

Preparing students for hybrid working: The place and case for authentic assessment via synchronous online presentations

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Abstract

Today's students need to be prepared for hybrid working to thrive in the contemporary workplace, and traditional assessment methods need modification to remain fit for purpose. Framing this as our point of departure, we propose that synchronous, online presentations offer an authentic assessment method with significant potential for enhancing student employability. Our essay highlights the benefits of the approach for students, lecturers, and employers while acknowledging the challenges that play out through resistance from universities and students. We conclude with a call for empirical research and stakeholder engagement to facilitate the authentic and impactful deployment of synchronous, online presentations.

Keywords

Hybrid workplace, authentic assessment, ChatGPT, socio-digital skills, higher education, employability, sustainable career

Setting the scene

The graduate workplace has changed substantially since the start of 2020 (Hughes and Davis, 2024), and universities seek innovative ways to enhance students' employability (Padgett and Donald, 2023). Rapid advancements in collaborative technologies such as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and Zoom, in response to pandemic disruption, have enabled the possibility of working anywhere at any time (Davis et al., 2022). Workforce surveys consistently demonstrate a sustained prevalence of hybrid working, indicating that it will remain a core feature of the contemporary graduate workplace (Thambar and Hughes, 2023).

Thriving among these contemporary work practices requires graduates to enter the workplace with sophisticated technical (digital) capabilities (Olšanová et al., 2022), and increasingly, those involved in preparing assessments in Higher Education are recognising this (Antunes et al., 2023). Naturally, many technical aspects of hybrid work must be mastered - for example, learning how to navigate break-out rooms, share screens, or capture and share recordings. However, we draw here on socio-technical

systems theory (Clegg, 2000) to argue that such technologies do not exist inside a vacuum. Flourishing in a hybrid workplace also requires graduates to simultaneously navigate the social environment in which these technologies are embedded (Karl et al., 2022). That is, it requires them to enter the workplace with sophisticated socio-digital capabilities (Goulart et al, 2022). This is because the hybrid workplace changes how graduates navigate the work environment, including capturing crucial information about etiquette, norms, politics, and work expectations (Hughes and Davis, 2024; Hughes and Thambar, 2023). Socio-technical theorists have long advocated that for organisations to thrive, they must consider and optimise social and technical components of work systems simultaneously (Clegg, 2000). Against this backdrop, prior research has shown that many students find hybrid situations

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uncomfortable and are entering the workplace with limited prior work experience and benchmarks to prepare them for the nuance of hybrid workplaces (Hughes and Davis, 2024). If Universities are to produce students who can excel in such environments, we, as lecturers, must do more to prepare them.

Calls for authentic assessment in Higher Education have been longstanding (Gulikers et al, 2006; Manville et al., 2022) and have been emphasised recently by the fast-moving onslaught of AI possibilities (Eager and Brunton, 2023). Traditional assessment approaches, such as in-person presentations, offer vital opportunities to refine communication skills and overcome public speaking nerves. However, in-person presentations differ from their online counterparts because their face-to-face nature ensures they are rich in social cues (c.f. media richness theory, Daft and Lengel 1986) and, therefore, afford opportunities to learn how to read and respond to environmental signals. Similarly, pre-recorded online presentations enable students to showcase the sophistication of their *technical* digital skills, which are equally vital to thriving in the contemporary workplace. However, neither approach adequately prepares students for the hybrid workplace, where social cues are more limited, yet an employee must still interpret and respond to information in real-time (Lackéus, 2023). Framing this as our point of departure, we propose that working and presenting in live online situations requires a *socio-digital* skillset that Universities must now teach students; and that synchronous (live) online presentations offer an authentic assessment method that can significantly enhance student employability.

Online presentations as an authentic assessment method

Synchronous online presentations are facilitated by digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Google Meet. Technological advancements ensure that the possibilities for operationalising online presentations are developing rapidly. Digital collaboration tools such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom now facilitate synchronous, online student presentations, where students can present and respond to live questions from a remote location. This offers assessors various choices and decision points, including whether to design the online presentation as a team or individual assessment, which technological platform to use, and whether to use such presentations for formative or summative assessment purposes.

