

Making it Real: Towards Authentic Assessment at Masters Level

Mary Fargher (University College London)

Introduction

Authentic assessment, most often defined as involving ‘real world’ knowledge, skills and competencies (Bearman et al, 2017; Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021; Ashford Rowe, Herrington and Brown 2014; Gulikers, Bastiaens and Kirschner, 2004), has been present in universities since the 1990s. Its use has been particularly evident in the United Kingdom and Australia, but also more recently in other countries including the Netherlands, Chile, Singapore, Sri Lanka, South Africa and Botswana (McArthur, 2022). The main argument supporting authentic assessment practices has been that they impact favourably on the quality and depth of learning acquired by students because they can relate more easily to knowledge and understanding that they then apply with specific outcomes directly to their work setting (Wu et al; 2015; Sotiriadou et al, 2020). Opportunities to work with like-placed colleagues (Hains-Wesson et al, 2020) and to promote individual student employability are also cited (Oliver, 2015).

Rationale

In a way, it can be argued that authentic assessment provides alternatives to these more high-stake forms of assessing individual students (Sotardi and Dutton, 2022). Anyone who has sat in an exam hall in finals or worked through the night to meet a deadline to complete an essay that will decide the outcome of a course module knows only too well how much weight is placed on assessment and how society has come to shape and judge itself by it (Stobart, 2008). This is not to say that authentic assessment is not without its critics or that

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it is not possible to identify barriers to its implementation or impact. There is an argument to be made that authentic assessment has become somewhat of a ‘buzzword’ in connecting learning in universities with the ‘world of work’ in rather superficial or tokenistic ways (McArthur, 2022). However, it can also be argued that authentic assessment at a deeper level can achieve a more inclusive approach for students, moving beyond the task that the individual relates more closely to, adding to their overall sense of wellbeing and achievement (Hanafin et al, 2007). In another way, by considering the bigger picture of the wider world within which assessment sits in society, it can be argued that challenging established status quo practices should include questioning how we come to know the world as individuals and to consider alternative epistemologies (Forsyth and Evans, 2019).

This UCL ChangeMakers project aims to consider the role of authentic assessment at a level deeper than simply involving ‘real world’ knowledge, competencies and skills. Building on the authentic assessment model (see Figure 1) developed by Villarroel et al (2018), this work considers the role of four key themes: realism, cognitive challenge, judgement and feedback in developing assessment practices on a Masters in Education university course.

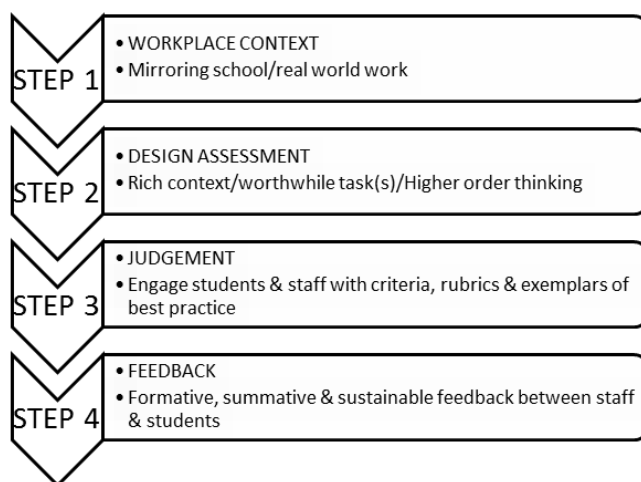


Figure 1: Building Authentic Assessment Model (Adapted from Villarroel et al, 2018)

Background

This project is one of over 200 UCL ChangeMakers projects carried out at University College London over the last eight years. The UCL ChangeMakers initiative has an ethos of staff-student partnership and aims to enable educational change and/or impact through teaching and learning together. Knowledge co-creation between educators and students engaging in this kind of research and enquiry provides new ways of working together in a relationship of trust, equality and mutual gain. This project set out to give students more direct opportunities to prepare for, and reflect on, their learning and gauge how to apply this to their further study, particularly as regards the preparation of their final assignment for the module. The main objectives of the project were to engage students as more responsible and pro-active learners, to develop a stronger sense of their/our working together proactively as a team and to support staff as educators in developing further good practice in authentic assessment. The data for the project was collected on a Masters Education course with Geography educators working collaboratively with Masters students. Participants in the study engaged in authentic assessment practices through the construction of curriculum artefacts intended for use in school Geography education. Students carried out activities that mirrored what was done in their professional practice by using the curriculum-making model (Lambert and Morgan, 2010) to construct artefacts and reflect on the ways in which knowledge, skills and teacher choices influence how geography is constructed in schools.

