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Disruptive Innovations in Business Education Research Group
The University of Sydney Business School

Navigating the dissonances of authenticity in assessment: Redefining the value and impact of authentic assessment in an era of generative crisis

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DIBERG is a research group of the University of Sydney Business School. It was established in 2021 by Professor Peter Bryant, Professor Juliette Overland and Professor Elaine Huber as a transdisciplinary group of engaged and evaluative pedagogical and higher education researchers generating rigorous applied and theoretical research that seeks to innovate, reshape, and disrupt the understanding and landscape of business education. We interrogate the future of business education and how the forces that shape the role and focus of Business Schools influences how we design for a better education and a more effective role of Business Schools as leaders for good.

The 2025/2026 Directors of DIBERG are Professor Peter Bryant and Dr Sandris Zeivots.

Introduction 2026

I wrote this essay in 2023, after the shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid snapback to 'traditional' forms of assessment that followed the pivots to online modalities in 2020 and the very early warning signs of the impacts of generative AI after the release of ChatGPT 3.5.

During those concurrent crises, as an educational leader and scholar, I found it disturbing that expertise was confounded by necessity, during and after the remote learning period, with the same dynamics emergent in terms of policy and reaction in the face of generative AI. What I mean by this assertion is that there was (is) an entire corpus of research and studies of practice that clearly articulated pathways to successful, impactful and valid assessment conducted online and with defendable compliance outcomes. Both during and after the pandemic, and subsequently over the last three years of the AI crisis response, this architecture of expertise was often ignored, and decisions were taken exclusive of pedagogy and inclusive explicitly of ICT or cost or even worse, an air of 'it will do'. In an environment of often glacial curricular change and deeply systematic procurement and governance, assessment change was implemented with neck-snapping rapidity. It was without doubt, a feast or famine response to crisis.

The most prescient example of this phenomenon during the pandemic was the rapid deployment of proctoring systems, which through their user experience and technical features determined the type and modalities of the assessments institutions could deliver, enforced often uncritical decisions about privacy, invigilation and assurance on entire cohorts of students and created significant breaches of trust between academics, leadership and students, many of which have had ongoing consequences for other online learning innovations (Hartnett et al., 2023; Kharbat & Abu Daabes, 2021; Newton & Essex, 2024).

Now in 2026, higher education institutions are buffeted by AI and the human contradictions and responses over immediacy, efficiency and purpose that saturate our assessment discourse. There is a tornado of debate, sometimes hyperbolically landing on assertions of impending irrelevance, nostalgic defences of practice (often as an insult) and problem definitions without a solution. In different ways to the pandemic, there remains derision of expertise and experience in equal parts. In the AI space, this manifests itself as polarised social media discourses often underpinned by an exponential increase in technology acceptance studies and learning gain projects published rapidly with small sample sizes, and often without peer review on pre-print servers (Adarkwah et al., 2025; Rudolph et al., 2025). The twin dynamics driving the same exclusion of pedagogy, this time supercharged by the *fear of missing out* inducing rhetoric of the AI vendor-sphere and the latent impact of the whiplash of remote learning and the sense of safety experienced when 'normal' returned, have once again challenged and ignored that what we know to be true about assessment.

This essay is more relevant today than it was in 2023, because strangely the stakes are higher. The constant undermining by enthusiastic boosters and researchers arguing that we must (with very little evidence) throw out all extant assessment practice because of AI, countered by the deeply pragmatic and evidenced research trying to stick a pin on a jelly in such a rapidly changing, black-boxed and contentious discourse leads the commentary and the internal policy discourses to be based on dismissive generalisations such as:

- Assessment is totally out-of-date and not fit for purpose.
- Assessment is totally cheatable with AI.
- Assessment that does not support the active use of AI is banning or resisting AI
- Assessment is not demonstrating validated student learning.

