

Critiquing the Signature Assignment

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Abstract

The assessment I am critiquing is taken from an EdX course, a massive open online course (MOOC), entitled Instructional Design and Technology 300x: Digital Media, New Tools, and Technology. The assessment did not squarely align with the learning activities or instructional strategy and did not align with the learning outcomes cited in the syllabus or the learner's needs. I would recommend changing both portions of the assessment to authentic assessments. In addition to reframing these activities into authentic assessments, I would recommend the development and use of two rubrics—one for each part of the assessment. Overall, the EdX course was well-designed with appropriate learning activities and a strong framework for a successful community of inquiry. However, the course design failed with regard to the assessment.

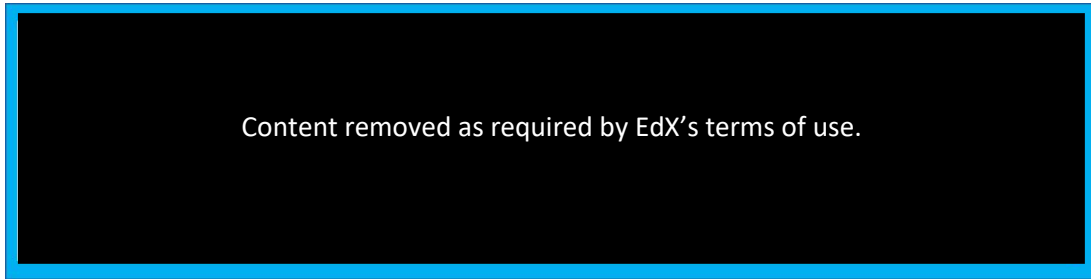
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Introduction and Thesis

The assessment I am critiquing is taken from an EdX course, a massive open online course (MOOC), entitled Instructional Design and Technology 300x: Digital Media, New Tools, and Technology. I took the course a year ago to learn more about various technological tools. I found the learning activities to be well designed and the course facilitators to effectively establish an online community of inquiry with social presence. The course included instructional videos, weekly assignments, discussion boards, and quizzes. The final assessment for the course was the Signature Assignment, an individual, summative assessment. The assessment did not squarely align with the learning activities or instructional strategy and did not align with the learning outcomes cited in the syllabus or the learner's needs. Since the course was otherwise well-designed, I have chosen the Signature Assignment as the topic of my critique and will offer recommendations for improved alignment with the learning activities, learner's needs, and learning outcomes.

The Assessment

The Signature Assignment was a two-part assessment, including a one to two-page paper and a digital media presentation. The activity was designed for instructional design and technology students pursuing a four-course certificate in instructional design and technology, a MicroMasters offered by the University of Maryland. The course was free except for those pursuing the MicroMasters. The assessment was a mix of authentic assessment, essay, and reflection with presentation. An authentic assessment "encourages learners to actually *do* something to demonstrate knowledge acquisition rather than taking a test of quiz" (Palloff & Pratt, 2009, p. 18). Part One of the assessment, Figure 1, involved a short paper linking digital media resources to critical thinking and creating a plan to incorporate tools.



Part Two, Figure 2, required a digital media presentation.

The activity was learner-centered, encouraging learners to reflect on what they had learned regarding digital technology and consider plans for incorporating it in learning environments. The activity did not allow any significant choices for learner control. Part one required a paper rather than allowing for other types of media, and various topics for choice were not presented. Part Two required a presentation and did not allow significant choices for the types of media uses, other than choosing PowerPoint or Prezi or similar software.

There was no explicit statement that the assessment was criterion referenced. In fact, no criteria were given for the Signature Assignment. The only specifications were due date, the submission method, the length of the paper for Part One, and the format for Part Two. The expectations were not clear as there were no examples of successful work, no lists of required elements, and no rubrics.

Alignment

Alignment with Learning Activities

The assessment aligned with some of the learning activities. For example, the Week 2 Activity gave options of creating a blog or podcast using Web 2.0 tools (performance assessments) or developing a personal plan for future use of these tools (University of Maryland, 2018b). The personal plan is in line with Part One of the assessment. However, other learning activities, such as Week 5 involved adding digital technology to a single objective learning

activity (University of Maryland, 2018b). The Week 5 activity is consistent with authentic assessments. The Signature Assignment was in part authentic. Subpart 3 of Part One of the assessment involved authentic assessment, creating a plan to incorporate technologies within a learning environment. However, the other two components of Part One were not authentic. Part Two was not an authentic assessment.

Alignment with Learning Objectives

The course syllabus provides that the learning outcomes are: Upon completion of this course, you will learn: 1) How to design and use instructional materials to enhance online teaching and learning; 2) Curriculum design techniques to develop technology-enhanced learning experiences; 3) How to engage stakeholders to collaborate, design and evaluate learning experiences and programs (University of Maryland, 2018a).

