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THE ROLE OF PERFORMANCE TASKS IN ENGAGING STUDENTS IN MEANINGFUL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT:
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.

Keywords: Assessment**,** trans-disciplinary, Depth of Knowledge, multi-faceted, authentic task, G.R.A.S.P.S.

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

I. INTRODUCTION

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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2. Methods and Materials

2.1 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

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.

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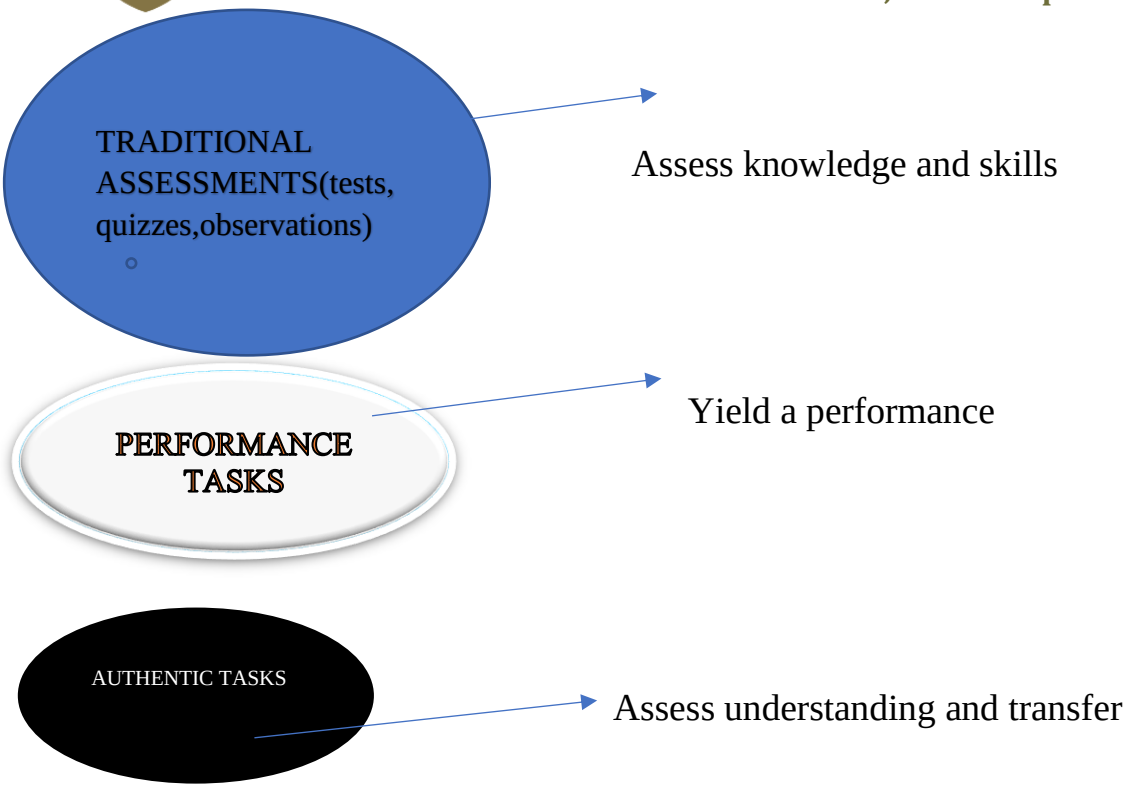

5. Performance tasks are multi-faceted. Unlike traditional test "items" that typically assess a single skill or fact, performance tasks are more complex. They involve multiple steps and thus can be used to assess several standards or outcomes.

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

3. Results

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

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.)

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

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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.

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.

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,

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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

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.

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.

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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.

Conclusion

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.

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.

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