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Authentic assessment: from panacea to criticality

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ABSTRACT

Authentic assessment is often positioned as an educational panacea, invoked in response to a broad range of complex problems. This paper considers authentic assessment in relation to three key challenges: preparing graduates for the future, cheating, and inclusion. Despite literature supporting its potential benefits, there is limited evidence on the relationship between authentic assessment and these challenges. Through an uncritical blending of authenticity with broader educational goals, the label 'authentic assessment' risks becoming a distraction or a thought-terminating cliché, impeding deeper conversation and interrogation. We argue that authenticity should be considered as a set of aspirational principles within a broader pedagogical framework. Authenticity in assessment requires thoughtful and contextualised design, and the negotiation of trade-offs with other educational goals. The concept of authenticity, if used judiciously, can foster critical conversations and meaningful interrogation of educational practices, rather than serving as an oversimplified solution to complex problems.

KEYWORDS

Authentic assessment; assessment design; cheating; inclusion

Introduction

Authentic assessment contrasts with 'traditional' forms of assessment in ways that appear to be significant and, largely, positive. However, authentic assessment is often invested with superpowers, including the ability to: surmount academic integrity concerns (Sotiriadou et al. 2020); make assessment more inclusive (Nieminen 2024); and ensure relevancy to future personal, social and professional contexts (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown 2014; Villarroel et al. 2018; Ajjawi et al. 2020; McArthur 2023). This view finds its way into assessment policies and teaching and learning resources that uncritically blend authenticity with inclusion, integrity or preparation of

graduates for the future (e.g. University of Reading 2023; University of Oxford 2024). In this paper, we argue that the promotion of authentic assessment as an answer to a broad range of complex problems unhelpfully positions it as a panacea.

Authentic assessment is often positioned as the ‘silver bullet’ solution for critical, urgent and widespread challenges in our current higher education environment (Ajjawi et al. 2023). While literature supports some potential benefits of authentic assessment in relation to challenges of cheating, inclusion, and the application and future relevance of learning, *in principle* (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown 2014; Villarroel et al. 2018; Sokhanvar, Salehi, and Sokhanvar 2021), there is very limited evidence of how, and the extent to which, authentic assessment actually does this in practice, or the relationship between authenticity and these other concerns (Ajjawi et al. 2023). Indeed, the review by Villarroel et al. (2018) showed that the vast majority of authentic assessment studies do not feature a clear model or practical guidelines for authentic assessment.

We have concerns that the label ‘authentic assessment’ is sometimes applied without sufficient interrogation of how aspirations of authenticity relate to broader contexts and purposes of assessment. This worry has a historical basis: higher education discourse has seen a range of panacea concepts come and go. Successive educational technologies – including print, radio, television, online, tablets, MOOCs, and now artificial intelligence (AI) – have been associated with ‘magical thinking’ around their capacity to solve complex educational problems (Cuban and Jandrić 2015), with promises of what should happen greatly outstripping the reality of what does happen (Selwyn 2013). Pedagogical innovations – such as student-centredness, constructive alignment, and active learning – have been suggested in response to problems of student learning, engagement and motivation (e.g. Freeman et al. 2014). Even higher education itself is commonly portrayed as a panacea for various global issues such as poverty and unemployment (see, e.g. Ostrowicka 2022). In each case, a concept or label covers over the need for nuanced negotiation and integration of new approaches into particular contexts. Similarly, where the label ‘authentic assessment’ is treated as sufficient explanation for what is actually a complex approach to assessment design and implementation, it can become a distraction (Arnold and Croxford 2024) or even a *thought-terminating cliché* (Lifton 1961) that hampers important conversations and considerations of the tensions between multiple purposes and practicalities.

In this paper, we examine the relationship between authenticity in assessment and three ‘problems’ it is often purported to address: preparing graduates for their futures; cheating; and inclusion. We have chosen these challenges because of their complexity, their significance, and the primacy of authentic assessment as a solution within current educational discourse. In our discussions, we consider how authenticity can be used as a principle alongside or within more targeted approaches to different assessment purposes. We argue that, if we think beyond authentic assessment as a form of assessment to conceive of authenticity as just one aspect to thoughtfully and judiciously consider within the design, we can more clearly see and address real problems and purposes of assessment and higher education more broadly.

