

# Authentic assessment to nurture students' self-worth: interview with Dr Jan McArthur

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## 1. What is authentic assessment?

**Elena:** Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us about your work on authentic assessment and, by extension, authentic education. The purpose of this interview is to delve deeper into some of the points you make in your recent papers (e.g. McArthur, 2021; 2023) and explore how they relate to English language teaching and learning. Let's first talk about what you mean by authentic assessment.

**Jan:** I have been constructively critical, I hope, of the way authentic assessment has become a bit of a buzzword. What I've tried to do is broaden it and give it, I think, more substance. I challenge traditional ways of understanding authentic assessment in relation to so-called real-world tasks, in which the real world very quickly gets conflated with the world of work. And while the world of work is really important to people's well-being, it's not all there is to a human life.

The second thing is talking about society as beyond the university. We shouldn't separate the world within and the world beyond. If we use the term 'real world', most of our students now are dealing with very real-world issues. There's a cost of living crisis in the UK, there are still issues about decolonization, gender imbalance, poverty, racial injustices. Rather than talking about the real world as outside and something we can't change, and students getting trained to be compliant workers, we should be talking about students understanding their membership in society, and assessment being about evaluating and marking achievement of skills, knowledge and dispositions through which students will contribute to society.

Another critique I have is that there's often this focus on whether the task is authentic. Authentic assessment requires us to question if a task is worth doing. There're lots of tasks currently being done in society and in the world of work, which we shouldn't be doing and aren't worth doing: tasks that are contributing to the climate emergency, for example. We need to be challenging why we do something and letting that *why* we are doing something shape the way we do it.

Finally, authentic assessment is about transformation, because we're always in a process of working towards a more just, kinder, fairer world. It would be lovely to think there was a point of arrival, but it's certainly beyond the lifespans of you, and me, and our students, and their grandchildren. It's a long way off; so it's always about an active process of transformation. And we should have that sense imbued in our idea of authenticity, too.

## 2. The world in and beyond the classroom

**Elena:** You mentioned that there's more to life than work. I'd be interested to get a sense of how you address these other areas of life in the classroom when talking to your students. What language do you use to talk about them?

**Jan:** That's such a good question, I've never been asked that before. For me, understanding education is all about relationships. And, you know, we have relationships between ourselves and the knowledge we engage with; we have relationships between our peers. The way I suggest students need to understand the world of work is to understand it as one of relationships. It's not saying there's work here and there's other stuff there. Nor am I saying they always all mix together. I am saying we see interrelationships. When I ask students to look beyond the world of work, it's partly looking beyond their working lives to see the impact they have on the lives of others. And these may or may not be involved with work. There are things you learn at university which can give joy to people. And that's a way of contributing to society that isn't necessarily tied to a job you get paid for.

So, I suppose it's just that sense that what really matters is for each and every one of us to participate in society in ways that contribute to the well-being of others and through that our own well-being is nurtured. What critical theory indicates to me is that we gain that individual sense through a sense of the well-being of others. I can't sit here and think "Oh, I've achieved happiness", knowing that there are people around who are unhappy. It's that process of transformation and always thinking in terms of others.

While in education we are clearly helping students work towards getting employment, we also have a responsibility to always say to them: "You know what? You need to find joy outside, as well, because that's the only way any of us survive, and are happy and healthy". And there is a big mental health crisis in society and in our students. It's the idea that one shouldn't feel guilty about joy, rest, pleasure. Just doing nothing is something I think we all have a responsibility to share. On a practical level, I think, actually, for teachers, one way we do that is by ourselves having certain boundaries. I've come to learn that having a boundary of 'I don't answer emails on a weekend' shows students that it's legitimate for them to do that, too. Both as students now, in that they don't have to be working for their teachers all the time, but also as citizens, when they go out to the world of work: having these boundaries is healthy and appropriate and not something to feel guilty about.

## 3. Student involvement in assessment

**Elena:** You talk a lot about involving students in the assessment design. What kind and what level of involvement on the part of the students do you have in mind?

