Forum Insights

Authentic Assessment in Irish Higher Education

This *Forum Insight* summarises the outcomes of a National Forum workshop on authentic assessment attended by representatives of disciplines and networks from across the country. It explains the rationale for authentic assessment and presents some characteristics of this assessment approach. Presenting authentic assessment as residing on a continuum of authenticity, this Insight elaborates on some examples of assessment tasks with varying levels of authenticity.

Introduction and rationale for authentic assessment

The National Forum enhancement theme for 2016-18 focuses on Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning. In particular, the theme aims to support the empowerment and engagement of students in the assessment process. Authentic assessment is a form of assessment which involves students conducting 'real world' tasks in meaningful contexts (Swaffield, 2011). Fostering an increased focus on, and better understanding of, authentic assessment therefore aligns with the aim of empowering and engaging students through assessment. The development of engaging and diverse assessments also aligns with the key principles of an inclusive assessment approach (universal design; CAST, 2011), which supports the growing diversity of students in the Irish higher education sector.

There is an increasing realisation in Ireland of the over-emphasis on the examination as an assessment approach, i.e., 61% of 487 modules in a recent profile of Irish assessment practices contained examinations (National Forum, 2016a). The examination, in particular, is perceived as not relating to how learners will engage with assessment in the workplace or in their lives more broadly.

Over the last decade, there has also been an increased awareness of the challenges surrounding enhancing student motivation and engagement in the curriculum (Healey et al., 2014). With competing demands on students' time, the relevance of the assessment process is key to student engagement. As authentic assessment is concerned with the relevancy of assessment, it has some overlap with work-based assessment. This is important because the number of students undertaking work placements or work-based projects as part of their programmes of study in Irish higher education is set to increase by 25% by 2021 (DES, 2016). This reflects a significant move at national policy level to strengthen the connection between learning in higher education and the application of such learning within students' lives and work.

## Characteristics and examples of authentic assessment

In exploring the literature on authentic assessment, Ashford-Rowe et al., (2014) identified eight critical elements:

1. An authentic assessment should be challenging.

2. The outcome of an authentic assessment should be in the form of a performance or product.

3. Authentic assessment design should ensure transfer of knowledge.

4. Metacognition is a component of authentic assessment.

5. There is an important requirement to ensure accuracy in assessment performance.

6. Designers should carefully consider the role of the assessment environment and the tools used to deliver the assessment task.

7. An opportunity to discuss and provide feedback should be formally designed into authentic assessments.

8. Collaboration is integral to authentic assessment.

In addition to the above characteristics, the involvement of students as partners throughout the assessment process is also a defining feature of truly authentic assessment (National Forum, 2016b). While there is overlap between authentic and work-based assessment, not all authentic assessment has to be work-based. The assessment task, for example, could have relevance to students' personal and social lives.

Based on a discussion with the National Forum discipline and network group (including student representatives), the following are some examples of authentic assessments within various disciplines:

