Authentic Assessment and Learning for Students and Teachers: a Path to Engagement
Imagine high school students developing and using videos and games to teach 6th and 7th graders key concepts and skills in mathematics, or conducting oral histories of homeless people in their own community and then sharing their research and recommendations with the City Council and with residents of their local homeless shelter. Picture middle schoolers investigating the reasons for a decreasing population in their own community, interviewing multiple constituencies regarding such trends and ultimately proposing actionable alternatives for the district to the School Board. What if students wrote proposals to a coal plant based on research that assessed cost-benefit opportunities for the use of alternative energy sources? Or if students produced reviews of new video games and posted them on sites endorsed by the original game creators? What would schools gain if students created a survival book for incoming students from countries other than the US?

What strides would we make around measuring worthy outcomes if tasks such as these were more prominent in today’s school assessment repertoire? Some of us have spent over 20 years working to make these scenarios more of a norm than an exception in United States schools, yet our progress remains marginal. One of the factors that accounts for this reality lies in the conditions that frame teachers’ role in supporting students’ learning.

In this article, we assert that teachers can provide authentic learning and assessment experiences if they themselves have learning opportunities that embody authenticity. We offer the combined perspectives of a facilitator of teacher learning and a principal to illustrate the role that both actors can play for teachers and students to engage in the kinds of learning experiences and work that promote authentic assessment.

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Authentic assessment and learning for students and teachers: a path to engagement

By Giselle O. Martin-Kniep and Duncan Wilson

Why consider authentic learning and assessment? First and foremost, because human beings are always searching for meaning. Engagement and motivation are compromised when learners can’t appreciate the meaningfulness and relevance of what they are learning. An over-reliance on standardized tests and on isolated prompts disengages students and lessens their interest in school. Emphasizing teacher evaluation, Common Core Standards, and use of data in the absence of meaningful opportunities for teachers to unpack, learn and internalize the meaning and purpose of these reforms to make needed adjustments in the practice, is disempowering and demoralizing.

How can we respond to the external pressures that these reforms impose upon schools in a way that enables those who work in schools to pursue and commit to an education for life? This is no simple matter and requires, at the very least, a shared understanding and commitment to helping students cultivate outcomes of significance, including strategic thinking, resilience, self-regulation, collaboration, etc.

But there is more. Once such a commitment and understanding are present, schools need to re-organize their learning routines and environment to create the needed spaces for adults and children to cultivate these outcomes. Teachers need resources to revisit and ascertain the purpose of their curriculum, and the content and tools to develop learning and assessment experiences that deepen students’ awareness of issues that matter, provide them with tools to transfer what they are learning into real-world applications, and inspire them to do good deeds.

What are the conditions that support authentic learning for teachers?

Over the past couple of decades, the time and space in the curriculum in which a teacher can develop and implement performance assessments that promote authentic learning has declined significantly. Unless school administrators, and especially principals, help develop or expand and sustain those spaces, teachers will continue to believe that this work can’t be done.

Many of us crave opportunities to use our imagination, participate in meaningful and relevant work, be of service, and impact those we care about and work with. However, teaching in many schools today is mired with mandates, externally imposed requirements, a packed curriculum, and assessments that often measure outcomes of doubtful importance. No matter how much we would like to purchase the right curriculum or the best assessments, learning is
an interactive experience between students and teachers that demands intuition, careful listening, and clarity of purpose on the part of teachers, all of which cannot be purchased for any price. Creating spaces in which adults ponder and negotiate answers to the question: What do we really want our learners to know, be able to do and value? in a context that enables them to consider the broad implications of their answers, is critical if we want teachers to engage students in rigorous and meaningful work.

Principals and facilitators can signal to teachers that authentic assessment matters by encouraging them to think about a unit through the lens of authentic learning, and by showing them examples of students doing the work of authentic assessment. There is nothing more powerful than watching students share their work with an audience (i.e., older students teaching younger students; posters displayed at the local library; students presenting at a Board of Education meeting, etc.).

Providing teachers with time to work on a project before, during, and after the unit supports the development of authentic experiences and creates a frame for teachers to value thinking, learning, working, and processing spaces for students. Helping teachers to access the time and physical spaces for this work requires changes to the schedule, accessing parent volunteers, and engaging in community outreach. Allocating resources as well as demonstrating an interest in student motivation and engagement are a few simple ways to remind teachers that authentic learning matters.

