

TEACHING AND SCHOLARSHIP BRIEFING

May 2022

ICE Project Report: Authentic Learning and Assessment

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In this briefing, the authors discuss the initial findings from an Institute for Curriculum Enhancement project, which examined authentic learning and assessment in Higher Education.

Overview

- Authentic pedagogies simulate real world tasks.
- Authentic tasks can increase student engagement and employability.
- Authentic assessments and traditional assessments are not mutually exclusive.
- The authors have collated case study examples of the introduction of authentic pedagogies in different disciplines.

What is authentic learning and assessment?

Authentic learning pedagogies engage students with real-world tasks, enabling them to "learn with intention by thinking and acting like professionals as they address real problems" (Herrington, Parker and Boase-Jelinek, 2014). Well-designed authentic activities "are inherently meaningful, interesting, relevant and have long-term value" and – crucially - they are perceived as such by students (Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013). The realism of authentic assessment contrasts with student perceptions

of the alleged artifice of traditional forms of assessment such as exams, which students tend to experience and describe as "hoop-jumping exercises" or "memory tests", undertaken purely to obtain credit (Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013). Many educators would justifiably argue that such a dim view of traditional forms of assessment is not completely accurate (Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013). However, research demonstrates that if students *perceive* that memorising facts and theories is the key to assessment success, this can encourage a surface approach to learning (Boud, 1990). In contrast, authentic learning pedagogy applies learning to real-world contexts, allowing students to see the inherent value of what they are doing.

As such, authentic learning and assessment can encourage students to adopt a deep approach to learning, as they are not “simply going through the motions, reproducing whatever information or answers they assumed their lecturers wanted to hear or see” (Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013). By emulating real-world experience and connecting students with their future professional lives, authentic learning and assessment can increase student engagement with their studies. As Kearney and Perkins state, authentic pedagogies can help students feel that they are “a part of the educative process, rather than being subjected to it” (Kearney and Perkins, 2011).

In practice, authentic forms of learning and assessment are wide and varied. For example, authentic pedagogies could include asking students to develop an exhibition as part of an Art degree,

interview a simulated client as part of a Nursing course, or deliver a case study presentation to employers in a Management module. Importantly, authentic assessments and traditional assessments are not mutually exclusive. Bloxham and Boyd state that assessment has four key purposes, namely: certification, student learning, quality assurance and lifelong learning capacity (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Certification and quality assurance are of vital importance in higher education. However, proponents of authentic assessment argue that authentic approaches can augment existing assessment practices by supporting student learning and lifelong learning capacity (Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013). Boud refers to this as “sustainable assessment,” as it “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of students to meet their own future learning needs” (Boud, 2000).



Advocacy in the mock courtroom: an example of authentic learning and assessment in Law

Institute for Curriculum Enhancement Project

The authors conducted an ethics approved study (reference bFL20146) in which they interviewed colleagues who use authentic learning and assessment at Lancaster University and its partner institutions. These interviews, together with key insights from the project, will be made available as good practice case studies on an openly accessible online resource platform, to inform and inspire others who are considering introducing authentic pedagogies in their teaching practice. The authors were aware that much of the research on authentic learning and assessment is currently drawn from professional fields such as nursing and medicine, where there are obvious links between study and very particular real-world of practices (Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013). As such, the authors' research included interviews with colleagues who use authentic pedagogies in non-vocational subject areas, in addition to disciplines that have clear connections with real-world contexts. A broad range of disciplines were covered, including interviews with colleagues in Music, Film, Sociology, Engineering and Law.

Initial findings from the project illustrate that authenticity can be achieved in a wide variety of ways, across the whole spectrum of subjects. Some colleagues create authenticity in their teaching by connecting students with employers and asking them to solve real-world problems. In non-vocational subjects, where the creation of authenticity is more challenging, students can be assessed using methods that replicate collective working practices, rather than requiring them to work individually (Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013).

Working on a Simulated Case: Authentic Learning and Assessment in Law

In a Civil Litigation and Dispute Resolution course in Law, students were asked to follow a simulated commercial case from the first client interview through to trial. Students were given new case study information (for example, fake client interview notes and contracts) as the course progressed, and were asked to conduct "real" legal work, such as drafting witness statements and preparing cross-examination questions.

The students were assessed by an advocacy assessment in the mock courtroom and a take home portfolio, both of which were based on a simulated case. Student feedback indicated that the students found the course enjoyable and relevant to their future professional practice in tangible ways. Some students reported that the module acted as a proxy for legal work experience and enhanced their employability.