The embedding of these generalisations as a rationale for widespread redesign (what has been unironically called *vibe pedagogy*, where AI is deployed to solve the curricular and pedagogical design problems arguably created by AI itself) (Gattupalli (2025), undermines the trust in our system of being. Each of those concurrent 'truths' challenges the foundational trust dynamics between students, academics and the industries we feed with graduates. Assessment must be relevant and meaningful to the partners in that tripartite relationship. This is where authentic assessment is critical. When something is authentically created and received, the conditions for trust are more fertile. Authenticity doesn't create trust, but trust cannot exist without authenticity.

Yet as a sector we have undermined, demeaned and disputed authenticity as a fool's panacea. We eagerly revert back to pen and paper exams, a form of assessment with little authenticity and one that deconstructs learning efficacy in the name of compliance. Exams are fine as a mode of assessment, but they are rarely assessment for learning, especially when they are high-stakes, high cognitive load and summative at program end. When applied to the innate flexibility of purposeful online learning, the coherency and experience frays at the edge as students are either offered the epistemic promise of a degree that is lesser valued (because of the quality) (Wang et al., 2025) or a less flexible experience because of the need for in-person assessment (Corbin et al., 2025). Which brings us to the central tenant of this essay.

Editing notes

This essay was first published in 2023 in three parts on the Disruptive Innovations in Business Education research group blog (https://diberg.blog). For this working paper I have made edits and additions to integrate the three posts, update references and bring the assertions about AI into the modern state of play. There is a 2026 afterword that focuses specifically on the inculcation of trust through authentic assessment acts.

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Introduction

This essay will look at the challenges of assessment in modern universities, both in terms of defining it epistemically and practically and articulating a vision for designing and enhancing it to ensure that it can deliver both the benefits of assessment *of* learning (which institutions require) and assessment *for* learning (or perhaps changing that common conceptual framing to learning *through* assessment).

There have been millions of words written about the practices of assessment in higher education. It has been deeply studied, critiqued, reimagined and undesigned to the point where defining what assessment is has become an essentially meaningless exercise. Assessment has become the measure by which success is determined, both from the perspective of the student and their learning journey, but also in how it forms the pathway to graduate employability through the heavy lifting work of assuring learning and graduate attributes through to a singular measure of the success of student experience interventions.

Assessment is also the one of the most derided and criticised parts of the higher education experience featuring as it does in the lower reaches of many student satisfaction surveys (although not always directly correlated with the indicators of poor teaching, see Burgess et al, (2018) and Langan & Harris, (2019). It seems nobody really likes assessment. Students hate doing them, academics hate marking them. As one student noted in Crossman (2007) 'Yes, if I see the value, I just swallow my dislike and just get into it'. She added, 'I see the value in them; I just absolutely hate doing them'. Assessment is also the most systematised, policy-driven and fear-informed process in higher education, often worthy of its own separate policy ecosystem, controlled affordances for its stress and overall life impact and organised like the rules of the road with all the fear of punishment that comes from infractions or the reward for successful performance.

The 'doing' of assessment has moved further and further away from notions of learning through its conduct to become defined by compliance, accreditation and fears of integrity and cheating. Zajda and Rust (2020) argue that managerialism and the neo-liberal, marketised university have made academic staff increasingly accountable for the resources allocated to assessment, especially as student numbers increase. Assessment practices are often front and centre in the media coverage of higher education, from how technology is being used to disrupt or take over assessment functions (see McKenna (2022) on the 'dangers' of exam proctoring, amongst many others from the pandemic era), to how a university education is not helping failing students (see Ajjawi & Dracup (2020) on why students fail), to how it has become weaponised within the industrial disputes that have disrupted universities since the pandemic (see Adams (2020) on the marking bans in the UK). These issues are magnified and multiplied at-scale

where assessment and feedback capacity is increasingly metricised, subject to continued pressures to be more productive and identify opportunities for automation in increasingly time-compressed and number-expanded teaching periods.

