

Authentic assessment: using assessment to help students learn

La evaluación auténtica: el uso de la evaluación para ayudar a los estudiantes a aprender

Brown, Rally

Leeds Metropolitan University, UK

Resumen

La evaluación auténtica ofrece a los estudiantes oportunidades para aprender a través del propio proceso de evaluación, cuando las tareas se eligen por su relevancia tanto para el programa de aprendizaje como para las orientaciones vitales que ofrecen a los graduados, de cara a su empleabilidad, investigación y desarrollo personal. Cuando la evaluación está diseñada para articularse claramente con los resultados de aprendizaje previstos, puede producir beneficios en términos de fomentar y profundizar en la participación de los estudiantes al tiempo que ayuda a los estudiantes a avanzar en el desarrollo de sus habilidades y en el conocimiento de la materia. Si bien la creación y la gestión de las tareas de evaluación auténticas pueden requerir mucho tiempo y recursos, se argumenta aquí que los beneficios en términos de mejora de aprendizaje son muy superiores a esos factores. El artículo concluye con un manifiesto proponiendo algunas condiciones previas para la evaluación eficaz y auténtica.

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Abstract

Authentic assessment offers students opportunities to learn through the process of assessment itself, if the tasks are chosen for high relevance both to the programme of learning and the ultimate life directions of graduates, in employment, research and personal development. When assessment is designed to articulate clearly with intended learning outcomes, it can have benefits in terms of fostering and deepening student engagement while helping students advance in their skills development and subject knowledge. While setting up and managing authentic assessment tasks can be time- and resource-intensive, it is argued here that the benefits in terms of learning enhancement far outweigh these factors. The article concludes with a manifesto proposing some preconditions for effective and authentic assessment.

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Introduction: the importance of assessment as a means of helping students learn

As technologies change the ways in which students with engage with, use and create knowledge so assessment becomes ever more important as a means by which learning takes place. Assessment has always been important but now more than ever it has become the key locus for interaction between the university

and the student, particularly since increasingly students are encountering content knowledge on line or in very large lectures. This is not always readily resolvable as Murphy (2006) in Brian and Clegg argues:

Student assessment is for many educators one of the hardest things to resolve satisfactorily and in many settings to leads to some of the fiercest debate (p. 38)

Corresponding author / Autor de contacto

Brown, Sally. 22 Clifton Terrace, Forest Hall, Newcastle, NE12 9NP. S.Brown@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

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Good assessment design is of highest importance, it needs to be constructively aligned (Biggs and Tang, 2007) to ensure that learning outcomes are accurately represented in what is assessed.

As Dunn et al (2004) assert:

Empirical research into student learning and curriculum demonstrates the need for assessment to fit closely to the learning objectives of the subject and also to the activities that are put in place by the teacher to teach the students to be able to perform the assessment tasks. This closeness of fit, or alignment, is the link between what we assess what we teach and all students to do in their learning and what we've told students to aim for in their learning (p. 6)

In a major collaborative national project, senior managers and educational developers representing all Australian universities asserted:

Universities face substantial change in a rapidly evolving global context. The challenges of meeting new expectations about academic standards in the next decade and beyond mean that assessment will need to be rethought and renewed. (Boud et al, 2010, p.1).

In a similar initiative in the UK, a Higher Education Academy project involving a team of assessment experts worked to produce a guide, 'A Marked Improvement' to reviewing institutional and departmental assessment practices at a national level. The authors propose:

Assessment shapes what students study, when they study, how much work they do and the approach they take to their learning. Consequently, assessment design is influential in determining the quality and amount of learning achieved by students, and if we wish to improve student learning, improving assessment should be our starting point (HEA, 2012, p.9)

This article proposes that if assessment is to be a significant vehicle for learning, (Gibbs, 1999) it needs to be authentic, that is the activities, context and scope of any assignment all align to realistic scenarios of the kinds students will encounter after university in employment, research or other life environments.

What is authentic assessment?

We often assess what is easy to assess, or proxies of what has been learned, rather than the learning itself. A valid assessment is one that has close relevance to the criteria, which are in turn fully linked to the stated learning outcomes of a programme. Effective assessment is highly relevant to ensuring that graduates can demonstrate the knowledge, behaviours, qualities and attributes that were described in the course outline or programme specification. Assignments that require students to write about something, rather than *be* or *do* something, may not be fit-for-purpose (Brown, 2015).

