

Title: Is the inauthenticity of authentic learning and assessment always problematic?: A case of A Level Project Work

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Abstract:

Through the case of A Level Project Work (PW) in Singapore classrooms, this paper examines how the inauthenticity of authentic learning and assessment can sometimes pose problems for the development of students' independent learning capacity. It is argued that the development of students' independent learning ability should be a key priority of authentic PW in order for students to be prepared for real life and the 21st century workplace. The authenticity of teaching and learning in PW is examined, in particular in the context for developing independent learning as a form of "sustainable assessment" (Boud 2000, p.151). To address this problem, a paradigm shift to value independent learning is in order; and two approaches are proposed and evaluated in this paper. While it has been assumed that authentic learning and assessment should be as authentic as possible, this paper challenges this notion and suggests that inauthenticity may not always be a problem. Implicit in the call for schools to simulate workplace experiences in order to be authentic is the idea that school experience is inauthentic. This is also challenged in this paper which urges us to see the value of school experience in its own right.

Keywords: authentic learning, authentic assessment, independent learning

Introduction

Job interviewer: I see you did well in school but what real-world skills do you have?

Interviewee: Tests. I can do tests.

(<http://weknowmemes.com/2013/06/what-real-world-skills-do-you-have/>)

Singapore has always emphasized the role of education in preparing Singaporeans to become competent workers who can generate prosperity both for the individual and also for the nation. At the turn of the century, the Singapore government, concerned that Singapore students might be inadequately prepared to compete successfully in the rapidly-changing 21st century economy, introduced a slew of educational reforms to better prepare students to become competent workers. The Ministry of Education (MOE) called for revisions in the curriculum and pedagogy to emphasise development of higher order thinking skills like problem-solving and independent learning that are valuable for workers to thrive in the highly competitive global economy. To complement curriculum and pedagogy changes, there was also a call to move away from a sole focus on traditional one-off pen-and-paper assessment to incorporate alternative assessment. One alternative assessment is authentic assessment, which was introduced to students in a new subject, Project Work, which encourages students to apply what they have learned to real-life situations. Project Work (PW), which was intended to be an authentic learning experience (AuL) and a form of authentic assessment (AuA), was introduced and made a compulsory examinable subject to all first year junior college students in 2002. As a new subject and a new kind of assessment, PW has not been well-received, and numerous problems regarding the implementation of the PW coursework and assessment have surfaced, one of which is how PW lacks authenticity. This paper would focus on discussing how PW has been inauthentic in its learning experience and assessment, some consequences of this, and propose some ways to begin addressing the negative consequences. However, it is noteworthy that a lack of authenticity may not be totally negative. In this paper, several questions have also been raised for the scholarship informing AuL and AuA, in the hope of further developing the discourse in this field.

Brief Introduction to PW

As a new subject, PW offers a learning experience and an assessment mode that are very different from those of other subjects. PW was introduced as part of MOE's educational reform that emphasises the development of higher order thinking skills like problem-solving in order to prepare students to apply their knowledge and skills learned in school in their future work-place to become competent workers and lifelong learners (SEAB, 2013). Thus, unlike some other subjects that focus on knowledge acquisition, PW places a heavy emphasis on knowledge application. In addition, the learning process, which develops students' independent learning and collaboration skills, is supposed to be a key focus for teachers and students, since these skills are the learning outcomes of PW, intended by the MOE. Thus, PW as envisioned by the MOE, is supposed to be different in its pedagogy. Teachers are to facilitate students' learning rather than transfer a body of knowledge to students and students are to become more active agents of their own learning.

The PW assessment is also different from that of other traditional subjects – instead of a one-time pen-and-paper examination at the end of the year, PW assessment consists of several assignments that students need to complete and submit at different times in the course of their one-year coursework. These assignments, some individual and some requiring collaboration with their classmates, are to be completed under the guidance of their PW teacher, but the guidelines regarding such guidance are perceived as vague by some teachers

(Chong, 2009). Most PW teachers give guidance by providing feedback on the drafts that the students produce for the assignments, in order to help them improve on the actual pieces of work they would submit at various times throughout the course of the year.