**Jan:** I think there's a real spectrum of involvement, but overall, there is an approach of not seeing students as passive recipients: we do assessment to them – this is the way students often feel. It's done to them, and they almost feel like they're victims of an assessment process. Most students I talk to do not understand how formal assessment works. We can give them marking criteria, but it doesn't really help students understand what we do. Until students really understand and can imagine how assessment is actually done, they can't ever really be given agency.

Sometimes the reason we don't make everything clear is because we're thrown into the trap of thinking that transparency equals tidiness. That we should make assessment look like there is a really clear set of steps to follow, and if you follow those steps, you will get the right mark, down to a percentage. That's not transparency. Actually, that is an opaque sort of screen pretending to be transparent, but it's not. Because assessment is about judgement. An assessment will be messy, an assessment can't be precise. We've got loads of research to demonstrate that. We need to be open to students about that.

On a practical level, I think that it is about students being able to judge their own work. They do need to have experiences of doing that, be it peer assessment or self-assessment, because by the time a student is at the end of their university education, they should be the ones who are able to evaluate whether they've met the learning outcomes, not us. If they're still relying on our judgement completely, then we've not done our job well. I think that we have to move towards that and let students know that is where we're moving. It's not about external accreditation. It's about internal understanding of their achievements or where they have to learn more.

Also, I think students should be given an opportunity to ask a question: “Why am I doing this assessment?” and to get some feedback from their teachers about that. And that's what we need: students to be really involved in assessment through conversations, perhaps early on in a module: “In this module, we're going to be assessed in this way, and let's talk about why we're doing that assessment. Why are we doing an essay?” Without such conversations, assessment remains decontextualized and that's what makes it inauthentic. And I don't care how much it looks like a real-world task. If students don't have a really strong understanding of why that task matters, then it's always flawed.

The next thing students need is time after the task, to reflect on it. We have to build in these moments of taking stock about what we have achieved in doing an assessment. And students have to be at the heart of that. And this is more than just traditional feedback. It's much more student-led. It's almost student feedback on the assessment for themselves, and for us, and for peers.

#### 4. On the value of reflection for assessment and ‘ungrading’

**Elena:** This reminds me of a colleague teaching writing modules. His end-of-module assessment is a reflective essay which he grades with a pass or fail.

**Jan:** I think that's terrific. We must stop assuming essays are bad assessment tasks, because, actually, students can benefit greatly from a piece of writing that's a critical reflection of what they themselves say about what they gained from the course, especially if it's open for them to say, e.g. “I didn't learn this”, or “I'm still

confused about that". That's real learning, isn't it? It's knowing what you don't know. Also, it's fairly straightforward for the teacher to know that boundary between a student really attempting critical reflection and not. To do all of the above, however, you have to have safety and trust.

And having a pass-fail grading system is a really great feature. I think a lot of us used to think that the ungrading movement was some fad on the side. But the more I think about it, the more I feel there's so much that we do wrong because of the intent to rank students. We know we're meant to be criterion-based, but we buy into this idea that employers want them to be rated, so we have to have people with 1sts. Surely employers want people who've had the best education and demonstrated their achievement. And we know that we will get that better through low-stakes assessment, where grading isn't differentiated. Also, the things that are most worth assessing (e.g. a student's development as a human being of self-worth) can't have differentiated grades. Where do you put that on an assessment scale?

I always say to people, go and look at your learning outcomes, because I've never seen a learning outcome that actually had a 'how much'. Well-written learning outcomes are about have you achieved or not achieved. So when did we then start deciding that there are going to be grades of this? And for most learning outcomes, there aren't. There simply aren't - there's no need. This is why in medicine in many countries they don't do differentiated grading. How do you grade amputating a leg? You've either done it well, ethically, kindly and efficiently so that the patient survives, or you've not. I think there's a lot about ungrading that we really need to embrace, and it's going to be very uncomfortable because there's such a strong social, hegemonic urge towards ranking people and having everything a competition. And as teachers, we have to do more to resist that. And for me, again, this gets back to where I started. It's a tragedy that we create generations of students who see self-worth in terms of an A. They should see self-worth in terms of what they do, whether it brings joy to them and others, whether it helps others and contributes to well-being. That's real achievement.

## 5. Assessment in the era of AI

**Elena:** Let's move on to consider the relationship between assessment and today's fast-changing world, especially with the advent of AI. It's becoming increasingly difficult for educators to predict the kinds of skills to teach/assess which our students might need in the future.

