# Authentic assessment through Professional Conversations: An AI-friendly assessment method?

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ABSTRACT

Professional Conversations were introduced as an assessment method for the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) programme at De Montfort University in 2019, allowing students to prepare for the end point assessment of the Level 7 Academic Professional Apprenticeship (L7 APA). This format evolved to be one of the key successes of the programme, with overwhelmingly positive feedback received from External Examiners, end-point assessors and students alike. This paper reflects on the steps taken to ensure that both students and assessors were fully prepared to engage in high quality conversations regarding their approach to teaching, learning and continuing professional development (CPD). An overview of the approaches to teaching, learning and student support is provided, alongside recommendations on how to assure the quality of the experience and the overall fairness of the outcome awarded. The paper also considers how Professional Conversations could be used more frequently as an assessment method in Higher Education, moving forward. The paper concludes with a projection of how assessed conversations could be used to maintain academic integrity in modern higher education (HE), whilst also highlighting key barriers that academics may experience, especially when faced with large student numbers and ever-increasing time constraints.

Keywords: professional conversations, authentic assessment, Artificial Intelligence (AI), quality assurance, student feedback

## Background & Introduction

Authentic assessment has become increasingly important in higher education, given the evolving landscape of teaching and learning in the digital age and the progressive evolution of accessible artificial intelligence (AI). Authentic assessments are designed to reflect real-world tasks and skills, emphasising the application of skills and knowledge rather than rote memorisation of information (Herrington & Herrington, 2006). In this context, we explore the implementation of authentic assessment within the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) programme that has been delivered at De Montfort University (DMU) since 2019, specifically focusing on Professional Conversations as a unique assessment method.

The PGCAP programme is dedicated to enhancing the pedagogical skills of university staff, most commonly those who are inexperienced at teaching in the UK HE sector. It was originally designed to align with the Level 7 Academic Professional Apprenticeship (L7 APA), which mandates the completion of Professional

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Conversations as a key assessment component. The professional conversation assessment took place towards the end of the two-year part time PGCAP programme and contributed 50% of the mark for the module. It was designed to closely mirror the assessment criteria and approach to be taken by end point assessors for the L7 APA, which would take place at the end of the taught programme.

This 'On the Horizon' paper reflects on the strategies employed to prepare both students and assessors for Professional Conversations, evaluates student perceptions of the assessment method, and presents recommendations for future considerations, including the potential integration of AI to enhance assessment practices.

## Preparing for High Quality Conversations

The 'live', and therefore unpredictable nature of the Professional Conversation presents both advantages and challenges to students and assessors alike. Students may experience increased anxiety in comparison to more traditional formats (Brand & Schoonheim-Klein, 2009), whilst the approach taken by assessors may vary dramatically without clear guidance and boundaries (Kogan et al., 2011). Effective preparation is therefore essential to ensure the Professional Conversation's authenticity and meaningfulness as an assessment method (Boud & Falchikov, 2007).

### Preparing Students

At the beginning of the module, students were invited to a 1 hour long conversation with a member of the delivery team. In support of assessment transparency (Winstone et al., 2017), the two 'Key Questions' that would be used in the discussion were provided well in advance alongside a short screencast explaining the purpose and structure of the assessment. It was made clear to students that this was an assessed *conversation* and not an *interview* or *presentation,* therefore assessors would naturally interject with supplementary questions where opportunities arose to explore criteria-related content in greater depth.

The programme team adopted a variety of approaches, aimed at increasing assessment literacy and reducing assessment anxiety in the lead up to the scheduled conversation. A Pre-Conversation Workshop was held in advance of the assessment window, providing students with the opportunity to gain a comprehensive understanding of the assessment criteria and expectations, aligning with the principles of constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003). In preparation for the workshop, students were provided with an example 'Conversation Plan' which included the two Key Questions that were to be used during the assessment, enabling students to formulate thoughtful responses and align their preparation with the assessment objectives. They were asked to note down their initial thoughts prior to attending the workshop and were challenged to use the CARR approach suggested by Advance HE - Context, Action, Results, Reflections - when analysing the impact of the examples provided.

