AN INTRO TO

Performance Tasks

Guide to Engaging Students in Meaningful Learning

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What is a Performance Task?

What is a Performance Task?

A performance task is any learning activity or assessment that asks students to *perform* to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and proficiency. Performance tasks yield a tangible product and/or performance that serve as evidence of learning. Unlike a selected-response item (e.g., multiple-choice or matching) that asks students to select from given alternatives, a performance task presents a situation that calls for learners to apply their learning in context.

Performance tasks are routinely used in certain disciplines, such as visual and performing arts, physical education, and career-technology where performance is the natural focus of instruction. However, such tasks can (and should) be used in every subject area and at all grade levels.

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Characteristics of a Performance Task

Characteristics of Performance Tasks

While any performance by a learner might be considered a performance task (e.g., tying a shoe or drawing a picture), it is useful to distinguish between the application of specific and discrete skills (e.g., dribbling a basketball) from genuine performance in context (e.g., playing the game of basketball in which dribbling is one of many applied skills). Thus, when I use the term performance tasks, I am referring to more complex and authentic performances.

Here are seven general characteristics of performance tasks:

1. *Performance tasks call for the application of knowledge and skills, not just recall or recognition.*

    In other words, the learner must actually use their learning to *perform*. These tasks typically yield a tangible product (e.g., graphic display, blog post) or performance (e.g., oral presentation, debate) that serve as evidence of their understanding and proficiency.

2. *Performance tasks are open-ended and typically do not yield a single, correct answer.*

    Unlike selected- or brief constructed- response items that seek a "right" answer, performance tasks are open-ended. Thus, there can be different responses to the task that still meet success criteria. These tasks are also open in terms of process; i.e., there is typically not a single way of accomplishing the task.
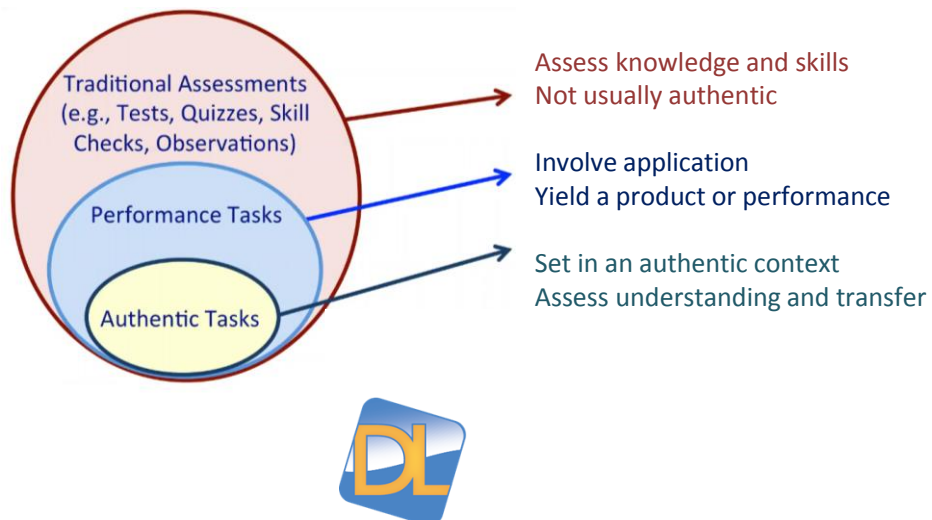
Characteristics of Performance Tasks

3. *Performance tasks establish novel and authentic contexts for performance.*

    These tasks present realistic conditions and constraints for students to navigate. For example, a mathematics task would present students with a never-before-seen problem that cannot be solved by simply "plugging in" numbers into a memorized algorithm. In an authentic task, students need to consider goals, audience, obstacles, and options to achieve a successful product or performance. Authentic tasks have a side benefit — they convey purpose and relevance to students, helping learners see a reason for putting forth effort in preparing for them.

4. *Performance tasks provide evidence of understanding via transfer.*

    Understanding is revealed when students can transfer their learning to new and "messy" situations. Note that not all performances require transfer. For example, playing a musical instrument by following the notes or conducting a step-by-step science lab require minimal transfer. In contrast, rich performance tasks are open-ended and call "higher-order thinking" and the thoughtful application of knowledge and skills in context, rather than a scripted or formulaic performance.

Characteristics of Performance Tasks

5. Performance tasks are multi-faceted.

Unlike traditional test "items" that typically assess a single skill or fact, performance tasks are more complex. They involve multiple steps and thus can be used to assess several standards or outcomes.