PW as Authentic Assessment and Authentic Learning

Tan (2008) proposes that assessment may be considered authentic when “it constructs a context for learning that is authentic to students’ ability to cope (eventually) with real-life and workplace contexts” (p.19). Using this definition, PW is an AuA and AuL experience as PW aims to enhance students’ ability to apply knowledge to “real-life situations” (SEAB 2013, p.1), communicate ideas to others, collaborate with others and to do independent learning, which are abilities that allow students to deal with challenges in their future workplace, and for “lifelong learning” (SEAB, 2013, p.1). However, while the MOE has intended for students to achieve these learning outcomes through PW, the enacted PW curriculum in the classroom seems to be less authentic than what AuL and AuA promise to be, because a context for learning that enables students to develop skills to cope with their future workplace such as independent learning and collaboration, is constructed only to a limited extent when PW is enacted in the classroom.

But why does it matter if PW lacks authenticity? When skills required for a smooth transition from school to the workplace are not developed, problems like worker incompetence surfaces. In the next section, we would discuss in greater detail how PW lacks authenticity and its resultant problems. However, it is noteworthy that the lack of authenticity may not always pose problems, and the assumption that it is always desirable to make learning and assessment authentic may not be true in all contexts, as would be discussed later.

PW lacks authenticity as it fails to develop independent learning

As discussed earlier, PW lacks authenticity as it fails to construct a context for learning independent learning and collaboration skills which are essential to cope with real-life and workplace context. Due to space constraints, only independent learning would be discussed. Candy (1991, p. 13) defines independent learning “as a process, a method and a philosophy of education in which a student acquires knowledge by his or her own efforts and develops the ability for inquiry and critical evaluation”. Moore (1973) argues that an independent learner does not need the teacher to tell him/her what to study, how, and when it is to be studied. Applying these ideas to PW, independent learners are people who can set their own learning goals for PW, decide on their plan to make up the deficiency between their current state and their goals, assess themselves at various stages to monitor their progress towards these goals, and discipline themselves to attain them, without relying much on their teachers. Independent learning is an important skill that students need in authentic workplaces as it is likely that nobody would advise them on what they are lacking in real-life workplaces (Tan, 2008). In the fast-changing 21st century global economy, workers need to adapt to changes quickly throughout their lives, so lifelong learning becomes a way of life, and one of the pre-requisites of being a lifelong learner is to be an independent learner.

However, instead of developing independent learning skills in students, some PW teachers may choose to provide lots of guidance to students in completing the various components of the PW assignments, rather than providing feedback in the form of questions or cues for students to think by themselves how to improve their ideas (Chong, 2009). Such hand-holding to produce assignments that meet SEAB’s standards also means that students

do not learn to assess their own performance, and think of how to monitor and close the gap between their current state and the standards set.

It does not help that there is a problem of validity in the PW assessment in that independent learning is not specifically assessed in the PW assessment, so students can still get an 'A' grade even if their teachers had given them much guidance and they have not developed independent learning. More significantly, by not developing independent learning which is an essential skill in the future, PW fails to be a form of sustainable assessment, which Boud (2000, p.151) defines as "assessment that meets the needs of the present and prepares students to meet their own future learning needs". It is ironic that PW which aims to prepare students for the future does not prepare students to meet their future learning needs, blatantly contradicting lifelong learning, a goal that PW is intended to achieve.

One possible reason why some teachers do not develop students' independent learning skills, but would prefer to give lots of hand-holding, is that teachers see how important it is for students to do well in PW which is an A Level subject and an admission criterion for local university entrance, and students and parents hold teachers accountable for the examination results. Moreover, PW examination result is also one of the components that PW teachers are evaluated on in their annual appraisal (Chong, 2009). Therefore, there is much pressure on teachers to ensure that their students achieve good results for PW. Yet, many teachers do not trust that students would be able to pick up and utilise independent learning skills to do well for PW assessment. Due to these reasons, while one learning outcome that the MOE intended for PW is independent learning, this is not a goal of some teachers who are more concerned about helping students attain good grades at the A Level examinations. This situation epitomises Harlen's (2006) argument that the summative assessment would overpower formative assessment as the learning component of assessment is often undermined by the accountability and selection functions of assessment.

In addition, PW requires teachers to play the dual-role of supervising teacher and assessor - they guide students in their PW coursework for formative purpose, and also grade the assignments at the end of the PW process for summative purpose (Chong, 2009). This dual-role is new and unfamiliar to PW teachers who had previously been teaching other subjects and just been performing the formative role of guiding students on how to improve their performance, but not the summative role as assessors for the A Level examination. Many teachers may therefore be uncertain how much guidance they should provide to students and how strict they should be in grading, especially in cases when they have provided much guidance to students. Akin to how problems can arise when assessment has to do "double duty" (Boud, 2000, p.7), teachers often find themselves in a quandary when they have to do both formative and summative assessment, especially when the summative assessment is high-stake. This dual-role system has led to many parents complaining that PW assessment is unfair and biased, since some teachers would have given much more guidance than others ("Grade disparity in Project Work upsets students", 2007).