To support the design process, we can invite teachers to articulate and/or revisit what they most value in students’ learning. In the schools in which we have done so, it has been both gratifying and surprising that the list that most teachers generate is often characterized by dispositions or habits or mind as well as thinking skills. Their outcomes include valuing learning and knowing how to learn, considering and recognizing multiple perspectives, engaging and valuing collaboration, being flexible, communicating to a wide range of audiences, and self-regulating. The shared list of outcomes can become the basis for the school community to ascertain the distance between the outcomes they care about and what they currently assess so that they can work together to create a more balanced and diversified assessment system that honors all that is valued. Exposing teachers to many different kinds of tasks and classrooms which embody authentic learning experiences can provide them with aspirational images, examples and resources that can help them close any gaps.

Once teachers have identified authentic audiences and purposes for students’ work and have begun to articulate relevant performance tasks, we could promote innovation in both design.
and implementation, by encouraging the concept of “prototyping” curriculum and assessment. This involves testing out one or more ideas within a unit on smaller groups of children and then sharing the results with one another. Instead of taking on the creation of a museum or science-fair style project for an entire grade, we could invite teachers to create a small museum that is presented during a lunch hour to a small group of teachers and parents. The goal with prototyping is to test ideas, compare results, learn from mistakes, keep what works, and apply it to the whole unit. By encouraging teachers and becoming an audience for this portion of the work, we signal the kinds of conditions and practices that are valued in our schools and invite them to take small but significant steps towards authentic learning experiences for students.

Case Study for the Impact of Authentic Assessments: the PADI Program

Diverse and collaborative settings in which teams from different schools and districts work together can be synergistic since they signal to everyone that they are not alone in valuing more than what they assess. They also transcend the local political discourse that can get in the way of teachers believing they can try something new and different. The Performance Assessment Design Initiative (PADI) provides such a setting.

PADI teams are members of the Tristate Consortium, a membership organization that promotes learning environments which nurture creative and critical thinking and the use of performance measures. The teachers and teams who participate in the PADI work as a robust and collaborative learning community whose purpose is to function as a laboratory for the design and implementation of rigorous, standards-based performance tasks which measure worthy outcomes that are not easily tapped by current tests and measures.

The PADI work is facilitated using a learner-centered and standards-based task design template with accompanying criteria. In addition, each team includes a school-based process facilitator who promotes productive interactions among each group member and works as a liaison between the team and the external facilitator, as well as between the teams and the district’s administration. This builds capacity for each team to be high functioning and to facilitate others’ team work.

Once teams determine the learner outcomes which will be the focus of their design work, they articulate culminating tasks

Overview of the PADI process

**Design:** Teams begin with a series of meetings that focus on developing a shared understanding of the kinds of measures teachers will design, the importance of authenticity for students, and the quality attributes of performance assessment. These are followed by sessions devoted to drafting performance tasks.

**Implementation:** A baseline performance measure is taken early in the school year to enable teachers and students to assess growth over time. Student work from the partial implementation of the performance tasks is then analyzed, with the resulting data used to refine the culminating performance tasks which are administered later in the year.

**Refinement:** The process ends with a review and comparison of students’ work in the pre- and post-measure, selection and annotation of exemplars and anchors, and a fine-tuning of the performance tasks for future implementation. Additional time during the year is often provided by district staff to help teachers fine-tune their assessments and their supporting curriculum units.
that would enable students to demonstrate attainment of the outcomes. To measure students’ growth, teachers design diagnostic tests or tasks, and then incorporate learning experiences and formative assessments into existing or revised units of study.

PADI teams devote eight days to the assessment design, implementation and review process over a two-year period. All teams design and share their work using a common template and all performance tasks are housed in a wiki for access by member districts. Common criteria, tools and peer review protocols support internal and external accountability for this work. Structured opportunities to assess student work stemming from diagnostic tools enable teachers to ascertain students’ learning needs, assess gaps in standards alignment and develop appropriate scaffolds and other opportunities for students to succeed in the culminating tasks.

Throughout the design process, teams access specific and actionable feedback they use to make revisions and improvements. This feedback models the critical role that formative assessment plays in supporting and producing learning.