Authentic assessment and the problem of preparing students for their futures

Authentic assessment is primarily regarded as an important factor in preparing students for future learning in work and life (Villarroel et al. 2018; Sokhanvar, Salehi, and Sokhanvar 2021). Authenticity is seen as a way to incorporate the complexity of ‘real-world’ actions and multimodal outputs (e.g. producing work-related media or performing in professional communities and settings). It challenges conventional, decontextualised approaches to assessment (Boud and Falchikov 2006), informing a broader trend toward experiential, ‘student-centred’ learning (O’Neill 2015; Damşa, Nerland, and Andreadakis 2019;). Authentic assessment aims to foster adaptable, lifelong learners equipped to navigate increasingly unpredictable futures, through enhancing relevance and application of learning to future professional, personal and social contexts (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown 2014; Ajjawi et al. 2020, 2023; McArthur 2023). Indeed, the authentic

assessment movement is based, in large part, on the proposition that education should help students apply learning and knowledge to things that matter (Wiggins 1990).

However, the relationship between authenticity in assessment and preparing students for the future is not straightforward. We offer four key critiques. Firstly, workplace learning research suggests that assessment contexts, irrespective of design or type, always involve issues of performativity and power. These, in turn, can lead to superficial and distorted engagement with learning activities. Professional placements, such as physiotherapy students working with hospital patients or primary school teachers teaching a class, might be considered the most authentic contexts for assessment. Yet, issues of power and trust within such workplaces may lead learners to act in 'inauthentic' ways to appear more competent (Castanelli et al. 2022), which is a particularly pertinent issue in placement assessments (Ajjawi et al. 2020). The inherent inauthenticity and performativity that are often associated with, and encouraged by, summative, high stakes assessment (Veen 2021), remain within authentic assessments (Macfarlane 2015). Hence, authentic assessment does not relieve assessors from the responsibility of considering and addressing the 'inauthentic' practices used to mimic the learning and achievement being assessed.

The second critique is that immersion in authentic activity is not necessarily conducive to learning or to the development of sustainable practices. 'Real-world' contexts, such as workplaces, often lack time for support, scaffolding, considered learning and reflection. Thus, there may be tensions between elements identified as fundamental to authentic assessment: realism, cognitive challenge and evaluative judgement (Villarroel et al. 2018). For instance, learners may find tasks or situations with a high degree of realism to be cognitively overwhelming, which may, in turn, inhibit their development of evaluative judgement. An example from the healthcare domain illustrates this. Students in professional healthcare settings must grapple with tensions between 'authentic' professional feedback (of the kinds they will encounter as professionals), and 'academic feedback' that is oriented towards helping students negotiate the requirements of university assessments (Dawson, Carless, and Lee 2021). Indeed 'authentic' feedback conversations in healthcare practice can become 'tick box' exercises, rather than developmental opportunities (Scarff et al. 2019). However, within less authentic, simulation contexts, expert facilitation can allow for 'privacy, open discussion, trust, review, and confidentiality' (Decker et al. 2021, 29). Thus, while assessment in authentic environments may offer certain opportunities for learning, they may inhibit others. There is value in balancing exposure to authentic contexts and more nurturing, educational environments.

Our third critique is that students' future contexts are often uncertain and unknown, which makes it problematic to define authentic, future-oriented practices. This is particularly evident in relation to rapid and complex technological change, such as the development of AI-driven technologies (Bearman, Ryan, and Ajjawi et al. 2023). AI already plays a significant role in professional work and practice, and some position the use of AI as inherently authentic (as part of a polarised discourse around AI, cheating, and authentic assessment) (e.g. Salinas-Navarro et al. 2024). From a more nuanced position, authentic assessment should, in theory, contend with the opportunities, risks and ethical implications of technological practices, including the need to develop evaluative judgement when using AI (Bearman et al. 2024). Surprisingly, however, there has been only limited work on how AI or, indeed, any digital technology, figures within authentic assessment design (Nieminen, Bearman, and Ajjawi et al. 2023).

