



Designing Assessments for Authentic Human Thinking: A Systematic Review of Assessment Frameworks Amid Generative Artificial Intelligence

Ntombentle Nomhlangano Grace Zoko-Fumba

Walter Sisulu University, Private Bag X1, Neslo Mandela Drive, Mthatha, 5117. Eastern Cape, South Africa.

*Corresponding author: ntosh724@gmail.com / nzoko@wsu.ac.za

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ABSTRAK

Kemajuan pesat kecerdasan buatan generatif (GenAI) telah mentransformasi pendidikan tinggi dengan memungkinkan mahasiswa menghasilkan keluaran akademik yang canggih dengan kemudahan yang belum pernah terjadi sebelumnya, sehingga menimbulkan kekhawatiran tentang validitas dan keaslian praktik penilaian tradisional. Berdasarkan Teori Kognisi Kontekstual, tinjauan sistematis ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi dan mensintesis kerangka kerja penilaian kontemporer yang mendukung pemikiran manusia yang autentik dalam pendidikan tinggi di tengah adopsi GenAI yang meluas. Dipandu oleh kerangka kerja PRISMA, tinjauan ini melakukan pencarian sistematis di Web of Science, ERIC, dan Google Scholar, menghasilkan 18 studi untuk sintesis tematik. Temuan menunjukkan pergeseran paradigma dari menilai produk pengetahuan ke mengevaluasi proses kognitif yang mendasari pembelajaran. Tiga dimensi yang saling terkait dari pemikiran manusia yang autentik muncul: sintesis subjektif, dialog metakognitif, dan penilaian kontekstual. Tinjauan ini mengusulkan kerangka kerja konseptual yang mengintegrasikan dimensi-dimensi tersebut untuk menginformasikan perancangan ulang penilaian dalam lingkungan pembelajaran yang dimediasi AI. Kerangka kerja ini memberikan panduan praktis bagi dosen, perancang kurikulum, pemimpin institusi, dan pembuat kebijakan yang berupaya mengembangkan praktik penilaian yang valid, kredibel, dan bermakna secara pendidikan.

ABSTRACT

The rapid advancement of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has transformed higher education by enabling students to produce sophisticated academic outputs with unprecedented ease, raising concerns about the validity and authenticity of traditional assessment practices. Grounded in Situated Cognition Theory, this systematic review aimed to identify and synthesise contemporary assessment frameworks that support authentic human thinking in higher education amid the widespread adoption of GenAI. Guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework, the review conducted a systematic search of Web of Science, ERIC, and Google

Scholar, resulting in 18 studies for thematic synthesis. Findings indicate a paradigm shift from assessing knowledge products to evaluating the cognitive processes underpinning learning. Three interconnected dimensions of authentic human thinking emerged: subjective synthesis, metacognitive dialogue, and situated judgement. The review proposes a conceptual framework that integrates these dimensions to inform the redesign of assessments in AI-mediated learning environments. The framework provides practical guidance for lecturers, curriculum designers, institutional leaders, and policymakers seeking to develop valid, credible, and educationally meaningful assessment practices.

1. Introduction

The rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), particularly following the release of ChatGPT in late 2022, has fundamentally transformed higher education assessment. Students increasingly use GenAI for coursework, writing and problem-solving, creating significant opportunities while also raising concerns about assessment validity and academic integrity (Batista, et al, 2024). Traditional essays, assignments and take-home examinations have historically assumed that written products provide evidence of students' thinking (Perkins, et al, 2025). However, GenAI can now produce coherent and sophisticated academic responses, weakening the assumption that a submitted product necessarily represents the learner's independent understanding, reasoning and critical thinking (Bearman, et al, 2023).

The challenge has shifted from simply identifying inappropriate AI use to reconsidering what assessment should measure (Arslan, et al, 2024). AI-detection technologies are not a sufficient long-term response; instead, assessment redesign should make learners' reasoning, reflection, contextual understanding and judgement visible (Xia, Weng, Ouyang & Lin, 2024). Although GenAI can generate plausible responses, human learners bring lived experience, personal values, ethical perspectives and situated knowledge to complex tasks. Assessment that foregrounds these dimensions may therefore provide stronger evidence of learning.

