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Motivational authentic assessment: a conceptual framework for assessment design in higher education

Christopher Martin 

Academic Development & Research, The University of Law - Birmingham Campus, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

Authentic assessment is widely used in higher education to connect learning with disciplinary, professional and societal practice. Its motivational value, however, is often assumed rather than explained. This conceptual article uses Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to examine how assessment environments may support or frustrate students' autonomy, competence and relatedness. A critical, integrative synthesis of authentic assessment and SDT scholarship informs a six-stage Motivational Framework for Authentic Assessment Design. The framework treats authenticity as relational and experienced, not as a fixed property of a task, and places the learner's motivational experience at the centre of design. Illustrative examples from biochemistry, early childhood studies, statistics and teacher education show how the framework can be used across disciplinary and professional contexts. The analysis identifies qualifications: examinations can contain authentic features; professional relevance depends on staff currency and whose values are privileged; choice without structure may weaken rather than support autonomy; and inclusive design must anticipate disability, neurodiversity and varied preferences for collaboration. The article argues that authentic tasks create opportunities for meaningful engagement but cannot secure it. Their value depends on the package of teaching, scaffolding, feedback and relationships through which students encounter assessment. It concludes with design questions and priorities for empirical evaluation.

KEYWORDS

Authentic assessment;
Self-Determination
Theory; assessment
design; higher education

Introduction

Assessment has long been recognised as one of the most influential drivers of student learning within higher education. Beyond its summative function of evaluating achievement, assessment shapes what students prioritise, how they allocate their effort and the approaches they adopt towards learning (Boud and Falchikov 2007; Carless 2015). Consequently, assessment is not merely a mechanism for measuring

CONTACT Christopher Martin  Chris.Martin@law.ac.uk  Academic Development & Research, The University of Law - Birmingham Campus, Birmingham, UK.

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learning but an educational intervention capable of influencing students' engagement, motivation and identity as learners (Wigfield and Eccles 2000). Yet, despite substantial advances in pedagogical theory, assessment practices across many higher education institutions continue to rely heavily on traditional formats, including unseen examinations, essays and standardised testing. While these methods remain appropriate for assessing particular forms of disciplinary knowledge and academic reasoning, or are prescribed by Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs), they have been criticised for encouraging strategic or surface approaches to learning, rewarding reproduction over application and offering limited opportunities for students to demonstrate the complex capabilities increasingly demanded beyond university (Boud and Falchikov 2007; Wiggins 1998).

Authentic assessment is also theoretically contested and inconsistently applied. Its popularity has outpaced conceptual clarity, allowing authenticity to become a capacious label for almost any alternative assessment (Arnold and Croxford 2025; Fawns et al. 2025; McArthur 2023). Workplace resemblance is often treated as the decisive test, implicitly equating the 'real world' with graduate employment. This narrows the purposes of higher education by privileging economic productivity over intellectual, ethical and civic contribution. McArthur (2023) instead asks why a task matters, whom it benefits and how it contributes to society, while Vu and Dall'Alba (2014) locate authenticity in students' developing ways of being. These positions also expose a neglected question: whose account of professional or social value is being treated as authoritative? Society, a discipline and a profession are not unitary, and their interests may conflict (Arnold and Croxford 2025).

These critiques reveal a further gap. Scholarship has identified characteristics of authentic assessment, developed multidimensional models and examined disciplinary, ontological and societal forms of authenticity (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown 2014; Fawns et al. 2025; Gulikers, Bastiaens, and Kirschner 2004; McArthur 2023; Vu and Dall'Alba 2014). Less attention has been paid to how students experience an assessment motivationally. Relevance is neither self-evident nor neutral: it is mediated by students' histories and aspirations, staff members' professional currency and the range of perspectives involved in design. A workplace simulation may still feel controlling, inaccessible or outdated, while an essay or examination may demand authentic disciplinary judgement (Stankov 2024). This article therefore does not oppose 'authentic' and 'traditional' formats. It examines assessments that invite consequential application, judgement or participation in disciplinary, professional or societal practice, whatever form the task takes.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a particularly compelling theoretical lens through which this motivational dimension can be examined. Developed by Deci and Ryan (1985) and subsequently refined over four decades of empirical research (Ryan and Deci 2000, 2020), SDT proposes that high-quality, self-determined forms of motivation emerge when three fundamental psychological needs are satisfied: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy refers to experiencing volition and ownership over one's actions; competence concerns feeling capable of meeting appropriately challenging demands; and relatedness reflects the need to experience meaningful connection with others and with the wider social environment. When these psychological needs are supported, individuals are more likely to demonstrate intrinsic

motivation, sustained engagement, deeper learning and enhanced well-being (Ryan and Deci 2020). Conversely, environments that undermine these needs may reduce engagement even when tasks appear inherently valuable or professionally relevant.

