

Authentic Assessment in Higher Education: Fostering Meaningful Learning

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A call for further research on authentic assessment in higher education has gained pace demanding learners have critical thinking, complex problem solving, creativity, and innovation skills. Yet the mechanisms of assessing learners to shape and harness these critical skills and desired pedagogical outcomes remain contested and under-theorised. Premised on being practical in application, offering opportunities for work, fostering best practices, and reducing risk of contract cheating, the adoption of authentic assessments is inevitable. Authentic assessments enable students to tackle real-world issues. By drawing from fine-grained research and contextualised understanding of authentic assessments, this study hopes to provide building blocks helpful in developing key considerations for institutions to use. The aim of this study is to contribute to existing research repertoire on the subject that seems to be at the intersection of pedagogy and the demands of the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

‘Old habits die hard’ (Litchfield and Dempsey, 2015). Higher education is undergoing a transformative shift in pedagogical approaches, moving away from traditional assessment methods towards more authentic forms of evaluation. Authentic assessment, rooted in real-world applications and tasks, aims to measure students' understanding and skills in a meaningful context. This paradigm shift

in assessments is essential to prepare students for the complexities of the modern workforce and to promote lifelong learning demanded by executives in organisations and authorities in governments (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown, 2014). In this Chapter, we will take a deep dive into the concept of authentic assessment in higher education, its principles, and relevance, while also exploring elements of successful implementation. This is in response to demands from executives in organisations and academics in higher education who are advocating for the use of authentic assessment to replace or complement traditional assessments, while at the same time maintain, if not enhance their rankings via accrediting agencies (Litchfield, and Dempsey., 2015). This study examines heterogeneous literature on the topic and existing theories that shape our understanding of the phenomena.

DEFINING AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

Authentic assessment goes beyond traditional testing methods, emphasising the application of knowledge and skills in real-world scenarios. Wiggins (2019), a prominent educational theorist, defines authentic assessment as “engaging and worthy problems or questions of importance, in which students must use knowledge to fashion performances effectively and creatively”. This definition underscores the importance of context, relevance, and the active application of knowledge (also see Koh, 2017). Other authors have tolled in with their understanding of what authentic assessments entail; as realism, contextualisation and problematisation when teaching and assessing curricular content (Benner et al., 2009; Raymond et al., 2013). Villaroel et al (2018) asserts the importance of authentic assessment as born in its ability to foster competencies that are closely tied to employability. While acknowledging the varying conceptualisations of the phenomenon (alternative, or performance assessment), Litchfield and Dempsey (2015) instead offered their understanding of the phenomenon referring to it as an “alternative assessment” where “students engage in real-world activities where they can realistically apply knowledge and skills with fidelity”. Similarly, Vu and Dall’Alba (2014) defined authentic assessments as engaging the whole student through the student’s knowledge, their actions, and their idea of self.

These attributes, conceptualisations and performance benchmarks mimic the real world of work or the professional realm, which over the years have been demonstrated to have a positive impact on student learning, autonomy, motivation, self-regulation, and metacognition. Wiggins (2019) avows that this mode of assessment examines students’ performance on ‘worthy intellectual tasks’ hence contrasting with traditional approaches that rely on ‘indirect or proxy items’ from which inferences of students’ performance can be drawn. Drawing from his earlier writings on the same subject

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