

## Episode 030: Authentic Assessment with Professor Sally Brown and Professor Kay Sambell

Hello and welcome to episode 30 of the Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University podcast.

I'm Dr. Chris Whiting. And in this episode, I'm going to be talking to professors Sally Brown and Kay Sambell about authentic assessment.

Without further ado, here it is. So professors Sally Brown and Kay Sambell are both experts in the field of authentic assessment,

and they're going to tell us a bit more about how we can actually plan and utilise this entire teaching in higher education.

So, what is authentic assessment? Thank you, Chris, for asking us, and we're delighted to be able to do this podcast, for Newcastle University.

And we're very grateful to you for making a contribution to our food bank as a thank you for doing so.

Kay and I, you may know, have been around in the world of authentic assessment for quite a long time and Kay and I are very keen to start off

the thing about authentic assessment by saying authentic assessment isn't all about employability skills and graduate skills.

We think it goes a lot wider. We think it's about actually enabling students to come to terms with assessment activities

who are engaging that are stimulating and that they recognise as having value and authenticity.

Kay, do you want to add something to that? Yeah, I think it's thinking about the longer-term value of assessment from the student point of view,

so they feel that they're really doing something worthwhile or meaningful.

And of course, that can be future employment focussed.

But quite often it's about feeling that they're doing something that really engages them in the ways of thinking and practising of the discipline.

So it can be very much about helping them feel more like an historian, feel more like a philosopher,

feel more like an engineer, because some of these subject areas don't necessarily lead to very clear professional pathways.

And that can make people think, Oh, I wonder if this is for us.

And actually, it is because it's about helping your students to get engaged in complex knowledge, advancing the discipline, I suppose,

but also thinking of themselves as someone who is joining that community and those kinds of challenging,

complex ways of thinking that characterise higher education. So it's often about helping them to see that this is really exciting,

interesting and meaningful to them in their own lives as well or in community focussed projects, that kind of thing.

I'm sure we'll say a little bit more about this as we go through,

but it's kind of important not to just think of it as work related learning or placement kinds of stuff because that whilst that's really important,

it's not the whole story with authentic assessment. It makes it sound really exciting and engaging for students and also lines up for a lot of the values

in higher education and those values that we talk about at Newcastle University as well.

So how can staff engaging with

authentic assessment measure or judge the success of these authentic assessment innovations that they're putting into place with their students?

Well, you've already started yourself on that bridge in that when students are engaged in authentic assessments that work for them,

work for the course and line up with the learning outcomes, then they tend to be more engaging and more enjoyable.

And students don't just see it as on the hamster wheel, just going through the motions.

They see it as something that's worth investing in. So that's on one level is none of this is easy to physically measure,

except, Kay and I have, over the last three years, worked a lot with universities with authentic assessment,

and the universities that change their assessment during the pandemic have tended to keep them going and moved

away from too much traditional assessment towards using a wider diversity of assessments that is more authentic,

not just because it's engaging for students, but also because they see benefits in terms of student satisfaction.

I mean, actual NFS outcomes and in terms of student achievement,

because the toughest thing we found since the pandemic has been trying to keep students engaged,

lots and lots of people are talking about how students having gone through that time at school before they get to us and during their time at university,

they were then not actually spending lots and lots of time in face-to-face activities.

When they start getting involved in assessment, they've got to see the value of it.

That's why I think it's really important.

Kay, you're keen on authentic assessment and its values as well, aren't you.

Well, I think it's about, you rarely with authentic assessment keep it a secret till the end of the learning process.

And so when we're talking about that kind of engagement that Sally has just been talking about,

you're kind of wanting students to really spend time on task.

And so if they know that they're going to develop the sorts of complex kinds of ways of engaging with

principals or theories or subject material that they can use again in novel contexts down the line,

then that takes time to learn. You can't just cram that. You can't just sort of suddenly produce that out of thin air.

So it kind of spreads the learning process right across your module and ideally your programme.

A bit more like you do quite often in a research project that students will do in the final year,

you're going for that kind of spreading the load over time.

