ASCILITE 2026

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Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Designing assessment through transformation: A learning beyond the classroom approach to AI-mediated assessment

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Where does meaningful learning begin in an era of generative artificial intelligence (AI)? Current responses to AI in higher education have largely focused on assessment redesign, academic integrity and AI literacy. While these developments have strengthened assessment practice, they often assume that meaningful learning begins when students enter university. This paper argues that responding effectively to AI requires reconsidering this assumption. Drawing upon the learning beyond the classroom framework, it proposes assessment through transformation as a philosophy for assessment design that recognises learners' existing educational resources and supports their development into disciplinary judgement. This paper contributes in three ways. First, it introduces the learning beyond the classroom framework as a conceptual foundation for understanding learning in AI-mediated higher education. Second, it proposes assessment through transformation as a philosophy that connects recognition, translation, transformation and disciplinary judgement within a developmental approach to assessment design. Third, it translates this philosophy into five practical principles that provide educators with a flexible lens for redesigning assessment across diverse disciplinary contexts. Rather than treating AI as the central educational challenge, the paper positions it as a catalyst for reconsidering the purposes of assessment, arguing that higher education's enduring contribution lies in cultivating critical judgement, ethical reasoning and meaningful contribution.

Keywords: assessment design, generative AI, higher education, learning beyond the classroom, educational equity, conceptual paper

Introduction

Where does meaningful learning begin in an era of generative artificial intelligence (AI)? The rapid emergence of generative AI has prompted universities to reconsider long-established assumptions about assessment, academic integrity and graduate capabilities. In response, institutions have accelerated innovation in authentic assessment, assessment security, AI literacy and curriculum redesign, seeking approaches that maintain academic standards while preparing students to engage responsibly with emerging technologies (Bearman et al., 2024; Kasneci et al., 2023; Tai et al., 2023). Recent scholarship has also repositioned AI as an opportunity to reconsider educational design and learner agency rather than simply a technological disruption (Mollick & Mollick, 2024; UNESCO, 2023). At the same time, assessment scholarship has increasingly shifted from information reproduction towards authentic learning, evaluative judgement and the development of higher-order capabilities that remain valuable in AI-mediated contexts (Boud & Soler, 2016; Carless & Boud, 2018; Tai et al., 2018). Assessment is now widely understood as an integral component of learning that supports students' capacity to evaluate evidence, exercise judgement and engage with complex problems (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Panadero, 2017). Yet much of the current conversation continues to begin with AI itself: How should students use AI? Which assessment tasks remain appropriate? How can academic integrity be maintained?

These are important questions, but they also reveal a deeper educational assumption: that assessment is primarily concerned with learning acquired after students enter university. Comparatively less attention has been given to a more fundamental question: what if assessment began by recognising that students already arrive with rich learning histories developed across workplaces, communities, digital environments and increasingly AI-mediated experiences? This reframing shifts attention from technological regulation towards educational purpose. Rather than asking how assessment should respond to AI, it asks how assessment can recognise, extend and transform the learning students already bring into higher education. This paper

therefore asks: How might assessment be redesigned to recognise learners' existing educational resources and transform them into disciplinary judgement in AI-mediated higher education? Furthermore, I would argue that responding effectively to generative AI requires more than redesigning individual assessment tasks; it requires reconsidering the educational assumptions that underpin assessment itself. Drawing upon the learning beyond the classroom framework (Christensen, 2026) it proposes assessment through transformation as a philosophy for assessment design in AI-mediated higher education. Rather than viewing assessment primarily as a mechanism for verifying learning, the paper conceptualises it as a developmental process through which learners' existing educational resources are recognised, translated into disciplinary understanding and transformed into disciplinary judgement. Its contribution lies not in claiming recognition, transformation or judgement as new educational ideals, but in connecting these elements within a developmental architecture that begins with learners' existing educational resources and culminates in disciplinary judgement and contribution. The framework also positions learning as a process that connects learners' existing educational histories with disciplinary knowledge and emerging technologies.

