

Chapter 11

Authentic Assessment in Online Higher Education: Connecting Adult Learner Needs With Industry Expectations

Mary A. Tkatchov

Western Governors University, USA

Dan Ervin

Western Governors University, USA

ABSTRACT

Among the increasing pressures on today's higher education providers are the call from employers for improved preparedness of graduates for entering the workforce and the expectation from students that their learning be personalized and targeted toward their unique professional goals. Authentic performance assessment is proposed as an opportunity for higher education to collaborate with industry and create targeted and personalized skills-based performance assessment for adult learners as a means for closing the skills gap between school and work. This chapter provides in-depth descriptions of the characteristics of authentic performance assessment and steps and strategies for creating them.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, higher education has been slower than other industries to make comprehensive changes in response to a rapidly evolving workforce and increasingly digitalized world. Studies about workforce readiness show that employers in the United States report recent college graduates they hire lack essential skills, such as written and oral communication, critical thinking, and problem solving (U.S. Department of Education, 2006; Strauss, 2016; Bauer-Wolf, 2018; Society for Human Resource Management, 2019). Employers and industry leaders have recognized that diplomas do not necessarily equate to mastery of relevant skills that lead to success in the 21st century workplace, and they have challenged U.S. colleges and universities to keep up with the evolving professional landscape.

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In response to this need for higher education reform, education providers and industry representatives have collaborated to create targeted skills-based education that can better translate to an effective workforce. What does this partnership mean to the educational experience? To begin with, educational institutions are working to ensure the skills developed in these programs are more transparent to students and employers. Some schools have even begun unbundling degree programs into smaller educational experiences that culminate in certificates or badges in industry-valued skills. These smaller academic achievements allow employees to specialize or advance in specific areas of their professions, or they can allow degree-seeking students to reach milestones throughout their education.

As educational institutions shift to providing industry-relevant curriculum, there has also been a fundamental change in the way students select and engage in their learning. Students now seek educational experiences that they see as relevant and valuable to their unique lives and circumstances, and they want to customize and personalize their learning to meet their personal and professional needs. They seek just-in-time curriculum that gives them professional advantages and creates meaning in their lived experiences.

The rapid growth of online educational offerings, expedited and magnified by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, has made the courses available to students seemingly boundless. Students of all ages and backgrounds have been empowered to tailor their education to meet their unique needs. More than ever, higher education is conveniently accessed remotely rather than restricted to a physical campus.

At the intersection of industry demands and student needs is higher education. For colleges and universities to successfully meet student needs for personalization and real-world relevance, while supporting them in developing skills valued by industries, these institutions must incorporate opportunities for students to produce concrete evidence of their skills with authentic performance assessments. Authentic assessment empowers students to make the learning relevant and meaningful to them and to graduate with artifacts that will tell a more detailed story than a degree, a certificate, or test scores.

Achieving authenticity in an online learning environment may be challenging when the institution and instructors have less control over the learning environment and when students are located in all different places rather than together in a campus classroom. However, with the increasing prevalence of remote work in today's workplace, online higher education may actually provide a more authentic experience for future professionals. This chapter addresses the role of authentic performance assessment in workforce-aligned education and provides strategies for developing high-quality performance assessments.

BEGINNING WITH A VISION OF THE END GOAL

Yolanda is a full-time elementary school teacher who is pursuing a master's degree in educational leadership at an online university. She has just completed a school policy course, and she offered this feedback on her end-of-course evaluation:

The school policy proposal I developed for an assessment in this course was so relevant to my work. I discovered an interest in school policy and developed a closer relationship with my principal. I sought advice from my principal while putting together an anti-bullying policy proposal for this assessment, and my school is now adopting the policy! Not only was this experience personally rewarding, but it actually allowed me to make a difference on my campus.

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