

Initiating Conversations about the ‘Authentic’ Nature of Assessment

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Abstract

The purpose of this short communication is to support our conversations regarding the educational value of authentic assessment design in practice. We as an Institution, I suggest like many, have begun to reflect more on its value to our learner experiences without necessarily offering an educational backdrop as to what it actually means, and how (and where) authentic assessment may feature within our practices. I have purposefully split these communications into three parts. This first part of the three addresses the nature of authentic assessment, what it means and presents a new framework to assist with assessment choice. Part 2 will offer an accessible toolkit that can act as a catalyst for our conversations and development of authentic assessment. Finally, Part 3 will present a series of case studies that demonstrate how, by using the framework, assessment can be adapted to move towards a higher degree of authenticity.

Keywords: Assessment, Higher Education, Learner Experience, Authenticity

Introduction

The aim of my writing is to support colleagues align their thinking and practice with educationally sound and theoretically underpinned ideas of effective learning, one may say our *Pedagogical Rationale* which I like to simplify down to a series of questions – “Why are we doing what we are doing?” and “What is its value?”. The concept of ‘value’ in the context of authenticity of learning experience is critical to this discourse, as too is the ownership of the authentic experience given that the assessment type and structure are often constructed external to the learner. These issues I will cover later.

The term authentic Assessment has been used in educational settings since the 1980s, before then coined authentic achievement (McArthur, 2022). It has gained pace throughout Higher Education over the last decade, most notably during the shift towards more blended modes of delivery and alternative forms of assessment as seen over the ‘COVID years’ (Sambell & Brown, 2022). The term authentic assessment has been regarded as yet another buzzword adding to an already congested pedagogical nomenclature. I use the term pedagogical in this context to

refer to the methods and tools we use as practitioners to teach adults (see also El-Amin, 2020). I would disagree with this characterisation of authentic assessment in HE, suggesting that this rather abstract concept perhaps has not been fully unpacked to expose the actual sound theoretical value and benefit such assessment approach can bear on the learner experience. In actual fact, once this concept is explored through the literature base, one can see that its features are grounded in sound learning theory that have a longstanding trail of evidence-based benefit (McArthur, 2022; Villarroel *et al.*, 2018).

For this reason, I hope Part 1, notwithstanding its inevitable gaps and shortcomings, may help clarify what we mean by the concept of authentic assessment, establish why authentic assessment within practice adds educational and social value to the learner experience, and extend the literature by presenting a new framework to guide discussion about the dimensions of our assessment practices. Included within are a wide range of collected references and resources that too may be helpful, firstly as a useful place to deepening understanding, and secondly to assist with operationalising assessment practices.

What is meant by authentic assessment?

Assessment forms the cornerstone to learning (see Biggs 1996 and 2003 for a thorough account of aligning learning outcomes to assessment). Such constructive alignment between the intended learning objectives, and the most appropriate types of assessment, set the foundation upon which our teaching and learning activities are built. The starting point to any assessment design is to determine exactly what is to be achieved by the learner, by way of measurable objectives. Irrespective of educational setting, there remains a strong shift towards more transformative forms of assessment, moving away from a culture of objective and standardised testing (which often, although not exclusively, assesses lower order thinking (see Hyder & Bhamani's 2016 reflections on Bloom's taxonomy and Figure 1) towards a more complex and comprehensive assessment of higher order thinking obtained when situated within a context or setting (Abosalem, 2016).

In a comprehensive systematic review led by Villarroel *et al.* (2018), the attempt to classify what is meant by authentic assessment led to thirteen consistent characteristics leading to the classification of three conceptual dimensions: realism, cognitive challenge and evaluative judgement (Table 1). From their analysis, authenticity of assessment is identified as a key characteristic of assessment design which promotes learning. Authentic assessment aims to replicate the tasks and performance standards typically bound in realism, and found to have a positive impact on student learning, autonomy, motivation, self-regulation and metacognition.

