



# The Performing University: Assessment, Authenticity, and Meta-Absurdism in Higher Education

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## Finals Week

It's finals week at a mid-sized American university, and something quietly extraordinary is happening in a classroom on the third floor of the humanities building. A student is presenting her research on the role of silence in Pinter's early plays. She has spent three weeks reading, thinking, and writing. She knows things about *The Birthday Party* that she didn't know a month ago, and that knowledge has changed the way she understands language, power, and the space between spoken words. She is genuinely excited. She has prepared carefully. As she stands at the front of the room, however, she is aware not only of what she has learned but of how that learning must now appear to others. She is performing.

She's performing for her professor, who is listening with practiced attention while completing a rubric. She's performing for her classmates, who divide their attention between her argument and the presentations they will soon deliver themselves. She's performing for herself, constructing the public version of the scholar she hopes to become. She is also performing for the records that will preserve this moment beyond the classroom: the transcript that will translate it into a grade, the program assessment report that will aggregate it alongside dozens of similar presentations, and the accreditation narrative that will eventually cite it as evidence of student learning outcomes.

None of these performances is dishonest. The student isn't pretending to care about Pinter. The professor isn't pretending to listen. The institution isn't pretending to educate. Yet something has multiplied in the room beyond what any one participant intended. The student is learning while also producing evidence of learning. These activities are related, but they are not identical, and the distance between them, unremarkable in any individual moment, has become one of the defining conditions through which contemporary higher education is experienced.

Theatre practitioners have long recognized the distinction between authentic response and performed effect. [Sanford Meisner's acting technique](#) insists that truthful performance grows out of genuine engagement with circumstances rather than an attempt to display emotion for an audience. His oft-repeated principle, sometimes described as the "pinch and the ouch," reminds actors that truthful behavior begins with authentic response. The student's deepest learning has already occurred in her sustained encounter with [Pinter's work](#). The presentation asks her to

transform that authentic intellectual response into a performance that can be evaluated. The educational tension begins precisely there.

This essay examines that distance with care and without cynicism. The expansion of audience within higher education, from the individual instructor assessing student work to departments measuring program outcomes and institutions demonstrating accountability to accreditors, legislatures, and the public, has unfolded through a series of well-intentioned reforms grounded in legitimate educational values. Understanding how those reforms have reshaped the experience of learning requires both a historical account of assessment's evolution and a theoretical framework capable of naming the condition that has emerged. That framework does not come from educational philosophy alone. It comes, perhaps surprisingly, from contemporary theatre theory.



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## The Assessment Tradition and Its Discontents

Assessment has always been part of formal education, but the form it takes and the purposes it serves have shifted considerably across the history of Western schooling. For much of that history, the relationship between teaching and evaluation was intimate and largely internal. A medieval university scholar defended a thesis before masters who knew him, had read the same texts, and exercised disciplinary rather than bureaucratic judgment. The examination existed to determine readiness, not to generate data. The audience for the performance of knowledge was small, specialized, and physically present.

The expansion of higher education during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gradually changed these conditions. As universities grew larger and more complex, as student populations expanded and academic disciplines became increasingly specialized, the informal practices through which faculty had long assessed student learning no longer served institutional needs. Standardized grading systems emerged less from theories of learning than from administrative necessity: the practical challenge of communicating something portable and legible about student performance across departments, institutions, and generations of students. As historians of education have observed, the letter grade is not primarily a pedagogical instrument. It is a bureaucratic one, translating locally situated judgments into forms that can circulate beyond the classroom.

The twentieth century also brought increasingly sophisticated efforts to align assessment with learning theory and with a richer understanding of how people actually acquire knowledge and skill. John Dewey's *Experience and Education* (1938) argued that learning is not the passive reception of information but the active reconstruction of experience. Education, for Dewey, is a continuous process of inquiry, action, and reflection. Assessment, therefore, must engage that process rather than merely sample its products. Dewey was not hostile to evaluation. He insisted instead that evaluation detached from authentic experience risks producing not knowledge itself but its simulacrum: students who can reproduce the appearance of understanding without having undergone the transformation that genuine understanding requires.

Paulo Freire extended this concern into the political sphere. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), his critique of the "banking model" described an educational system in which students function as repositories into which teachers deposit knowledge. Such a system, he argued, produces not education but domestication. Students learn to receive, store and reproduce information on demand, a process that resembles learning from the outside while remaining detached from authentic intellectual development. Freire's deeper insight was that educational structures are never neutral. The ways learning is organized, evaluated and reported do not simply measure education; they help determine what kinds of learning become possible.

