

# Title Page

## MASTER'S DEGREE FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

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Completion Term: Spring 2026

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The supervisory committee met with the candidate for a final evaluation in which all aspects of the candidate's program were reviewed. The committee's assessment and recommendations are:

Recommendations:

- ✓ Degree should be awarded

Recommendations:

- ✓ Exit Requirement has been approved
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# **Flexible Assessment in an 8th-Grade Social Studies Classroom**

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An Action Research Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Teaching Western Oregon University 2026

Reading Committee: Coley Lehman, Kenneth Carano

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## **One: Philosophy of Education**

I excelled in school. I was quiet, shy, obedient, and bright. Teachers openly praised me and often held me up as an example to my classmates. I enjoyed learning and I especially enjoyed the success that I experienced as a student. School was my natural habitat. I thrived in school, largely due to the prevalence of summative assessments that tested reading comprehension, while I struggled with open-ended tasks that tested my perfectionism and language disorder. My struggles with writing and speaking didn't cause me much trouble until I was in high school, and even more so in college when I could no longer coast through classes by depending on heavily-weighted multiple choice tests.

During my junior year of high school, I began to struggle in my English Language Arts classes. I took an accelerated English class where we read Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mary Shelley, and George Orwell. I was inspired and awakened by these classic works of fiction; my mind racing with new thoughts and ideas. However, I seemed to lack the ability to express any of these thoughts. When I sat down to write for this class, my mind essentially went blank, or at least my thoughts were too tangled for me to grasp anything to write about until too late.

My grades in English Language Arts began to fall as writing assignments became more common. I stopped paying attention in class and started goofing off in the back row of desks. As writing became central to success, fear of failure led me to disengage. In-class writing assignments caused me so much anguish because I felt like I didn't have the fluency to express my thoughts coherently within a class period. I have learned some strategies to help support quicker organization of my thoughts and I have worked to adjust my mindset away from performance goals and towards mastery goals, but writing is still a daunting task for me. College has facilitated an explosion in my writing abilities, largely thanks to lots of practice and many

late nights/early mornings spent staring at a blank computer screen. Most of my improvement has come from self reflection. I've learned that reflecting on my learning through writing (although stressful for me) helps me learn the best.

My difficulties in English Language Arts climaxed in a class called "First Amendment", when we were assigned an impromptu speech about a controversial topic that we picked from a hat. I felt extremely self-conscious speaking in front of people, so I usually tried to avoid such situations. This time I couldn't avoid it, not to mention I was actually excited to speak about a topic that I was interested in. When it was my turn to select a topic and speak, I picked the "War on Terrorism", so I began to think about everything I thought about the War on Terrorism. I was confident in my ideas and I felt prepared.

When I got up to the front of the class to speak, I felt my skin grow hot as my mind became blank. I vaguely remember speaking one sentence and a series of mumbled words as I could not escape the collective, judgmental gaze of my classmates. Needless to say, I ended my impromptu speech with "and yeah" then walked back to my desk, embarrassed. My teacher took no pity on me and gave me a failing grade. I felt angry and hopeless; it felt unfair. "Why should something I can't control determine my success?", I asked myself.

I have only recently realized the irony of that question coming from a gifted, middle-class, white, able-bodied, cis man. I realized later that most of my classmates did not have the same reading comprehension and test-taking abilities that I had. For others to take a multiple choice test may be equivalent to me giving a speech. It took over a decade of schooling for me to understand what it felt like to have the cards stacked against me in our school system, while students from historically marginalized groups have experienced so many more barriers for several generations. I took it for granted that my teachers had high expectations for me, looked



like me, and that I could attend school in my neighborhood, where I had every resource available and nearly everyone spoke the same language that I spoke at home.

My overall experience was very different from that of African Americans, women, Asian Americans, Indigenous Americans, and Latinx Americans throughout US history. Our society, especially our school system, was built for white, cis men like myself at the expense of everyone else. I can't say that I have been misunderstood on the same level as these historically marginalized peoples, but I can try to understand where they come from and what they have endured to get here and I can take steps to ensure that I am not contributing to my students feeling misunderstood. Moments like from my personal story above, shaped my belief that assessment methods should not punish students for the modes of expression they struggle with. This experience directly informs my interest in investigating student choice in assessment as an avenue for more equitable and humanizing learning experiences.

I think that we, as teachers, should always keep learning. I believe that all of us have a true passion for learning that we need to model to our students. We ought to help our students learn everything they can learn from the world using every tool at our disposal, so that they can share it with the next generation and we can enjoy progress as a civilization. As a teacher, I want to ensure that my classroom is a place where people are valued as human beings and are becoming the best version of themselves. Drawing from Dewey's democratic ideals, Freire's humanizing pedagogy, hooks' critical engagement, and Deloria and Wildcat's relational metaphysics, I believe that teachers should tap into students' intrinsic motivation to direct their learning and express themselves toward productive, meaningful pathways.

Who am I becoming as a teacher? I hope that I am becoming a competent teacher, both culturally and practically competent. If I am to be the best teacher that I can be, I'll need to keep

learning about my students and their worlds. I will need to follow their lead and their interests, while using all of my educational resources to support them. I am becoming a reflective teacher who challenges his own perceptions daily. Reflection as a tool for learning has been most effective for me as I synthesize my personal experience into my learning, so I will look forward to promoting it in my students' learning as well. I am becoming a more compassionate teacher as I learn about the issues that affect my students' lives. I am becoming a more conscientious teacher: as I learn more about what I can do to help my students, I am motivated to do more. I hope that I am becoming a teacher that students can depend on for support, guidance, and mutual respect.

Looking back at my education history, I see a clear pattern: I learned the best when I was given time, freedom, and relational context to make meaning from educational experiences. I made the most meaningful connections when I was able to connect the lesson to my own experience through critical reflection. Per Deloria and Wildcat (2001), our education should reflect an ecological paradigm that considers the multitude of connections available to our understanding and doesn't limit it to a narrow predetermined focus. This realization is why I have chosen American Indian Metaphysics as my guiding pedagogical theory for studying assessment choice.

### **Guiding Pedagogical Theory: American Indian Metaphysics (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001)**

American Indian Metaphysics as described by Deloria & Wildcat (2001) is a relational epistemology that understands the world as an interconnected web of relationships rather than isolated causes and effects. It emphasizes holism, contextual knowledge, suspended judgment, and deep attentiveness to the relationships among people, land, community, and experience.

While contemplating American Indian Metaphysics (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001), at first I struggled to find any practical application for my teaching, however, over time, with wider experience, I've recognized more places where I could apply it in the classroom. One lesson I take away from American Indian Metaphysics is that I need to try to take on other perspectives – the perspectives of my students, my teachers, and the people we study in a Social Studies classroom – in order for me to teach to my students' needs. When taking on the perspective of my students, I can't help but recognize the absurdity of sitting silently while listening to one person talk about something seemingly disconnected from their reality, then being tested on some obscure learning objective. American Indian Metaphysics asks us to challenge our preconceived notions about what is important in an education – whether our goal is for students to be able to repeat a list of facts, or to be able to recognize how these facts connect to each other, themselves, and their world.

Deloria and Wildcat (2001) pit *American Indian Metaphysics* against European metaphysics: highlighting the debate between relation vs. causation; unity vs. reductionism; suspended judgement vs. misplaced concreteness. Deloria and Wildcat (2001) explain that American Indians' worldviews reflected a deep knowledge of the relationships found in nature.

The best description of Indian metaphysics was the realization that the world, and all its possible experiences, constituted a social reality, a fabric of life in which everything had the possibility of intimate knowing relationships because, ultimately, everything was related. (Deloria, 2001, p. 2)

This relational metaphysics contrasts sharply with the metaphysics imported from Europe that seeks to draw boundaries between all things, especially things we can know and things that we cannot know. European Metaphysics insists that we conduct experiments that isolate causes and

effects, physically and ideologically removed from their relevance. However, I believe it is fruitless to understand nature until we understand how its parts are related — how everything converges to create each moment.

Backwards planning normally means that we start with our Learning Target, then we plan a lesson that reaches that target through a sequence of strict, chronological steps. We succeed only if students reach that objective by the end of the lesson which will be decided through a formal assessment. After spending three, 56 minute class periods trying to understand the American Indian perspective through the Iroquois Confederacy's Great Law of Peace so that I could help my students understand it — I happened upon the thought that I have been doing backwards planning backwards. Yes, we should start with a goal, a learning target, but from there, we should let the students help decide which path to take. In the context of American Indian Metaphysics, not only are step-by-step instructions tedious and unreasonable, they are also unnecessary and antithetical to the learning target. When a teacher plans a lesson down to the minute, any tangents are unwelcome interruptions, but oftentimes, it is within these tangents where students are doing the important work of making the connections from the lesson to their personal experiences.