Although SDT is influential within educational psychology, its application to authentic assessment design remains underdeveloped. Research links autonomy-supportive teaching, competence-building feedback and relational learning environments with stronger motivation (Ryan and Deci 2020). Yet authentic assessment is still commonly presented as motivating by virtue of its format or realism. This matters because poorly designed choice, opaque standards or exclusionary assumptions can frustrate the very needs through which students might internalise the value of a task. A psychological lens therefore helps explain not simply whether an assessment looks authentic, but why different students may engage with it differently.

This article brings authentic assessment scholarship into dialogue with SDT and develops a Motivational Framework for Authentic Assessment Design. Autonomy, competence and relatedness are treated as design principles rather than hoped-for outcomes. The framework addresses a practical problem: educators can redesign the visible task yet leave intact the controlling instructions, inaccessible expectations, weak scaffolding and impersonal feedback that shape students' experience. It does not assume that learners will respond uniformly or that commitment is a precondition for use. Instead, it identifies conditions that may support the internalisation of value, including among strategic or initially reluctant students, while recognising that design creates possibilities rather than guarantees motivation.

Materials and methods

This is a conceptual study using a critical, integrative synthesis. Its materials comprise established and contemporary scholarship on authentic assessment and Self-Determination Theory, supplemented by literature on inclusive assessment, feedback, constructive alignment and autonomy-supportive teaching. Sources were selected purposively for their conceptual influence, direct relevance to assessment design or capacity to challenge common assumptions about authenticity. The analysis was organised around three questions: how authenticity has been defined; what SDT explains about students' engagement with assessment; and how the two bodies of scholarship can be translated into usable design principles. This approach is interpretive rather than systematic and makes no claim to exhaustive coverage.

Concepts were compared iteratively to identify areas of convergence, tension and omission. Authentic assessment scholarship supplied the dimensions of context, performance, disciplinary participation, identity and social value; SDT supplied an explanatory account of autonomy, competence and relatedness. The six stages of the framework were then developed by mapping these dimensions across the assessment cycle and testing their conceptual usefulness against four disciplinary examples. The examples are illustrative rather than empirical cases and were chosen to vary by discipline, format and proximity to regulated practice. The resulting framework is therefore a theoretical proposition for subsequent empirical testing, not evidence of causal effectiveness.

The synthesis proceeded through repeated movement between theory and design rather than a linear extraction of features. Initial categories drawn from the authentic assessment literature were examined against the three psychological needs, with particular attention to points at which the traditions made different assumptions. Collaboration, for example, is often presented as a characteristic of authenticity, whereas SDT requires closer consideration of whether social arrangements actually foster relatedness. Similarly, choice may appear autonomy-supportive while remaining inconsequential or overwhelming. These tensions were used to refine the framework stages and prevent a simple one-to-one mapping between an assessment feature and a psychological outcome. The framework was considered conceptually adequate when each stage could accommodate variation in format and discipline while retaining a clear motivational question. This process strengthens theoretical coherence, although researcher judgement remains central and should be scrutinised through empirical work.

Results

Authentic assessment reconsidered: from real-world tasks to motivational design

Early accounts positioned authentic assessment as an alternative to indirect tests of recall. Wiggins (1990) emphasised intellectually significant performance: students construct knowledge, solve problems and justify decisions rather than reproduce isolated information. Later work stressed situated learning and the wider assessment ecology. Herrington and Herrington (2006) located learning in realistic problems requiring sustained inquiry and judgement, while Gulikers, Bastiaens, and Kirschner (2004) distinguished the task, physical and social contexts, outcomes, criteria and assessor. This multidimensional view weakens any simple division between formats. An examination, for example, may be authentic when it elicits disciplinary reasoning comparable to valued practice, while a project can be inauthentic when it merely imitates workplace appearance (Stankov 2024).

Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown (2014) further identify cognitive challenge, transfer, metacognition, collaboration, feedback, environmental fidelity, meaningful performance and valid evaluation. Authenticity therefore concerns the relationship among task, environment and judgement, not the replacement of essays or examinations with presentations. More recent critiques go further. McArthur (2023) resists the reduction of authenticity to employability and argues for attention to social value; Vu and Dall’Alba (2014) emphasise students’ developing identities and ways of being; Arnold and Croxford (2025) question whether an overextended term can still discriminate between educational purposes; and Fawns et al. (2025) call for critical attention to context, inclusion and the claims made for authenticity. Together, this scholarship positions authenticity as plural and negotiated across disciplinary, professional and societal communities.

This plurality matters because lecturers may be distant from current practice or may reproduce a narrow version of it. Professional currency and the diversity of the design team influence which problems, behaviours and standards are represented

as relevant. The issue is especially acute where professional bodies prescribe outcomes: fidelity may be necessary for safe practice, yet education should also enable students to question exclusionary customs and imagine better practice. Authenticity is thus a defensible relationship between learning, context and purpose, not a claim secured by realism alone.

A relational account also clarifies what is excluded from the present argument. Not every assessment needs to simulate employment or involve an external client, and an assessment is not rendered authentic by the addition of a role-play, live brief or professional vocabulary. The relevant distinction concerns the kind of intellectual participation invited. Tasks become more authentic when students use disciplinary knowledge to make situated judgements, produce consequences that matter within a defined context, or contribute to conversations beyond the reproduction of taught content. This may occur through an essay that intervenes in a scholarly debate, an examination that requires defensible economic reasoning, or a practical task that engages with professional standards. Conversely, an elaborate simulation may remain educationally thin when the outcome is predetermined and the student's role is merely procedural. This account retains conceptual boundaries while resisting an unhelpful hierarchy of formats.

Self-Determination Theory: a motivational lens

SDT explains how educational environments influence motivation, engagement and well-being (Deci and Ryan 1985; Ryan and Deci 2000, 2020). It distinguishes the quality of motivation rather than treating motivation as a single quantity. Students may act from interest, personally endorsed value, external pressure or avoidance, and these regulations are associated with different experiences and outcomes. Three basic psychological needs underpin more self-determined motivation: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Assessment is therefore important not only because it directs effort, but because its design can support or frustrate these needs.

Autonomy is the experience of acting with volition and ownership, not unrestricted freedom (Ryan and Deci 2020). Students may experience autonomy within clear academic or professional constraints when rationales are credible and there is room for judgement. Choice is useful only when it is meaningful and manageable; a menu of formats does not compensate for a wholly prescribed intellectual process. Nor should autonomy support be confused with minimal guidance. Structure and autonomy can work together when expectations, resources and staged decisions help students acquire the confidence to exercise greater independence (Reeve 2016; Sierens et al. 2009). This is better understood as scaffolding autonomy than withdrawing support.

This distinction is important for students who approach assessment strategically. SDT does not require intrinsic interest at the outset, nor does it suggest that well-designed assessment converts every learner into an enthusiast. It describes a continuum through which externally prompted activity may become more fully internalised when students understand its value and experience meaningful ownership. A student may initially engage because a task carries marks yet still come to endorse its purpose through credible rationales, relevant decisions and evidence of

growing capability. Strategic behaviour is therefore neither a fixed learner trait nor proof that motivational design has failed. The more realistic expectation is that design can improve the quality of engagement available to students, including those who remain selective about effort. It cannot eliminate competing priorities, instrumental goals or legitimate disagreement with the values embedded in a task.

Competence concerns feeling able to meet worthwhile challenges and to improve through action (Deci and Ryan 1985). Transparent standards, appropriately demanding tasks, rehearsal and usable feedback can support it; ambiguity, excessive difficulty and unfamiliar hidden rules can frustrate it. Competence should not be reduced to reproducing one authorised answer. Many authentic problems permit several defensible responses, so criteria should recognise different routes to high-quality performance while maintaining disciplinary or regulatory thresholds. Staff willingness to accept plural forms of competent practice is therefore part of the assessment environment.

