Journal of Teaching and Learning with Technology, Vol. Vol. 11, Special Issue, pp.55-56.
doi: 10.14434/jotlt.v11i1.34458

Creating Authentic Assessments Through Controversy

Lamia Scherzinger
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis

Abstract: We are surrounded by controversy—politics, religion, diets, and even science are all up for debate in our 24/7 world of social media and the internet. With this controversy comes a lot of misinformation and competition with what our students might otherwise be learning in our classrooms. I know this intimately, since I teach fitness and nutrition courses, two topics widely addressed by internet "experts" who continually contradict what I teach in my class. Whereas some may say this makes an instructor's job more difficult, I have decided to rise to the challenge and use controversy to enhance my students' learning. By using an assortment of technologies and platforms—web searches, Twitter, TikTok, and more—I have been able to move beyond the classroom to engage my students in real-world problems, a strategy that results in more authentic assessments.

Keywords: authentic assessments, controversy, technology, misinformation, impact

Controversy is only dreaded by the advocates of error.

—Benjamin Rush

A brief background on my teaching situation: All my classes are 100% online and asynchronous, so my use of technology for assessments is a necessity. I teach general education courses, so my students are all types of majors and come with all levels of knowledge (or lack thereof) on exercise and nutrition. This means what I teach is competing with whatever nutrition and fitness information they receive daily from social media influencers, unscientific online articles, and hearsay, which for today's social-media-obsessed students, can be a lot!

One of my course learning objectives can help illustrate how I use technology and a controversial topic in an authentic assessment: Evaluate the relationship between food intake and physical health. We know the quality of one's food intake is tied to one's health; foods high in saturated fats increase the risk of heart disease, for example. One way I assess this is by posing the following question in a discussion: Is access to healthy foods a privilege or a basic human right? This is controversial for a few reasons: First, one cannot talk about healthy food access without addressing race, since studies show that Black Americans have a much higher rate of poverty and therefore much less access to fresh foods than White Americans (Drewnowski & Eichelsdoerfer, 2010). Second, it asks the students to share their thoughts on what they philosophically consider basic human rights, which differs depending on one's personal beliefs. And finally, I ask that once they are done posting their contribution to the discussion, they then reply to two other students who chose a different stance from their own. Technology is a great help in this, and I use several technologies to facilitate this discussion. The most obvious one here is the use of my learning management system's discussion board. I also use YouTube to share a minidocumentary entitled "Divided Cities: The Food Deserts of Memphis" that illustrates the way race, socioeconomic status, and basic human rights come together to cause a huge dichotomy of haves and have nots when it comes to fresh food access. I then have the students use governmental websites to look up statistics on poverty levels, food deserts, and health markers of Americans to support their claim. They also must use their class-assigned e-text to cite nutritional facts and food access information. Finally, students have the option to reply via a regular discussion post or to record their response and replies to each other, allowing them to have more of

a "conversation" than just a typed discussion. Therefore, in one assignment, I might use up to five different technologies to authentically assess one course learning objective in a real-word situation.

Another example of this, and one where I address the obsession many students have with acquiring much of their health and fitness knowledge from social media, is to approach our diet-obsessed culture with science. I first have them list two popular diets they have seen on social media apps and write out a brief explanation of what these diet guidelines and restrictions are. They then are to try to find, via the university's library databases, at least three scientific articles that support that particular diet. Finally, they use what they have learned in our class via the e-text and class notes and assignments to compare these diets to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. This assignment provides a way for the students to learn a few things: (1) Not everything you learn on social media is true; (2) overall, scientific research does not support most fad diets; and (3) when compared to the *Dietary Guidelines*, many of these diets fall woefully short.

Participating in assignments such as these allows my students to use the information they learned in class to combat possible misinformation, participate in a respectful, engaged discussion that is supported by facts, and achieve the course learning objectives. By facing these topics head-on, I have provided my students with not only the power to overcome the inaccuracies they see every day but also a chance to engage in real-world situations that may arise or questions they may be faced with in their futures as health professionals or even in everyday life. And although in my examples I used multiple technologies, this does not have to be the case for all topics. For example, when discussing a diet that is popular among the students in a particular class, an online diet analysis tool might be the only technology necessary to illustrate that by nearly cutting out an entire food group on this diet (a low-carb diet, for example), the student is actually missing some much-needed nutrients that food group provides. Thus, while the controversy might be involved and multilayered, the assessment of it can be quite simple yet meaningful.

Here, I am showcasing my topic, but the applications for this approach are numerous—in political science, theology, history, philosophy, and law, for instance. Instead of just teaching the material and assessing whether students learned it through multiple choice and true/false questions, with this approach teachers give their students the chance to apply their knowledge to real-world situations and come away with a firmer grasp on how to overcome misinformation. In a journalism class, for example, whether photojournalists should be allowed to capture and then share images of dead soldiers has been discussed since the Civil War. This can lead to a robust discussion on the First Amendment and journalists' efforts to show the true cost of war. Or in a political science class, the long-debated question of when life begins can be analyzed from the perspectives of different religions and personal belief systems, highlighting how these can influence law making. Both are "hot topics" on which students can use a variety of technologies to research the subject and formulate informed, factual arguments.

Many people have been taught that to have civil conversations, they need to ignore certain topics or "agree to disagree." However, this does not have to be so in the classroom. With the right technologies, careful assessment construction and instruction, and the selection of topics that can be useful in students' possible real-word work and/or life situations, controversy can be impactful.

References

Drewnowski, A., & Eichelsdoerfer, P. (2010). Can low-income Americans afford a healthy diet? *Nutrition Today*, *44*(6), 246–249. https://doi.org/10.1097/NT.0b013e3181c29f79