We shouldn't be expected to learn everything we should know about a topic in a single lesson. My comprehension of the reading assigned by Dr. Lin Wu during the Winter term of 2024/25 is still in progress as I write this on October the 29th of 2025, so how should I judge whether a student grasps my learning target before the end of class? I shouldn't judge it strictly, for one. If anything they learn that day can spark their imagination enough to inspire further understanding of our learning target, then I believe that we should count it a success: "The hallmark of the true Indian philosopher was the ability to hold in suspended judgment the

experiences he or she had enjoyed or was told, and to file away that bit of knowledge until the time when more data of closely related content came his or her way.” (Deloria Jr. & Wildcat, 2001, p. 6). “Suspended judgment” is a key concept in Deloria Jr. and Wildcat’s 2001 work and is also a key theme in my own experience as a learner. Teachers should recognize the value of suspended judgement when assessing students’ understanding and students should be allowed the opportunity to suspend their judgement while taking the time to process what they are learning and discover connections to what they have learned and will learn.

When I plan my lessons I must begin with what I want my students to understand about a topic while being mindful that my students may not express their understanding in the way that I expect and when I expect them to express it. The most convenient way for me, I believe, to implement this planning strategy would be to involve students in the decision-making within their curriculum, especially by encouraging students to choose how they are assessed by their teachers. Providing multiple, valid, assessment options for students to choose from, affords students a greater sense of autonomy along with a more just assessment of what the student actually understands about the content. Throughout my own education, I have listened to and generally concurred with many grievances about standardized testing – how it requires teachers to “teach to the test”-- but I had rarely heard any alternatives that respect the public’s valid desire for accountability in public education as well as respecting our educators’ desire to teach content that is engaging and relevant to our students’ individual, interconnected lives. I believe that my research will show that offering choice in alternative assessments to students is beneficial to both teachers and students while they are also more representative of a student’s growing understanding than standardized tests.

### **Connection to INTASC Standards**

This project directly corresponds to multiple INTASC standards as assessment is an essential part of being a successful teacher. My goal in researching alternative assessments reflects my goal in becoming a supportive, effective, and reflective teacher for my students because it will allow me to better understand my students, their strengths and needs as learners.

- Standard 1: Learner Development

1(a) “The teacher regularly assesses individual and group performance in order to design and modify instruction to meet learners’ needs in each area of development (cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical), and scaffolds the next level of development.

This project explicitly addresses INTASC Standard #1 by focusing on assessment practices that aim to better reflect students’ understanding of the content. Offering a variety of assessment choices allows teachers to meet students at their needs in each area of development while highlighting their strengths.

- Standard 2: Learning Differences

“The teacher designs, adapts, and delivers instruction to address each students’ diverse learning strengths and needs and creates opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning in different ways.”.

Promoting choice in assessment allows students to show their learning in the ways that they feel most competent, which I believe will provide more representative information for the teacher to use when differentiating instruction for a diverse student population.

- Standard 3: Learning Environments

“The teacher works with others to create environments that support individual and collaborative learning and that encourage positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation”.

I believe that assessment choice will improve students' self-efficacy, improving motivation and engagement in the classroom. As students are encouraged to demonstrate their learning according to their strengths, they should grow more confident and comfortable with sharing their ideas during collaborative learning.

- Standard 4: Content Knowledge

“The teacher understands the central concepts, tools of inquiry, and structures of the discipline(s) he or she teaches and creates learning experiences that make these aspects of the discipline accessible and meaningful for learners to assure mastery of the content”.

Providing multiple options for students to demonstrate their learning requires the teacher to have a solid understanding of the content, because the teacher must craft multiple assessments that are valid representations of the content knowledge.

Standard 6: Assessment

6(e): “The teacher engages learners in multiple ways of demonstrating knowledge and skill as part of the assessment process”

The aim of my Action Research Project is directly in line with INTASC Standard 6 (e) as I will be examining the use of multiple alternative assessments, their validity, and effect on student learning.

### **Summary**

In this introductory chapter, I shared my personal educational history which described my overall success in spite of my struggles with written and oral expression. My educational history naturally leads to my philosophy that education should be equitable and humanizing for every student, which leads to my conviction that we must borrow from the wisdom of American Indian Metaphysics in order to facilitate a paradigm shift in how we assess student learning. Ultimately,

I believe that assessments should be a tool for learning, first and foremost – not a tool for punishing students’ inabilities to express their understanding at any given moment – which is why I will be committed to offering a variety of assessment options that allow students to demonstrate their understanding more on their terms.



## Chapter 2. Literature Review

My action research project focuses on alternative assessments and how offering students multiple pathways to demonstrate their learning may improve equity, engagement, and accurate representation of student understanding. This topic grows directly from my own educational history, especially the ways traditional assessments often failed to capture my thinking, despite my strong comprehension skills. Because of this personal connection, I am interested in what the research says about assessment flexibility, student choice, and how nontraditional forms of assessment support diverse learners.

To explore this topic, I reviewed peer-reviewed journal articles, meta-analyses, and practitioner pieces that examine alternative assessment practices across K–12 and higher education contexts. I used search terms such as “alternative assessment,” “assessment choice,” “performance-based assessment”, “equitable assessment”, “authentic assessment”, and “flexible grading.” I accessed articles primarily through the WOU library database, ERIC, and Google Scholar. I chose these search terms because they directly reflect the questions I am trying to answer: What happens when students are given multiple options to demonstrate understanding? Which models work best, and for whom? And how do alternative assessments compare to traditional, standardized measures of learning? The sources I collected represent a range of perspectives – empirical studies, qualitative analyses, theoretical pieces, and practitioner guides – allowing me to see both the opportunities and the challenges in offering students meaningful assessment choices.

### Annotated Bibliography

Achacoso, J. M., Achacoso, J. D., & Cabal, E. M. (2021). Academic Performance of Grade 8 Students in the Traditional and Alternative Assessment in Social Studies. *International Journal of Education Humanities and Social Studies*.

In their 2021 article, Achacoso et al. investigated how performance of 8th grade social studies students from Botolan National High School in the Philippines in traditional assessments compared to performance in alternative assessments. The authors used descriptive research to understand more about student performance in different assessment types through a descriptive research framework measuring student performance on traditional assessments (multiple-choice, true or false, matching, and essay) and alternative assessments (portfolios, checklists, journals, and performance assessments) and using statistical analysis to determine significance. Achacoso et al. found that student performance was, on average, “very good” in social studies and that there was a strong positive correlation between performance on traditional assessments and alternative assessments. The authors suggest that teachers utilize a variety of assessment options to better gauge student understanding and promote deeper engagement.

This article is relevant to my research because it establishes a clear correlation between performance on traditional assessments and alternative assessments, which lends more credibility to alternative assessments as appropriate accountability measures. This study makes progress in addressing the concern that alternative assessments would not be as academically rigorous or effective as traditional assessments in measuring student performance, but the researchers found strong statistical evidence that they are comparable. The authors also note that alternative assessments may be more authentic measures of student understanding beyond rote memorization of discrete facts and could contribute to student engagement in social studies. The article is also one of the few I have found that are specifically about secondary social studies students so it is especially relevant to my own research.

The article could have included more qualitative data to justify the author's conclusions about alternative assessment as more engaging for students. Including interviews or questionnaires with questions about the process of alternative assessments versus traditional assessments would have provided insight into why teachers should utilize alternative assessments along with traditional assessments, although this information could be acquired through other, more qualitative studies.

Alokozaya, W. J. (2022). Students' Perception of Alternative Assessment: A Qualitative Meta-Analysis. *International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, 14(2), 1419–1441.

In their 2022 study, Alokozaya investigated how students perceive alternative assessment through the lens of motivation theories, in a qualitative meta-analysis of a total 24 qualitative, quantitative, and mixed studies published from 2004 to 2018, representing a total of 2807 students' perceptions of alternative assessment. Alokozaya found that overall, learners have a positive perception of alternative assessment across multiple learning contexts.