These insights informed a wave of assessment reform during the late twentieth century. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's *Understanding by Design* argued that curriculum should begin with enduring understandings rather than content coverage. Assessment, in this framework, should reveal genuine understanding: the ability to transfer knowledge, explain concepts, and apply ideas in unfamiliar situations. Wiggins argued that conventional testing privileges recall over understanding, rewarding behaviors that often bear little resemblance to meaningful learning. His concept of authentic assessment, therefore, emphasized performances, projects, and portfolios that approximate the work of practitioners rather than isolated demonstrations of recall.

John Biggs's theory of constructive alignment extended this concern from individual assignments to the design of educational systems. Students, he argued, orient themselves toward whatever assessment rewards, regardless of what instructors claim to value. That observation carries an implication that becomes especially important for this essay. If assessment shapes learning, and if assessment increasingly serves institutional as well as pedagogical purposes, then those institutional purposes inevitably shape learning as well. The administrative function of assessment is never merely administrative. It becomes part of the educational environment itself.

Dylan Wiliam's work on formative assessment demonstrated empirically what Dewey and Freire had argued philosophically: assessment exerts its greatest influence while learning is still underway, when feedback can alter understanding rather than simply record it. His distinction between formative assessment, assessment for learning, and summative assessment, assessment of learning, clarifies an important feature of contemporary higher education. The reforms that have transformed institutional assessment over the past several decades have been overwhelmingly summative. Program learning outcomes, accreditation self-studies, institutional effectiveness reports, and course-embedded assessment primarily document learning after it has occurred. Their purpose is legitimate. Their orientation, however, is fundamentally different from assessment designed to shape learning itself.

David Boud's work on sustainable assessment shifts attention from institutional evaluation to students' long-term capacity for self-assessment. The graduate who leaves a course asking, "What grade did I earn?" has developed a different habit of mind from the graduate asking, "How well did I accomplish what I intended to do?" Sustainable assessment seeks to cultivate the latter. Lee Shulman's concept of signature pedagogies similarly emphasizes that professional education involves more than acquiring knowledge. Students learn to think, act and value as members of a discipline. Assessing that formation is necessarily more complex and less reducible to quantifiable measures than assessing content knowledge alone. Together, Boud and Shulman remind us that the deepest educational achievements often resist the very forms of documentation contemporary institutions increasingly require.

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## The Expanding Audience

The educational literature on assessment consistently argues that learning is most authentic when it serves real purposes and real audiences. Whether scholars describe authentic assessment, constructive alignment, formative feedback or sustainable assessment, they converge on a common principle: students learn most deeply when their work matters beyond the production of a grade and when feedback can still shape understanding rather than merely record it.

Ironically, the institutional development of higher education over the same period has expanded the audience for learning in a different way. Students no longer demonstrate understanding primarily to instructors and classmates. Their work increasingly becomes evidence for departments, institutions, accreditors, legislatures and funding agencies. Each additional audience serves a legitimate purpose. Collectively, however, they change the conditions under which learning is experienced.

This expansion did not arise from indifference to education. It emerged through a series of reasonable responses to reasonable concerns. As higher education became more expensive and more consequential for students' economic lives, questions about educational quality became increasingly urgent. Universities receiving public funding were expected to demonstrate public value. Regional accreditors shifted their attention from institutional inputs, such as library holdings and faculty credentials, toward evidence of student learning. State and federal agencies likewise sought measurable indicators that educational investments were producing meaningful outcomes. Each reform addressed a genuine problem. Together, they required institutions to

generate forms of evidence that earlier generations of universities had never been asked to produce.

Ernest Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990) exemplifies both the promise and the complexity of this transformation. Boyer argued that teaching should be recognized as scholarly work worthy of the same intellectual seriousness traditionally reserved for research. His vision was not one of bureaucratic accountability but of a scholarly community. Teaching, he believed, should become a public practice that colleagues could examine, discuss, and improve.

The scholarship of teaching and learning that followed has enriched higher education in countless ways. Yet as those ideas became embedded within institutional accountability systems, they acquired additional functions that Boyer himself did not envision. Faculty increasingly documented learning objectives, collected evidence of student achievement, and interpreted assessment data not only to improve teaching but also to satisfy promotion processes, departmental reviews, and accreditation requirements. None of this documentation is inherently performative or educationally empty. In many settings, it has improved teaching by making instructional decisions more intentional and more transparent. It has also expanded the audience for teaching beyond students and disciplinary peers to include institutional structures responsible for demonstrating educational effectiveness.