While there are many similarities between synchronous online and traditional face-to-face presentations, studies demonstrate differences in how these are perceived and used within the workforce (Karl et al., 2022). Yet, while synchronous online presentations are commonplace in today's

hybrid workplace (Davis et al., 2022), we suggest they remain underused as an assessment approach within Higher Education, and so students entering the contemporary workplace are underprepared for this reality. Unlike face-to-face presentations, students must navigate online presentation technologies from a remote location – that is, they are not usually situated with their peers or assessors. This also creates differences in the social environment for online presentations. For instance, in a traditional in-person presentation environment, the student(s) usually present from the front of the room, speaking to a panel of assessors who are usually organised as an audience. In contrast, in an online presentation, the assessor panel are usually equally distributed across boxes on-screen. These structural differences also change how information flows between student and assessor in online presentations, where the student must read and interpret social cues in the environment differently – for instance, without necessarily having access to body language or informal conversation during the presentation's set-up (Hughes and Davis, 2024). Module feedback from our own experiences of running synchronous online presentations as assessments, shows that despite their similarities, students often perceive these types of experience to be very different, with some even able to convince themselves that when online, they are presenting alone: for example, “*it is much easier to speak to a screen than to a real person*”. Furthermore, where online presentations are used, our feedback suggests students generally prefer the opportunity to pre-record, to enable them to retain a sense of control.

Benefits of synchronous online presentations

To students

Students often have the opportunity to develop sophisticated *technical* digital skills within their University education, but often without the opportunity to apply them in a social context. In an era where AI has the potential to mask competency deficits, synchronous online presentations provide an opportunity for authentic assessment, in which students can develop and be tested on their socio-digital proficiency in a simulated hybrid work environment, thereby offering a ‘safe’ space for trial and error. This is important since emerging research on hybrid working in new graduates has found that graduates in remote workplaces often mask their ability by taking time to research and respond to enquiries (Hughes and Davis, 2024).

We find it is hard for students to mask their abilities in live online presentations. They must handle uncertainty in the moment and can experience misunderstandings or faulty assumptions about online working and associated etiquette – for example when to turn cameras on or off,

etiquette around interjecting and ‘raised hands’, challenges in being visible in group presentations, and knowing when and how to ask questions. In hybrid workplaces, these uncertainties can create *unknown unknowns* for graduates as they ‘do not know what they do not know’, and so we now need to teach these aspects explicitly to ensure and facilitate work readiness.

Another benefit to synchronous (as opposed to recorded) online presentations for students is that they add a sense of pressure to online performance. Students report that it can be tempting to be passive in an online study environment by, for instance, turning cameras off and avoiding questions (Hughes and Davis, 2024). Knowing that the presentation is being assessed can force hybrid working onto the radar, encouraging students to nurture these skills proactively, and engage in broader research on etiquette and norms. Additionally, the approach offers a space for students to practice speaking and receive audience feedback to identify development needs and opportunities (Kim et al., 2022) or be framed as a form of peer learning, with the potential to increase employability and social mobility outcomes (Donald and Ford, 2023).

To lecturers

In the age of generative AI, where authentic assessments are becoming harder to design, synchronous online presentations provide a valuable opportunity for lecturers. They are versatile and adaptable, enabling application across degree programmes and geographical locations. With careful design, they can also be efficient ways of assessing students’ presentation skills by reducing pressures on room bookings and campus timetabling since they can be undertaken anywhere with a Wi-Fi connection. Assessment briefs for synchronous online presentations can be adapted to nurture the development of the student’s broader skillset, such as live, technological problem solving, or adapted to suit group work, enabling the assessment of hybrid collaboration. Collectively, these aspects offer significant potential benefits for enhancing pedagogy, since recent studies have challenged those involved in the digital upskilling of students to think of this as a ‘socio-digital’ phenomena, in which students must learn to utilise digital technologies within a wider, social working context (Hughes and Thambar, 2023). Simultaneously, synchronous online presentations can facilitate high-quality formative feedback, enabling students to more easily record and then play back presentation recordings, and thereby facilitating opportunities for student-tutor and peer discussion around difficulties and misconceptions, and thereby better learning from mistakes.

