

How Should We Teach Toward Success with Performance Tasks? (Part 7)

In this blog we'll examine five recommended practices for instructional planning and teaching in order to prepare students to tackle authentic performance tasks.

Practice #1 – Plan Your Teaching Backward from Authentic Performance Tasks

In our work on *Understanding by Design*® (2012, 2011, 2005), Grant Wiggins and I proposed that the most effective teaching is planned “backward” from desired learning outcomes (e.g., academic standards, 21st century skills) and from the assessments that will show evidence of their attainment. Backward design of instruction is the norm in performance-based disciplines (e.g., visual and performing arts, career and technology education), as it is in extra-curricular activities (e.g., athletics, yearbook, theater). This is likely due to the fact that these areas are naturally directed toward authentic performance (e.g., the game in athletics, the concert in band, the public display in visual art, the production deadline for yearbook). Teaching, learning and practice are thus orchestrated to prepare learners for a desired performance.

Planning our teaching “backward” from desired performances on rich, authentic tasks helps teachers focus on what matters most. With this performance orientation, teachers are less likely to simply march through lists of content objectives or pages in a textbook, or to have their students complete worksheets on discrete skills. When genuine performance is the goal, we can emulate the practices of effective coaches and sponsors of extra-curricular activities by following a general instructional process like the following:

1. Once the performance task has been identified, deconstruct the task to identify necessary concepts, knowledge and skills needed by learners for a successful performance.
2. Use pre-assessments to find out the entry level current knowledge and skill levels of the learners.
3. Plan targeted lessons to develop the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to tackle the summative task. Differentiate this instruction as needed to address the learning variability among students. Use on-going formative assessments to check on the development of requisite knowledge, skills and understandings.
4. Engage learners with formative “mini tasks”—simplified or scaffolded versions of the summative task—and provide feedback to students as they work on the mini tasks.
5. Allow time for them to practice and/or make revisions based on the feedback.

It has been my observation that this last two steps (#4 and 5) are often skipped. This is understandable given the pressures that teachers face to “cover” a large volume of material. Indeed, it is tempting to think that if I cover all the factual information and component skills, then I have prepared students for performance. But ask yourself, *How do successful coaches and band directors prepare their charges for the game or the concert?* They do more than simply have their players or performers learn the rules/notes and practice the necessary skills. They recognize the need for players to be able to “put it all together.” Consequently, they include scrimmages and concert rehearsals that simulate game/opening night conditions, and they offer feedback in the context of authentic performance.

Classroom teachers in all subjects can emulate the practices of effective coaches, for example, by including the equivalent of “scrimmages” as formative assessments. To be blunt: It is important for teachers to realize that just covering a body of discrete knowledge and skills, and assessing their mastery in isolation, will *not* prepare learners to apply their learning in an authentic context. Basic knowledge and skills are necessary, but insufficient, in the quest for genuine performance.

A wonderful resource in support of Practice #1 has been developed by The Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC). Click on this link to see their description of “mini tasks” — <https://ldc.org/how-ldc-works/mini-tasks> In addition, you can view examples of units for English/Language Arts, Science and Technical Subjects, and History/Social Studies that have been planned backward from rich performance tasks and follow the teaching sequence I have proposed. Click — <http://www.literacydesigncollaborative.org/resources/sample-modules/>

Yes, *but...* When performance tasks are being used as assessments, some educators may object that the practice I described equates to “teaching to the test” and is thus not desirable. I agree that the backward design approach *does* teach with the task (or the test) in mind, but that’s not a bad thing *if* the test or task reflects what matters most — authentic performance reflecting core standards and 21st century skills. Have you ever heard coaches apologize for coaching to/for the next game, or theater directors say they are sorry when their actors rehearse for the play?

Practice #2—Present Authentic Performance Tasks as *the* Learning Targets

Some schools require teachers to list their daily objectives on the board. While it certainly makes sense to have clear lesson goals, my contention is that students need to know not only what they will be learning today, but also why they are learning it and how this learning will prepare them for something worthwhile in the future. One way to help students see the larger goal for their learning teachers to frame their learning outcomes not simply as lists of knowledge and skill objectives (or grade level standards)

but rather in terms of the authentic performances that learning will enable. The message to students is, “*we are learning this so that you will be able to...*”

The practice of working toward known tasks is certainly not a new idea. There are multiple examples both within and outside of school such as the merit badge system for Boy and Girl Scouts, colored belts for the proficiency levels in karate, or completing the annual yearbook on deadline. In all such cases the performance tasks are known (i.e., what you need to accomplish) along with the evaluative criteria (i.e., how your performance will be judged).