Defining and deconstructing authentic assessment

Authentic assessment has been used a conceptual marker differentiating better, more 'authentic' assessment practices from the derisively labelled 'traditional' forms such as exams and multiple-choice tests. Authentic assessment has been deployed as the panacea for the challenges created by the graduate employability agenda (Sokhanvar et al., 2021), the impacts of AI on integrity (Dawson, 2021) and unholy and unexplainable link between student satisfaction, university rankings and successful domestic and international student recruitment (Manville et al., 2022). Wiggins (1990) argues that authentic assessment is where we (the academy) '...directly examine student performance on worthy intellectual tasks', with worthy in their assertion representing the apparent unworthiness of alternate tasks of assessment. Another common frame for defining authentic assessment is context. Darling-Hammond and Snyder (2000) argue that authentic assessment develops the capacity of learners to adapt their learning to different contexts as their career progresses. The most common definitions of context conflate the notions of assessment in the context of the 'real world' (see Ashford-Rowe et al., (2014) and Karunanayaka & Naidu, (2021), with assessment tasks that applies skills to the ways of working students will use in their jobs, and potentially only in the first graduate job (see Villarroel et al.,(2018) and Wiewiora & Kowalkiewicz, (2019).

Authenticity is another overly used and poorly defined corollary to the theory and practices of assessment. Petraglia (1998) argues that the notion of authenticity, however vaguely defined in assessment literature is so familiar it does not need defining. This taken-for-granted status allows authenticity to circulate unchallenged, masking normative assumptions about realism, relevance, and value in assessment design. Consequently, authenticity risks becoming an empty signifier, mobilised without conceptual discipline. Hegel argues in the '*The Phenomenology of Spirit*' that '..quite generally, the familiar, just because it is familiar, is not cognitively understood' (Hegel, 2018). Heidegger argued that authenticity resides within our sense of being and our relationships with it. There is, in the Heideggerian world, no single authenticity, with learning emerging from where individuals feel unsettled or unhomely with their own being or identity. It is this angst at the ontological state of not knowing that can be educative within their learning experiences and thereby positive (Withy, 2015).

At the core of any analysis of the definitional and modelling frameworks of authentic assessment is a decided (but not exclusive to be fair) absence of the agency and the current and future ontological state of the student. Gibbs (2001) argues that:

> The adoption of this model of the market for HEIs, and its accompanying discourse of marketing, is based on a manifestation of the concept of rights, particularly consumer rights, and can be seen in the move towards structured, consumable education through modularisation, semesterisation and self-directed learning. This leads to education being dealt with as a commodity. The sense of ends rather than means that this confers is most visible in outcome-driven education. Here process is incidental and the outcome sought is not an educated person in the classical sense, but an accredited person able to use their educational outcomes (or competencies) to further their economic desires. (p.87)

Gibbs goes on to argue that process and the journey of higher education as made manifest through assessment have been replaced by a problem-solution mentality more akin to consumer behaviour

theory rather than education. Many studies have attempted to navigate this tension through the application of a wider theoretical lens to authentic assessment such as Freirean critical pedagogy (see Serrano et al, (2018) or pedagogical delivery and curriculum structure models of work-based or real world learning (Archer et al., 2021; Garnett, 2016) Others have leant into the ends versus the means dialogic and used outcomes as a starting point for the design and rubricisation of authentic assessment (see Gulikers et al., (2004), for example).

Academics design assessments, whether it be for context, for perceptions of relevance to employability or to comply with policy and accreditation. Students undertake assessment often with little or no agency over its design, its content or its impact. The epistemic outcome of assuming that all assessment is familiar is in part rooted in the developmental experiences of assessment we have been immersed in since we were small children. We have been poked, prodded and tested on for decades, from early evaluations in primary school, through sequences of summative, evaluative exams and tests to measure progress against standards. At the heart of this ecosystem is the conceit (truth) that increasingly assessment is not designed *for* students. It is designed *for* teaching. It could also be argued that assessment is designed for compliance, peace of mind and accountability by and for the institution (Colina & Blanco, 2021; Macheridis & Paulsson, 2021). Ramezandadeh et al., (2017)argue the counter-logic, positing that authenticity exists in how the assessment is framed by the student and the teachers own framing of self, noting:

> The results revealed that authenticity in teaching consisted of themes of being one's own self, pedagogical relationships, contestation, and ultimate meaning which were enacted in the participants' practices through their sense of responsibility, awareness of their possibilities, understanding of pedagogical relationships, self-reflection, critical reflection, and critical hope. (p.299)