Finally, we do not want authentic assessment to simply replicate potentially problematic practices. Assessments in clinical workplaces, for example, often reinforce practices, attitudes, and cultures that educators wish to avoid, such as stereotyping or racism (Holmboe et al. 2023). There is a need to be selective and judicious in shaping which authentic practices we want to encourage and cultivate in students. This is challenging where authentic assessment is also intended to promote skills and practices that are authentic to unknown, future contexts and 'ways of working that have not yet been developed' (Dawson and Bearman 2020; Nieminen, Bearman, and Ajjawi 2023, 538). McArthur (2023, 93) calls for authentic assessment to be based on a 'dialectic of self

and society... and a commitment to genuine transformative change'. This means looking beyond a focus on replicating 'real world' work contexts, and beyond the hype of technological disruption, to prepare and equip graduates for knowledgeable and agentic action in a future yet to be shaped.

Together, these critiques lay out a case that the most commonly presumed benefits of authentic assessment – preparing students for their futures – are not as straightforward as they sound. We do not claim that authentic assessment has no role here. Assessment can, and should, play a role in helping students learn how to develop practices that are attuned to uncertain and changing contexts (Fawns and O'Shea 2019).

Authentic assessment and the problem of cheating

Claims that authentic assessment is an effective way to address cheating are widespread, likely in response to the rise in contract cheating (Ellis et al. 2020) and widely-available generative AI technologies. The fundamental (and very appealing) idea is that through authentic assessment, we can 'design out' cheating (Quality Assurance Agency 2017). However, research on cheating and AI is still very limited, and research on authentic assessment and cheating does not present a clear case. We lay out our concerns about the lack of supporting studies before discussing additional, conceptual challenges.

There appears to be minimal empirical evidence that authentic assessment prevents cheating, despite some confident claims that it does. For example, in the chapter on authentic assessment in the authoritative *2nd Handbook on Academic Integrity* (Openo 2024), the statement 'many studies illustrate the impact of assessment design in reducing incidents of academic misconduct' (219) is supported with a reference to the literature review by De Maio and Dixon (2022). The sentence supporting Openo's claim is most likely: '...many studies illustrating the effects of good, authentic curricula and assessment design in reducing incidents of academic misconduct by students in higher education' (De Maio and Dixon 2022, 13). Such a statement sounds like it would be supported by a wealth of empirical evidence. However, it is supported by an internal university teaching and learning presentation, a 2008 conceptual edited book chapter on international students and plagiarism (McGowan 2008), and a case study of the use of criminological theory to address academic integrity, which does not mention authenticity (Baird and Clare 2017). Another reference that is often used to support claims of authentic assessment as a solution to cheating is Sotiriadou et al. (2020). However, their study simply demonstrates that students perceived a small range of assessment tasks (largely, interactive oral assessment) as harder to cheat in. Interactive oral assessment is, of course, not necessarily authentic, particularly where it is used as an approach to increase assessment security. In addition, the authors, themselves, caution against generalisation to authentic assessment more broadly, and they do not present evidence of actual reductions in rates of cheating. In short, we are not aware of any evidence demonstrating that authenticity, in and of itself, reduces rates of cheating.

On the other hand, there is empirical evidence that authenticity does not solve the problem of cheating. For example, Ellis et al. (2020) found that contract cheating sites provide many students with passable responses to authentic assessment tasks. Indeed, the supposed mechanisms through which authenticity can reduce cheating are unclear. Is it that cheating becomes more difficult? Is it that students understand that cheating is wrong? Is it that students prefer doing the work themselves because the task is more engaging? The conceptual claims underpinning assessment design as a silver bullet solution to cheating can broadly be placed into two categories: academic integrity and assessment security. We discuss each in turn with reference to authenticity.

