

Chapter 10

Authentic Assessment through an Online Professional Conference: Barriers and Affordances

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Researchers such as Deutsch and Nicholson (2006) have proposed authentic assessment as a means to connect learning with practice and develop a commitment to life-long learning. Recently, newer forms of distributed technology such as audio-conferencing and social networking have been central in moving learning opportunities beyond the classroom door. In this case study, the authors examine the process of developing and implementing a new culminating assessment in an online graduate program via newer technologies. Culminating student presentations shifted from an in-house, on-campus to an international, online venue. This chapter examines the rationale for the use of an international conference, the design of scaffolds required to support student success in the endeavor, and feedback from faculty and students on learning impacts of virtual conference participation. The case asks questions about viability and provokes debate about the types of experiences institutions should provide students, especially given the access technology can provide.

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ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

This case study is focused on the adoption and development of a culminating assessment in a graduate program in educational technology. Traditionally, students were assessed through typical theses defended to a small, specialized audience in an on-campus setting. A new assessment practice required students to produce papers for a major international, online conference and defend those papers in an online presentation format open to international conference attendees as well as invited university representatives. In this chapter, we look at both pedagogical and technological shifts that made this change desirable, as well as the process involved in moving both faculty and students successfully through the implementation stage.

The case study we describe in this chapter is situated in the Department of Educational Technology (ETEC) at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa (UHM). The department has one of the oldest Master's programs in continuous existence in the U.S., evolving from its initial graduates in the 1960s in the field then called "educational communications" (Kucera, 1997). Today the program houses more than 100 students in its campus and online Master's in Education in Educational Technology programs, with a mix of mid-career professionals from K-12, higher education, military, health care, corporate and non-profit sectors, and including local, mainland and international students (<http://etec.hawaii.edu>). The ETEC department is situated in a large, public research extensive university that is the only one in Hawaii offering significant post-baccalaureate degrees. While it serves the entire state, its location on the island of Oahu limits access to post-graduate education for many adult students who live on other islands in Hawaii.

Although the ETEC Master's program now includes an online option for students, the shift from offering an entirely campus-based program has been a gradual one. Options for online elective classes began over ten years ago, but moving to offering an online program occurred beginning in Fall 2006. As in many institutions of higher education, the shift has not been without debate.

Concerns were raised both within the department and in the larger institution, which must approve such program changes about quality, equivalency of teaching and advising loads, and concern over equity of services among students on and off campus. Some of the challenges included giving up traditional practices that had already been working well for students and faculty, practices that in fact had been the basis of numerous teaching awards and other recognitions for the faculty and department. Should ETEC invest in significant change to a model that seemed to work well just because technology provided new opportunities? Would these changes devalue the basis of the campus experience for many faculty and students: the opportunity for high quality, face-to-face scholarly and practitioner interaction?

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