This leaves educational designers and academics with a challenging quandary. Authentic assessment gets wheeled out, critiqued, disputed or revamped each time another disruptive force threatens to change higher education forever (Ellis et al., 2020; Fawns et al., 2025). It is used as a counter to the regulatory arguments that institutions need to do more to prepare students for the challenges of work (Sokhanvar et al., 2021). Authentic assessment design has become removed from the purposes of learning to the point of becoming abstracted compliance as assurance of learning and graduate quality achievement (the very thing that authentic assessment should be railing against) (Ito & Yokoyama, 2025; Lambert et al., 2026).

Yet in the wider context of being truly authentic, deep engagement with the student, their agency over how the assessment is related to their learning and benefits of an assessment design that utilises critical reflection is critical to discovering pathways to assessment practices that are *for* learning. Designing assessment for learning requires a redefinition of authentic assessment both within the philosophical framing of authenticity and the institutional and quality assurance frameworks that define assessment conduct in a modern university.

Fracturing the soul of assessment

The practices of assessment in higher education have been debated, contested and fractured for decades (Knight, 2002; Sadler, 1989; Vernon, 1959). From a student experience perspective, assessment is the root cause of significant institutional administration burden and stress, which often results in poor student satisfaction metrics (Woelert, 2023; Yu et al., 2023). It is a critical determinant of rising student angst in the form of appeals, academic integrity investigations and ongoing fears of a surveillance culture

built on mistrust and punishment (Ruiz-Camacho & Gozalo, 2025). The conduct of assessment within the frameworks of quality set out by regulatory bodies such as TEQSA in Australia, has resulted in the use of technologies that have generated often visceral student reactions ranging from anger to outrage and student action against platforms surveilling students to ensure integrity (Khalil et al., 2022). With the introduction of AI into the assessment ecosystem, these pressures to use technology to detect, and validate have seen many institutions reverting back to more traditional forms of inauthentic forms of assessment such as pen and paper exams as an uncontentious default (Brattli et al., 2026; Cotton et al., 2024).

Reverting to pen and paper exams in response to generative AI presents both academic integrity gains and pedagogical risks in higher education. Invigilated handwritten exams substantially reduce access to undetectable AI assistance, addressing the disputed claims that AI-generated submissions can outperform human work without detection (a claim highly dependent on the quality and complexity of the assessment task) (Scarfe et al., 2024). Handwriting assessment tasks can support deeper encoding, conceptual understanding, and memory consolidation, enhancing construct validity under time constraints and develop problem-solving capabilities in students (Flanigan et al., 2024; Marano et al., 2025). Conversely, a wholesale return risks entrenching assessment traditionalism, undervaluing legitimate technology-enabled professional skills, and disadvantage students requiring digital accessibility (Maleki, 2026; Ncube et al., 2025)

Students consistently and universally share their dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback through student satisfaction surveys, institutionally and nationally (MacKay et al., 2019). Extrapolating the impact of assessment on the learning experience and informing solutions through data is made more complex when student satisfaction surveys conflate satisfaction with overall happiness (Dean & Gibbs, 2015) which can mean singular dissonances in experience can create exponentially better or worse student satisfaction scores, whilst underrepresenting the students happiness with the experience. Especially in terms of assessment, many student surveys attempt to measure complex processes and outcomes through simple, Likert-scale dimensions (were you satisfied or not satisfied with the feedback you received across the unit/program?) (Winstone et al., 2022). With the direct relationship between metrics and the rankings position of universities (Badiuzzaman, 2025), assessment becomes a zero-sum game in the defining of the student experience, with student decisions about engagement, participation, attendance and transformation taken through the prism of the time and risk associated with achieving the desired grade through assessment, even if *not* participating is to the detriment of that very aim (Bollas & Bennett, 2026).