Academic integrity is a positive, values-based mission intended to equip students to do assessment work with integrity, and to want to do so (Dawson 2021). It is not concerned with the

detection of cheating, but instead focuses on developing values of honesty, trust, fairness, responsibility, respect and courage (Fishman 2014). This makes more sense with respect to authentic assessment in contexts where authentic practice is diligent and honest, but cheating and taking shortcuts are authentic parts of many professional and social contexts. In many professional contexts, the final product is often valued more than the process itself, with the end justifying the means (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown 2014). In these contexts, it could be seen as *inauthentic* to prevent students from using strategic approaches or shortcuts. Good assessment design may be able to reduce motivation to cheat by, for example, encouraging students' sense of autonomy, competency and relatedness to what is being assessed (Sutherland-Smith and Dawson 2022), but this is not automatically achieved through the decision to design authentic assessment.

Assessment security seeks to guarantee that students can demonstrate pre-specified learning outcomes (Dawson 2021) by engineering rules and conditions that enforce certain forms of engagement and prevent others. Prohibiting certain activities, such as the use of generative AI, often relies on the detection of cheating, which is a key aspect of assessment security (Dawson 2021). Such guarantees, offered by assessment security approaches, may be in tension with authenticity. The learning of authentic practices is messy, emergent, and uncertain in relation to what will actually be learned. Indeed, as mentioned in the previous section, an important purpose of authentic assessment is to encourage the learning of things that we cannot clearly specify in advance. Further, assessment security measures often involve inauthentic restrictions, such as performing in invigilated conditions, or prohibiting consultation or collaboration with other people, technologies or resources. These restricted activities are, often, part of authentic practices in contexts outside of education. This tension is illustrated by calls for authentic assessment as a way of stopping students from using AI, even as AI technologies become increasingly embedded in professional contexts (Markauskaite et al. 2022). However, assuming that any use of AI or digital technology is inherently authentic is also an oversimplification. As mentioned, there is not much scholarship on this or what constitutes authenticity in relation to the integration of technology into assessment practices (Nieminen, Bearman, and Ajjawi et al. 2023). There is a need for further discussion and research around what kinds of authenticity, in relation to technology, we want to promote and why.

Authentic assessment and the problem of inclusion

While authentic assessment research has rarely focused on inclusion, the emerging literature regarding inclusive assessment tends to portray 'more authentic' assessment as 'more inclusive' (Nieminen 2024). This is again very appealing: making assessment inclusive presents considerable challenges, not least of which is that one size cannot fit all (Tai et al. 2023). Yet, despite assumptions that authenticity is philosophically aligned with inclusion (Abramenka-Lachheb and de Siqueira 2022), this relationship has not been adequately explained. In this section, we explore some tensions between authentic and inclusive practices.

It is not always the case that 'more authentic' equals 'more inclusive'. Certainly, the removal of inauthentic barriers to inclusion can create a more equitable assessment. Where structured exam conditions create accessibility barriers for students with disabilities, even with adjustments (Nieminen, Moriña, and Biagiotti 2024), alternative formats such as work-relevant case reports might allow students to demonstrate learning in diverse, multimodal ways that resist standardisation (Jorre De St Jorre, Boud, and Johnson 2021). However, more authentic forms of assessment can be onerous for students who have limited experience of them, and this can be exacerbated for those with competing demands on their time (Wake et al. 2023), such as employment or caring responsibilities. Further, designing authentic tasks that mirror professional or social contexts might make assessment less equitable by creating new barriers, more pressurised situations,

higher safety risks, time restrictions, inaccessible buildings, unforgiving cultures, stigmatisation of disabilities, and more. The 'real world' is not a naturally inclusive context, and workplaces or broader societal contexts do not readily accommodate the diverse needs of all learners.