Mager (1997b) stated that “[a]n objective always states what the learner is expected to be able to do and/or produce to be considered competent” (p. 46). Thus, I have rewritten the objectives to state: 1) Be able to design and use instructional material to enhance online teaching and learning; 2) Be able to develop technology-enhanced learning experiences through application of curriculum design techniques; 3) With a clear design plan and well-communicated presentation, be able to engage stakeholders to collaborate, design and evaluate learning experiences and programs.

Based on these clarified objectives, one would expect authentic assessments. Mager (1997a) stated that:

[w]hen the performance mentioned in the objective is OVERT and at the same time the MAIN INTENT, the test item looks almost identical to the objective, the objective describes what students should be able to do, and the test item says, ‘Do it.’ (p. 53).

Thus, Objective One would lead to a rewritten objective and the subsequent assessment item in Figure 3.

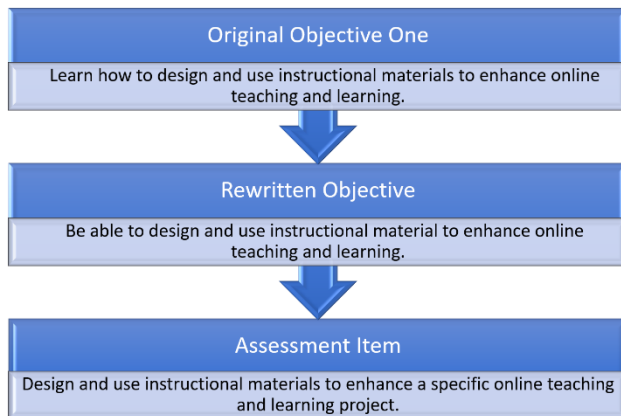


Figure 1 - Process diagram of Objective One as revised and aligned with assessment item.

In the same fashion, the second objective would require an assessment item to develop a technology-enhanced learning experience. The third objective would be aligned with an assessment item, to present a clear design plan in a well-communicated presentation to engage stakeholders to collaborate, design and evaluate learning experiences and programs.

Authentic assessments allow the learner to “effectively demonstrate not only acquisition of knowledge but ability to apply that knowledge in professional or other settings” (Palloff and Pratt, 2009, p. 76). Thus, authentic assessments are particularly appropriate for this MOOC, a course for professionals in instructional technology and design. Palloff and Pratt (2009) also suggest that “[s]tudents perceive the value of the assessment, as it demands real-world performance of learning” (p. 76). Palloff and Pratt (2009) also posit that authentic assessments are “not only a better indicator of knowledge acquisition, but also more likely to align with outcomes and competencies” (p. 18).

Alignment with Learner Needs

If the learner needs to acquire the skills listed in the objectives, then the assessment is not meeting learner needs. If the learner's needs are met simply by interaction with technology, then perhaps the assessment has value to the learner. Since these are learners training to be professionals in the field of instructional technology, authentic assessments would best meet their needs. The assessment as originally designed, as part authentic, does not verify that learning objectives have been met. The assessment fails to align with learner needs.

Recommendations for Improvement

I would recommend changing both portions of the assessment to authentic assessments. Part One could be developing a design plan which incorporates appropriate digital technology to enhance learning. The plan could be short, one to two pages, based on the complexity of the learning activity. Part One would read, "Create a design plan for a learning activity which incorporates digital technology to enhance learning outcomes." Part One would address the first two learning objectives. Part Two could be an authentic assessment focusing on stakeholder engagement to address the third learning objective. Part Two would read, "Create a ten-minute presentation, using your choice of digital media, which persuades stakeholders that your incorporation of digital technology is suitable for their instructional needs as pertains to a specific learning design."

In addition to reframing these activities into authentic assessments, I would recommend the development and use of two rubrics—one for each part of the assessment. According to Palloff and Pratt (2009), rubrics "provide clarity in expectations for student performance" (p. 68). The rubrics should at least include criterion for satisfactory and unsatisfactory performance levels, but criteria for exceptional performance would be helpful as well in helping students hone

their skills as instructional designers. Palloff and Pratt (2009) emphasize that authentic assessments are “effectively assessed through the use of rubrics” (p. 76).

Conclusion

Overall, the EdX course was well-designed with appropriate learning activities and a strong framework for a successful community of inquiry. However, the course design failed with regard to the assessment. Had the assessment included a rubric and aligned the learning objectives with two authentic assessments, the course design would have been exemplary. The course designers clearly focused on learning activities more than the assessment, an approach which makes sense in this MOOC setting. All learners were participating in the formative assessments and learning activities while only a portion would complete the Signature Assignment. My critique of this assessment has emphasized the importance of rubrics and of fully aligning assessments with clear learning objectives. In order to effectively meet learning objectives, the entire course design, rather than just learning activities, must be carefully reviewed for alignment.

References

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