Introduction to *TechTrends* Special Issue: Authentic Learning Experiences via Distance Learning

Victoria L. Lowell¹ · Linda L. Campion²

Published online: 10 June 2020

© Association for Educational Communications & Technology 2020

This special edition of *TechTrends* aims to provide readers with a rich snapshot of the current landscape of research studies, practices, and discussions around authentic learning experiences in distance education. Toward this goal, we sought original papers that discussed authentic learning to enhance instruction offered at a distance in various contexts including higher education, primary or secondary schools, corporate training and non-profit organizations.

Authentic learning, sometimes referred to as “learning by doing,” (Anzai and Simon 1979), is an instructional method that involves learning experiences connecting classroom instruction or training to real-world issues, problems, and applications. Authentic learning has been touted as a method to further engage learners allowing them to connect their knowledge and skills through experiences that will better prepare and replicate tasks in their careers. Implementing authentic learning through instruction offered at a distance, including online learning, can be challenging. Researchers have noted that creating curricula which includes authentic learning, particularly to real-life problems, is time-intensive, requires significant planning prior to implementation, and must also include significant scaffolding and flexibility due to unexpected challenges. Additionally, instructors may find managing the facilitation of students completing different projects difficult increasing the need to create robust assessments (Brush and Saye 2000; Stefaniak 2015). Yet successful authentic learning is possible in distance education and online learning and practitioners and researchers are finding ways to create effective authentic learning experiences that are meeting the needs of

their learners. A variety of projects will be found in this special issue with specific examples and design details we encourage you to examine. The timeliness of this issue cannot be understated.

Included in this issue are eleven manuscripts showcasing the theoretical underpinnings, benefits, and applied uses of authentic learning in practice. The articles reflect some of the diverse and innovative authentic learning practices that are being proposed and used in distance education, in particular, online distance education. Among the manuscripts, there are research articles using various methodologies, as well as conceptual and theoretical papers, and literature syntheses. They emphasize innovative practices and methods of authentic learning experiences via distance education providing readers with practical and applicable ideas, methods, and techniques on topics related to authentic learning experiences aligning with the *TechTrends* mission of “linking research and practice to improve learning”.

The common theme linking these highly diverse articles is that they consider the context of the learning, the learner’s needs, and the application of educational technology in the design and delivery of authentic learning experiences. We start our issue with some of the literature that has been published on authentic learning for distance and online learning in the field of higher education.

Jill Stefaniak presents a systematic review of research examining instructional supports used to facilitate e-service-learning experiences in an online environment and proffers a conceptual framework to support the design of learning experiences that promote service-learning, real-world experiences, while contending with contextual factors that impact transfer of learning in authentic contexts. Jill also examines how instructional scaffolds are being used in digital settings to mitigate design challenges and promote authentic experiences through e-service-learning activities.

Kyungmee Lee presents a method of instruction integrating both the epistemological and ontological approaches to instruction. Kyungmee does this through the addition of

✉ Victoria L. Lowell
vllowell@purdue.edu

Linda L. Campion
campionl16@ecu.edu

¹ Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA

² East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, USA

autoethnography with her doctoral students as they examine the combination of “knowing” and “becoming” in their field of study.

Victoria Lowell and Rob Moore discuss the re-design of an online graduate course for novice instructional designers to provide real-life authentic learning experiences and improve their practical knowledge and skills for transfer to their careers. Through the integration of a real-world project situated in a real-life context, students develop instructional design skills, including: project management; stakeholder negotiation; and product design, development, and testing.

Tiffany Anne Roman, Matthew Callison, Rodney Myers, and Anne Berry argue that a central challenge in facilitating authentic learning in distance education settings is the difficulty of providing comprehensive scaffolds to learners. To address this challenge, they discuss the research they completed and critical design decisions made in the design and development process of a technology tool developed to support authentic learning.

Jessica Devine, Kristen Bourgault, and Ruth Schwartz share two examples and specific design elements utilized to ensure an authentic learning experience for students completing their capstone projects. In an online master’s program, they have exhibited authentic learning is possible.

Ümit Kartoğlu, Ria Christine Siagian, and Thomas C. Reeves utilized the educational design research (EDR) model as they transitioned a face-to-face training course to an online authentic learning environment. By doing so, the World Health Organization now offers award-winning e-learning instruction; their motto “Go authentic.”

Crystal Marull and Swapna Kumar introduce online “telecollaborative language coaching sessions” with native speaking coaches into their online language course. This connection, they show, increases their student’s ability to comprehend and speak their new language, while making important cultural connections as well.

Nikki James and Andrea Humez discuss their Virtual Business Project; a model of team based, industry engaged experiential learning, where teams of students complete a business project for an industry sponsor, aided by instructional

technology, to apply their technical skills and build twenty-first century competencies while studying.

Noelle Wall Sweany, Emily Finbow, Yun Li, and Rebecca Burgner present a project where students in an Advanced Instructional Design course spent a semester designing content for a client through a partnership between the Texas A&M School of Innovation (I-School), Texas A&M Educational Technology program, and the Texas New Ventures Competition.

Susan Loucks and Gamze Ozogul discuss preparing business students for a distributed workforce and global business environment through learning virtual leadership skills in an authentic context.

Nandita Gurjar describes the impact of social networking in an online course on the authentic learning experience. The course itself was designed utilizing authentic learning principles, but the implementation of social networking constructs and tasks truly drove home the authenticity of the students’ learning.

The timeliness of this issue cannot be understated. In a period when most instruction has moved to a remote or online format, finding ways to provide effective instruction and learning experiences can be challenging. Therefore, we hope this issue will prove some insight into how others are meeting this challenge.

References

- Anzai, Y., & Simon, H. A. (1979). The theory of learning by doing. *Psychological Review*, 86, 124–140.
- Brush, T., & Saye, J. (2000). Implementation and evaluation of a student-centered learning unit: a case study. *Educational Technology Research & Development*, 48(3), 79–100.
- Stefaniak, J. E. (2015). The implementation of service-learning in graduate instructional design coursework. *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*, 27(1), 2–9. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12528-015-9092-7>.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.