Inclusion is not just about equitable learning opportunities for students to do well in assessment, but also about how we create social change for a more inclusive society. One promise of authentic assessment is that by participating in it, students may gain more authentic knowledge about themselves (Vu and Dall'Alba 2014; Ajjawi et al. 2023), including their future professional selves. Authenticity in assessment may allow students more agency to develop understandings of their strengths, weaknesses and career narratives (Dollinger, Nieminen, and Finneran 2024; Nieminen, Morriña, and Biagiotti 2024). However, not all students can afford the cost of disclosure, or tying their personal characteristics, experiences or identities to their assessment. In many professional disciplines, such as in medical education, students' abilities are measured against professional standards – often defined not by universities but by industry – which set the 'norm' of what an 'able' student looks like. Such authentic standards create barriers for authentic disclosure for those who, for one reason or another, do not fit this predetermined idea of normalcy (Nolan et al. 2015). The same issue can be seen in life after graduation as many historically underrepresented student groups, such as students with disabilities and students of colour, face discrimination in the employment market (e.g. Pesonen et al. 2022; Dollinger, Nieminen, and Finneran 2024). Therefore, the development of employability skills can be seen from an emancipatory perspective, where assessment is aimed at encouraging equitable graduate employment and participation in society (Nieminen, Bearman, and Ajjawi 2023). For example, authentic assessment could create opportunities for diverse students to network with industry partners in ways that highlight the value of their diversity.

For some students, authenticity in assessment depends on the extent to which relevant future contexts can be configured to allow them to participate. For example, the authentic assessment would not have been possible within law degrees for Melbourne women prior to 1903, when they were first allowed to practise law (Kirk 1996). This provides a historical illustration of the tensions between inclusion and equity and authentic alignment with workplace contexts. A focus on workplace practices tends to direct assessment conversations away from more critical, societal discourses (McArthur 2023), such as confronting gender inequity, structural racism or ableism in education (Zaidi et al. 2021; Keefe 2022) or society more broadly. A more useful question might be to ask what kinds of authentic assessment practices in higher education – which is still an exclusive setting in many national contexts – could promote equity and inclusion in societies at large? This could involve asking students to engage with the wider society, community service and social good in their authentic assessment tasks (Nieminen 2022, 2024; Fawns and Nieminen 2023).

Exploring these types of challenging questions might prompt educators and employers to consider how to balance tensions between authentic replication of current practices and authentic engagement with the challenge of making social contexts more inclusive. Being abled, feeling a sense of belonging, or being acceptable for a professional role, is relative to cultures and contexts in which spaces, materials and systems are not always set up to be conducive to certain forms of 'disability' (Nieminen 2024), identity, or ways of being. Thus, rather than automatically making assessment inclusive, authenticity in assessment opens up possibilities to discuss messy, ethical and complex ideas in relation to the relevance of assessment to broader personal, social and professional contexts.

The role of design

As we have shown, an authentic assessment design does not automatically ensure relevance to personal, social, or professional contexts, prevent cheating, or create more inclusive opportunities. However, this does not mean discarding the idea of authenticity in assessment design. Authenticity, in all its pluralistic glory, is one of many important elements of assessment, to be woven in, judiciously, alongside other design elements (Ajjawi et al. 2023).

Authenticity in assessment is not a method or format, nor is it a fixed property of any given assessment. Instead, it can be viewed as a set of principles guiding design and implementation (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown 2014). These principles help assessors aim for authenticity *in*, rather than *of*, assessment (Ajjawi et al. 2023). Authenticity in assessment depends on how designs are negotiated and enacted by educators, students, and others (Ajjawi et al. 2020, 2023). Therefore, rather than viewing an assessment as wholly authentic or inauthentic, we can consider different elements on a spectrum of authenticity (Ajjawi et al. 2023), in relation to purposes, trade-offs, and learners' experiences. For example, even short-answer or multiple-choice questions can be seen as relatively authentic if they feature real-life scenarios (Smith 2022), require creativity and application to novel, contemporary situations (Stankov 2024), or are perceived as relevant by students.