Conceptual approach

This is a conceptual paper developed through an iterative conceptual synthesis of scholarship on learning, assessment, higher education, educational equity and generative AI. The analysis identified complementary concepts concerning learners' prior educational resources, recognition, translation, transformation, disciplinary judgement and contribution, which were progressively integrated into the learning beyond the classroom framework. The framework was then used to derive assessment-design questions that informed the five design principles developed later in the paper. The principles are therefore conceptually derived rather than empirically validated and are offered as a design lens for further application and investigation. As the paper reports conceptual analysis rather than research involving human participants, personal data or empirical data collection, research ethics approval was not required.

Theoretical foundations

Contemporary scholarship has responded to generative AI by reimagining assessment, strengthening authentic assessment and promoting students' capacity to exercise evaluative judgement in increasingly complex learning environments (Bearman et al., 2024; Boud & Soler, 2016; Tai et al., 2018; Tai et al., 2023). These developments have shifted assessment beyond information reproduction towards critical thinking, judgement and meaningful engagement with knowledge. Yet they largely begin from a common assumption: that assessment is primarily concerned with learning acquired after students enter higher education. The learning beyond the classroom framework begins from a different educational question: Where does learning begin? Rather than treating university as the starting point of meaningful learning, the framework recognises that students arrive with educational resources developed through formal education, workplaces, families, communities, cultural participation, digital environments and interactions with generative AI. AI has not created learning beyond the classroom; rather, it has made the distributed and socially situated nature of learning more visible (Gee, 2004; Giroux, 2004; Ito et al., 2013). The framework proposes that assessment begin by recognising these existing educational resources.

In order to do this effectively, the learning beyond the classroom framework draws together complementary perspectives on how learning develops and changes. First, constructivist perspectives position learners as active participants in the construction of knowledge, with new understandings developing in relation to prior knowledge and experience (Richardson, 2003). This provides a theoretical basis for the framework's first stages of learning histories and recognition: learners do not enter higher education as blank slates, and meaningful learning is strengthened when existing understandings are made visible and connected with new disciplinary knowledge. Recognition, however, does not imply that prior knowledge is complete or correct; rather, it creates a starting point from which disciplinary knowledge can revise and extend existing understandings. Second, sociocultural and situated perspectives emphasise that learning develops through participation in social, cultural, professional and, increasingly, digital contexts (Gee, 2004; Giroux, 2004; Ito et al., 2013). These perspectives provide the foundation for understanding learning as distributed beyond formal educational settings and support the framework's emphasis on the diverse contexts from which learners' educational resources emerge. Third, transformative learning theory provides a theoretical basis for the

framework's emphasis on translation and transformation. Transformative learning involves critical examination of existing assumptions and the development of more critically informed ways of understanding (Mezirow, 1997). The framework extends this insight into assessment by asking how disciplinary inquiry can make changes in learners' understandings visible. Transformation is therefore not simply the acquisition of additional knowledge; it involves the critical reworking of existing understandings through disciplinary concepts and judgement. Finally, the framework draws upon accounts of higher education that position universities as spaces in which learners develop the capacity to navigate uncertainty and participate responsibly in complex worlds (Barnett, 2000; Biesta, 2020). These perspectives provide the conceptual basis for the final two framework stages, disciplinary judgement and contribution beyond the classroom, locating assessment within the broader educational purposes of higher education. The framework therefore does not claim to introduce a new theory of learning. Its contribution is integrative; it brings together established accounts of prior knowledge, situated learning, transformative learning and the purposes of higher education to develop a specific conceptual account of assessment.

The learning beyond the classroom framework

These theoretical components are brought together through six interconnected stages (Figure 1), representing a developmental movement from learners' existing educational histories towards disciplinary judgement and, ultimately, contribution.

