

Why Assessment Is the Great Unlock for AI Adoption in Education

By Matthew Pittinsky, Ph.D. · **DRAFT** · Last Revised May 8, 2026

When I taught SOC 421: Education and Society at Arizona State University, the explicit goals of the course were the ones you would expect from an upper-division sociological theory course: students would grapple with the nature of education in American society, schools as social organizations, and perhaps reconsider their own educational experience through the lens of the field. Of course, most of the students were not going to be sociologists of education. So, I added to the syllabus four "equally important" secondary objectives: this course is designed to improve your writing skills, your speaking skills, your analytic skills, and your comfort with numbers.

Because it was a theory and discussion course, the assessments leaned heavily on writing -- two short topic papers, a longer team paper, two in-class essay exams, and weekly reflections on the course's discussion board. The tradeoff of assigning a lot of writing, of course, is that someone must read and evaluate it, ideally in a way that promotes student learning.

In a class of fifty or sixty students, that someone was me. Every faculty member who has graded a stack of fifty papers before the next assignment is due knows where this is heading. The focus of my comments on the page, and of the grade I assigned, was the substance: the argument, use of evidence, and mastery of the concepts. What I did

not do -- but wish I had -- was engage with their writing in any depth. Re-reading my syllabus, I was honest about it:

The TA and/or I will be happy to discuss ideas with you, but we are not in a position to read drafts of your paper to offer suggestions for revisions or proofreading. For this type of assistance, see ASU's Writing Center.

On the page, that sounded reasonable. In practice, it meant that the meta objective I had announced on day one got outsourced. Not because I didn't care about it, but because I was one human, and the rubric in my head was richer than the time I had.

I have been thinking about that classroom a lot lately. It is one example -- a small one -- of why I have come to believe that *nailing assessment is the unlock for AI adoption in education*.

Where the Fear Is Concentrated

Recent surveys paint a picture of rising negative concern about AI in education -- driven, more than anything else, by cheating and the erosion of authentic student work.

In Pew Research Center's February 2026 study of U.S. teens, 59 percent said AI-assisted cheating is a regular occurrence at their school; about a third said it happens *extremely* or *very* often. Among teens who use chatbots for schoolwork themselves, three-quarters say their classmates are using them to cheat. In Pew's earlier survey of K-12 teachers, twenty-five percent said AI does more harm than good in their classrooms; among high school teachers, that share rose to thirty-five. The AAC&U / Elon University faculty survey, released earlier this year, sharpens the

point: 78 percent of college faculty say cheating on their campus has increased since generative AI became widely available, and 73 percent have personally dealt with an academic-integrity issue involving a student's use of it. The [Walton Family Foundation / GSV / Gallup Voices of Gen Z](#) report captures the student side of the same anxiety -- agreement that AI helps "speed up learning" *fell* seven points last year, even as adoption inched up.

The fear is real, and it is older than ChatGPT. The sociologist and education historian David Labaree has spent thirty years arguing that American schooling has been pulled in tension by competing purposes, and that over time the credential -- not the learning -- has steadily won out as what the system reliably produces and protects. Randall Collins's earlier [Credential Society](#) (1979) made the same diagnosis from a different angle. A student cheating with AI is behaving rationally. The system trained that rationality long before there was a chatbot to ask. AI is not the disease. AI is the symptom, made visible -- the moment the gap between what a credential certifies and what a learner actually knows became impossible to ignore.

The early- and mid-1990s, with the Internet as the disruptive technology of the moment, did not feel like this. Where Internet alarmism *did* exist in higher education, it tended to be about market structure -- the confident commercial prediction that the Internet was a winner-take-all medium for the academy too, where the top hundred universities would do fine and the rest would slide toward irrelevance -- and about ownership of course materials and instructional IP, and about being pushed onto digital learning environments that faculty did not choose to use. Those concerns were real. What you didn't hear as much was an existential concern about the ability to assess learning and the integrity

of the education process, except perhaps in whether online was "as good" as face-to-face.