Authentic assessments are actually constituted by other forms of assessment (e.g. workplace-based assessments, portfolios, group projects, studio-based assignments, problem-based learning), that are configured towards authentic tasks and contexts. Evidence of the impact of authentic assessment, therefore, requires a closer investigation of the particular design of these other forms, which principles of authenticity inform their design and implementation, and how they manifest in particular contexts. Assessment designers must also carefully consider what problem authenticity is supposed to address, and make design decisions accordingly. Trade-offs are inevitable (van der Vleuten and Schuwirth 2005), and are likely to involve multiple purposes (Boud 2000), and considerations of assessment security and integrity, inclusion, sustainable learning, fairness, reliability, standardisation, and more. Short-term credentialing of learning outcomes must be balanced with longer-term, learning-oriented, sustainable assessment (Boud 2000; Boud and Falchikov 2006) that helps students develop the capacity to continue learning, and to evaluate the quality of their work. Further trade-offs may be required due to contextual constraints, such as policies, grading systems, rubrics, and workloads, and the different priorities of different stakeholders, such as industry professionals or placement supervisors. Employers, for example, often, value autonomy, decision-making, and collaboration, which tend to conflict with the individualised and constrained nature of university assessments (Villarroel et al. 2018). Some inauthenticity is inevitable within the assessment, due to standardisation, grade-related performativity, and the need to scaffold learning. Acknowledging these tensions presents an opportunity to talk candidly with students about the mix of authenticity and inauthenticity, helping them understand the limitations of their education and their future learning needs (Molloy and Bearman 2019; Fawns et al. 2021). Such discussions may align with reasons for pursuing authentic assessment, like promoting academic integrity or inclusive environments.

Authenticity might also, usefully, be considered in relation to the broader educational ecology in which students learn. Without appropriate scaffolding, even well-designed assessments may not achieve their objectives (Willey and Gardner 2012). To support students in learning how to approach authentic tasks, rather than merely testing them (Boud and Falchikov 2006; Villarroel et al. 2018), authenticity in assessment must involve scaffolding and integrating assessments into broader educational practices, which may be intentionally inauthentic in relation to external contexts. Educators have a responsibility to help students find personal relevance in their assessments, and to navigate complex, uncertain and dialogic educational spaces (Esterhazy, Nerland, and Damşa 2019) that may involve a range of stakeholders.

Asking critical questions whilst considering authenticity in assessment design may help educators to design for meaningful learning experiences. Such questions might include:

- What is meant by authenticity in your context?
- What kinds of authenticity are desirable, to whom, when, and why?
- Is authenticity in assessment characterised by particular activities or outcomes, or by how students engage with tasks?
- To what extent should authenticity be prioritised over other assessment concerns?

Beyond the buzzword: the role of critical conversations

In the previous sections, we have illustrated how the label of authentic assessment can, sometimes, detract from, rather than enhance, important aspects of higher education. Thus, we return to our previous suggestion that ‘authentic assessment’ is already, on occasion, a *thought limiting cliché* (Lifton 1961). This might be a consequence of it being a ‘buzzword’ (McArthur 2023; Arnold and Croxford 2024) – a momentarily fashionable concept. Educational buzzwords are not entirely without value as they can motivate important conceptual shifts; they denote that there is something worth ‘buzzing’ about. The very notion of authentic assessment helps us think about the future needs of students and the design of tasks that allow deeper engagement in complex, meaningful tasks.

As a catalyst for reform, the ‘buzz’ around authentic assessment may lead to positive changes to assessment practice and policy. However, as we describe above, there is a risk of pushing false propositions, where educators allow the label of authentic assessment to stand in for complex design decisions, particularities of implementation, and critical conversations. Labelling an assessment as authentic does not, for example, address tensions between emergent, messy and non-standardised experiences, and the credentialing requirements of assessment.

Assuming a shared understanding and sense of direction with respect to authentic assessment is dangerous; it leaves important tensions hidden. Different stakeholders (institutions, students, educators, regulators, industry professionals, wider society) have different reasons for wanting authenticity, along with different preferences, beliefs, benchmarks, expectations and requirements. It is important to negotiate different understandings of the kinds of authenticity that are desirable and how they relate to the particular educational context at hand. Therefore, *collectively* seeking authenticity is challenging but, if managed through open communication, can inform assessment designs that manage multiple purposes and tensions of assessment. The questions at the end of the previous section might provide a useful starting point.