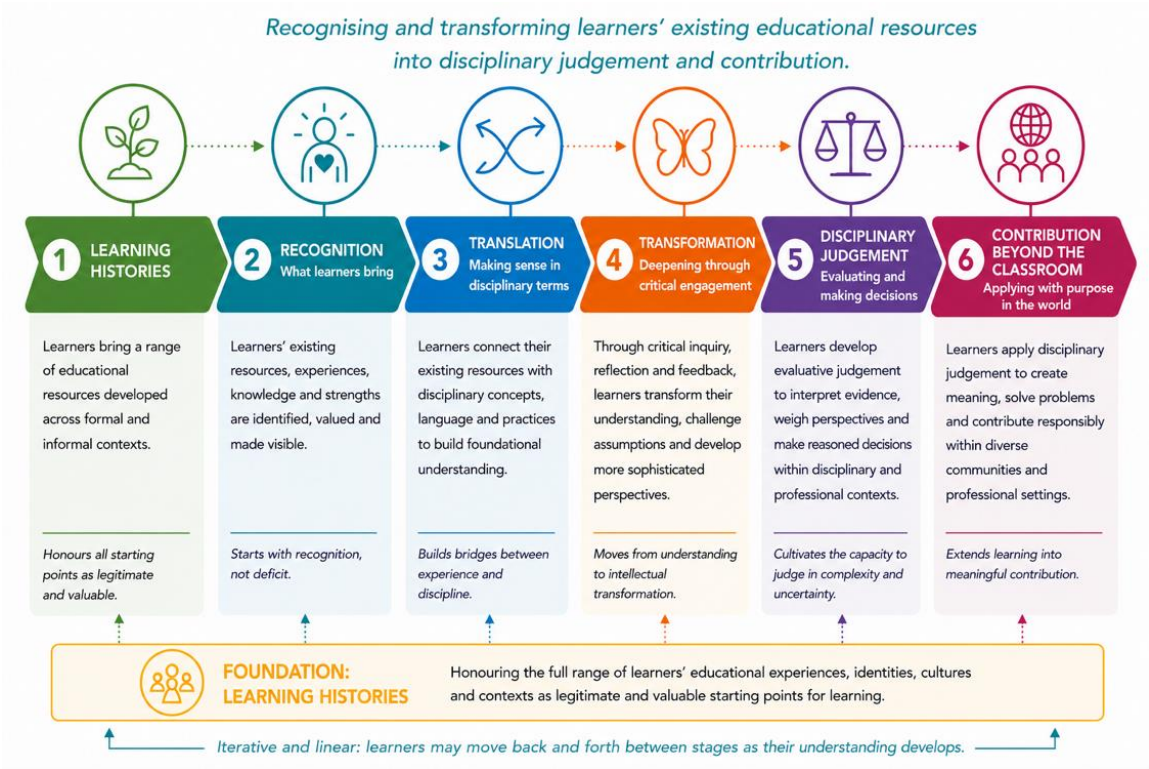


Figure 1. The learning beyond the classroom framework

Learning histories

Learning histories recognise that students enter higher education with diverse educational experiences developed across formal, informal and AI-mediated contexts. These histories provide the educational foundation from which disciplinary learning can develop.

Recognition

Recognition involves intentionally identifying and valuing these existing educational resources. Rather than beginning from educational deficit, assessment begins from educational presence, acknowledging learners' strengths as the basis for intellectual development.

Translation

Translation describes the movement from existing understandings towards disciplinary concepts, methods and standards of evidence. In AI-mediated environments, this includes critically interpreting, evaluating and refining AI-generated information rather than simply accepting it.

Transformation

Transformation occurs as learners' thinking changes through sustained disciplinary inquiry. This reflects transformative learning's emphasis on critically examining and revising existing frames of understanding (Mezirow, 1997). Assessment therefore values evidence of conceptual development rather than the reproduction of information alone.

Disciplinary judgement

Disciplinary judgement represents learners' capacity to evaluate evidence, justify decisions and respond ethically within complex professional and societal contexts. As AI increasingly performs routine information tasks, these capabilities become higher education's distinctive educational contribution.

Contribution beyond the classroom

Contribution beyond the classroom recognises that learning extends beyond assessment and graduation as learners apply disciplinary judgement within professional, civic and community contexts.

