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Authentic Performance
Tasks: The Student
Perspective

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Many schools and districts have come to realize the limitations of traditional assessments, which can effectively show what students know but which don't necessarily promote long-term learning or outcomes that we value. Authentic performance-based assessments offer a different approach - one where the assessment is indistinguishable from the learning – and is often seen by teachers and administrators as a useful addition to their repertoires. As advocates of these types of assessments, we've heard positive feedback from educators who have used them, but, as a parent, I was curious to learn more about students' experiences with authentic tasks. What do students do differently in classes that use these assessments? Do they see benefits to their experiences with them? Would they like to see them implemented in more of their classes? When I had the chance to examine student feedback on these assessments, I was encouraged to learn of the value that students place in authentic performance tasks.

Authentic Performance Tasks: The Student Perspective

By Patti Miller

A recent article published by UNESCO Bangkok¹ is among the many voices speaking of the need for educators to promote competencies that enable students to succeed outside of school. There is a growing recognition in the field that it is not enough to teach our students facts; students must *understand* those facts and build the skills to be able to apply their understanding to situations that require action.

The 2015 NACE Job Outlook Survey², which highlights the qualities employees value in their potential employees, underscores this point. Traditional methods of teaching and assessing, in which the teacher is the ultimate arbiter

| Top 10 Candidate Skills/Qualities Valued by Employers | |
|---|------------------------|
| Skill/Quality | % valuing that quality |
| Leadership | 77.8 |
| Ability to work in a team | 77.8 |
| Written communication skills | 73.4 |
| Problem solving-skills | 70.9 |
| Strong work ethic | 70.4 |
| Analytical/quantitative skills | 68.0 |
| Technical skills | 67.5 |
| Verbal communications skills | 67.0 |
| Initiative | 66.5 |
| Computer skills | 62.6 |

Source: NACE Job Outlook Survey 2015

¹ <http://www.unescobkk.org/education/news/article/taking-action-on-global-education>

² <https://www.naceweb.org/s11122014/job-outlook-skills-qualities-employers-want.aspx>

of knowledge in a classroom and where students are asked to prove their knowledge primarily via information recall-type assessments, do not produce these types of hard-to-measure yet critical outcomes. However, performance-based assessments, which make use of curriculum-embedded tasks to help students acquire knowledge, skills, and work habits (Hibbard et. al, 1996), can help students to build those competencies.

The Performance Assessment Design Initiative (PADI), sponsored by the Tri-State Consortium and led by LCI, has for the past 4 years supported the increased understanding and use of authentic performance assessments among 24 participating Tri-State member districts. PADI participants have designed and implemented 76 K-12 tasks to date, providing a wealth of information about the challenges and benefits of using these types of assessments.

As a parent, I was curious to use this data to explore how students feel about authentic assessments, given how different they can be from typical assignments and tests. Would the students see the same value in these assessments as do their teachers?

The Results

Starting in 2013, PADI tapped several groups of elementary, middle and high school students from 5 different districts in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut to discuss their experiences with the assessments designed under the project. The groups clearly articulated benefits they received from using authentic assessments, and generally expressed a preference for those types of tasks versus traditional assessments. The one caveat they raised is that they are time-consuming and therefore can make it difficult for students to meet all the demands imposed by school.

Specific themes that emerged from the discussions include:

Authentic tasks are seen as fostering competencies

Several students spoke about enjoying the freedom and control that the assessments provided. Along with highlighting their enjoyment, their comments underscored the competencies that students felt they gained by going through their assessments. They had to “get over” their objections to the use of technology, the assignment structure, etc., and spoke of learning that they needed to adapt to get things done. And the nature of the tasks, in which they weren’t

Resource links

For a grounding in authentic performance task assessments, read this [article](#).

To understand various types of learner-centered assessments, consider this [webinar series](#).

To download a blueprint to create your own authentic task assessment, click [here](#).

spoon-fed assignments or solutions, forced them to rely on themselves and their teams to arrive at answers.