The MA Education (Geography) is an online Masters Course aimed at practising, or potential, Geography schoolteachers and educators and others with an interest in high quality Geography in schools. Students come to the course with a wide range of experience, some considering teaching having just completed Geography/Humanities-related degrees, some having just completed Postgraduate Certificates in Education, others are in their very early years of teaching, alongside more mature students returning to study after several years teaching in schools. Many are practising teachers in the United Kingdom but the course has always attracted a wide range of international students. Participants in the case study included two UK-based students and four others from Germany, Canada, Singapore, Hong Kong and mainland China.

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‘Transforming the Geography Curriculum’ upon which the research project was focused, is an online module which requires students to engage with deep critical thought about curriculum development practice, the nature of Geography education research and integration of theoretical knowledge and understanding with students’ own experiences and practices in schools. Students consider the teaching of Geography as more than just a technical problem and one that requires their engagement with a range of moral and political complexities in education and society as a whole. Centrally, the module aims to nurture student capability to take critical perspectives on their teacher agency and role in shaping the Geography education young people experience in the ‘real world’.

The project adapted an authentic assessment model from Villarroel et al (2018) as an analytical framework to both examine and review current assessment practice. Also drawing on the broader field of literature on authentic assessment, the project set out to examine the extent to which distinct dimensions of authentic assessment could be addressed through the ‘Transforming the Geography Curriculum’ module.

Context

In the past, the ‘Transforming the Geography Curriculum’ module upon which this project is centred has often received positive feedback from students with regards to their enjoyment of content and their perceptions that it was very relevant to their ‘real-life’ experiences of constructing a geography curriculum in school. External examiners and course reviewers have also commented favourably on the quality of teaching and learning and support for students. The module team was keen to review the ways in which the project could explore how our wide-ranging students could be better supported with regards to assessment.

‘Transforming the Geography Curriculum’ incorporates students working within an online Moodle platform to complete reading, writing and individual and group discussion tasks through access to video, live/recorded tutorials and seminars. Students develop a portfolio of work throughout the module including writing commentaries for an online forum, contributing to live/recorded workshops, writing proposals for their construction of a

curriculum artefact and contributing to peer formative assessment with other students and staff.

Designing the Authentic Assessment Framework

The module team were keen to build on the range of activities included in the module with a particular focus on developing more authenticity in assessment processes because it can be argued that providing students with these kinds of opportunities can allow them to demonstrate mastery of meaningful university tasks that they can translate to a real world setting (Murphy et al, 2017).

The project set out to:

- revisit the assessment processes on the module, with a view to further developing authentic practice
- consider how authentic assessment could support all students in developing further as creative individuals and collaborators in their learning with each other and their tutors
- expand upon ways in which the MA course could engage students with disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge that could potentially contribute to transforming the Geography curriculum within their varied school environments

In authentic assessment, context can be described as realistic when student tasks replicate real-life experiences and pose questions and problem-solving which reflect their workplace practice (Villarroel et al, 2018; Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021). In this project, via workshops and a focus group, students were introduced to the well-established concepts of 'curriculum-making' and 'curriculum artefacts' in Geography education. The project's ethos was very much centred on staff giving students opportunities to 'own their curriculum-making' in line with the sentiments of Biddulph, Lambert and Balderstone (2015).

'The curriculum artefact becomes yours! You invest it with special meaning. You do this as a Geography specialist who can see the potential wrapped up in the artefact –

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as a source of data and inspiration to think about a topic or idea in a way that will provide the platform for developing a deeper understanding of it. It is highly unlikely that the artefact will be the sole resource used in a sequence of lessons, but it will be the key or signature material that drives the sequence: as such, it may be referred to frequently as a kind of reference point (2015, p 67).