Situated Cognition Theory proposes that knowledge and thinking develop through interaction with authentic social, cultural and contextual environments rather than existing as abstract information independent of context (Sannholm & Risku, 2024). Learning occurs through participation in meaningful activities in which knowledge is constructed within particular situations and communities. In assessment, this perspective supports tasks that require learners to apply knowledge in realistic contexts and demonstrate reasoning, problem-solving, decision-making and judgement (Ayoo, et al, 2026).

The theory is particularly relevant to GenAI-mediated assessment because contextual participation, lived experience and value-laden decision-making are not equivalent to the generation of text. Assessment informed by situated cognition can therefore shift attention from whether a final answer appears sophisticated to how learners use knowledge within meaningful situations.

The rapid adoption of GenAI has intensified concerns about academic integrity, assessment validity and student learning. Written assignments

and take-home examinations are particularly vulnerable to AI assistance (Chiu, 2024; Liu & Zhong, 2025). Recent scholarship consequently advocates redesigning assessment to evaluate authentic engagement, reflection, critical thinking and contextual reasoning rather than concentrating exclusively on detection (Kofinas, et al, 2025; Rodríguez-Ortiz, et al, 2025). At the same time, GenAI can support brainstorming, feedback, problem-solving and personalised learning when used responsibly (Nikolic, et al, 2024). The central issue is therefore not the complete exclusion of AI but the design of assessment that preserves meaningful evidence of human learning (Francis, et al, 2025).

Authentic assessment requires learners to apply knowledge, skills and judgement in realistic or professionally relevant contexts (Sokhanvar, et al, 2021). Reflective journals, portfolios, case studies, simulations, presentations and experiential projects can provide opportunities for meaningful application rather than recall. Such approaches can develop problem-solving, autonomy, self-regulation, metacognition, communication and professional judgement. They also align with Situated Cognition Theory because learning is demonstrated through participation in tasks resembling real-world practice.

The novelty of this systematic review lies in synthesising contemporary assessment frameworks through the lens of Situated Cognition Theory and conceptualising authentic human thinking as three interconnected dimensions: subjective synthesis, metacognitive dialogue, and situated judgement. Subjective synthesis concerns the integration of disciplinary knowledge with personal experience and interpretation; metacognitive dialogue concerns reflection and articulation of one's reasoning and learning processes; and situated judgement concerns the application of knowledge, values, and reasoning to authentic, context-specific situations. The review, therefore, contributes more than a catalogue of alternative assessment practices: it integrates these dimensions into a coherent framework for understanding how assessment can make authentic human cognition visible when GenAI is readily available.

Addressing this gap is important because the central assessment problem in the GenAI era is not only whether students have used AI, but whether assessment can provide credible evidence of what students understand, how they construct meaning, how they reason about their decisions, and how they apply knowledge within authentic contexts. This requires a shift from predominantly assessing completed products to designing assessment processes that make learners' cognitive engagement observable and assessable.

GenAI can process large volumes of information, identify patterns and produce sophisticated responses efficiently (Atchley et al., 2024; Agbo, et al, 2025). Human cognition, however, is shaped by lived experience, emotions, ethical values, social interaction and personal interpretation (Xia et al., 2024). These dimensions are important when learners must interpret ambiguity, balance competing considerations and justify decisions in particular contexts. The literature therefore suggests that assessment should prioritise creative synthesis, evaluative judgement, critical reflection, ethical reasoning and contextual problem-solving (Bearman et al., 2024; Perkins et al., 2024).

This systematic review synthesises contemporary literature on assessment frameworks that seek to preserve authentic human thinking in AI-mediated higher education. It focuses on assessment approaches that move beyond product evaluation and identify cognitive processes that should remain central to educational assessment. The review was guided by the question: What assessment frameworks are proposed in the literature to support authentic human thinking in the age of generative artificial intelligence?

2. Materials and Methods

A systematic review methodology was used to identify, appraise and synthesise literature on assessment frameworks that promote authentic human thinking in the context of GenAI. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) approach to support transparency and consistency.

Searches were conducted in Web of Science, ERIC and Google Scholar. The manuscript limited the search to peer-reviewed, open-access journal articles published between 2024 and 2026. Search terms combined concepts relating to GenAI, higher education assessment, authentic human cognition and situated judgement. The core search string was: ("Generative Artificial Intelligence" OR "GenAI") AND ("Higher Education Assessment") AND ("Authentic Human Cognition") AND ("Situated Judgment"). Related searches incorporated authentic assessment, metacognition, assessment redesign and human cognition.

