

T4T

Tools for Teaching

Authentic Assessment

What is Authentic Assessment?

Authentic learning activities and assessment techniques involve the use of real-world tasks that a learner can expect to encounter at work, at home, or in other social contexts. They are designed to be as personally meaningful and relevant as possible to help learners practice skills in learning situations that are similar to those in which the skills will actually be used. Authentic learning is supported by a *learning outcomes* approach, where the activities and assessment are connected directly to the outcomes of the course. According to Woo, Heatherington, Agostinho & Reeves (2007), authentic learning activities:

- Have real-world relevance.
- Focus on ill-defined problems.
- Involve complex tasks investigated over sustained periods of time.
- Require learners to examine an issue from different perspectives using multiple resources.
- Encourage collaborative learning.
- Engage learners in reflection and meta-cognition.
- Focus on integration of knowledge and skills across different subject areas and topics.
- Involve assessment strategies that are integrated with the task.
- Result in the creation of tangible products or outcomes.
- Accommodate multiple interpretations, solutions and outcomes.

Learning strategies that support authentic learning include:

- Problem-based learning
- Experiential learning
- Games, simulations and role-playing
- Use of real-data sets
- Portfolios that promote reflection and self-assessment
- Apprenticeships, co-op programs, in-service learning
- Performance tasks consistent with profession, e.g. write newspaper article, prepare and submit proposal bid, develop design documents, etc.



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Why Would I Want to Use an Authentic Learning and Assessment Activity in My Course

The use of authentic learning and assessment activities is highly relevant to Royal Roads University's emphasis on the application of learning to the workplace. Integrating authentic learning and assessment tasks into your course helps learners make connections between their own personal interests/applications and those within the field of study, which in turn, better prepares them for professional practice. As well, it helps learners to be more motivated to engage and persevere due to the relevance of the activity to their own workplace or other application. The enhanced relevance also helps with the absorption, retention, and transfer of skills and knowledge. Furthermore, the use of authentic learning activities can provide learners with a sense of enculturation into the profession or discipline by requiring them to work with tangible problems that are often complex but grounded in real-



What Should I Take Into Account in Using Authentic Learning and Assessment Strategies in My Course?

In designing courses featuring authentic learning and assessment activities, keep the following tips in mind:

- Start small, think big – change one activity at a time and assess its impact before enhancing or modifying your approach.
- Focus on complex and real problems, issues, or questions.
- Clarify learning outcomes and expectations for the activity – design the activity with the 'end in mind' and communicate these expectations to learners.
- Provide challenging activities and situations – design in opportunities for learners to try out their own thinking, challenge their own mental models, rethink their assumptions, etc.
- Help learners to ask their own questions about the issue, the subject matter, and the discipline as a whole – people often learn most effectively when they are trying to answer their own questions.
- Help learners make connections between the discipline or subject and the broader area of focus – situate the discipline, topic, area of study in a broader, interdisciplinary context.
- Encourage opportunities for learners to collaborate and learn from each other.
- Invite expert guests to contribute to the course, collaborating with learners on tasks or providing feedback on learner activities.
- Provide appropriate scaffolding (i.e. supports for learning) that help learners to self-evaluate their own performance, take stock of their own insights, and learn from their efforts and mistakes.
- Ensure there is a product or deliverable required at the end of the activity.
- Provide effective and timely feedback, i.e. individual (self), peer, and instructor-based assessment.

What is the Role of Technology Mediated Environments in Authentic Learning?

At Royal Roads University technology mediated environments are used in both on-campus and distance courses. There are a number of affordances within these technology mediated environments that support authentic learning. These technological supports help learners to engage in activities with real-world relevance; to examine tasks from different perspectives; to use a variety of resources; to work across discipline domains; and to create complete products.

Here are some examples of affordances of technology mediated online environments:

- information and communication technologies for collaboration, interaction and communication among the learners;
- a wide range of resources available online to support the learners' activities;
- non-linear use of realistic metaphors and authentic contexts, preserving the real-life setting activities take place in multiple forms of presentation content for the learners to interact with and use;
- production media allowing for a diversity of outcomes, enabling the learners to produce projects;
- shared virtual spaces for dialogue among learners; and
- a visual space for works in progress, enabling the learners to reflect on their projects and activities while they are in production.

(Anderson 2004; Reeves et al., 2002; McLoughlin et al., 2002).

Authentic Assessment in Action: Examples from RRU

MA/ MBA in Leadership: Problem-Based Learning

In the first on-campus residency, a sponsoring organization from the private, public, or not-for-profit sector is invited to present a Leadership Challenge® to the class of learners. The Leadership Challenge is a complex, current, unresolved, and substantive leadership dilemma or opportunity of significance. Learners, in teams of 6-8, examine the issue intensively over a one-week period, gathering background information, researching similar issues in other organizations, and sometimes, interviewing members of the sponsoring organization. During this period, faculty members give seminar sessions to small clusters of learners (10-11 students) on a rotational basis. These seminars focus on developing and enhancing skills such as problem analysis, team-based learning, self-assessment techniques, etc., that can be applied to investigating the organization's issue. Faculty members observe the teams and provide non-intrusive coaching and support. The complex, real-life nature of the leadership challenge allows the teams to integrate their learning from the seminars, workshops and other readings that are part of the curriculum while attempting to find viable "solutions" to the organization's challenge. In addition, the processes of tackling the leadership challenge allow learners to develop their team and interpersonal skills in an often high pressure environment. At the end of the week, each team of students presents its analyses and recommendations to a review panel from the sponsoring organization, both orally and in a written report. After the presentations, faculty members debrief the learning experience with each team and provide an assessment based on observations, student self-reflective journaling, and team products.

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Authentic Assessment in Action: Examples from RRU (cont'd)

Justice Studies: Role-Play

A course in the Canadian Constitution is the focus of a simulation activity conducted online with groups of learners over a 2-week period. Teams of learners engage in a moot exercise where they take opposing sides of a legal issue and make the best arguments they can that their view of the issue is correct. Learners are assigned the role of prosecution or defence in a particular case.

Once learners are assigned a role, they have to research their role, review the case and course readings, and prepare their arguments. Then they start to 'play' with the defence presenting their argument first. Then the prosecution team will reply to the defence arguments and present their own arguments. Finally, the defence team may reply only to new arguments presented by the prosecution.

None of this could be achieved without the research involved in the task. All roles have to be represented in the moot and everyone has to contribute.



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Where Can I Get More Information About Authentic Learning and Assessment?

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