When the performance tasks are set in an authentic context that reflects “real world” application of knowledge and skills, learners are more likely to see the purpose and relevance of what they are being asked to learn. Like the game in athletics and the play in theater, having a clear and authentic performance goal (solid performance on a known task) focuses both teaching and learning.

Here are three examples of performance tasks that can serve as learning targets.

Ancient Engineers

Roman Roads Gr.3 Community Advocate

Fracking Gr. 7 Automotive Materials Engineer

Fuel Efficiency Gr. 11

Practice #3—Present the Evaluative Criteria, Rubrics and Models at the Start

In Blog # 6 in this series, I discussed the benefits for teachers of having clearly articulated criteria, embedded in rubrics. Well developed rubrics can benefit learners as well. In order to enhance learning and the quality of student performance, teachers can (and should) present evaluative criteria and rubrics to students early in the instructional process in order to help their students focus on the purpose and important dimensions of authentic performance. When students know the criteria *in advance*, they don't have to guess about what is most important or how their work will be judged. There is no

“mystery” as to the elements of a quality of a targeted product/performance or the basis for its evaluation (and grading). In addition, when we share criteria and rubrics with students, we offer them the opportunity to self-assess as they work.

This recommended practice of sharing criteria/rubrics with students does not mean that this process has to be completely teacher directed. In fact, involving students in helping to create a rubric can engage them in thinking carefully about the goals of the task and help them better understand the salient qualities needed for successful performance.

Presenting a well-designed rubric to students in conjunction with the performance task, does not guarantee that the benefits will be fully realized, especially if/when students do not understand the language of the rubric. Phrases such as “logically organized,” “insightful interpretation,” and “sufficient evidence” may have little meaning for inexperienced students. To be useful, students need to be able to comprehend what the language in the rubric means. One strategy toward this end is to couple the rubric with tangible examples that illustrate its key traits and the different performance levels. By showing examples that display both excellent, good and novice-level work, teachers can make the abstract language in a rubric become more specific, relevant, and understandable. The practice is grounded in a basic principle: If we expect learners to produce high quality work, they need to know what that looks like, and how it differs from work of lesser quality.

Yes, but... Some teachers express concern that students will simply copy or imitate an example. A related worry is that showing an excellent model (sometimes known as an exemplar) will stultify student creativity. I have found that providing *multiple* models helps avoid these potential problems. When students see several exemplars showing how different students achieved high-level performance in unique ways, they are less likely to follow a cookie-cutter approach. In addition, when students study and compare examples ranging in quality—from very strong to very weak—they are better able to internalize the differences. The models enable students to more accurately self-assess and improve their work before turning it in to the teacher.

Practice #4—Assess *before and while* you teach.

Like effective coaches and sponsors of extra-curriculars, successful teachers don’t just begin a new unit before they have assessed their learners. Indeed, diagnostic (or pre-) assessment is as important to teaching as a physical exam is to prescribing an appropriate medical regimen.

Thankfully, a variety of practical and efficient pre-assessment techniques are available (e.g., Skill Checks, Pre-Tests, K-W-L, Concept Mapping) to enable teachers to determine students’ prior knowledge and skill levels and reveal potential

misconceptions that can influence their performances. By gathering such information in the beginning, a teacher can determine the best starting place for instruction and decide what differentiation may be needed to best equip students with varied knowledge and skill levels for the desired performance.

Pre-assessments are not solely for the teacher. They can also serve as advanced organizers by previewing forthcoming learning and activating prior knowledge that learners may have about the concepts and skills that will support their forthcoming performance on known tasks.

In addition to pre-assessment, the use of on-going, formative assessments is an essential practice for optimizing student performance on authentic tasks. The purpose of formative assessments is to *inform* both teachers and learners by providing feedback about what is working and what adjustments are needed. Indeed, learning of all kinds – whether in the dance studio, on the practice field, or in the classroom—requires substantive feedback.

Not surprisingly, the best examples of formative assessment and feedback are often observed in the performance-based subjects, such as the visual and performing arts, physical education and athletics, and vocational-technical courses. Indeed, the essence of coaching involves ongoing assessment and feedback. However, what is common practice in these areas is less widespread in the mainstream academic subjects. In their seminal research on classroom assessment, British researchers Paul Black and Dylan William (Black and William, 1998) noted that formative assessment and feedback is lacking in many classrooms.