With AI, academic integrity and what it means to assess learning , AI's adoption will stall.

For Faculty, Assessment Is the Painkiller

There is an old Silicon Valley adage that the difference between a successful product -- one that gets adopted, used, and loved -- and a failed one is the difference between a *vitamin* and a *painkiller*. Vitamins are good for you; most people don't take them. They are nice-to-haves. Painkillers are must-haves: when you need one, they are the only thing in the medicine cabinet that matters.

The honest read on AI in higher education today is that, for faculty, AI is mostly a pain *creator*. Academic-integrity concerns. Pressure to redesign assessments built for a pre-AI world. New policy questions for the syllabus. Awkward conversations in office hours. The Internet went through a version of this in its early days -- the moment a course had a website, the implicit expectation became that the professor would respond to student email and discussion-board posts within twenty-four hours, an always-on customer-service relationship that hadn't existed before. But the Internet was, on balance, a powerful painkiller for faculty. Course websites, digital assignment submission, the gradebook -- all of it made the *administration* of a course easier.

So, what is the painkiller for faculty in the AI era?

It is assessment, and not because AI created the pain. The pain of assessment was already there. The work of assessing student learning

along multiple dimensions, of giving frequent low-stakes checks so that no single test is high-stakes, of writing rich rubric-aligned feedback at the scale of a fifty- or sixty-student course -- that has always been difficult, and most faculty have always quietly compromised on it. What AI may bring is a set of natural affordances to address that problem.

Go back to my sociology course, and imagine software that, calibrated to *my* rubric and *my* theory of what good writing in this course (and field and assignment type) looks like, surfaces rich, formative feedback on the writing for every student -- so that the marginal hour I spend on each paper goes to where my expertise actually lives, which is the argument. I still write the closing comments. I still assign the grade. I am still able to sit down in office hours with a student, explain the grade she earned and why, and talk through where she should invest the next round of effort. But the writing objective stops being the line item I quietly compromised on. That is a painkiller.

The dystopian version is just as easy to imagine. Software that *does* the assessment instead of *supporting* the assessment. A faculty member divorced from the substance of student work. A student wondering why she is paying tuition to be evaluated by a model. The line between the two is not blurry. It is the difference between AI an instructor directs and AI that replaces the instructor -- and we will have to draw that line, in policy and in product, with care. But the existence of the dystopian version does not change the fact that, of all the things AI may offer faculty, the historical pain of assessment is probably the single biggest opportunity for AI to be a real and unmistakable painkiller.

The Pedagogy AI Demands and Enables

Before going further, a caveat. My background is not in instructional design or assessment, and what follows is my best read of the literature. That said, as I have dug a bit into the world of assessment in the AI era -- yes, with the help of AI -- the pattern in the most-cited work is striking.

For most of the last forty years, a common critique of assessment in higher education has been: too much summative, too little formative. Too many high-stakes exams thrown over the transom at the end of the term, too few low-stakes checks for understanding woven into the teaching itself. Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam's 1998 work on formative assessment -- especially *Assessment and Classroom Learning* and its widely read companion essay *Inside the Black Box* -- helped make that critique central to the field. Royce Sadler's earlier work on formative assessment and instructional systems made a related point: feedback matters when it helps learners understand the gap between current performance and the standard they are trying to reach. Together, that work points toward a deceptively simple claim: assessment should not merely certify learning after the fact; it should generate feedback that helps teachers adjust instruction and students adjust their work while learning is still underway.

Each of those traditions arrives at the same place: assessment works best when it is integrated into the teaching and learning process, not divorced from it.

That happens to be the answer to the AI-integrity question, too. A take-home essay submitted at midnight on Sunday is easy to fake. A semester-long sequence of small, formative checks -- short writes, drafts with feedback, problem sets that build on yesterday's mistake, oral defenses,

discussion exchanges that demand the student show her work -- is much harder to fake, because the student has to keep showing up and growing in front of her instructor.