Such close guidance from some teachers also makes one wonder how much of the work students hand in is really done by students. This issue about integrity is worth examining. Not addressing it would convey to students the message that integrity can be compromised in the pursuit of one's goals, which would have negative implications for students' moral development. In real life and in workplaces, one's values and attitudes have a significant impact on one's achievements and inter-relationships. To be successful in the workplace requires not only competence in knowledge and skills but also values like integrity. Pope's (2002) study showed how the lack of integrity has become a problem among many students because of the pressure to perform well in examinations, highlighting the urgent

need for educators and parents to focus on the issue of moral development. However, moral development is not one of MOE's learning outcomes for PW. It has also not been discussed very much in the literature on AuL and AuA. More discussion needs to be devoted to how assessment is authentic when it constructs the context for students to develop values and attitudes that they need in real life, both in the workplace and beyond.

Addressing these problems of PW

The problems that arise from not developing students' independent learning are intractable, and I don't pretend to be able to solve them with the following suggestions but I hope to begin addressing them with these suggestions.

Firstly, the fundamental reason why most students and teachers are less concerned about the PW learning process and learning outcomes laid out by the MOE than about the PW test scores is because they do not seem to understand what is truly at stake in PW, beyond the test scores. They do not see the value of the AuL and AuA in PW, or think that skills like independent learning can be developed in university or later in the workplace, hence there is no need to worry about them now in JC. To change this situation, there needs to be paradigm shift for teachers and students to see the importance of developing independent learning which necessitates students and teachers to focus as much on the learning process as on the assignments submitted. If the learning process is not emphasised to ensure adequate and consistent efforts are made to develop independent learning in students, then its learning outcome of developing independent learning would be unachieved, and its value of adequately preparing students for future employment lost to some extent.

There are two ways to facilitate this paradigm change, one is to force teachers and students to focus on learning by tweaking the PW assessment, and the other is to persuade them to try out and experience the benefits of learning by working on what appeals to them.

Tweaking the PW assessment is one way, since numerous scholars (Biggs, 1999; Ramsden, 1992; Tan, 2004) have discussed how assessment is an important entity that drives students' behaviour, and in the case of Singapore, it most probably drives teachers' behaviour as well, as teachers are evaluated partially based on their students' test scores. The MOE can tweak the PW summative assessment to not only focus on the submitted assignments but also on the learning process. Assessment needs to be evaluated based on its consequences (Messick, 1989). As it is now, the consequences of PW assessment is that independent learning skills are not developed, as it only assesses students' assignments, not the learning process. Assessing the learning process of PW would be asserting what Tan(2004) calls the "epistemological power" of the PW assessment, to signal clearly to teachers and students that the learning process is valued in PW, and force them to pay greater attention to it, thereby compelling them to develop skills of independent learning.

However, it would be difficult to fairly and reliably assess the learning process of PW, as that would probably require teachers to observe carefully students' behaviour during the PW lesson to decide if they are using independent learning skills, and many things may not be observed by teachers (e.g. when students are completing PW assignments outside class-time), or are simply unobservable (e.g. metacognition processes involved during student self-assessment for independent learning). Moreover, this would be very time-consuming for teachers.

To counter these problems, some may offer the suggestion of asking students to submit reflections to clearly document their learning process. However, if teachers' and students' mentality is not changed and they continue to be obsessed with test scores rather than learning, then the PW assessment of the learning process would probably just result in the same old story of teachers hand-holding students to produce reflections that would score well, instead of genuine learning. How ironic that authentic assessment and authentic learning

should lead to inauthentic learning, in that students put up a show that they have developed independent learning when they have not! More fundamentally, using assessment to force teachers and students to focus on independent learning is paradoxical, as independent learners are supposed to be active learners who have an intrinsic desire to learn and take the initiative for their learning, so if one needs to be driven to become an independent learner by the assessment, then how much of an independent learner is he?