Relatedness describes meaningful connection and being valued within a social context (Ryan and Deci 2000). It overlaps with belonging but is not identical to the wider institutional concept. Belonging may concern identification with a course, discipline or university; relatedness specifies the interpersonal need for care, respect and reciprocal connection through which such identification can develop. Assessment is often individualised and competitive, yet collaborative inquiry, dialogue with practitioners and work for real audiences can connect students with peers, communities and disciplinary purposes. These arrangements support relatedness only when participation is safe and contributions are recognised.

The distinction between relatedness and belonging also guards against treating social connection as a matter of student adaptation. Students may be invited to join a professional or disciplinary community while receiving signals that their language, identity, body or ways of participating are peripheral to it. An assessment can therefore appear socially authentic and still frustrate relatedness. Belonging is more likely when students are recognised as legitimate contributors who may also question the community they are entering. This is particularly relevant because professional norms are often presented as settled. Designing for relatedness requires attention to interpersonal conduct, representation and power, alongside opportunities for collaboration. The aim is not simply to make students feel comfortable, but to create conditions in which they can participate without suppressing difference.

The analysis therefore treats autonomy, competence and relatedness as interacting features of an assessment environment. They help explain why the same task can be experienced as purposeful by one student and alienating by another, and why authenticity cannot substitute for teaching, scaffolding or relationships.

The motivational framework for authentic assessment design

The six-stage framework translates the synthesis into design activity. Authenticity alone is insufficient: students may engage strategically, reject a task's values or encounter barriers associated with disability, neurodiversity, culture, prior opportunity and professional aspiration. Rather than attempting to compel motivation, the

framework asks designers to create conditions in which students can understand, test and, where appropriate, internalise the value of assessment.

The stages are presented sequentially for clarity but are iterative in use. At each stage, designers examine both the visible task and the surrounding learning environment, asking how choices, standards, support, relationships and feedback affect students' motivational experience.

Stage one: identify learning objectives and meaningful contexts

Design begins with the knowledge, capabilities and values students should develop and the contexts in which these matter. Constructive alignment can connect outcomes, teaching and assessment (Biggs 1996), but aligned outcomes may still narrow what is valued or encode assumptions about knowledge and ability (Newby and Cornelissen 2025). Designers must therefore ask whether the intended learning is educationally defensible, inclusive and open to critical interpretation.

Meaningful contexts may be professional, disciplinary, civic or personal. The framework shares phenomenon-based learning's concern with consequential problems but remains assessment-focused and need not be interdisciplinary. Questions of purpose are central: why should students care, who is affected, whose account of relevance is absent and what would constitute a worthwhile contribution?

This stage principally supports relatedness by connecting learning with communities, purposes and possible identities. Students need not arrive already committed. A credible rationale and space to examine competing values can help a strategic or reluctant learner move from compliance towards more personally endorsed engagement.

Stage two: design the assessment task

The second stage concerns the task through which students demonstrate learning. Existing models emphasise realism, complexity, collaboration and transfer (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown 2014; Gulikers, Bastiaens, and Kirschner 2004); the motivational framework adds psychological ownership. Autonomy is supported when students make consequential decisions about problems, evidence, methods or audiences, rather than selecting from cosmetic options. Regulated disciplines may impose firm boundaries but can still allow judgement within them and critical examination of their rationale.

Autonomy nevertheless requires structure. Milestones, modelling, resources and formative dialogue can scaffold novices towards independent judgement (Reeve 2016; Sierens et al. 2009). Support can recede as competence grows, while rationales and routes for seeking help remain visible.

Stage three: develop performance criteria, learning resources and authentic environments

Criteria communicate what a community values as competent performance. They should separate essential disciplinary or regulatory standards from conventions that

allow legitimate variation. Contrasting exemplars, rehearsal and co-interpretation can make quality visible without implying that competent work has only one form.

Resources and environments need enough fidelity to reproduce the decisions, tools, relationships and constraints that matter (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown 2014). Fidelity should be purposeful rather than theatrical: a carefully designed case, dataset or audience may reproduce the relevant reasoning more effectively than an elaborate simulation. Support must be available while students can use it.

Stage four: ensure relevance, inclusivity and rigour

Authentic tasks can reproduce barriers in the settings they emulate. Assumptions about prior experience, communication, sensory processing, mobility or access to professional environments may disadvantage disabled, neurodivergent and other students (Bain 2023; Nieminen, Moriña, and Biagiotti 2024). Inclusive design anticipates learner variability and separates the capability being assessed from incidental features of its usual performance.