So they're developing as they go rather than just putting a foot on the gas

because they know how to do a good essay or they know how to do cram for an exam.

And so I see it as much more inclusive as well, and it's much more social and it kind of gets you engaged over the spread of time as a community.

And that can be really, really powerful and very energising because they start to see how else things can be done and what else is going on.

And lots of universities who talk to us have been talking about fostering a sense of belonging.

And crucially, the trouble with belonging is it's a nebulous concept.

But one of the things that's very clear from the literature on belonging is the interaction with peers,

and this community support they get from one another is of great importance.

So authentic assessment that involves students in doing tasks together can be a real benefit in terms of

helping students to feel that they belong in their subject community and their university.

That's some really exciting stuff and lots of kind of overlap with other conversations we have across

HE about inclusivity and the well-being that comes with belonging and a better learning as well.

So how could we kind of make a start and work out when we're doing in terms of enough authentic assessment?

Well, I think, Kay and I are really keen that we don't say, well,

this is authentic and this isn't what we're very interested in to try and make sure that authentic assessment is right,

for that course, for that level, for those students, for that discipline.

So it might be the case that actually we're simply changing something like the audience that the students are writing for.

We don't have to say - change the format radically,

but just ask them to think about who the recipients of the writing are very often in traditional assessment,

it's all just written almost abstractly for the tutor.

Or, we don't really know who it's for and students that Kay

and I did research on years and years and years ago,

We'd talk about assessment going into a black box and then the result coming up the other end, I think with the kinds of things we're talking about;

you don't have to be all or nothing. It can be just changing the focus slightly.

I've talked about changing the audience, but there are other things that you can change to build in realistic scenarios and plausible contexts so that

what the students are doing are still very much the same kinds of things they were doing in their exams before.

But instead of just saying, write an essay on this,

you provide them with a plausible scenario or realistic context and ask them to write the response to that,

rather than just a traditional, old fashioned,

quite boring for students, and boring for us to mark essay type questions that they might encounter in an exam.

Kay? Yeah, I think again, this goes back to sort of perceptions of authentic assessment.

So often people will use a different format other than the traditional time constraint exam or the essay.

And Sally's talking about some tweaking that, if you like, to give it a bit more of a sense of plausibility.

But it's not a sort of all-or-nothing thing. I see it as a spectrum rather than an absolute.

So there are, you know, getting students to create an executive summary or getting students to work on an exam where they have open notes.

So they're actually it's more authentic because they are actually consulting material, which is how it kind of works in the real world.

You know, so there's no sort of one tried and tested alternative format.

We do tend to consider a wider range of alternative outputs, if you like.

But they don't have to be. You can make an exam a little bit more authentic or you can make an essay,

you know, take a step in making an essay, have a slightly different audience.

I once saw a really interesting one,

I think it was in English where the lecturer got students to create an anthology instead of writing an essay on whatever it was American literature.

She got them to work on creating an anthology for people who were going to look at these things.

So they've got a very different sense of communicating their subject area and

all the complex theory that goes alongside that and analytical approaches.

But they communicated it in a slightly different way, and it was so powerful in terms of the student experience.

They absolutely, but they don't always entirely love it immediately because it's quite challenging.

But the problem is that some students don't find the essay format terribly challenging because they're not,

you know, they're not really engaging in it in the full way that academics see

the essay. So, I think about it as tipping them into a kind of sense of communicating their subject knowledge in ways that are palpably different.

And that can be for some students that can be really, really powerful and engaging.

So I've just been working with some pharmacists and the it's in pharmacy, of course,

dosage and calculating dosage, and that kind of thing is incredibly important.

And their exams tended to be very much based around just doing calculations,

and they've actually found the student get a lot more engaged if those calculations are related to a particular context of a particular patient.

Actually building in that realism makes for a more authentic exam while they're still doing exactly the same thing.

So you don't have to go the whole hog. You can do it incrementally.

And some really good answers, and it kind of gets us on to

the sort of idea of well and showing that we have a healthy balance between these sort of innovations like authentic assessment,

but also a sense of consistency and familiarity. So students don't become overloaded with that learning of assessment.

