

Authentic Assessment

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Article published in *The Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Foundations of Education*, Edited by Eugene Provenzo, SAGE Publications, 2008.

Authentic assessment enables educators to determine students' skills, knowledge, and competencies and to provide evidence of their learning. Utilizing a variety of performance-based measures, complex rubrics, and real-world tasks, authentic assessment encourages greater understanding of concepts in a meaningful context. Developed in response to the rote memorization and less complex assessments of objective measurements, such as multiple-choice tests, which have been traditionally employed in education, **authentic assessment provides a more engaging and effective way to measure students' learning while promoting understanding and valuing the process of learning.**

How It Developed

In the 1990s, renewed interest in holding public education accountable led state legislatures and the United States government to require ongoing and in-depth testing at various points in students' educational careers. Performance-based funding initiatives in states across the nation ensured that testing would become standardized in an attempt to homogenize the curricula and the depth and breadth of student learning in various disciplines. Proponents of mandatory standardized testing also endeavored to create normalized benchmarks of student competencies across school districts and state lines in the nation.

Teachers soon discovered that standardized testing did not engender the in-depth understanding that their students would need for lifelong learning. Grant Wiggins, a former secondary English and philosophy teacher, has been at the forefront of the authentic assessment movement for the past twenty years. In his 1993 book, *Assessing Student Performance: Exploring the Purpose and Limits of Testing*, Wiggins challenged the morality of standardized testing and multiple-choice tests, which assess student learning on a superficial level of understanding, involving discrete and simple facts. Wiggins posed authentic assessment as an antidote to these less effective types of tests. Authenticity produces greater student achievement and learning while providing relevant, contextual, real-world applications of curricular concepts that incorporate problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

Wiggins further suggests that to design appropriate assessments, teachers need clearly defined curricular goals; then they can determine what to assess and the data they need to do so. In 1998, Wiggins and co-author Jay McTighe further developed this idea in *Understanding by Design*, which employed "backwards design" in curriculum and assessment planning. This design encourages teachers to determine the results they seek, followed by identifying appropriate evidence of those results. After completing these steps, teachers then plan learning activities and determine instructional methods. Ultimately, teachers would establish "curricular priorities" based on their instructional objectives with three levels of knowledge, including material "worth being familiar with," followed by knowledge "important to know and do."

The ultimate goal, Wiggins and McTighe suggest, is that teaching will lead to "enduring understanding" whereby students are able to achieve more in-depth knowledge that produces performances or critical thinking that exceed traditional instructional experiences. In other words, instead of learning discrete facts, students are expected to focus on ideas, principles, and processes, ensuring that they are able to apply their knowledge in new ways and in different contexts.

How It Works

Teachers design successful authentic experiences when students employ a complex array of critical thinking and problem-solving skills that involve independent research, analysis, and application of knowledge. Students engaged in applying knowledge in new and meaningful ways are expected to achieve enduring understanding, a characteristic of authentic assessment.

Authentic assessment focuses on contextual learning in an environment that fosters inquiry and enduring understanding using evidence collected by the teacher in ongoing evaluations of student learning. The evidence of authentic learning involves documenting performances and products developed during a unit or over a period of time, which may include observations, dialogues, and students' self-evaluation. To employ authentic assessment methods, teachers should design open-ended, complex assignments.

As Wiggins and McTighe note, these tasks and projects reflect the problem-solving challenges and learning experiences that students will encounter as adults. In addition, authentic assessments utilize ongoing, multi-stage processes and projects. Characteristics of performance tasks and projects include simulations in technical and professional settings; a requirement that students identify and address particular audiences; the development of specific goals related to their audiences; students' personalization of their experiences; and evaluation criteria and standards for students before and during the learning activity.

Further, Wiggins and McTighe explore the various qualities of authentic assessment in six levels of understanding. They suggest that students who truly understand concepts are able to explain, interpret, apply, see in perspective, demonstrate empathy, and reveal self-knowledge, with clearly defined criteria for performance and production. As Wiggins explains in *Assessing Student Performance*, authenticity is thus characterized by intellectually challenging learning experiences in which students are involved in addressing worthwhile and meaningful problems and questions, requiring learners to employ their knowledge in developing effective and creative performances. Other examples of authentic assessment include contextual learning, which replicates real-life situations or employs actual problems that require students to apply a repertoire of skills and knowledge that lead to a sound judgment or an effective solution.

Students who engage in tasks that require the development and creation of an actual artifact or product according to pre-established criteria and standards are providing evidence of authentic assessment. In addition, these assessments involve interactions between teachers and students about the evaluation process itself and provide opportunities to justify responses and to explain further through follow-up questions and challenges that allow for an ongoing two-way exchange of feedback and adjustment during the assessment. These projects and performances also increase students' engagement both with the process and the product, ensuring greater motivation and responsibility for their learning while teachers get feedback in order to design ever more effective tools for evaluating them.

Ultimately, authentic assessment produces enduring understanding in a meaningful context that replicates the experiences of living in a complex, ever-changing society. In this way, Wiggins and his colleagues suggest, authentic assessment prepares students to negotiate the challenges of everyday life, the complex world of careers and work, and the diverse needs of individuals and societies both now and in the future.

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FURTHER READINGS

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Wiggins, Grant, and Jay McTighe. (1998). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

WEBSITE

University of Wisconsin-Stout School of Education Online Assessment Resources for Teachers:
<http://www.uwstout.edu/soe/profdev/assess.shtml>