



Assess FOR SUCCESS

Designing Authentic Assessment

by Sally Brown and Kay Sambell

What is the issue?

In this guide we will make the case for the implementation of more authentic approaches to assessment, due to the benefits for student learning and student success. Authentic assessment tasks send powerful messages about the complexity of knowledge in university-level study and the extent to which success implies valued, deep and incremental approaches to learning. In other words, authentic assessment helps students realise that ongoing effort, formative activity and mastery over time are crucial to success. Furthermore, there is a good chance that the quality of work that students produce as a result of being asked to undertake meaningful tasks, rather than just reactively answer exam questions or essays, will be higher, encouraging students to become more fully engaged, to take more responsibility for their own learning and to adopt deep rather than surface approaches to learning (Ramsden, 2003). The premise is that students will be encouraged to perceive the relevance of what they are doing to their future lives and selves, and therefore be more likely to demonstrate thoughtfully the knowledge and capabilities contained within the specified learning outcomes. Alternative, manageable and authentic approaches to assessment, such as leaflets, posters, podcasts, take-home papers, reflective journals, blogs, articles, vivas, annotated bibliographies and other alternative formats that go beyond the routine essay or exam, can be more inclusive (Tai et al., 2021) and can engage students more fully as well as being more

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resilient in the case of, say, campus-closures. In any case, assignments which promote a sense of worth beyond 'going through the motions' in response to assessors' demands are likely to be less stultifyingly dull for students to undertake and for us to assess than traditional exams! In many cases, then, authentic assessment is about putting joy into the assessment process (McArthur, 2022).

Research-informed thinking about assessment

Authentic assessment tries to make the assessment tasks we set feel meaningful, worthwhile and valuable to students (McArthur, 2021a) beyond picking up marks. The principle of authenticity is particularly useful as it helps us think about the long-term value of the tasks we set, and helps us to stimulate genuine, high order learning where students really get to grips with building complex ideas and grasp them so thoroughly they can integrate and apply them to novel situations.

Authentic assessment is a concept promoted by Wiggins (1989) and others to counteract the assumption that educational testing regimes are necessarily detached, artificial and contrived, and

authentic assessment has traditionally been taken to mean that students are engaged in ‘using and applying skills and knowledge to address “real world” problems’ (Lund, 1997, p. 25). Using assessment formats that are much more like the ‘real things’ that academics or professionals in the field do has the power to engage students in much more meaningful ways than those which students assume require them to cram short-term knowledge, which is quickly forgotten, or topic spot to pass a test, rather than build foundational knowledge, skills and know-how that they can apply in an analytical and thoughtful way. Furthermore, authentic assessment is one of the best tools we have in our teaching toolkit to develop a learner’s sense of becoming a member of a discipline or professional community.

A sense of ‘realism’ is a key characteristic (Villaruel et al., 2018), so students feel they are creating outputs which, for instance, have a plausible audience (not just the assessor) or require them to work in realistic contexts. Of course, these features clearly link to employability (Sokhanvar, 2021) and can boost students’ sense that they are learning to be work-ready (gaining practical knowledge and skills, and developing professional identity), thereby relating closely to work-integrated learning whereby students learn off campus, for example, in practice settings, work placements (O’Neill et al., 2022). However, we suggest the principle of authenticity can be much broader than this. One case in point is where a feeling of developing identity can also be clearly associated with assessment which feels personally relevant to the individual student and their individual interests (Davison, 2011), or seems faithful to the discipline (Sambell et al., 2013).

a feeling of developing identity can also be clearly associated with assessment

Hence, authentic tasks may resonate with stakeholders outside the university (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014) in ways which include, but also transcend, the needs of employers. As Jan McArthur points out ‘assessment can be a powerful force in shaping individual students’ identity and sense of self-worth.... it’s about who they are and who they go on to be in our society’ (McArthur, 2021a, p.8). So suitably reframed, more authentic, learning-oriented assessments can also be a powerful force in fostering,

among other things, a student’s personal growth, development, sense of belonging and becoming in disciplinary communities, as well as identity, confidence and self-worth (Arnold, 2021; Brown, 2019). More authentic tasks can also play a key role in developing students not only as individuals but also as active and fulfilled citizens by, for instance, fostering criticality, divergent thinking, agency, motivation to question commonly held assumptions, creativity, and a sense of pride and value in deeply engaging with complex knowledge, or potential contributions to the broader social good (McArthur, 2021b).