“Assessment is necessarily contextualised and value-laden” (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012, p.76), so one’s concept of assessment is always influenced by the social context one is in. In an examination-based meritocracy like Singapore, where the sorting role of assessment has always been emphasised and doing well in high-stakes summative assessment is the gateway to well-paid jobs and social status, it is hard for teachers and students to change their mentality of placing a higher premium on test scores than learning. Admittedly, it is an uphill task to change teachers’ and students’ mentality, as it takes a very long time and much concerted effort, yet it is a task we cannot afford to ignore. To change teachers’ and students’ mentality, perhaps the first step is to work on what appeals to them. There are several research studies (e.g. Duncan, et al. 2007; Zimmerman et al., 2002) that show independent learning skills can lead to better academic performance. Since many teachers’ and students’ utmost concern presently is test scores, raising their awareness about how developing and using independent learning skills can help improve one’s academic performance would most probably entice teachers to develop independent learning skills in students, and students to try out using independent learning skills when studying and doing assignments. This decision to try out independent learning would be out of their free will, and not imposed upon them, since the PW assessment still does not assess independent learning. In addition, students would be inclined to use independent learning skills for subjects other than PW, since there is promise that doing so would lead to better test scores. Although they would be still driven by a concern for test scores when they first develop independent learning, they would at least start paying more attention to really developing independent learning, and it is hoped that through the process, they would discover the intrinsic value of learning, and really become independent learners subsequently.

Compared to the first approach of forcing teachers and students to focus on independent learning by assessing it, the second approach avoids problems such as the difficulties of fairly assessing independent learning, and students guided heavily by teachers to produce evidence of independent learning when they have not really developed independent learning. In addition, developing independent learning through this second approach is done out of the students’ free will, and research (e.g. Lemos, 2002; Nolen, 2003) has shown that when students choose to learn something, rather than be coerced to do it, they would learn better. The second approach thus seems to be the better approach of the two.

PW lacks authenticity in other ways but it is not a problem

By analysing the issue of independent learning, we have seen several problems resulting from PW’s lack of authenticity, yet a lack of authenticity may not always be problematic, which we would now discuss.

According to Newmann & Archbald (1992), one characteristic of authenticity is value and meaningfulness for the learner. However, what is meaningful to one can be totally meaningless to another (Gulikers et al., 2007). As AuL and AuA, PW is supposed to be meaningful and relevant to students but the research carried out by the MOE in 2003 indicated that some students could not see the value of PW and would rather have spent the time for PW on their other A-Level examination subjects (Bryer, 2006). To address the PW

assessment tasks, students usually examine a social problem in their real lives and propose solutions or at least attempt to address the issue, if it is intractable. Hence, it may be puzzling why some students do not see the meaning and relevance of PW to their lives, since it is a problem that they see in their society. A possible explanation is that these students are largely interested in scoring well for the A Level examinations in order to get into a university and a course of their choice, and tend to be more apathetic towards social problems which most probably do not have a direct impact on their lives presently. Some also do not see themselves engaged in addressing social problems in future. With such an attitude, they see PW as a subject they need to pass in order to enter university, a necessary evil which does not hold much meaning for them beyond this.

While directly dealing with social problems like working in the civil service may not be some students' future career choice and students are largely apathetic about social issues happening around them now, and hence do not see social problems as meaningful to them, it does not mean that students should not learn to see the meaning and relevance of engaging with these social problems. This is because AuA and AuL which prepare students for adult life after school should not be just narrowly focused on employment since adult life after school encompasses so much more than just work; engaging with and addressing social problems is part of civic engagement which is a vital part of adult life, whether one's professional work is directly dealing with social problems or not. While much of the literature on AuA like Cumming & Maxwell (1999), Gulikers et al.(2007), Tan (2008), and Tan & Lim (2008) do not discuss the need for AuA to construct contexts for students to develop the skills needed for civic engagement, King, Newmann and Carmichael (2009) argue for the importance of authenticity to include complex intellectual work that is socially meaningful, including civic engagement. King et al. (2009) contribute to our understanding of AuA and AuL because preparing students for life after school should not just be limited to the specific or generic skills needed for the workplace, but also meaningful civic participation, which is an important component of life after school.

