

Teaching Tip Tuesday

Authentic Assessments

Traditional versus Authentic Assessments

Traditional assessments are backward-facing. After the instruction has occurred, these assessments are employed to determine the degree to which students have assimilated content.

They usually stress recall and theoretical understanding. Good examples of this type of assessment are midterm and final exams. **Authentic assessments** are more forward-facing, in that they promote learning as well as evaluate it. They focus on the application of knowledge in novel contexts, requiring students to use judgement about what knowledge and skills to apply. Authentic assessments can therefore provide a better measure of student achievement of higher order learning outcomes than traditional exam-based assessment.

Key Features of Authentic Assessments

- **Realism.** Present a problem or context that students might encounter outside of the classroom in which they would be expected to reach a solution through application of content knowledge of skills.
- **Relies on student carrying out methods of the discipline.** This forces students to “do” rather than to recite/restate knowledge or explain how they would use skills.
- **Replicates situations in which professionals are “tested” in work, civic, or personal situations.** Rather than the theoretical optimum circumstances often stressed on exams, these assessments include the messy and murky constraints of “the real world,” necessitating realistic use of judgement.
- **Requires judgement and innovation.** The scenario must not be a model of an exercise already practiced but should present an unstructured problem for which they must plot a solution.
- **Assess student’s ability to integrate knowledge and skills to negotiate a complex task.** Unlike the artificially isolated recitation of understanding common on traditional assessments, authentic assessments can evaluate students’ knowledge while challenging their judgement about how to put together diverse areas of knowledge and skills.
- **Provide opportunities to practice, consult resources, obtain feedback, and refine products and performance.** This allows the assessment to be used as a learning tool to facilitate student improvement, not solely as an evaluation student achievement.

Examples of Authentic Assessments

- Case studies.
- Writing lesson plans.
- Developing marketing strategies for novel products.
- Solving novel public affairs problems.
- Gaming potential effects of policy change.
- Predicting how a novel event will affect a pathway or process in natural sciences.
- Describing how a change in one element of a historical event would alter history.

Wiggins, Grant. 1998. Ensuring authentic performance. Chapter 2 in *Educative Assessment: Designing Assessments to Inform and Improve Student Performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 21 – 42.