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Engaging Students in Deeper Learning Requires Engaging Assessments

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Research has shown that student engagement is strongly related to performance on assessment tasks, especially for English language learners and students from historically underserved backgrounds. Increasing student engagement, however, has not been the goal of standardized tests of content knowledge. In the traditional assessment paradigm, engagement has been overshadowed by a focus on equity, specifically, issues of bias and accessibility. A common tactic used to avoid bias has been to create highly decontextualized items. Ultimately, this has come at the cost of decreasing students' opportunities to create meaning in the task as well as their motivation to cognitively invest in the task and, thus, undermines their ability to adequately demonstrate what they know and are able to do.

Recent state and federal policies, however, are changing the assessment landscape. For example, the adoption of the Common Core State Standards has spurred a renewed interest in the development of more **balanced assessments** that are designed to measure higher-order thinking skills and support deeper learning. More balanced assessments include performance-based tasks that tap into students' higher-order thinking skills and require students to perform, create, and demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and abilities.

In addition, the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes assessment provisions that may offer opportunities to increase student engagement in large-scale assessments. It specifies that state and local assessments should include "measures that assess higher-order thinking skills and understanding, which may include measures of student academic growth and may be partially delivered in the form of portfolios, projects, or extended performance tasks." Assessments that tap into students' higher-order thinking skills, such as performance-based tasks, can support the development of students' deeper understanding of content and increase student engagement in learning. Thus, the changing state and federal landscape offers a ripe opportunity to develop performance-based assessments that allow students to demonstrate deeper learning competencies (e.g., evaluation, synthesis, analysis, application, and communication skills), and enhance student engagement in those tasks.

But can this be done? Can assessments be designed with engagement considerations in mind? And for that matter, do students and teachers, who are the end users of assessments, even value the use of engaging assessments? We recently took up this challenge by conducting a **study** that examined how students and teachers conceptualize and recognize engagement concepts in performance-based tasks. We found that students and teachers do identify and value engagement concepts and believe that assessments that incorporate those concepts are more engaging and motivate students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills to their fullest abilities. Based on our findings, we offer the following recommendations to educators and assessment developers for ways to increase student engagement in performance-based assessments.

Recommendation 1: Increase task *relevance* for students by making connections to students' lived experiences and interests or through personalization. The task should create a "need to know" for students and give them a reason for doing the task.

Recommendation 2: Create *authentic* tasks for students that emphasize real-world connections and require students to solve real-world problems. Highlight the task's authenticity by ensuring that the task has utility value for students so that they see that the learned content or skill will be of use to them beyond school.

Recommendation 3: Incorporate opportunities for students to *collaborate* in pairs or small groups to increase engagement in the task. In low-stakes assessments, provide opportunities for students to share ideas, answer each other's questions, and engage in sense making. In higher-stakes assessments, include opportunities for students to collaborate through a classroom activity that is completed before launching into independent work. In addition, use simulations or context scenarios that place students in a collaborative setting to create a virtual collaborative experience.

Recommendation 4: Emphasize *higher-order thinking skills* in the tasks by requiring students to analyze, interpret, and manipulate information to solve the problem. In addition, ensure that the tasks have multiple solutions or involve various solution strategies

Recommendation 5: Support student *autonomy* within the task by providing opportunities to make choices that are consistent with students' interests. Create open-ended tasks that afford students cognitive, procedural, and organizational choices.

Recommendation 6: Incorporate self-checks or prompts within the task to engage students in the *self-assessment* process. Require students to explain or justify their answers or use reflection questions so that they engage in metacognitive practices and assess their own learning. Alternatively, design the task such that the task's outcome or product will provide an immediate and authentic self-check to students (e.a..

...internally, design the task such that the task's outcome or product will provide an immediate and authentic self-check to students (e.g., does the robot actually work? does the bridge made of straws hold up?).

The development of educational assessments does not have to come at the expense of student engagement. Rather, in order to accurately measure deeper learning, we argue that students must be engaged in the assessment. Thus, educators and assessment developers should incorporate engagement strategies into the design of new assessments, especially if the assessments are to be used to inform high-stakes decision-making. With the introduction of ESSA, which explicitly specifies assessment provisions such as performance-based tasks, the time is ripe for engagement considerations to further the goal of deeper learning for all students.

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