

Authentic Assessment in Higher Education: Applying a Habermasian Framework

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Abstract: The pursuit of authentic assessment has challenged educators to redesign and reformulate assessment and evaluation to better meet the needs of digital-era learners. Its primary goal has been to bring more accurate representations of “real world” situations and characteristics to education through assessment. However, these moves toward authentic assessment have too often limited notions of authenticity to an *external* real world, which itself is often limited to the world of work. This restricted view of authenticity in assessment risks neglecting key aspects of students’ ontological and epistemological subjectivity, and their ever-changing, evolving and *authentic* notions of self. Authentic assessment requires a holistic approach that underscores the student as an individual within a society. This means we must strike a balance between social expectations and individual autonomy because authentic assessment that aims to replicate the world of work risks neglecting student agency, self-determination and the desire to achieve subjective authenticity. This paper’s purpose is to critically interrogate authentic assessment and analyse theoretical frameworks upon which higher education can build and implement balanced and holistic approaches to authenticity in assessment. Resting on Jurgen Habermas’ *Knowledge Constitutive Interests*, the authors argue for a more balanced approach to authentic assessment that incorporates human drives for objectified knowledge, communicative rationality, and emancipatory learning. After establishing the relevance of Habermas’ theoretical framework to authentic assessment, this paper examines the value of self, peer and negotiated assessment and the potential of digital tools to aid these processes.

Keywords: authentic assessment, higher education, Habermas, adult education

1. Introduction

Adult and higher education have long focused on the goals of perspective transformation, lifelong learning and the development of identity (Knud, 2014; Mezirow, 1981; Mezirow, 2000). Central to these goals are the tasks of critical thinking, critical self-reflection, and collaboration. It is important to build assessments around these skills, but it is difficult to implement widespread and reliable criteria for them (Davis, 2013). However, if reliability is disproportionately emphasised over validity, testing and assessment become less valuable ends that dictate educational means (Boud et al., 1999; Davis, 2013, p.227; Madaus & O’Dwyer, 1999; Wiggins, 1989). This is particularly relevant to online learning, which often falls into top-down modes of content delivery (Tilak & Glassman, 2020) not conducive to the aforementioned emancipatory goals of adult and higher education. While modes of authentic assessment attempt to address these problems, there are often gaps in defining or determining what authenticity is. Drawing on Habermas’ (1971) knowledge constitutive interests (KCI), this paper argues that holistic, ontologically and epistemologically grounded approaches are required to develop authentic forms of assessment and help restore a balance between reliability and validity in assessment. It is through this theoretical lens that online tools for self, peer and negotiated assessment are evaluated.

2. Overview of assessment: Historically problematic

It is important to place authentic assessment in its historical context as, in part, a reaction to the shortcomings of assessment in the modern period. Modern period assessment (from 1900 to the 1980s) was characterised by efficient, cost-effective means of testing and examination that reliably reproduce results, a common example being the multiple-choice test (Madaus & O’Dwyer, 1999, p.693). Wiggins (1989, p.703) emphasised several key problems with modes of assessment geared toward efficiency, objectivity and reliability. He argued that tests are not designed in students’ interests as they are geared too much toward widespread distribution, whose necessary focus then is on reliability, which is to the detriment of the education process itself. This detrimental effect on the practice of education is referred to as a “backwash” (Boud et al., 1999, p.418; Davis, 2013, p.227; Madaus & O’Dwyer, 1999, p.689), where an overemphasis on a particular approach to testing or assessment too strongly influences how a curriculum, course or class is designed or implemented, and even how a teacher behaves. This is where the tension between reliability and validity in test and assessment design is most visible (Davis, 2013; Wiggins, 1989), and where the former overrides the latter. Wiggins (1989) argued that this stems from “political, structural, and economic” circumstances such as time and financial constraints (p.704). To counter this, he argued for a student-centred approach to assessment that prioritises authenticity.

3. Defining authentic assessment

Wiggins (1989) outlined his concept of authentic assessment as both replicating “the challenges and standards of performance that typically face writers” and as “responsive to individual students and school contexts” (p.704). This, he claimed, “is most accurate and equitable when it entails human judgments and dialogue” (p.704). He goes on to describe four key elements of authentic assessment: structure and logistics, intellectual design features, standards of grading and scoring, and fairness and equity (Wiggins, 1989, p.711). These elements involve a balance between reliability and validity, real audiences, multiple judges, complex assessment criteria, real-life context, represented social and cultural standards, and an emphasis on holistic, open-ended assessments and tasks.

