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Response: Performance Assessments are 'Adaptable, Accessible & Forgiving'

By Larry Ferlazzo on February 18, 2017 9:26 AM

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(This is the first post of a three-part series)

The new "question-of-the-week" is:

What is "performance assessment" and how and why should I use it with students?

Assessment is an obvious key part of our work as educators. There are many different types, and one, in particular, has been generating a fair amount of interest lately. It's called "performance assessment." This series will explore its advantages and disadvantages, and how teachers might use it.

Today's contributors are Mike Kaechele, Allison Zmuda, Bena Kallick, Elizabeth Leisy Stosich, and Jennifer Borgioli. You can listen to a **10-minute conversation** I had with Mike, Allison and Bena on **my BAM! Radio Show**. You can also find a list of, and links to, **previous shows here**.

Performance Assessments: A More Meaningful Approach? (http://www.bamradionetwork.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4191&catid=228)

Allison Zmuda, Mike Kaechele, Bena Kallick



Join us as we explore the fundamentals of performance assessments. What are they? Are they more effective?

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You might also find this collection useful: **The Best Resources For Learning About Performance Assessment**, as well as previous columns here on **Student Assessment**.

Response From Mike Kaechele

Mike Kaechele is a PBL consultant, blogger, and social studies and math teacher. As National Faculty for Buck Institute for Education, Mike leads PBL workshops across the country. He is also the creator of the #MyParty16 Election Project:

Performance assessments are when students demonstrate their learning through projects or performances, instead of traditional tests or writing tasks. They should involve students applying their learning to new contexts in creative ways. Performance assessments push students to the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy by having them analyze, synthesize, and create new applications for content standards.

The days of rote memorization of Googleable facts are long past. We live in a world where the content knowledge that most traditional assessments focus on is inadequate preparation for the connection economy. Performance assessments push students to grow in the success skills of collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity. These are the skill sets that employers are looking for and will offer students the most opportunities in the future.

Project Based Learning (PBL) is a natural platform for performance assessments as students make final products for authentic audiences. Examples of performance assessments in PBL include writing children's books or graphic novels for younger grades on WWII, pitching design prototypes to a "Shark Tank" panel of judges, or designing house blueprints for a geometry class. Performance assessments challenge students to apply learning to new situations and give teachers a richer and deeper understanding of students' comprehension of subject matter.

Performance assessments are also motivating to students. They enjoy the opportunity to utilize their knowledge in diverse ways. In the
http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2017/02/response_performance_assessments_are_adaptable_accessible_forgivin... 1/7

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Performance assessments are also motivating to students. They enjoy the opportunity to utilize their knowledge in diverse ways. In the [#MyParty16 Election Project](#), student groups created their own political parties, draft party platforms, and record thirty second campaign commercials. These performance assessments demonstrate students' understanding of the political process and the use of rhetoric. During the process, students change their mindsets from political apathy to excitement about the election. These kind of results do not happen with traditional assessments. Performance assessments make learning deeper for both teachers and students, preparing them with critical success skills for their unknown future.

"Performance assessments are when students demonstrate their learning through projects or performances, instead of traditional tests or writing tasks."

Mike Kaechele in Education Week Teacher

Response From Allison Zmuda & Bena Kallick

Dr. Bena Kallick is an international consultant providing services to school districts, state departments of education, professional organizations, and public agencies throughout the United States and abroad. Bena Kallick co-authored with Art Costa *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind* and *Habits of Mind Across the Curriculum* (ASCD 2008). She co-authored a new book, *Students at the Center: Personalized Learning and Habits of Mind* with Allison Zmuda that was published by ASCD in January 2017.

Allison Zmuda is an education consultant specializing in learning that is challenging, possible, and worthy of the attempt. Zmuda began her career as a public high school teacher in Newtown, Connecticut. Her passion for her students combined with her innovative spirit resulted in the writing of her first book, *The Competent Classroom* (2001). She continued to write, penning nine more books including *Students at the Center: Personalized Learning and Habits of Mind* that was published by ASCD in January 2017. In addition to her books, Zmuda provides personalized learning insight on her website, [Learning Personalized](#), which features ideas, resources, and interviews to inspire at the classroom, school, and district levels:

Performance assessments are tasks that pose a problem, question, or challenge with no obvious answer or straightforward solution path. Students are required to consider what approach to take, monitor progress, and reexamine strategy, inquiry, and ideas as needed.