To serve learning, feedback must meet four criteria: It must be timely, specific, understandable to the receiver, and allow for self-adjustment by the learner. Feedback on strengths and weaknesses needs to be prompt for the learner to improve. Waiting two weeks to find out how you did on a test will not help your learning. In addition, specificity is key to helping students understand both their progress and the areas in which they can improve. Too many educators consider grades and scores as feedback when, in fact, they fail the specificity test. Pinning a letter (B-) or a number (82%) on a student's work is no more helpful than such comments as "Nice job" or "You can do better." Although good grades and positive remarks may feel good, they do not advance learning. Specific feedback sounds different, as in this example: "The website you designed is generally well organized, visually appealing and contains a great deal of information on your topic. You used multiple sources and documented them correctly. However, your conclusion is not clear, nor are the actions you expect viewers to take based on the information the website provides."

Finally, learners need opportunities to *act* on the feedback—to refine, revise, practice, and retry—and teachers need to build in time for these. Writers rarely compose a perfect manuscript on the first try, which is why the writing process stresses cycles of drafting, feedback, and revision as the route to excellence.

The teacher should be a main feedback provider, but students are encouraged to seek feedback from peers, parents, and others as they work on performance tasks. Regardless of the source, here's a straightforward test for a feedback system: Can learners tell specifically from the given feedback what they have done well and what they could do next time to improve? If not, then the feedback is not sufficiently specific or understandable enough for the learner.

Note: It is critical that students understand the purpose of formative assessments and know that their results will *not* be used as part of a summative evaluation. Accordingly, I advise teachers not to average formative assessment results into the calculation of a final grade.

Practice #5—Expect students to self assess their learning and performance and set goals based on assessment results.

The most effective learners are metacognitive; i.e., they self-assess their performance, seek and use feedback, see mistakes as learning opportunities, set goals to improve their performance, and reflect on their learning. Teachers can cultivate these productive dispositions by modeling the processes of self-assessment, reflection and goal setting for students who have never been asked to do so. They should also expect students to apply them regularly and structure opportunities for them to do so. For example, ask students to self-assess (and/or peer assess) their work against a rubric *before* it is submitted. Teachers are often pleasantly surprised at how honest students can be with the assessment of their own work and that of their peers.

Here are a few examples of prompting questions to encourage such students to self assess their performance, set goals for improvement and reflect on their learning:

- *What aspect of your work do you think was most effective? Why? How so?*
- *What aspect of your work do think was least effective? Why? How so?*
- *What specific action(s) would improve your performance based on the feedback you received?*
- *What advice would you offer to next year's students to help their performance on this task?*

- *What did you learn from working on this task—about the content, topic, process and/or yourself?*

Self-assessment requires a small investment of time for an impactful return. This practice signals that self-assessment and goal setting are expected as part of a learner's job.

Educators who provide regular opportunities for learners to self-assess and set goals often report a change in the classroom culture. As one teacher put it, "My students have shifted from asking, 'What did I get?' or 'What are you going to give me?' to becoming increasingly capable of knowing how they are doing and what they need to do to improve. Over time, we should expect students to become increasingly capable of honest self-assessment and adjustment, without the teacher having to tell them how they did or what they need to do to improve.

A related practice to encourage self-assessment and goal setting is to include students in parent–teacher conferences. In "student involved" or "student run" conferencing, the learner takes an active role in reviewing his or her work, and with a teacher's guidance, sets specific goals to improve his or her future performance. Parents are more likely to be able to support their child's academic growth if they are aware of these agreed-upon goals.

Conclusion

Teaching toward authentic performance calls for teachers to employ an array of instructional practices, including direct instruction and modeling, facilitative teaching and ongoing assessments. When preparing students to apply their learning in realistic situations, teachers function like coaches, providing feedback as students develop the skills and work on "scrimmages."

The following chart summarizes key instructional practices, framed as questions to be used by teachers and teams for self-assessment and goal setting.

Chart for Self-Assessment of Classroom Practices to Support Teaching to Tasks

For a collection of authentic performance tasks and associated rubrics, see **Defined STEM**: <http://www.definedstem.com>

For a complete professional development course on performance tasks for your school or district, see **Performance Task PD with Jay McTighe**: <http://www.performancetask.com>

For more information about the design and use of performance tasks, see **Core Learning: Assessing What Matters Most** by Jay McTighe: <http://www.schoolimprovement.com>

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