Edinburgh Napier UNIVERSITY | Department of Learning & Teaching Enhancement

ENssentials Quick Guide: Authentic Assessment

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What's the problem?

Traditional assessments like exams and essays, while valuable, often fall short of mirroring the complexity of the real-world learning and practice that students may encounter in their personal and professional lives. Cramming in facts for regurgitation rarely translates to lasting critical thinking, problem-solving, or professional competency. This disconnect between assessment and application can leave students disengaged and hinder their development as well-rounded graduates (Brown & Sambell, 2023; Kearney & Perkins, 2014).

While its main orientations are towards real-world applications, authentic assessment can also help students engage with a sense of social justice (McArthur, 2023) and broaden their views of their roles in Higher Education and society. McArthur (2023, p. 93) for example, argues for three conceptual shifts in understanding and application of authentic assessment:

1. Shift the focus to society as a whole rather than the 'real-world/world of work.
2. Instead of focussing on the task itself, consider the value of the task and how that validates the social belonging of the student.

3. Consider authentic assessment as a vehicle for transformative change not reinforcing the status quo (in the discipline, its professional practice or society).

A common approach to countering outdated and irrelevant assessment is that of 'authentic assessment'. In brief, authentic assessment has the following characteristics which make it different from traditional methods that often focus on knowledge comprehension or recall:

- **Tasks** that mirror real-world applications which require students to show their knowledge and skills in meaningful ways that they will use in the workplace and/or further academic study.

- **Focus on synthesising and applying knowledge and skills**: Students complete tasks which require complex answers and draw on their ability to problem solve and reason using their subject knowledge and skills and draw on other aspects of their lives.

- **Promotion of student agency**: Assessments often offer students a choice of assessments

tasks or encourage them to personalise the task by choosing their own focus within the assessment brief. This allows students to engage with multiple perspectives and move away from a single knowledge base or exposure to one model of thinking (Chlochasaigh et al., 2024). Equally, agency may allow them to draw on and apply knowledge from learning across years/ levels of study and modules. Agency also allows students to incorporate reflections about their own personal development.

▪ **Feature formative assessment, scaffolding and reflection**: Tasks focus on offering students the opportunity to develop the necessary knowledge and skills needed to complete a graded summative assessment. Equally, both formative and summative assessments may invoke deeper engagement with tasks by asking students to reflect on any holistic and personal learning that took place because of the assessment task (Irons & Elkington, 2021).

Authentic assessment may also operate under different terms such as empowered assessment, task-based personal assessment and meaningful/contextualised assessment (Litchfield et al., 2015).

Why is it important?

▪ **Increases engagement and motivation**: Authentic assessments (e.g., projects or presentations), directly link learning to meaningful contexts. Students actively engage with the material, seeing its relevance to their future careers or personal lives. This fosters intrinsic motivation and deeper understanding (Kearney, 2013).

▪ **Develops key skills**: Beyond memorisation, authentic tasks require students to apply knowledge, analyse, synthesise, and collaborate with classmates. These skills are sought by employers and are vital for lifelong learning.

▪ **Fosters assessment for Learning**: Authentic assessments provide opportunities for ongoing feedback and self-reflection. Students learn from mistakes and refine their work through iterative processes, fostering a growth mindset and ownership of their learning. This not only stands them in good stead for future modules but also develops necessary competencies for the workplace (Sotiriadou et al., (2020)).

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What can we do?

1. **Embrace Real-World Contexts**: Incorporate case studies, simulations, or projects that replicate professional scenarios or address community challenges. This allows students to apply their learning in practical ways and develop problem-solving strategies. Typical assessment examples include artefacts, case studies, dialogues, and projects. See the [DLTE Quick Guide on alternatives to essays and exams](#).

2. **Use Reflective Practice**: Encourage students to reflect on their learning process and outcomes, fostering deeper learning. This might be achieved by using digital portfolios and storytelling. Reflective practice has been a key feature for many on [DLTE's PGCert in Teaching and Supporting Learning](#).

3. **Go Beyond Individual Performance**: Encourage collaborative projects where students work in teams, mimicking real-world work environments. This fosters communication, negotiation, and leadership skills (Miller et al 2022).

4. **Provide Clear Feedback and Rubrics**: Clearly articulate your assessment expectations early in modules via discussions around detailed rubrics outlining assessment criteria. Offer timely, ongoing and constructive feedback that guides students towards improvement and engage with the creative aspects of the assessment brief.

5. **Experiment, collaborate with colleagues, and seek support**: You can draw on experience and advice from your immediate School colleagues at Edinburgh Napier as well as Edinburgh Napier's service departments including the Department for Learning and Teaching Enhancement (DLTE) where many [assessment resources](#) are located. DLTE colleagues who specialise in assessment can also be contacted by [emailing DLTE](#).

6. **Collaborate with Industry**: Partner with professionals and professional regulatory and statutory bodies to design assessments that are current and relevant. The Edinburgh Napier [Student Futures](#) team can support you with these collaborations.

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Further Reading:

- [Assessment Design Handbook, QAA: https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/advice-and-guidance-assessment.pdf?sfvrsn=ca29c181_4](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/advice-and-guidance-assessment.pdf?sfvrsn=ca29c181_4)

- [Authentic Assessment in a UK Context, University of Sussex: https://staff.sussex.ac.uk/teaching/enhancement/support/assessment-marking-feedback/overview](https://staff.sussex.ac.uk/teaching/enhancement/support/assessment-marking-feedback/overview)

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Exemplars from Napier Colleagues

Several academic staff across Napier's Academic Schools have engaged with authentic assessment. Examples of their practice have been summarised in the following slideshows:

['A pedagogy of trust' by Professor Zack Moir.](#)

['Using assessment to meet expectations and professional development' by Hazel McPhillips.](#)

[Authentic assessment at scale by Dr. Catherine Mahoney.](#)

Any questions

Please get in touch with us at dlte@napier.ac.uk with any questions.

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