Collectively, these six stages translate the framework's theoretical foundations into a developmental account of assessment. Rather than asking whether AI has been used, the framework asks how assessment can recognise learners' existing knowledge, support their transformation through disciplinary inquiry and cultivate the judgement that is required for meaningful contribution. This conceptual foundation provides the basis for assessment through transformation, developed in the following section as a philosophy for assessment design in AI-mediated higher education.

Assessment through transformation

The learning beyond the classroom framework establishes a different starting point for understanding learning in higher education. If students arrive with rich educational resources developed across educational, professional, social and increasingly AI-mediated contexts, assessment cannot be understood simply as the verification of learning acquired during a university course. Instead, it becomes the educational process through which those resources are recognised, translated into disciplinary understanding and transformed into disciplinary judgement. This paper describes this philosophy as assessment through transformation.

Assessment through transformation is a philosophy for assessment design rather than a new assessment method or assessment format. It builds upon established scholarship that has progressively repositioned assessment from educational verification towards learning, feedback, sustainability and evaluative judgement (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Boud & Soler, 2016; Carless & Boud, 2018; Panadero, 2017; Sadler, 1989; Tai et al., 2018; Winstone & Carless, 2019). Its originality does not lie in claiming recognition, transformation or disciplinary judgement as new educational ideals. Rather it lies in bringing these established commitments together within an assessment development architecture.

This distinction can be clarified by considering the relationship with related assessment traditions. Authentic assessment typically emphasises meaningful, contextualised tasks that resemble the complexity of practice;

sustainable assessment extends attention towards capabilities that learners can use beyond the immediate course; and evaluative judgement focuses on learners' capacity to make informed decisions about the quality of work (Boud & Soler, 2016; Tai et al., 2018). Transformative learning, meanwhile, provides an account of how learners' existing ways of understanding can be critically examined and revised (Mezirow, 1997). Assessment through transformation connects these perspectives through a different organising question: how can assessment begin with what learners already bring and deliberately support its transformation through disciplinary inquiry towards judgement and contribution?

This perspective also responds to a question that has become increasingly significant in the era of generative AI: what educational work should remain central to universities when information is abundant, accessible and increasingly algorithmically generated? This paper argues that higher education's distinctive contribution lies not in providing access to knowledge but in cultivating learners' capacity to interpret evidence, justify decisions, and exercise disciplinary judgement. Assessment therefore becomes less concerned with information reproduction and more concerned with making these forms of intellectual development visible within professional and civic contexts.

Assessment through transformation is organised around three interconnected propositions.

- Educational presence rather than educational deficit

  Assessment begins with educational presence rather than educational deficit. Students should not be understood primarily in terms of the knowledge they have yet to acquire. They arrive with educational resources developed through formal education, employment, family life, community participation, cultural engagement, digital environments and increasingly AI-supported learning. Assessment therefore begins by recognising these resources and creating opportunities for students to connect them with disciplinary inquiry. Recognition does not diminish the value of disciplinary expertise; it provides the conditions through which deeper learning becomes possible.

- Transformation rather than reproduction

  Assessment should privilege transformation rather than reproduction. As generative AI increasingly performs routine information retrieval and text generation, reproducing information becomes a less meaningful indicator of higher learning. Assessment should therefore require students to question assumptions, reinterpret prior understandings, evaluate evidence critically and demonstrate how their thinking has changed through engagement with disciplinary knowledge. Learning is evidenced not simply through what students know, but through how their understanding has evolved.

- Judgement rather than recall

  Assessment should culminate in disciplinary judgement rather than information recall. Higher education has long sought to prepare graduates capable of applying knowledge responsibly within uncertain and complex environments (Barnett, 2000, 2012; Biesta, 2020). Generative AI reinforces the importance of this purpose. Graduates require the capacity to interpret evidence, justify decisions, respond ethically and exercise context-sensitive judgement in ways that cannot be reduced to algorithmic outputs. Assessment therefore becomes the educational process through which these distinctly human capabilities are cultivated and demonstrated.