This study provides a large sample of research supporting a positive view of alternative assessment among students, which I believe is a critical factor in my own research on alternative assessment. Students should enjoy learning, which includes how they are assessed, so it is a positive sign when such a large meta-analysis yields such solid results that students enjoy learning more as “the student is feeling motivated, heightened, communicative, reflective, critical thinker when assessed through alternative assessment.” (p. 1438) This article also offers a clear description of alternative assessment in general, through the twelve characteristics of alternative assessment elucidated by Brown & Hudson (1998):

1. Require students to perform, create, produce, or do something;
2. Use real-world contexts or stimulations;

3. Are nonintrusive in that they extend the day-to-day classroom activities;
4. Allow students to be assessed on what they normally do in class every day
5. Use tasks that represent meaningful instructional activities;
6. Focus on processes as well as products;
7. Tap into higher level thinking and problem-solving skills.
8. Provide information about both the strengths and weaknesses of students
9. Are multi-culturally sensitive when properly administered;
10. Ensure that people, not machines, do the scoring, using human judgment;
11. Encourage open disclosure of standards and rating criteria; and
12. Call upon teachers to perform new instructional and assessment roles.

This description of the characteristics of alternative assessment is helpful for me in determining the extent of my research on alternative assessment because I now have a clearer idea of what alternative assessment entails. Alokoyaya further clarifies the concept of alternative assessment with a definition on page 1438: “Alternative assessment is a developed technique in which the teacher has opportunities to assess or test the strengths and weaknesses of the student in a different context and situation.”

The authors note that their research was limited by the amount of research on the topic available for their analysis. The authors even suggest that future studies could have a more narrow focus on specific educational contexts. For example, the study utilized studies on university students as well as K-12 students so if readers require more specific data from a particular educational context, they would need to search other articles.

Avdiu, Valentina & Ahmedi, Vjollca (2024). Alternative Assessment Strategies to Enhance Learning for Students with Special Needs. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, 15(5), 1–25.

In their 2024 article, Avdiu and Ahmedi investigated assessment strategies and their effect on the learning for students with special needs. The authors analyzed responses from 75 primary school teachers on standardized questionnaires distributed across 15 educational settings in Kosovo in order to gather data on the impact of employing alternative assessment methods through the lens of a quantitative approach using statistical analysis. Avdiu and Ahmedi found that there is a statistically significant positive correlation ( $r=0.364$ ,  $p=0.001$ ) between using alternative assessment tools and improvement in student learning, which indicates that when teachers increase their use of alternative assessment, learning experiences tend to improve.

This study was very impactful on my teaching and understanding of how effectively utilizing alternative assessment tools can improve students' learning process. The article is strong in its application of quantitative analysis to describe a correlation between alternative assessment and improved teacher perception of student learning. The article draws numerous connections between ideas from multiple learning theories (Constructivist Theory, Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, and the Universal Design for Learning framework) and using multiple alternative assessment methods, which aids me in strengthening my own project's theoretical foundations. The researchers' findings suggest that teachers have overall positive perceptions about various alternative assessment methods which is a strong indication that alternative assessment benefits teaching.

This study could have benefitted from the inclusion of a more diverse representation of questionnaire respondents since all 75 of those who responded were female primary school teachers in the Kosovan school system. A more diverse representation may elicit a more diverse set of data. Teachers' attitudes about alternative assessment in Kosovo could be very different

from teachers in Oregon in the United States, so I will have to be skeptical when applying these results in my own research. I also believe that the article would have benefitted from another questionnaire with questions for students of the teachers from the original questionnaire. I would be interested to see a comparison between students' perceptions of alternative assessment methods and teachers' perceptions.

Coulter, S. E., Coyne, P., & Andrews, D. M. (2024). The Choice is Theirs: Students Achieve Positive Outcomes when Offered Flexibility in Course Assessment Options. *Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning*, 15(1), 1–16. <https://doi-org.wou.idm.oclc.org/10.5206/cjsotlracea.2024.1.14923>

In their 2024 article, Coulter et al. investigated how student choice – specifically in group sides and how weights of grades are designated for particular assessments – affected students' educational outcomes. The authors used Self-Determination Theory to understand more about flexibility in course assessment options through a quasi-experimental design measuring the effect of student choice on course grades. Coulter et al. found that students experienced positive results when they were offered flexibility to choose how they were assessed. The study shows that 1.) Students got better grades in a course when they could choose how individual or group assessments are weighted. 2.) Students got better grades when they weighted group assessments higher than individual assessments. 3.) Students generally demonstrated correct judgment when making choices about assessment weights.

This article was impactful on my teaching and understanding largely because it shows how integrating student choice in assessments can be simple and effective. The authors caution against over-complicating assessment by offering too many choices which can overwhelm and confuse students, while they offer a simple way that choice can be integrated with sufficient structure: students should choose how to group themselves and how assessments are weighted.

Although the results are not generalizable for my own research, I can use the study as an example of an effective model to integrate student choice in assessment.

The article is limited in its application because the results could be explained by a number of factors not directly related to student choice. The results point more to the conclusion that students receive higher grades when group assessments are weighted higher than individual assessments, which doesn't necessarily support student choice as having a positive impact on student learning. The study could have been improved with more data collection to control for other variables such as student motivation, prior achievement, and relative difficulty of assessments. With more data, readers would have a clearer picture of whether the act of choice contributed to achievement.

Cowan, Mairi (2024). Flexible Assessment: Some Benefits and Costs for Students and Instructors. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 49(3), 408–418.  
<https://doi-org.wou.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/02602938.2023.2263668>

In their 2024 article, Cowan investigated how flexible assessment affected students and instructors in a higher education setting. The author uses self-determination theory to understand more about how flexible assessment can increase student motivation by respecting their innate psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Through an analysis of student responses to a survey, class discussions, and instructor observations following the implementation of flexible assessment in a fourth-year undergraduate history course, Cowan (2024) found that students largely benefitted from flexible assessment through increased motivation, while both students and instructors faced some challenges including increased workload for teachers and confusion/anxiety for students. The author recommends implementing

flexible assessment, but suggests instructors consider their course's structure and their students' levels of independence, while being prepared for an initial increase in workload.

This study is directly applicable to my own teaching and learning as it helps validate flexible assessment practices and describes multiple benefits and costs for students and teachers, while it highlights some important considerations for instructors to make when implementing flexible assessment. Although this study is about a fourth-year undergraduate course, it suggests that flexible assessment can be implemented for younger students if the choices are simplified and clearly explained. The authors also recommend instructors be transparent about the reasoning behind flexible assessment and encourage students to seek out challenging and creative assessment options.

In light of Cowan's (2024) recommendations and my personal history, I am encouraged to focus on offering flexibility in modes of expression: for example, I can allow students to respond to prompts using writing, drawing, speaking, graphic organizers, or other creative modes of expression, while providing clear guidance for what I expect student responses to entail in the form of rubrics and modeled examples. Rather than overwhelming students and teachers with multiple assessment types, I can use the same assessment for each student while offering flexibility in modes of expression.

Gozuyesil, E., & Tanriseven, I. (2017). A Meta-Analysis of the Effectiveness of Alternative Assessment Techniques. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 70, 37–56.

In their 2017 article, Guzuyesil and Tanriseven investigated how alternative assessment techniques affected students' academic achievement. The authors used a constructivist approach to understand more about improving student academic achievement with alternative assessment techniques through a meta-analysis of 26 studies on the effectiveness of alternative assessments



in improving student academic achievement in Turkey. Guzuyesil and Tanriseven found that a significant majority of the results of their analysis were in favor of alternative assessment.

This article was very impactful on my teaching and understanding of the effectiveness of alternative assessment techniques because it offers clear evidence that alternative assessments positively impact academic achievement. The study also disaggregates data based on school subject, grade-level, and assessment type, finding that the most significant results occurred at the secondary-education level, with portfolio assessments having the greatest impact. Since the most significant results occurred at secondary-education level, the study is especially relevant for my research on alternative assessment in middle and high school.

The article could have included more data across multiple school subjects as the authors admit that some subjects were underrepresented, leading to less significant results based on school subject. Another limitation of the study is its focus on studies from Turkey, so future studies should include meta-analysis of research from other countries.

Janisch, C., Liu, X., & Akrofi, A. (2007). Implementing Alternative Assessment: Opportunities and Obstacles. *Educational Forum, The*, 71(3), 221–230.

In their 2007 article, Janisch et al. investigated the opportunities and obstacles in implementing alternative assessment. The authors used Constructivist Theory to understand more about the theoretical support for alternative assessment through graduate students' course writing, including journals and reflection papers in a literacy assessment course about their experiences with alternative assessment. Janisch et al. found that responses could be sorted into two themes: Opportunities and Obstacles. Opportunities from alternative assessment included "positive experiences for students" and "responsive instruction". Obstacles from alternative assessment included "external constraints" like lack of support from administrators or parents

and “internal constraints” like student inexperience with alternative assessment and practical concerns like purchasing of materials and increased teacher workload. Ultimately, the authors concluded that the students’ responses reflected a solid connection to the theoretical framework for alternative assessment.

