Exploring an authentic approach to assessment for enhancing student learning

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Abstract

As interest in the quality of teaching and learning in higher education has grown, attention is being directed to ways in which student learning can be enhanced. Given assessment can be expected to impact on student learning, this paper explores an authentic approach to assessment for enhancing learning.

In recent research, student learning has been re-conceptualised as integration of knowing, acting and being in a process of developing appropriate ways of being within a range of practices. To facilitate such integration, the focus of higher education programs should extend beyond acquisition and application of knowledge and skills. Epistemology—what students are expected to know and be able to do—should be integrated with, and in the service of, ontology—who students are becoming. Within this conceptualisation, knowledge and skills are not ends in themselves but, rather, contribute to enabling meaningful engagement with other people and things in social practice.

In line with this re-conceptualisation of student learning and the associated need for a shift in focus in higher education programs, this paper seeks to identify principles of authentic assessment for enhancing student learning. Conventionally, authentic assessment is regarded as an educational intervention for improving students’ performance via a strengthened link with the world beyond formal education. In this conceptual/theoretical paper, we challenge this conceptualisation of authentic assessment as too narrow and limited. We argue, instead, that authentic assessment should assess the extent to which students integrate what they know and are able to do with who they are becoming. Drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger, we argue that operating in an authentic mode as human beings involves calling things into question, taking a stand on who we are, and acting accordingly. Through engagement with authentic assessment tasks, students can become more fully aware of who they are becoming and what is involved in this process, providing focus for their learning and professional development.
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Introduction

As higher education has increasingly come to be seen as playing a key role in equipping the workforce and contributing to productivity in a range of countries around the globe, there have been more frequent calls for improved accountability. In recent years, these calls have been accompanied by growing interest in the quality of teaching and learning, generally without associated investment in resources despite increasing student numbers. Alongside these moves has been a flourishing of terms such as life-long learning and self-directed learning (see, for example, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1987; Aspin et al., 2001). While student learning and teaching are attracting increasing interest in higher education, there are differing perspectives on what students should learn and under what conditions they learn best.

Moreover, the way in which knowledge has conventionally been conceptualised has been challenged, with implications for student learning and teaching. The notion of a fixed body of knowledge that can be transmitted to students has been extensively criticised (for example, Lave, 1993; Schön, 1983). Instead, knowledge is understood as fluid, as both a process and product of communication and interpretation (Brew, 1999; Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). In this sense, knowledge is inter-dependent with practice and the knowing subject or ‘knower’. In other words, knowledge is created, embodied and enacted in and through lived experience (Dall’Alba, in press; Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2005, 2007; Dall’Alba & Sandberg, 2006).

This concept of knowledge demands a re-conceptualisation of learning. In recent research, learning has been re-conceptualised as integration of knowing, acting and being in a process of developing appropriate ways of being for particular social practices (Dall’Alba, 2005; Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2005, 2007). This notion of learning not only incorporates epistemology—what students are expected to know and do—but also ontology—who students are becoming or, in other words, learning to be. Students construct and organise what they know and can do in a process of becoming. For example, teacher trainees not only learn about what teaching involves and how to act as teachers, they also become teachers.

In exploring ways that higher education can facilitate student learning, renewed interest is being directed towards assessment, as it has direct impact on student learning. Students organise their learning according to cues from assessment (Biggs, 2003; Brown et al., 1997; Gibbs, 1999). For this reason, using assessment strategically can lead to enhanced student learning (Brown et al., 1997; Gibbs, 1999). Numerous strategies in using assessment to promote student learning have been proposed in the research literature. These include: (a) rewarding high-order thinking (Biggs, 2003); (b) making assessment appropriate to the learning that students are engaged in through aligning or integrating assessment with learning outcomes and learning tasks (Biggs, 2003; Cowan, 2007); (c) providing timely and multiple feedback to ‘feed forward’ future learning (Brown & Glasner, 1999; Lambert & Lines, 2000); (d) maximising learning opportunities through multiple interactions between teacher and students, as well as among students (Vu & Dall’Alba, 2007); and (d) making whole programs, including assessment practices, coherent and meaningful to students (Banta et al, 1996; Sutton, 1992).

