A holistic approach to authentic and engaging assessment during the Covid-19 pandemic: an Australian case study

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The challenge

During the height of the pandemic, we had to transition to online learning rapidly. This required educators to move all content, activities, and assessment tasks very quickly onto Canvas, our Universities Learning Management System (LMS). One of the most significant issues that we experienced was fostering engagement with the students and finding suitable eTools to promote engagement and support authentic assessment of this unit.

This research uses one large case study based on a Master of Commerce (MCom) Business School unit, with over 2300 students in semester one, 2021.

For the unit we had to develop assessments that would foster student engagement throughout the semester.

Once we had developed the assessment the next hurdle was to trial several eTools, such as Menti, Jamboard, and Padlet, to find out which were suitable for our activities. The eTools needed to not dictate the pedagogy; the pedagogical approach directly influences learning, and we did not want to compromise the pedagogy of online, active, and peer learning, or the assessment of this unit (Clark, 2001; Cook, 2020; Peterson, 2020). Therefore, by developing the assessment first and then identifying the eTools that would
best support it, we ensured that the development of the assessment was not driven by eTools.

**The response**

Each of the connected learning at scale (CLaS) units that we are working on is allocated a small team comprising of one learning designer (LD), an educational developer (ED), and Media staff. In addition, we have a research assistant (RA) that conducts research and evaluation (R&E), as indicated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. BCD Design and Development Coordination.**

![BCD Design and Development Coordination](image)

Source: first author, 2021

Each team member is tasked with designing, developing, and implementing changes to units to meet the challenges of the pandemic and the switch to online and blended learning and teaching. With the help of this team approach in co-designing this enormous MCom unit we developed several authentic assessments to encourage student engagement and learning:

- Icebreaker activities linked to the weekly topic were carried out at the beginning of each workshop. We used Mentimeter for the icebreaker activities and most of the students (73.5%) agreed that participating in these activities motivated them to engage in the workshops.
- Reflective ePortfolio – video log (‘Vlog’). There is much content to cover in this unit, and a vlog was one way to ask the students to reflect on each of the
perspectives/topics they have covered. Students were instructed to upload their Vlog to Canvas studio, with the bulk of them (89%) saying they enjoyed the ‘Vlog’.

- Workshop Presentation Debates were carried out in groups/teams of five. Students had to split into two sides in their group – a ‘For’ and an ‘Against’ side. Students then worked together (as a team) to present both sides of an argument for their designated debate topic (using communication and presentation skills) using the lecture materials and resources. The majority (78%) of the students indicated that the workshop presentations benefited their learning.

Some workshops were run face-to-face, and for these, the students did the debates in front of the class but the majority of the workshops were held online using Zoom (as most of our students are based overseas).

We also utilised Jamboard where possible – Jamboard is an easy-to-use eTool to get the whole class engaged. One downside to Jamboard is that it can only support up to 50 students at one time. Thus, when our class had more than 50 students, we had to switch over to Padlet (another eTool). Most of our students (67%) indicated that Canvas/Padlet/Jamboard helped support their assessment requirements.

It was crucial to ensure that assessments are authentic, as student perceptions of authenticity are vital and contribute significantly to the completion of learning outcomes (Ajjawi et al., 2020). Students make judgments about the assessment tasks they are given, including judgements on the authenticity of assessments. The individualistic nature of assessment tasks, such as report writing and reflective writing, does not allow students to exhibit the communication, problem-solving, and collaboration skills they learned (Mantai and Huber, 2021). Qualitative analysis conducted by Ajjawi et al. (2020) found that students also perceived written assessments as incapable of capturing learnt professional skills adequately.

We therefore sought to create authentic assessments which support online, active, and peer learning and by doing so, we increased student engagement and provided learners with a platform to demonstrate the skills they learnt. In addition, we minimised academic dishonesty issues (which are often linked to written assessments) as it is impossible to cheat on a Vlog which requires students to film themselves delivering a reflective piece. As
a result, in a class of over 2,300 students, we had zero academic dishonesty issues in semester one, 2021.

**Recommendations**

Our goal was to foster student engagement in a predominantly online delivery model, which still encouraged active and peer learning. In addition, we sought to create a relevant, innovative and authentic assessment where learning is applied and tested through authentic assessment modes and supported by opportunities to receive and share feedback from academics and their peers.

We achieved this goal by developing innovative assessments, such as icebreaker activities, in-class debates, and Vlogs. Our aim was to engage students within both large groups and in small tutorial classes, using a process of educational design involving socially constructed alignment, staff development, supported student-led learning, and innovative large-scale teaching pedagogies (Bryant, 2019; Cerimagic and Khanna, 2020).

Recommendations for others trying to implement similar practices:

1. Develop the assessments first: To ensure that pedagogy takes primacy, the tools should serve to allow you to support learning and develop resources that remain authentic to your agreed approach.

2. Explore and pilot several eTools. Select a few eTools that will meet your needs and requirements and ensure that the eTools are simple to use and that they are inexpensive and/or accessible.

3. Additionally, you should create detailed assessment instructions (either as a Word doc or on your LMS) to manage student queries around assessments. Then, your tutors can refer students to this whenever there are questions.

Never before has it been so crucial that online teaching and assessment is engaging, educational, and innovative. This can be achieved by ensuring that the pedagogy and the eTools are chosen to complement and support each other. In this short paper we have outlined an example of how this can be achieved. Future studies on assessment design...
and transformation may incorporate this case study and perhaps merge with other similar cases in the same context to improve the design of authentic assessments to foster and encourage increased student engagement.

References


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