This article argues a strong case for the theoretical basis for alternative assessment while showcasing the reflections of students learning to be teachers and their experiences with alternative assessment. The article drives home the importance of understanding why alternative assessment is a worthy undertaking for teachers so that we can better understand how to implement it. Recognizing the opportunities alternative assessment provides will help guide teachers to create effective alternative assessments, while understanding the obstacles will help teachers prepare for their implementation.

Kosky, C., & Curtis, R. (2008). An Action Research Exploration Integrating Student Choice and Arts Activities in a Sixth Grade Social Studies Classroom. *Journal of Social Studies Research*, 32(1), 22–27.

In their 2008 study, Kosky & Curtis (2008) investigated integrating student choice and arts activities in a sixth grade social studies classroom. The authors used Multiple Intelligence Theory (e.g. Gardner & Moran, 2006) and Motivation Theory to understand how incorporating arts activities in a social studies classroom could contribute to higher-quality learning experiences for students through an Action Research Project utilizing teacher reflections, student surveys, and classroom grades. Kosky and Curtis found that integrating arts and promoting student choice improved student engagement and classroom grades.

This article was very impactful on my teaching and understanding of how arts and student choice could be integrated into a social studies classroom because it showed how arts and choice improves students’ motivation to participate in learning activities and encourages deeper

engagement with the learning material. The study is relevant to my own research especially because the studies' participants were middle school social studies students. The article's strengths lie in the connection between student choice, assessment variety, and motivation which provides more support for my own research on student choice in alternative assessments.

The study could have been expanded to include more quantitative data like test scores before and after the intervention of integrating arts and student choice into the lessons, which would have made a stronger case for the author's conclusions. The authors' conclusions are well supported by qualitative data from student surveys and teacher reflections, but it is difficult to generalize the results for my project when they are dependent on the subjective impressions of individuals who may differ from my own students'. This points to a central issue in offering alternative assessment options: it is unclear how to compare results across classrooms, schools, states, etc when there is no standardized assessment, which is a concern for a population committed to holding schools accountable for the success of their students.

Lazarakou, E. (2024). Students' Artistic Creation as an Alternative Assessment Task in a Non-Artistic Course within Higher Education. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 25(28).

In their 2025 study, Lazarakou investigated artistic creation as an alternative assessment task. The author used Gale and Bond's Assessment Framework (2007) to understand more about alternative assessment, through content analysis of students' work following a higher-Ed psychopedagogy course learning about empathy. Lazarakou found that artistic creation provided rich data about students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Lazarakou argued that artistic creation should be utilized as an alternative assessment for non-art courses in higher-education.

This article was very impactful on my teaching and understanding of how artistic creation can be an effective assessment tool as an alternative to written or oral assessments because it

provided a clear framework for assessing artistic creation in the context of a non-art course and showed that artistic creation can provide valuable insight into students' understanding while being a learning experience in itself. The article also provided numerous examples of students' artistic creations and demonstrated how they were assessed based on the researcher's framework.

The article had significant limitations in generalizing the results of the study, especially the small sample size and the specific context of a post-graduate psychopedagogy course. The study's subjects were all adults with graduate degrees so their ability to express their ideas was likely far more advanced than students in a secondary education setting. Due to these limitations, it is not clear whether data from an assessment of artistic creation would be so rich and bountiful in other contexts.

O'Rourke, M. & Doyon, A. (2024). Rethinking Assessment Strategies to Improve Authentic Representations of Learning: Using Blogs as a Creative Assessment Alternative to Develop Professional Skills. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 21. <https://doi-org.wou.idm.oclc.org/10.1186/s41239-024-00483-0>

In their 2024 article, O'Rourke & Doyon investigated how using blogs as a creative assessment alternative could improve authentic representations of learning. The authors used Constructivist, Engagement, and Self-determination theories to understand more about using blogs as a creative assessment alternative through collection of data from 26 students in an undergraduate Governance and Planning course using a questionnaire, student evaluation survey, focus groups, and analysis of video and text based blog assessment tasks. O'Rourke & Doyon found that blogging "increased engagement with the content, enhanced student learning and dialogue about the profession, and facilitated peer learning." (p. 14).

The article was very impactful on my teaching and understanding of blogs as an alternative assessment tool because it demonstrated how courses could use blogging to enhance

and assess student learning. The rich, qualitative nature of this study led to some insightful comments regarding the effectiveness of an alternative assessment like blogging in promoting student understanding through greater engagement, real-life application, and efficiency. The article was also helpful in elucidating the complications with implementing such alternative assessments, namely: student unfamiliarity with the assessment format and larger work-load for the instructor especially in providing timely feedback and course design.

The article could have included more research participants to provide even more data about the effectiveness of blogging as an assessment tool, as well as follow-up data about the effect of the assessment type on students' successes in their future educational and professional careers. Ultimately, I can take a lot from this article for my own research and teaching practice, specifically in implementing a similar assessment integrating blogging.

Pack, J. (2019). Indigenizing Education and the Phenomenology of Place. *Educational Theory*, 69(5), 603–613. <https://doi-org.wou.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/edth.12389>

In their 2019 essay, Pack (2019) offers a clear explanation of American Indian Metaphysics as elucidated by Deloria and Wildcat (2001) and offers key insights into its application in the classroom. The author uses Deloria and Wildcat's (2001) American Indian Metaphysics to understand more about challenging student's Western worldviews in order to facilitate a deeper, relational understanding of the world and our place in it. Through a focus on "place" and "personality" embedded in our curriculum, Pack (2019) suggests that teachers can bring students to relational understanding of their world. Pack found that by teaching students stories from Native American people local to their area, they developed a more meaningful connection to their place which facilitated deeper understanding.

This article is very impactful on my teaching and learning because it opens my eyes to another path for applying American Metaphysics to this project and my future teaching and learning. My focus has been on the concepts of suspended judgment and relations, but I believe it will be crucial to connect my student's learning to place and personality. This is especially relevant to a social studies teacher who necessarily teaches about many places and how people have interacted with them. By drawing attention to the importance of place, not only as a name on a map, but as a medium for countless relations that shape our understanding, students will have a more complete understanding of what has motivated individuals throughout history.

This article has little impact on my methodology because it is not an example of rigorous academic research, but is more of a philosophical reflection on the author's own practice. However, the article does help to clarify my theoretical framework and implores me to consider the content of the lessons I teach: I should share with my students how one's worldview can be disrupted by American Indian Metaphysics to the benefit of their understanding.

Rangachari, P. K. (2006). Promoting Self-Directed Learning Using a Menu of Assessment Options: The Investment Model. *Advances in Physiology Education*, 30(4), 181–194.  
<https://doi-org.wou.idm.oclc.org/10.1152/advan.00001.2006>

In their 2006 article, Rangachari investigated how instructors can promote self-directed learning by offering a “menu” of assessment options. The authors used self-directed learning theory and inquiry-based learning to understand more about offering a menu of assessment options in an investment model through a course design that allowed students to choose from a list of which assessments to complete, and qualitative data gathered from student responses to an end of term questionnaire, student grades, and instructor reflections. Rangachari found that offering a menu of assessment options was well-received by students and resulted in improved student engagement.

This article was very impactful on my teaching and understanding because it provided an example for how to promote student choice using a menu of assessment options. Since the author had success with their efforts, I am further inspired to offer assessment options in my own classes. The article also had strengths in its presentation of many student examples acting as evidence for the success of the course design along with a strength in the author's and the students' reflections on a learning process that features student choice.

This study was conducted in the context of an undergraduate course for sophomore undergraduate science students at a Canadian university, not a secondary social studies class, so its application to my own research is limited. Sophomore university students have more knowledge and experience to be able to participate meaningfully in the alternative assessments, so I could not expect the same results in my context. Sophomore university students also generally have more maturity, so choosing from multiple assessment options may be less overwhelming for them than for middle school students. For application in secondary education contexts, one would probably need to simplify the process of choosing assessments while being mindful that each assessment is age-appropriate.