**The Positive Impact of Authentic Tasks: PADI Evidence**

Teachers who design and implement authentic tasks have a deeper appreciation of their value within and beyond their classroom. Their own excitement in bringing these tasks to life reconnects them with their motivation to inspire students and guide them through the process of inquiry, problem solving and decision-making. One teacher’s characterization of PADI’s impact speaks to the legacy of the work:

“I have started to incorporate pre and post assessments and reflection pieces into my other units. **Variety is important. Everything can’t be PADI, but these elements can be everywhere.**”

Teachers in PADI also have a broader understanding of what can be assessed and of their own capacity to make worthy outcomes visible and important to their students and their colleagues. They have struggled to articulate what quality looks like when ascertaining creative thinking or persuasiveness, and recognize that even subjective outcomes can be described in ways that communicate the difference between meeting and exceeding a standard. They know what it takes to develop a valid and significant classroom task and have a profound respect for its demands, but they are also able to leverage their learning by making incremental but important changes to their units and lessons that provide students with spaces for performance and even authentic learning experiences. Even though they have altered only a small portion of their curriculum and assessment repertoire, they have a revised and even transformed view of
themselves in relation to the curriculum and assessment they use.

“Our design work gave me a different lens to work through the content (perspectives). It helped me to think more organically, formatively. I now spend more time trying to understand students’ needs.”

Students who have the opportunity to engage with authentic performance tasks have much to say about their value. Data from three different groups of elementary, middle and high school students in three of the districts that have implemented these tasks indicate that students find these tasks valuable beyond the tasks themselves. They speak to their ability to apply skills and habits of mind learned in other courses and assessments, and comment on their value in terms of expanding their perspective awareness.

“I am pushing myself to go further and to the “extra step”. I learned that you learn more if you push yourself to go further.”

“To be good, you have to know more than you can present.”

“I learned how to work with people who are more shy. You have to ask people who are not talking what they think.”

When asked to differentiate their learning from authentic tasks from that from other assessments, students use statements such as:

“When you take a test, you are not connecting what you are learning... We had to come up with a logical plan (vs made up idea) and decide how much info to include.”

“You learn what you find interesting, and not just what the teacher wants you to know.”

How can we best leverage teachers’ increased capacity to promote ongoing improvements?

There is no question that public accountability in education is here to stay. We share the concerns of scholar who described a “current imbalance between ‘prove’ and ‘improve’ forms of accountability.” (Vidovich, 2009). We see that spending too much time talking about testing and data sends the signal that teachers must spend their time “proving” that students are learning, which in turn leads to practice that leaves students unmotivated and disengaged. By inviting teachers to spend their time “improving” through the use of authentic assessment, and by creating space for them to collaborate, to take risks, and to share their work, we can support and encourage the kind of accountability for teachers that will in turn help them create meaningful and engaging learning opportunities.

Longer-term implementation involves presenting the work of teams to a broader audience - using small successes to build more success. For example, the work from successful prototypes can be brought to the larger faculty. Inspired teachers and great student work samples could build momentum allowing the process of inspiration to repeat itself. Allocating time in faculty
meetings to share student work, and even to hear from the students themselves, is essential to sustaining the momentum.

Teachers who have access to protected spaces to think about worthy learning outcomes - along with the necessary resources to develop authentic performance tasks to assess them - become strong proponents of their value. Their learning often spills over their entire curriculum and slowly but surely permeates it with opportunities for authentic student engagement. However, leveraging these teachers’ learning and capacity system-wide requires other important strategies. These include:

- Encouraging schools to refine existing projects and other opportunities that approximate authenticity to increase the opportunities for students to engage in this kind of work throughout their schooling
- Publicizing and disseminating authentic assessment projects to increase their visibility and to begin to balance the public’s perception of what is formally assessed and its focus
- Inviting teachers to adopt and even adapt assessments developed by the design teams to foster a climate in which all teachers co-construct some aspect of the assessment they use
- Engaging multiple teams within a school in the design work to ensure that there is a critical mass of individuals who understand and know how to do this work

Over the years, we have gathered ample evidence that, given the opportunity, students can address real problems and issues and learn much in that pursuit. Teachers are not a barrier to these kinds of innovations. When properly prepared, they are in the best position to create and sustain authentic learning experiences for children.

Authentic learning and assessment experiences can help schools measure more of what they value, enable students to reconcile diverse perspectives and manage the inherent ambiguity of challenges that elude simple solutions. It can promote the development of stewardship, empathy, flexibility and other important dispositions and habits of mind. Why not invest in the very actors that can make these experiences an important component of students’ education in every school?

Reference:

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