Assessment through transformation therefore repositions assessment from an institutional process of educational verification towards a developmental process of intellectual transformation. Rather than asking, "What have students learned during this course?", it asks, "How has assessment transformed the learning students already brought with them into disciplinary judgement?" The distinctive contribution is therefore architectural rather than categorical. This philosophy is further operationalised through five interrelated principles that provide educators with a practical lens for redesigning assessment in AI-mediated higher education.

Designing assessment through transformation

Assessment through transformation becomes practically useful when translated into principles that educators can apply to assessment design. The five principles were derived by translating the developmental sequence of the learning beyond the classroom framework into assessment-design questions. Significantly, recognition is treated as an integral component of the first principle rather than as a separate design principle: recognising learning histories establishes the inclusive starting point from which subsequent translation, transformation, judgement and contribution can occur. Each principle therefore corresponds to a particular movement within the framework.

Rather than prescribing specific assessment methods, these principles encourage educators to reconsider the educational assumptions underpinning assessment in AI-mediated higher education. Together, they shift attention from regulating AI use towards recognising learners' existing educational resources, supporting conceptual development and cultivating disciplinary judgement. The examples that follow are illustrative rather than prescriptive and demonstrate how the principles can be adapted across diverse disciplinary contexts.

Principle 1. Begin with recognising learning histories

Design question: What educational resources do students already bring to this assessment?

Assessment often assumes that meaningful learning begins when students enter university. Assessment through transformation instead begins by recognising learners' existing educational resources, including experiences developed through work, community participation, media engagement and AI-supported learning. Assessment should therefore invite students to connect these resources with disciplinary inquiry rather than treating them as background knowledge.

Illustrative example – Media and communications

Students prompt an AI platform to generate an interpretation of how a contemporary media text represents gender, ethnicity or class. They compare the AI-generated interpretation with their own reading before evaluating both using disciplinary concepts from media studies. Assessment focuses on the quality of students' critical engagement rather than whether AI has been used.

Assessment focus:

- Begin with learners' existing experiences.
- Use AI to stimulate rather than replace thinking.
- Position disciplinary concepts as analytical tools.
- Assess critical engagement rather than AI use.

Principle 2. Design for translation

Design question: How will students reinterpret existing knowledge through disciplinary thinking?

Translation moves learners from everyday understandings towards disciplinary concepts, methods and standards of evidence. Assessment should therefore require students to reinterpret familiar issues through disciplinary inquiry rather than simply describing prior experiences.

Illustrative example – Sociology

Students ask AI to explain a contemporary issue such as housing affordability or algorithmic bias. They then reinterpret the explanation through competing sociological perspectives, identifying assumptions, omissions and alternative explanations revealed through disciplinary analysis.

Assessment focus:

- Move from everyday understanding to disciplinary interpretation.
- Make conceptual change explicit.
- Encourage iterative engagement with AI outputs.
- Assess reasoning rather than factual recall.

Principle 3. Make transformation visible

Design question: How will students demonstrate that their thinking has changed?

Assessment should make intellectual development visible rather than evaluating only finished products. Students should demonstrate how disciplinary inquiry has refined, challenged or transformed their original understandings.

Illustrative example – Academic literacies

Students generate an initial AI response to a research question before undertaking independent scholarly reading. They then submit a commentary explaining how disciplinary literature challenged both the AI-generated response and their initial assumptions, identifying the conceptual changes that occurred during the inquiry.

Assessment focus:

- Include structured reflection.
- Reward evidence of conceptual change.
- Make learning processes visible.
- Value intellectual revision.

Principle 4. Cultivate disciplinary judgement

Design question: What forms of judgement should students exercise that AI cannot?

The educational purpose of assessment increasingly lies in developing learners' capacity to evaluate evidence, justify decisions and respond ethically to complex situations. Assessment should therefore privilege judgement over information reproduction.