4. Theoretical framework: A gap in authentic assessment

While the emphasis on authentic assessment that emerged in the late 1980s signals a shift away from an overreliance on reliable and repeatable methods of assessment, theoretical issues with authentic assessment remain. As defined and outlined by Wiggins (1989; 1990), authentic assessment draws attention to and addresses problems with tests that over-prioritize reliability and objectivity, yet this still fails to address deeper interests of students. These interests can be revealed through ontological and epistemological analyses of individuals as social and critical beings.

Vu and Dall’Alba (2014, p.779) emphasised the gap between authentic assessment and ontology, stating that in requiring a closeness to real-life contexts or tasks, authentic assessment forgoes focusing on a student’s sense of self. This sense of self is derived from Heidegger’s concept of being, which concerns authenticity and inauthenticity. Authenticity involves individuals becoming more directly aware and responsible for themselves, whereas inauthenticity involves the uncritical replication of group or social behaviour (Vu & Dall’Alba, 2014, p.781). A recalibration of the ontology of authentic assessment is thus required, and Vu and Dall’Alba’s (2014) argument is that assessment should help students achieve authenticity by enabling critical self-reflection and critical reflection on their environment, perceptions, and preconceptions. Ultimately, students must be aware of how to replicate social behaviour, but they must also be able to respond to it critically. Arguably, neither the modern-era forms of assessment (e.g. multiple choice tests) nor Wiggins’ authentic assessment adequately facilitates this critical reflection.

Vu and Dall’Alba (2014) do not offer specific examples of what a Heideggerian approach to authentic assessment would entail, instead opting to provide a theoretical critique, which itself is problematic. McArthur (2022) argued that viewing authenticity through Heidegger focuses too much on the individual, thus neglecting the importance of the relationship between the individual and society. Instead, she has offered a critical stance that has as its central notion the inter-relationship between society and individual subjects as based on both individual autonomy and cooperation. This realignment of philosophical grounding brings into focus the importance of the individual in society and argues for three central tenets (McArthur, 2022, p.8-11):

- 1. Moving FROM real world/world of work TO society
- 2. FROM task performance TO why we value the task
- 3. FROM the status-quo of real-world/world of work TO transforming society

These points signify a critical engagement with transformative ends that aim to satisfy the drive towards individual autonomy and social cooperation, objectives a Heideggerian approach cannot achieve. Nevertheless, both a Heideggerian and critical approach to authenticity can help educators realign perceptions of, and move toward deeper notions of, authenticity.

5. Habermas’ knowledge constitutive interests

Vu and Dall’Alba’s (2014) ontological conceptualization of authentic assessment considers the importance of students’ sense of being, and McArthur’s (2022) theoretical critique injects a vital social component. Considering both publications’ emphases on individual autonomy, and the latter’s incorporation of engagement in social transformation, pertinent theoretical parallels are evident in Habermas’ (1971) knowledge constitutive interests (KCI). Further to this, McArthur’s criticism of Heidegger’s notion of authenticity is derived from the very critical theory upon which Habermas developed his theory of KCIs. It is through Habermas’ theoretical framework that we can start to understand how to develop authentic assessment further and assess appropriate tasks to help students achieve autonomy in and with their societies.

Within the context of higher education, the aforementioned overemphasis on reliability and reproducibility with its resulting “backwash” is critically problematic and arguably a result of narrow definitions of authenticity and authentic assessment. This is particularly so considering Habermas’ (1971) KCIs: technical interests, communicative interests, and emancipatory interests. Interest, for Habermas (1971), refers to “the basic orientations rooted in specific fundamental conditions of the possible reproduction and self-constitution of the human species, namely for work and interaction” (p.196). Roderick (1985) elucidates these “knowledge-guiding” constitutive interests as innate, stating Habermas’ assertion that their conceptual basis arises from humans being “tool-making and language-using animals” (p.52). Therefore, as Roderick (1985) describes, these knowledge interests are borne out of the necessity to control our natural surroundings (technical interests) and to communicate through language or symbols (communicative interests). However, for humans to truly understand technical and communicative interests, a third interest that comes from the ability to act rationally is needed. This is the emancipatory knowledge interest, which involves self-reflection, self-determination, and the “creation of knowledge which furthers autonomy and responsibility” (Roderick, 1985, p.52). Each of these interests is essential to human social existence, and therefore ought to be represented in education (Boud & Brew, 1995; Denton, 2011; Hammond, 2015; Kruszelnicki, 2020). This interest has parallels in Freire’s (2018) critical pedagogy, whose focus is on a democratic form of education that addresses social inequalities (Vassalo, 2013), and in Mezirow’s (1981; 2000) transformative learning theory.