And are there any sort of advice or tricks and tips you could offer on how to kind of support the students and the staff in this sort of balancing act?

Well, I think I mean, ideally at programme level, this would be the time to have what we say, and I often call the programme spring clean.

Where, you actually look at the assessments that your students are doing across the whole programme, you know,

with Post-it Notes and just map it in the way that you might do it if you are having a, you know, a review.

But it can be a really helpful thing to see where they are doing something.

What you're using one format over and over and over again. Or, you're introducing a novel format to them quite late in the programme,

they've not had a chance to have a go at those sorts of things at the lower levels.

So I think, you know, mapping your assessment strategies to a programme level,

which also gives you the chance to say, Are we actually overdoing this, folks?

Are we doing too much? Is it reasonable for us and them?

Sally, I don't know if you've got. Yeah.

What I wanted to talk a bit about was practice runs, rehearsals, opportunities to ask questions, ideally opportunities to get things wrong.

We talk about first attempt in learning fail. So practise runs which happen in class before they have to do the summer school assessment.

Now, Kay and I often say to people, Look, we think you need to look at your time in class, not as separate from assessment,

but totally integrated Kay particularly is one of the key proponents of assessment, for learning.

We've both been in that from the beginning.

But the key thing about assessments is if you treat it as something that happens after the learning is taking place,

then you're missing the trick because the practise runs the rehearsals working

out how to do drug calculations while you're actually within the classroom,

within the lecture room. And I'm not just talking about little classes.



This happens in lots of programmes in very big lectures,

but the practise runs that's taking place in the face-to-face interactions are where assessment for learning happens.

And I think the whole pandemic has made us rethink the time that we have students in the classroom.

I know of programmes where they said, actually, we're not going to do formal lectures the way we used to.

We're going to create in advance reusable learning objects, which is about eight minutes of input from the lecturer, which is pre-recorded.

And then the lecturer live in class,

uses his or her pre-recorded elements and then interacts with them and gets students doing things with them in the classroom.

It's a different way of thinking about teaching, which is not a mono directional thing, but more a partnership and whoever wants,

as I came across one programme, where they were teaching 18 times the same lecture because they didn't have a big enough classroom for all of their students.

So what they did is to look at ways where that learning could happen alongside formative assessment,

formative assessment, not separate from the interacting within the learning sessions.

And I think that leads very nicely to them. To one of the main tactics, if you like, of assessment for learning, especially in big groups,

is using things like exemplars or helping students to actually get their heads around.

What an assignment, what all the stuff that you put in your assignment brief looks like in practise.

So students need to get that heads round what standards look like.

Students need to get their heads round what criteria look like in concrete illustrations of work in progress,

and that kind of thing can be very powerfully done in quite a short space of time.

Using worked examples really carefully chosen or specially written extracts, if you like,

of the kind of things that you're really trying to ... pedagogic points you're trying to make.

You can really engage students to think about assessment from the assessors point of view.

I'm not talking about marking work necessarily,

but helping them to see what standards and criteria look like in time for them to make a change if they need to.

They need to learn to see how they're going, rather than relying solely on a lecturer to tell them all the time.

So I think these formative activities that Sally is talking about aren't necessarily about

people doing more marking they're about flipping an assessment into spaces where you're

having these discussions and interactions and sense making things around standards and

criteria at different points throughout the learning process. And picking up on that point, Kay,

I mean, the whole point of all this is that we don't want to make loads and loads

of extra work for the lecturers, if we ask people to do more and more work, they'll just say, you must be kidding.

However, if it's carefully planned and it's planned by a programme

team, making tweaks or changes to the assessment pattern doesn't have to be a major task that's going to run people into the ground.

Actually, from the examples that we've mentioned in the diverse compendia we've put together of good practise authentic assessment.

You can see not only the staff involved in much smaller items of assessment sometimes, but not all of those items have to be assessed by staff.

They can be discussed by students or students themselves can compare to exemplars.