Lorrie Shepard's influential essay "The Role of Assessment in a Learning Culture" (2000) identified a tension that remains central to contemporary assessment. Drawing on cognitive science and educational psychology, Shepard distinguished between assessment that supports learning and assessment that serves accountability. She did not reject accountability. Rather, she observed that accountability systems tend to dominate educational environments because they carry institutional consequences. When funding, accreditation, and public reputation depend upon measurable evidence, the production of evidence naturally commands attention. The performance begins to compete with the learning it was designed to represent.

Graham Gibbs reached a similar conclusion from a different direction. His research on assessment regimes demonstrated that the quantity and design of assessment profoundly influence how students approach learning. Environments dominated by frequent, high-stakes assessment encourage surface approaches focused on succeeding on the next evaluation rather than developing a durable understanding. Assessment itself is therefore never educationally neutral. It teaches students what matters.

This observation becomes increasingly significant as assessment accumulates across institutional levels. Learning outcomes exist for assignments, courses, academic programs, and institutions. Faculty complete formative assessments, summative assessments, embedded assessments, peer observations, student evaluations, and administrative reviews. Individually, each requirement serves a defensible purpose. Collectively, they create an educational environment saturated with evidence. Assessment becomes increasingly visible while learning itself risks becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from the documentation intended to represent it.

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## Meta-Absurdism and the Performance of Learning

What has emerged from this history is something the educational literature, despite its considerable sophistication, has struggled to name with precision. The problem is not that higher education has become dishonest, nor that its participants have abandoned their commitments to learning, teaching or institutional excellence. Rather, the legitimate expansion of audiences and accountability structures has created conditions in which performance, the visible demonstration of learning, teaching and institutional effectiveness for multiple audiences, has become an inescapable dimension of educational life.

Students now perform learning not only for their instructors but also for transcripts that will be read by graduate schools and employers, for families who have invested in their education, and for institutional assessment systems that aggregate their work into program-level evidence. Faculty perform teaching not only for students but also for peer reviewers, annual review committees, student evaluations, promotion processes and accreditation reports. Departments perform accountability for deans and institutional research offices. Universities perform institutional effectiveness for accreditors, ranking organizations, donors, legislatures and the public.

These performances are not false. They arise from genuine commitments to learning, teaching, institutional stewardship, and public accountability. The student presenting on Pinter is genuinely learning about Pinter. The faculty member preparing a promotion dossier is genuinely reflecting on pedagogy. The department chair reviewing assessment reports genuinely wants to know whether students are learning. The institutional activity is authentic. What has changed is the environment in which that authenticity is enacted. Higher education has become so saturated with the requirement to demonstrate learning that the demonstration sometimes threatens to overtake the thing being demonstrated.

Educational philosophy has described these institutional developments with remarkable sophistication. What it has lacked is a vocabulary for describing the lived experience of inhabiting those structures simultaneously. Theatre theory, because it is fundamentally concerned with performance, audience and self-consciousness, offers precisely that vocabulary.

The Theatre of the Absurd emerged from the collapse of mid-twentieth-century confidence in stable meaning. Samuel Beckett's characters wait for a salvation that never arrives. Eugène Ionesco's characters speak without communicating. Harold Pinter's characters inhabit worlds charged with menace they cannot fully explain. What unites these playwrights is not style but orientation. Absurdism confronts absence. It asks how human beings continue to live when inherited structures of meaning no longer provide reliable ground.

Contemporary culture has inherited those questions while confronting a different condition. For many people, the defining problem is no longer the absence of meaning but its proliferation. Explanations, narratives, institutional frameworks and competing interpretations circulate continuously through digital media, organizations, algorithms and public discourse. The challenge is no longer discovering meaning within silence. It is discerning trustworthy meaning within overwhelming abundance.

This condition has given rise to what I have been developing as Meta-Absurdism, an emerging artistic and cultural framework that inherits the existential concerns of Absurdism while responding to the conditions of contemporary mediated life. Where Absurdism confronted silence, Meta-Absurdism confronts saturation. Where Absurdism dramatized the search for meaning, Meta-Absurdism dramatizes the search for authentic meaning within systems that generate competing meanings faster than individuals can fully evaluate them. Its characters struggle not because meaning is absent but because too many frameworks compete simultaneously for authority. They become persistently aware of observation, interpretation and competing expectations, and that awareness shapes behavior long before any external judgment is rendered.

Higher education increasingly exhibits precisely this condition. Students, faculty, departments and institutions all participate in authentic educational work while simultaneously producing evidence of that work for multiple audiences. The awareness of observation is no longer an interruption of educational life. It has become one of its ordinary conditions.