The initial search identified 29 records: 16 from Web of Science, 10 from Google Scholar and 3 from ERIC. Three duplicates were removed, leaving 26 records for screening. Eight records were excluded at screening, and 18 articles were retained for qualitative synthesis, as reported in the manuscript.

Inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed journal articles published from 2024–2026, available open access, and addressing GenAI, authentic human cognition, higher education assessment, assessment redesign or situated judgement. Books, conference papers, reports, theses, non-peer-reviewed publications, subscription-only articles and studies focused solely on general AI use outside higher education assessment were excluded.

Records were managed in Zotero, followed by screening against the predetermined criteria and full-text eligibility assessment. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages.

Data Extraction, Quality Appraisal and Analysis

A structured extraction matrix was used to record author, year, study aim, research design, theoretical or conceptual framework, assessment approach and principal findings. Information concerning reflection, metacognition, contextual reasoning, evaluative judgement, creativity and other human-centred processes was also extracted. This facilitated comparison across studies and identification of recurring concepts (Schmidt, et al, 2021).

Each included article was appraised for methodological rigour, theoretical contribution to authentic assessment and GenAI scholarship, and relevance to higher education assessment. Thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to identify, code, compare and synthesise recurring concepts. Three overarching themes emerged: subjective synthesis, metacognitive dialogue and situated judgement.

Table 1 summarizes the inclusion and exclusion criteria used to select studies for this review in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines. The eligibility was then determined according to the inclusion and exclusion presented above. Only journal articles that met the inclusion criteria were retained and those meeting any exclusion criterion were removed.

Below (as illustrated in figure 1) is the PRISMA flow diagram summarising the systematic study-selection process, from database identification and duplicate removal through screening and eligibility assessment to the final inclusion of studies. The search identified 29 records, of which 3 duplicates were removed and 8 were excluded during screening, resulting in 18 studies being included in the thematic synthesis as previously indicated under materials and methods above.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication date	Journal articles published between 2024 and 2026	Studies published before 2024.
Document type	Published journal articles	Books, conference papers, reports, theses and other document types.
Peer review	Peer-reviewed studies.	Non-peer-reviewed publications.
Accessibility	Open-access articles.	Subscription-only articles.
Relevance	Studies examining GenAI, authentic human cognition, higher education assessment, assessment redesign, or situated judgment.	Studies focusing solely on general AI use without assessment or higher education contexts.

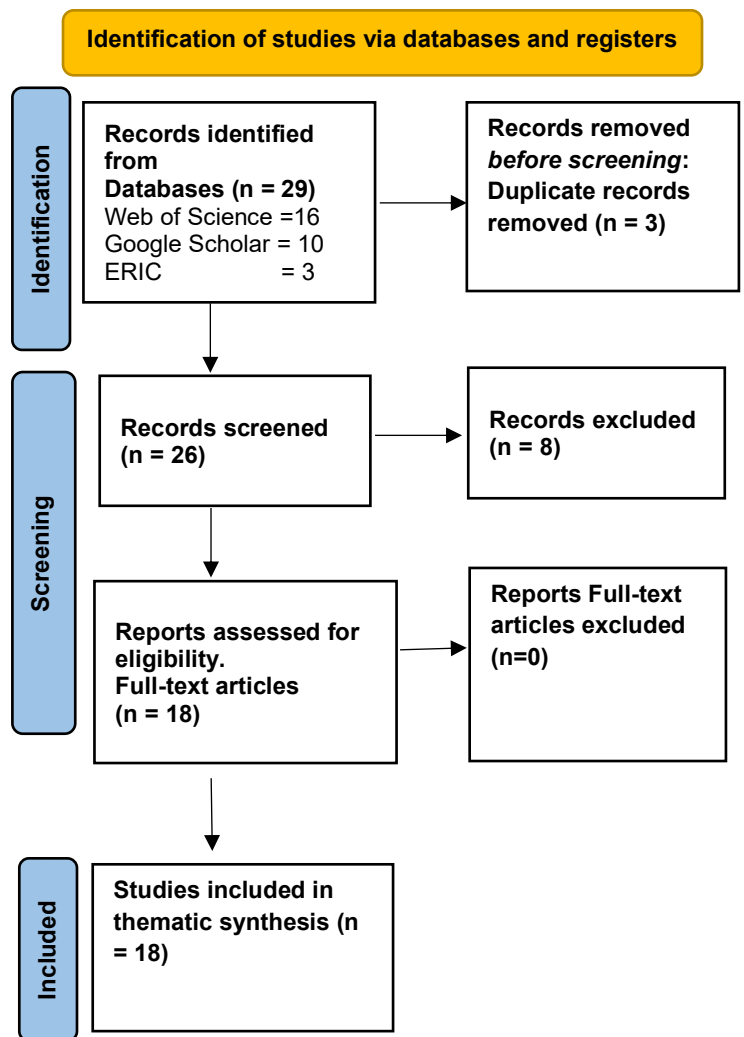


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram showing the study selection process.