Yet each time we move away from the high stakes summative assessment regime defined by the invigilated exam, or the over-assessing we do in part to manage the engagement and participation challenges, we end up being challenged by the next existential crisis. We are faced with the disruptions of how AI will end the university as we know it. We are buffeted by changes to government policy around employability driven by how employers want better, more prepared graduates. Each time we get hyped up about the impacts of these challenges on our practice we snap back to the modes of assessment we feel familiar with. Even during the pandemic, the pervasiveness of proctoring was a recall mechanism of traditional practice in whatever replicated form we could muster at short notice. We are bound by the familiar.

Hegel in his thinking about the *familiar* argues that it separates us from the tensions and uncertainties that make us uncomfortable or uncertain and returns us to a safe space, with Aldouri (2022)observing that:

> The familiar operates in Hegel's description an image of a comfortable world in which we no longer experience ourselves (somatically and cognitively) as the site of bifurcations, divisions and tensions (that is, as modern) but are, rather, in a state of quietude, fully reconciled with ourselves in our given socio-historical context. (p.30)

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* Hegel (1977) elaborates on this assertion of the familiar by observing:

> The familiar, just because it is familiar, is not cognitively understood. The commonest way in which we deceive either ourselves or others about understanding is by assuming something as familiar and accepting it on that account; with all its pros and cons, such knowing never gets anywhere. (p.18)

The decisions taken by institutions and academics about assessment are not exclusively determined by the efficacy of assessment to support and facilitate learning. The same perverse logic applies to authentic assessment, with considerations of economies of scale, cost-per-student, integrity and technological capability defining the nature of many assessments. These dynamics situate assessment within regimes of performativity, wherein auditability, comparability and reputational risk routinely displace pedagogical judgement (Andrew, 2024; Ball, 2012). As rankings and associated metrics increasingly structure institutional decision-making, assessment design functions as an instrument of organisational risk management rather than as a vehicle for learning. In turn, students often rationally approach assessment as an optimisation problem, calibrating engagement according to perceived risk, workload and grade yield, thereby reinforcing instrumental participation and constraining transformative learning.

As universities have marketised and increased cohorts and breadth of program offerings, the driving imperative for the design and practice of assessment has become scale (Marginson, 2020). Methods that enable the administration of assessment at scale such as auto-marking, online exams, AI generated feedback and other efficiency interventions are fed by more simplistic, dichotomous, memory-based, or standardised questions. The scale imperative is informed and catalysed by the administrative and compliance cultures which are in-part enforced upon universities as a quality assurance mechanism by regulators and accreditors. This has led to the prevalence of the assessment of learning, which is retrospective and compliant, but not developmental or in itself a learning experience for students (Kuh et al., 2015).

The Hegelian familiar is the other gravitational force at play here. As a sector, we are deeply over-reliant on the exam as mode of assessment (French et al., 2024). We hold an almost romantic attachment to invigilated pen and paper exams held in large rooms, with students cramming every word they can remember into tiny books filled with smudged pen scrawls. Implicitly and sometimes explicitly we assert that they did us no harm when we were students. As Rapanta et al., (2021) note '…for many teachers, virtual assessment in the COVID-19 pandemic context has been a nightmare because it has been difficult for them to think of another way to assess that is not based on face-to-face or traditional exams' (p.728). This is despite how much empirical evidence argues that the method of assessment is flawed (and in the main is determinedly inauthentic) (Dillon et al., 2018; Dollinger & Nieminen, 2026; Teshome, 2025).

Redefining the value and impact of authentic assessment

We have been talking and debating the design and practices of authentic assessment for well over a decade now with little evidence of a widely accepted definition (see Zhan et al., 2025). At the same time as not agreeing what authentic assessment is and isn't, there is significant debate and commentary

about how it has passed its sell-by date, especially with the hype-infused crisis of AI undermining assessment practices (Chatterjee, 2025; Fawns et al., 2025).

The epistemic heart of modern assessment must be the integrated deployment of the principles of authentic assessment *for* learning. If the assessment task can be completed, and all that students are able to do is demonstrate what they have already learnt (or memorised) then that task fails to be authentic (and falls easily into the vendor-sprung rabbit hole of assessment critique in an era of AI). If feedback is only produced after it can be used by the student to learn (or feedforward) or to justify the allocation of a numeric grade, then it is not authentic. If AI creates and generates feedback for student assessment work, eschewing the human judgement and emotional cadence, then it is not authentic. But to be honest, it is easy to say what something is not, just as it is easy to assessment is broken because of AI. It is more challenging and exposing to offer a solution.