If authentic assessment is more than a buzzword but less than a panacea, what might it achieve? We propose that authenticity in assessment should open up, rather than close down, possibilities for critical dialogues. This could be helped by being more precise in our language and not allowing ‘authentic assessment’ to stand in for a wide range of considerations (Arnold and Croxford 2024). Discussing authentic restrictions (Dawson 2021, 136), for instance, can lead to significant conversations about distinctions between ‘cheating’ and professional activity, such as sourcing ideas, asking others’ opinions, and engaging in strategic behaviours that might transgress rules set by educators. Openly and respectfully debating assumptions that using AI technologies within assessment *either* invalidates learning *or* is inherently authentic, might lead to understanding the limitations of authenticity in assessment in relation to preparing graduates for somewhat unknown futures (Fawns et al. 2021). Assessment that grapples with the complex tensions between collaboration (needed for professional environments) and cheating (important to institutional mandates, assurance of learning, assessment validity and integrity), might produce less straightforward design and implementation but richer and more honest and critical conversations about what it means to learn to contribute to contemporary society. Other conversations might concern equity and inclusion (Dawson 2022), how authentic practice might look different for different people, or how certain forms of authenticity may be unattainable for some students. For example, authentic practices in medical education, like long clinical shifts or unpaid placements, could be seen as ableist or elitist. Authentic industry collaborators in assessments may hold inequitable beliefs reflected in their feedback, such as when teachers believe educators should not have disabilities (Dollinger, Nieminen, and Finneran 2024).

Perhaps authenticity should be negotiated, experienced, interrogated, and shared, not imposed on students. As Forsyth and Evans (2019) ask: whose authenticity is valued in assessment? Without addressing broader systemic issues in education—such as underfunding, class size, and access to resources—designing authenticity into assessments is unlikely to produce more

inclusive outcomes. These types of challenging discussions can promote rich learning experiences, even if they do not present neat solutions to complex educational challenges. By participating in authentic assessment that is accompanied by careful yet candid conversation and support, students might gain more authentic knowledge about themselves as future professionals and more agency to develop their own understanding of their strengths, weaknesses and career narratives (Dollinger, Nieminen, and Finneran 2024; Nieminen, Moriña, and Biagiotti 2024).

Conclusions

The concept of authenticity has helped the education sector to broaden out forms of assessment, and to consider the personal, professional and social relevance of assessment tasks. More problematically, the label 'authentic assessment' is sometimes viewed as a panacea for multifaceted educational challenges. In this article, we have examined three educational challenges for which authentic assessment has been proposed as a solution: preparing graduates for the future, cheating, and inclusion. We have argued that imagining authentic assessment as a cure for particular educational challenges may be getting in the way of meaningfully interrogating those challenges and relating them to problems of assessment.

We suggest that authenticity be regarded as a set of aspirational principles, that can inform the design and implementation of assessment, but that must also be set alongside, and traded off against, constraints and alternative ambitions. While authenticity in assessment can promote relevance, engagement and application to important contexts, principles of authenticity require integration into a broader pedagogical framework, involving multiple purposes and forms of scaffolding, support, opportunities for student agency, and sustainable learning. We might also be wary of too much focus on replicating existing work practices at the expense of other ideas of authenticity (Ajjawi et al. 2023; McArthur 2023). There are interesting assessment design possibilities to explore here, such as promoting trusting relations as part of aspirations towards authenticity, in order to promote academic integrity. Such aspirations require care, consideration of trade-offs, and a focus on cultures and structures of targeted support that can help students succeed with integrity. Finally, we suggest that authentic assessment can also promote inclusion, but that this is likely to involve effortful, consultative design and implementation, and, quite possibly, the imposition of arguably inauthentic structures and parameters. Without such care, approaches to authentic assessment might inadvertently perpetuate barriers and forms of inequity.

Thoughtful and judicious consideration of authenticity in assessment can allow educators to wrestle with real problems of higher education. This is not a solo act, but a collective one. Therefore, we suggest that authenticity in assessment can be a catalyst for challenging, critical conversations and activities that expose and interrogate, rather than gloss over, important tensions in education.

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