

Book review of "Assessment Strategies for Online Learning: Engagement and Authenticity"

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Book Review / Compte rendu

Conrad, Dianne, & Openo, Jason (2018). *Assessment Strategies for Online Learning: Engagement and Authenticity*. Edmonton: Athabasca University Press. Pages: 206. Price: 37.65 CDN (paper)

Reviewed by Tamara Leary, Associate Professor and School Director, Royal Roads University.

Conrad and Openo's combined wealth of experience as adult educators and online practitioners is evident in this well written text on assessment strategies for online learning. Each of the ten chapters reflects a well-organized course with clearly stated learning outcomes, a discussion supported by evidence and examples, and a summary of the chapter's intent and key take-aways.

The book is not intended to be a step by step guide to developing assessment tools; instead, it offers a well-informed discussion of topics that are pertinent to understanding assessment in the online learning forum. The authors offer a constructivist position on learning and assessment, and focus more on online learning and teaching in the humanities and social sciences than the hard sciences – a point made by the authors early on to acknowledge the differences between the two when it comes to the use of assessment and evaluation tools. Engagement and authenticity, the subtitle of the text, are woven throughout the discussion as two priority components for effective assessment strategies in online learning.

The first three chapters of the text offer a historical context of the evolution of online learning theory from a focus on the physical separation between teacher and student, and the use of technology, to being centered today around the learner and the full online learning experience. The authors distinguish between assessment and evaluation, with the former described as an interactive process between the stakeholders that informs the teacher about the students' learning, and the latter as typically a grade or measurement of the learner's performance. The foundational role of adult education in the development of distance education, from which online learning emerged, is presented in chapter two. The authors' commitment to constructivism and connectivism as the preferred philosophical frameworks for online learning is detailed in chapter three and revisited throughout the text to ground their position on assessment: that it is a vital component of ensuring learners the opportunity for self-reflection and engagement, from which the learners construct meaning. For the reader, this review of the history of online learning

helps to situate assessment as a means of engaging learners in an authentic and purposeful way. It challenges readers to consider their own understanding of online learning and the role of assessment versus a more traditional use of evaluation.

The authors detail what they mean by authentic assessments in online learning in chapter four, where they focus on quality assessment that is a transparent and meaningful part of the full learning cycle. They propose that two vital elements that must precede authentic assessments are clearly defined learning outcomes and well-developed rubrics. An authentic assessment concludes with engaging learners in the process of providing feedback and a critique of their learning.

Chapter five identifies assessment techniques that have been used in traditional face to face programs and can, when properly designed, be equally effective in an online learning environment. Specifically, recognition of prior learning e-portfolios learning journals, projects and group work are identified as tools that can be used to engage online learners and can offer effective means for authentic assessment. The key is transparency, in that learners are involved in and aware of the tools' intent, and there are frequent opportunities for learners' reflections, engagement and assessments.

In chapter six the authors consider some of the more recent trends that have emerged with "open" learning. Questions are raised as to how to most effectively offer authentic assessment in courses or programs in which the learner and educator never meet face to face and may have little required connection with each other. Conrad and Openo maintain that it is indeed possible to offer effective assessment in "open" learning by using a constructivist, learner centered approach and by ensuring an authentic approach in how learning is assessed.

The authors drift slightly from the text not being a "how-to" guide in chapters seven and eight by including specific models and examples to frame their discussion. When they do so, however, the reader is exposed to tangible take-a-ways that are not as readily available from the other chapters in the book. In chapter seven the authors offer examples of the types of questions that one might consider in developing authentic assessment and evaluation strategies by using examples of online course syllabi from the internet. Limitations identified in the examples include: limited opportunities or requirements for learners to engage with one another; attempts to transfer traditional face to face evaluations methods into an online forum; and, gaps between stated learning outcomes and evaluation methods and values. Fostering a community among online learners is reinforced by the authors as a priority to not only engage learners but to offer authentic assessment that is embedded in the full learning cycle.

Chapter eight considers the different types of online learning formats – flexible, flipped, and blended – and how authentic assessment can be most effectively designed in each. Given that the use of social media and other technology type tools are very much the reality in online learning, the authors propose that educators ensure they understand the tool they are using and that they are intentional in determining how it can be best used to support authentic assessment. Revisiting learning outcomes, assessment and evaluation strategies is an ongoing responsibility, considering how quickly technology advances and influences the online learning forum.

As constructivists, the authors emphasize the benefit of self-assessment for learners' own critical self-reflection, personal growth and development, but they recognize its limi-

tations as an evaluation tool. In chapter nine they propose that self-assessment, instead, can be considered as a learning tool in online learning if the educator has constructed a safe learning environment, and is actively engaged and able to offer learners guidance on how to best use the self-assessment tool as a means for personal growth and development.

True to adult education techniques, the authors conclude by revisiting the proposed learning outcomes of the book and providing a brief summary of the themes presented throughout the discussion. 