Two things follow. First, the pedagogy that experts have been quietly recommending for forty years is, in the AI era, also the pedagogy most robust to AI misuse. Second -- and this is the part I think has been undersold -- formative, rubric-aligned, embedded assessment at the scale of an actual classroom has been impractical for most faculty until *now*, precisely because it required authoring and configuration work no faculty member had time for. Generative models, supervised by faculty and structured around their rubrics, may be the first software in the history of the LMS that can deliver this kind of assessment at scale. The pedagogy is not new. The capacity to actually run it might be.

How's that for a twist? The thing AI is being blamed for breaking -- student assessment -- may turn out to be the thing AI is uniquely positioned to enable.

For Institutions, Assessment Is the Painkiller Too

So far, we've discussed academic integrity concerns, faculty painkiller incentives, and pedagogical upside. The fourth reason assessment is key to unlocking AI adoption is the longest arc. American higher education has been quietly trying, for two decades, to associate courses and programs with explicit learning outcomes -- competencies, capabilities, skills -- and to award credentials that *directly* attest to mastery of those outcomes rather than *infer* mastery from a grade above C or a credit hour completed. Competency-based programs at Western Governors and elsewhere are the most visible expression of it; the Comprehensive

Learner Record, stackable credentials, and the registrar-as-data-steward conversations at AACRAO are also dimensions of this.

The bottleneck has not been the vision. It has been the friction. Articulating learning objectives is difficult. Mapping them to rubrics is difficult. Asking faculty to do that mapping on top of the actual work of teaching is more difficult still. And aggregating the resulting evidence up to the institution -- for accreditation, for institutional effectiveness, for the assertion that *this* institution's graduates know and can do specific things -- has been the most difficult of all.

This is the institutional version of the same painkiller. Institutions need defensible answers to the questions their accreditors and boards routinely ask: what do your graduates learn and know? How well do they know it? What can they actually do? Done well -- instructor-led, rubric-driven, embedded in the natural rhythm of the course -- AI may remove much of the friction that has held those answers back. It may give faculty real authoring support for designing assessments aligned to learning objectives. It may give institutional-effectiveness offices and accreditors something they have wanted, in this form, for decades: course-by-course evidence that the program-level outcomes a department claims to deliver are actually being delivered. And it may give the learner a credential that finally describes the analytical reasoning she demonstrated in her seminal essay on Collins's credential society and the meta-analysis she ran in R -- instead of a transcript that says only that she earned a B+ in *Soc 401: Sociology of Education* in spring of 2026.

In other words: the same set of practices that defend against AI-enabled cheating may also produce the kind of credential that narrows the gap between what a transcript certifies and what a learner actually knows --

the gap Labaree, Collins, and the sociology of credentials have been describing for half a century, with or without AI in the room.

The Stakes

The faculty and student concerns the surveys describe are not going away on their own. Adoption of AI in education will rise or fall on whether the academy meets those concerns head-on -- in the language we use to describe what AI mechanically is and is not, a point I tried to make in *[A Note on AI Language and Adoption in Education](#)*, and in the practice of assessment, which is where the worry actually lives.

Get assessment right and AI's adoption follows -- for faculty, because the painkiller is real; for students, because the credential finally describes what they know and how well they know it; and for institutions, because the integrity question gets a defensible answer that does not depend on locking down the technology students are already using everywhere else in their lives.

Get assessment wrong, and the whole thing stalls. The fear hardens into policy. The pedagogy that experts have been pointing at for forty years stays where it has always been -- aspirational and underadopted. The credential continues to drift from the learning. And the most plausible chance in my professional lifetime to close that gap goes by.

Assessment, in other words, is the great AI unlock.

Matthew Pittinsky is the incoming CEO of Blackboard, which he co-founded in 1997 and previously helped lead as CEO and Executive Chairman. More at matthewpittinsky.com.