- “The teacher encouraged us to solve our own problems, which felt good”
- “She started us then left us to it... but (teachers) were still supportive even when they were not helping us.”
- “If there was a problem, we had to fix it or change it or start again”
- “I learned that you learn more if you push yourself to go further”
- “It has helped us with patience when working with others.”

Letting pupils choose their area of focus led to higher levels of engagement, effort and learning

Fans of authenticity are probably not surprised to find that students responded well to being able to define the focus of their assessments. Although initially it could be difficult to find an area of study that they felt passionate about, students reflected upon how owning this part of the process ultimately improved the quality of their learning.

- “You give the student the ability to find something that they’re actually interested in, and they’ll put in so much more effort to that assignment”
- “One of the things about testing is that when you’re studying, you memorize the information, and then once you take the test you forget about it. And then at the end of the year you’re like oh god, what was it that I learned the first month of school? This way I was able to internalize the information more, and I was more interested in it.”

Students learned the value of process as well as product

Panelists spoke of the tendency of many of their student peers to concentrate on product rather than process, particularly when the end product is a grade. However, experiencing performance assessments did help these groups to understand the value of the process, even if, at times, their aha moment happened later in their school career.

- “A lot of people including me strive for the final product. But the process is what sticks with you longer.”
- “I don’t really think the process for the student really matters at the time.... But as senior I can look back and see how the process helped me become a better writer and thinker.”
- “It was kind of frustrating for me... but now I see that it was good for me.”
- “You can learn a lot more through doing and through life experiences (than by taking a test)”
- “You had to time out this project. You could not do it last minute.”

The tasks built transferrable school skills

Student comments reflected an understanding of how performance tasks helped them to build skills that could be applied outside of the original tasks. These skills ranged from specific study strategies to critical thinking abilities.

- “We gained skills in note taking and project planning”
- “This helped us (do) a much more careful reading of all texts”
- “We learned about how to analyze a problem”
- “You had to be able to back up what you were saying”

But... authentic assessments are time-intensive

In the midst of all of this positivity, there was a recognition on the part of the students that in some ways, it’s easier for them to take a traditional assessment, even if that might be less intellectually stimulating for them. With a traditional assessment, the path to completion is clearly defined and the way to succeed is easily understood (memorize this packet; write an essay on this topic using these research materials). By contrast, with authentic tasks, students needed to put a lot of up-front work into defining their task, research sources, and other parameters. Given their depth, these tasks often took a lot of time and energy to do well. Students saw this time factor as a possible roadblock to implementing them across all classes as a replacement for traditional assessments – but they valued their experiences with the tasks they had, and wished to continue using these kinds of assessments in at least some of their classes.

- “A lot of times these projects take a lot of work, and I think there’s a level of maturity that has to come with that.”

As a parent with a job in the education field, I’m deeply sympathetic to the realities faced by educators. Pressures of time, mandates and efficiency often cause schools to assess their student via a limited number of measures that are easy to count. These types of assessments can do a decent job of showing what students know. But as a parent, I’m concerned with more than *what* my children know; I’m interested in understanding if and how they’re being prepared to succeed in life. Looking back at the NACE survey information, I’m heartened to see how many of those attributes our sampled students feel they are acquiring via their authentic performance tasks. And as parent, I wish our students were exposed to more of them.

About the Author



Patti Miller serves as the Director of Communications and Marketing for LCI. In this role, she is involved in planning, communicating and executing initiatives related to the mission and work of the company. Closer to home, she appreciates the manner in which LCI's work informs her understanding of her children's experiences in school.

Patti worked as a management consultant prior to joining LCI, and holds degrees from Yale and Wharton. She can be reached at pattim@lclitd.org.

About the Publisher

Learner-Centered Initiatives works to improve education by focusing on teaching, learning and leadership practices. Our Professional Development programs, products and services integrate relevant neuroscience approaches and focus on research-grounded, field-tested educational practices.

At LCI, we practice the priority that our name establishes, integrating learner-centered practices into our work, engaging participants' perspectives, energy and expertise and tapping their passion for education.

We are a certified MWBE in NYS and NYC, and have been successfully helping clients since 1995.

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