

Introducing authentic assessments in online teaching

~ Dr Priyamvada Agarwal



It has often been pointed out that the real problem in education and examinations is that they do not test learners' intelligence but their memory. With online teaching, this problem has intensified one level up. With the sudden shift to online teaching and learning due to the pandemic, teachers and students have been struggling for the last one year to find the balance to establish a healthy teaching-learning scenario. While teachers have bravely stepped up to the task, what has been constantly bothering them is the authenticity in assessments. This article attempts to focus on what may be kept in mind while designing assessments for online teaching so that authentic results may be fetched.

Why is it important to talk about authentic assessments in online teaching?

Once fully into the online teaching mode, it did not take teachers and educators to realize that what worked well in face-to-face teaching in terms of traditional forms of assessment – tests, quizzes, etc., did not work well in the online mode. Thus, the methodology to measure what a learner knows had to be changed, and quickly, to avoid facing such queries:

- Is the student who has enrolled for a course the same as the test taker?

- How can the school, parents, or teacher be sure that the students have really understood what was taught to them and can apply that knowledge or skill in real life?
- Are students plagiarizing?



Things to keep in mind while designing assessments

1. **Self-reflection:** As the learning process has changed drastically, the assessment pattern too must change keeping pace with it. Self-reflection is a very powerful tool to get a realistic idea about what the students have been able to acquire. For example, at the end of a week's class, ask students to reflect on and answer to exit ticket questions like:
 - a. What three things did I learn in this lesson?
 - b. What is that one thing I am still not sure of?
 - c. What one thing surprised me?
 - d. What is that one thing I would like to explore more?

Stephen Brookfield in his *Critical Incident Questionnaire* (CIQ) dwells upon such self-reflexive questions that teachers can use to initiate a self-assessment exercise in class. Here are a few examples:

- i. At what moment in class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
- ii. At what moment in class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
- iii. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most affirming and helpful?
- iv. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
- v. What about the class this week that surprised you the most? (This could be about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that concerns you.)

2. **Power of rubrics:** Rubrics help both teachers as well as the learner.

While they provide students with a good idea of what is expected of them while solving a question or problem, or what is to be kept in mind while doing their tasks, rubrics help teachers to provide meaningful feedback to learners. In other words, they are a good way to



bring clarity in expectations regarding students' performances and its use will take away the guesswork in grading. Rubrics assist in bringing an objective element even in subjective assessments, such as responses to comprehension questions. It allows both teacher and student to know how well the learner has engaged with the course material. Thus, there will be objectivity in grading, which will increase the satisfaction levels of all stakeholders. Student will instantly become aware of the areas in which they need to improve their performances, and accordingly teachers can plan their remedials.

Here is a sample grading rubric template which teachers can use as a blueprint. The criteria and their descriptors can be modified as per the task.

Name of the activity				
Name of the criteria	0 Non performance	1 Basic	2 Good	3 Excellent
Include here the points to grade the scale:				

- Design of assessments that move beyond rote memorization:** Tests and quizzes can be good to a certain extent in online teaching, but they may not be the main pie in the assessments. If quizzes are to be done, then use websites like [Quizziz](#) which allow randomisation of questions. Tasks that move beyond rote memorisation should be included in the course, like collaborative activities, projects, discussions, group problem-solving activities, etc. These can be successfully integrated into online teaching. The idea should be to design tasks which will call for application of knowledge. Questions based on higher order thinking skills would therefore be more suitable to assess how much a student has understood a concept. It is best to assess collaborative activities collectively – self and peer assessments are very effective in such cases. However, incorporating group activities in online teaching does not mean that individual tests and quizzes cannot be used. The latter can be used to assess individual acquisition of skills.
- Short assessments:** Although the possibility of a student getting help to complete an assessment is quite high in an online teaching-learning-assessment scenario, it is unlikely that they will be able to do that frequently or throughout the course. Thus, it is practical and useful to design small and frequent assessments which are related to real-life situations. For example, a writing prompt may be given on a student's

own life experience. This will reduce chances of plagiarism or taking content off the internet considerably. At the same time, ask students to even submit the page where they brainstormed ideas or how they created outlines. This will help to chart the stages of progress and validate the authenticity of a work. The knowledge that they will also have to submit their “work-in-progress” or brainstorming sheet will act as a deterrent for students to indulge in malpractice and ensure that they put in the required effort to submit a genuine work.