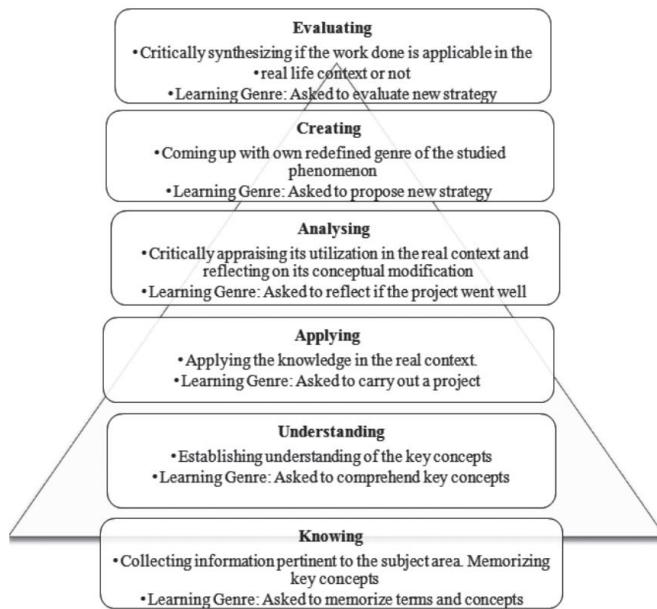


Figure 1 Bloom's revised taxonomy of education objectives (Hyder & Bhamani, 2016, p.295): Notwithstanding its shortcomings, Bloom's model offers a useful reminder for objective setting when moving from lower order (i.e. Knowing and Understanding) to higher order thinking (i.e. Evaluating and Creating)

Dimensions	Characteristics as identified from the evidence
Realism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Problems contextualised to everyday life - Relevance beyond the classroom - Authentic performance - Competencies for work performance
Cognitive Challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Higher order thought - Ability to solve problems - Ability to make decisions - Similar tasks to the real/working world - Practical value
Evaluative Judgement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regular feedback - Formative sense - Assessment criteria known a priori

Table 1 Dimensions of authentic assessment (adapted from Villarroel et al., 2018, p.843)

What is the educational value of authentic assessment?

Assessment, teaching and learning are inextricably linked, each one being a critical part of the pedagogical process (meaning the methods and practices in which we deliver our curriculum), and where feedback is used to adjust learning experiences (Kolb 2015). Assessment is considered a salient component of students' learning experiences, not just as a measure of learning, but more importantly as a significant contributor for learning (Wiliam 2011). This switch from traditional to more authentic modes of assessment has been prompted by the goal to dissolve the dichotomy in what is being learned in the lecture theatre or seminar with what is happening in a situated 'realistic' setting (shifting from behavioural and cognitive theories of learning towards socially situated theories of learning e.g. social constructivism and situated learning theory). In fact, the concept of authentic assessment has become increasingly popular, as the evidence continues to show the value towards more situational higher order thinking experiences to learning (Villarroel *et al.*, 2018).

Authentic assessment moves beyond learning by rote and memorization taught through more traditional methods of practice towards activities that empower students' creativity, deep applied understanding, problem-solving skills, social skills, and attitudes that are used in a 'real-world', or simulation of a real-world situation (Fook & Sidhu, 2010). Of interest here is the term 'real-world', contextualised to mean something away from the academic learning space, and external to the student and ourselves. As McArthur (2022) puts it "*The real world is out there*" implying a sense of separation between our world and the real-world, where in fact they are one of the same. McArthur (2022) argues that although this should feature within our conversation about the deeper understanding of authenticity, we too need to develop a more holistic and richer sense of what the 'real-world' really means to the learner, viewing this as the social value the assessment brings both for the learner and those to which the learner interacts with (social relationships and their value). She suggests that placing too heavy a weight on the 'real-world' experience, as place or activities that occur within that situation, may negate our consideration of the personalised experiences of authenticity. Viewing authentic assessment as a socially 'situated' achievement can be powerful and transformative.

With a higher degree of realism that draws the learner towards higher levels of cognitive skills, assessments become part of the learning process or assessment for learning, as opposed to assessment of learning (Raymond *et al.*, 2013). Realism therefore involves linking knowledge with situational experience, affording the learner the opportunity to gain social and personal sense of authenticity during their experience.

Presenting a framework to initiate conversations

It is important to acknowledge that our choice to adopt authentic assessment into practice is not binary. It is fair to say that we rarely have conversations about our 'inauthentic assessment', neither are we likely to indicate that our assessment is

inauthentic by design. Although this seems a rather arbitrary point to make, it is relevant because the very concept of authentic assessment functions upon a continuum with types that we may consider having lower degrees of authenticity through to assessment types that hold higher degrees. What constitutes 'lower' and 'higher' is a derivative of the degree of realism within our assessment (Y-axis) and the type of cognitive challenge we seek from our assessment (X-axis) (Figure 2).