Flexibility should be principled. If collaboration is not an assessed outcome, individual work may be appropriate; where it is essential, accessible processes, varied roles and evidence of individual learning may be preferable to exemption. Regulated standards can constrain adaptation, but the means of demonstrating them may remain negotiable. Fidelity is not a justification for avoidable exclusion.

The key distinction is between reasonable variation and alteration of the assessed construct. Interaction cannot simply be removed when collaborative decision-making is the capability, but compulsory group participation may be an unnecessary barrier when collaboration is only the customary setting for an individual outcome. The same test applies to timed performance, physical presence, oral communication and sensory demands. Consultation with disabled and neurodivergent students can reveal barriers that designers overlook, allowing anticipatory design to be combined with responsive individual arrangements.

Inclusivity supports competence and relatedness, but it also depends on whose experience informs design. Teams with varied disciplinary, professional and lived experience are better placed to detect narrow assumptions about the ‘typical’ student or practitioner. External partners can improve currency, while students can reveal how apparently reasonable arrangements are actually encountered.

Rigour concerns the quality of reasoning and performance, not the familiarity of a format. Projects, simulations and portfolios are not inherently more or less demanding than examinations. Intellectual challenge becomes visible through standards that require integration, justification, transfer and critical judgement.

Stage five: facilitate collaboration and Reflection

Collaboration may mirror practice and expose students to different expertise, but compulsory group work is not automatically authentic or inclusive. Designers should explain its purpose, establish accountable roles, provide routes for resolving conflict and decide whether the outcome requires collective performance, individual learning

or both. Relatedness grows through mutual respect and shared purpose, not proximity alone (Ryan and Deci 2020).

Reflection makes the process of becoming visible. Students examine how decisions changed, what informed their judgement and how learning might transfer. This supports metacognition and allows professional norms to be questioned rather than merely copied.

Reflection can also strengthen autonomy as students become less dependent on lecturer judgement. Assessment moves from something done to students towards a process in which they participate as evaluators of their own developing practice.

Stage six: use feedback for continuous improvement

Feedback has limited educational value when it arrives only with a final grade. Because authentic practice is iterative, students need opportunities to seek, interpret and use information while work can still change (Carless and Boud 2018). Dialogue, comparison and revision can strengthen competence without becoming controlling when feedback addresses strategy and leaves room for student judgement.

Cycles of drafting, consultation and refinement make progress visible and normalise imperfection. They also connect assessment with future practice, where competent performance is maintained through continuing learning rather than one final submission.

Integrating the framework

The framework is not a checklist. Decisions about criteria, inclusion or feedback often require the purpose and task to be revisited, and all three needs operate across every stage. Its unit of design is the package of task, teaching, scaffolding, relationships and opportunities to improve.

This emphasis complements models concerned with realism, complex performance and meaningful application (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown 2014; Gulikers, Bastiaens, and Kirschner 2004). [Figure 1](#) places the learner's experience of autonomy, competence and relatedness at the centre, surrounded by six design stages. The centre is not the assessment task alone: it is the motivational experience produced through the interaction of task and learning environment.

The framework is best used through programme-team dialogue. An existing assessment can be traced across the six stages to expose assumptions that have not been tested: relevance may reflect one lecturer's view of a profession, apparent choice may not alter the intellectual work, and extensive feedback may arrive too late to support competence. Contrasting staff interpretations and student accounts allow the designed environment to be compared with the experienced one. The framework can therefore support prospective design and retrospective review without treating isolated features as proof of motivation.

The framework offers an explanation of why authentic assessment may support meaningful learning without assuming that it will. Authenticity creates an opportunity; motivational design influences how that opportunity is encountered. [Table 1](#)



Figure 1. Motivational framework for authentic assessment design.

summarises the alignment between each stage, the authentic assessment literature and the dominant psychological needs.

Illustrative application across disciplinary contexts

The four redesigns illustrate how authentic assessment may support autonomy, competence and relatedness, the three basic psychological needs associated with more self-determined forms of motivation in SDT (Brown and Sambell 2021; Ryan and Deci 2000, 2020). The comparison is not intended to imply that essays or examinations are inherently inauthentic. It considers how changing the activity and its surrounding conditions alters the opportunities students have to experience ownership, capability and connection. These are design propositions rather than evidence that students necessarily experience need satisfaction.

