

*Synoptic and Authentic Assessments: Moving Away from Traditional Assessments to Integrate the Development of Transferable Skills*

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**Abstract**

Using traditional forms of assessment (e.g. exams and essays) does not fit with a program that aims to have a broader and richer approach to the subject as well as the development of transferable skills that will upskill students and prepare them for the graduate world. In addition, assessment is not to be used as a form of reassurance to the assessor (i.e. they have done a 'good' job); assessment must allow the student to understand and discover what is fundamental from the topic, at the same time as they learn different, innovative, practical ways to show and disseminate key knowledge and their skills set. This approach is in line with Brunel University London's strategy of using new, innovative ways of teaching and learning, and simultaneously it provides students with continuity, consistency, and clarity in terms of their assessments across the program. The purpose of this paper is to disseminate good practice on the use of innovative assessments, specifically authentic, synoptic and reflective assessments. These assessments ensure a positive correlation with the skills set students must carry into their graduate careers, as well as allowing a shift from 'silo-thinking' to a more interconnected perspective between modules, and improving synthesis and application skills.

Keywords: Synoptic Assessment, Authentic Assessment, Reflective Assessment, Transferable Skills, Innovation in Assessments

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## **Introduction**

Why is transforming assessment important? The purpose of assessment is not to assess students' ability to recall knowledge; instead, it should be about the ability students have to apply the knowledge they have acquired and developed. Therefore, traditional assessments must be transformed to meet the desired purpose as it increases student satisfaction, develops students' aptitude for learning, prompts a more accurate representation of student achievement, and promotes and enhances academic standards (Advance HE, 2019).

A 'good' assessment aligns with and promotes the desired learning outcomes, defines the purpose of the assessment, considers the context in which the assessment takes place (i.e. it is up-to-date with the current environment and societal challenges, and takes into account the characteristics of the students enrolled in the program), and consists of tasks that allow for students' development and engagement with learning (Bearman et al., 2014).

Whilst revising assessments across the Psychology Undergraduate Program, authentic, synoptic and reflective assessments were updated and extended across all years of study as these meet the criteria above. Gulikers, Bastiaens, and Kirschner (2004, p. 69) define authentic assessment as "an assessment requiring students to use the same competencies, or combinations of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they need to apply in the criterion situation in professional life." In other words, authentic assessments create the environment for students to showcase the knowledge and skills they have learned and apply these to real-life situations they will encounter through their graduate life (i.e. in a graduate workplace setting). Synoptic assessments integrate two or more modules into a one single assessment, thereby enhancing students' understanding of the links between the different components of a specific field of study (e.g. psychology). This type of assessment allows to move away from 'compartmentalized' modules and 'silo' thinking into a holistic approach to teaching and learning (Constantinou, 2020; Gibbs, 2006). Reflective assessments include students in the assessment process by requiring them to reflect individually or in groups on their learning experience. These assessments engage students in self-evaluation and bring an emphasis to meta-cognition and learning, by asking students to think about their own thinking (Thayer, 2018).

## **Our Solution**

Year 1 includes one authentic assessment, two synoptic assessments and two reflective assessments. The authentic assessment consists of a 10-minute 'mock' interview for an actual placement/internship that is available for students to apply for in that particular academic year; this assessment is part of the 'Portfolio for Academic and Employability Skills in Psychology' module. The synoptic assessments are part of the 'Research Methods' and 'Statistics' modules and consist of two lab reports where students combine research methods to conduct an experiment and use the relevant statistical knowledge to analyze and report the data. In the reflective assessments, students are required to reflect on (i) their development of academic and transferable skills throughout Year 1 ('Portfolio for Academic and Employability Skills in Psychology'), and (ii) their experience in taking part in research in psychology ('Portfolio for Research Methods and Statistics').

Year 2 includes four authentic assessments, one synoptic assessment and two reflective assessments. The authentic assessments consist of (i) clinical cases where students have to incorporate their knowledge of 'Biological Psychology' and 'Cognitive Psychology' to come

up with an explanation of what is behind the described symptoms, (ii) analyzing children's behavior in a video in light with the 'Developmental Psychology' theories and concepts, (iii) combining knowledge from 'Social Psychology' and 'Individual Differences' to explain and analyze current societal phenomena, and (iv) a poster where students have to present psychological research as they would in a conference ('Advanced Academic Skills for Psychology'). The synoptic assessment is part of the 'Quantitative Research Methods' and 'Advanced Statistics' modules and consist of a lab report where students combine research methods to conduct an experiment and use the relevant statistical knowledge to analyze and report the data. In the reflective assessments, students are required to reflect on (i) their levels of performance based on marking criteria created by themselves on a particular essay ('Conceptual and Historical Issues in Psychology'), and (ii) their experience in taking part in research in psychology ('Portfolio for Quantitative Research Methods and Advanced Statistics').

In Year 3 there are five authentic assessments and one reflective assessment. Authentic assessments include (i) a portfolio containing exercises involving analysis, presentation and interpretation of neuroimaging data grounded in real-world examples ('Practical Investigations of Mind and Brain'), (ii) writing a report where students work on a 'mock' clinical case and assess risk of violence, or provide a clinical formulation addressing why a patient has offended ('Forensic Psychology'), (iii) evaluating the value of different methodologies to analyze social media-related behavior ('Psychology of Social Media'), (iv) writing a report for a stakeholder organization to fund research for the treatment of a specific disorder ('Disorders of Perceptual and Movement Control'), and (v) design an imaginary small- to mid-scale religion for a small society ('Psychology of Religion'). The reflective assessment involves students' participation and reflection in a six-week mindfulness course ('Mindfulness: Neuroscience and Clinical Applications').

For every year in the program, these assessments coexist with more traditional forms of assessment (i.e. essays and exams).

## **Conclusion**

The assessments were revised based on student and staff feedback, student performance data, student engagement data, and student satisfaction data. These revised assessments are being implemented in the academic year 2021/22 and the success of these will be assessed through year-by-year assessment performance, student satisfaction, and graduate outcomes (i.e. degree/award classification and graduate employment).

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