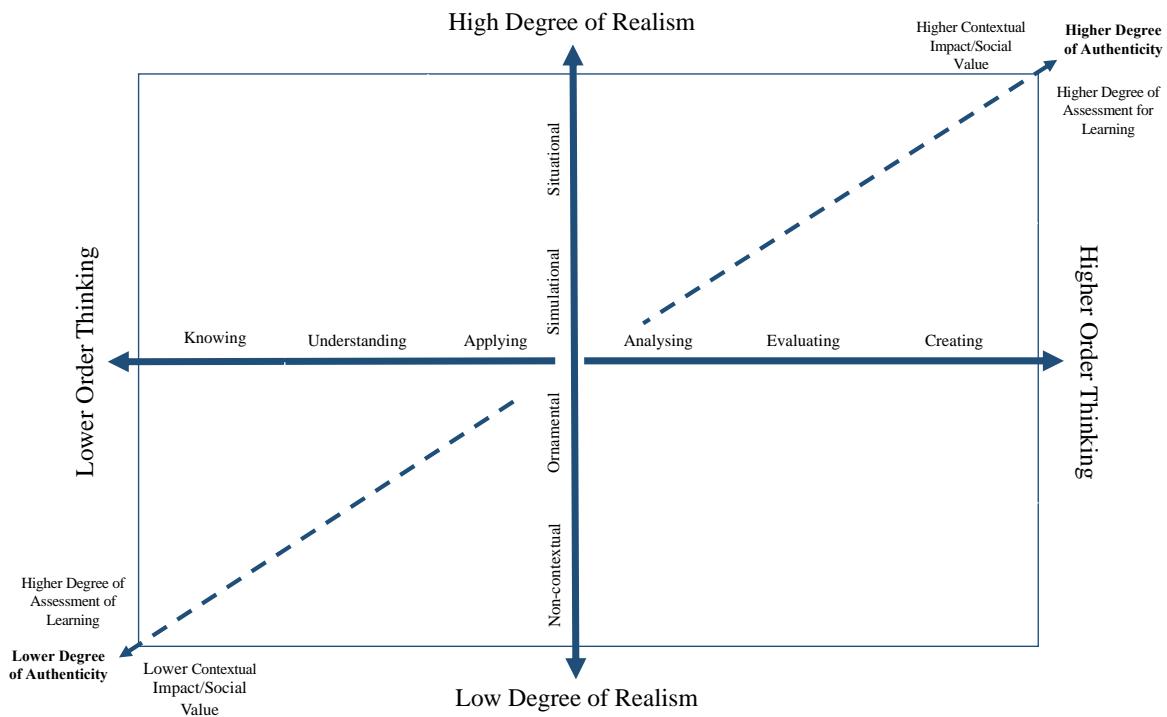


Figure 2 Authenticity of assessment conceptual framework: Note the inter-relationship between the degree of realism bound within an assessment piece and the level of higher order thinking linked to assessment educational objectives

As shown, each dimension functions across a spectrum. The extent to which any assessment type is considered authentic (its contextual realism and cognitive challenge) works within an interconnecting matrix. The Y axis (from bottom to top) describes the degree to which the assessment type is considered realistic in terms of placing it within a real setting. In this context, 'non-contextual' refers to any assessment that is not placed into any context. An example of this (see Figure 3) may be MCQs or short-answer questions where both questions and answers are not linked to any real context or situation (e.g. Sport Therapy students answering questions on anatomical terminology). Any assessment type that aims to present a 'contextual scenario' either based on a real or fictitious example without actually experiencing that context would be seen as an 'ornamental' placeholder (e.g. a Psychology Student writing a Timed Constrained Exam (TCA) on a real-life case

study without having experienced the case first-hand). Next are situational experiences, set to mimic real situations and contexts but within a controlled and managed environment aimed at replicating aspects of part or all of an activity (e.g. Law Students using the Moot Court to perform a legal case with their peers). At the other end of the spectrum is positioned assessment types considered situational. With higher levels of realism, these would be assessment types located in live environments (e.g. Nursing or Medical student on placement within a Hospital Ward).