Biochemistry: The original examination asked students to describe how paracetamol and caffeine overdose could be detected in a clinical biochemistry laboratory and to interpret supplied data. The redesigned task places students within the fictional case of Ashley Taylor. They analyse laboratory evidence, identify gaps in the available information, request further clinical information and produce a scientific report. The authentic element lies in constructing and defending an investigative pathway rather than responding to a problem whose evidence and route have already been selected.

Table 1. Alignment of the motivational framework for authentic assessment design with authentic assessment literature and Self-Determination Theory.

Framework Stage	Authentic Assessment Literature	Dominant SDT Condition(s)	Intended Educational Outcome
1. Identify learning objectives and meaningful contexts.	Wiggins (1998); McArthur (2023)	Relatedness	Students recognise the purpose and societal relevance of learning.
2. Design the assessment task.	Herrington and Herrington (2006); Gulikers, Bastiaens, and Kirschner (2004)	Autonomy	Students exercise judgement, decision-making and ownership over their learning.
3. Develop performance criteria, learning resources and authentic environments.	Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown (2014); Boud and Falchikov (2007)	Competence	Students understand standards, practise judgement and encounter purposeful fidelity with appropriate support.
4. Ensure relevance, inclusivity and rigour.	Bain (2023); McArthur (2023); Nieminen, Moriña, and Biagiotti (2024); Villarroel et al. (2020)	Competence; Relatedness	Students have equitable routes to demanding performance and can question whose account of relevance is privileged.
5. Facilitate collaboration and reflection.	Herrington and Herrington (2006); Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown (2014)	Relatedness; Autonomy	Students develop professional identity, collaborative capability and reflective judgement.
6. Provide feedback and opportunities for continuous improvement.	Carless and Boud (2018); Boud (2000)	Competence; Autonomy	Students develop self-regulation, feedback literacy and continuous improvement.

Autonomy - Students exercise meaningful choice by formulating hypotheses, deciding which evidence is needed and determining how to pursue the investigation. Their freedom is bounded by laboratory protocols and the evidence available, but the decisions affect the direction and defensibility of the final conclusion rather than offering cosmetic choice.

Competence - The case requires students to integrate laboratory technique, biochemical knowledge and data interpretation. Staged analysis, access to contrasting evidence and opportunities to revise hypotheses can make progress visible. Criteria should reward the quality of the investigative reasoning, including recognition of uncertainty, rather than the production of a predetermined diagnosis.

Relatedness - Collaborative investigation connects students with the social character of scientific practice and with the healthcare consequences of laboratory decisions. Defined roles and individual justification are needed so that participation is reciprocal and no student's understanding is hidden by the group product.

Initial Teacher Education: The traditional assessment took the form of a 5,000-word essay. Although this could assess synthesis and critical engagement with literature, it created distance between scholarly critique and the situated decisions made by teachers. The redesigned task asks students to evaluate an established teaching approach, design an alternative sequence of learning for a specific educational context and justify the decisions made. Academic writing remains important but now provides the rationale for professional action.

Autonomy - Students select curriculum content, pedagogical approaches and relevant evidence, then decide how these should be combined for a particular group of learners. Curriculum requirements establish legitimate boundaries, while the

absence of one prescribed design leaves room for ownership and professionally defensible alternatives.

Competence - Capability is demonstrated through the integration of subject knowledge, educational theory, curriculum requirements and feasible planning. Contrasting examples, rehearsal of curricular reasoning and formative dialogue can help students move from proposing attractive activities towards explaining why a sequence is educationally coherent and evidence-informed.

Relatedness - The task positions teaching as relational by requiring attention to pupils' needs, mentor perspectives and the purposes of education. Connection to the professional community should not require uncritical conformity: students need permission to question established practices and recognise themselves as legitimate contributors to their developing profession.

Early Childhood Studies: The original essay asked students to discuss and evaluate the observation and assessment of children, including Early Year Foundation Stage (EYFS) requirements and approaches to recording and reporting. The redesigned observational learning journal shifts observation from an object of description to a developing practice. Students organise evidence over time, interpret observations through theory and the EYFS, compare methods and justify professional decisions.