Designing *for* learning means that students learn through the act of doing the assessment. That doesn't mean that prior learning is irrelevant, but it exists within frameworks of uncertainty, transition and shifting degrees of confidence. Traditional assessment is driven by the opposing forces of fear (of failing or not achieving a desired outcome) and confidence (I have memorised or learnt everything I need to in order to pass or achieve the same outcomes). The balance of those forces influences motivation, performance and wellbeing in varying interesting degrees. It also increases the weighting put on critical thinking, reflective practice and creativity, all of which are out of sync with memory-based testing, especially with the highest stakes being placed on practices like rote learning, memorisation and recall.

It is critical to (re)define authentic assessment in part because assessment in higher education is deeply broken, not because of AI, but due to the overwhelming and conflicting forces of a modern university system. AI has compounded the fractures within an already overwhelmed academic ecosystem. The internecine tensions between the assurance and pedagogical aims of assessment have exerted so much stress on the frameworks and foundations of our practice. The perfect storm of generational change in the student cohorts influencing learner behaviour, the petrification of learning into hardened administrative structures and the exponential growth and productivity spirals of a marketised university supercharged by AI has rendered assessment as beyond problematic.

The result is that the emotional and ontological state of the student has been excluded from the process of designing and delivering assessment. The sense of transition and uncertainty that define the nature of a higher education are replaced by a certainty of purpose and outcome (for the student assumed by us and for the staff bound in compliance), an absolute clarity that the skills assessed are the skills deployed in work and that authentic assessment (whatever that is) like all assessment in the pre-AI era is compromised and no longer fit for purpose (even though we are still enraptured by exams).

The premise of this essay is simple. Authentic assessment that locates assessment not as something that is done to an abstracted student, but something that is designed for and with them and considers (as a learning opportunity) the ontological and emotional states of the learner matters more now than it did pre-AI crisis. Authentic assessment as I define it imbues authenticity not as a process or skill to be ingested, but as a pathway to meaning making and trust. Authentic assessment can be redefined as the (co)design, conduct and marking of meaningful assessment that recognises the reflexive, uncertain, and uncanny experiences of student learning and belonging within the situated context of work, life and play.

1. *The (co)design, conduct and marking of meaningful assessment…*

Authentic assessment must have meaning for both the teacher and the student. If it's only meaning is the number written on the front of the paper, then we have already lost the assessment *for* learning argument. Feedback is a site for meaning, but if its only function is to provide justification for the same number, then

assessment is nothing more than a postscript to learning, not the catalyst for it. Meaning enables action, meaning enables reflexivity and meaning rewards thinking, doing, making and creating. Meaning is amplified and earned through trust.

2. *…that recognises the reflexive, uncertain, and uncanny experiences of student learning and belonging…*

The students lived and living experiences are critical for the effective design and delivery of authentic assessment. It is also critical to understand that many of the contexts that assessed skills and knowledge will be used in are *yet to be experienced*. Students are in liminal transition between states of unknowing and knowing, states of youth to adulthood, states of learning to working. Turner (1974, 1987) argues that liminality is a phase where the individual reflects on their place within a social structure, to be able to return to 'society' with a new identity and reasons for being. He adds that being in a liminal state runs counter to the human desire to make sense of uncertainty in the world and leaves the liminal individual with a sense of ambiguity, indeterminacy and vulnerability.

Assessment needs to be designed and delivered through and in transitional spaces for learners that replicate not just the skills of practice but the risks, affordances, opportunities and connectivity of it, in safe ways to experiment. This recognises students are not 'complete' or 'oven ready' but are lifelong works in progress. The capacity for reflexivity (Majgaard, 2016) and the capability for students to engage in wayfinding through complexity and liminality initiated and guided by authentic assessment is critical. Both liminality and reflexivity are states defined in part by the notion of unsettlement, where through transition learners question the social structures that they are transitioning from and to (learning and assessing ethical and moral structures are good examples of unsettlement) (Cunliffe, 2009; Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003).