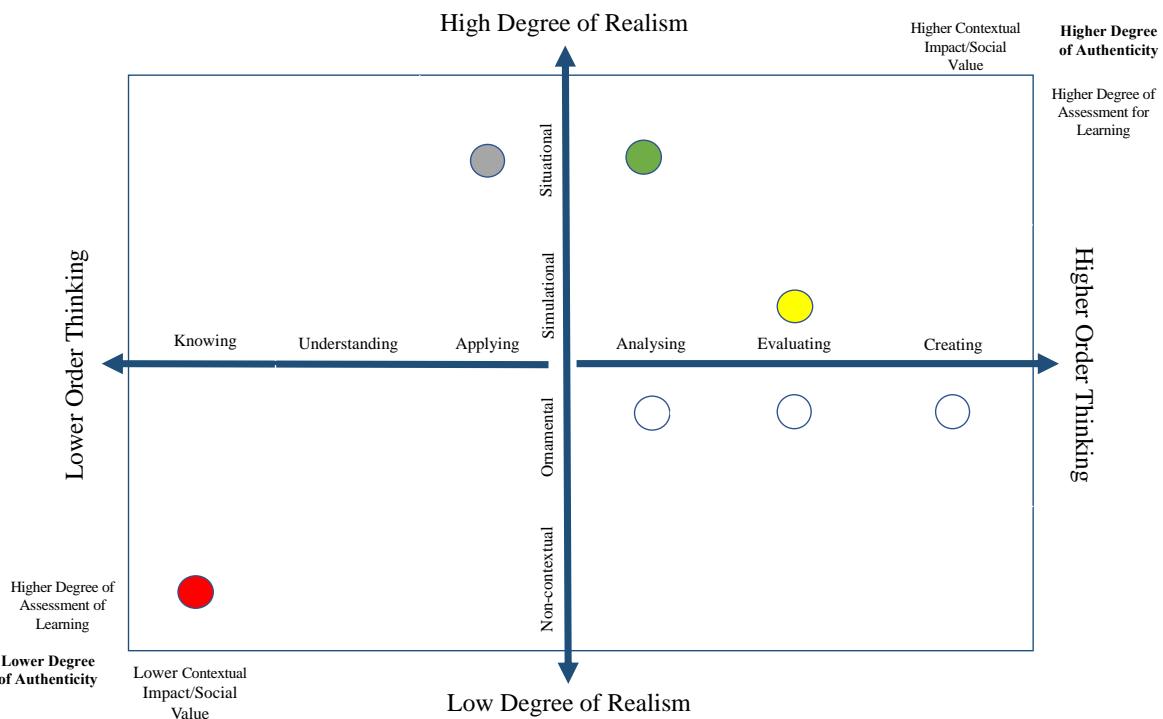


Figure 3 Illustration that shows the positioning of the five assessment types within the framework: MCQ = ● Entrustable Professional Activity (EPA) = ● TCA Case Study = ○ Court Performance = ● Work Placement Reflective Diary = ●

In reality, these four locations on the Y-axis may not be so distinct as the examples provided, however they do provide positions upon which assessment types can be grouped around. Of course, it goes without question that how each discipline defines these may slightly differ, having more nuanced subject-specific examples. But the act of discussing these will assist the conversation about the degree of realism seen within current assessment types and how they compare within and across levels of a programme.

Cognitive challenge (X-axis from left to right) reflects the degree in which the educational objectives (i.e. learning outcome verbs) align to lower though to higher order thinking. The Sport Therapy students who were required to 'identify' the correct

answer from a list of five possible answers were being required to show their 'knowledge'. The Psychology students who were required to write a TCA based on a Case Study provided by their Module Leader having to 'manipulate' data, 'interpret' its meaning, and then 'devise' an intervention strategy would have demonstrated higher order thinking through 'analysis', 'evaluation', and 'creation'. The Law students who was asked to make 'judgement' on their legal case simulation were being asked to show their 'evaluative' skills. For the Medical students who were required to 'demonstrate' a core competency in practice, required as part of a professional qualification, they would have needed to 'apply' their knowledge and comprehension. Finally, the Nursing students on their ward placement who were asked to write a diary entry on how a patient may react to a certain treatment they had to administer were being asked to 'predict' an outcome by using their 'analytical skills'. Each of our learning outcomes should align directly to a position along the X-axis. However, most assessments very rarely have only one learning objective so there may be a span across several per assessment type. It is not untypical though for one to be the domain objective for the assessment selected.