3. Result and Discussion

Overview of the Reviewed Studies

The review reports 18 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2024 and 2026 that addressed assessment in higher education in the context of GenAI. The studies represented diverse disciplines, countries and methodological approaches. Across the literature, conventional essays, take-home assignments and written examinations were viewed as increasingly vulnerable to AI-generated or AI-assisted responses. The dominant recommendation was assessment redesign rather than greater reliance on AI detection.

The thematic synthesis identified three interconnected dimensions of authentic human thinking. Subjective synthesis concerns the integration of disciplinary knowledge with learners' experiences, values and perspectives. Metacognitive dialogue concerns learners' ability to explain, monitor and evaluate their reasoning.

Situated judgement concerns the application of knowledge to complex, contextual and ethically informed situations. Together, the three dimensions shift assessment from evaluating only completed products towards making human thinking visible.

The results indicate that the literature does not reject GenAI as an educational resource. Instead, it supports assessment models in which AI may assist learning while assessment requires evidence of human interpretation, reflection and judgement.

Theme One: Subjective Synthesis

Subjective synthesis emerged as the capacity to construct meaning by integrating disciplinary knowledge with personal experience, beliefs, emotions, ethical values and identity. Human learners interpret knowledge through individual histories and contexts, whereas GenAI generates responses from learned patterns (Yan et al., 2024). Authentic assessment should therefore provide

opportunities for learners to explain how they interpreted information, why they reached particular conclusions and how their experiences shaped their reasoning.

Examples include reflective journals, professional portfolios, learning narratives, workplace reflections and community-engaged projects. These activities connect theory with experience and make learners' meaning-making processes more visible. The theme suggests that assessment validity can be strengthened when evaluation moves beyond a polished final product towards evidence of how knowledge is interpreted and applied.

Theme Two: Metacognitive Dialogue

Metacognitive dialogue refers to learners' ability to monitor, regulate, explain and critically evaluate their own thinking throughout learning and assessment. The reviewed literature identifies metacognition as an important means of making authentic cognition visible because a final answer alone may reveal little about how the learner reasoned, responded to uncertainty or revised an approach.

Assessment designs that support metacognitive dialogue include learning journals, process portfolios, reflective commentaries, oral defences, think-aloud activities, draft submissions with explanations and iterative project development. Such approaches enable educators to observe how learners plan, monitor, evaluate and refine their thinking.

The literature also distinguishes between producing an answer and understanding the cognitive process through which the answer was developed. Human learners can identify misconceptions, modify strategies and reflect on progress. Incorporating these processes into assessment can consequently strengthen self-regulated learning and lifelong learning.

Metacognitive dialogue should not be treated merely as an additional reflective task; it can form part of the evidence used to establish whether learning has occurred. Process evidence, explanations of decisions and opportunities to revise work can make learners' thinking more visible and can reduce reliance on the final written product alone.

Theme Three: Situated Judgement

Situated judgement refers to the capacity to make context-dependent, ethically informed and professionally appropriate decisions in situations characterised by uncertainty and complexity. The reviewed literature emphasises that assessment should examine how learners apply knowledge and justify decisions when more than

one reasonable response may exist (Bearman et al., 2024).

GenAI is effective at information processing and response generation, but assessment tasks can still require learners to interpret ambiguous circumstances, balance competing considerations and explain why a particular decision is appropriate. Xia et al. (2024) similarly emphasise contextual reasoning, ethical decision-making and authentic problem-solving.

The findings concerning faculty readiness reinforce the importance of human judgement (Afzal et al., 2026) report that educators recognise AI's potential while identifying concerns about integrity, fairness, transparency, bias and accountability. Decisions about when and how AI should be used in assessment therefore require disciplinary, institutional and pedagogical judgement. Ethical governance and institutional policy are important, but they do not replace the need for context-sensitive professional decisions.

Situated judgement consequently represents a strong indicator of authentic human thinking because it integrates disciplinary knowledge, reflection, ethics, contextual awareness and responsibility.

