
What Do We Want Students to Know? . . . and Other Important Questions

Answers to four questions will guide schools as they develop new models of curriculum and assessment.

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The successful use of new assessment strategies requires new assumptions about teaching, learning, and assessment. A traditional focus on the delivery of information and the standardization of the circumstances of that delivery needs to give way to an emphasis on the development of learners.

Based on nearly 20 years of experience of the faculty at Alverno College, as well as our own work in assisting schools and districts with the change process, we suggest four questions that will help schools and teachers guide the development of new models of curriculum and assessment.

What Do We Want Students to Know and Be Able to Do?

In past practice, teachers and schools have often focused almost solely on content. The goals for an English course, for example, would be expressed in terms of the literary genres students will study. Asking what we want students to know and be able to do forces a more expansive look at curriculum goals and also raises the issue of relevance: To what end will they study literature? What personal abilities (thinking, empathy for others, self-expression) can be developed through interaction with works of literature?

We may, indeed, want to specify that students gain certain understandings or skills (as is done in the

"required figures" part of a figure skating competition). But mightn't we also think about multiple modes of demonstration of the outcomes as well (as in the skater's "free program")?

The California social studies curriculum provides an example of an integrated goal, where content and performance come together: Students will demonstrate empathy for different periods of history.¹ The "required figures" (for example, the analysis of specific social, economic, political, and religious events and relationships) will depend upon what periods of history within which we choose to embed the development of this ability. But we could learn a great deal about the student by allowing for "free program" expression in a variety of student-selected demonstrations (written products, group projects, integrated art and writing, and so on).

What Will Count as Acceptable Performance?

Determining criteria for satisfactory performance may be the most difficult aspect of assessment. It requires us to back up and ask, "What would a student do if he or she had mastered a specific ability?" This means that we must examine what is at the heart of any and all competent performance, without being tied to the specifics of a particular performance.

In determining criteria for academic

assessment, for example, we must look at the situation and set of directions that elicit the performance. For example, if we created an assessment in an American history course to measure a student's ability to demonstrate empathy for different periods of history, we might select the Civil War as a context and offer the following alternative directions (inviting students to suggest others):

1. Write a diary as though you were the mother of two sons during the Civil War, one fighting for the South and one for the North. Attach a statement about what you think was hardest for this mother.

2. Create a play about a family in the Civil War, where the action revolves around the decision of a member of the family to join the army. Attach a commentary about how the members of this family are like or unlike families you know.

3. Create a chart of aspects of the Civil War that affected families. Compare the experiences of families during the recent Persian Gulf War.

A second type of criteria, to assess quality, would relate to how well students demonstrate the goals: through some comparison with their own experience, how well do students connect an analysis of aspects of this period of history to how they themselves might feel had they lived at that time?

Performance criteria need to be general enough to allow students to practice what they will be judged on, without memorizing specific answers. They also need to be applicable to other periods of history, so that we can assess students' use of the ability in

other contexts. Using both types of criteria to assess students in any one of the three tasks about the Civil War should show us whether students are seeing the period in historical perspective, as well as making links to their own experience.

How Can We Assure Expert Judgments?

The ability to use the criteria to determine the quality of students' work is what we mean by expert judgment, and it is far from the subjective process some fear. Because the criteria are known in advance to the students (and teachers use them to design learning experiences that lead up to the appraisal), assessment becomes a matter of gathering evidence in the student's performance to support a judgment whether each criterion is met.

Some criteria we might identify to assess students' ability to perform any of the three tasks about the Civil War noted above might include:

1. *Accurately uses information from the historical period (no evidence of anachronisms).* When students use information to create a picture of life in a specific historical period, the teacher can see the depth of their understanding; obviously, the presence of 20th century devices (televisions, fax machines), for example, would reveal problems in a student's grasp of the period.

2. *Uses sufficient detail to create a sense of what it was like for people who lived at the time under study.* This criterion calls upon the teacher's and students' sense of "how much is enough?" The teacher should talk through the need for the performance to satisfy an audience's need: Who will read what the student produces? What context-setting information will the audience need? How much description and how many examples

What's the Difference Between Authentic and Performance Assessment?

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Performance assessment and authentic assessment are often used interchangeably, but do they mean the same thing? Although both labels might appropriately apply to some types of assessment, they are not synonymous. We must be clear about the differences if we are to support each other in developing improved assessments.

Two Examples

To distinguish between the two terms, let's look at a familiar form of assessment with which we have a wealth of experience. Following are two examples of a direct writing assessment in which students produce writing samples.

Case 1: Every May school district X conducts a direct writing assessment. For four days, all students at selected grade levels participate in a standardized series of activities to produce their writing samples. Using a carefully scripted manual, teachers guide students through the assessment with limited teacher directions and extended student writing time (up to 45 minutes) each day: Topic Introduction and Pre-writing (Day 1), Rough Drafting (Day 2), Revising and Editing (Day 3), and Final Copying and Proofreading (Day 4). The assessment clearly supports the Writing-as-a-Process instructional model.

Case 2: School district Y also conducts a direct writing assessment annually in May. Each student has a

conference with his or her teacher to determine which paper from the student's portfolio to submit for assessment purposes. The papers in the portfolio have not been generated under standardized conditions but, rather, represent the ongoing work of the student for the year. All the papers were developed by the student, with as much or as little time allocated to each of the Writing-as-a-Process stages as he or she saw fit.

