From Performance Tasks to Projects (PBL):
Comparing Two Approaches for Engaging Students in Meaningful Learning

by
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The terms, *performance tasks* and *projects* (as in project-based learning) are familiar to today's educators. Like fraternal siblings, they share many common characteristics, yet they are not identical twins. In this article, we'll explore their commonalities, distinguish their differences, and suggest the use of shorter performance tasks as steppingstones toward full-blown project-based learning.

We'll begin with definitions. What is a performance task? In its essence, a performance task asks students to apply their learning in some fashion. More specifically, "we define a performance task as any learning activity or assessment that that asks students to construct a multi-faceted response, create a product, or produce a demonstration. In other words, to perform with their learning." (McTighe, Doubet, Carbaugh, 2020).

By "project" we don't just mean building something in a makerspace. In Project-based learning (PBL) the "project" is a much more in-depth, rigorous learning experience. It's not just the product being created, it's the whole process; the project provides the motivation and the framework for the learning and the doing required to complete it. PBL has been defined as "a teaching method in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge." (Buck Institute for Education, 2014).

To better understand the relationship of tasks and projects, let's look at a few examples. Would you call each of the following a performance task or a project?

1. Students play the role of community garden planners in a city. They calculate lot and plot sizes and amounts of soil needed, create a site map, and consider water and fertilizer needs for various plants that could be grown. They create a flyer and a presentation that would be appropriate for an audience of community members. (Source: Defined Learning)

2. Students read three fairy tales that all have the same general pattern. They are asked to write a story that includes all the characteristics, and general pattern, of a fairy tale. They then read their story to a kindergarten reading buddy and teach him/her about the

characteristics and general pattern of a fairy tale. (Source: Marzano, Pickering, McTighe, 1993)

3. Students investigate the question, "Why is it important to tell untold stories of the American Revolution?" by considering what stories are commonly told and why. Then, they study less-commonly told stories about the "people's rebellion" in Massachusetts in 1774 and the role of women, African Americans, and Native Americans in the Revolution. They create podcasts telling an untold story and share them with an audience at a publishing event. (Source: Educurious 2021).

4. Students act as a consumer advocates researchers who have been asked to evaluate the claim by the Pooper Scooper Kitty Litter Company that their litter is 40% more absorbent than other brands. Students develop a plan for conducting the investigation that must be specific enough so that the lab investigators could follow it to evaluate the claim. (Source: McTighe, 2021)

5. Students interpret the data on Coronavirus infection on two (selected) countries for the past 12 months. Then, they prepare a newspaper article or podcast to help citizens and legislators understand how various policies (e.g., lockdowns, mask mandates, travel restrictions, testing, and vaccination requirements) influenced infection rates, hospitalizations and Covid19-related deaths over this time period. (Source: McTighe, 2021)

There isn't an obvious answer to our question, is there? Indeed, the line between a "performance task" and "project" is not always clear because they share many of the same characteristics. Rather than trying to pigeonhole any example into an "either-or" category, we propose that performance tasks and projects can be more fruitfully examined according to a set of dimensions. (McTighe, Doubet, Carbaugh, 2020). Think of each dimension as a variable, laid out along a continuum, like the sliding scale of a light or sound board. Then, we can profile any performance task or project according to where it falls along the scale of the various dimensions.

Eight Key Dimensions
Let's consider a set of eight dimensions to use in analyzing performance tasks and projects.

Time Frame – *How long will students be involved in this task or project (including time for presentations and evaluations)?*
2-4 class periods 5-10 class periods more than 2 weeks
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Commentary: Generally speaking, a performance task is of shorter duration and less complex than a project. However, they may not always be too far apart. For example, some performance tasks may take several days, and some projects may take only two weeks.

Degree of Authenticity – *To what extent is the task authentic (realistic challenge, problem, issue; genuine product/performance; authentic audience; real-world constraints)?*

Inauthentic/decontextualized simulates an authentic context fully authentic
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Commentary: A performance tasks may involve "higher-order" thinking and transfer application, yet not be particularly authentic to the wider world beyond the classroom. Often, performance tasks *simulate* an authentic context in that they set up a realistic (albeit hypothetical) situation, role and/or audience. (Sample #4 presented above offers an example). Some PBL projects may also be simulations, but most tend to be more authentic as students tackle genuine issues and produce authentic products/performances for a real audience.

Integration of Subjects – *To what extent is the task interdisciplinary?*
single discipline integrates two subject multi-disciplinary
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Commentary: Performance tasks are often focused on a single subject, although tasks in science and social studies often include a "communications" component (e.g., written, oral, multi-media or visual), and thus may be considered interdisciplinary. Since project-based learning typically focuses on authentic issues, it is far more likely that projects will involve multiple disciplines.

Direction – *Who will direct the project?*
teacher directed? teachers w/ some student self-direction? student directed?
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Commentary: A typical performance task specifies exactly what students need to do. Even "open-ended" tasks are nonetheless directed, and the students simply respond to a prompt. Project-based learning, on the other hand, often requires students to direct some (or most) of the project. In fact, in PBL students may be the ones to identify a need, an issue or a problem that serves as the launchpad for the project.