6. Performance tasks can integrate two or more subjects as well as 21st century skills.

In the wider world beyond the school, most issues and problems do not present themselves neatly within subject area "silos." While performance tasks can certainly be content-specific (e.g., mathematics, science, social studies), they also provide a vehicle for integrating two or more subjects and/or weaving in 21st century skills and Habits of Mind. One natural way of integrating subjects is to include a reading, research, and/or communication component (e.g., writing, graphics, oral or technology presentation) to tasks in content areas like social studies, science, health, business, health/physical education. Such tasks encourage students to see meaningful learning as integrated, rather than something that occurs in isolated subjects and segments.

7. Performances on open-ended tasks are evaluated with established criteria and rubrics.

Since these tasks do not yield a single answer, student products and performances should be judged against appropriate criteria aligned to the goals being assessed. Clearly defined and aligned criteria enable defensible, judgment-based evaluation. More detailed scoring rubrics, based on criteria, are used to profile varying levels of understanding and proficiency.

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Why Should We Use Performance Tasks?

Why Should we Use Performance Tasks

The New Standards Demand Performance

The most recent sets of academic standards in the U.S. — The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English Language Arts and Mathematics , The Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), The College, Career and Citizenship Standards for Social Studies (C3) and The National Core Arts Standards (NCAS) — call for educational outcomes that demand more than multiple-choice and short answer assessments.

Rather than simply specifying a "scope and sequence" of knowledge and skills, these new standards focus on the performances expected of students who are prepared for higher education and careers. For example, the CCSS in English Language Arts have been framed around a set of Anchor Standards that define the long-term proficiencies that students will need to be considered "college and career ready."

Similarly, the NGSS have highlighted eight practices, including Asking Questions and Defining Problems and Analyzing and Interpreting Data. These practices are intended to actively engaging learners in "doing" science, not just memorizing facts.

The pattern is clear: the current crop of academic Standards focus on developing transferable processes, not simply presenting a body of factual knowledge for students to remember. A fundamental goal reflected in these Standards is the preparation of learners who can *perform* with their knowledge.

Why Should we Use Performance Tasks

Needed Shifts in Assessment

The new emphases of the Common Core and Next Generation Standards call for a concomitant shift in assessments — both in large-scale and classroom levels. The widespread use of multiple-choice tests as predominant measures of learning in many subject areas must give way to an expanded use of performance assessments tasks that engage students in applying their learning in genuine contexts.

The two national assessment consortia, Smarter Balanced (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment and Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), have declared their intent to expand their repertoire to include performance tasks on the next generation of standardized tests.

While it is encouraging to see changes in external testing, my contention is that the most natural home for the increased use of performance assessments is in the classroom. Since teachers do not face the same constraints as large-scale testing groups (e.g., standardized implementation, limited time, scoring costs, etc.), they can more readily employ performance tasks along with traditional assessment formats.

Why Should we Use Performance Tasks

21st Century Skills

In an era in which students can "google" much of the world's knowledge on a smart phone, an argument can be made that the outcomes of modern schooling should place a greater emphasis on trans-disciplinary skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, communicating using various technologies, and learning to learn. In the paper, "21st Century Skills Assessment," the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2007) describes this need and the implication for assessments of students:

> "While the current assessment landscape is replete with assessments that measure knowledge of core content areas such as language arts, mathematics, science and social studies, there is a comparative lack of assessments and analyses focused on 21st century skills. Current tests fall short in several key ways:
>
> - The tests are not designed to gauge how well students *apply* what they know to new situations or evaluate how students might use technologies to solve problems or communicate ideas.
> - While teachers and schools are being asked to modify their practice based on standardized test data, the tests are not designed to help teachers make decisions about how to target their daily instruction.

The Partnership proposes that needed assessments should "be largely performance-based and authentic, calling upon students to use 21st century skills". I agree!

Why Should we Use Performance Tasks

Current Assessment Landscape

Many current classroom assessments focus on the most easily measured objectives. Teachers devote valuable class time to "test prep" involving practice with multiple-choice and brief constructed-response items that mimic the format of standardized tests. While selected-response and short-answer assessments are fine for assessing discrete knowledge and skills, they are incapable of providing evidence of the skills deemed most critical for the 21st century.

Ironically, the widespread use of narrow, inauthentic assessments and test prep practices can unwittingly undermine the very competencies called for by the next generation academic Standards and 21st Century Skills. Students will *not* be equipped to handle the sophisticated work expected in colleges and much of the workforce if teachers simply march through "coverage" of discrete knowledge and skills in grade-level standards. Moreover, they deprive students of relevant and engaging learning experiences.

In order to counter to these trends, we need to significantly increase the use of authentic performance tasks that require students to apply their learning in genuine contexts. We need to assess the performance outcomes that matter most, not simply those objectives that are easiest to test and grade. Meaningful learning will be enhanced when school curricula are constructed "backward" from a series of rich performance tasks that reflect the "end-in-mind" performances demanded for college and career readiness.