Autonomy - Students choose appropriate observation methods, decide how evidence should be organised and determine how competing interpretations will be addressed. These choices are consequential because they shape the account of the child's development, while ethical guidance constrains how information may be gathered and represented.

Competence - Repeated entries allow students to practise observation, test interpretations, use feedback and revisit earlier judgements. Competence is therefore developed incrementally rather than inferred from a single essay. Criteria should value careful interpretation, ethical recording and acknowledgement of the limits of observation, not unwarranted certainty.

Relatedness - Peer dialogue can locate individual observations within a community of professional enquiry and expose students to alternative readings of the same evidence. Relatedness must also include ethical responsibility towards children and families. Where access to settings is unequal, authorised material or vignettes can prevent belonging from depending on opportunity or placement circumstances.

Statistics: The original pen-and-paper examination supplied a small dataset and required descriptive calculations, graphs and multiple-choice responses. This can establish procedural fluency, but the technique, purpose and audience are largely determined by the lecturer. In the redesigned task, students analyse authentic institutional datasets and communicate their findings through an A1 conference-style poster. Calculation becomes part of a statistical argument rather than the final outcome.

Autonomy - Students decide which analyses are appropriate, which findings warrant attention and how evidence should be represented for an audience. The choices have intellectual consequences: different techniques and visualisations can support different interpretations, which students must justify rather than merely execute.

Competence - The task integrates calculation, interpretation, ethical use of data and communication. Formative critique of sample analyses and misleading graphs

can clarify quality before submission. Assessment criteria must privilege statistical reasoning over visual polish so that poster-design experience is not mistaken for disciplinary capability.

Relatedness - A conference-style audience gives statistical work a communicative and social purpose, allowing students to contribute to a shared enquiry into educational decision-making. Peer discussion may support connection, but accessible presentation formats and clear individual accountability are needed so that participation does not create unrelated barriers.

Across the four redesigns, autonomy arises from consequential rather than decorative choice; competence is supported through structured opportunities to practise, interpret feedback and justify judgement; and relatedness develops through connection with peers, professional communities and those affected by the work. No feature guarantees these experiences. Group work can frustrate relatedness, open choice can undermine competence when structure is absent, and a realistic context can remain controlling. [Table 2](#) summarises the intended alignment and should therefore be read as a set of motivational hypotheses to be examined with students, not as confirmation that an authentic task has satisfied their psychological needs.

Discussion

The analysis suggests that authenticity is best treated as a negotiated relationship among task, context, purpose and learner rather than a fixed property of an assessment. Realism, complexity and professional alignment can create valuable opportunities, but their effects are mediated by autonomy, competence and relatedness. A learner may engage strategically, resist the values represented or be excluded by the conditions of participation. The framework therefore explains possibility rather than inevitability.

Its contribution is to shift attention from the visible task towards the assessment environment as experienced. This does not make all assessment 'authentic' or render the term redundant. It provides a more discriminating question: does the assessment require consequential disciplinary, professional or societal judgement, and are the surrounding conditions likely to support students in engaging with that demand? This formulation allows an examination to contain authentic features and a work-place simulation to fall short.

In practice, programme teams should review assessment, teaching and scaffolding as one package. They can ask where students exercise consequential judgement, which standards are essential, how autonomy is scaffolded, whose account of relevance is represented, what barriers arise and when feedback can still influence the work. This scrutiny should involve students, professionally current staff, disability and learning support expertise and, where relevant, employers or community partners. In regulated programmes, it can protect required standards while challenging customs that are not necessary to competence.

Programme-level review is also necessary because students encounter an accumulation of demands, deadlines and messages about success. A single task may offer choice while the wider pattern remains controlling, or formative rehearsal may coincide with high-stakes submissions that make deep engagement unrealistic.

Table 2. Illustrative alignment of assessment exemplars with the three psychological needs.