Staff making the connection between what was learnt on the module that formed the focus of the study and what students experienced as practising teachers in school was seen as an essential starting point. In addition, promoting the role of students working with each other and their tutors in engaging with how and why they were assessed, was essential in a context where these kind of student-staff collaborations often remain under-represented in the university setting (Murphy et al, 2017).

Promoting Cognitive Challenge

In the first workshop students were introduced to ways in which curriculum-making is an approach to bringing together Geography as a subject, teacher choices and student experiences.

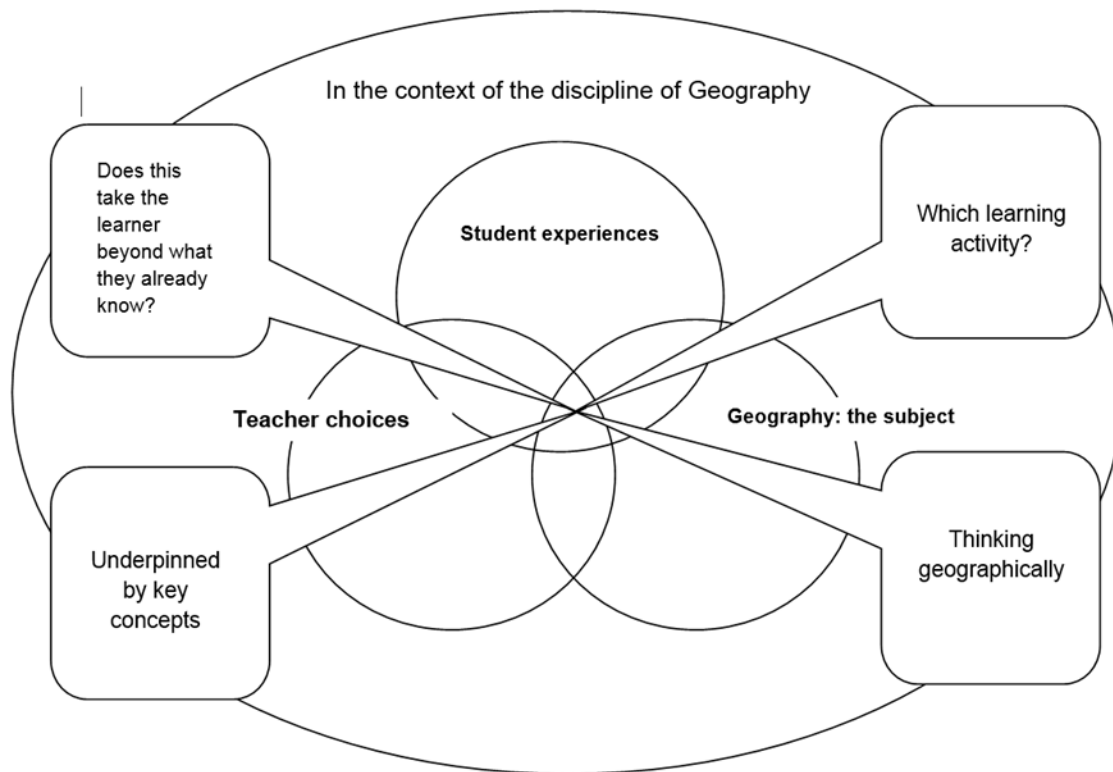


Figure 2 : The Curriculum Making Model (adapted from Lambert and Morgan, 2010)

The discussion between students and tutors examined the ways in which participants perceived that the curriculum-making model could be used to engage teachers in deep thinking about four balancing and interconnected functions of their curriculum work as:

- underpinning the curriculum with Geography's key concepts;
- taking the learner beyond what they already know;
- choosing learning activities which reflect curricular aims that are adapted to student needs and experiences;
- engaging young people in thinking geographically (Lambert and Morgan, 2010).

In the second workshop, students and tutors critically discussed the extent to which curriculum artefacts could be used as a 'key' to a series of lessons on a given topic. This discussion focused on how students could use a particular resource such as a map, a series of photographs, a set of numerical data, a text or a combination of these as multi-layered resources (Biddulph, Lambert and Balderstone, 2015).

Sharing Judgement and Feedback

One of the central aims of authentic assessment is for students to be able to develop a full understanding of how judgements are made about their learning and to acquire a strong foundational understanding of how criteria are used to judge their performance (Villarroel et al, 2018). It can be argued that in order for students to hone judgement on the quality of their own work, they need to gauge these in the light of appropriate evidence (Boud and Molloy, 2013). In the project focus group, staff and students engaged with assessment criteria, rubrics and exemplars to develop their evaluative judgements.