## Summary

Across the literature, researchers consistently highlight the potential of alternative assessments to increase equity, engagement, and more authentic representations of student learning. Studies spanning K-12 and higher education show that when students are offered flexible or creative ways to demonstrate understanding – such as portfolios, artistic products, blogs, or choice-based assessment menus – they often experience higher motivation, deeper engagement, and improved academic outcomes. Several quantitative studies (e.g., Achacoso et al., 2021; Avdiu & Ahmadi, 2024; Gozuyesil & Tanriseven, 2017) found positive correlations between the use of alternative assessments and student achievement, suggesting that these formats are not only pedagogically meaningful but also academically rigorous. Qualitative and mixed-methods pieces (e.g., Janisch et al., 2007; O'Rourke & Doyon, 2024; Rangachari, 2006) further demonstrate that alternative assessments can support reflection, collaboration, and real-world application, while also revealing challenges educators face, such as increased workload, student unfamiliarity, and institutional constraints.

Taken together, the research paints a clear picture: assessment flexibility can support diverse learners and align well with constructivist, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and motivation-related theories, but it requires thoughtful design and scaffolding. The literature also points to gaps relevant to my project, including limited research specifically in secondary social studies contexts and a need for more studies comparing student and teacher perspectives. Overall, the evidence supports my action research focus on offering multiple pathways for students to show what they know, while also reminding me to remain attentive to issues of practicality, clarity, and equity in implementing alternative assessments in my own classroom.





### **Chapter 3: Methods**

Action research is an investigation by teachers, who gather and analyze data during teaching, in order to improve teaching practice. First, teachers find a focus. Next, teachers should clarify theories that influence their thinking and practice. Third, teachers develop research questions. Then, they collect data. Next, teacher-researchers analyze the data. Finally, teachers share their findings with colleagues and develop a plan for action. Action research is the best method for my study because I am a prospective teacher interested in improving my teaching practice through research. It would be unethical and contrary to my goals to do an experimental study that requires me to withhold effective education from a control group of students, so action research fits my purposes in that I am using research-based practices in an attempt to improve my teaching practice, documenting, and reflecting on the results.

My research question has two parts: 1.) Does offering students choice from a menu of assessment options improve student engagement? 2.) How can educators ensure that alternative assessments are academically rigorous and valid measures of student learning?

#### **Participants and Setting**

This study took place at a middle school in a small, rural Oregon community. Local Middle School (LMS) serves approximately 530 students grades 6-8. Of the 530 students enrolled, 15% are documented as having disabilities, 35% are experiencing poverty, and 7% are English Language Learners (ODE, 2024-2025). I focused on one class of 8th-graders in a US History class during our second semester 3rd period class. The classroom is adorned with historical documents, maps, so many globes and other historical artifacts presenting the classroom as a space focused primarily on social studies, especially US History and geography.

Seating charts are partially randomized with consideration given to accommodations and student needs.

The class is a semester-long 8th-grade US History course exploring the culture, politics, and critical events from European colonization to the US Civil War. Students had knowledge of the classroom layout, policies, procedures, and expectations. Students were able to recognize the values inherent in the United States' founding documents and see how these values haven't always been reflected in the actions of our government. Students were familiar with the context that led to the creation of the US Constitution: i.e., colonization of North America by Great Britain; the French and Indian War; colonial resistance to taxation; the American Revolution; the Declaration of Independence; the Articles of Confederation; Federalists/ Anti-Federalists; and the Bill of Rights.

The class has 24 students with gender presumably spread out evenly. Less than 25% of the students are latinx while the remaining appear white, non hispanic. The full-time teacher in the classroom, my clinical teacher (CT), is a respected, enthusiastic, and competent teacher with 5-years of teaching experience. This class began January of 2026 so I only had one month with these students before beginning the unit. I knew some of them from encounters in the hallway and classrooms that I've substituted for, but we were still fairly new to each other. This was a great group of students who demonstrated curiosity, were generally respectful, and were quick to engage in learning activities. I had the opportunity to help each of these students during classes while my CT was teaching and also had some opportunities to provide direct instruction for these students.

As a part of the process of building our teacher-student relationships, I was able to connect with much of the class as we discussed our personal values and created personal flags.

My strengths with these students, I believe, is my calm and understanding demeanor which helps develop a trusting relationship with students. This semester, I have improved my authoritative-ness and my staying firm with expectations, but I need to keep improving in this area.

### **Data Collection & Analysis**

For my data analysis, I examined four themes in order to better understand how my research questions were answered with the data I collected. The themes were drawn through the open coding process which was guided in part by my purpose statement to “learn how flexible assessment impacts student learning and teacher teaching”. I used the graphic organizer provided at the in-person MAT workshop at WOU to write down my “research questions” and my “sources of evidence”, then “findings and emerging themes”. This graphic organizer helped me discover the themes that emerged from the evidence. The themes I wrote at the bottom of the graphic organizer were 1.) Suspended Judgement 2.) Validity 3.) Motivation 4.) Practicality. These themes came from my research and education philosophy as well as from the data itself. Dr. Lehman reviewed my work and responded promptly with positive, constructive feedback asking to expand on my themes and sharpen my data analysis.

Since Dr. Lehman’s feedback, I have expanded on my four themes and have more thoroughly analyzed the data from my surveys and from the WOUTPA formative criteria-based assessment. I finished writing Section V, which discussed theme four – suspended judgment – and aimed to describe a clear connection between my data and the theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 1. Dr. Lehman’s advice inspired me to keep writing while focusing on tangible improvements in my data analysis.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As a white, cis-het, middle-class, English-speaking man, I come from a place of privilege. Growing up, I took it for granted that I would go to college and pursue some sort of professional career. I recognize that many of my peers and students do not come from a similar place of privilege and that any judgements I make about their effort or ability would be based on my own ignorance, so it is important that I suspend my judgement and first seek to understand their perspectives. In a similar vein, I realize that it can be problematic for me to pretend to understand American Indian Metaphysics enough to rely on it to guide my study and I worry it is too much of a stretch to fit it into my research, but I also feel like it is important to try to shift my my own perspective toward one that's potentially less toxic. I believe that focusing on suspending judgement and inviting multiple perspectives with an anchor to "place" is a correct path toward improving my teaching practice in a way that is aligned with my educational philosophy.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

### **Section 1: Overview**

Four major themes emerged from analyzing the data. They are 1.) the impact on students' motivation and engagement; 2.) the validity of measuring student learning through different assessment types; 3.) the practicality of implementing flexible assessment in an 8th grade US History class; and 4.) the relevance of practicing suspended judgment in assessment. Each theme is discussed below with supportive data.

### **Section 2. Motivation and Engagement**

The first theme, “the impact of student choice from a menu of assessment options on students' motivation and engagement”, is a theme directly derived from the first part of the research question: “Does offering students choice in assessment type improve student engagement?”. The data collected for this part of the research question included teacher candidate observations and reflections, student responses to a survey, and students' assessment submissions along with their scores. Although there are limitations to how this data can be interpreted to indicate that student engagement improved as the result of students having a choice among assessment options, the data did provide some compelling insight into its effects on student engagement.

The quality of work that a student submitted for their assessment was one potential indicator of their levels of engagement and motivation. When students demonstrated sustained effort in order to complete a high quality assessment, it could be assumed that they had higher levels of engagement in the learning and assessment process. When scoring student work, the teacher candidate consulted a rubric defining a high quality assessment submission as work that demonstrates understanding and explanation of government concepts, that is organized and clear,

that utilizes appropriate writing conventions, and that demonstrates effort, neatness, and visual appeal. Assessments that received full credit in each of these categories were likely completed by students who were highly engaged in the learning and assessment process.

The average grade across the three 8th-grade classes totalling about 80-85 students was 75.3%, indicating that students, on average, met the criteria for their assessment choice. In this case, the outliers are just as informative as the averages, since high quality work would indicate an engaged and motivated student, while low quality work may indicate the opposite.

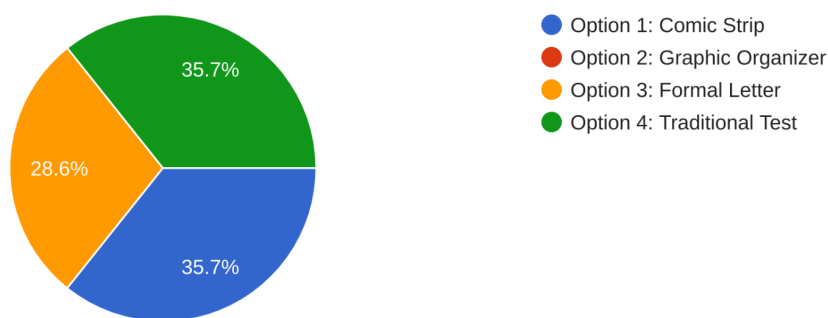
Another aspect of assessment submissions that indicate student engagement levels is the amount of assessments submitted compared to the amount of assessments still missing. Students who have not submitted an assessment may not be as engaged as students who have. Although other factors such as absences, extracurricular activities, learning differences, socio-emotional, and social-economic circumstances may have a greater impact on student engagement, it is certainly plausible that students who completed the assessments were motivated by their ability to choose their mode of expression. However, no clear trend emerged from this data, because there were a number of students who did not submit an assessment even though they know late work is always accepted for full credit

On the final day of the unit of instruction, students were invited to share their opinions on the assessment format via a google form survey. Students were asked which assessment option they chose; they were asked to rate the difficulty of their assessment out of 5; they were asked how much they liked having options for assessment; they were asked whether they agreed with 9 different statements; they were asked whether they would choose the same assessment option again; they were asked if there should be more choices or less; and they were asked what they

would change about the assessment format. Fourteen students responded to the survey which represented about 1/3 of students who participated in the assessments.