**Jan:** I think this is why we have to think about assessments and the student as a whole person. Because, yeah, there's no way that tasks and skills that students do in university will necessarily be what they need for fulfilling work and social lives in 10 or 15 years. But the disposition to approach things in ethical, honest and meaningful ways - that's what we should be supporting because that's transferrable. When people talk about transferable skills, the most transferable thing of all that we need are students committed to the well-being of others, to using knowledge, and to performing skills in ethical and socially just and kind ways. So, when people worry about AI, I always say, well, we approach this the same way as when it was just a

library to access information. You do it ethically, with a strong sense of purpose, with a critical, questioning mind.

Now, how to take those things into the world of AI? None of us at this stage can know quite how. It's beyond our imaginations in a way. That's why going back to these fundamentals is all I think we've got to work with at the moment, because the future is uncertain. How do you prepare for an uncertain future? You prepare people who can cope with it not just in terms of these traditional things e.g. good communication skills. It's more about whether they've got a desire to communicate well with others. There's this ethical dimension, which I think we should be less cautious about nurturing. When I first wrote the book on assessment (McArthur, 2018), I got quite a bit of flack for talking about trust. And people said it was naive to think about trust and assessment. But actually, I think trust might be all we've got left to rely on because, you know, you can't check up on everything. And you can't check up once the students have left. There's no Turnitin in the corner of a lawyer's office when they're advising a client. So, we have to be instilling a sense that trust is both an admirable thing, but it's also in our self-interest to work in that way because we're promoting a better society.

I do believe that some of these basic dispositions and abilities to use knowledge in certain ways are going to be vindicated in this new world because there is no technological solution to AI and assessment. There just isn't, it's wrong to pretend there is. The only chance we have is to go back to the human solutions of encouraging students to want to do an assessment for themselves, maybe using AI as a tool.

What we need is students realising they must deal with the fact that they are going to be changing answers to the problems we face. This isn't saying anything goes, but it is saying there is not always a definitive right answer. Our assessments aren't encouraging and enabling students to deal with those situations. And then we get into the workforce, which can be harsh. We shouldn't romanticize the world, and we shouldn't romanticize the workforce because we are all still very flawed human beings. And we have to help students understand that.

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# Analyzing student reflections with generative AI: an experiment with ChatGPT

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## 1. Introduction

Analyzing student reflections can provide useful insights for educators to better understand their students' needs and interests, especially when innovating new pedagogical approaches. However, traditional approaches to analyzing student reflections can be laborious and time-consuming. Generative AI is an emerging technology that might offer new ways to process student reflections, giving teachers new perspectives on their classrooms without adding to their teaching workload.

Integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) has been gaining traction, even before the release of ChatGPT in November 2022, but mostly to personalize student learning paths (Jia, et al., 2022; Yuan, 2022). Much less has been written about how to implement tools like ChatGPT into the ELT classroom with students. Initial explorations of AI in education have shown promise when used cautiously (Alafnan, et al., 2023). Now that AI is accessible to teachers, it will be important to explore how generative AI can be used to improve pedagogy.

ELT researchers have explored how fostering reflective practices in students can improve learning. For example, reflection essays have proven to be valuable tools for gauging students' understanding, learning experiences, and growth as writers (Ahmadi & Yanuarti, 2020). Studies also suggest that reflective writing in the ELT classroom aids in personal and professional development, encourages updated teaching methodologies, and enhances classroom effectiveness (Mesa, 2018).

In the Spring of 2023, I experimented with generative AI tools in a new class called AI & Digital Storytelling. Because tools like ChatGPT can be fine-tuned for specific contexts through structured and detailed prompts, this practice can be tailored by any ELT teacher for their specific approach to reflection.

Having worked extensively with AI in the writing process, I wondered how these tools might enhance reflection in the classroom. I was interested in exploring how AI can be used to help comprehend and examine my students' reflections or might help me understand the sentiment behind my students' reflections to gain insights I may have otherwise overlooked. Using AI to help me analyze student writing might provide me with valuable feedback that I could use to improve the learning experience of my students. In this article, I will evaluate ChatGPT's ability to generate