Illustrative example – Education

Students compare three AI-generated recommendations for improving learner engagement. Drawing on educational research, they evaluate the strengths, limitations and ethical implications of each recommendation before proposing and defending their own evidence-informed approach.

Assessment focus:

- Require justification of decisions.
- Incorporate ambiguity.
- Evaluate reasoning processes.
- Prioritise evidence-informed judgement.

Principle 5. Extend learning beyond the classroom

Design question: How will this assessment prepare students to contribute beyond university?

Assessment should prepare students for thoughtful participation within professional, civic and community contexts. Rather than ending with submission, learning should extend towards meaningful contribution.

Illustrative example – Social work

Students investigate a local community issue using AI as an initial research tool. They evaluate the information using disciplinary literature before developing an evidence-informed resource for a community audience. Assessment therefore values students' capacity to translate disciplinary knowledge into an authentic public contribution.

Assessment focus:

- Connect assessment with authentic contexts.
- Encourage civic and professional engagement.
- Adapt communication for diverse audiences.
- Evaluate contribution as well as understanding.

Collectively, these five principles operationalise assessment through transformation as a practical design lens for assessment redesign. Rather than prescribing particular assessment formats, they provide educators with a flexible process for recognising learners' existing educational resources, supporting conceptual development and cultivating disciplinary judgement.

Implications for assessment and higher education

Generative AI has prompted universities to reconsider long-established assessment practices, yet much of the current response has focused on technological adaptation. While these developments remain important, the argument advanced throughout this paper suggests that the more significant challenge is educational. If meaningful learning begins before students enter university, assessment must also begin by recognising and building upon the educational resources learners already possess. Assessment through transformation therefore represents more than a framework for assessment redesign. It offers an educational philosophy that repositions assessment from the verification of learning towards the cultivation of intellectual transformation. This shift has implications for assessment practice, curriculum design and the broader purposes of higher education.

Critical tensions and implementation challenges

The framework also presents tensions that require careful consideration. Importantly, recognition of learners' existing educational resources must not be confused with treating all prior knowledge as equally authoritative. Learners may bring misconceptions, incomplete understandings or experiences that conflict with disciplinary evidence. Recognition therefore needs to function as a starting point for inquiry rather than as validation of existing beliefs. The purpose of translation and transformation is precisely to create opportunities for learners to interrogate and extend what they already know. A focus on learning histories does not in itself resolve inequalities learners bring to class. Students' prior opportunities for cultural participation, digital engagement, academic preparation and professional experience are unevenly distributed. Without careful design, an approach that values existing resources could inadvertently reward forms of cultural or educational capital that are already privileged. The framework therefore requires educators to distinguish between recognising learners' resources and assuming that all learners begin from equivalent positions. Its equity contribution depends on assessment providing opportunities for students to develop the disciplinary resources required for participation, rather than simply rewarding resources they already possess.

Implementation will also necessarily vary across disciplines. What constitutes meaningful transformation, appropriate evidence and disciplinary judgement differs between, for example, sociology, engineering, nursing, creative practice and the sciences. The framework is therefore intended to be discipline-responsive rather than discipline-neutral: its sequence provides a common conceptual architecture, while the knowledge, and forms of judgement remain grounded in disciplinary practice. This flexibility is a strength for application across higher education, but it also means that the framework cannot prescribe a single assessment format.

These tensions also identify the limits of the present contribution. The framework and design principles are conceptually derived and have not yet been empirically tested across disciplines, student cohorts or

assessment contexts. Questions therefore remain about how learners experience recognition and transformation, how educators operationalise the principles, how disciplinary standards shape their application, and whether the approach produces demonstrable changes in students' evaluative judgement. Empirical investigation is required to examine these questions rather than treating the framework's conceptual coherence as evidence of education effectiveness.