Which assessment option did you choose?

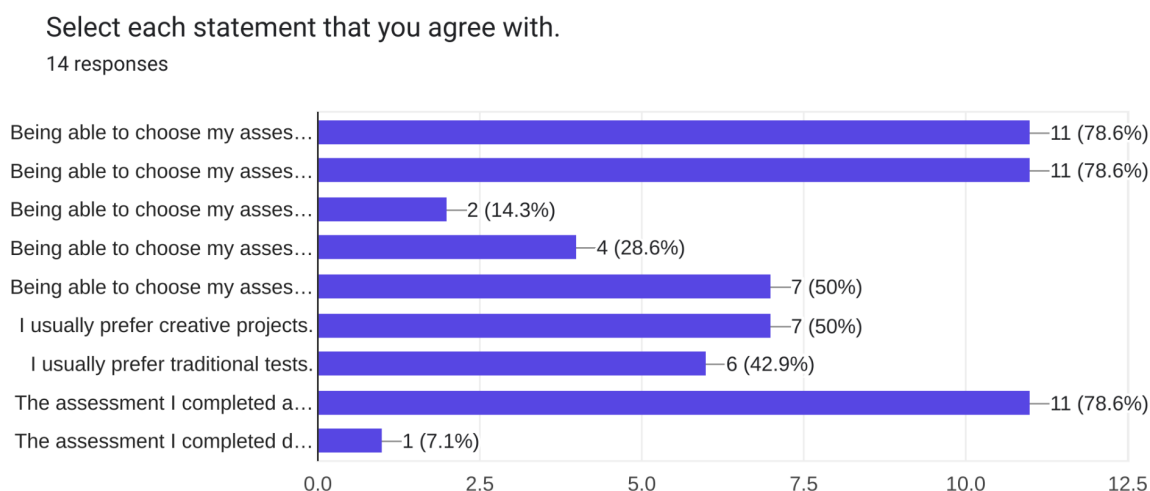
14 responses



*Figure 1*

The percent of students who chose the comic strip option and the traditional test was the same at 35.7%, while 28.6% percent chose the formal letter option. 64.3% of students who responded gave their assessment a difficulty rating of  $\frac{3}{5}$ , while 35.7% thought they would receive an A and 35.7% thought they would receive a B, indicating that students were generally confident in their assessment product. 64.3% of students who responded ranked their appreciation of assessment options a 5/5. 78.6% of students who responded agreed with the statement “Being able to choose my assessment makes me want to do a better job” which would be a clear indication that the flexible assessment format improves student engagement and motivation if perhaps there were a larger sample size.





*Figure 2*

These survey percentages hinted at an increased motivation from the students who participated in the survey, although it may rather hint at these students' motivation to complete the survey. I even witnessed one student scan the QR to take the survey, but never finished their assessment. Surveys were anonymous and optional so students weren't necessarily motivated to provide sincere responses. Ultimately, these survey responses mainly contribute to my research question in that they show how I could improve my surveys to better represent student motivation to complete high quality assessments. In the meantime, I can fill in the gaps and assume that other students would supply similar responses, i.e. that increased student choice in assessment leads to increased motivation and engagement.

While observing and interacting with students as they made their decisions, I noticed a clear theme of students changing their minds from the comic strip option to the traditional test after realizing the comic strip required more of a commitment than the traditional test. One high-achieving student lamented that it would take too long to create a comic strip that lived up to their own standards so they decided to take the traditional test even without preparing notes. This

student excelled at the traditional test, scoring a 21.5 out of 20, while the decision itself was extremely telling for me. The notion that this student could make the decision to express their learning in the mode they were most comfortable with validated my reasoning for allowing students to choose from a menu of assessment options.

One clear example of a student being motivated by the alternative assessment options is shown in figure 3. This student is normally motivated to do well in class, but struggles to finish lengthier writing assignments. I believe the comic strip option suited them well because it allowed them to express their thoughts primarily using images and action, while requiring minimal, yet clear and concise writing. I was informed by the student's parents during a conference that they stayed up late in order to finish it, which further supports the idea that flexible assessment improves motivation for this student..

Figure 3

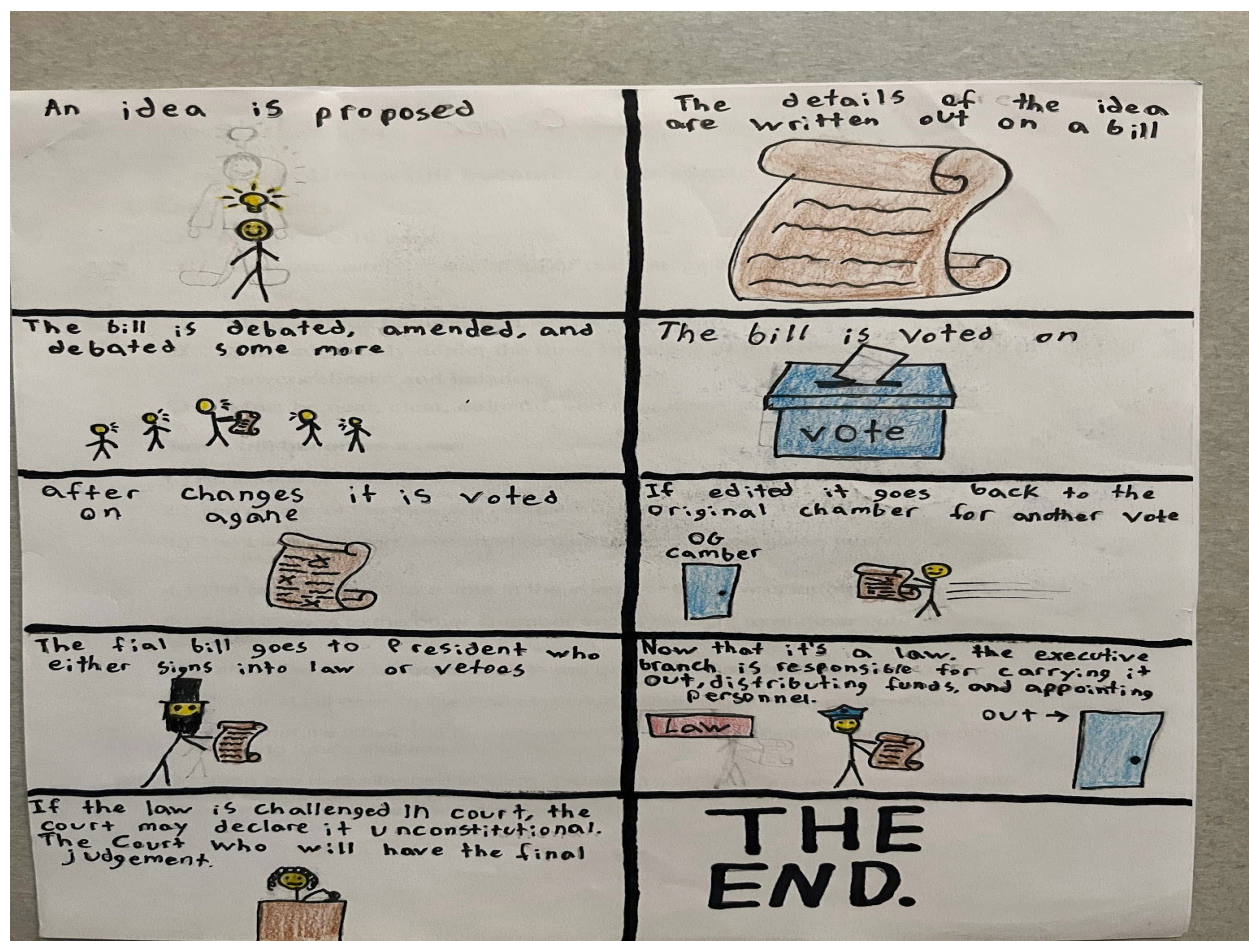


Figure 3 is a sample of one student's comic strip showing how a bill becomes a law.