Good assessment can act as a positive lever for learning where it is fully integrated within the teaching process: treating it as an add-on at the end of the curriculum design process is a wasted opportunity to shape student behaviour and skills development (Brown, 2015)

Authentic assessment relies on the creation of meaningful and precise learning outcomes at the appropriate level for the award being sought, which are then fully reflected in the tasks students are asked to undertake to demonstrate their competence. Such tasks must be focused on advancing students' learning and have intrinsic value that students can recognise and hence value, rather than being simply proxies for assessment of competence performance. The vast majority of higher education assessment globally relies on a relatively limited range of methods (including unseen, time-constrained exams, essays, multiple-choice questions and formal reports) which rarely emulate the kinds of activities that graduates are likely to be asked

to perform on leaving university. As Bloxham and Boyd (2007, p193) argue:

Being able to reproduce knowledge in a decontextualized examination does not guarantee that knowledge can be used in a real-life setting.

Authentic assignments require students to *make active use of* theoretical material (rather than just remember it) and apply it to actual, contemporary and practical contexts.

Authentic assessment happens when we directly examine student performance on worthy intellectual tasks, when students are required to be effective performers with acquired knowledge and we can make valid inferences about the student's performance from the assignments presented for assessment (Wiggins, 1990). As Wiggins goes on to argue such assignments:

- present the student with the full array of tasks that mirror the priorities and challenges found in the best [teaching] activities;
- attend to whether the student can craft polished, thorough and justifiable answers, performances or products;
- involve students coping with potentially ill-structured challenges and roles, [with incomplete information], that help them rehearse for the complex ambiguities of adult and professional life. (Wiggins, 1990)

Employers value students who can quickly engage in real-life tasks immediately on employment, having practiced relevant skills and competences through their assignments.

They often seek graduates who leave the university 'job ready' (University Alliance 2014). In a report for a UK university think tank, an employer working with Plymouth University, said:

I expect students to come in highly motivated, energetic and with a very good core base of up-to-date skills in terms of technology, computing and

presentation skills. I also expect them to come with an enquiring mind, because all of those skills are immediately applicable to the roles we put them into. After this, it's the task specific knowledge that we are looking to provide for them. We're looking for self-starters really.

Traditional assessment formats rarely develop and test these kinds of skills and competences: hence the need for authenticity.

Benefits of authentic assessment for students, staff and other stakeholders

Universities will only thrive in the 21st century if they take seriously the need to engage students fully and ensure that their learning experience are transformative. Conversely, disengaged students don't live up to their potential and fail to achieve their very best while making life more difficult for the staff who teach and support them. Failure to engage can result in high attrition rates which is damaging for a universities performance indicators as well as being damaging to the students' futures and feelings of self-worth, so it is in everyone's interests to keep students engaged in their own learning.

Students undertaking meaningful and relevant assessments tend to be more fully engaged in learning and hence tend to achieve more highly because they see the sense of what they are doing. If assignments make use of real examples, contemporary themes, live contexts and current data the assignment itself becomes a learning opportunity which provides challenges to students' thinking.

Authentic assessment challenges students because they often haven't encountered assessment activities where they are asked to think creatively and sometimes laterally. It can expose particular 'threshold concepts' and 'troublesome knowledge' (Meyer and Land, 2013) that students struggle with because it requires application in use of theories, rather than straightforward recall.

Achieving authentic assessment

This can best be achieved if we take a proactive approach to assessment design, interrogating and clarifying purposes, applications, approaches and methods, agency and timing, that is, Fit-for-Purpose assessment. In this model, curriculum designers are well advised to ask in advance of developing any assignment:

1. **Why is assessment happening at this time?** (for example, is it to help students know how they are doing or to give newly-arrived students early feedback on how they are doing, or to motivate them, or to help students check for themselves if they have understood a difficult concept, or to make a judgment about whether a graduate student is safe to practice in a practical context and so on);
2. **What is being assessed?** (for example, product or process, theory or practice, knowledge, skills and attitude, subject knowledge or application, whether a student can resolve issues with incomplete information, whether students can work together collegially, problem solving and so on);
3. **What methods and approaches** are most suitable for the task? Unseen, time-constrained exams, for example are perhaps fine as final summative assignments but less than helpful with nervous students in the initial induction phase of programme, where confidence-building is more important than testing knowledge;
4. **Who is best placed to assess?** Should this be peers, tutors, practice supervisors, employers, service-users for students in practical areas like social work and nursing, or the students themselves?
5. **When should assessment take place?** Many argue that only using end-of-programme summative assessment is less conducive to learning than incremental formative and summative assessment throughout a programme with plenty of feedback opportunities.