This is not about loading up the staff with loads and extra loads of extra work,

but they will need to give themselves, if in effect, an induction into authentic assessment, not on their own.

It's got to work with colleagues to do this so that it's not basically digging a massive hole that they then got to find ways to fill.

Don't throw the baby out with the bath water, work with the assessments you've got,

and just say to yourself thinking about authentic assessment principles, how can we make this a bit more authentic?

Oh, there's so much good stuff in those answers. Lots of stuff about the peer learning, which of course, is another huge topic which drastically overlaps,

which supports your earlier comments about the community supporting students,

the feeling of, you know, feeling welcome and belonging in that group, which will enhance their learning and their assessment literacy as well.

Being able to learn about that assessment, learn the rubrics and how to assess the work themselves or very powerful autonomous learning.

And again, university values all supported here with the sort of plethora of things that

a member of staff could be doing when we talk about peer learning assessment, which say an authentic learning and authentic assessment,

it can sometimes feel with all the examples that are available, I sort of a paralysing paradox of choice.

And so

What questions could a module leader ask themselves to help work out what's most effective for their students amongst all of these choices?

And how do they make a first step from moving from a simple essay to something more meaningful for students and their learning?

And I think the first step they should do is do a little bit of creative upcycling from what other people are doing.

We've worked across subject communities across the UK and indeed internationally,

and you'll find examples not just in the UK but of Ireland, Hong Kong elsewhere in our compendium.

The key thing is you've got to have a look at what other people are doing in disciplines like yours and say, Could we do something like that?

I like that, but I don't like that bit. All the people who've generously contributed to our compendium are very approachable.

And my guess is, if you wanted to say, Oh, I love what you're doing in Belfast, can we just have a chat on the phone.

People are really, really open to that. So first step is don't feel you've got to start from a blank sheet of paper.

Have a look around and see what other people are doing. I've said, start from your own discipline.

But again, when we do the workshops where we are asking them to use a range of disciplines, people go, Oh oh, that's so microbiology.

But I could see how I could use that in history because you're asking students to make some A-level revision notes.

Well, we could do that in history. You're asking students to do a two-minute podcast, which is a mini explainer.

Well, that doesn't just apply to surgical principles. We could use that as an explainer about how to tackle mediaeval German.

So it doesn't all have to be right from a blank page.

No, that's right. But yeah, I think it's really important to start small,

but don't sort of go get launched off out of your comfort zone because if you're out of your comfort zone, probably the students will be too.

So that's why these taking a smaller step and moving in a more authentic direction is a really positive thing.

And of course, talk to students, talk to former students.

If you're an external examiner, you'll be hopefully talking to other people's students and getting these kind of worked.

Examples of the art of the possible in your discipline area is a really useful thing to do so that you can adapt it, tweak it to your Newcastle context.

In this instance, if they can hear, Chris, you're playing back, you know Newcastle's values and Newcastle's sort of strategy, if you like.

You'd need to explain this to students, too. I think there's a lot of it,

so there's a sense in which you need to be clear yourself about why the step that you're taking to

move this in a more authentic direction is going to be really helpful and powerful for your students.

And the more you can explain that and the more comfortable you feel with it, the better it's going to go.

But talk to your students, get them to talk to you about what really floats their boat,

what helps them to think about things in complex and challenging ways,

what helps them to see how they're going while they're actually moving towards the ultimate learning goals?

Then those kinds of things are really, really useful and time really well spent sort of stress testing something before you launch.

Absolutely. And that was just the point I was going to pick up.

I'm glad you said stress testing because in the four and a half decades I've worked to an assessment in higher education.

The biggest disasters I've had have been when I've gone, Oh, I know what I can do,

and I launch off on something and I nowadays always for myself, I'd recommend to others that you do destruction testing.

That is to say, when you've created a new approach, you get together a bunch

of people who might include people who are least likely to like your approach to assessment and they might include alumni and other students,

students from parallel courses, students from your own course and say to them, How can we break this?

How can we make this not work?