For promoting student learning, authentic assessment has been proposed as an appropriate model of assessment, with a number of studies demonstrating a link between authentic
assessment and high quality learning (for example, Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000; Denman, 1995; Ridley & Stern, 1998). Authentic assessment has generally been conceptualised as an educational intervention that aims at improving students’ performance through a strengthened link with the world beyond formal education. Assessment practices are regarded as authentic when the tasks are real-to-life (Darling-Hammond et al., 1995; Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000; Wiggins, 1989) and/or have real-life value (Wehlage, Newmann & Secada, 1996).

While authenticity inherently has a real-to-life quality, it means more than this. Such a conceptualisation of authenticity is too narrow and limited. Below we argue that an ontological character is central to authenticity. In this conceptual/theoretical paper, we draw on phenomenology and, more particularly, Martin Heidegger’s concept of being-in-the-world in elaborating a broader perspective on authenticity and authentic assessment.

**Being-in-the-world**

Phenomenology is both a philosophy and social movement (Moran, 2000, p. 1), originating with the work of Edmund Husserl more than a century ago. As a philosophy, it is a form of inquiry that explores the relation between persons and their world. According to phenomenology, knowledge neither dwells in the subject, confined to his/her head, nor in the object, ready to be grasped. Conversely, knowledge is constructed through interactions between persons and world. In phenomenology, then, there is no study of either person or things in isolation. Instead, things are studied in terms of how they are experienced or apprehended by us. Robyn Barnacle further elaborated this relation by pointing out that in “coming to understand the nature of phenomena, we must attend to the relation that exists between things and ourselves” (2001, p. 10). Moreover, understanding of things can only be gained by exploring them in relation with their surroundings, which is also how we experience them.

One of the 20th century’s most influential thinkers was the phenomenologist, Martin Heidegger. He developed phenomenology through exploring ways in which “the world comes to appearance in and through humans” (Moran, 2000, p. 15; italics in original). For Heidegger (1962), things gain their meaning via manipulation and interpretation by human beings; without human beings there would be things, but no meaning. Thus, an understanding of things can only be gained through attending to our everyday being in the world.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger explored our mode of being as being-in-the-world. As we go about our everyday activities, we are always already embedded in and intertwined with our world. Our entwinement with others and things in our world is not incidental, but central to who we are as human beings. Our being differentiates us through the ways in which we attend to the world and form our lives. We can only encounter our being through interactions with other entities (Mulhall, 2005, p. 8). However, being is not one quality among others that belong to entities, such as spatiality or intelligence (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 82-94). William Blattner said the following about our being:

> [Y]our being is who you are, and who you are includes and suffuses how you feel, how you act, how you are disposed, how you talk, with whom you congregate. (2006, p. 38)

Given our being is who we are, it is embodied in the stands we take and the way we lead our lives (Blattner, 2006, p. 38). Our ways of being influence how we understand ourselves and...
how we are understood by others. For instance, our way of teaching is related to our understanding of ourselves as teachers and also how others understand us as teachers. In this sense, being doesn’t reside in individual human beings. Being is relational; it is being-in-the-world.

According to Heidegger, we do not simply exist ‘side-by-side’ with things and others (1962, p. 81). Instead, people and things have meaning for us, which becomes available through our interactions with them. Our entwinement with world points to our mode of being-in-the-world as being-amidst or inhabiting the world:

When we inhabit something, it is no longer an object for us but becomes part of us and pervades our relation to other objects in the world. This way of being-in is dwelling. (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 45)

Dwelling in the world, our life is lived there in the web of meaningful interactions with others. To some extent, due to our involvement in the world, our life is not entirely ours in the sense that others and things play a part, too. Together with others and things, we form the world. The world is the ‘home’ for our everyday activities and interactions.

While the world is our home, it also transcends us. It was there before we were born and will be there after we die. As we do not initiate it, conformity to social conventions is a condition of our participation in the world (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 95). We learn to do things in the public way. We do what makes sense according to accepted norms. We become one with the masses. Every one of us is doing what everyone else is doing, more or less in the same manner.

However, for Heidegger, conformity to social conventions can be troublesome. This is because we tend to accept things as they are without calling them into question. We take them for granted. In this way, we may not be open to exploring other possibilities, including renewing usual ways of perceiving and doing things. We ‘fall’ into the world and become ‘lost’ in it (Heidegger, 1962, p. 220).