For a longer account of fit-for-purpose assessment, see Brown and Race, 2013 (pp 77-85).

The importance of feedback

Providing early, helpful and formative feedback is even more important in authentic assessment than in conventional assessment as feedback is the key locus of enhancement for individual students, supporting as it does their in-programme development which can be acted upon immediately rather than waiting until work has been marked and handed back. However, this needs to be directed towards the individual student rather than generic as Hartley in Bilham (2013) argues:

Current guidelines on good feedback tend to treat students as a homogenous group. But how significant are the differences between students, and how can we best characterise their different approaches? And how far do we take into account changes over the duration of the course? (p. 124)

He subsequently indicated from his earlier collaborative research that feedback can provide long term, substantial benefits for students:

despite some rather cynical comments from tutors about statement to about student motivation, there was significant evidence of students behaving as 'conscientious consumers'- keen to obtain a good degree and therefore act as critical consumers of a service but also 'conscientious' in their enthusiasm for the subject area and learning for its own sake. They saw feedback as both a way of improving their performance and increasing the chances of achieving that good degree but also as a way of helping themselves as learners. (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2002)

Nicol and McFarlane Dick (2006) assert that good feedback is an essential component of assessment which:

1. “Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);
2. Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;
3. Delivers high quality information to students about their learning;
4. Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;
5. Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;
6. Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;
7. Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching”.

All these are elements central to authentic assessment, since students in environments beyond the university need to develop the skills to make judgments about their own performance once regular grading is no longer a part of their day-to-day lives.

Royce Sadler argues that only through receiving feedback and having formative conversations can students recognise what good quality work looks like and thereby know what they should be aiming for:

Students need to be exposed to, and gain experience in making judgements about, a variety of works of different quality... They need planned rather than random exposure to exemplars, and experience in making judgements about quality. They need to create verbalised rationales and accounts of how various works could have been done better. Finally, they need to engage in evaluative conversations with teachers and other students. Together, these three provide the means by which students can develop a concept of quality that is similar in essence to that which the teacher possesses, and in particular to understand what makes for high quality. Although providing these experiences for students may appear to add more

layers to the task of teaching, it is possible to organise this approach so that it becomes a powerful strategy for higher education teaching (Sadler, 2010, pp. 535-550).

Assessment literacy

Authentic assessment can play an important part in systematically and progressively fostering assessment literacy (Sambell *et al*, 2012). When students are supported in being able to, *inter alia*, make sense of key terms such as criteria, weightings, and level, encounter a variety of assessment methods (e.g. presentations, portfolios, posters, assessed web participation, practicals, vivas etc.) and get practice in using them and becoming strategic in their assessment behaviours, by putting more work into aspects of an assignment with high weightings and interrogating criteria to find out what is really required and so on, they gain clarity on how the assessment works in their university and thereby have a better chance of succeeding.

Some examples of authentic assessment

In Brown, (2015, pp. 130-132) Victor M. López-Pastor of Segovia University describes how he uses incremental and ongoing feedback assessment with early years student teachers who are on teaching practice in schools. It works well because as well as evaluating students’ competences, students are required to demonstrate their reflection on practice and to demonstrate development over their period of study.

These students aren’t just summatively assessed, they receive much formative assessment from regular meetings with the course tutor, with dialogical processes with individual students and groups in regular discussions, to ensure deep learning occurs, rather than just checking-off competences. Importantly, the classroom teachers in host schools are also involved in discussions directly with students and tutors. Capabilities which are assessed include planning and competence in teaching practice, but also include professional behaviours such as

punctuality and the extent of deep engagement with the host school.

Significant components of the assessment are a reflective diary which students write daily and an extended reflective report, which is incrementally produced following classroom discussions and includes students' analytical reviews of the scholarly literature they are reading and an element of action research. This example combines the core elements of authentic assessment in that students are engaging with journal articles and books so as to illuminate their practices, and trying out techniques and approaches they have learned about in the classroom with live pupils.