Contemporary universities also increasingly inhabit this condition through the digital systems that mediate institutional life. Learning management systems record patterns of participation, assignment submissions, discussion activity and assessment data. Institutional effectiveness platforms aggregate course outcomes into program reports and accreditation evidence. Analytics dashboards translate individual acts of learning into institutional metrics that can be reviewed long after the classroom experience itself has concluded. These technologies are not inherently coercive, nor are they educationally misguided. They exist to make learning visible across increasingly complex institutions. Yet they also extend the field of observation beyond the classroom, creating a condition in which students and faculty become aware that their educational activity is continually capable of being translated into evidence for audiences they may never meet directly. If the theatrical metaphor describes performance before an audience, digital assessment technologies increasingly function as the cameras that remain present even after the immediate audience has left the room.

John Biggs's theory of constructive alignment helps illuminate how this condition develops. Biggs argued that learning objectives, teaching activities and assessment tasks should reinforce one another so that students encounter a coherent educational experience. Within individual courses, constructive alignment remains one of the most influential and productive ideas in contemporary pedagogy. Yet when alignment expands from classrooms to entire institutions, its character changes. Course outcomes align with program outcomes. Program outcomes align with institutional goals. Institutional goals align with accreditation standards. Each layer of alignment is defensible. Together, they create a system in which demonstrating alignment becomes an institutional activity in its own right.

The central institutional question therefore begins to shift. It is no longer simply, "Are students learning?" Increasingly, it becomes, "Can we demonstrate that students are learning in ways that satisfy every audience to whom we are accountable?" Those questions are related, but they are not identical. The effort devoted to answering the second can gradually reshape the experience of pursuing the first.

This is why Meta-Absurdism offers something educational philosophy alone has not fully articulated. The challenge facing contemporary higher education is not a crisis of absent meaning. Universities have never possessed more clearly stated missions, learning outcomes, assessment frameworks or accountability systems. The challenge is one of saturation. Educational purposes have multiplied, audiences have multiplied, and the performances through which institutions demonstrate those purposes have multiplied as well. The result is a learning environment in which authenticity and performance no longer stand in opposition. They exist simultaneously, each continually shaping the other.

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## Recognition, Agency and Hope

The value of a theoretical framework lies less in solving a problem than in making it visible with sufficient precision that meaningful responses become possible. Meta-Absurdism does not resolve the tensions within contemporary higher education. It gives a name to a condition that has developed gradually through decades of well-intentioned reform and that existing educational theory has described only in part.

Naming the condition matters because structural problems are most easily mistaken for personal failures. Faculty who recognize that they work within a Meta-Absurdist educational environment understand that the competing demands upon their attention are not simply products of poor time management or insufficient commitment. They teach for students, document for colleagues, report for administrators, prepare evidence for accreditors, and respond to institutional expectations that often operate simultaneously. Recognizing that multiplicity allows those demands to become objects of deliberate judgment rather than sources of vague but persistent inadequacy.

Students benefit from the same recognition. A student who understands that higher education asks her to demonstrate learning for multiple audiences can more intentionally remain oriented toward learning itself. Freire argued that naming oppression is the first act of liberation. Without equating educational accountability with oppression, the underlying insight remains valuable. Structural conditions become easier to navigate once they become visible. The student who recognizes the performance can choose not to confuse it with the purpose it serves.

Recognition also changes the way existing educational scholarship can be understood. Within a Meta-Absurdist educational environment, David Boud's concept of sustainable assessment acquires renewed significance. Boud sought to cultivate students' capacity for self-evaluation rather than continual dependence upon external judgment. Under conditions of institutional saturation, that capacity becomes more than a desirable educational outcome. It becomes one of the principal ways authentic learning resists being reduced to its public performance. Within institutions that necessarily require grades, rubrics and learning outcomes, faculty can still create moments in which authentic inquiry temporarily takes precedence over documentation. The question becomes not whether accountability should disappear, but how educational practices can preserve spaces where curiosity, uncertainty and intellectual risk remain primary.

Graham Gibbs's work likewise takes on new significance when viewed through the lens of Meta-Absurdism. Gibbs demonstrated that assessment design shapes the way students approach

learning. Within a Meta-Absurdist environment, that observation extends beyond individual assignments. It suggests that the cumulative architecture of assessment also shapes how students experience education itself. Assignments that reward genuine inquiry, invite intellectual risk and encourage students to wrestle with questions whose answers are not predetermined reduce the distance between learning and its public demonstration. Rubrics and learning outcomes need not eliminate authentic learning. Their educational value depends upon whether they illuminate the learning process or simply document its products.

There is, ultimately, a hopeful dimension to this argument. The Theatre of the Absurd did not merely describe a world stripped of certainty. It transformed that condition into art. Beckett's characters continue speaking, waiting and caring for one another despite the silence surrounding them. Their persistence is not naïve optimism but disciplined attention to what remains possible within difficult conditions.