- Musical performance (music)
- Product development (entrepreneurship)
- Business plan; showcase for industry (business)
- Product design project (engineering)
- Event management (hospitality)
- Competitions (marketing)
- Write a blog, carry out interviews (social studies)
- Create a patient information leaflet (health care)
- Journal article /poster publication (research)
- A debate (politics)
- A case study (law)
- Community-academic research to solve a real community issue (community studies)
- A newspaper article /radio interview (journalism)
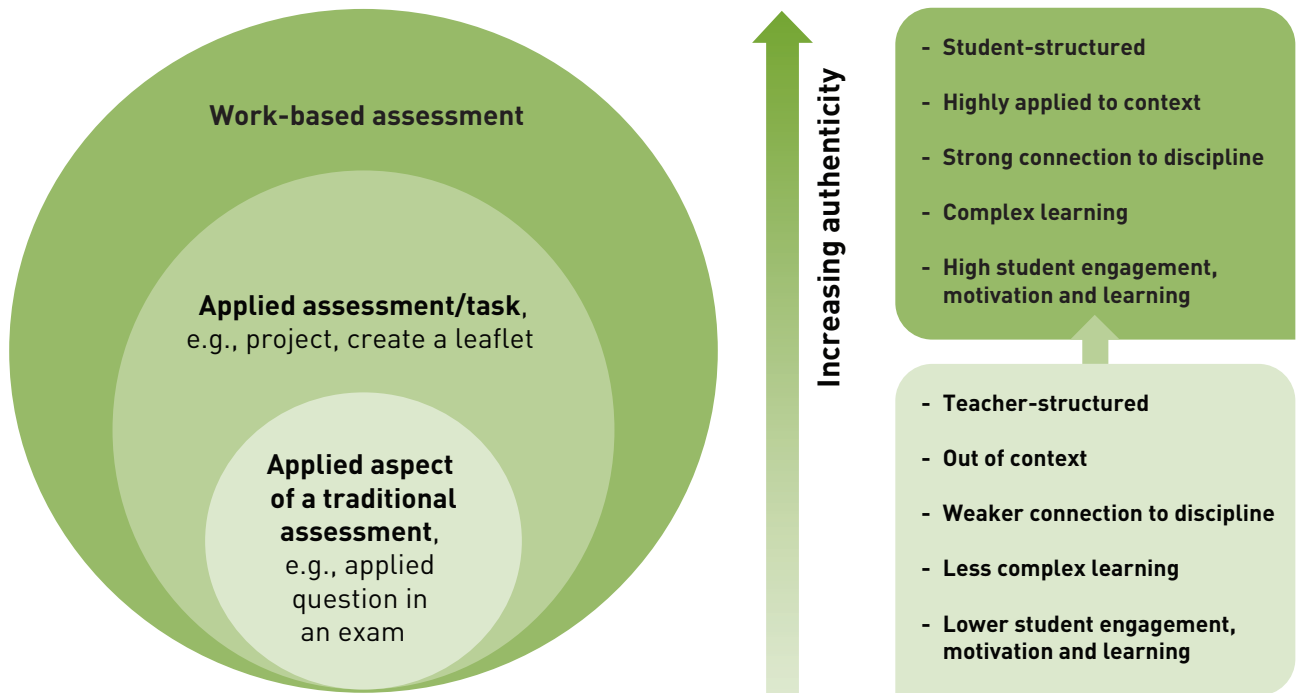
Figure 1 Continuum of authenticity

Continuum of authentic assessment

The concepts of the 'real-world' and 'knowledge and skills transfer' are often associated with authentic assessment (Swaffield, 2011). However, these can be contested terms: What is 'real' for students? Can life outside of the higher education context be genuinely replicated? Can learning be 'transferred'?

Mueller (2006) presents the idea of a continuum from traditional to authentic assessment. He suggests that the level of authenticity of an assessment can be judged based on the degree to which it: involves performing a task, is set in 'real life', involves construction/application, is student-structured and involves direct evidence. At lower levels of authenticity, students could, for example, be asked in an examination question to apply the answer to their own life, discipline or work context (if relevant). Whereas this example is low on context, requires less complex learning and does not involve feedback and/or collaboration, it may enhance the relevance of the answer for the student. Moving along the continuum, health care students could be asked to create an information leaflet for patients that gives the signs and symptoms of a condition, as opposed to writing these in a traditional examination. Further along the continuum, students have the opportunity to experience complex assessment tasks on work, community and/or professional practice placements or related projects, where the level of authenticity can be very high. Facilitating students to reflect on this experience is key to developing student metacognition (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014). Equally, giving students some choice in the assessment task may allow them to choose a task that has a stronger sense of authenticity for them. (see Figure 1)

This continuum is useful in allowing staff to consider how they might more easily design assessment tasks from lower to higher levels of authenticity. Designing authentic assessment is similar to designing any assessment in that it needs to align with the module's learning outcomes and teaching and learning approaches. However, authentic assessment differs in that it should be strongly determined by the discipline with which the particular student cohort identify and/or the context in which they anticipate that they will be working or studying.

References

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