> *"Our assessment photo album needs to include performance tasks that provide evidence of students' ability to apply their learning in authentic contexts."*

\- Jay McTighe

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How Can Educators Design a Performance Task?

How Can Educators Design Performance Tasks?

In the spirit of "backward design," let's begin at the end by considering the qualities of a rich performance task, summarized in Figure 1. Since the criteria listed here define the features that we should see in an authentic task, they serve as targets for constructing tasks as well as the basis for reviewing draft tasks.

Figure 1 – Performance Task Review Criteria:

A. The task addresses targeted standard(s)/ outcome(s)

B. The task calls for understanding and transfer, not simply recall or a formulaic response

C. The task requires extended thinking — not just an answer

D. The task establishes a meaningful, real-world context for application of knowledge and skills

E. The task includes criteria/rubric(s) targeting distinct traits of understanding and successful performance

F. The task directions for students are clearn

G. The task allows students to demonstrate their understanding

H. The task effectively integrates two or more subject areas & technology

How Can Educators Design Performance Tasks

Let's examine these task characteristics as they apply to designing authentic performance tasks:

A. The task addresses/assesses targeted standard(s)/ outcome(s).

As noted in previous blogs in this series, performance tasks ask students to perform with their knowledge. Accordingly, they are well suited to those educational goals that call for application of learning. Also, performance tasks are naturally aligned with trans-disciplinary outcomes, such as the 21st Century Skills of Critical Thinking, Cooperation, Communication and Creativity (4Cs).

Here is a quick check to see if a performance task is well aligned to targeted standard(s)/ outcome(s): Show your task to another teacher or a team and ask them to tell you which standards/outcomes are being addressed. If they can determine all of your targeted standards/outcomes, then the alignment is sound. If they can infer one, but not all, of your targeted standards/outcomes, then you will likely need to modify the task (or eliminate one or more of the outcomes since they are not being addressed.)

How Can Educators Design Performance Tasks

B. The task calls for understanding and transfer, not simply recall or a formulaic response.

Students show evidence of their understanding when they can effectively do two things:

1. apply their learning to new or unfamiliar contexts; i.e., they can transfer their learning;
2. explain their process as well as their answer(s).

Therefore, when designing a performance task, educators should make sure that it requires application, not simply information. The task must also call for learners to present the why not just the what; to explain a concept in their own words; use new examples to illustrate a theory; and/or defend their position against critique.

A wise teacher I met once offered a wise aphorism: With performance tasks, "the juice must be worth the squeeze." In other words, the time and energy needed to design, implement and score a performance task must be worth the effort because it will promote meaningful learning and show that learners can use their learning in authentic and meaningful ways.

How Can Educators Design Performance Tasks

C. The task requires extended thinking — not just an answer.

Authentic performance tasks engage students in the thoughtful application of knowledge and skills. In order to insure that our tasks involve "higher order" thinking, I suggest using the [Depth of Knowledge (DOK) framework](#) developed by Dr. Norman Webb as a reference.

DOK describes four levels of tasks according to the complexity of thinking required to successfully complete them:

Level 1: Recall and Reproduction

Tasks at this level require recall of facts or rote application of simple procedures. The task does not require any cognitive effort beyond a rote response..

Level 2: Skills and Concepts

At this level, students must perform two or more steps and make some decisions on how to approach the task or problem. Involve some reasoning beyond recall.

Level 3: Strategic Thinking

Tasks at this level require strategic thinking and reasoning applied to situations that generally do not have a single "right" answer. Expect students to support their answers, interpretations and conclusions by explaining their reasoning and citing relevant evidence

Level 4: Extended Thinking

Level 4 tasks require extended thinking and complex reasoning over an extended period of time. Expects students to transfer their learning to novel, complex and "messy" situations.

May require students to develop a hypothesis and perform complex analysis.

My general recommendation is that authentic performance tasks should target DOK Level 3.

How Can Educators Design Performance Tasks

D. The task establishes a meaningful, real-world (i.e., "authentic") context.

If you have ever watched a house or apartment being constructed, you know that carpenters frame out the individual rooms to outline the walls, doors, windows, closets and ceiling based on the dimensions specified in a blueprint. This framing guides the installation of sheetrock (drywall) on the walls and ceiling, etc. Then, the windows and doors are installed and the finishing touches (e.g., painting, carpeting) applied. The idea of framing applies to the construction of performance tasks as well!

Grant Wiggins and I created a task design frame based on the acronym, G.R.A.S.P.S. Here are the **G.R.A.S.P.S.** elements that are used to frame a performance task: (1) a real-world **Goal**; (2) a meaningful **Role** for the student; (3) authentic (or simulated) **Audience**(s); (4) a contextualized **Situation** that involves real-world application; (5) student-generated **Products** and **Performances**; and (6) performance Standards (criteria) by which successful performance would be judged. Figure 3 presents this practical task design tool containing associated prompts for each of the G.R.A.S.P.S. elements.