Summary of results

The thematic synthesis conceptualises authentic human thinking as a multidimensional construct comprising subjective synthesis, metacognitive dialogue and situated judgement. The dimensions are distinct but interdependent. Subjective synthesis connects knowledge to lived experience and individual interpretation; metacognitive dialogue makes reasoning and self-regulation visible; and situated judgement requires knowledge to be applied ethically and contextually.

Collectively, the findings indicate a shift from product-oriented assessment towards process-oriented assessment. Rather than attempting primarily to prevent AI use through detection, the reviewed literature supports assessment designs that foreground cognitive processes that are difficult to evidence through generic AI-generated products. The three dimensions provide a conceptual basis for assessment design in AI-mediated higher education.

Discussion

The review demonstrates that GenAI requires higher education to reconsider the relationship between assessment and evidence of learning. If a sophisticated written product can be produced with substantial AI assistance, the product alone may provide insufficient evidence of the learner's understanding. Assessment validity therefore

depends increasingly on making cognitive processes visible.

The three dimensions identified in this review complement one another. Subjective synthesis establishes the learner's personal and contextual interpretation of knowledge. Metacognitive dialogue provides evidence of how the learner monitors and evaluates thinking. Situated judgement demonstrates whether knowledge can be applied appropriately when a problem is complex, uncertain or ethically contested. Together, these dimensions are consistent with Situated Cognition Theory because they position learning within authentic activity and context.

The findings suggest a change in the role of the educator. Instead of treating AI detection as the central mechanism for protecting assessment integrity, educators can design tasks that require reflection, contextual application, oral explanation, iterative development and justification of decisions.

This approach does not necessarily prohibit GenAI; it establishes clear boundaries around its role and evaluates what the learner can personally explain, defend and apply. AI may support idea generation, feedback, language assistance or information organisation, while the learner remains responsible for interpreting outputs, making decisions and demonstrating understanding.

Assessment design should therefore distinguish between acceptable technological assistance and the cognitive evidence that must remain attributable to the learner. This perspective acknowledges the educational potential of GenAI while protecting the validity of assessment.

The review further highlights institutional support. Assessment redesign requires staff development, coherent AI policies and shared understanding of academic integrity. However, policy alone cannot determine appropriate assessment across disciplines. Professional judgement remains necessary to align tasks, learning outcomes, disciplinary expectations and responsible AI use.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

This systematic review examined assessment frameworks intended to support authentic human thinking in higher education amid the expansion of GenAI. The evidence indicates that sustainable assessment reform should focus less on restricting AI and more on redesigning assessment to evaluate human cognitive processes.

The review identifies three interconnected dimensions: subjective synthesis, metacognitive dialogue and situated judgement. Together, these

dimensions provide a theoretically grounded basis for assessment that requires learners to construct meaning, explain and evaluate their reasoning, and exercise informed judgement in authentic contexts. Future research should empirically test the framework across disciplines, institutions and educational contexts and investigate how the three dimensions can be operationalised in valid and reliable assessment criteria.

The review contributes to emerging scholarship by synthesising recent literature into a coherent framework of authentic human thinking. Its principal contribution is the conceptualisation of authentic human thinking through subjective synthesis, metacognitive dialogue and situated judgement and the demonstration of how these dimensions can inform assessment redesign.

By extending Situated Cognition Theory to AI-mediated assessment, the review provides a human-centred perspective that can inform assessment practice, institutional policy and future empirical research. The framework offers educators a way to design assessment that remains meaningful and credible while acknowledging the continuing presence of AI in higher education.

Several limitations should be considered. The review was restricted to peer-reviewed, open-access journal articles published between 2024 and 2026 and indexed in Web of Science, ERIC and Google Scholar. This may have excluded relevant evidence from earlier publications, subscription-based journals, conference proceedings, books, dissertations and other databases. The included studies also represented diverse disciplines, contexts and research designs, which may limit transferability.

The synthesis was qualitative and therefore involved researcher judgement in identifying and organising themes. In addition, the manuscript's reported total of 18 included studies should be checked against the final study matrix before submission, as the supplied matrix lists fewer individual studies than the stated total. The proposed framework should consequently be regarded as a theoretically informed synthesis requiring empirical validation. Rigour was supported through predefined eligibility criteria, a structured extraction process, systematic screening and thematic analysis guided by PRISMA principles.

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