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# Why practical content really matters for assessment in online learning

By Melissa Fanshawe and Katie Burke

Meet Melissa Fanshawe and Katie Burke, two senior lecturers from the School of Education at the University of Southern Queensland. These two first met in a Zoom workshop in which they were both presenting on online pedagogy.



**Hearing about each other's ideas, they instantly wanted to work together. Here's what happened next.**

**Melissa:** We teach maths and the arts for pre-service teachers, who enrol mainly in online courses. These are very hands-on practical subjects so we are always looking for ways to try and help our students ensure they learn the course outcomes while learning online. This is the story of how we changed our courses using constructive alignment to get our students to participate in practical learning activities.

"In constructive alignment, we start with the outcomes we intend students to learn, and align teaching and assessment to those outcomes" (Biggs, 2011, para 2).

**Katie:** We signed up to do a peer review of each other's course to see how our students engaged, and saw a number of opportunities to improve. We then decided to use the *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Cycle* (Kinash, 2019) to engage in a data-informed approach to improving our courses. This would also help us assess the innovations we wanted to implement.

We were really concerned to find that it was possible for our students to complete our courses without undertaking practical learning activities in the weekly learning which would help contextualise theory and practice and prepare them for the classroom.

**Our course engagement data over two semesters in 2019 found that only 72 per cent of students in our courses participated in course content. More than 72 per cent of our students passed the course. How was this possible?**

**Melissa:** We believed our students needed to do practical activities not only to understand the application of theory, but more importantly, so they could feel confident to teach our discipline areas when they graduate.

We found our students chose to engage with the activities that were related to the assessment. This was concerning for us, as we both believe the purpose of assessment is "to inform future teaching and learning, rather than only for assigning a summative grade" (Ayalon & Wilkie, 2020, p.1).

**Katie:** So knowing that some of our students only complete what is being assessed, we saw an opportunity to bring practical learning into assessment. Then our objectives would be constructively aligned.

**Melissa:** We decided we could prioritise specific outcomes by creating practical learning activities and aligning them with assessment. This meant that activity completion was a part of core learning, and students would probably do it, because they were being assessed!

**Katie:** We both rewrote our courses starting with the content and skills needed in our disciplines when teaching in the classroom. We created practical activities that the students had to do each week, and this became part of their assessment. This allowed them to practice with the hands-on learning that you don't often get online.

**Melissa:** My maths students were guided to submit practical activities that related to number and algebra, measurement and geometry, statistics and probability.

**Katie:** In my Arts course, students completed and submitted evidence of their completion of a range of practical activities in dance, drama, media arts, music and visual art.

We then collected data within our online courses over two semesters through course engagement data (n=305), an anonymous voluntary survey (n=64), and semi-structured interviews (n=3). We found our students not only found these activities enjoyable and achievable but they also improved knowledge, understanding and confidence in discipline areas.

**Melissa:** We were happy to find all students who responded to our survey indicated growth in confidence in their respective discipline area, with the majority of respondents indicating that the assessment tasks were important (19 per cent) or very important (75 per cent) in improving their skills and understanding of maths or the arts. One student told us "I now feel confident that I have the theory together with the practical elements of the arts knowledge".

**Katie:** What about our interview participant who said they had "a lot more confidence and a deeper understanding of not only mathematical content but also how to teach this to children"?

**Melissa:** Oh yes, our data also showed us

1. the **importance of Critical reflection** to help students realise the application of theory into practice (Biggs, 2014). Following the activities, our students were asked to reflect on their activities, and how they aligned to the curriculum and course theory. 91 per cent of survey respondents found this useful for preparing for the classroom.

**Katie:** Students told us that they gained an understanding of how learners would feel completing the activity, as well as some of the complexities of planning. One interview participant told us, "I didn't realise how much depth I'd have to go into planning a lesson and how much content and thought goes into that". This thinking is really getting them ready for the classroom.

**Melissa:** They also said it made them think about the resources required and differentiation for diverse learners.

**Katie:** I think our strongest finding was that:

2. **assessment of practical learning increased engagement.**

**Melissa:** It sure did. Only 54 per cent of our students said they would have completed the activities if they were not assessed. Some students told us they may have completed the activities they enjoyed. Like your arts student who said "I definitely would not have done the drama or the visual art .... I would have done the music one because I enjoy the music".

**Katie:** Or the many respondents who told us they were time poor.

**Melissa:** That's right, there were many comments about that, such as "I feel that as my studies need to fit around so many other aspects of my life, I wouldn't take the time to complete optional

activities". Our survey showed only 38 per cent of students in full time employment would have been likely to complete the activities if they had not counted toward their grades.

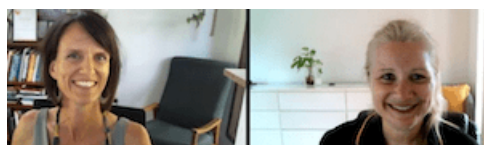
**Katie:** Well this supports research (Bettinger & Loeb, 2017; Stone et al., 2019) that many online students try to complete studies alongside many other responsibilities such as families, work and other responsibilities. So they often engage only with course content that will ensure they pass the course assessment.

**Melissa:** Well if they are only going to prioritise the assessment, doesn't that show how important it is to make sure that our assessment includes the knowledge and practical skills they need when they graduate?

**Katie:** I think so, but what did the course engagement data say?

**Melissa:** The best part was that after changing our courses to focus on practical activities as assessment, in two courses, over two semesters, 94 per cent or 287 of 305 students completed the learning modules directly aligned to assessment. This was an improvement of over 20 per cent!

**Katie:** Wow! These incredibly high engagement statistics suggest that the practical learning experiences as assessment, created with a constructive alignment to graduate outcomes strongly influenced students' engagement in our courses.



**Katie Burke** is a Senior Lecturer (Arts Curriculum & Pedagogy) at the University of Southern Queensland. **Melissa Fanshawe** is a Senior Lecturer (Mathematics Curriculum & Pedagogy) at the University of Southern Queensland.

COVER IMAGE: this beautiful work is from one of the students who participated in the research.

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## One thought on “Why practical content really matters for assessment in online learning”



**Tom Worthington**

March 8, 2021 at 8:53 am

It is good that educators are getting to grips with constructive alignment and passing this on to their students to use in their own teaching. However, it is unfortunate it took a pandemic for this to happen, outside a few areas of vocational education, where constructive alignment was routine. I suggest we need to put in place changes in what and how we teach so the painful lessons we have learned are not lost, as things go back to “normal”.

As well as constructive alignment, I suggest we need to teach all teachers to teach in a blended mode, combining online and classroom techniques. Younger students need more time with a teacher face to face, older students need less and adults almost none at all. But there will be circumstances where the student can't get to classroom and this flexibility should be designed into our education systems.

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