During the workshop, students listened to audio extracts from exemplar conversations, fostering observational learning as per social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). By listening to and marking these exemplars against the assessment criteria, students not only became familiar with the expected performance level but could also internalise effective strategies through modeling. Students were asked to firstly judge the performance of the participant(s) in the audio clips, and then encouraged to provide 'feedforward' on what could have been said to provide more comprehensive, or evidence -informed responses during the conversation. Students then engaged in a game of *Pedagogy Blockbusters*, where commonly used researchers, theories and pedagogic terms were revised. Finally, they were asked to reflect

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on their preparations, adding detail to the conversation plans and highlighting areas that required further research before the scheduled assessment date. As a plenary activity, recordings of a selection of the full hour-long recordings from previous participants, were made available on the module's VLE (with permission).

*Preparing Assessors*

The preparation of assessors is equally vital to maintaining the authenticity and reliability of Professional Conversations (Brown & Knight, 1994). To ensure a consistent and robust assessment process, a range of approaches were introduced. Firstly, assessors were provided with a recording of the Assessment Workshop held with the students. This enabled them to hear the same guidance that was provided to students and made them aware of the preparations that had been undertaken.

Secondly, assessors were provided with an assessment crib sheet to guide them through the conversation. The crib sheet included an initial scripted section which welcomed the participant to the conversation and reminded them of the time available, the nature of the assessment (a semi-structured professional conversation) and the approach that was expected when articulating responses (CARR). Participants were also reassured that they could refer to their plans throughout the conversation if necessary. The first key question was then shared and the conversation commenced. A crucial role of assessors was to maintain a natural dialogue with the participant, whilst also steering the conversation to ensure that opportunities to achieve all targeted assessment criteria arose. To assure the quality of the experience and overall outcome of the assessment, assessors were provided with a list of 'supplementary questions' which could be asked should the quality of responses, or the direction of the conversation, deviate from the criteria to be addressed. These questions were open ended, typically starting with terms such as 'how', 'what', 'why' and 'who', handing control of the conversation to the participant, stimulating reflective thinking and evoking further questions more naturally (Pearce, & Chiavaroli, 2020).

Finally, all assessors were involved in the moderation of assessment outcomes. All professional conversations were recorded and a sample from each assessor was (a) peer moderated, and (b) moderated by the module leader. This not only established a robust approach to assuring the assessment outcomes, but also acted as a powerful professional development opportunity for colleagues across the team.

## Evaluation & Student Perception

Advance HE's revised Professional Standards Framework (2023) continues to recognise the importance of critical evaluation as the basis for effective practice (Core Knowledge descriptor K3). As such, student perception is regularly sought to inform the continued enhancement of the PGCAP programme at DMU. Module Leader's devise contextual surveys to evaluate the impact of approaches used throughout their modules. In this instance, the survey focused more closely on the student experience of the assessment methods employed, not only to review the module but also in preparation for the revalidation of the programme. PGCAP participants across five cohorts were asked to complete a short survey, focusing on their experience of the Professional Conversation and the assessment strategies used throughout the module. Students were made aware that the survey was completely voluntary, and that although the primary purpose was to inform module (and course) development, anonymised results may also be used in wider research projects where opportunities to share best practice across the sector arise.

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For context, the PGCAP utilised a selection of formats, including Reflective Written Passages, a Screencast, a Teaching Observation, a Reflective Portfolio and the Professional Conversation. The student perceptions regarding the use of Professional Conversations as an assessment tool yielded valuable insights.

When asked to rank the above assessment methods in terms of *preference*, 57% of students identified Professional Conversations as their most preferred or second most preferred assessment method, indicating a largely positive reception. 73% of respondents agreed that Professional Conversations were an 'authentic' approach to assessing their *knowledge* of teaching and learning, second only to the Teaching Observation (fig.1). Interestingly, the Written Passage had the highest amount of 'not authentic' responses and lowest number of 'authentic' responses.

When asked which approach best challenged their *skills* and *behaviours as* a teacher, the Teaching Observation (34%) and Professional Conversation (29%) were the most commonly selected methods (fig.2).