Over the course of the module students were given several opportunities to identify areas for improvement in developing their curriculum artefact. After the workshop that introduced and discussed the concept of curriculum artefacts with tutors, students were asked to contribute to a series of forum posts where they presented and justified their choices of artefact and discussed and commented on each other's choices. Students also submitted a formal proposal for writing their final assignment on 'How can a teacher lead the Geography curriculum through construction of a curriculum artefact?' Tutors gave collective and individual formative feedback using the assessment criteria and rubric and participants in the project discussed these together in the project focus group.

One student teaching in Hong Kong presented a proposal for constructing her artefact to address the question: How can a curriculum artefact, a photograph of Wing Kwong Street, be used to develop powerful geographical knowledge? Figure 3 is a photograph artefact of the street which is near to her school.

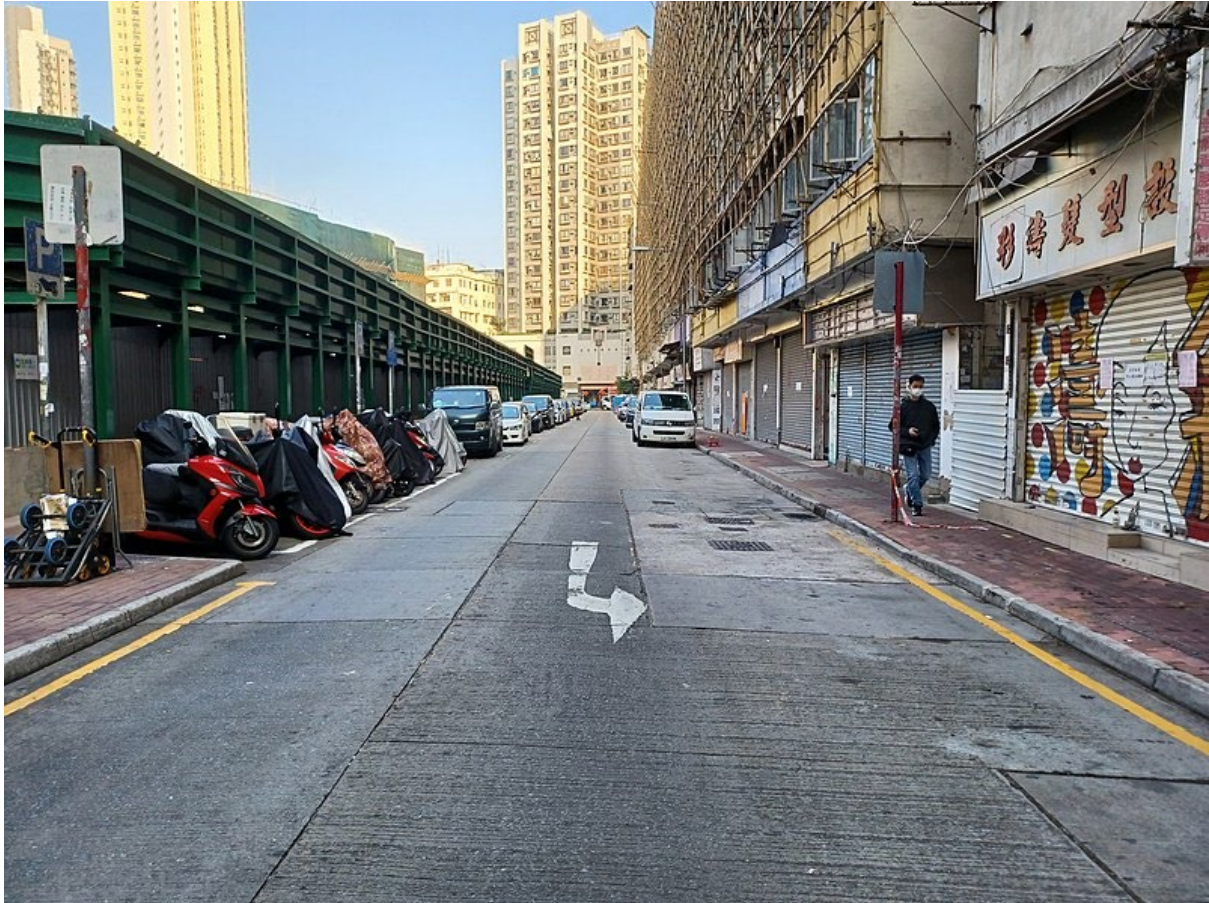


Figure 3: Wing Kwong Street, To Kwa Wan, Hong Kong (Wikipedia Commons, 2022).