Is Case 1 an example of a performance assessment? Yes. The students are asked to perform specific behaviors that are to be assessed: to prove that they can write, the students produce a writing sample. Is Case 2 an example of a performance assessment? Yes, also. The portfolio contains numerous examples of actual student performance, although much of the structure associated with testing has been removed.

Is Case 1 an example of an authentic assessment? No. While the students are asked to perform the specific behavior to be assessed, the context is contrived. In real life, individuals seldom write under the conditions imposed during a standardized direct writing assessment. Is Case 2 an example of an authentic assessment? Yes. Performance is assessed in a context more like that encountered in real life; for example, students independently determined how long to spend on the various stages of the writing process, creating as many or as few rough drafts as they saw necessary to complete their final copies.

As we can see, performance assessment refers to the kind of student response to be examined; authentic assessment refers to the context in which that response is performed. While not all performance assessments are authentic, it is difficult to imagine an authentic assessment that would not also be a performance assessment.

Criteria for Authenticity

To determine whether a given performance assessment is authentic, we must ask, "Authentic to what?" It is a seemingly simple question, but one whose answer may be complex. The following are just a few facets of authenticity: stimuli, task complexity, locus of control, motivation, spontaneity, resources, conditions, criteria, standards, consequences.

Some of these points may be more critical than others in a particular assessment. The assessor needs to make that determination. But in labeling an assessment as authentic, the assessor must specify in what respects the assessment is authentic.

Moreover, because authenticity has a multidimensional nature, some assessments are more authentic than others. Ironically, the most authentic assessment in many situations can probably not be contrived for purposes of testing, for then it would no longer be totally authentic. Educators and assessors must thus be explicit about which facets of authenticity are most critical.

Proposed Definitions

Two definitions may help further clarify the distinction between the two terms.

In a performance assessment, the student completes or demonstrates the same behavior that the assessor desires to measure. There is a minimal degree, if any, of inference involved. For example, if the behavior to be measured is writing, the student writes. The student does not complete

multiple-choice questions about sentences and paragraphs, which instead measure the student's ability to proofread other people's writing, and require a high degree of inference about the student's ability to write.

In an authentic assessment, the student not only completes or demonstrates the desired behavior, but also does it in a real-life context. "Real life" may be in terms of the student (for example, the classroom) or an adult expectation. The significant criterion for the authenticity of a writing assessment might be that the locus of control rests with the student; that is, the student determines the topic, the time allocated, the pacing, and the conditions under which the writing sample is generated.

Implications for Educators

What significance do these definitions have for educators? First, when we read materials or attend presentations, we must determine whether the authors or presenters are sensitive to the distinction between the two terms. We must be particularly cautious of generalizing from information provided by individuals who use the terms interchangeably.

Second, we must become informed consumers when purchasing tests, assessment programs, or other materials being marketed as either performance or authentic assessments. Buzzwords sell, unfortunately, so beware.

Third, when planning an assessment, we must carefully identify the purpose in order to determine whether performance assessment — authentic or not — is relevant. Only appropriate matches will improve assessment of student learning. □

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will be enough to paint a vivid picture for the reader? Having the teacher and students explore beforehand the meaning of "sufficient detail" can be an effective way to make the criterion clear to students.

3. *Draws out relationships or comparisons between that period of history and the present.* This criterion addresses critical thinking needed to make relationships, draw inferences, and engage in analysis. Both the teacher and students should examine the appropriateness and accuracy of the comparisons. Are these only the most obvious? Are they the most significant? Understanding and making relationships is not a skill that needs to wait until middle or high school. Elementary school children can learn to identify similarities and differences.

4. *Uses affective language in dealing with the experiences of people — in history and today.* This criterion requires preparation, as do the others, in the learning experiences that build up to the assessment. Our traditional testing practices have not emphasized affective goals. What better way to begin to make history meaningful than to see it as affecting the way people feel about their lives? Both the teacher and students need to ask questions like: Does the affective language capture what it might feel like to live in a period of war, given the circumstances of the time? Does the student link the way people in that period might have felt with his or her own feelings in a similar experience?

By being explicit and open about the criteria and giving students many examples of excellent work, we give them guidelines for improvement.

How Can We Provide Feedback?

Because the types of performances we've described do not reflect single



solutions or memorized facts, they enhance opportunities for discussion with students and their parents. How well is a student learning to make relationships, not only in history, but in science, mathematics, and literature as well? Is he or she using this skill at home in the practical decisions of daily life? How can the student, teacher, and parents strengthen this ability to make relationships? Used in this way, the criteria become guides for learning, not an end point to the learning process.

The value of teachers and parents communicating productively is evident in the comments of a 1st grade teacher in Milwaukee who is developing assessment criteria in mathematics:

For the first time, I had a lot of things to talk about when discussing mathematics. I was able to present parents with many examples of their child's development in terms of specific assessment criteria. My knowledge of the criteria provided me with the language necessary to present my assessment of students to parents.

Linking Learning and Assessment

By answering these four questions, we believe that schools and teachers can connect teaching, learning, and assessment in a meaningful way. With explicit goals and standards, teachers' expert judgment becomes a vehicle for informing learners about their progress toward specified goals and guiding them toward improvement. □

¹F. Alexander and C. Crabtree, (1988), "California's New History-Social Science Curriculum Promises Richness and Depth," *Educational Leadership* 46, 1: 10-13.

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