While each of these knowledge interests is vital and ought to be represented in higher education (Hammond, 2015; Kruszelnicki, 2020), it is the emancipatory interest that most directly concerns the authenticity of being. The emancipatory interest directly addresses the innate need to critically reflect on one’s thinking, circumstances and environment, and it involves a focus on adult independence and responsibility, or *Mündigkeit* (maturity) (Habermas, 1971, p.197-198).

6. Making assessment more authentic

An overemphasis on reliability and reproducibility imposes instrumental rationality on education and assessment that hinders emancipatory knowledge interests through its “backwash” effect. This reduces the focus on critical self-reflection and critical engagement with one’s surroundings; necessary parts of authentic being, learning, and therefore assessment. Although there is consistent institutional and economic pressure that pushes more generalizable assessment and testing onto students and faculty (Madaus & O’Dwyer, 1999; Wiggins, 1989), several approaches to assessment have demonstrated some efficacy in achieving more balanced and therefore authentic modes of assessment.

6.1 Self-Assessment

Boud and Brew (1995) argued for a Habermasian approach to assessment and emphasised that self-assessment can provide opportunities for students to satisfy each of Habermas’ knowledge interests. For Boud and Brew, technical interests are evident when students strive to exercise objective control of grading criteria, which they use to measure and develop responses, while communicative interests are seen in the discussion of assessment criteria and feedback. Emancipatory interests are evident when students step back and critically reflect on their learning in response to assessment feedback and grades. Thus, self-assessment has the potential to satisfy each KCI.

6.2 Peer assessment

A further possible extension of Boud and Brew’s (1995) typology for self-assessment can be seen in peer assessment (Gielen et al., 2011), which bears many similarities to self-assessment (Panadero et al., 2016). Peer assessment is a useful tool for engagement in the learning process, which helps moderate instrumental ends of assessment while giving students the chance to own and interrogate the learning process, thus encouraging greater learner responsibility (Gielen et al., 2011, p. 731). Utilising peer assessment also encourages interactions that lead to co-regulation and collaborative learning (Panadero et al., 2016).

While peer assessment has demonstrated efficacy in improving critical self-awareness (Panadero et al., 2016), there are challenges in implementing it. Boud et al. (1999, p.421) stated that formal peer assessment can often be counterproductive to student cooperation, particularly in competitive environments where students are ranked by grade, or are summative, with students acting as replacement assessors whose chief goal is to expedite grading (Boud, 2000, p.157). These tensions are echoed by Zhou et al. (2021), who emphasise the

social-affective impacts of peer assessment, stating that students often believe respect is not reciprocal. Price et al. (2011) highlight concerns with short-termism in peer assessment and feedback being viewed as a product rather than part of an ongoing dialogue constituting a developing relationship. Teachers and students alike see self and peer assessment less as promoting critical self-reflection or feedback – key goals for self-regulated and lifelong learning – and more as a way of controlling and maintaining student involvement (Willey & Gardner, 2010).

Boud et al. (1999), however, propose several potential solutions, including a combination of peer feedback and self-assessment, which would have one key purpose: to help enable critical cooperation by reducing implicit or explicit competition. Emphasising feedback over assessment, Zhu and Carless (2018) highlighted its increasing relevance and importance to academic writing in higher education. Building on research that has argued for the efficacy of peer feedback as a tool for boosting inner feedback processes (Nicol et al., 2014), Zhu and Carless' (2018) qualitative study involving observation of feedback within classes, the collection of reflective journals, and interviews with individuals and focus groups found that dialogue is beneficial to both the receiver and provider of feedback. However, it is the provider who gains more from the process as it forces them to spend more time critically reflecting on assessment criteria, thus enabling deeper learning. Another key element of feedback exchange for Zhu and Carless (2018) was that oral discussions of feedback engaged students in clarification and negotiation processes that were less likely to happen through written communication.

