

Authentic Assessment and Artistic Expression:

A Brief Exploration

Response to Thomas-Reid

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Matthew Thomas-Reid's piece, "Building Bridges with Bullshit: Authenticity and Performativity in Assessment," aims to analyze *bullshit* through queer theory and educational assessment.¹ To say something is bullshit—be it the assignment or the student product of the assignment, is to call it inauthentic. But Thomas-Reid invites us to ask, what happens if we “trouble the bullshit, and . . . break down reified understandings of objectivity, authenticity, and . . . performativity?”² What might educational assessment look like if we queer *bullshit*, by which Thomas-Reid means we embark on “the violent undoing of [the] meaning” of it?³ Thomas-Reid hypothesizes that if we can undo the meaning of bullshit, we might be able to upend the normative power of *authenticity* in educational assessments.

Calling *bullshit* would seem to have disciplinary power, as Thomas-Reid suggests. Doing so on another's identity (e.g., “Are you really gay . . . [or are you] doing it for attention?”) holds close parallels to stating a student is bullshitting an assignment—trying to pass off something as true or authentic when it knowingly is not.⁴ Bullshitting then denotes deliberate deception in these cases. And calling *bullshit* does seem to aim at redirecting the activity towards what is understood to be true and authentic presentation. However, there is something distinctive about each of these cases that makes one less problematic than the other. Saying a high school student is bullshitting their way to a solution for a system of equations, because the operations are unintelligible, is incontrovertible. This is something quite different, though, than calling bullshit on a human (not mathematical) identity expression. Likewise, the claim that an assessment itself is bullshit, and the claim that a student product for an assessment is bullshit,

seem to make two distinctly different claims. By extension, calling an authentic assessment *bullshit* is different than claiming expressive student work is *bullshit*.

We might gain some greater sense of the confusion arising from these denotative uses of *authenticity* from a distinction made between *expression* and *representation* in Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art*, especially given that Thomas-Reid's example of a student product involves a piece of student work that is a "visual response to a prompt guided by conceptual standards . . . a mason jar decorated in translucent colors and symbols, filled with sand and various household objects."⁵ Goodman states that "expression is somehow both more direct and less literal than representation," and that "what is expressed [in an expression] is metaphorically exemplified . . . And what is metaphorically sad is actually but not literally sad. . . ."⁶ The example Goodman provides to explain this distinction is a picture painted in dull grays, expressing sadness. We can say the picture is sad, metaphorically. And to denote it thusly is to say something entirely different than to say it is a gray painting, by which we mean it literally has gray colors. Saying the picture is sad is to say that the painting possesses something metaphorical and therefore makes a symbolic reference. So, while we can use the word *gray* in both cases, one denotes the metaphorical exemplification of sadness and the other denotes the literal representation of the color. While I cannot go into the full discussion of this distinction, given the required scope of this essay, I do hope my brief explanation serves well enough to make the point.

To bring this distinction to Thomas-Reid's example, consider how *authentic* might function in the same way. An assessment is denoted by *authentic* if we are speaking of an assessment that bears the hallmarks of that pedagogical instrument which is commonly understood to be "an authentic assessment" (the painting contains the color gray/the assessment is authentic as defined). It is an example of what an authentic assessment is, literally. However, if by *authentic assessment* we mean an assessment product that expresses the maker's or the student's authenticity (the painting expresses sadness/the product expresses authentic identity), we are speaking of a different predicate meaning of *authenticity*, one that need not be an example of anything beyond itself; the

student's expression of identity is symbolic or referential, not literal.⁷ Moreover, because the expression of identity runs in the direction of solipsistic meaning-making (it need only be meaningful to the individual bearing the identity), treating the work as anything but mere expression runs into the very hazards that worry Thomas-Reid, specifically that an assignment asking for expression would essentialize that which is fluid and reinforce normative modes of identity through disciplinary power.

