

Authentic assessment

What is authentic assessment?

Authentic assessment is characterized by open-ended tasks that require students to construct extended responses, to perform an act, or to produce a product in a real-world context—or a context that mimics the real world. Examples of authentic assessments include projects, portfolios, writing an article for newsletter or newspaper, performing a dance or drama, designing a digital artefact, creating a poster for science fair, debates, and oral presentations.

Such assessment tasks are deemed able to engage and motivate learners when they perceive the relevance of the tasks to the real world or when they find that a completion of the tasks is meaningful for their learning.

Why is authentic assessment important?

Authentic assessment can serve as a powerful tool for assessing students' 21st-century competencies of critical thinking, complex problem solving, creativity and innovation.

Although many of these competencies are not new, they have become increasingly in demand in workplaces that have shifted from lower-level cognitive and routine manual tasks to higher-level analytic and interactive tasks (e.g. collaborative problem solving) (Darling, Hammond & Adamson, 2010). This enables students to experience what it is like to work or perform in real-life contexts, which are often messy, ambiguous, and unpredictable. Such a “learning by doing” experience is in line with Dewey’s experiential education (McDermott, 1981).

What is authenticity?

Authenticity is an abstract concept which according to Villarroel *et al* (2018) can be understood in terms of realism, contextualization and problematisation when teaching and assessing curricular content.

- Realism involves linking knowledge with everyday life and work;
- Contextualisation characterizes situations where knowledge can be applied in an analytical and thoughtful way;
- Problematisation invokes a sense that what is learned can be used to solve a problem or meet a need

Designing authentic assessment

If you are not in a position of being able to redesign a whole assessment approach, move incrementally towards more authentic assessment by changing one task and/or context at a time or an aspect of a task or context. Designing authentic assessment involves the following steps:

1. Determine the broad characteristics of authenticity

How authentic can the assessment be, in terms of various dimensions of authenticity? Some significant characteristics of authenticity, in terms of how it contrasts with more traditional forms of assessment in academic settings such as exams, are set out in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Dimensions of authentic assessment (after Mueller, 2010)

DIMENSION	More traditional assessments	More authentic assessments
Structure of problems	Predetermined	Unpredictable
Learning setting	Contrived	Real
Cognitive activity	Lower-order	Higher-order
Learner agency	Teacher-defined	Learner-defined
Application of learning	Indirect evidence	Direct evidence

2. Align assessment with the intended programme competencies/learning outcomes:

- Ideally, associate competencies that reflect real-world contexts with authentic assessment tasks.
- You may need to revise the assessment plan and/or intended competencies/learning outcomes to some extent, to ensure effective alignment.

3. Design the real-world conditions.

This involves describing problems or scenarios, finding placements in authentic settings, or designing a learning environment, taking account of the following:

- Placements in real-world contexts can be high-risk for both the student and those with whom they will interact. Ensure that everyone exercises appropriate duty of care in the preparation and ongoing management of students in these contexts, and recognises the needs of all parties.
- Where placement in a real setting is not possible or desirable, simulations and technologies can be exploited to design scenario-based learning environments in which conditions, characters, circumstances and parameters of a real-life context for learning.

4. Ensure that students have the knowledge and skills needed

- Ensure that students have the *knowledge and skills* they need to carry out the tasks, that they are *well prepared and equipped* for their engagement in the setting, and that they *understand the assessment requirements*.

For example:

- Are students aware of what a report looks like, in contrast to more academic essays?
- Do they know how to make written or verbal presentations to the public?
- Are they aware of the legal implications of designing a website?
- Do they appreciate the ethical issues involved in reporting their observations?

5. Highlight the importance of students understanding their roles when engaging in real-world activities

- Students are ambassadors of the university; they should present themselves appropriately within the wider community.
- Students should be well prepared, and behave responsibly and professionally.

Designing the assessment task(s)

According to Wiggins (1993), the tasks for assessment should, as much as possible:

- be enabling, in that they guide students toward more sophisticated use of skills or knowledge;
- entail the integration of skills and knowledge contextualised to the authentic setting in all its complexity, rather than being disaggregated;
- depend on the student's own research or use of knowledge;
- emphasise higher order reasoning rather than simple recall or description;
- be representative rather than comprehensive, giving students the opportunity to probe deeply rather than to gain broad but shallow experience;
- be interesting and worthwhile, engaging students' interest and motivation.

Managing the assessment load

In authentic assessment situations, students may be over-zealous, producing very large portfolios or very long reports. It is important to set limits on the size of the submission, if for no other reason than to manage students' and staff workloads. For example, if students are to keep journals, have them submit brief periodic reflective statements based on their journals, rather than submitting the journals themselves.

Plan for improved reliability in grading authentic assessment tasks

The more complex the assessment, the more judgment is required from markers, and the greater the need to incorporate reliability measures into the grading process.

- Establish clear assessment criteria;
- Include process indicators in assessment criteria, as well as product indicators;
- Develop an assessment rubric outlining standards at different grade levels;
- Incorporate multiple sources of evidence of student achievement;
- When grading, involve others such as host supervisors and marking teams, and; students themselves as self- or peer assessors;
- Develop dialogue between assessors and learners;
- Provide opportunities for students to present additional evidence.



Case Study

A number of case studies from different universities / disciplines have been compiled by Sally Brown and Kay Sambell.

[Compendium 1](#)

[Compendium 2](#)

Further Reading

Darling-Hammond, L., & Adamson, F. (2010). *Beyond basic skills: The role of performance assessment in achieving 21st century standards of learning*. CA: Stanford University, Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.

Mueller, J. (2010). [Authentic assessment toolbox](#)

McDermott, J. (1981) *The Philosophy of John Dewey*. [UIL: University of Chicago Press](#)

Villarroel, V. *et al* (2018) Authentic assessment: creating a blueprint for course design, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43:5, 840-854

Wiggins, G. (1989). A true test: Toward more authentic and equitable assessment. *PhiDelta Kappan*, 70(9), 703–713.

Acknowledgement

University of New South Wales, Assessing Authentically, [Online Resource](#)

UKPSF

V4: Acknowledge the wider context in which higher education operates recognising the implications for professional practice

K2: Appropriate methods for teaching, learning and assessing in the subject area and at the level of the academic programme

A3: Assess and give feedback to learners