What can you see that might go wrong so that you won't end up with a ludicrous marketing scheme like I did once that you won't end up

with something where you're driving yourself insane with having to watch endless five minute presentations by individual students,

which mean your workload balloons,

what you need to do is to do the destruction testing first of all and go what could possibly be wrong because some of it will do that.

We learnt a lot during the pandemic. What could possibly go wrong if the internet goes down?

What could possibly go wrong if, as in Kay's case a tree falls on her internet in the middle of something she's doing?

What could possibly go wrong

if students are unable to leave the house for a fortnight and whatever else it is destruction testing is something we should be thinking about,

not just in crisis times, but all the time. Some really sound advice.

I think we're kind of getting into a little another hot topic a moment ago about co-creation with students.

What was known might talk about students as partners and partners in learning,

engaging as students in with this sort of learning activity and the designs and these innovations.

Does that help limit that disruption to student's kind of learning and how their involvement in their assessment works?

I'm going to I'm going to start replying with two anecdotes, and then I'm sure Kay will have more to add.

So my two anecdotes are working in a very, very, very posh university once where one of the tutors said to me, I just don't get what you're saying.

How can students possibly be involved in the assessment of each other because they don't know anything?

And that was his deeply felt belief. And then I go back to another course where I was doing some service teaching,

where I saw a surveyor doing the teaching class to a bunch of surveyors, many of whom who've come in from industry on day release.

And at the end of the session on how to use a particular piece of kit.

One of the students quietly came up to him and said, Actually, we don't do it that way anymore.

We've actually got very different equipment. Would you like me to bring it in next week?

And then the student was able to add enormously to the learning of fellow students.

And in terms of what that did for that student's confidence, he wasn't a very confident student and he wasn't doing terribly well.

But by goodness, he did afterwards. I think we've got to work very closely with students in partnership.

I think these yes, I think the notion of co-construction, again, it can vary,

it depends on what level they're being involved in, at what level they themselves are at.

But I think it's really healthy to have ongoing conversations with students to see where they're at.

But when it comes to authentic assessment, again,

one of the sort of smaller things that are very powerful to do is give students some element of choice.

So that they're not all feeling that they're churning through the same question, the same thing.

And that's very easy to do with, you know, the traditional essay. Give them a sense of choice of location or a sense of the choice

of the theoretical material or the sense of the choice of the focus of their assignment.

And once they got that sense of individual ownership, that can be a really powerful driver.

It also helps them to see that, you know, all answers don't look the same in complex, challenging tasks.

Many times you don't all have converge on the same response.

You know, the essay doesn't do that. So there's the sense in which if they can locate it in something that they're passionate

about or interested in or know about or have future aspirations around that can be really,

really powerful. And you can do that in the early years as much as you can in the traditional dissertation module.

So I think it's always using that kind of mechanism of thinking,

how can we scaffold students to become more independent autonomous choice makers who apply their knowledge to complex issues throughout the level four,

five and six that can really, really help? And that's what authentic assessment is actually all about,

helping them to have dialogic interactions around their subject material at the right kind of level.

I'm picking up on Kay's point about choice. If we say to students studying 21st century literature, if we specify 10 texts,



they have to refer to, that could end up making some students who maybe haven't got

a traditional English school based curriculum that can make them feel alienated.

If we're saying that when we're looking at case studies on particular diseases, if we specify one only common in the western world,

that disadvantaged students who might have been working clinically in other parts of the world where

other things that are rare in the UK are actually much more familiar to them in their own context.

I think the choice element allows students not only to bring that unique perspective,

but also enables them to draw on pre-university experience,

which in many cases is very expensive and we tend to recognise failed to recognise it at our peril.

Some wonderful advice about recognising the value and experiences of our students when they come to us, they're not blank canvases or empty vessels.

Something we really value is steps to constructivist approach to recognising students backgrounds and scaffolding that learning.

So that's some really good advice. We've kind of mentioned a little bit about how feedback isn't just from the assessor.

We do have assessment, well, peer assessment and therefore peer feedback.

But in terms of the assessors feedback, when utilising these, very rich and engaging modes of assessment.