For Habermas (1971, p.199-198), the emancipatory human interest involves a drive toward autonomy and responsibility for oneself. Yuan and Kim (2018) identified supporting the desire for autonomy as a key area of concern in peer assessment in online spaces. Using Su and Reeve's (2011) autonomy-supportive strategies - providing choices, demonstrating rationales for peer assessment, utilising non-controlling language, and recognizing students' negative feelings - they developed a peer assessment website for students to use. For the experimental group, the website explained the importance of peer assessment, provided a variety of sources explaining different approaches to peer assessment, afforded students opportunities via prompts to express frustrations with the peer assessment process, and withdrew any instructions that commanded students to act. Yuan and Kim (2018) did not find a significant difference in engagement or feelings of autonomy between the experimental and control group. This, they posited, was partly due to the unintended autonomy granted to the control group. Despite this, the focus on autonomy support can be viewed as a central element of encouraging peer assessment, and the use of technology as a peer assessment tool offers an alternative to face-to-face interactions.

Both communicative and emancipatory knowledge interests are evident in the development of student knowledge of writing through peer feedback processes using tools such as peerScholar (Paré & Joordens, 2008). The peerScholar system is a web-based tool for peer assessment, allowing students to engage in, explore, expand on and assess work without being overly reliant on an expert (Joordens et al., 2009, p.12). PeerScholar guides students through three stages: the reading and writing phase, the marking phase, and the results and feedback phase (Paré & Joordens, 2008). Paré and Joordens (2008) found that the mean grades given by students through peerScholar differed very slightly from those given by expert markers (in this case, graduate students), which indicates an encouraging level of fairness and consistency also seen in traditional classroom-based peer assessment.

Another tool that enables peer to peer assessment and feedback is Kritik. Kritik aims to help students achieve metacognition, self-reflection, and lifelong learning through direct peer-to-peer communication for feedback and assessment (*How Peer Assessment Develops the Higher-Order Thinking Skills Students Need Today*, no date). Although relatively new to online education, and therefore in need of further scrutiny, Kritik's own analysis purports its ability to provide actionable, valid, timely feedback with the opportunity to engage in dialogue with an assessor. Each of these aspects is difficult to achieve through unidirectional, teacher-disseminated feedback.

6.3 Negotiated assessment

In relation to the dialogic merits of peer feedback, negotiated assessment can also be used to minimise the tension inherent in peer assessment. Negotiated assessment involves the discussion of, and agreement on, assessment processes with regards to learning goals and outcomes (Boud et al., 1999). A benefit of negotiated assessment is that it provides an opportunity for all parties, peers and teachers, to discuss assessment. Zhu and Carless (2018) emphasise the importance of teacher scaffolding for peer feedback, and negotiated assessment

may also provide opportunities for teachers to clarify key concepts of evaluation, ensure the inclusion of non-negotiable assessment criteria, and help maintain consistency across different groups (Boud et al., 1999).

Beyond the practical benefits of negotiated assessment, Gosling (2000) argues that negotiated assessment has the potential to help students overcome the pathologies of distorted communication in higher education classrooms. Using Habermas' theories of communicative action and KCIs as frameworks, Gosling's (2000) action research implemented negotiated assessment in two graduate-level courses. While students initially found the process ambiguous and unnerving, they ultimately saw the benefit of engaging in negotiated assessment, emphasising the satisfying and rewarding nature of taking control of one's learning. Supporting the framework proposed for negotiated assessment by Gosling (2000), Morrison (2015) extends further the importance of KCIs and adopts Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action as a means to reduce domineering technicism and bureaucratization. Communicative action emphasises discursive action, critical interrogation of ideology, and the scrutinization of educational practices such as assessment and evaluation, all of which are possible in self, peer and negotiated assessment.

7. Discussion

Often, critical pedagogy and education theories offer an almost diametric opposition to prevailing neoliberal economic ideologies. However, a theoretical approach such as Habermas' (1971) KCIs offers a more pragmatic balance for adult education (Hammond, 2015; Kruszelnicki, 2020) and therefore notions of authentic assessment. This means instrumental learning can take place alongside communicative and emancipatory learning. These should all be nurtured in adult education, with institutions, curricula, and teachers incorporating a balance of tasks and assessments that, in their design and implementation, involve consideration of each interest. However, assessment has often neglected communicative and emancipatory knowledge interests. It is therefore important to develop holistic approaches to assessment that incorporate these knowledge interests that are central to the goals of self-realisation and social engagement adult education purports to facilitate. The approaches considered here – self, peer and negotiated assessment – have the theoretical potential to facilitate a balance between the three knowledge constitutive interests (Boud & Brew, 1995). This potential has been supported by Zhu and Carless' (2018) study, which emphasises the positive role dialogue can play in supporting deeper learning and critical self-awareness, both of which are key aspects of communicative and emancipatory learning. Gosling's (2000) study on negotiated assessment also highlights the emancipatory learning benefits of open dialogue in educational settings.