### Section 3. Validity

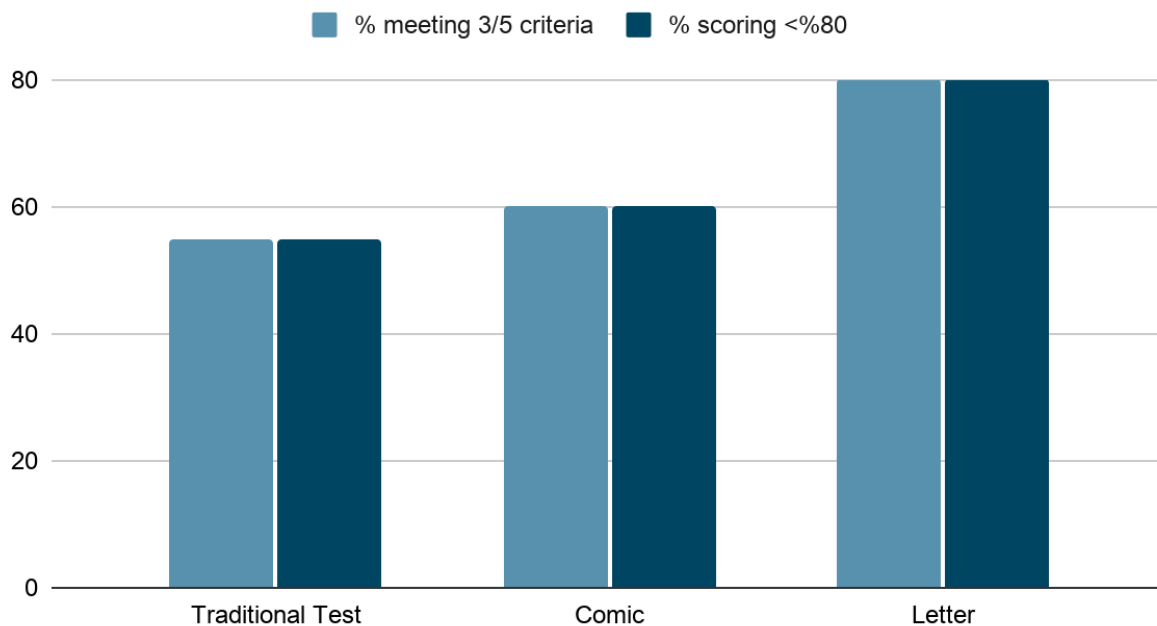
The validity of measuring student learning through different assessment types is also a theme derived from a research question: "How can educators ensure that alternative assessments are academically rigorous and valid measures of student learning?". This theme came up frequently while planning and scoring assessments, since it wasn't straightforward how to create assessments with equal difficulty that could be scored based on the same criteria. Ultimately, I decided on 4 different assessment types: three creative projects and one traditional test. I created one rubric to cover the three creative projects that highlighted understanding and explanation of

government concepts; organization and clarity; writing conventions; and effort, neatness, and visual appeal. The traditional test was much more straightforward with clear right or wrong answers, so in a sense, it acted as a control that enabled me to compare the accuracy of the scores for the creative project assessments.

While analyzing the data from these assessments using the WOUTPA Formative Criteria Based Assessment and Follow-up Plan template ([Copy of Section 4, Part 2: WOU TPA Formative Criteria Based Assessment and Follow Up Plan](#)), I recognized a clear trend where not only was it possible to evaluate each of the 4 assessments based on the same criteria, the number of criteria met by each assessment was strongly correlated with the scores they received. There were 5 criteria selected for this analysis based largely on the unit's central focus: 1.) Demonstrated knowledge of each of the three branches' structure and powers; 2.) Demonstrated knowledge of the concept of checks and balances; 3.) Demonstrated knowledge of the concept of separation of powers; 4.) Used their own words to clearly answer the prompts; 5.) Made no factual mistakes. The assessments that met each criterion were the same assessments that received a 20/20 (or more if they received extra credit on the traditional test). Some assessments did not yet meet one of the criteria, but made up for it by exceeding in another criteria which was reflected in the score it received. For example, one comic strip relied predominantly on the descriptions that I supplied in the handout (not yet meeting criterion 4), but the images that the student drew showed an especially clear understanding of checks and balances (exceeding in criterion 2).

Figure 4

## Percent



*Figure 4 shows that assessments meeting the majority of criteria also received a “B” or better in the gradebook. This should come as no surprise since my criteria and my rubric were based on the same central focus.*

*Figure 5*

| Category & % Weight                                             | Beginning                                                                                                             | Approaching                                                                                                                                  | Meets                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Exceeds                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Understanding & Explanation of Government Concepts (50% weight) | I show major misunderstandings or am missing key concepts.<br><br>My explanations are very unclear or mostly missing. | I show some understanding but am missing important information OR have several mistakes.<br><br>Some explanations are unclear or incomplete. | <input type="checkbox"/> I accurately explained the main ideas.<br><input type="checkbox"/> My information is mostly complete.<br><input type="checkbox"/> I use my own words.<br><input type="checkbox"/> I made only small mistakes. | I show a strong and accurate understanding of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The three branches.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Separation of Powers.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Checks &amp; balances.</li> </ul> + <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I clearly explain ideas in my own words.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I show how the branches connect and interact.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I make no factual mistakes.</li> </ul> |
| Organization & Clarity (20%)                                    | My project is hard to follow.                                                                                         | Some parts are confusing or out of order.                                                                                                    | My project is <b>mostly</b> clear and organized.                                                                                                                                                                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> My project is very easy to follow<br><input type="checkbox"/> My ideas are in logical order.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Writing Conventions (15%)                                       | Errors make the work difficult to understand.                                                                         | Frequent errors that distract the reader.                                                                                                    | Some small errors, but the meaning is clear.                                                                                                                                                                                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Few or no errors.<br><input type="checkbox"/> Writing is clear and polished.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Effort, Neatness & Visual Appeal (15%)                          | My work is very messy, rushed, or incomplete.                                                                         | My work looks somewhat rushed or messy,                                                                                                      | My work is neat and complete.                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <input type="checkbox"/> My work shows strong effort and care.<br><input type="checkbox"/> It is neat, readable, and visually clear.<br><input type="checkbox"/> I took pride in my work.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

Figure 5 is a copy of the rubric used to score all alternative assessments. The understanding and explanation category was worth 10 points out of 20.

#### Section 4: Practicality

The third theme - the practicality of implementing flexible assessment in an 8th grade US History class- showed up frequently in the literature review and proved to be a significant factor in this ARP. As previously mentioned, it was complicated to create 4 different assessments that could be scored on the same criteria. The teacher also had to spend their time split between

creating 4 different assessments rather than spending their time strengthening one solid assessment. These complications would be minimized if I were to teach the same lesson again, since I wouldn't have to create the assessments again from scratch, but I could build from them each time.

The next complication arose when each of the assessment options were introduced to the students. For one, the introduction of the assessment options took up half of the class time, so students had less time to make their decisions and begin work on their assessment. Second, students who were deciding between assessment options had to split their focus for understanding each of the 4 options, so their understanding of the requirements may have been limited or mixed up. This theme presented itself in students' assessment products since many of them left out key details

### **Section 5: Suspended Judgment**

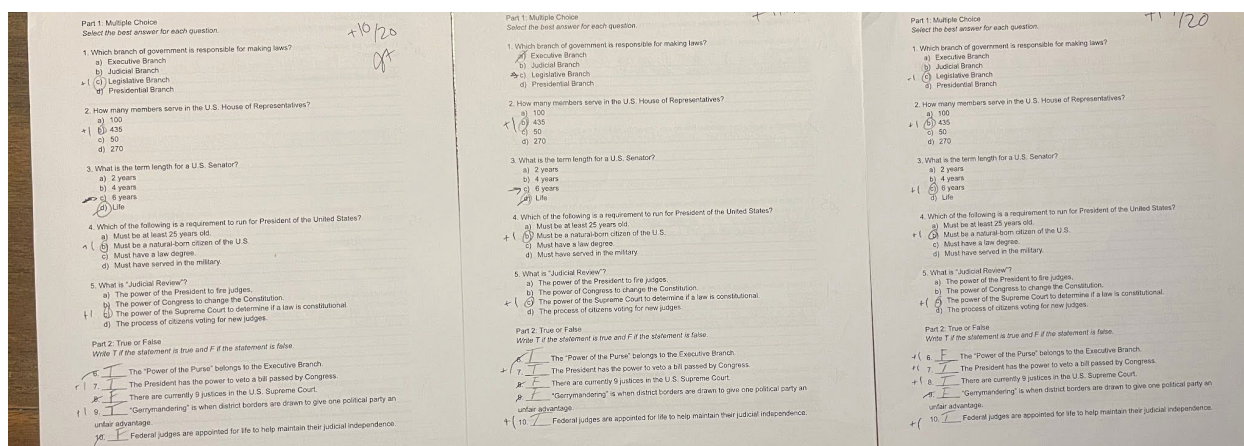
The fourth theme -- suspended judgement -- became obvious when I agreed to allow nearly unlimited assessment retakes. Suspended judgment, whether mine or my students', was critical to my justification for allowing multiple retakes. I wanted students to be able to change their minds and learn from their misunderstandings, while I also reserved the opportunity to grow my understanding of their learning through each retake. Although this added significantly to my own work load and complicated the integrity of the assessments, it did provide a clear view of growth toward meeting and exceeding the unit's central focus.