Practical advice

Recognising that designing authentic assessment activities from scratch can seem like a daunting job, we have devised a ‘Task Generator’, to help people create more authentic assignments, which comprises six steps:

- Whenever writing assignments, it’s a good idea to start with the learning outcomes, (Chapter 3 in Brown, 2014).
- If the learning outcomes are well written, they are likely to contain one or more powerful, driving verbs at their centre to direct student effort, such as ‘interpret’, ‘research and review’, ‘set up and calibrate’, ‘evaluate’ and ‘compile’.
- This is then followed by the object of the verb, that is, what students do which provides a focus for action, for example, interpret sometimes complex and incomplete information from a variety of sources, or set up specialist equipment appropriately, or evaluate three proposed solutions to a problem and suggest two further solutions of your own.
- Next, indicate what outcomes/evidence of achievement you would need so you could be confident the outcome has been attained; these could include, for example, action plans, executive summaries, annotated bibliographies, reports, teaching packs, patient information leaflets, step-by-step guides to practice posters, vlogs/blogs/ audio outputs, short reflections, and many more. You can also see many examples of this approach in practice in the compendia of good practice examples provided by colleagues across the disciplines and in different nations.
- Preface these steps with detail around the subject or professional context relevant to the subject area/discipline/course to bring the assignment to life. It is relatively straightforward to create fictionalised scenarios, building on lived

experiences of academics and professionals in the field. These might include real life events, for example, a police raid or a news story based in the Australian outback; adopting a role, for example, as company surveyor for an energy company, or an experienced practitioner mentoring a junior colleague; professional contexts, for example, health and social care workers preparing health interventions in a care home during the pandemic; unfolding incidents, for example, a building site which is flooded and then has a landslide or research-paper based assignments, for example, asking students to read two articles about contamination and then undertaking tasks related to these. It's sensible to keep them fairly simple and short, without too much extraneous detail, but with just enough to pique your students' interest.

- Complete the assessment brief with modifiers/developments/range statements to guide the students about the scale and scope of what is required of them. These can provide guidance to help students see what kinds of performance is associated with different bands of grades. The key feature of this stage is to provide sufficient scaffolding and guidance to students so that the task seems achievable rather than daunting, without over-prescribing outcomes.

More detail about this approach can be seen in the paper 'Writing better assignments in the Post-Covid19 era: approaches to good task design'.

Our task generator can help busy practitioners to come up with divergent rather than convergent student responses to summatively assessed tasks where their 'answers' don't all look the same and students can often position their response in relation to a personal interest or local context.

To sum up

For successful outcomes, we need students to become agents for change in their own lives and beyond. This involves cognitive challenge, development of metacognitive capabilities, shaping of identity, building of confidence and a growth towards active citizenship. Hence, we are keen to develop and value assessment practices which are transformative, and which stimulate student engagement, both now and in the longer term. Authentic assessment can, by providing authentic contexts and realistic scenarios around which assessment activities are framed, give students the stimulation and challenges they need to succeed. Examples of work of this nature that is happening in Maynooth University can be accessed [here](#)

Over to you - what might you do next?

- ✓ Explore possible authentic assessment approaches which might work in your discipline. You might want to use some of the resources in the relevant section of the 'Assess for Success' hub to do this.
- ✓ Look at Brown and Sambell's suggestions for using the Task Generator to direct your assessment tasks in a more authentic direction, in 'Writing better assignment in the post-Covid-19 era: approaches to good task design' published 17 August, 2020 and available [here](#)
- ✓ With colleagues and/or students, brainstorm possible authentic assessment approaches for a module that you teach or plan to teach.
- ✓ Reach out to relevant professionals in placement setting or in professional bodies to learn about their perspectives on authentic assessment.
- ✓ Connect with the relevant professionals on campus to understand how authentic assessment can work within your institution.

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