Self-assessment and peer assessment can both be justified through a Habermasian typology (Boud & Brew, 1995; Gielen et al., 2011), and have both demonstrated efficacy in promoting self-regulated learning and self-efficacy among students (Panadero et al., 2016; 2017). Further to this, peer assessment can boost self and co-regulation qualities (Panadero et al., 2016). Educational frameworks for online communities require various digital tools. The importance of discussion forum use and design is also highlighted by Garrison (2022) and Scardamalia and Bereiter (2008). However, there are concerns about the tendency for LMSs to act as an information repository rather than an environment for critical learning (Boyd, 2016), which echoes Freire's (2018, p.72) stance against the banking concept of education, and Tilak and Glassman's (2020) concerns of a top-down system of information distribution. A more practical tool for self, peer and negotiated assessment is Knowledge Forum (WebKF) (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2008). Unlike traditional discussion forums utilized by many Learning Management Systems, WebKF appears as a manipulable mindmap in its design, which helps support collaborative learning as students can design the layouts of their discussions and interactions (Hong & Scardamalia, 2014). This gives students the chance to take control of their collaborative learning in a much more tangible way.

Several forms of educational technology have demonstrated efficacy in improving key aspects of critical learning such as autonomy, self-reliance, self-efficacy, self-regulation, co-regulation and collaboration. The use of autonomy-supportive strategies (Su & Reeve, 2011; Yuan & Kim, 2018), scaffolding in web tools (Paré & Joordans, 2009; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2008) and peer-to-peer feedback and assessment tools such as Kritik (*How Peer Assessment Develops the Higher-Order Thinking Skills Students Need Today*, no date) offer realistic alternatives to top-down information distribution. While the dialogic and collaborative approaches of self, peer and negotiated assessment demonstrate theoretical and practical promise, there are other key considerations to take into account. Facilitating student cooperation is complex, and while some social-affective issues (Zhou et al., 2021) and tensions of high-stakes assessment have been considered (Boud et al., 1999), this paper is

chiefly concerned with supporting a theoretical framework for authenticity and authentic assessment. Organisational support, student buy-in and teacher reluctance are considerations for future research on implementing authentic assessment.

A common thread in self and peer assessment is the emphasis on student self-regulation and self-efficacy. These are all common goals in student-centred learning which, while preferable to teacher-centred learning, offers up new challenges for critical theories of education.

Emphases on self-regulated learning often point towards the notion that students should become independent, autonomous, mature lifelong learners. However, criticisms of self-regulated learning warn of ethical complexities in pushing students to self-regulate in an academic setting (Diaz-Diaz, 2022; Vassalo, 2013; 2015). The risks Diaz-Diaz (2022) and Vassalo (2013; 2015) warn of are inherent in student-centred learning that is grounded in a neoliberal economic framework. These concerns have been echoed in relation to educational institutions' adoption and adaptation to digital technologies under neoliberal economic imperatives both pre-covid pandemic (Boyd; 2016, Kruszelnicki, 2020; Regmi, 2017) and since the covid pandemic began (Schwartzman, 2020). These criticisms and concerns have parallels with authentic assessment, which too often blinkers educators' perspectives, incorporating an atomizing and overly-individualistic emphasis on student needs (McArthur, 2022). Incorporating a critical approach a la Habermas, which is oriented towards autonomy both in and with communities, can help provide a broader notion of authenticity in education and assessment

8. Conclusion

The initial conception of authentic assessment addressed the imbalance in objectively applied, repeatable mass testing and assessment and returned assessment's focus to student needs. However, notions of authenticity are too often restricted to ideas of the "real world" as the world of work. As educators begin to incorporate more digital tools, and online learning continues to grow, it is imperative that education, curriculum, and assessment design do not continue to adopt narrow conceptions of authenticity. Developing assessment necessitates the consideration of more complex views of authenticity, including an analysis of ontological (Vu & Dall'Alba, 2014) and epistemological (Boud & Brew, 1995; Habermas, 1971) concerns. Habermas' (1971) knowledge constitutive interests offer a pragmatic lens through which practitioners of higher education can assess methods of assessment design and the potential of digital tools to enable more authentic forms of assessment.

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