As we all exist “in the womb of externalised and public existence” (Barrett, 1964, p.196), most of the time we fall in with the crowd and carry out our activities in the public way. However, human beings are also self-determining. Stephen Mulhall described this self-determining aspect, as follows:

For [human beings], living just is ceaselessly taking a stand on who one is and on what is essential about one’s being, a being defined by that stand. (2005, p. 15)

In other words, being is an issue for us. As a result, we are interested in making our own way in the world: this is the way I do it, this is what I perceive it to be. Indeed, we are a life to live (Blattner, 2006, p. 36).

In sum, as human beings, we exist through our meaningful involvement in the world. Our being is being-with others, being-amidst the world we share with others and things, a world in which we dwell and make our home. Our existence is conditional upon everyday understanding of how we go on in the world in the public way. For this reason, falling in with the crowd is part of how we live our lives. However, if we simply follow the public way at all times, there will be no space for creativity and advancement. Therefore, we must resist falling
in with the crowd completely. At times, we must call things into question, engage in renewal and explore other possibilities. This paradox of falling in with the crowd and resisting this falling is highlighted through Heidegger’s concepts of inauthenticity and authenticity, which we explore below.

**Authenticity**

Heidegger argued that human ways of being include modes of inauthenticity and authenticity (Heidegger, 1962, p. 68). When we fall in with the crowd, thinking and acting as others do, we are operating in a mode of inauthenticity. When we make up our mind and make a choice, even a choiceless choice such as our own death or being inauthentic, we are in the mode of authenticity. As we are a life to live and our life is lived in the world, living involves making our own decisions as well as following the public. In other words, we operate in both inauthentic and authentic modes.

For human beings, being inauthentic is our ‘default’ mode. For most of the time, we go about the world and carry out our activities in the public manner because we are familiar with that way of operating and it is convenient to adopt it. Two things might happen, however. First, the context for our activities may change such that something in our activities breaks down, preventing us from carrying them out in the usual way. Second, we may feel uncomfortable with carrying out activities in a routine manner. Either changes in our circumstance or our discomfort with routines may force us to explore other possibilities. Whether by chance or by choice, we are confronted with the call to be authentic.

Working out possibilities is a way in which we respond to the call to be authentic. In doing so, we rely on our prior understandings, our ways of approaching our activities, and our expectations of the possibilities open to us. For example, when we plan a lecture or tutorial, we draw upon our understanding of what it means to teach, as well as upon the approach we tend to adopt in teaching a lecture or tutorial. In addition, we have expectations about the constraints operating, such as the time period and resources available, as well as ideas about what it is possible and desirable to teach in the class. In other words, working out possibilities is made possible by our prior epistemological and ontological knowledge (Reynolds, 2006, p. 35). In the light of the possibilities open to us, we realise our own way and a pattern for our life (Golomb, 1995, p. 98). We either decide to go along with the way others usually teach the lecture or tutorial, for instance, or we critically assess what is appropriate for this class in this course in the present context. We become authentic by defining our future through making our own way and life pattern, even if this means choosing to fall in with common ways of operating.

This process of becoming authentic involves interplay between tradition—or prior understandings and ways of doing things—and the self who calls into question and works out possibilities (Schmidt, 1996). In this sense, becoming authentic brings our past and future together in that our past contributes to shaping our future. We are historically and temporally projected towards possibilities or, in other words, towards our future. Only in the mode of being authentic can we make a difference to our future and, in a broader sense, to our world.

However, our possibilities are not limitless. Through entwinement with our world and engagement with others in the world, we form our surroundings while also being formed by them. More specifically, we form and are formed by the activities we pursue, the people we interact with, available conditions for carrying out our activities and the social institutions of
which we are a part (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Dreyfus, 1991; Inwood, 2000; Thomson, 2001). Within this space of manoeuvres, our possible ways of being are realised.

Authenticity is not dichotomous to inauthenticity, then, nor does authenticity negate inauthenticity (Heidegger, 1962, p. 68). In the ‘womb of public existence’, we find ourselves confronted with the call to authenticity. In becoming authentic, inauthenticity provides a background for our activities and contributes to forming them. As Jacob Golomb expressed it, inauthenticity functions as a horizon upon which our possible ways of being are defined “vis-à-vis what are not genuinely [ours]” (1995, p. 98).

