

## Chapter 4

# Authentic Learning in Online Courses: A Course Design Model

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this chapter is to describe authentic learning, review the literature pertaining to authentic learning, discuss the benefits for online learning, and provide a model for the use of authentic learning in online course design. Students comment they are motivated by solving real-world problems and often express a preference for doing rather than listening. At the same time, most educators consider learning by doing the most effective way to teach (Lombardi, 2007). The chapter will be beneficial to instructors and instructional designers alike.*

### INTRODUCTION

It is clear that in today's environment employers are expecting university graduates to be able to walk right into the workforce with the skills needed to do their jobs; they want employees who are innovative and communicate in their chosen profession. Traditional approaches to higher edu-

cation do not necessarily provide graduates with those skills. Many faculty members have looked to authentic learning approaches to content to help prepare students for the workforce in their chosen profession. But, what exactly is authentic learning? First, let's look at the tool that has advanced the use of authentic learning, particularly for online learning.

The Internet has fundamentally changed the instructional process in higher education. The

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Internet has provided educators with a powerful tool to create effective and immersive learning environments and provides efficient and collaborative forms of communication for students with their instructors and with each other (Herrington & Oliver, 2006). Most common of the learning environments are online courses.

Online learning's use of the Internet to focus on real-life problems and projects allows students to explore and discuss these problems in ways that are relevant to them. Embedded in this concept is the idea that authentic instructional approaches include a focus on real-life questions and issues, active pedagogy, collaboration, and connectedness. Authentic learning, based in constructivism, engages students in constructing new ideas or concepts that build on previous experiences and knowledge. Authentic approaches to teaching and learning recognize the importance of collaboration (Mathur & Murray, 2006). There are many strengths of the Internet for authentic learning. It supports lifelong learning; it shifts the instructional paradigm from a teaching environment to a learning environment; it provides communication tools that support dialog within and between diverse communities of learners; it fosters the collaboration needed for scaffolding, support, and shared meaning-making; it supports "deep learning" through meaningful dialog; it provides easy access to broad, deep sources of information and supports meaningful interaction with this information; and it provides a flexibility and convenience for learners that are not feasible in the traditional face-to-face classroom (Mathur & Murray, 2006).

### **Interactivity in Authentic Learning for Online Learning**

The emphasis of the book is on interactivity in online courses. Interactivity refers to the interaction between the learner and the instructional source. Interactivity in online courses deals mainly with

print and digital media. It is more predesigned and programmed, needing to prompt and engage learners (Wang & Gearhart, 2006). This chapter progresses first with defining authentic learning and describes how it is used in successful online course design.

### **Defining Authentic Learning**

Authentic learning is a pedagogical approach that allows students to explore, discuss, and meaningfully construct concepts and relationships in contexts that involve real-world problems and projects relevant to the learner. Students are presented with problem-solving activities that incorporate authentic, real-life questions and issues in a format that encourages collaborative effort, dialogue with informed expert sources, and generalization to broader ideas and application (Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999; Christensen, 1995).

According to Cornelius-White and Harbaugh (2010) many students find much of their education to be irrelevant, especially students who struggle academically. Particularly, adult students find it hard to connect the value from traditional teaching of facts to real world situations. Adult learners are drawn to online learning for its flexibility and convenience and adult learners want to find relevance of their learning to their real world situations. Transfer of learning is one of the biggest challenges teachers face in teaching from an authentic curricula. This is particularly compounded when taking authentic curricula from the traditional classroom to the online course.

Authentic learning and inquiry-based teaching are interrelated methods of knowledge construction and skill development consistent with learner-centered facilitation, engagement, and achievement. Characteristics of authentic learning include high perceived relevance and direct redressing of simulated and real-world problems. Authentic learning methods can support distance

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