In the light of this, imposing on students the compulsory task of solving or addressing social problems so that they can cultivate an interest or concern for social problems is perhaps a right move by the MOE, even though most students are currently apathetic about these problems and do not care much about civic engagement. While deciding what to learn based on what is meaningful to students may seem empowering as it considers students' viewpoints and allows them a say in deciding their learning, it may not be always good to empower students. After all, students are not finished products but work-in-progress whose interest and passion can be shaped and developed in school, and are often in need of advice and direction from educators with regards to how they should be further developed, since some of them, as Azevedo & Cromley (2004) have highlighted, lack awareness about their own learning needs. Thus, it might not be prudent to decide what students should learn in school for AuL and AuA solely based on their perception of what is meaningful to them right now. Such a circumstance calls for Tan's (2004) notion of epistemological power of assessment to be asserted so that students learn what knowledge is valued by the larger society, instead of just learning knowledge which they perceive as meaningful to themselves presently. While students may not be interested in such learning initially, it is for their good and the good of the larger society. In addition, there is perhaps no better way to get students to comply with the task of addressing social problems than through assessment, as what and how students learn is often determined by how they will be assessed (Biggs, 1999; Ramsden, 1992; Tan, 2004).

Another reason why some people have criticised PW as inauthentic is that PW only requires students to propose solutions or suggestions to address the social problem they have chosen to focus on; students are not required to really carry these ideas out, hence some do not experience the actual consequences had their ideas been actually implemented. Such lack of authenticity in some forms of authentic assessment was also a problem highlighted by Cumming & Maxwell (1999), and Tan (2008). Admittedly there is value to making assessment as authentic as possible to the actual happenings in the workplace, but it is important for us to bear in mind that students are still learning and developing their skills and knowledge, and we would be expecting too much of students if we expect them to achieve the same level of mastery as experts. Since the school is a place for learning, when doing AuL and AuA, students need to be given some freedom and space to make mistakes and try again in order to improve (Stein, Isaacs, & Andrews, 2004), as they might not have such second chances when they leave school. Thus, making students experience the actual consequences of what they do in order for the assessment to be authentic may be too harsh at times. In the light of this, authenticity may not be always good, contrary to what scholars have been suggesting or implying in their call for assessment to be made as authentic to the real world as possible.

In addition, educators need to consider the feasibility of allowing students to carry out their ideas for PW. Sometimes, the costs involved may be too high and the consequences too severe, (e.g. allowing students to implement their newly designed counselling programme on people suffering from depression when the programme may adversely affect the psychological well-being of these people, instead of benefitting them) so the ethics of it need to be carefully considered.

Implications for the scholarship

Examining the authenticity of PW and its consequences has raised some critical questions for scholars to consider and do further study. As discussed earlier, there needs to be more thought given to assumptions or questions such as, is authenticity is always beneficial, do AuL and AuA always need to be meaningful to students, and how can students learn about ethical behaviour through AuL and AuA? Another idea scholars can consider is that AuL and AuA supposedly empower students because they equip students for future employment, but is such a focus on future employment actually disempowering and shackling students rather than empowering them, because it ties students to the idea of learning as preparation for future employment, instead of freeing students from the burden of employment to consider other things in life? Masschelein & Simon (2010) argue that schools should give students the space and time to play with ideas which are totally unrelated to work to liberate them from concerns and anxieties about employment. People after all, are *not* created just to work, and schools do *not* exist for the sole purpose of preparing students for future employment. In addition, the call to make assessment and learning in school more authentic suggests what is happening in schools is inauthentic, and only life after school is authentic. Masschelein & Simon's (2010) idea as stated earlier can be useful to help us see this from another perspective: their idea moves us away from the notion of authenticity as preparing students for life after school to focus on valuing what is done in school, e.g. experimenting with ideas, as authentic in its own right, because it is also a part of life.

Conclusion

PW as a form of AuA and AuL lacks authenticity in some aspects. While this lack of authenticity is not problematic in some situations, it does have negative consequences that

demand our attention. It is ironic that PW that aims to prepare students for life in the future actually hampers the development of students' future learning needs, due to an over-emphasis on PW test scores, at the expense of its learning process and outcomes. Yet, one's performance in the many roles that one plays in life, like a spouse, a parent, a worker, a friend, etc. is usually not, and cannot be assessed using tests set by others. As Boud (2000, p.4) argues, "there is no point in having a reliable summative assessment system if it inhibits the very learning it seeks to certify". There needs to be a shift in emphasis towards the learning processes and outcomes of PW, rather than just paying lip service to them. Going back to the joke quoted at the beginning of this paper, this shift is urgently required before the joke becomes a reality which we would not be able to laugh at.

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