Authentic pedagogies and student engagement

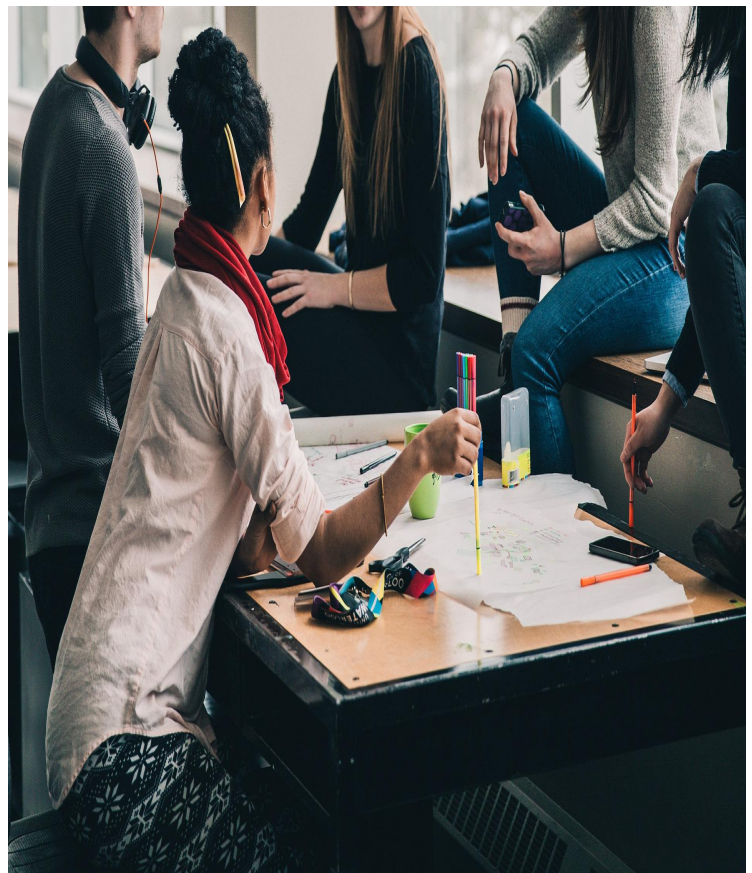
From discussions with colleagues who use authentic pedagogies, a common theme was that authentic learning and assessment can enhance student engagement. Engagement is a multi-faceted concept, but we can define it as "the emotional and behavioral motivations of students to be actively involved in the academic experience" (Kearney and Perkins, 2011). Authentic pedagogies have been identified as a fundamental way to enhance student engagement. When students can identify the intrinsic value of their learning beyond the classroom, deep approaches to learning are encouraged (Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013).

Authentic pedagogies and employability

Many of the colleagues that we interviewed discussed the link between authentic pedagogies and employability. Graduate employability is a key concern in Higher Education and authentic learning and assessment can help students to develop skills and prepare for employment (Sotiriadou, Logan, Daly and Guest, 2020). Authentic pedagogies can encourage students to imagine themselves in their respective professional fields, and well-designed authentic tasks can help contextualise the subject matter (Sokhanvar, Salehi and Sokhanvar, 2021). In this manner, authentic pedagogies can help bridge the gap between education and the world of work.

Challenges to the introduction of authentic pedagogies

There are challenges to the introduction of authentic pedagogies. Both students and educators may feel unprepared to take on new and often unfamiliar forms of assessment and learning. Particularly in a non-vocational academic context, authentic forms of learning might require a fundamental rethinking of teaching and learning practices. Another challenge raised by many project participants was the time, educational resources, and buy-in required to develop authentic activities (Sokhanvar, Salehi and Sokhanvar, 2021). In both cases a careful and phased introduction of authentic learning is key.



About the Authors

Sadie is a practising Solicitor, Lecturer and Director of Clinical Legal Education at Lancaster University Law School. Sadie's research and scholarship focuses on civil litigation, clinical legal education and authentic learning and assessment. Sadie is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. She is also a 2021/22 Fellow of the Institute for Curriculum Enhancement.

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Relevant Links

Digital Media Studio (LICA/Sociology) <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/sociology/digital-media-studio/>

Developing Practical Media Skills:

<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/study/why-lancaster/media-and-cultural-studies-developing-practical-skills/>

ICE Fellowships:

<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/institute-for-curriculum-enhancement/ice-fellowships/2021-22-ice-fellowships/2021-22-ice-fellows/>

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