3. *… within the situated context of work, life and play*.

Students are the experts in interrogating and sharing their own experiences of learning (countering the fact that most teachers are not experts in being a modern student, especially as the generational change dynamics are accelerating) (Gibbs & Wood, 2023; Miller, 2023). Authentic assessment represents the positionality of students within sequences of liminal space (personal, professional, cultural, recreational, technological, and educational) that intersected with their shared expectations and outcomes of studying at university and living their lives. For some students, situating learning within these liminal spaces is disruptive and uncomfortable, exposing the unsettlement of the student experience, the understanding of which is critical to the effective co-design of diverse and supportive learning. It also serves the purpose that many definitions of authentic assessment address, which is the preparation for work, as well as the preparation required to enhance learner's capabilities of working and thriving within a civil society. It is in those situated contexts that transitional space becomes even more critical as a way of creating safe spaces to learn through assessment, with moral, achievement and progression consequences tailored according to the degree of transition being effected.

Where we are dealing with fluid and subjective notions such as transition, reflexivity and uncertainty, a singular rubric or framework cannot define or indeed provide design guidance for authentic assessment. Each time we attempt to do that, we inch closer to the metricisation of learning and the measurement of things that are already known. Authentic assessment needs to be deeply rooted in the epistemology of the learning design, the pedagogy of the teaching and learning practice, the boundaries and affordances of the (trans)disciplinary domain the assessment is located within and the lived and living experiences of the students and how the assessment prepares them for the *yet to be experienced*.

Typologies of authentic assessment

Figure 1: The typologies of authentic assessment

A. Epistemological authenticity
Is the assessment design and practice authentic to the knowledges, philosophies, aesthetics and ethics of the disciplinary field/s or domain/s (or the spaces in between them)?
For example, does the assessment task reside within the legitimate, responsible and ethical framing of the area? Does it draw on the language and theoretical approaches requiring them to be integrated into a solution, or challenged, remixed and reapplied as opposed to being able to recite them chapter and verse? How does it interact with the ethical, behavioural and attitudinal frames of the student and the academic?

Epistemological authenticity is the most challenging of the typology to quantify and assure, but without it the soul of the assessment is lost. In the hyper-charged debates around AI, the epistemic character of assessment is rarely considered as the transaction overwhelms the rationality of purpose of authentic assessment. In this design of assessment, the authentic person undertaking the task is as much a part of the learning as the demonstration or evidence collection.

B. Educational authenticity
Is the assessment design and practice authentic to the pedagogical intention and approach of the educator and the student (if co-designed)? Is it engaging with the structural integrity of the program it fits into? Does it afford for differences in learning capabilities, reasonable adjustments and intersecting spheres of knowledge from life and other units of study? Is it fair and equitable for learners and provides the assurance necessary for the academic?

For example, if you have designed a unit which is deeply informed by a case study approach, does the authentic assessment tasks allow the students the opportunity to apply those skills to varying contexts (cases)? Are the cases themselves relevant to the emotional, ethical, ontological and connective values

of the student cohort (or of the expectations of the (trans)disciplinary field? Does the task and the case reinforce existing knowledge, or does it push the boundaries of knowing, challenging the students to draw on a wide variety of data and ideas to craft solutions, as opposed to looking for the 'one right answer'?

C. Experiential authenticity
Is the assessment design and practice authentic to past, present and future experiences of students, within their journeys through work, life and play? Is the assessment aligned with the expectations of students as they find new pieces to their developmental jigsaw puzzle.

For example, if your pedagogical intent is to develop a unit at a postgraduate level for experienced students seeking to transition to the next level of the journey, does the assessment task support them on that transition through the assessment? Does the authentic task accentuate and illuminate their skills to scaffold them into this different state of knowing, as opposed to assuming every student is an empty vessel bereft of knowledge about your unit (until you start filling them up from the beginning)?