The Power of Performance Assessments

Performance assessments measure a student's capacity to apply learning in novel, complex, and ill-defined situations.

When students regularly experience performance assessments, they become more comfortable with being uncomfortable and are more capable of independently using key habits of mind such as applying past knowledge to novel situations, questioning and problem posing, and thinking flexibly.

Real-World Accountability

Performance assessments can have natural, real-world audiences. There is a significant difference in engagement and attention to detail when the task moves from a hypothetical scenario to one where there is an expectation to share, submit, or publish.

Consider the following examples:

Assignment: *Students conduct a scientific investigation where the inquiry is guided but not a "cookie cutter" lab.*

Example: *Students research a local environmental problem (e.g., water quality, reducing carbon footprint) to develop a hypothesis and resulting*
http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2017/02/response_performance_assessments_are_adaptable_accessible_forgivin... 2/7

investigation.

Assignment: Students form a position on a given topic based upon evidence from multiple texts with diverse points of view or sets of data.

Example: Students develop and deliver a stump speech on a topic they feel passionately about using evidence to support their claim/point of view. They are expected to share/publish to see audience response to both their delivery and presentation of compelling evidence.

Assignment: Students develop an idea (e.g. prototype, storyboard, artistic piece) and journal what actions they took and impact it had on their process.

Example: Students create a prototype of a car for public viewing at a car show. Students create a film to showcase at a local movie theater or viewing party.

Establish an Authentic Audience

Asking students to enter competitions or include their work in public exhibitions is one way to find an authentic audience, but it's not strictly necessary.

They can realize many of the same benefit by consulting the criteria for these events, working with teachers to find community members with the requisite evaluative expertise, and enlisting these people as audience members.

Having students work to criteria established outside of the classroom -- such as industry standards or judging criteria for competitions -- makes learning feel more meaningful and engaging.

An Important Investment

These performance assessments are certainly more time consuming in nature and require more attention to logistics. But the benefits are offering clarity to students as to why what they are learning is important and how it will matter to them.

Students also can have a seat at the design table to co-create the assessment through an opportunity to pose and pursue the question, tap the expertise of others within and outside of the classroom, and produce a deliverable in an authentic form that mirrors work done outside of school.

**"Performance assessments
measure a student's capacity
to apply learning in novel,
complex, and ill-defined
situations."**

Allison Zmuda & Bena Kallick in Ed Week Teacher

Response From Elizabeth Leisy Stosich

Elizabeth Leisy Stosich, EdD, is a Research & Policy Fellow at the [Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education \(SCOPE\)](#) and recently released a [study, *Building Teacher and School Capacity to Teach to Ambitious Standards in High-poverty Schools*](#), suggesting mechanisms for enhancing teacher professional development to improve instruction in high-poverty schools. Follow her on Twitter at [@lizleisystosich](#):

When I began teaching, there was a great deal of focus on assessment in my school. The school had been "restructured" after five years of low test scores and the pressure was on to raise student performance. Although I found the assessments we used in our school helpful for supporting

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students' academic growth, I never really viewed assessment as an opportunity for meaningful learning--learning that was relevant, engaging, and encouraged creative thinking.

As a researcher, I had the opportunity to learn from a team of four fourth-grade teachers in a high-poverty urban school who changed the way I viewed assessment. These four women--two veteran and two novice teachers--were using performance assessments for the first time as part of their efforts to teach to the Common Core ([learn more](#)). These teachers described using performance assessments that engaged students in conducting research, conducting debates about real world problems, and communicating their ideas through multimedia presentations.

All four teachers described viewing the performance assessments as "too much" or "too difficult" for their students initially, but they worked together to prepare their students to be successful with the new assessments. As a result, they described changing their beliefs about what they and their students could do. As a special educator on the team remarked, "You'd be surprised what you can do and what your students can do." [As research from Linda Darling-Hammond and others shows](#), the process of using, developing, and scoring performance assessments can serve as a powerful learning experience for teachers about how to support students in engaging in high-level learning.

A challenge for many teachers is access to high-level performance assessments. At [SCOPE](#), I have been working in partnership with SCALE and CCSSO to develop the [Performance Assessment Resource Bank](#), a free and public online bank with high-quality, expert-reviewed performance assessments and the resources teachers and leaders need to support their use with students. Our hope is that this bank can help to create more meaningful learning opportunities for students. The resource bank is fully open to educators.