The inter-dependent relation between inauthenticity and authenticity highlights that, as human beings, our lives move back and forth between inauthenticity and authenticity. According to Golomb, authenticity calls and inauthenticity is called upon (1995, p. 112). In order to hear and respond to this call, we should not take things for granted and simply fall in with the crowd. In other words, we should be, as we can be, aware of our being. In leading a life, we should take a stand on who we are and act accordingly. In short, we cannot become authentic without attending to our ways of being and acting to define our stand.

Given we become authentic through attending to our ways of being and defining our stand, becoming authentic is intertwined with our everyday activities (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 322). In other words, we constantly face the choice to act in our own way or to follow the public. As Golomb commented, “one cannot become authentic as an ontic entity [defined by characteristics] among entities, as a static being, but only as asking, searching, Becoming” (1995, p. 96).

Several features of authenticity have been identified above. These features include: (a) public existence as background and horizon of becoming authentic; (b) the inter-dependent relationship between authenticity and inauthenticity; (c) the centrality of our awareness of being; and (d) the ‘asking, searching, becoming’ process. As we do not become authentic only by chance, we should become authentic by choice, such as when we challenge assumptions and renew routinised ways of understanding or doing things. Given that becoming authentic needs constant effort (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 236), there are implications of authenticity for higher education, in general, and for assessment practices, in particular.

Implications of authenticity for higher education

In this section we outline several implications for higher education that can be drawn from the discussion on authenticity above. Education can promote authenticity in a number of ways. First, as being human includes a call to authenticity, space and opportunities are needed that encourage students to respond to this call. Enabling this to happen requires a shift in the focus of many higher education programs from acquisition and application of knowledge and skills to integration of knowing, acting and being (Dall’Alba, in press). Epistemology—what students are expected to know and be able to do—should be integrated with, and in the service of, ontology—who students are becoming (Dall’Alba, 2005). Knowledge and skills are then not seen as ends in themselves but, rather, as part of a process of enabling students to form and establish themselves in the world.

Second, the relationship between authenticity and inauthenticity highlights that students cannot become authentic in isolation. They need to interact with peers, teaching staff and others in order to construct their understandings and to be challenged to form their own
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perspectives through this wider exposure. This process has the potential to extend their possibilities for being, including being with others.

Third, the centrality of awareness of being for authenticity points to the need to raise with students periodically the question of who they are becoming and what it means to become skilful professionals (Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2007; Dall’Alba & Sandberg, 2006). Students should be encouraged progressively to take a critical stand on ways of being skilful professionals and to construct their knowledge and skills accordingly.

Last but not least, as becoming authentic is an open-ended process, there is a need for learning opportunities in higher education programs to extend beyond classrooms in embracing students’ past and future. Taking learning seriously means we have to take learners seriously (Shulman, 1999). Students’ prior experiences and perspectives need to be explored and respected, while they also provide a learning resource for encouraging students to take a critical stand on who they are becoming. Students should be encouraged to question assumptions and routinised practices, including their own. They need to be assisted to see the familiar in an unfamiliar light and to engage in renewal. For example, teacher trainees need to be challenged to consider teaching in new and unfamiliar ways as a means of extending their possibilities for being teachers. Through challenge and support in embarking on a journey of ‘asking, searching, becoming’, students are provided with a basis from which to make choices toward authenticity.

**Implications of authenticity for assessment**

Given the nexus between assessment and student learning, assessment practices can be used strategically to enhance learning (Brown et al., 1997; Gibbs, 1999), as noted above. In line with strategies in using assessment for student learning that were identified in the introduction and implications of authenticity for higher education outlined above, we now propose features of assessment for authenticity, or authentic assessment.

First, in line with a shift in focus from acquisition and application of knowledge and skills to integration of knowing, acting and being, assessment practices should aim to assess the extent to which students integrate their knowing and acting with who they are becoming. Authentic assessment extends beyond completion of tasks that assess performance to embrace processes in which students are encouraged to explore new perspectives, draw on their knowledge and experience, and take a critical stand on who they are becoming. Involvement in assessment practices can thereby provide students with opportunities to synthesise and demonstrate what it means to become skilful professionals. Assessment is not an end in itself but, rather, an opportunity for students to learn and to reflect on their learning in a way that enhances future learning and professional development.

