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Chapter 8
Rethinking Assessment by Creating More Authentic, Learning-Oriented Tasks to Generate Student Engagement

Sally Brown
Independent Researcher, UK

Kay Sambell
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8192-8537
University of Cumbria, UK

ABSTRACT

In March 2020, assessment in universities and colleges globally changed in radical and unprecedented ways when the Covid-19 pandemic closed campuses to students and staff, meaning that on-site, unseen, time-constrained exams could not take place. University management and staff had to move very fast to ensure that students could be assessed reliably and validly in crisis conditions. The authors' immediate and widely shared suggestions on pragmatic alternatives incorporating assessment-for-learning principles were well-received and prompted the development of a systematic and practical six-stage 'task-generator' to enable the creation of flexible context/scenario-based assessment activities for use off-campus. This chapter concludes by arguing why some of the changes implemented in crisis conditions have so much value in terms of student learning and engagement that universities must never revert to an over-reliance on former modes of assessment.

INTRODUCTION: A RAPIDLY CHANGING LANDSCAPE

In this chapter we aim to discuss the rethinking of assessment that occurred when the pandemic caused Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to change from on-campus face-to-face, and in particular, our own rapid response. Next, we discuss the case for alternatives to traditional exams and why we think that

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authentic assessment approaches that use an *assessment for learning* paradigm work well, before discussing definitions and features of authentic assessment, drawing on global scholarship before making the case for wider adoption of authentic assessment practices, which we argue is as much about advancing self-hood as it about preparing students for graduate employment. We illustrate this with our own six-stage strategic approach to designing authentic assessment tasks, including examples, before pointing readers to further exemplification of these. We conclude with a summary of our argument, together with an exhortation to refuse to revert to former less authentic approaches.

When, in March 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the need suddenly to close campuses to students and staff, this meant that on-site, unseen, time-constrained exams could not take place. Given the widespread reliance on in-person invigilated examinations across the tertiary education sector, university management and staff had to move very fast to ensure that, during the enforced rapid pivot to emergency remote teaching, students at the end of the forthcoming semester could be examined in ways that aligned with prior plans.

Different Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) dealt with the situation in different ways: some by shifting planned exams to off-site take-home papers with no changes to the questions asked, some by radically increasing the amount of off-site computer-based assessment and some by moving to alternative forms of assignment which reframed the assessment process altogether. While our chapter deals briefly with these developments, it is this latter area that forms the principal focus, because, we argue, there are considerable benefits to be accrued by using alternative assessment formats instead of traditional exams, both during the challenging period of the pandemic but also, more importantly, in the longer term.

The impetus to move universities towards more authentic, learning-oriented assessment practices underpinned the extensive suite of widely-used, highly pragmatic resources that we produced over time in response to the Covid pandemic. The resources in our Covid Collection were created at rapid pace, because our objective was to support university-based colleagues cope with the range of assessment issues and challenges that emerged during the pandemic as time unfolded (Brown and Sambell 2020, 2021). Our work built on our pioneering involvement in over three decades of research on Assessment for Learning (Sambell et al, 2013). This has convinced us that assessment practices which are fully integrated throughout the learning process have high value in fostering student engagement, resulting in deeper approaches to learning and better ultimate outcomes. Central to this approach is our conviction of the importance of authenticity in assessment as a means of enhancing student learning for the longer term (Boud and Soler, 2014). The main objective of this chapter, then, is to argue that universities would do well to seize the opportunity to make some radical and substantial reconfigurations to assessment in the future to make it more authentic.

To set our recent work on authentic assessment practices in context the chapter will, first, briefly present the timeline against which we created our assessment resources, together with an explanation for the ways in which our Covid Collection evolved as the pandemic unfolded. It will then move on to outline the theoretical rationale for moving towards more authentic assessment tasks, highlighting the significant literature upon which the desirability of this trajectory is based. Next, some of the key defining characteristics of authentic assessment will be indicated. The substantial evidence base highlighting the impact of authentic assessment on students in higher education will be reviewed and key challenges and issues which face course designers who wish to embrace the benefits of authentic assessment will be identified. These include a lack of familiarity among practitioners about methods that move away from well-worn assessment formats towards more authentic assessments targeted on university-based learning which is focused on *subject-knowledge*, in contrast to the relatively well-established authentic

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