

Authentic assessment

Authentic assessment means providing assessment opportunities which are like tasks in the 'real world'.

This might mean that business students are asked to produce a market analysis report for an actual product, rather than writing an abstract essay on the principles of marketing. A property management student might be asked to perform a client consultation in a role play situation rather than undertaking an exam. A music production student might be asked to support a live event, and be judged of their performance in a live situation.

The advantages of authentic assessment:

- **It helps learning:** Authentic assessment provides opportunities to learn through completing the task, especially where feedback is given.
- **It's motivating for students:** Authentic assessment motivates students to engage with assessment because tasks are often relevant to their future career path – students may see the point of the task and can be keen to get involved.
- **It develops a wide range of skills:** Authentic assessment allows a range of skills to be developed because of the real world demands of the task. This type of assessment does not usually just focus in on a small area of abstract knowledge. Typically the types of skills developed through authentic assessment include: Communication skills, decision making, use of digital technologies, empathy, collaboration, practical skills, management of people or resource, time management, working with uncertainty and specific presentation skills e.g. writing for a technical audience.
- **It's interesting and rewarding for staff:** Marking can be a laborious process but when students are working on authentic assessments, it may be inherently more interesting for staff too!

Despite the benefits you should be aware that there are some challenges with authentic assessment.

- Designing the task can take time and imagination. Working closely with colleagues, contacts in industry and getting students involved in shaping the requirements can be helpful.
- There is a need to make sure that students are fully supported to develop the skills that they will need to achieve the task. It's not enough to 'transfer' knowledge in class and then expect students to be able to apply this without preparation. For example, if students are to be assessed in writing using a particular professional format such as a technical report, then they need opportunity to practice and engage with this format before being asked to use it in an assessment situation. Similarly, if students are expected to work as a team to deliver a real business solution, then for the purposes of assessment, you should consider how they will be supported through this to work as a team, manage their time and manage difficult real world demands of the project.
- Not all of the students in your class may want to go on to the most common career paths. For some students the tasks presented may not be what they have in mind for the future. To assist these students, be vocal in sharing the wider benefits of the type of assessment presented and don't focus entirely on the alignment with future professional practice.
- It is tricky to form authentic assessment tasks in course which are not clearly aligned to a profession. You may need to discuss and debate with colleagues, how specifically real world assessment can work in your own discipline.

Trying to make 'real world' assessments may imply that universities exist to 'train' students rather than to encourage free thinking individuals.

Remember though, it is possible to be both relevant to the real world and



academically sound; part of the solution is to offer tasks that allow and encourage creativity rather than fixed solutions.

Designing a real world task

Here are some simple tips to get started with authentic assessment:

- Be clear what the students need to do, make or produce.
- Be clear on how the task will be marked (what are you looking for in the students' work or performance?).
- Ensure that the task you are setting tests the relevant learning outcome and not something different. If the learning outcomes don't lend themselves to authentic assessment, consider making a change to them, using the correct processes at your institution.
- Ensure that the task is manageable in the time available.

Remember students are unlikely to only be undertaking this assessment. They will have other demands on their time, so keep your expectations realistic! Providing a time guide for how much students might spend on different parts of the task can be helpful. Ask your students how long they spent on the assessment task and adjust the advice or the scope of the task accordingly for future cohorts.

- Involve industry bodies, local businesses, charities, community groups or other stakeholders to give the assessment an authentic feel. There are many ways that this is possible. Your time, resource and confidence may shape what is possible in reality. Some ideas include:
 - Invite stakeholders to provide advice sessions for real world assessment, for example on working as a team, project management or on the use of industry requirements.
 - Get a relevant external party to offer a real world problem for all of your students to work with (i.e. we have this problem, can you help us solve it?) with a commitment to adopt the solution that they assess to be most appropriate.



- Pair up groups of students with a client or group to work with in a live situation so that each group has a slightly different issue to work with.
- Invite stakeholders to provide formative feedback to students as they progress in the assessment task. Students can then show how they used this valuable input in their final assessment. This could be through a lunch time mini-conference, through a one page summary or through a panel discussion.
- Require students to showcase their final assessment ideas at an exhibition event to gain feedback, and consider offering prizes for different aspects of the assessment performance. This type of event can also work to connect students and employers.
- Don't just plan the assessment. Plan the support for assessment. Consider how you will ensure students have the skills to succeed. Better, discuss this with the students and identify where support may be most needed.
- Consider where you can introduce the tools and technologies that would exist in the real world, but make sure that you support their use. If third parties are needed to support the use of technology, make sure that the process for this is clear. For example you might run whole class workshops on specific software, or you might offer students groups a technical help meeting where they can resolve any issues that they have been able to resolve themselves.
- Keep colleagues informed! If your University has academic skills support units, it can be very beneficial to keep this team in the loop about your assessment plans so that they are not surprised by students working with less familiar types of tasks who may arrive for additional support.