Second, as each person is unique, this uniqueness should be reflected in the way students approach assessment tasks. A supportive environment is needed so that students can approach assessment tasks from their own perspectives, while at the same time collaborating with peers to diversify their ideas and strategies. Assessment tasks can also provide space for students to challenge outdated ideas, routinised practices, and their own as well as public assumptions. Assessment can thereby encourage students not to take things for granted, but to develop and articulate the stands they take on relevant issues and practices. In this way, assessment can contribute to increasing students’ awareness of who they are becoming.
Third, as becoming authentic is a continuous process, there is a need for integrity and consistency of entire educational programs. Not only is alignment among learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment critical in promoting student learning (Biggs, 2003; Cowan, 2007; Sutton, 1992), but assessment should be integrated with learning tasks (Cowan, 2007). Through this integration, students can determine what is expected of them so as to direct their efforts towards appropriate learning. Moreover, assessment tasks should sample real-life activities (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000; Wiggins, 1989) and require students to demonstrate how their practices have been informed by their learning (Ridley & Stern, 1998). Assessment of this kind can be used to promote in-depth understanding of the field, which is highlighted as a critical learning outcome in the research literature (for example, Newman & Associates, 1996). In addition, when assessment is integrated with learning tasks, it can be used in providing ongoing and meaningful feedback for student learning (Lambert & Lines, 2000).

Fourth, as becoming authentic is intertwined with involvement in the world, there is a need to attend to everyday being in the world. In other words, a challenge for assessment is in an open manner to attend to ways in which students interact with others and things around them. Moreover, assessment tasks can play a part in nurturing and promoting discursive interactions between students and teachers, as well as among students. Such interactions can allow for timely and relevant feedback that can be used as a source of learning and also in planning for learning. These interactions can also facilitate mutual understanding and trust that pave the way for collaborative learning with peers. During interactions, students can form and develop their own perspectives by differentiating what are, and what are not, their perspectives. In order for students to learn from interactions and resolve potential conflicts and tension, teachers should sensitively handle discussions surrounding these interactions to focus student learning (Vu & Dall’Alba, 2007).

Fifth, as authentic assessment would engage students in assessment processes, it is essential that assessment objectives, procedures and outcomes be made clear to students. Adequate preparation, including clarifying these points prior to assessment, is necessary to enhancing student learning from assessment for both personal and professional development (Vu & Dall’Alba, 2007). Engaging students in assessment processes highlights the role of teachers in providing support, supervision and opportunities for students to learn from assessment.

These features of authentic assessment point to several conditions for its successful use in higher education contexts. The introduction of authentic assessment as an alternative to conventional assessment approaches can be expected to be socially and intellectually challenging. These challenges include possible resistance from some staff and/or students, as well as the additional workload involved in adopting a new approach to assessment and restructuring teaching/learning practices accordingly. Hence, institutional commitment and support are critical. Inside the classroom, both teachers and students must be open to the process, while at the same time being adequately trained and prepared for the use of assessment practices (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2001; Brown & Glasner, 1999; Orpwood, 2001).

**Conclusion**

Recent research has re-conceptualised learning as integration of knowing, acting and being. This re-conceptualisation points to the need for concerted effort to integrate epistemology and ontology in higher education programs. In exploring ways in which student learning of this
kind can be enhanced, authentic assessment has been proposed as an appropriate model of assessment. In this paper, we have put forward a reconceived notion of authentic assessment that places emphasis on ontology. This notion of authentic assessment is consistent with learning that integrates knowing, acting and being. Authentic assessment seeks to both assess and enhance processes by which students call things into question, take a stand on who they are and act accordingly. Its purpose is to enable students to respond to the call to be authentic, while also assessing their efforts in striving toward this end. Assessment that is authentic can contribute to extending students’ possibilities for becoming who they endeavour to be, although this is never achieved once and for all. While authentic assessment of this kind can be beneficial to student learning, its introduction into higher education programs presents challenges. Additional research is needed which explores and evaluates the use of assessment practices seeking to be authentic in ways that incorporate ontology in higher education contexts.

References

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