# ASCILITE 2026

***The Future is Connection:***

*Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society*

# "Engaging and exciting": Student perspectives on digital learning, authentic assessment and enabling pedagogy

**Dr Jennifer Stokes, Dr John Pike**
Adelaide University

Students who see purpose or "find meaning" in coursework are more likely to achieve deep learning outcomes (Gee & Esteban-Guitart, 2019, p. 9); yet, there are limited examples which show how to engage learners in this way. Authentic assessment extends engagement through connection to aspirations, "challeng[ing] university students intellectually and creatively" (Australian Technology Network, 2020), and enhancing motivation through purposeful learning aligned to real-world contexts (ACEL, 2016). Enabling pedagogy advocates for purposeful learning connected to student goals (Stokes, 2023). Tai et al. (2022) observe authentic assessment provides opportunities for learners to blend "values […and] future aspirations" (p. 9), and showcase individual strengths and capabilities to demonstrate "distinctiveness" (p. 10). These approaches support design and delivery of meaningful assessment, encouraging student persistence and transformative learning outcomes.

In our research, we investigated digital learning and authentic assessment framed through the lens of enabling pedagogy. Enabling pedagogy is an inclusive, strengths-based approach which focuses on student capabilities, facilitates understanding through dialogue, and supports learner agency at university (Bennett et al., 2018; Hattam et al., 2024; Stokes, 2014). Developed within university enabling programs (Fee-Free University Ready programs), enabling pedagogy offers insight to better support students from underrepresented backgrounds at university, which can inform and guide educators in the implementation of inclusive design and teaching practice across the sector.

Identifying a gap in research on authentic assessment and enabling programs, we investigated student perspectives in an innovative digital literacy course at an Australian university. We built upon Forsyth and Evans' (2019) work to consider inclusive approaches which extend beyond workplace-readiness, and conducted mixed-methods research into student perspectives on digital learning and authentic assessment. Course design and delivery embed enabling pedagogy, assessment is linked to professional production practice, and students actively develop capabilities and agency (Stokes, 2017). To identify course practices that are beneficial and empowering, we collected student perspectives through an online survey based upon Ashford-Rowe et al.'s "critical elements of authentic assessment" (2014). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) of survey responses ($n$ = 25) provided insight into student motivation, engagement, relevance, and authenticity of assessment tasks. Data indicated student perception of task usefulness grew with alignment to authentic assessment. The relationship between choice, motivation and engagement was emphasised; highlighting the importance of "being able to create something that interested me," as one respondent articulated. Assessment design which bore a clear relationship to professional practice was appreciated, as was the development of transferable skills for graduate employment. All respondents saw the value of digital literacy in future careers, and 68% identified they would use digital production in the workplace or further studies "very often" or "often." Respondents indicated purposeful challenge led to enjoyment, and they found benefits in project-based learning in a supportive environment, with one observing this was "more impactful and effective in my learning than traditional methods."

Through this research, we identified strategies and evidence-based recommendations which will assist educators in embedding authentic assessment, and which prepares university students to succeed while also developing skills for professional practice and active societal participation in our increasingly digital world.

*Keywords*: Authentic assessment, digital learning, enabling pedagogy, motivation, purposeful

## References


ACEL. (2016). Authentic learning: What, why and how? *E-Teaching*, *10*. http://www.acel.org.au/acel/ACEL_docs/Publications/e-Teaching/2016/e-Teaching_2016_10.pdf

Ashford-Rowe, K., Herrington, J., & Brown, C. (2014). Establishing the critical elements that determine authentic assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *39*(2), 205–222. doi:10.1080/02602938.2013.819566

Australian Technology Network. (2020). *ATN joint statement on authentic assessment*. Australian Technology Network. https://www.atn.edu.au/news-and-events/latest-news/atn-joint-statement-on-authentic-assessment

Bennett, A., Motta, S. C., Hamilton, E., Burgess, C., Relf, B., Gray, K., Leroy-Dyer, S., & Albright, J. (2018). Enabling pedagogies. A participatory conceptual mapping of practices at the University of Newcastle, Australia. *Open Research Newcastle. Report*. https://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1389907

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781036232078.n9

Forsyth, H., & Evans, J. (2019). Authentic assessment for a more inclusive history. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *38*(4), 748–761. doi:10.1080/07294360.2019.1581140

Gee, J.-P., & Esteban-Guitart, M. (2019). Designing for deep learning in the context of digital and social media. *Comunicar*, *27*(58), 9–18. doi:10.3916/C58-2019-01

Hattam, R., Hattam, Sarah, Weiler, Tanya, & King, Sharron (Eds.). (2024). *Enabling pedagogy and action research for higher education in Australia.* Peter Lang. (Original work published DIO Press)

Stokes, J. (2014). New students and enabling pedagogies: Supporting students from diverse backgrounds through a university enabling program. *The International Journal of Diversity in Education, 13*(2), 115–124. doi:10.18848/2327-0020/CGP/v13i02/40096

Stokes, J. (2017). Inclusion and engagement by design: Creating a digital literacy course to inspire diverse learners in an Australian university enabling program. *Access: Critical Explorations of Equity in Higher Education*, *4*(2), 65–78. https://novaojs.newcastle.edu.au/ceehe/index.php/iswp/article/view/85

Stokes, J. (2023). Enabling pedagogy. *HERDSA Connect*, *45*(1), 20. https://herdsa.org.au/publications/herdsa-connnect/herdsa-connect-vol-45-no-1

Tai, J., Ajjawi, R., Bearman, M., Boud, D., Dawson, P., & Jorre de St Jorre, T. (2022). Assessment for inclusion: Rethinking contemporary strategies in assessment design. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 1–15. doi:10.1080/07294360.2022.2057451



Stokes, J., & Pike, J. (2026, Nov 29 – Dec 2). “Engaging and exciting”: Student perspectives on digital learning, authentic assessment and enabling pedagogy. [Pecha Kucha Presentation]. In Cochrane, T., Narayan, V., Poole, T., Lai, P., Lake, P., Moore, O., & Li, L. (Eds.), *The Future is Connection: Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society*. Proceedings ASCILITE 2026. Brisbane (pp. 136–137). https://doi.org/10.65106/apubs.2026.3349



Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.
The author(s) assign a Creative Commons by attribution license enabling others to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon their work, even commercially, as long as credit is given to the author(s) for the original creation.

© Stokes, J., & Pike, J. 2026