

The Definition of Performance Assessment

Performance assessment is a measure of assessment based on authentic tasks such as activities, exercises, or problems that require students to show what they can do.

Some performance tasks are designed to have students demonstrate their understanding by applying their knowledge to a particular situation. For example, students might be given a current political map of Africa showing the names and locations of countries and a similar map from 1945 and be asked to identify and explain differences and similarities. To be more authentic (more like what someone might be expected to do in the adult world), the task might be to prepare a newspaper article explaining the changes.

Performance tasks often have more than one acceptable solution; they may call for a student to create a response to a problem and then explain or defend it. The process involves the use of higher-order thinking skills (e.g., cause and effect analysis, deductive or inductive reasoning, experimentation, and problem solving). Performance tasks may be used primarily for assessment at the end of a period of instruction, but are frequently used for learning as well as assessment.

Source: Adapted from *The Language of Learning: A Guide to Education Terms*, by J. L. McBrien & R. S. Brandt, pp. 77-78, 1997, Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

What is performance assessment?

Grant Wiggins: Performance assessment is about performing with knowledge in a context faithful to more realistic adult performance situations, as opposed to out of context, in a school exercise.

Jay McTighe: The emphasis is really on performance. One consideration with performance tasks is that we look for opportunities for students to really demonstrate understanding and the ability to use knowledge in meaningful ways.

What is the goal of a performance task?

Jay McTighe: Performance tasks really ought to be oriented toward what I refer to as enduring knowledge. What is it that we really want students to understand and be able to do three years from now or five years from now after they've left our class or our school? That's enduring knowledge.

How should teachers develop performance tasks?

Jay McTighe: As teachers work together to develop performance tasks, they really are developing what I think of as teaching targets. The performance task becomes a target toward which they are teaching. And in fact, I would go so far as to say that I think a powerful way of thinking about curriculum is not thinking about curriculum as activities to be done or content to be covered, but rather curriculum in terms of the desired performances of understanding you're after as a result of studying this body of knowledge. And so it suggests that a way of thinking about curriculum is really to think first about assessment and about the performances you are after, and then backward map, if you will, from those performances of understanding to think about what is the most important knowledge to be emphasized and what skills really need to be cultivated so that students can use this knowledge in a meaningful way.

Why should schools stress performance assessment?

Grant Wiggins: There's only one basic reason to do performance assessment: it's what people want from students out in the wider world—the ability to use what they know wisely and effectively. If performance assessment didn't promise better performance, if it didn't give you in fact better quality work from students, it's not worth doing. It's too hard. It's too difficult. But the fact of the matter is that if you go to the best places of employment, if you go to the best universities, if you even go to many of the best schools, performance assessment is the norm, not the exception. Performance assessment is vital to give the link between school and reality and to let you have some confidence that the student can bridge the gap.

What do you, as a student, like about performance assessment?

Jamie, high school student: I feel that the best thing about performance assessment is that there is no guessing for the student. One teacher told me that she didn't see herself so much as the judge anymore,

but as a coach. Teachers and students can work together. There's no guessing. A student doesn't sit in the class and wonder, "Gosh, what am I going to put in this paper, what does the teacher want from me?" It's spelled out right there, and the teacher can now work with the student as to what parts can be improved. And it allows for better communication overall and, I think, a better feeling between teachers and students.

What do teachers see as some of the positives of performance-based education?

Susan Shaw, teacher: One of the biggest positives of performance assessment and making it be successful is being able to work together with people to design it—collaboration in a risk-free environment. Knowing that, if you're starting on a new road, there are going to be successes and there are going to be some failures. And it's okay that both occur, as long as there's learning that takes place from that. And you can grow from that.

Assessing and Reporting on Habits of Mind (Book 3 of 4)

ARTHUR COSTA, BENA KALLICK