Meta-Absurdism offers a similar form of hope. It does not deny the complexity of contemporary institutions, nor does it imagine that accountability structures will disappear. Accreditation reviews, promotion processes, institutional assessment, and public reporting are now enduring features of the contemporary university. The audiences for educational performance are unlikely to become fewer. What can change is the degree to which those audiences are consciously recognized and deliberately negotiated by the people who inhabit them.

That recognition creates agency. Faculty who understand the performances their institutions require can make more deliberate choices about how those performances are organized, what purposes they ultimately serve, and when they genuinely contribute to student learning. Students can recognize that they are producing evidence of learning without allowing the production of evidence to become the goal of learning itself. Institutions, likewise, can distinguish between documentation that genuinely strengthens educational practice and documentation that merely accumulates because additional audiences have come to expect it.

Lorrie Shepard's vision of a learning culture also appears differently once the Meta-Absurdist condition is recognized. Shepard argued that assessment should become more fully integrated into learning itself rather than functioning primarily as external accountability. Meta-Absurdism suggests an additional reason that vision matters. Within saturated systems of observation, learning-oriented assessment helps preserve the educational purpose that accountability structures are ultimately intended to support. Assessment need not disappear, nor should it. Rather, assessment can become more fully integrated into the process of learning rather than existing primarily as evidence that learning has occurred. That possibility depends not only upon improved assessment practices but upon a clearer understanding of the institutional conditions within which assessment now operates. Naming those conditions does not diminish accountability. It allows accountability to be pursued with greater intentionality and greater awareness of its educational consequences.

Theatre offers one final insight. The accomplished actor never mistakes performance for the reality from which performance emerges. Performance is the public expression of something that has already been cultivated through rehearsal, discipline and imagination. The actor remains fully committed to the character while simultaneously maintaining the craft awareness necessary

to shape that commitment into artistic form. Authenticity and performance therefore coexist without becoming interchangeable.

The same is true of education. Students do not merely perform understanding. At their best, they genuinely come to understand. Faculty do not merely perform teaching. They teach. Assessment, accreditation and institutional accountability become educationally valuable insofar as they illuminate and support those realities rather than substituting for them.

Although this essay has focused on higher education, the theoretical framework it proposes is not limited to universities. Similar conditions emerge wherever authentic human activity unfolds under overlapping systems of observation, documentation and accountability. Contemporary medicine, nonprofit organizations, religious institutions, corporate workplaces and even artistic communities increasingly require participants to perform authentic practice while simultaneously generating evidence that the practice has occurred. Higher education provides an especially visible case because it has developed one of the most sophisticated vocabularies for describing learning while also constructing one of the most elaborate systems for documenting it. Meta-Absurdism argues that these developments are not unique to education but are characteristic of a broader cultural condition.

Higher education has always involved performance. Lectures, seminars, recitals, clinical rotations and dissertation defenses all ask learners to demonstrate publicly what they have come to know. What has changed is not the existence of performance itself but the proliferation of audiences, the multiplication of documentary evidence and the institutional weight attached to each act of demonstration. Educational philosophy has given us sophisticated accounts of assessment, curriculum and institutional effectiveness. Meta-Absurdism contributes a complementary vocabulary for describing what it feels like to inhabit those structures from within, when authentic learning and its continual public demonstration become inseparable features of the same educational experience.

The student presenting her research on Pinter will finish her presentation, receive her grade and move on to her next course. The rubric will be archived with the department's assessment materials. The learning outcome will eventually become one more point within a larger institutional narrative about student achievement. Yet somewhere within and beyond that documentation, something less measurable will endure. She will have learned to hear silence differently. She will notice pauses in conversations that once escaped her attention. She will recognize power in what remains unsaid. None of those changes will fit neatly inside a rubric, yet they remain the reason the rubric exists. The performance will conclude. The learning, if it is genuine, will continue long after the audience has gone home.

### **Further Reading**

- Biggs, John, and Catherine Tang. *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*.
- Boud, David. "Sustainable Assessment: Rethinking Assessment for the Learning Society." *Studies in Continuing Education*.
- Boyer, Ernest L. *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*.

- Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
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- Shepard, Lorrie A. "The Role of Assessment in a Learning Culture." *Educational Researcher*.
- Shulman, Lee S. "Signature Pedagogies in the Professions." *Daedalus*.
- Wiggins, Grant, and Jay McTighe. *Understanding by Design*.
- Wiliam, Dylan. *Embedded Formative Assessment*.