Imagine students engaging in a deep exploration of social policy issues by conducting oral histories of homeless people in their own community and then sharing their research and recommendations to the City Council with the parents in the community but also with the residents and managers of their local homeless shelter. What might happen if students captured their own histories in the form of rap songs and poems and then performed them in Grand Slam competitions with students from other schools across the county?

What if students produced their own reviews of video and other games and posted them on sites endorsed by the original game creators? What would schools gain if students explored and proposed ways of maximizing the use of energy and other resources to their school’s Board of Education? Or if high school students created a survival book for incoming students from countries other than the US?

Issues of engagement and motivation diminish greatly when students can appreciate the meaningfulness and relevance of what they are learning. This is what schooling should do for students. It should deepen their awareness of issues that matter, provide them with tools to transfer what they are learning into real-world applications, and inspire them to do good deeds.

Classroom assessments fall into a continuum of real-life problems or tasks on one extreme, and narrowly defined and isolated test items on the other. Life in and outside of school presents us with challenges and opportunities that comprise the entire range of that continuum. Oftentimes, these challenges are complex and require that we use skills and knowledge from a variety of areas. Getting a loan, preparing a dinner for guests with different dietary needs, and organizing a family vacation require the use and application of more than one skill and area of knowledge. On the other hand, at one point or another, we face situations that resemble the kinds of tests we take in schools, as in filling out job applications, taking the written part of a driving test, or reading a recipe. These require basic reading comprehension and mathematics skills.

Motivation is essential for learning to occur. It can be enhanced when students are provided with strategically devised authentic opportunities which help students apply, transfer and connect seemingly separate knowledge and skills. The recent adoption of Common Core standards by many states and its inclusion on Race to the Top legislation offers teachers the opportunity to revisit their curriculum and develop authentic learning and assessment experiences that incorporate these standards and indicators.
A teacher may begin the design process with the idea that her students will explore and propose ways of maximizing the use of energy and other resources in their school to the Board of Education. Without going much further with her design, the teacher may review the Common Core Standards and identify the following ones as relevant to the design of this unit and assessments.

### Reading

**Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**
- Integrate and evaluate content presented in different formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words
- Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence
- Analyze how two of more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take

**Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity**
- Read and comprehend complex literary texts independently and proficiently

### Writing

**Text Types and Purposes**
- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence

**Production and Distribution of Writing**
- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to the task
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach
- Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others

**Research to Build and Present Knowledge**
- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation
- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection and research.

Using these standards as a frame for her design, the teacher may determine that students will begin the unit of study by reviewing the schools’ expenses for energy use for the past two years. As they acquire some foundational knowledge on energy concepts and formulas, students will also conduct a walkthrough and audit of their school documenting current energy use in terms of air conditioning, heat, lights, and use of equipment, and its apparent impact on staff. Included in the audit will be the cataloguing of the age, energy efficiency ratings, and use of equipment and appliances comparing and using different methods for calculating energy use. Students will also work in teams to engage in internet research on current guidelines of energy use and efficiency for different equipment. They will also investigate their own and other students’ personal footprints using sites such as the Global Foodprint Network (www.foodprintnetwork.org). Based on their research, they will write individual letters with their recommendations to the Board of Education. They
will then review and assess all the letters identifying the most compelling and clear arguments with supporting data, which they will consolidate into a single class letter signed by all of them. They will finally draft, develop, rehearse and present a 10 minute presentation of their work and recommendations to their school’s Board of Education.

The preceding unit with its accompanying tasks possess the following eight distinct attributes. Many of these attributes would enhance any assessment task, authentic or not.

- **Real purpose and audience**: students solve a real problem for an invested audience beyond the classroom in a way that enables students to experience the benefits and consequences of their work. Audiences may include other students when they are held accountable for learning the material presented by their peers; parents and community members; government officials; and any other party that benefits from the information or products generated by students. They may include the students themselves when they derive personal benefits from the assessment task. This would be the case if students developed and implemented a personal wellness action plan for themselves. In the case of the energy use unit, the audience would be the Board of Education but the beneficiaries would include the school and community.

- **Integration of content and skills**: students build upon prior knowledge and apply knowledge and skills from two or more naturally related areas. Possible combination of content areas and skills may include but are not limited to science/technology/society-related topics; language arts/social studies topics; and, foreign language/culture topics. In the preceding example, the use of written communication enhances students’ mathematical problem-solving and scientific skills as well as the application of their inquiry and literacy skills and knowledge. The energy use unit seamlessly integrates mathematics, science and literacy.