In Brown and Race (2013, pp88-9) Julia Tum's work with the UK Centre for Events Management at Leeds Beckett University is outlined, where assignments similar to Objective Clinical Structured Examinations (OSCEs) used in medicine are undertaken with cohorts of 270+ students. An OSCE provides several relevant and challenging short scenarios and tasks which can be used to assess students' understanding and the application of theories in a practical setting. These encourage a deeper understanding of the taught material and the relevance and usefulness of its application as well as ensuring that the assessment is realistic, challenging and reflected the everyday pressures of decision-making in the Events industry. It is a very practical assessment with students demonstrating industry relevant skills, competences and orientation

In Pickford and Brown (2006, pp. 85-6) Andrew Ireland's work in the Media Department of Bournemouth University in the south of England is described where students in groups produce TV projects replicating industry practices. Students take shared responsibility for projects with students undertaking different roles including Producer, Director, Camera operator and so on, all demonstrating different levels of technical and creative responsibility. Students are assessed both collectively on the final product and individually on their production analysis as

well as through peer assessment of their interactions.

Other examples of authentic assessment include:

- Science students creating learning packs for school pupils that present complex ideas and content in accessible formats: making difficult material available to laypeople and non-specialists requires sophisticated understanding and advanced-level skills;
- Law students working under the supervision of trained solicitors offering supported advice to walk-in clients on consumer law and personal rights: skills such as the ability to take a comprehensive history from clients without missing any crucial details is a useful life-skill;
- Fine Art students curating art exhibitions in community environments: working to a client brief and producing outputs that satisfy consumer needs are valuable skills for artists who plan to make a living from their own work on graduation;
- Business Studies students working in simulated Trading rooms, buying and selling stocks and shares using live data (with a time delay so they don't impact on actual trading!). In this way they learn to perform in high stress but risk-free environments;
- Medical students using simulators to emulate undertaking key-hole surgery in preparation for real surgery once qualified: much surgery nowadays uses highly advanced computer-based systems to support their handiwork and such equipment needs significant practice before operating on live patients

What all these examples share is a focus on performative competence, in realistic or live contexts, with students having a level of autonomy and choice, with an accompanying high level or responsibility for their own learning.

Some barriers to the uses of authentic assessment

Inertia factors mean that many colleagues would prefer to stick to ‘tried and tested methods’ they are used to since organising traditional exams, multiple-choice questions and essays requires less effort to set up than assignments which include the development of case study material, and the establishment of authentic practice setting environments in university buildings. Additionally, authentic assessment tasks may involve additional costs.

A concluding manifesto

In conclusion I offer a manifesto for authentic assessment. It must be:

- Action-orientated, with students learning through action in a range of relevant contexts;
- Underpinned by relevant, evidence-based scholarship so that practitioners can make use of the shared experiences of others and put into place innovations that have been demonstrated to work well;
- Nuanced, clearly articulated and transparent in the way that decisions are reached on grades. This is sometimes harder to achieve with practice-orientated task than it might be with more traditional assignment types, but in each case inter-assessor reliability relies on shared understandings and dialogue;
- Truly representative of student effort and achievement, with weightings of criteria matched to their importance in terms of learning outcomes;
- Maximising of student effort and time-on-task while remaining manageable and viable in terms of its organisation for the staff doing it;
- Inclusive in its approaches, so it doesn’t disadvantage students with special educational needs and disabilities but instead allows all to achieve best they can;

Feedback must:

- Be timely in its execution (so that students have a chance to learn from feedback from one assignment before they submit another) while being tactical in its purpose;
- Enable productive dialogue between university teachers and students, rather than being a one-way conduit for critique, so as to enhance learning and involve students’ action to continuously improve;
- Be developmental and really useful to students, in that it is strong on advice and highly supportive, without failing to help students to understand what they need to do to achieve.

This is difficult to achieve, but if we can do it, the benefits for all are substantial!

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Author

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Brown, Sally (S.Brown@leedsbeckett.ac.uk).

Independent Consultant, Emerita Profesor of Higher Education Diversity in Teaching and Learning, Leeds Metropolitan University, UK. She was Head of Quality Enhancement at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle. Address: 22 Clifton Terrace, Forest Hall, Newcastle, NE12 9NP.



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