support to redesign them (Joughin, Dawson, and Boud 2017; Norton, Norton, and Shannon 2013). Bearman et al. (2017) argue for embedding appreciation of assessment development through relationships and institutional systems. This study provides concrete illustrations of how co-design can support such embedding through relational, distributed and practice-based mechanisms.

The four co-design interventions offered complementary forms of support. Connect:In workshops offered actionable feedback, weekly reflections provided real-time evidence of student experience, academic capacity-building workshops created safe environments to engage with peers and cultivated assessment literacy while testimonial videos strengthened inclusive communication and belonging. These interventions supported educators to make practical, iterative improvements grounded in both lived experience and theory. The combination of methods was more powerful than any single activity, demonstrating the cumulative effect of relational professional learning on assessment design (Kruiper, Leenknecht, and Slof 2022).

Institutional conditions strongly influence the sustainability of such practices. For interventions such as co-design to thrive, universities are recommended to embed supportive practice architectures (Kemmis 2021) and structures that recognise assessment design as educational quality and professional growth (Bearman et al. 2017). This entails allocating time for assessment design that allows critical reflection and collaboration, policy frameworks that legitimise partnerships with students and other stakeholders, a culture of recognition, and professional development opportunities that connect educators with peers, evidence and theory (Chan and Chen 2023; Macdonald and Joughin 2009; Smith et al. 2025). Without such supports, co-design risks remaining project-based rather than systemic.

Embedding co-design also means treating assessment design as integral to teaching and learning enhancement, not as compliance. It encourages educators to use student data meaningfully, engage in reflective inquiry and experiment with assessment formats. Some courses might decouple formative assessment from high-stakes grading, emphasising learning and feedback cycles. Others might adopt program-level or systems-thinking approaches that align assessment with

graduate attributes and student progression (Charlton and Newsham-West 2024). These directions position assessment design as a collective educational work that extends beyond individual courses.

Supporting educators to engage in co-design strengthens both teaching practice and student experience. Universities that recognise and resource this work contribute to a culture of shared inquiry and improvement, where assessment is continuously reimagined through collaborative practice.

Conclusion

Co-design in assessment design represents a generative mode of professional and institutional learning. Engaging stakeholders in iterative cycles of dialogue, reflection and design, repositions assessment design as a shared practice. Across this study, co-design operated not only as a set of activities but as the means through which a different way of practising assessment design became possible. This study shows how co-design reshapes the sayings, doings and relatings of assessment design, making visible the interdependence between educational relationships and assessment quality. Sustaining these practices requires institutional architectures that value time, trust and collaboration. Future research could explore longitudinal impacts of co-design, its scalability across disciplines and its influence on student outcomes. If assessment communicates what learning is valued, then assessment design communicates what teaching is valued. Co-design offers a pathway towards alignment between the two, making assessment less of a measure and more of a living practice.

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