Authentic learning is “focused on real-world, complex problems and their solutions, using role-playing exercises, problem-based activities, case studies, and participation in virtual communities of practice” (Lombardi, 2007, ¶ 5). Problems, situations, or issues are encountered in the messy context in which they exist. Encountering problems, situations, and issues requires that the learner draw from an evolving base of data, information and knowledge about multiple perspectives and disciplines. This approach to authentic learning requires that the learner grapple with the multidimensional nature of problems rather than the taken-out-of-context approach that dominates many lectures, discussion, and group projects in the traditional classroom.

Another feature of authentic learning is the embedded social interactions. Being able to work in teams to grapple with situations and draw on each others’ knowledge, social skills, and problem-specific skills mirrors the way the world works; that is, a group of individuals co-constructing their understanding of a situation, how to best approach it, manage it, and evaluating their agreed upon solution to determine it’s value in working through the situation. This co-construction of understanding occurs every day in workplaces, families, friendships, and other common everyday life situations. Herrington and Oliver (2000) describe an instructional design framework for authentic learning environments. The ten characteristics they identified are listed below:

**Ten Characteristics of Authentic Learning (quoted from Herrington, Oliver, Reeves (2003), ¶ 8)**

1. **Authentic activities have real-world relevance:** Activities match as nearly as possible the real-world tasks of professionals in practice rather than decontextualised or classroom-based tasks.

2. **Authentic activities are ill-defined, requiring students to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to complete the activity:** Problems inherent in the activities are ill-defined and open to multiple interpretations rather than easily solved by the application of existing algorithms. Learners must identify their own unique tasks and sub-tasks in order to complete the major task.

3. **Authentic activities comprise complex tasks to be investigated by students over a sustained period of time:** Activities are completed in days, weeks, and months rather than minutes or hours. They require significant investment of time and intellectual resources.

4. **Authentic activities provide the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, using a variety of resources:** The task affords learners the opportunity to examine the problem from a variety of theoretical and practical perspectives, rather than allowing a single perspective that learners must imitate to be successful. The use of a variety of resources rather than a limited number of preselected references requires students to detect relevant from irrelevant information.

5. **Authentic activities provide the opportunity to collaborate:** Collaboration is integral to the task, both within the course and the real world, rather than achievable by an individual learner.

6. **Authentic activities provide the opportunity to reflect:** Activities need to enable learners to make choices and reflect on their learning both individually and socially.

7. **Authentic activities can be integrated and applied across different subject areas and lead beyond domain-specific outcomes:** Activities encourage interdisciplinary perspectives and enable students to play diverse roles thus building robust expertise rather than knowledge limited to a single well-defined field or domain.

8. **Authentic activities are seamlessly integrated with assessment:** Assessment of activities is seamlessly integrated with the major task in a manner that reflects real world assessment, rather than separate, artificial assessment removed from the nature of the task.
9. **Authentic activities create polished products valuable in their own right rather than as preparation for something else:** Activities culminate in the creation of a whole product rather than an exercise or sub-step in preparation for something else.

10. **Authentic activities allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome:** Activities allow a range and diversity of outcomes open to multiple solutions of an original nature, rather than a single correct response obtained by the application of rules and procedures.

Virtual worlds are seen as being fertile environments for authentic learning to occur because they can embody both the physical nature of an experience and the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of learning.

**Key Questions for Discussion**

- How does a completely authentic setting differ from a virtual setting in the context of learning?
- Time on task is described as an important aspect of authentic learning. In what specific ways does time constrain the use of this approach in synchronous and asynchronous classes?
- What value does an authentic learning approach have in any specific discipline in terms of the depth of knowledge, skill development, or values development?
- How do learners transfer learning from a virtual environment to subsequent situations utilizing the same knowledge, skills, and values?

**Resources for Further Exploration**


In a study that examined the effects of an authentic learning environment on student learning, the researchers found that students who worked in an authentic learning environment performed no better than students in a less authentic environment.


This book is a compilation of experiences using an authentic approach to learning. The first chapter highlights the characteristics of authentic learning from the work of Jan Herrington. Subsequent chapters describe individual experiences in using authentic learning environments.


This article is the source for the ten characteristics of authentic learning described above. The authors also describe patterns of engagement that included the concept of “willing suspension of disbelief” that they argue is an important element of engagement in authentic environments. In other words, the learner needs to see the context as a possibility where they can engage in the thinking tasks required by the situation and be less
concerned about the physical environment. According to this perspective, the learner engages in the same kind of experience as watching a movie, where reality is distorted to match their engagement in the movie plot.


The authors describe the development of an instructional design framework for creating authentic learning environments.


A white paper that defines authentic learning, provides examples that utilize this approach to learning, and describes the role that technology plays in creating effective authentic learning environments.