

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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What use is authenticity if students do not understand the skills gained?

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Abstract: The COVID pandemic forced academics to move from face-to-face teaching into the online world of Zoom whilst, ensuring that as Higher Education providers, we embed much needed employability skills into the curricula (Jackson 2013). There is a complex triangulated need to assess students virtually, embed employability skills and ensure that such employability skills are visible to employers (Fuller 2021). One way in which we can embed employability into modules is via the use of digital authentic assessments (Sotiriadou et al. 2020). However, even the use of digital authentic assessment does not mean that students automatically recognise or can articulate the skills gained.

Indeed, what use is authenticity if students do not understand the skills gained and skills are not demonstrated to the very industry professionals that the assessment supports?

This case study examines the building of a holistic infrastructure, enabling students to articulate and demonstrate their newly developed employability skills.

Paper: In 2013, Barber et al. identified that technology was becoming an “ever bigger part of the learning process” (Barber et al. 2013:44) and more pervasive in Higher Education (Garrison and Kanduka 2004). The adoption of digital assessments up until 2020, was slower than anticipated, with a focus on traditional assessments, however, the COVID pandemic forced significant innovation. Whilst this is a positive step forward however, “just” a move to digital delivery does not support students’ skill development, nor do innovations enable students to automatically understand their newly acquired skills.

For many years, the focus has been on ensuring that as the providers of future employees, we embed much needed skills into the curricula (Jackson 2013). Despite this considerable effort, employers are still concerned that there is a graduate skills gap and that “someone” needs to take responsibility for this (Somerville 2019). It is unclear why this skills gap is evident however, Jackson (2013) argues that there is an assumption, that once skills are embedded into modules, that there is an automatic transfer of skills to students. One way in which we can try to overcome this issue, is via the use of digital authentic assessments (Sotiriadou et al. 2020). However, even when we design such authentic assessments that mirror industry practice, students may still not be aware of their newly developed skills. By critically addressing this research gap around skill development (Jackson et al. 2013; Succi and Canovi 2020), we examine how building an infrastructure with multiple stakeholders, can

support students' awareness of their skill development, via a digital authentic assessment.

Literature Review:

Employers, WEF (2020) and QS (2019) all identify that graduates do not have work ready skills despite the effort that universities have made, to embed employability into curricula. The key skills that are likely to be in high demand over the next five years are critical thinking, analysis, creativity and active learning as jobs change and the disruption of COVID is felt (WEF (2020) and QS (2019)). As companies have been cancelling work experience programmes (Holt-White and Montacute 2020) it is even more important that students gain employability skills via modules. Furthermore, there is an additional gap between what employers want and how student perceive their own skills (QS 2019; Succi and Canovi 2020).

Authentic assessments are a popular device to enable students to develop such critical skills for the future workplace; to mirror industry practice (Sotiriadou et al. 2020) and develop students' digital citizenship (Adams Becker et al. 2017:22) via experiential learning (ISE 2021). While the aim of an authentic assessment may to help students to understand the complexity of work, contextualise their own skills and allows the development new work ready skills (Ashford-Rowe et al. 2014), it is essential that students recognise such skill development and be able to articulate these skills to future employers. In a competitive graduate marketplace, students must have something different on their CV's to help them stand out (Herbert et al. 2020; Fuller 2021). If such skills become "siloes" within modules, the key objective of an authentic assessment is essentially nullified.

Indeed, what use is authenticity if students do not understand the skills gained and skills are not demonstrated to the very industry professionals that the assessment supports?

Aims and Objectives:

The aim is to appraise the impact of a holistic infrastructure to support digital skill development via authentic assessments.

The specific objectives are to:

- Understand how students can demonstrate and articulate their employability skills gained
- Investigate if there is a positive impact on students gaining graduate roles
- Identify what level of support is needed from key stakeholders

Methodology:

This research takes a qualitative case study approach. Case studies are particularly suitable for complex situations with multiple stakeholders (Easton 2000) and a qualitative approach allows for emergent theory, the establishment of theoretical patterns (Bryman 1989; Symon and Cassell 2012) leading to the discovery of "buried treasure" (Saldana 2016: 289). This approach will enable an understanding of the students' and key stakeholders' reflections of the digital authentic assessment (Gill and Johnson 2010).

Qualitative questionnaires will be sent to module students and professional services and academic stakeholders. The data will be analysed using Krippendorff's (2013) syntactical (units of language) and thematic (broad relationships and key issues) units of analysis.

Conclusion:

It is essential that we do not become side-tracked by exciting digital innovative authentic assessments and instead we build a holistic infrastructure, so that students can articulate and demonstrate their newly developed creative, analytical and digital skills to ensure career success.

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