How Can Educators Design Performance Tasks

E. The task includes criteria/rubric(s) targeting distinct traits.

Since authentic tasks do not typically result in a single, correct answer, student products and performances need to be judged against appropriate criteria aligned to the goals being assessed. Clearly defined and aligned criteria enable defensible, judgment-based evaluation by teachers and self-assessment by learners.

F. The task directions for students are clear.

A key feature of authentic performance tasks is their "open ended" nature. However, this feature can also inject ambiguity. Sometimes students will interpret the task differently than the teacher intended and go off on unproductive tangents. Here are three practical ways of checking task clarity and getting feedback for improving the directions if needed:

- Show your draft task to a teacher from a different subject or grade level and ask them to tell what they think the outcomes or standards are; what students would need to do to successfully complete the task; and what the key evaluative criteria should be. If they have difficulty with any of these questions, you probably need to refine/sharpen the task directions.

- Conduct a "pilot test" of a draft task to see if and when students become confused or go off on unproductive tangents.

- Following their work on a task, ask your students to offer edits to the task directions to make them clearer for next year's students.

How Can Educators Design Performance Tasks

G. The task allows students some appropriate choice/variety.

The open-ended nature of performance tasks allows teachers to offer their students options. Students *may* be given choice(s) about:

1. Task Topic — For example, if the outcome involves research, then students might be allowed to pick the topic or question for their investigation.

2. Product/Performance — For example, learners may be given some options regarding how they demonstrate their thinking and learning, such as a poster, blog, or an oral presentation.

3. Audience — For some tasks, it may be appropriate to allow the students to identify a target audience for their product or performance.

Ultimately, the purpose of the task will determine *if* and *when* students should be given choices, and if so, which are the appropriate options.

H. The task incorporates appropriate use of technology.

Authentic performance tasks offer many opportunities for involving students in the purposeful and productive use of technology — for finding information, processing it, interacting with others and communicating. Of course, today's students are truly digital natives and it makes sense to let them play in the digital sandbox. Increasingly, teachers are finding that the incorporation of digital tools can transform a mundane task and engage more learners.

How Can Educators Design Performance Tasks

Final Tips

The design of authentic performance tasks, like any writing or composing process, is iterative in nature. It is very common for task developers to revise task directions, add options for students or modify the evaluative criteria as the task design evolves. Additionally, feedback from self-assessment, peer review and classroom implementation invariably suggests further refinements to the task and associated rubric(s).

Remember to always keep the "end in mind" when designing performance tasks. The goal of the task is to address and assess targeted learning outcomes, not to simply offer "cool" products, entertaining technology or interesting scenarios. The main goal is to design rich tasks that will promote meaningful learning while gathering evidence of students' abilities to apply their learning in authentic contexts.

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Examples of Performance Tasks

Examples of Performance Tasks

Let's look at a few examples of performance tasks characteristics:

Botanical Design (upper elementary)

Your landscape architectural firm is competing for a grant to redesign a public space in your community and to improve its appearance and utility. The goal of the grant is to create a community area where people can gather to enjoy themselves and the native plants of the region. The grant also aspires to educate people as to the types of trees, shrubs, and flowers that are native to the region.

Your team will be responsible for selecting a public place in your area that you can improve for visitors and members of the community. You will have to research the area selected, create a scale drawing of the layout of the area you plan to redesign, propose a new design to include native plants of your region, and prepare educational materials that you will incorporate into the design

Check out the full performance task at Defined STEM: Botanical Design Performance Task. Defined STEM is an online resource that offers hundreds of standards aligned tasks.

Examples of Performance Tasks

Accident Scene Investigation (high school):

You are a law enforcement officer who has been hired by the District Attorney's Office to set-up an accident scene investigation unit. Your first assignment is to work with a reporter from the local newspaper to develop a series of information pieces to inform the community about the role and benefits of applying forensic science to accident investigations.

Your team will share this information with the public through the various media resources owned and operated by the newspaper.

Check out the full performance task from Defined STEM here: Accident Scene Investigation Performance Task

CHAPTER

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Conclusion

Conclusion

In sum, performance tasks like these can be used to engage students in meaningful learning. Since rich performance tasks establish authentic contexts that reflect genuine applications of knowledge, students are often motivated and engaged by such "real world" challenges.

When used as assessments, performance tasks enable teachers to gauge student understanding and proficiency with complex processes (e.g., research, problem solving, and writing), not just measure discrete knowledge. They are well suited to integrating subject areas and linking content knowledge with the 21st Century Skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and technology use.