


How to Give Assessments a Boost With PBL

Middle school teachers can update their assessments by offering students authentic opportunities to display what they have learned.

 Allison Shelley for the Alliance for Excellent Education

There are many mixed messages in education. For instance, there are tons of mandated tests to help schools identify and analyze data, but I believe there's also a moral imperative to ensure that learning is authentic and meaningful to students. These two principles, assessments and authenticity, need not be an oxymoron. They can support each other, but it does take 21st-century student-centered design.

The students of 2021 aren't the students of 2019, and our [pacing guides](#), grading practices, and traditional assessments are showing the dust of inflexibility. The research on student engagement always showed the need for lessons and assessments to be meaningful and relevant, but as students returned to school, we're seeing evidence in behavior and academic issues that students aren't just hoping for more authenticity, they are demanding it.

Making Assessments More Authentic

To make your assessments more authentic, you don't need to start over. It's important, however, to ensure that student voices are heard. Many times, assessments exist as a task created by the teacher or a program, but authenticity considers each individual student.

To make an assessment more authentic, just think of turning up the dial on any of the following ideas:

- Having students reflect on and assess their own work
- Ensuring that there are audiences for their work beyond the teacher
- Using assessments that focus on topics of real-world significance, structure, and problem-solving
- Allowing students to select topics of focus

Here's a document I created with a list of options to help turn up the dial on authentic assessments.

[Authentic Assessments Chart](#)

[A list of assessments that provide authentic ways for teachers to gauge student learning.](#)
pdf 49.1 KB

Authenticity as a Part of the Classroom Culture

One of the ways to ensure that assessments are authentic is to use more elements from project-based learning (PBL) in the classroom. In PBL and in any of its many branches—design-based learning, inquiry-based learning, service-based learning, etc.—systemic authenticity is a prime directive. Assessments are utilized to help a teacher understand the students' trajectories, strengths, and growth areas without sacrificing authenticity.

For instance, Telannia Norfar, an Oklahoma high school teacher and coauthor of *Project-Based Learning in the Math Classroom*, uses a more authentic assessment system in her math classroom. This system is a cycle of formative assessments, each followed by critique and revision, that lead to a summative assessment, all of which are based in real-world scenarios. After interviewing a family, her students create an individual financial analysis for it. Formative assessments, like first explaining the basic compound interest formula, scaffold students toward their final presentation to their clients. You can [view her authentic system of assessment](#) in action on YouTube.

Then there's Sara Lev, a transitional kindergarten teacher in Los Angeles and coauthor of *Implementing Project Based Learning in Early Childhood*. In her latest project, students mimicked a recent touring Lego Art exhibit by creating their own. According to Lev, she assessed students throughout her project, sorting Legos "in different ways in order to organize them for their Lego Art Studio—by size, shape, color, number of studs, shiny/dull—as a means of assessing this standard: Classify objects into given categories; count the numbers of objects in each category and sort the categories by count."

So, rather than create an inauthentic test time when all students sat down solely for the purpose of being assessed, Lev used observation and walked around the students as they created their exhibit.

Creating a more authentic assessment experience isn't just about occasionally offering more choices of prompts or allowing students to write a letter to a principal. It's about creating a classroom culture that honors student voice and agency, where students know that what they are learning will make an impact on the world outside of school.