Conclusion

Who would disagree to the fact that assessment has to change if we have to teach online? Designing assessments which are 100 per cent authentic is an art that one needs to master, and it does not come about easily. However, it is worth the effort. After all, what is at stake is students' lives. Change does not mean that the complete wheel has to be reinvented because then the possibility of resistance and reluctance can be high. It is just the small changes – a little tweaking here and there – that will make all the difference. If you are willing to try and incorporate application-oriented tasks in online teaching to assess students, take a look at an example in the lesson plan.

Dr Priyamvada Agarwal, founder of TakeAnEdge, is an experienced ELT specialist. Her passion includes teaching, training teachers, and material development. She has worked with organisations like NCERT, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Delhi University, Times of India, etc. Currently, she teaches at Ambedkar University, New Delhi.

Lesson Plan: Introducing authentic assessments in online teaching

~ Dr Priyamvada Agarwal

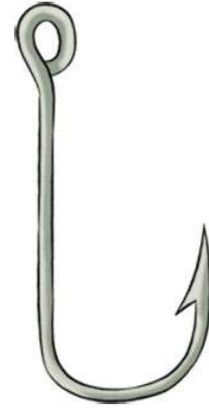
It is no doubt that just as teachers and educators have modified their teaching-learning setup and approach with the changed circumstances, assessment practices also need to evolve. Below are a few tried and tested techniques in authentic assessments in online teaching. The ideas shared can be used in English language classes. A teacher's constant concern is students lifting things off the net and passing it off as their own work. Not only does it impact the assessment but also is a serious ethical concern that needs to be explained to them. While it is easy to copy essays/articles/writing assignments from the Internet, here are some ideas that addresses this concern and will make it difficult for students to indulge in plagiarism. The design of the activity will be such that it will be possible only for the student to attempt the tasks. The answers to these kinds of questions will also be an authentic indicator of how much a student has acquired and applied the new knowledge. These tasks are designed in such a way that the power of annotation may be used in writing tasks also. According to Matthew Johnson, "The act of annotation is the very definition of metacognition and reflection, both of which have been shown to significantly improve student learning outcomes. I also like that asking students to explain their writing recognizes them as purposeful writers making meaningful decisions, which is very different from how student writers are often approached."¹

Teachers may choose from the following activities as per students' level:

1. Assign a topic to write a paragraph. The second part of the question should be to tag each part of a paragraph. What tagging a student is expected to do will depend on what a teacher has taught in the class. For example, ask them to tag the following things in their paragraph:
 - i. *Topic sentence*: Parts of the topic sentence, that is, the topic and the controlling idea.
 - ii. *Supporting sentences*: What strategy has been used to develop the supporting sentences? Are examples, definitions, explanation, comparison, etc. used to do the same or a combination of any of them?
 - iii. *Concluding Sentence*

¹ Johnson M. Matthew. "Annotated by the Author: Why Having Students Annotate Their Own Writing Is My New Favorite Writing Instruction Tool" *MatthewMJohnson.com* matthewmjohanson.com/2021/02/12/annotated-by-the-author-why-having-students-annotate-their-own-writing-is-my-new-favorite-writing-instruction-tool/ Date of publication :February 12, 2021. Date of access: May 11, 2021

2. Divide the marking scheme: If students are assigned to write an essay, then 50% marks can be allotted for content and the remaining 50% for tagging. For example, ask students to tag the following parts in their essays:
 - i. The *Introduction*, *Body Paragraphs*, and the *Conclusion*.
 - ii. In the *Introduction*, the hook statement, background information, and the thesis statement. If it has to be made a little more intensive, specify in the question the technique that should be used to make the hook statement. For example: data, quotation, question, or anecdote. Or ask the students to tag the technique that they have used, if you do not want to limit the choice of students by specifying what should be used.
 - iii. In *Conclusion*, ask them to tag each part of the paragraph as 'X', 'Y' and 'Z' where 'X' explains the thesis statement in different words, 'Y' for why the reader should care, and 'Z' for creating the zing in the reader with a final thought.
 - iv. In case, for example, if the assessment has an argumentative essay to write, then apart from the above things, ask students to tag "counter argument", "concession", and "rebuttals" in the paragraph.
3. Make the tagging more extensive based on the level of your students. For example, in writing skills, students are taught to use the transition signals or signal words. As per the genre of writing, ask them to use a certain minimum number of signal words.
4. Exercise checks to curb plagiarism among students. Now more than ever, it is important to emphasize the need of academic integrity. A lot of websites help in checking plagiarism. In fact, students should be asked to submit a plagiarism report for their own work. This way they will be discouraged to avoid plagiarism. Although there is no consensus on how much plagiarism is acceptable in any piece of writing, still if we were to put a number to it then it is anything below 15%. Here is a sample task along with a student's original answer and plagiarism report.