In this written extract, the student contextualises and rationalises how they intend to use the artefact to construct (part of) the Geography curriculum in their school:

‘The artefact captures a part of the urban area of Hong Kong in a specific time. It can be used to teach Option G Urban Environments in the IBDP curriculum as a place that all students can relate to. The photo can be combined with resources like Google Map, Google Earth or ArcGIS to spark students’ curiosity, creating a “need to know”. Students can use the artefact to learn about characteristics of an urban place, including the site, situation, site factors and the part of the city Wing Kwong Street is in according to urban models. As we progress, the artefact can also serve as a focal point to examine change in time and space as the area is now undergoing urban redevelopment. Similarly, it can be used to examine social and environmental stress experienced by people who used to live there. Finally, students can apply powerful

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knowledge they have learnt in the unit to propose possible ways to re-imagine future development on Wing Kwong' (Student A, MA Education – Geography)

In the focus group on judgement and feedback, students and tutors discussed the formative feedback given on participants' assignment proposals alongside the assessment criteria, rubric, and exemplars of best practice with regards to their tutor's summary feedback. For Student A this comprised:

'Strengths include: Your strong working title. The way you are drawing on potentially relevant literature. The way you intend to use curriculum making to frame your writing/as an analytical framework.

Areas to develop: Consider narrowing down the literature focus. This is a strong initial idea - enquiry through a rich place-based artefact. Perhaps link that to one strongly argued approach, e.g., Future 3 which would seem to fit well? Is the spiral curriculum approach needed? How does this contribute to Future 3? What do you mean by a 'concept-based curriculum' and is this relevant here?' (Individual Tutor Feedback for Student A)

In order to model good practice, in the group discussion tutors and students discussed how Student A could apply principles of powerful knowledge and how these could be applied within their use of the artefact, particularly with regards to the concept of a Future 3 curriculum in Geography education (Maude, 2020). Students engaged in what could be described as 'sustainable feedback' (Boud and Soler, 2016) throughout this process as they used a range of resources to make their own judgements about how they could potentially demonstrate their grasp of the field of study and/or understand and evaluate research and methodologies.

Conclusions

This small-scale case study set out to revisit assessment procedures on a module on a Masters course for teachers with a view to developing more authentic approaches with staff

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and students working as partners. The specific dimensions of authentic assessment, realism, cognitive challenge, judgement and feedback, were realised through the project in a number of ways. With regards to realism, the project demonstrated that providing students with opportunities to engage with real world assessment in the form of the construction of a curriculum artefact can promote 'authentic' capabilities that students can transfer to the world of work (Villarroel et al, 2018) in this case, to the Geography classroom.

In connection with cognitive challenge, students were given opportunities to refine their Geography curriculum knowledge using Lambert and Morgan's curriculum-making model (see Figure 2) as an analytical frame. It can be argued that this promoted a significant cognitive challenge associated with the construction of geographical and pedagogical knowledge in tandem, that can be directly applied to how the teacher, the student and geographical knowledge are connected in real-life classroom situations. With regards to developing evaluative judgements, formative assessment procedures in the project came to the fore. As the vignette presented above depicting the interactions between student A and their tutor and other students indicates, these 'critical moments' between staff and students, and students and students, were pivotal as students were exposed to learning about, and judging, quality and applying it to their own practice.

There were limitations associated with the study, which was small-scale, conducted in one particular context and not necessarily generalizable. Though as a case study, it can be argued that 'thick description' (Geertz, 2008) from the project, may be useful for comparison for other teachers and teacher educators adopting similar authentic assessment practices.

Going forward, the MA Education (Geography) team intend to apply for a second phase of UCL ChangeMakers funding to extend the project and further apply the findings of the case study to support students both within their summative assessment on this module and in their research module later in their studies.

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