Furthermore, 90% of respondents agreed that the Professional Conversation effectively challenged their *transferable skills* as teachers, such as planning, confidence in public speaking, and engaging in academic dialogue in relation to their practice. This reinforces the value of Professional Conversations in assessing and developing essential teaching skills.
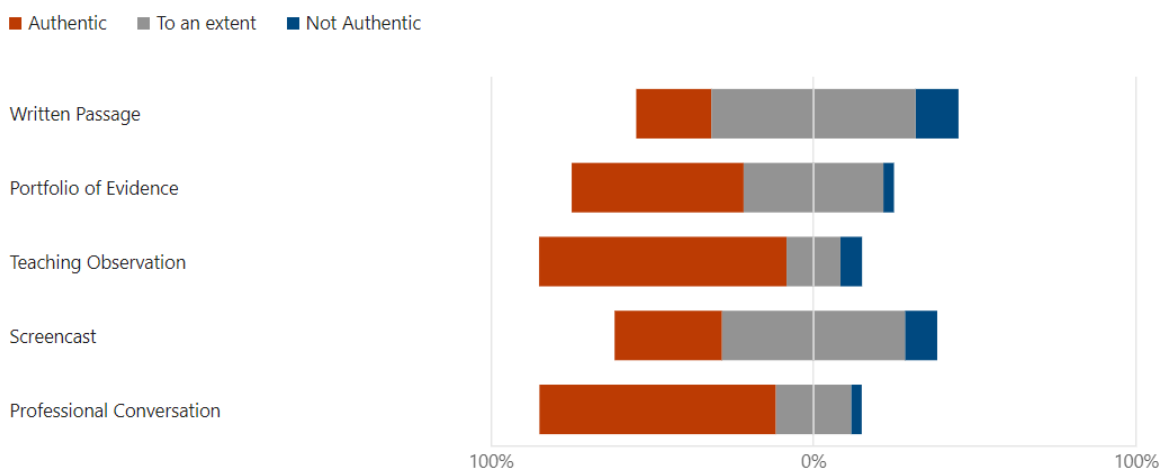


**Figure 1** "How authentic would you consider each format to be in relation to assessing your knowledge of teaching and learning?"

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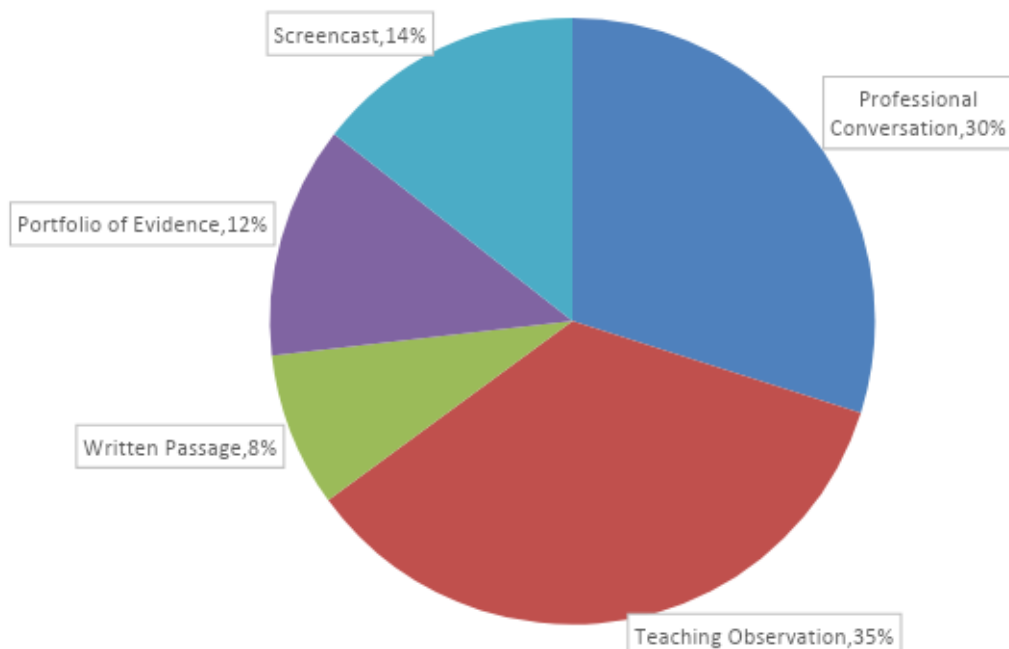


**Figure 2** "Which methods effectively allowed you to demonstrate or explore your skills and behaviours as a teacher? (You may select more than one answer)"

In terms of preparation, the provision of key questions before the conversation received unanimously positive feedback, with 100% of students noting its *positive impact*, 70% of whom indicating that this was *highly impactful* when planning. Creating a conversation plan and listening to prior conversations were also identified as having a positive impact on student preparation (both 43% *highly impactful* and 33% *positive impact*). Moreover, the other preparation methods, such as revising pedagogy in class, marking example conversations and 1:1 support from tutors also contributed positively to the outcome of the conversation.