Question: Argue for or against getting a college degree through online courses. How effective are online courses? Is it better to have face-to-face contact with other students and instructors? Do online courses give more people access to education? (500 words)

Tag your essay clearly with colour coding and names in the comment section. Tag the following:

1. *Introduction* paragraph (ABC)
2. body paragraphs (TS+SS+CS)
3. *Conclusion* paragraph (XYZ)
4. counter-arguments, concessions, and rebuttals
5. in the body paragraphs, the technique that you are using to support your topic sentence, whether it is an anecdote, cause and effect, summary, quotation, definition, etc.

College Degrees Through Online Courses

"Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." This quote by John Dewey implies that every person should experience this life, that is education, vividly in a way that allows them to make the best of it. I don't believe that such an indispensable experience can be gained through a small screen. Obtaining degrees through online courses doesn't do justice to the journey of learning and is troublesome for a lot of students.

Online courses don't create an optimum learning environment for students. By 'learning environment', I mean a physical location that facilitates the ability of students to learn. Online classes can be very distracting since students study either at their homes or in public places which contain a lot of distracting elements. This can lead to a reduction in attention span. Moreover, various facilities like libraries, boards, practical labs, photocopy shops etc. which are easily available on campuses are not accessible to students completing their degrees through online mode. Such a discouraging environment promotes disinterest in learning.

The process of receiving online education online doesn't help to improve the social and communication skills of students. This is caused by the lack of physical interaction with students and teachers. It restricts the all-round development of individual personalities. It can become an obstacle in the future for students seeking employment as good communication skills and coordination are pre-requisites for most of the jobs. A report mentioned in an article written by Paul Fain stated that a lack of adequate synergy "is likely online education's Achilles' heel."

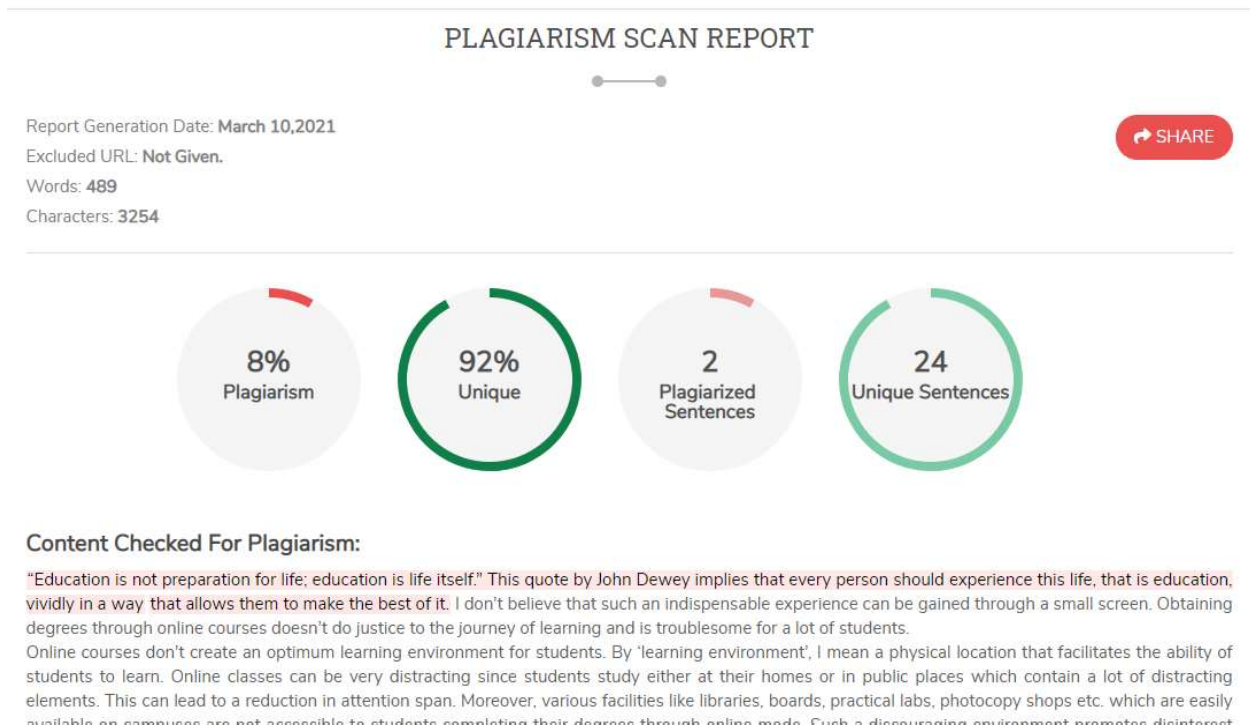
There are people who claim that online courses are accessible to a great number of people. While I can see how such classes can be beneficial for distance learning for certain students, I would like to point out that they prove to be ineffective for a large number of students with poor or no network connections. Constraints such as locations with bad connectivity, poor financial condition, power outage failures, etcetera impede the online learning process for a lot of students, especially in India.