Discipline	Original task and redesigned activity	Autonomy	Competence	Relatedness
Biochemistry	Exam: describe overdose detection and interpret supplied data. Redesign: investigate the Ashley Taylor case, request information and report conclusions.	Students determine investigative pathways, formulate hypotheses and allocate responsibilities within groups.	Practical laboratory techniques and scientific reasoning are applied to progressively refine conclusions.	Collaborative investigation mirrors authentic scientific practice while connecting learning to healthcare contexts.
Early childhood studies	Essay on observation and assessment processes. Redesign: an iterative observational learning journal aligned with the EYFS.	Students choose observation methods, organise evidence and justify professional decisions.	Incremental observation, reflection and application of developmental theory build professional confidence.	Peer discussion and professional reflection foster belonging within the early years community.
Statistics	Exam using a supplied dataset for calculations, graphs and multiple-choice items. Redesign: analyse an institutional dataset and communicate findings through a conference-style poster.	Students decide which analyses are most appropriate and determine how findings should be communicated.	Statistical techniques are applied to authentic datasets requiring interpretation rather than calculation alone.	Collaborative analysis and presentation encourage peer learning while demonstrating the value of statistical evidence in educational decision-making.
Initial teacher education	A 5,000-word essay. Redesign: evaluate an established teaching approach and develop an evidence-informed sequence for a specific context.	Students select curriculum content, pedagogical approaches and forms of evidence, then justify their professional decisions.	The integration of educational theory, subject knowledge and critical reflection develops curriculum-design capability and professional judgement.	Engagement with pupils' needs, mentor perspectives and the wider purposes of education supports developing professional identity and connection to the teaching community.

Mapping the stages across a programme can reveal where autonomy is repeatedly narrowed, competence is assumed rather than developed and relatedness depends on isolated activities. The aim is coherence in conditions for learning, not uniformity of format.

The framework remains a conceptual proposition. The illustrative applications test coherence, not effectiveness, and the purposive synthesis may omit relevant traditions. Empirical work should therefore compare intended design with students' lived experience rather than treating the presence of a design feature as evidence of need satisfaction. A useful first phase would combine structured curriculum review with student interviews and staff design conversations to refine the stages and identify disciplinary differences. Subsequent mixed-methods studies could use validated SDT measures, engagement indicators, assessment outcomes and longitudinal qualitative data. Comparisons across conventional and explicitly authentic

formats would help determine whether the psychological conditions explain variation more convincingly than format labels.

Evaluation should separate the framework's design logic from its outcomes. Student approval would not demonstrate that all three needs were supported, and improved attainment would not establish a motivational mechanism. Studies should combine documents and lecturer accounts with measures taken as students encounter choice, challenge, collaboration and feedback. Sampling ambivalent and negative responses, and attending to disability, prior experience, caring or employment responsibilities and disciplinary belonging, would clarify for whom and under what conditions the framework is useful.

Further research is also needed across cultural contexts, specialist institutions and tightly regulated professions. These settings may expose tensions between learner autonomy, inclusive adaptation, public safety and prescribed competence more sharply than less regulated programmes. Studies should attend to disability and neurodiversity, staff professional currency, team diversity and students who remain strategically motivated despite supportive design. Such work would establish the boundary conditions of the framework rather than seeking simple confirmation.

Contribution to scholarship

The article brings together two bodies of scholarship that have largely developed separately. It uses SDT to explain why authenticity may, but does not necessarily, generate meaningful engagement, and translates autonomy, competence and relatedness into questions spanning the assessment cycle. It also places limits around the claim: motivational design can widen opportunities for internalised and intrinsically motivated engagement, but cannot manufacture commitment or erase structural inequalities.

Conclusion

Authentic assessment is not secured by professional resemblance, an alternative format or a claim of relevance. Its educational value depends on what students are invited to judge and create, whose purposes the task serves and how the wider environment supports agency, capability and connection. The Motivational Framework for Authentic Assessment Design makes these conditions visible across six iterative stages.

The framework's practical message is straightforward: put as much design effort into the conditions surrounding assessment as into the task itself. Teaching, criteria, scaffolding, accessible participation, relationships and opportunities to use feedback form one motivational environment. When these elements are considered together, authentic assessment has a stronger prospect of supporting meaningful learning while remaining open to critique and variation.

Authenticity establishes a possibility. Whether that possibility is realised remains an empirical question about students' experience.

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Author contributions

Christopher Martin is the sole author and was responsible for the conceptualisation, analysis, framework development and preparation of the manuscript.

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Generative AI was used to support spelling, grammar and punctuation. The author reviewed, revised and approved the manuscript and remains responsible for its argument, accuracy and integrity.

ORCID

Christopher Martin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5967-9052>

Data availability statement

No datasets were generated or analysed for this conceptual study.

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