

Creating Authentic and Engaging Assignments in Your Online Course

Lisa Bathe

Adjunct Instructor

Illinois Online Network

University of Illinois

"Why do I need to learn this?" and "When will I ever use this?" have been age old student questions. Challenging students with an authentic assignment provides them an answer and by showing them relevance helps engage them in the material. In many cases, a shift is all that is necessary to provide these types of assignments. For example, rather than have students write a persuasive paper, challenge them to write an editorial and get it published. When students are challenged and asked to go beyond the normal assignments, it creates a spark and most students will rise to the occasion.

The question for the instructor now becomes *how do I ensure that the assignment I create is authentic?* Grant Wiggins (1998) in his book, "Educative Assessment" proposes the following 6 criteria:

- 1) *It's realistic.* The task or tasks replicate the ways in which a person's knowledge and abilities are "tested" in real-world situations.
- 2) *Requires judgment and innovation.* The student has to use knowledge and skills wisely and effectively to solve unstructured problems, such as when a plan must be designed, and the solution involves more than following a set routine or procedure or plugging in knowledge.
- 3) *Asks the students to "do" the subject.* Instead of reciting, restating, or replicating through demonstration what he or she was taught or what is already known, the student has to carry out exploration and work within the discipline or science, history, or any other subject.
- 4) *Replicates or simulates the contexts in which adults are "tested" in the workplace, in civic life, and in personal life.* Contexts involve specific situations that have particular constraints, purposes, and audiences. Typical school tests are contextless. Students need to experience what it is like to do tasks in workplace and other real-life contexts, which tend to be messy and murky. In other words, genuine tasks require good judgment. Authentic tasks undo the ultimately harmful secrecy, silence, and absence of resources and feedback that mark excessive school testing.
- 5) *Assesses the student's ability to efficiently and effectively use a repertoire of knowledge and skill to negotiate a complex task.* Most conventional test items are isolated elements of performance – similar to sideline drills in athletics rather than to the integrated use of

skills that a game requires. Good judgment is required here, too. Although there is, of course, a place for drill tests, performance is always more than the sum of the drills.

- 6) *Allows appropriate opportunities to rehearse, practice, consult resources, and get feedback on and refine performances and products.* Although there is a role for the conventional "secure" test that keeps questions secret and keeps resource materials from students until during the test, that test must coexist with educative assessment if students are to improve performance; if we are to focus their learning, through cycles of performance-feedback-revision-performance, on the production of known high-quality products and standards; and if we are to help them learn to use information, resources, and notes to effectively perform in context (p. 22-24)

Here's an example of a transformation from a U.S. Labor History course:

Previous discussion question during the last week of class:

What do you think is the biggest challenge facing labor unions today?

Respond to 2 of your classmates' responses to other questions in 1 to 2 paragraphs building on and addressing their comments

The authentic version: For your initial post, respond to the following scenario: You have just been asked to run for President of your union. You now need to develop your agenda. What issues would be your top priorities and why? What factors influenced your decision? Are there things that could happen in the future that would affect your priorities?

In your responses to your classmates, consider the following questions as a basis for your reply: Would you vote for them? Why or why not? If your priorities were different, how did you determine them? Is there anything you would change now about your own post? Does the type of union affect the priorities? After exploring the future of labor, how does this impact you as a worker? Does this make you want to become more involved with a union? What other actions would you consider (i.e. contacting your representatives, etc.)?

As always, wording can be everything in terms of student responses. The first version of the transformation read: You have just been elected President of your union. You now need to develop your agenda. What would be your top priorities and why? What factors influenced your decision? Are there things that could happen in the future that would affect your priorities? To my surprise, what I got in response was very generic, "take care of old business" type responses without them covering what they felt were the issues facing unions today. Reworking it to be their election platform and including the word "issues" helps to further direct students towards the type of response you are looking for them to submit.

Wiggins (p. 32) also cautions that an authentic task does not necessarily translate into a reliable or valid assessment. He provides a two question checklist:

1. Could the student do well at the task for reasons that have little to do with the desired understanding or skill being assessed?
2. Could the student do poorly at the task for reasons that have little to do with the desired understanding or skill?

If either if these questions are answered "yes" then the task is not a good measure of that skill.

It may not be possible to always provide students with this type of activity, they have to learn the basics first, but providing authentic assignments throughout the course can assist them in seeing the relevance of all the material and how it fits into the bigger picture. Once they see this relevance, they can become more engaged in the material and the class. It also assists them in developing other skills necessary in today's workplace such as critical thinking and decision making that transcends the material. All of this assists the students in becoming engaged with a living subject.

References:

Wiggins, G. (1998). *Educative assessment; Designing assessments to inform and improve student performance*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.

Resources for Problem-Based Learning:

<http://www.imsa.edu/programs/pbln/>

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy Problem-Based Learning Network 2005

<http://www.pbli.org/core.htm>

Problem Based Learning Initiative

<http://www.indiana.edu/~legobots/q515/pbl.html>

Nowak, J. and Plucker, J. "Student Assessment in Problem-Based Learning" revised June, 1999. Indiana University

<http://www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/menuitem.d8ed71bf0cbe37fbbfb3ffdb62108a0c/>

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development 2006

<http://www.pbl.uci.edu/whatispbl.html>

Gallow, Dr. De. "What is Problem-Based Learning?" University of California, Irvine

<http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/pbl/info.html>

Maricopa Center for Learning and Instruction 2001

<http://pblmm.k12.ca.us/>

The Challenge 2000 Project-Based Learning & Multimedia 1999