To return to the question of whether Thomas-Reid's students might question the authenticity of the assessment—call *it* bullshit—or others the authenticity of student work—call *their work* bullshit—as he worries, we have to first ask whether what the students are being asked to do would map onto any application to problems encountered in civic, social, or work life; for, that would be the literal denotation of what an authentic assessment is in common pedagogical nomenclature. If Thomas-Reid is asking students to offer an expression that correlates to some kind of problem and its solution—a solution that uses the ambiguity of art to imagine beyond what already is—then there would be little doubt it is an authentic assessment. Perhaps Thomas-Reid only needed to be clear on whether student work was intended to be expressive and thus metaphorical and not literal. Yet solving this question of authenticity does not solve another: if student work is to be merely expressive, then who is to judge the expression and by what standards? Perhaps this is what Thomas-Reid's spouse was pointing to when he said a student could easily bullshit an assessment product: there's no firm criteria by which evaluate the product, so anything can arguably count as a successful product and little information can be gathered. In such a case, it would not appear to be an assessment at all, if an assessment—authentic or not—is understood as “a systematic method of obtaining information . . . used to draw inferences about characteristics of people, objects, or programs.”⁸

If we attempt to move away from the aforementioned definition of assessment, though, in order to adopt Thomas-Reid's suggestion that we “view assessments as performative, subversive, and mutually transformational,” then Thomas-Reid wants assessments to contain qualities mutually exclusive

to the commonly adopted understanding of what an assessment is.⁹ If this is true, then we need not call this activity *assessment* at all. We might give it a new name, like *transfoversative* activity. Regardless, if we try to retain, in the case of Thomas-Reid's student's work, some sense of the essential feature of what an assessment is commonly understood to be, then the teacher is forced to draw inferences about a student's ability to subvert any assessment, to transform one's self and others, and to do so through expression. And in such a case, how will anyone—student or teacher—know whether a student's expression is successful in “imagining beyond the possible”? If we say it is the teacher who must judge, then this form of assessment seems to lay an undue amount of arbitrary power in the hands of the teacher, who in this case becomes the sole arbiter of what constitutes imaginativeness, subversion, the transformational, and the adequate expression of those things. Can it be subversive that a teacher will exercise personal judgement—judgement that may conform to no external norms—upon a student's expression of subversion? How will the teacher determine whether the student's expression is authentic or a fake?¹⁰

Ultimately, maybe the problem with authenticity in assessments is not with the authentic nature of the assessment, or with a student's expression of authenticity, or whether an assessment is an assessment at all, or that any assessment is doomed to do anything but perpetuate normative power. Perhaps, instead, one instructor calling *bullshit* on another instructor's assessment points to the larger problem that assessment regimes established by educational institutions, state bureaucracies, etc., unduly infringe upon the autonomy of the instructor and the organic life of the classroom. Here, teachers are robbed of their judgement to determine what is a bullshit assessment to begin with. Institutional views of power and subversion, and the bureaucratic categorization and essentialization of people, carry the risks of symbolic violence and normative power by the calling of student work—representational or expressive—as bullshit for failing to conform to and affirm whatever dominant institutional ideologies and categories define the dynamics of power and normativity. Yet, at the same time, we cannot forget that without such assessments conducted at levels higher than the individual classroom, public schools will have one less

view with which see and to correct systemic educational marginalization.

1 Mathew Thomas-Reid, “Building Bridges with Bullshit: Authenticity and Performativity in Assessment,” *Philosophy of Education* 76, no. 1 (2020).

2 Thomas-Reid, “Building Bridges.”

3 Thomas-Reid.

4 Thomas-Reid.

5 Thomas-Reid.

6 Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1976), 51; Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 85.

7 We might also consider the assignment itself as a teacher’s expressive work, but discussing this point is beyond this paper’s scope.

8 Thomas-Reid.

9 Thomas-Reid.

10 Here I refer to authenticity as not being plagiarized or copied. As students might very well *bullshit* their work in this sense, too.