- Release the assessment in draft form for discussion with colleagues, stakeholders and students, before finalising. Inviting scrutiny before finalising the task can help make improvements to the task design.

Dealing with unpredictable assessment

It may feel daunting to set assessment tasks where you don't have full control over what will be produced, and where there is a risk of complications (for example difficulties in the expectations of external stakeholders). If you are developing an authentic assessment for the first time it may be useful to seek support from your educational developers or from experienced colleagues. It's important to remember that when things may seem to go wrong in these unpredictable assessment types, the students will be able to learn a lot from it. Sometimes we need to take risks with assessment formats, because the benefits are high.

Plan across programmes

Take care not to suddenly introduce these types of assessment in to a programme or course at unexpected times, particularly when students have not been equipped. Ideally, assessment should be planned across a whole course, rather than within separate modules; by working as a team, with colleagues, you can consider how authentic assessment can work together across the student's whole course journey so that students don't suddenly encounter something that feels unfamiliar and daunting, when they might already feel pressure and anxiety about performance. Some small tasks in the early part of the course might build up to give confidence in later years to tackle live projects.

Marking a real world task

It may feel daunting to mark a real world task because the outputs from students can be quite varied. This can raise questions such as, how can I compare one with another when they are so different? In these situations the assessment criteria are essential to ensure fairness and transparency. The assessment criteria should be used for all student work. These should



be written in such a way that guides performance, but which does not limit students to one way of thinking.

When designing the assessment task, which must test the learning outcomes of the module or unit, ask 'what are the most important aspects of performance that must be demonstrated?' These points should become your criteria for marking. In a clinical situation the focus may be on safety, communication and accurate diagnosis; whereas in an engineering task the focus might be on team collaboration, the presentation of an accurate set of requirements from a client, and developing a realistic action plan. Be clear at the outset what success in the task looks like, and use these points as the basis for the criteria. Be open with students about these criteria, use them actively throughout the assessment process to develop performance. This might mean having mock assessment activities, working with past examples of student submissions where these are available, or undertaking peer assessments.

When marking real world assessments:

- Don't be concerned by diversity of student submissions: Student work is unlikely to be standardised as each will bring their own approach to real world tasks.
- Where appropriate, allow space in your criteria for unexpected answers or performances. If the assessment criteria focus on doing the task in a particular, pre-defined way, you will encourage standardised responses. While this may be appropriate in some cases (e.g. clinical or safety components), for other aspects of a task it may be limiting.
- Define your assessment criteria and stick to them! In more complex real world tasks, it can be helpful for students to know on what basis they will be assessed because there are so many possibilities. Take for example a task which requires students to:

'In groups of four, develop and implement a social media strategy to assist your client's charitable fundraising and evaluate the effectiveness of the approach'.

In this task the tutor needs to decide on what skills are most important. Is it the student's ability to assess client need? Is it developing a rationale for a specific marketing approach? Is it media production skills? Is it engagement with a variety of social media platforms? Is it application of underpinning marketing theory? Is it knowledge of the law around charitable giving? Is it working as a team? Is it delivering a marketing campaign that has real impact? Is it about how the final report is presented? Is it about the student's ability to learn from a task? Is it about managing a positive relationship with the client? Is it about managing a productive relationship with the client (which might include managing expectations and conflict)?

The choice of criteria should be determined by the learning outcomes. Look at the outcomes and ask, what skills does the module seek to develop and assess? Clear criteria help the marker to see past the differences in submission, so that a fair and transparent judgment can be made.

Signposts

Find out more about authentic assessment by:

- Reading articles in Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education.
- Discussing the range of assessments across your course, but also in other discipline areas.
- Talk with employers and other stakeholders about the types of challenges that students might get involved in.
- Exploring the of the following articles:



- Ashford-Rowe, K., Herrington, J. and Brown, C. (2014) 'Establishing the critical elements that determine authentic assessment', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 39(2), pp. 205–222.
- James, L. T. and Casidy, R. (2018) 'Authentic Assessment in Business Education: Its Effects on Student Satisfaction and Promoting Behaviour', *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(3).