When taken together, the extent to which our assessment choices have a degree of realism and the extent to which the learner is cognitively challenged, in part begins to define how authentic our assessment type may be. In addition to these two features, we may also wish to consider the social value of our assessment choice, that being the impact it may have both on the learner and those that they form relationships with whilst completing the assessment, as well as the degree to which the assessment offers the learner the opportunity to feel authentic about who they are within their experience (a wonderful talking point with students). If scaled up to evaluate all assessment types across a level or even a programme, the overall picture of assessment authenticity can emerge. As illustrated in Figure 4, via a hypothetical programme matrix, initiating conversations amongst a Module or Programme team may reveal the extent to which assessments provide a learner with a full range of experiences across the programme.

The final dimension that defines the degree of authenticity within any assessment is the extent to which evaluative judgements are built directly into the assessment requirements. Although not explicitly featured with the framework, the very act of defining the location of an assessment item within the matrix should initiate a conservation concerning the point(s) at which feedback is offered and used within the learning process. For those assessment types typically positioned towards the lower-left quadrant of the framework, judgment (i.e. feedback of learning) comes summatively following assessment completion. Within the top-right quadrant, learners who were required to complete tasks that afford formative feedback, receiving feedback following each reflective diary entry within their placement portfolio further reinforces the authentic nature of their assessment type.

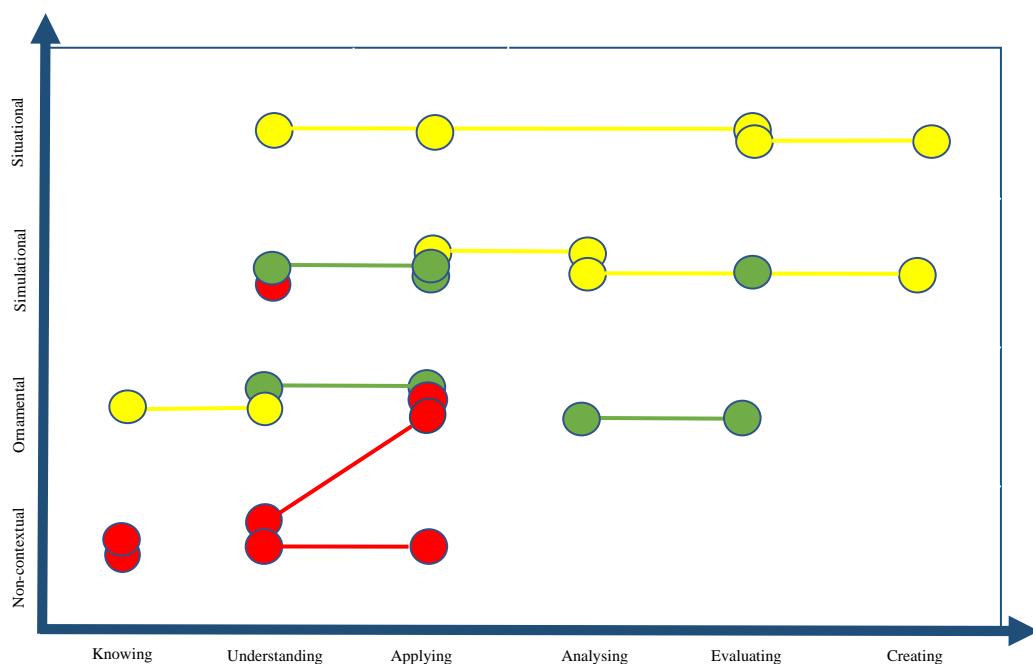


Figure 4 Hypothetical programme matrix where assessment mapping has occurred across three years of study: Year 1= ● Year 2 = ● Year 3= ●

Conclusion

The hope for this short communication is to provide the reader with a concise justification for the move towards more authenticity within our assessment types. Acknowledging this is not an exhaustive account of the evidence, I have sought to include literature that itself have provided a comprehensive coverage. Part 1 of three sets out to offer an initial conversation piece built around a new framework that explores the three dimensions of authentic assessment: Realism; Cognitive Challenge and Evaluative Judgement. Examples have been provided that show how examination of current assessment types can be used as a catalyst for further conversations about the depth and breadth of assessment within and across years of a programme. Part 2 will aim to offer an accessible Toolkit that can be used during such conversations, whilst the final Part will draw upon case study examples that show how assessments can be developed to enhance their degree of authenticity.

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