To employers

The assessment of synchronous online presentations during University study also benefits employers by helping to

ensure employers can better recruit graduates who are prepared to enter the hybrid workplace, and who are more experienced in this by the time they enter graduate recruitment processes. Not only can this lead to improvements in core socio-digital competencies so that they can excel more quickly once in the workplace, but in our experience, it can also help ensure students’ workplace expectations better match the reality. This can indirectly benefit employers by reducing uncertainty, and smoothing the university-to-work transition. We advocate for closer collaboration between Universities and employers in assessment development to ensure they reflect the contemporary workplace, with a view to symbiotic reputational benefits for both partners.

Challenges of online presentations

University resistance

There can be logistical reasons why Universities and lecturers designing assessments might shy away from synchronous online presentations. There can be technological failure risks – for example, the student cannot ‘log on’, a poor Wi-Fi connection, which can stilt the recordings, and logistical challenges around ensuring bandwidth and online storage. Nevertheless, such challenges are also experienced in the contemporary workplace, and students must build skills to circumvent them.

There can also be a view that Universities are doing ‘enough’ by investing in their digital capabilities, and in commonly measuring digital proficiency amongst students (cf. the Teaching Excellence Framework). Of course, most universities today do prepare students for a ‘digital’ world. However, as outlined, most of this concerns the *technical* aspects of ‘digital’ readiness and not the *socio-digital* aspects that must accompany them if students are to be work-ready. Resistance is often compounded by the fact that students may not ‘like’ online presentations, risking low student satisfaction scores when implemented, which further pressures Universities given their dependence on league tables and rankings. Moreover, in the fallout of the pandemic, there was a widespread and international drive to bring students back to their campuses, including from the UK Government, leading to pressure to teach and assess students in person, where practicable (Department for Education, 2021).

However, we suggest that steering away from synchronous online presentation assessments on these grounds is counterintuitive because students who are ill-prepared for the workplace pose a reputational risk to the University. More importantly, steering away from online presentations on such grounds does students a disservice, by actively failing to prepare them for the contemporary, hybrid workplace.

Student resistance

Presenting in any form can be intimidating for students, so there can be resistance to synchronous, online presentations amongst the student community, due to perceptions of additional layers of uncertainty and unpredictability. In fact, feedback on our modules has shown a range of student perspectives - which often change following a positive synchronous online presentation experience. Some students report preferring online to in-person presentations, believing that any online variant of a presentation offers advantages since they can use notes or scripts, which can mask insecurities or prevent feeling 'on the spot'. The online format can 'de-personalise' the experience, thereby reducing their anxiety. Others feel an increased sense of anxiety from the prospect of synchronous, online presentations due to reduced social cues and the prospect of technical difficulties. Others still, report an early perception that online presentations are 'easy', but subsequently perform terribly due to naiveties they had not realised.

Consequently, students can find the prospect of synchronous online presentations uncomfortable and occasionally even lobby against having to do them. Of course, we see this elsewhere in the curricula, as there is evidence that modules perceived to be *difficult* often receive lower student ratings (Sutherland et al., 2019). Nevertheless, our student feedback upon completing a synchronous online presentation compellingly demonstrates that students gain tremendous learning opportunities from undertaking an online presentation in their assessment. Most commonly, students take away insights they had not expected to – for example, how to use backgrounds and chat functions and how to manage and organise themselves once in break-out rooms or in the face of technological challenge. To borrow a medical analogy, they may not have liked the medicine, but they benefitted from the treatment. Additionally, students without access to hybrid working role models benefit significantly from these in-curricula experiences (Hughes and Davis, 2024).

Final thoughts

Effective student training is a fundamental enabler of an effective Higher Education sector, in any world economy (Donald and Hughes, 2023). Universities must produce knowledge and insights, and graduates are vital to translating this, to become responsible and global citizens who can tackle today's global problems (Jakubik, 2022). Online presentations are one small way Universities can contribute to the authentic training and assessment of students. Therefore, we conclude this essay by calling for empirical research exploring the value of synchronous online presentations as an authentic assessment method, and for structured stakeholder engagement to consider how best to

deploy this approach authentically, creatively, and effectively. We must have the courage, particularly for students with limited hybrid work experience, to be honest with them about what employability means, and what we believe are *unknown unknowns* that, by addressing, can help them thrive.

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