When asked about what concerned students the most in the lead up to the conversation, responses primarily revolved around a selection of themes. The challenge of fitting all required content within the time limit, and worries about the unpredictable nature of the conversation, regularly arose. There was also apprehension regarding potential subjectivity of assessors and being able to coherently link theory to practice. However, these concerns were largely alleviated through engagement in preparatory activities, emphasising the value of adequate preparation and transparency in reducing assessment anxiety.

## Future Application & Considerations

The prevalence of openly accessible Generative AI tools presents both opportunities and challenges to academic developers across all education sectors (Waring & Evans, 2023). The Russell Group principles on the use of Generative AI in education (2023) provide overarching guidance with regard to what should be considered in order to maintain academic rigor and integrity, however educators must now closely consider *how* exactly these principles can be upheld when designing assessments in the modern era.

Academics are now closely considering the integrity of a range of traditional assessment formats (which rely on largely text-based evidence) and introducing more diversity into their assessment strategies. This report presents the case for the Professional Conversation to be considered as one such format.

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The live oral assessment of students (VIVAs, oral presentations, interviews etc.) has been described as an A-Tier approach to avoiding cheating (Dawson, 2022) which can effectively assess the knowledge of students in a way that cannot currently be replicated by AI. The experiences of students and assessors on the PGCAP programme at DMU reinforce this concept and should encourage educators to utilise the Professional Conversation as an authentic and reliable assessment method.

Although students show initial signs of apprehension, a range of approaches have proven to alleviate these concerns and allow students the opportunity to clearly demonstrate (in this case) their knowledge of teaching, learning and the benefits of professional development. These include:

- providing students with 'key questions' prior to the Professional Conversation

- allowing them the opportunity to listen to and assess previous conversations

- guiding students through the production of a Conversation Plan

- preparing assessors to ensure an equal experience and fair assessment outcome

- comprehensive and collaborative moderation of the assessment outcome.

It is acknowledged, however, that there are still questions regarding the scalability and true authenticity of this approach when assessing the knowledge, skills and behaviours of candidates. Student perception and assessment outcomes were both impressively high when compared to written alternatives, however it is still unclear as to whether this correlates to high performance in the classroom. When it comes to assessing the capability of teachers, the Professional Conversation should therefore still be complemented by an Observation of Teaching to allow assessors to determine whether what has been *said* transfers to what candidates are able to *do.*

It's also clear that the Professional Conversation is a time-consuming assessment approach. In this instance, each conversation took up to one hour, with preparation and moderation activities adding to the commitment. The scalability of the approach is therefore something that academics should carefully consider prior to adoption. DMU has recently transitioned towards a Block Delivery model to curriculum design/delivery, providing programme teams with a specific assessment week at the end of each seven-week teaching block (Merry & Weldon, 2023). This provides a timely opportunity for staff and students to schedule in and participate in professional conversations at the end of a condensed period of learning. Similar 'assessment windows' could be built into more traditional curriculum schedules, to provide space for conversations to take place.

For large cohorts however, this commitment may still remain impractical. It is at this point that AI could be considered a future friend to the assessor. AI bots are already being utilised as coaches and interviewers in a variety of contexts, both in education and in recruitment. As the capability of such systems evolve and *Human Inspired*, or even *Humanized AI* (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019) platforms become available to educators, a Professional Conversation with an AI assessor may realistically be '*on the horizon'*.

For now, DMU will continue to refine the use of Professional Conversations as an assessment method on both the new Postgraduate Certificate in Empowering Education (PGCEE) and for Senior Fellows as part of the newly accredited Advance HE Professional Recognition Scheme at DMU.

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## Biography

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