- **Disciplined Inquiry/Academic Rigor**: students search for in-depth understanding through systematic research and inquiry using a variety of primary and secondary sources. Research may include field-based inquiry where students interview members of the community, book-research, and web-based research. The walkthrough, equipment audit, energy equipment use and footprint research illustrate the use of disciplined inquiry.

- **Explicit standards and scoring criteria**: students participate in the identification of performance standards for the task and in its articulation in the form of rubrics that effectively distinguish the levels of performance; performance criteria guide students in evaluation and goal setting, and a variety of exemplars and anchors illustrate various levels of performance. The Common Core standards and their accompanying indicators used to design the unit and assessments could be the foundation of the co-creation of rubrics and checklists by students and the teacher.
Leveraging the Common Core Standards with Authentic Assessments, G. Martin-Kniep

- **Elaborate communication**: students communicate what they know and can do and how they think through written, artistic, and oral performances, as well as exhibitions and through opportunities to teach others. The letter and presentation to the Board of Education illustrate this criterion.

- **Levels of thinking**: students use basic and higher levels of thinking in a task that calls for a combination of skills and forms of knowledge. It is hard to illustrate this attribute without a detailed explanation of a unit. However, some of the practices that support multiple levels of thinking are the use of essential and guiding questions, along with having students conduct research as they try to solve problems or design products and performances, such as the energy use problem.

- **Meta-cognition, self- and peer-assessment and feedback**: students reflect on both products and processes through ongoing and specific questions, checklists, or rubrics. They formally evaluate their own and each other’s learning through ongoing, elaborate and specific feedback from both the teacher and their peers. This feedback encourages student revision to produce quality work as would be the case in the assessment and refinement process that led to development of the class letter to the Board of Education.

- **Flexibility in content, strategies, products and time**: the assessment task allows for student-generated choice of content and strategies; time allotment is flexible for different students and accommodates differences among the products/performances selected. This would be illustrated if students had choices as to the specific focus for their energy inquiry and if they were able to play a greater role in the aspects of the unit that caters to their preferred learning style (i.e., the data presentation, writing, cataloguing, etc.).

**What gets in the way of using authentic assessments?**

Authentic assessments can be used in any subject or grade level. However, teachers sometimes struggle to find legitimate opportunities or spaces for them. The struggle stems from a number of different issues. Among these are: a) authentic tasks can take much time out of an already crowded curriculum; b) teachers perceive that they need to devote most of their time to instructing basic content or skills or to preparing students for high stakes tests; and, c) teachers have little experience designing or using the kinds of units or tasks that support authentic projects; and, d) it is difficult for some teachers to identify authentic purposes and audiences for their assessments.

Teachers could increase the room for authentic assessments by shifting some of the transmission of knowledge from themselves to the students. One effective strategy for doing this involves the use of jigsaws. In this strategy, the teacher divides some of the material in a text or unit into sub-topics and assigns each sub-topic to a small group of students. Each group reads and reviews its own topic simultaneously until they have...
mastered the material. The jigsaws are then disbanded into new groups comprised of a student from each of the original small groups. Students take turns teaching each other the new material until everyone has all the knowledge of the original sub-groups.

Teacher can also engage students in the design of their own tests, review cheat sheets, games and contests, using technology applications such as Castle Learning, EdHelper, and Expertspace to increase the authenticity of the review and studying processes.

One strategy for identifying authentic audiences for students’ work is to use one or more faculty meetings during the school year where teachers share assessment ideas and brainstorm possible audiences. In some cases, it is possible for one class or the school itself to be the audience for another’s class work.

Authentic assessment is not a luxury or something teachers do if and when they have time. They should be an integral component of a rich and balanced and standards-based educational program designed to maximize students’ acquisition and use of basic knowledge and skills; and enable them to use and apply their learning in contexts and situations that relate what they learn in school with what they need to succeed in the world we live in. Now, more than ever before, and in the face of a world in which all kinds of knowledge are accessible digitally, it is critical that schools re-establish the value of school learning by helping students find purpose and meaning in what they learn.

Other authentic assessment resources by Giselle O. Martin-Kniep:

With Picone-Zocchia, J. Changing the Way You Teach, Improving the Way Students Learn. ASCD, 2009. (Chapter 4)


Becoming a Better Teacher: Eight Innovations that Work. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. 2000. (Chapter 4)


With Soodak, L. Authentic Assessment and Curriculum Integration: Natural Partners in Need of Thoughtful Policy. Educational Policy, 8, 2. June 1994.