Furthermore, online classes negatively affect the health of students. Prolonged screen time can cause headaches and eye-strain and make the person lethargic. It also disrupts the sleep-cycle of students. This can further lead to critical health issues. Jennifer Katzenstein, director of psychology and neuropsychology stated that college students learning online have to stay extra-focused to keep up with their college assignments and assessments which can impact their mental wellness. Thus, mental as well as physical health becomes a major concern vis-à-vis E-learning.

The cream of the crop is that online courses fail to impart the valuable essence of education in students. They aren't up for grabs for a significant number of learners and can be counterproductive. They don't create a motivating framework. Low-level interaction doesn't allow students and instructors to fully express themselves and reach their potential. On that account, E-learning can never rise to the level of offline/face-to-face education.

Diza Arora	Attention getter
Diza Arora	Background information
Diza Arora	Thesis statement
Diza Arora	Topic sentence
Diza Arora	Definition
Diza Arora	Supporting Sentences
Diza Arora	Cause and effect
Diza Arora	Additional Information along ▼
Diza Arora	Concluding sentence
Diza Arora	Topic sentence
Diza Arora	Cause
Diza Arora	Effect
Diza Arora	Supporting Sentences
Diza Arora	Concluding sentence along ▼
Diza Arora	Counter argument
Diza Arora	Concession
Diza Arora	Rebuttal
Diza Arora	Topic sentence
Diza Arora	Facts
Diza Arora	Supporting Sentences
Diza Arora	effect
Diza Arora	Summary
Diza Arora	Concluding sentence
Diza Arora	Explaining the thesis ▼
Diza Arora	why the reader should care
Diza Arora	broader context of the essay

Here is a sample of a plagiarism report generated through an online portal (www.smallseotools.com) which allows complimentary usage. The report provides details of the degree/extent of plagiarism found (8%). There is always the possibility of a certain degree of repetition which could be taken as plagiarism. In that case, teachers will have to ascertain the extent of plagiarism that can be allowed, most commonly 15%.



Dr Priyamvada Agarwal, founder of TakeAnEdge, is an experienced ELT specialist. Her passion includes teaching, training teachers, and material development. She has worked with organisations like NCERT, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Delhi University, Times of India, etc. Currently, she teaches at Ambedkar University, New Delhi.

Kosher (adjective)



Pronunciation: /'kəʊʃə/

Meaning: (of food, or premises in which food is sold, cooked, or eaten) satisfying the requirements of Jewish law.

(Informal) genuine and legitimate

Origin and additional information: The word originated in the mid-19th century from the Hebrew word 'kāšēr' (meaning "proper"). Restrictions on the foods suitable for Jews are derived from rules in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Word section: Animals must be slaughtered and prepared in the prescribed way, in which the blood is drained from the body, while certain creatures, notably pigs and shellfish, are forbidden altogether. Meat and milk must not be cooked or consumed together, and separate utensils must be kept for each. Strict observance of these rules is today confined mainly to Orthodox Jews. The Jewish food regulations are also known as *kashrut*. It is also used in a phrase form – "keep kosher" – meaning observe the Jewish food regulations.

According to modern archaeologists, non-kosher fish once used to be part of the menu in areas that are now part of Israel and Egypt – at a time when Judaism was still developing in that region. Their studies have shown that scale-less and

fin-less fish used to be consumed regularly between 1550 BCE and 640 CE.¹
They have found remains of non-kosher fish at the ancient Judean settlements.

Usage:

1. *But my mother was worried about how she would feed and care for four kids who could eat only kosher food.*

(Source: <https://www.lexico.com/definition/kosher>)

2. *His family kept kosher, went to services and developed its community around the temple.*

(Source: <https://www.lexico.com/definition/kosher>)

3. *Sara Goldstein, of Long Island, New York, has the added requirement of finding kosher foods suitable for her Weight Watchers diet.*

(Source: <https://www.lexico.com/definition/kosher>)

¹ What Archaeology Tells Us About the Ancient History of Eating Kosher
(<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-archaeology-tells-us-about-ancient-history-eating-kosher-180977804/>). Accessed on May 26, 2021 at 20.51 pm.