Extent of teacher support – *To what extent will students receive support from a teacher?*
no support some support extensive support
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Commentary: Performance tasks may be used for assessment purposes only (as a "performance assessment"), in which case the teacher is not supposed to provide support

except to orient and monitor students. Performance tasks may also be used for instructional purposes, in which case teachers may provide some support, in the form of monitoring, feedback, and facilitation—which is true for some types of independent student projects too. For a more complex performance task and often in PBL, depending on the nature of the project and their age and experience level, students may receive extensive support from the teacher. This can include team formation and management, coaching the inquiry process, conducting lessons and activities, providing resources, and offering on-going feedback via formative assessments.

Student Choice – *To what extent will students have choices regarding any of the following: task topic, problem, issue? product(s)/performance(s)? audience(s)? how and with whom they work?*

no choice some choices extensive choices
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Commentary: Some performance tasks simply specify what students need to do without allowing any choice, whereas others will include some opportunity for students to choose such things as the target audience or final product. Projects tend to be more open-ended and longer term, thus enabling more choices—along the way in addition to the final product(s)/ performance(s).

Performance Mode – *How will students work?*
individually some group & some individual work all work done collaboratively
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Commentary: Performance tasks are often presented as assignments or assessments intended for individual students. However, some tasks may include a component in which students work with a partner or small group. It is much more likely that projects (PBL) will require teamwork, and that the students will be assessed on how well they work in groups, in addition to being evaluated on the quality of their culminating product(s) or performance(s).

Evaluation of Student Product(s)/Performance(s) – *Who will be involved in evaluating student products and performances?*
classroom teacher only team of teachers external evaluators/experts
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Commentary: When performance tasks are used for assessment, the classroom teacher generally evaluates the students' performances based on a set of criteria or scoring rubric(s). On occasion, a team of teachers will work together (e.g., in a Professional Learning Community) to evaluate students' performance on a common task. In contrast, one of the hallmarks of PBL is that students are often evaluated by others than just their teacher; e.g., by fellow students, community members, and/or by a panel of adults that may include experts in the field.

Key Qualities of Effective Performance Tasks and Projects

Regardless of where they fall along the various continua, quality tasks and projects will reflect important characteristics. Alas, we have seen examples of ones that are not worth the time and effort they require. Here are a few examples: constructing a model of the Eiffel Tower from toothpicks; creating a detailed diorama of an historical event; students dressing up as a literary character to recite a memorized speech; making a collage showing the effects of climate change. While such performance-based activities may be "hands on" and even engaging for students, they do not qualify as worthy experiences that result in deep and authentic learning. Indeed, such examples can lead some teachers to conclude that performance tasks and PBL projects are nothing more that fluffy time wasters that lack intellectual rigor.

On the contrary, the kinds of tasks and projects we advocate need to meet certain qualities to make sure that the "juice is worth the squeeze." Figure 1 presents key criteria for a well-designed performance task (McTighe, 2020) and Figure 2 lists the six attributes that students should experience in a quality PBL project (Framework for High Quality Project Based Learning). You'll notice similarities.

Figure 1 – Performance Task Criteria

1. The task aligns with targeted standard(s)/outcome(s) and one or more of the 4C's – critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration.

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

3. The task requires extended thinking and habits of mind – not just an answer.

4. The task is set in an "authentic" context; i.e., includes a realistic purpose, a target audience, and genuine constraints.

5. The task includes criteria/rubric(s) targeting distinct traits of understanding and transfer; i.e., criteria do not simply focus on surface features of a product or performance.

6. The task directions for students are clear.

7. The task will be feasible to implement.

Optional:

8. The task allows students to demonstrate their understanding/ proficiency with some

appropriate choice/variety (e.g., of products or performances).

9. The task effectively integrates two or more subject areas.

10. The task incorporates appropriate use of technology.

Figure 2 – High-Quality PBL Criteria

1. Intellectual Challenge and Accomplishment
   Students learn deeply, think critically, and strive for excellence.

2. Authenticity
   Students work on projects that are meaningful and relevant to their culture, their lives, and their future.

3. Public Product
   Students' work is publicly displayed, discussed, and critiqued.

4. Collaboration
   Students collaborate with other students in person or online and/or receive guidance from adult mentors and experts.

5. Project Management
   Students use a project management process that enables them to proceed effectively from project initiation to completion.

6. Reflection
   Students reflect on their work and their learning throughout the project.

Let's return to our previously-posed rhetorical question—Is this a performance task or project? We hope you recognize that there is not always a definitive answer. Indeed, there are often shades of grey suggested by the position of the "sliders" along each of the eight dimensions described earlier. Moreover, there is no "right" answer to where a task or project should fall on the various dimensions. The choices suggested by the eight dimensions will be determined by other considerations, including:

- The learning goals—content standards in academic disciplines, competencies identified in a Profile of a Graduate, habits of mind found in a mission statement
- Age and experience of the learners
- Organizational factors—e.g., available time, schedules for both students and teachers, availability of resources

- The experience levels of teachers in facilitating tasks and PBL

In summary, think of a performance task as being embedded in every high-quality PBL project. The project provides the framework for the task and includes the process of learning what is needed for completing it. In other words, the project is "bigger" than the task; it's the "surround" for it. Accordingly, we believe that shorter, more structured performance tasks can naturally serve as steppingstones to more comprehensive project-based learning. Indeed, it takes time for teachers to cultivate the skill sets needed to facilitate long term, student-centered projects. Similarly, students need instruction, guidance, and opportunities to develop the skills and dispositions necessary for effective project implementation. With performance tasks as steppingstones, more teachers may find that making the leap to project-based learning becomes more do-able, and lead to deeper, more engaging, and authentic learning.

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