The traditional test contained 5 multiple choice, 5 true/false, 5 short answer questions, and 8 matching. Students were allowed to make one page, front and back, of notes for their test – but some students chose not to make notes. One student took the traditional test 3 times before settling on a score they were content with. First, the student earned 10 out of 20 points on the



quiz and stated that they were unhappy with it, so they wanted a retake. I recommended they write some notes before trying again. The next class day, the student wanted to try again – without notes again – and earned an additional 1.5 points. I strongly recommended that the student make a page of notes before trying again, which they did, and they earned a 19/20. I have heard some debate about whether or not allowing students to retake the same test questions over and over is valid, but I believe that when the focus is on the learning process, each retake [figure 4] is an informative and valid measure of student learning.

*Figure 6: Traditional Assessment + two retakes*



*Figure 6 shows three attempts at the traditional test from the same student. The student still confused the Executive and Legislative Branch, but each attempt showed growth.*



## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusions**

### **Discussion**

My ARP mirrored the approach of some studies from Chapter 2 and some of the results were also replicated. Achasoso et al. (2021) utilized a mix of assessment types and noted a positive correlation between performance on traditional assessments and alternative assessments. My data also showed that the traditional assessment performance was comparable to performance on the alternative assessments when analyzed under the same criteria. Because I designed each assessment to allow students to show that they met the unit's central focus and social studies standard, each assessment could be evaluated according to how well they were able to describe the 3 branches of US government as well as concepts of checks and balances and separation of powers. These results contribute to answering my research question: "How can educators ensure that alternative assessments are academically rigorous and valid measures of student learning?", because it shows that alternative assessment performance is comparable to traditional assessment performance.

Cowan (2024) illustrated how flexible assessment and student choice can improve student motivation, but noted some drawbacks in the increased teacher workload. Students' responses to my survey hinted toward a similar conclusion although it's not clear given the small sample size. Cowan (2024) promoted assessment flexibility through a "'choose-your-own-adventure' suite of assignments" in an undergraduate university history course. The author noted benefits in improved student motivation and satisfaction with the course, but warned that flexible assessment should be appropriate for the course content and shouldn't be overly complicated.

I took Cowan's advice when designing my own menu of assessments, choosing to create only 4 options, including a standard, traditional quiz, and using one rubric for each alternative assessment. Limiting students' choices to 4 simple assessment options appeared to reduce the

anxiety that Cowan's students experienced over too many options in flexible assessment, but it may still have been too many options for students to completely understand the requirements of each choice. The increased workload that Cowan described was also apparent in my own application of flexible assessment, because there was a notable increase in my own work in creating, instructing, and evaluating the assessments.

Rangachari (2006) administered a menu of assessment options in the context of an inquiry-based, interdisciplinary, undergraduate science course at the University of Calgary. Rangachari (2006) provided students with 8 different options spread out over the course and permitted flexibility in how assignments were weighted. The author found that students generally responded positively to the flexible assessment format and submitted high-quality work. The author also noted benefits to the teacher/grader who enjoyed the variety and creativity demonstrated through the various assessments rather than the monotony of grading traditional assessments. For an eighth-grade social studies course, Rangachari's approach would likely be too complicated to carry out – so, although I also offered multiple assessment types, there were only half as many options, they were weighted the same, and they were each due at the same time. Although my assessments were not on the same level of flexibility and variety, I also preferred grading the different types of assessments over a single assessment largely for the reasons described above.

### **Limitations**

Limitations for my study include theoretical limitations, methodological limitations, and practical limitations. In some ways, my study was limited by the very nature of the theory that guided it. The tenets of American Indian Metaphysics could be described as “Relation v. Causation”; “Unity v. Reduction”; and “Suspended Judgement v. Misplaced Concreteness”

(Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). American Indian Metaphysics is explained in contrast to European Metaphysics which happens to be the predominant paradigm for how we do modern science. The question becomes: how can we learn from American Indian Metaphysics to better understand student learning while operating under the European Metaphysical paradigm?

American Indian Metaphysics suggests that we look for relations rather than causes which is currently all we can do when studying something as complex as human learning. The goal of science may be to find the cause of students learning the content while pointing to measurable outcomes, but that is not something that is within the scope of this ARP. The goal of this ARP *is* to examine the relationship between flexible assessment and student learning, which I believe is very much compatible with American Indian Metaphysics.

The main methodological limitations are related to the theoretical limitations, i.e., this study does not and cannot isolate causes and effects. Flexible assessment is only one small component of what may be influencing students' learning and their demonstration of learning. It may be true that flexible assessment improves students' motivation to complete high-quality assessments, unless that student has developed learned helplessness or has more urgent things to focus on outside of school, for example. On that note, my research only shows the relationship of my version of flexible assessment with my students' learning and may not apply to classrooms in other communities.

Another methodological limitation is researcher bias. My bias has shaped this entire project despite my best efforts to hide it. Perhaps, for example, I wanted to show that flexible assessment benefits student learning and teacher teaching, so I interpreted the data in a way that supported this conclusion. Since much of the data is dependent on the teacher/researcher's subjective judgment, there is a lot of room for bias to infiltrate the process and conclusions.

Practical limitations carry over from the fourth theme from chapter 4: flexible assessments add more complications than some teachers may be ready or willing to add to their workload. Other teachers with more experience designing and evaluating assessments would likely be better suited to apply flexible assessment in their own classrooms since they will have the tools to ensure each of their assessment types are sufficiently academically rigorous and appropriately scaffolded. Other teachers seeking to apply flexible assessment in their classroom should also take more time to pre-teach and have students practice how to complete each of the different types of assessments

Future studies may gather more quantifiable data and try harder to isolate causes and effects but such a study would still only show part of the picture. Student learning is influenced by a multitude of factors, many outside our control or understanding as teachers and researchers. Future studies should consider all of these potential factors while leaving open the possibility of unknown influences. To understand how flexible assessments motivate students, for instance, we should become familiar with what already motivates them in their lives. I believe that the wisdom of American Indian Metaphysics and its orientation toward “place” is especially relevant for the implications because the results of my study may only apply in this specific context or place, so future studies should be wary of making generalizations from my conclusions to apply to their own place of study.

### **Conclusion**

My study examined the relationship between flexible assessment, student learning, and teacher teaching. I created 4 different assessments for 8th grade US History students to choose from. One assessment was a traditional quiz with multiple choice, true/false, short answer and matching questions. Option 2 was to create a 10-panel comic strip about how a bill becomes a

law. Option 3 was to write a letter to an elected official. Option 4 was to create a graphic organizer/infographic describing checks and balances. I intended for each assessment to target different student strengths, whether they excel in the traditional format or in creating art to express their learning. Some students felt more comfortable creating a graphic organizer/infographic, while others felt inspired to write to a representative. Although there were complications in creating, presenting, and evaluating the alternative assessments, the process and the results of the study were rewarding.

I learned that students appreciate when they can choose how they are assessed for their learning and that this kind of flexible assessment can be an effective way to evaluate student learning. I also learned that American Indian Metaphysics can guide an action research project that yields productive conclusions even in the context of modern science. Ultimately, when I examined the relationship between flexible assessment, student learning, and teacher teaching, I found satisfactory answers to my research questions: flexible assessment can improve student motivation and engagement in some circumstances, and alternative assessments can be comparable to traditional assessments.

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