How can we ensure that the feedback is also timely, rich and usable for those students when it's part of a summative?

When it is part of a summative I think I think we've got to think quite carefully about what we mean by feedback and the issue is that feedback,

if you simply see it as information which is delivered to someone is when it only comes at the summated point is too late you know it's after the fact.

So it's much better, much more useful to think of feedback as a process, which is wound almost like DNA throughout the learning and teaching process.

And then that information is not just coming from the tutor, but it's coming from a whole range of sources.

So and I think if you're thinking about summative feedback,

there's a sense in which you need to think I've often sort of slimming that down to be manageable, doable, but also useful.

So think about where it's going to land in future because we spend an awful lot of time writing feedback on summative work,

which doesn't actually sometimes even get read.

Because if you talk the students, why is that it's because they can't see how they're going to ever use it again, because they've already done that bit.

Now this is to some degree, a problem with much organisation.

But rather than spending all your very limited workload time on that element,

bring it forward so that you're devising activities that are before the facts.

And that's when feedback information becomes usable.

And some people, like Dave Barry would say,

you can't even call it feedback unless somebody actually does something with it unless it changes behaviour.

When you think like that, then you start thinking, Well, what else are we going to do?

And of course, the workload issue really comes in feedback donation, if you like or delivery is a massively time consuming model.

So spend it really wisely and focus on

action points and that kind of thing where students can actually do something with it.

And thinking back to when I was a pro vice chancellor at a big northern Metropolitan University,

I caused a riot because I started saying, Well, why do you need to have written feedback on final dissertations?

Because students probably don't read much of it?

And why don't you make it the final dissertations

look, people can have a discussion about how they felt like did if they request it, and these courses that tried

that found a tiny number of students came to have a look at discussion about the feedback and the hours of work that saved.

I said to them instead, invest the time earlier in the final year, giving students feedback at a time when it could be some use to them.

So, form of feedback during the production of that final major piece of work is much, much more

use them writing carefully crafted comments on a final piece of work that frankly, they've possibly never going to look at.

But it wasn't always popular because people felt, you know,

you have to do justice to the student's work, try asking the students and see what they want.

It was a really nice model, Newcastle, when I was an external examiner on the combined honours project,

and they had a sort of team approach to delivering the summative comments on work and that, to my mind, would seem to work really well.

It was really very focussed and it focussed on sort of, I think it was three action points and three strengths.

So it was a very targeted, really helpful.

But they it was wrapped around, of course, with all these assessment for learning approaches,

which was shot through the the formative activities before the event.

So it's about getting that balance right. But I think you've got to be really mindful of workload with all of these things for students

and for staff and making that really manageable and really is as useful as it can be,

rather than a chore that it often becomes. This has been a wonderful conversation.

So much rich stuff to kind of dig into, of course, will be putting up a link to the COVID assessment blog that you've been keeping,

which has had so many useful ideas and examples for people to use.

And just to kind of summarise,

I think we've kind of hit on a few of key ideas that can help anyone gets involved in authentic assessments and to evaluate what they're doing.

Starting off with changing format or audience, but also engaging with others,

whether that's engaging with your colleagues in how you present these innovations to make sure that their programme level suitable

and structured and scaffold it for your students taking ideas from colleagues who are already working in authentic assessment,

whether in your discipline or beyond. And also engaging the students in that authentic assessment.

What are they getting out of it? What do they want from this? And how can we ensure that that's going to bring value to them?

And lastly, I'd say that stress testing any new idea sounds like an excellent approach.

Great. Thank you, Chris. Thank you very much for your time.

Sally Brown, Kay Sambell, you've been wonderful guests and thank you again.

So I want to round off by saying thank you to Professor Sally Brown and Kay Sambell for their

really wonderful insights and informative ways of approaching authentic assessment.

I'd like to thank you for listening. If you want to find out more, you can go to our learning and teaching blog or learning and teaching website.

And while you're here, remember to like, subscribe and download the rest of the podcast and tell everyone else, you know.

Thanks so much. Bye.