"The Performance Assessment Resource Bank [is] a free and public online bank with high-quality, expert-reviewed performance assessments and the resources teachers and leaders need to support their use with students."

- Elizabeth Leisy Stosich in
Education Week Teacher

Response From Jennifer Borgioli

Jennifer Borgioli is a Senior Consultant at Learner-Centered Initiatives, Ltd. where she supports teachers, schools, and districts with designing assessments that capture evidence of student learning in ways that are meaningful for students and teachers. She also assists districts with auditing or reviewing their tests and assessments in order to better support balanced assessment systems:

Learning is messy and often difficult to capture. If we want to take stock or ascertain if learning has occurred, we need to collect a proxy, or evidence, of that learning. In effect, assessments are the structures we use to collect that evidence. There are basically three ways we can ask students to share their learning with us. We can:

- give them a question and some choices and ask them to pick out the right answer
- ask them to create a product for us such an essay or a piece of art

- ask them to demonstrate their learning by speaking or using their body (i.e. playing basketball)

If a teacher wants to see if all students can provide the same or a similar answer, they can create a boilerplate, sometimes referred to as a "traditional assessment." Their other option is to create a structure in which students apply their learning to a task. These form of assessments are performance assessments (Brookhart and Nitko, 2011).

A quality performance assessment:

- measures the most important learning
- aligns to standards (both content and process)
- identifies criteria for performance

The most compelling reason for using performance assessments is simple: they blur the lines between a place called "school" and the someplace else known as "the real world." Performance assessments enable us to ensure that the task is worthy of students' (and their teachers') time and energy. We can accomplish that by focusing on authenticity and meaningfulness and by incorporating choice and audiences that would benefit from the students' learning. Students are much more likely to feel engaged with and interested in an assessment when it requires learning that is applicable beyond a school-based task or experience (Martin-Kniep, Picone-Zocchia, 2009).

These kinds of assessments can be simple, such as a short pencil and paper task in which students work out how many badges they would need to sell to support animals at a local shelter; or integrated into a unit where students select a shelter, research costs of caring for a given animal, design and sell badges, and donate their proceeds to the shelter. What's most significant about a performance task is that students are using their learning to do something that goes beyond finding one right answer or filling in a template.

There are numerous design processes teachers can use to create performance assessments. Generally speaking, following the Project or Problem Based Learning (PBL) structure will result in a performance assessment. Assessments created using the Understanding by Design approach typically lead to tasks in which students are asked to do something with their learning. Finally, the Stanford "Beyond the Bubble" project models how to incorporate performance assessment design into the social studies classroom.

Incorporating and using performance assessment doesn't necessarily require following a particular a multi-step design process or structure. It's helpful to instead think about the give or flex of an assessment. A traditional assessment is generally identifiable by its rigid and unyielding form. A performance assessment is adaptable, accessible, and forgiving. By its very nature, it allows the teacher to differentiate or make accommodations. For students, there is a connection from their learning, to the assessment and beyond. Performance assessments' greatest strength lies in their ability to make the messy process of collecting evidence of student learning an experience that benefits both student and teacher.

<https://beyondthebubble.stanford.edu/>

Martin-Kniep, G. O., & Picone-Zocchia, J. (2009). *Changing the Way You Teach, Improving the Way Students Learn*. ASCD.

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- Jennifer Borgioli in Education Week Teacher

Thanks to Mike, Allison, Bena, Elizabeth and Jennifer for their contributions!

Please feel free to leave a comment with your reactions to the topic or directly to anything that has been said in this post.

Consider contributing a question to be answered in a future post. You can send one to me at lferlazzo@epe.org. When you send it in, let me know if I can use your real name if it's selected or if you'd prefer remaining anonymous and have a pseudonym in mind.

You can also contact me on Twitter at [@Larryferlazzo](https://twitter.com/Larryferlazzo).

Anyone whose question is selected for this weekly column can choose one free book from a number of education publishers.

Education Week has published a collection of posts from this blog, along with new material, in an e-book form. It's titled **Classroom Management Q&As: Expert Strategies for Teaching**.

Just a reminder--you can subscribe and receive updates from this blog via [email](#) or [RSS Reader](#). And, if you missed any of the highlights from the first five years of this blog, you can see a categorized list below. They don't include ones from this current year, but you can find them by clicking on the "answers" category found in the sidebar.

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Look for Part Two in a few days...

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