Assessment

The first implication concerns the design of assessment itself. Assessment has traditionally focused on demonstrating what students know at the completion of a course. Assessment through transformation proposes a different starting point: what educational resources do students already bring, and how can assessment intentionally transform those resources into disciplinary judgement? This shift changes both the design and evaluation of assessment. Rather than privileging information reproduction, assessment increasingly values conceptual development, critical interpretation and evidence-informed judgement. Recognition also aligns with strengths-based approaches to student success and transition that emphasise learners' existing capabilities rather than educational deficit (Devlin, 2013; Gale & Parker, 2014; Kift, 2009). In this way, the framework positions assessment as a process that builds upon students' existing educational resources while extending them through disciplinary inquiry.

Curriculum

The framework also has implications for institutional practice. Institutional responses to AI have understandably concentrated on policy, disclosure requirements and academic integrity. These initiatives remain important but are unlikely to achieve lasting change without a coherent philosophy underpinning assessment design. Assessment through transformation suggests that curriculum renewal should begin not with technological capability but with educational purpose. Professional learning can therefore move beyond demonstrating AI tools towards helping educators recognise learners' existing educational resources, design opportunities for conceptual transformation and cultivate disciplinary judgement. Likewise, curriculum review processes can evaluate assessment not only in terms of compliance and security but also according to the extent to which assessment supports intellectual development across AI-mediated learning environments.

The purpose of higher education

The broadest implication concerns the purpose of higher education itself. Generative AI has exposed a critical question: what remains the distinctive contribution of universities in a world where information is increasingly abundant and algorithmically generated? This paper argues that the answer lies not in protecting universities as exclusive sources of knowledge, but in strengthening their role as places where learners develop the capacity to interpret evidence, exercise judgement and contribute responsibly within complex professional and civic contexts. Assessment through transformation therefore reframes assessment as a process that begins with recognition and culminates in contribution. Rather than measuring what students know at a single point in time, assessment becomes the means through which learners transform existing educational resources into increasingly sophisticated disciplinary judgement. Assessment through transformation also extends into a broader educational philosophy for AI-mediated higher education. By beginning with recognition rather than deficit, prioritising transformation over reproduction and culminating in disciplinary judgement, it provides educators with a foundation for designing assessment that remains meaningful as technologies continue to evolve. The challenge is therefore not simply to redesign assessment for AI, but to redesign assessment around the kinds of learning universities are uniquely positioned to cultivate.

Conclusion

Generative AI has prompted universities to reconsider long-established assumptions about assessment. Much of the resulting response has focused on technological adaptation through new assessment formats, academic integrity processes and AI literacy initiatives. While these developments remain important, this paper has argued that AI also presents a broader educational opportunity: to reconsider where learning begins and what assessment is ultimately designed to achieve. Rather than conceptualising assessment primarily as a mechanism for verifying learning acquired during a course, the learning beyond the classroom framework

positions assessment as the educational process through which learners' existing educational resources are recognised, translated into disciplinary understanding and transformed into disciplinary judgement. The significance of this contribution extends beyond the current AI moment. Technologies will continue to evolve, but the educational purpose of assessment remains constant. Students arrive at university with rich learning histories developed across formal education, workplaces, communities, digital environments and increasingly AI-mediated contexts. The distinctive role of higher education is therefore not simply to regulate those experiences, but to help learners interrogate and transform them through disciplined inquiry. The learning beyond the classroom framework and assessment through transformation therefore provide a conceptual response to the changing conditions of higher education in an AI-mediated environment. Their contribution is not to offer a universal solution to AI-related assessment challenges but to provide an alternative starting point for assessment design.

Ultimately, the challenge confronting higher education is no longer simply how to design assessments that withstand AI. It is how to design assessment that develops the distinctly human capacities AI cannot replace: the capacity to interpret, evaluate, justify and contribute. By beginning with recognition rather than deficit, privileging transformation over reproduction and cultivating disciplinary judgement, assessment through transformation offers one pathway towards that future. In doing so, assessment through transformation reaffirms higher education's enduring role in cultivating not only knowledge, but also judgement and thoughtful participation in an increasingly complex world. The most significant educational response to AI may not be to redesign assessment around technology, but to redesign assessment around learning itself.

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