Conclusion

These questions are not designed to be yes/no answers, nor should they 'define' authentic assessment. Authentic assessment is a critical framing tool to redesign the learning experience, from expectation through to outcome and all points between. It is part of the design process that includes information engagement and how students are part of an active and connected learning experience (Bryant, 2022; Bryant et al., 2025). Most critically, authentic assessment is a site for learning that can and should equally support the institutional imperative to assess learning in meaningful, valid and reliable ways to ensure the quality of the degrees we are privileged enough to offer. When well designed, there is no zero-sum game required.

Marina Warner (2013) in her book *Joan of Arc* observed that:

> Creating simplicity often makes the heart leap; order has been restored, the crooked made straight. But order is understanding that things cannot be made simple, that complexity reigns and must be accepted.

Authentic assessment is a complex and uncertain process, and it is through this complexity that the capacity to support the diversity of learners to learn with and through each other, their discipline and the academy is truly enlivened. We must resist the counter pressures of order and the familiar even if scale demands as close to the lowest common denominator or the nirvana of fantasy rewards of economies of scale as we can get. Revelling in complexity is a part of being in transition. The swirling winds of inspiration, perspiration and fear intersect through authentic assessment design in ways that are not simple. They require skill sets from teachers and students (and acceptance of different ways to represent order from leadership and administration). But the rewards can, in Marina Warners words, make the heart leap, and fulfil the social contract we have to transform, to inspire, to educate, to trust and be trusted and to prepare students for the future they will transform.

2026 Afterword

Authentic assessment is not a silver bullet, nor is it, a fool's panacea as I noted earlier. Authentic assessment, deployed as a framing and design tool to articulate assessment for learning in a petri dish ecosystem of assurance also requiring evidence of assessment of learning is a rational and realistic model for the reimagination of assessment both for generative AI and Generation Alpha. It is a rhizomatic sprout of trust, as trusting engagement, interaction and human connection breeds trust back after periods of lying fallow and dormant. Enough of the analogies and euphemisms though! Authentic assessment delivers an assessment experience that frames learning as organic, emotive, personal and critical, because it offers the opportunities to catalyse and reward meaning-making and knowledge-seeking. What is the alternate of that?

The alternate is the potential dystopian world of compliance, uncriticality and mistrust. Assessment systems that often arbitrarily declare AI can and must be used matched with modes that are AI-exclusive to ensure compliance make the human invisible, despite the growing chorus of 'but what about human capabilities and skills?'. The growing use of AI feedback (in part to manage rising workloads) where students gain the administrative advantages of authentic feedback (24 hours, immediate, tailored, directly aligned to the rubric) without the authenticity that only a human interaction can create (see Bryant, (2025). This dystopia marginalises trust.

In the freewheeling, you can't ban AI world, academics cannot trust what students write (Crawford et al., 2026; Liu, 2025). The growing frustration at marking something written by AI and potentially never read by the student is evidence to that. In the locked-down compliance side of the assessment world, the clear message is that academics cannot trust students, so we must limit their capability to break assessment or potentially cause (the institution) harm through it. It is like the pedagogies of prison. In prison there is no trust. Everything is mediated through deconstructing activities to the point where they cannot be misused or abused. Trust here is one way. To follow this through to its logical end. Exams are also examples of one-way trust. They assure the institution that the degrees awarded can be trusted to protect the reputation of the academy and the value of that award to the not just the single student, but the whole cohort. The irony is that all the rest of the assessment experience is lost to other, under-debated and increasingly devalued assessment tasks, reduced in value and benefit to small-stakes formative tasks. We are not trying walk and chew gum, but we are trying to have our cake and eat it too. Authentic assessment can be the cake. It can do both things at the same time when designed purposefully and backed by trust.

By 2030, Generation Alpha will be entering undergraduate education. Values like authenticity and trust are central to the relationships they want to have agency over building. It has been deeply ingrained in their school experiences, their interactions with parents and with the disruptions created by crisis, mental health and the behaviours shaping their online and personal lives. If we offer them, their siblings, their circle an assessment environment that does not privilege trust and authenticity they will seek alternatives to a university education. And this is truly a crisis.

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