

Chapter XIV

Authentic Assessment Online: A Practical and Theoretical Challenge in Higher Education

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Abstract

This chapter addresses the issue of authentic assessment in an online, asynchronous educational environment. Initially, a definition of “authentic” is articulated. Building on this theoretical foundation by describing authentic assessment in the face-to-face classroom, a framework for authentic assessment in the virtual classroom is developed. Next, the multiple challenges of conducting authentic assessment online are addressed. Finally, specific strategies for authentic online assessment are identified and discussed. These strategies include the use of electronic portfolios, electronic journals, assessment embedded in online discussion, and rubrics.

Introduction

This chapter addresses the thorny issue of authentic assessment in an online environment by articulating a definition of “authentic.” Applying this definition, the authors describe authentic approaches to assessment in a traditional classroom. Building on this theoretical and practical foundation, frameworks for authentic assessment in an online asynchronous environment are developed. Next, the multiple challenges of conducting authentic assessment in a computer-mediated classroom are discussed. Finally, the authors identify and detail specific strategies for authentically assessing student learning online.

In designing coursework, colleges and universities are being challenged by two trends—one practical and the other theoretical. Practically speaking, academic institutions are experiencing increasing enrollments in online courses. Projections indicate that growth in enrollment is likely to continue steadily during this decade. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Education’s report from the Web-based Education Commission (2000) illustrate the increase in scope and participation in online coursework on U.S. campuses. Consider these facts:

Approximately 84% of four-year colleges were expected to offer distance learning courses in 2002, up from 62% in 1996.

In 2000, U.S. colleges and universities offered more than 6,000 accredited courses on the Web.

In 2002, 2.2 million students were expected to enroll in distance learning courses, up from 700,000 in 1998. (p. 77)

One of the many reasons for increased enrollment in online courses is the growing number of adult students pursuing college degrees. These students need practical, relevant, work-based knowledge and skills, and they need flexibility to accommodate work and family schedules.

Theoretically, social constructivism, as articulated by Bruner (1990), Dewey (1938), Piaget (1973), von Glaserfeld (1983), Vygotsky (1978), and others educational theorists, continues to influence the design of curriculum and instruction. This philosophy describes learning as an active process by which the teacher engages learners in inquiry and discovery, and learners apply what they have discovered by building on current and past knowledge in personally relevant ways. Constructivist approaches challenge educators to move away from decontextualized, passive, and fact-driven learning in favor of approaches to learning that are active, collaborative, reflective, and that connect learning to students’ needs and life context. Social constructivism, as a widely held theory firmly grounded in research on learning and cognition, has shaped the current educational emphasis on authentic learning (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Carpenter &

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