



## Performance Assessment – What is it and why is it useful?

Various assessment techniques can be used to determine what students know and can do. Before selecting the assessment methods to be used, however, it is important to determine the purposes for assessment and the manner in which results will be reported. Assessment method(s) need to be selected that are consistent with the purposes and intended uses of the assessment results.

Student content knowledge can be readily assessed using selected-response (multiple-choice) and short-constructed-response items. These assessments are easy to administer and can provide considerable information on student content knowledge in a relatively short period of time. However, we often wish to learn more about students' levels of understanding than just what they know. This includes learning more about what students understand of concepts they have learned, and having students use what they know to solve novel problems.

One way to accomplish this is by using performance assessments. These are assessments designed to measure what students are able to do in relationship to the content standards developed at the state and local levels. These are some of the most valuable means of assessing students, and while they have several advantages, there are also several

challenges in using them. This paper will describe the major types of performance assessments, why they are useful, challenges in using them, and how these challenges might be addressed.

### What is performance assessment?

As stated in a recent assessment design article (Kahl and Hofman, 2013): *“Rather than requiring students to select a response from two or more*

*‘performance assessment’ commonly refers to substantive activities — either short-term, on-demand tasks or curriculum-embedded, project-based tasks that yield reliable and valid scores. Products can be extended writing, research reports, presentations, works of art, performances, and more.”* (p. 1).

Performance assessments are measures on which students are asked to perform in some manner, such as

**“Rather than requiring students to select a response from two or more options, performance assessment asks students to apply their knowledge and skills in creating some form of product, presentation, or demonstration focused on key aspects of academic learning . . . Products can be extended writing, research reports, presentations, works of art, performances, and more.”**

Kahl, S and Hofman, P, (2013)

*options, performance assessment asks students to apply their knowledge and skills in creating some form of product, presentation, or demonstration focused on key aspects of academic learning. In the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills the term*

*conducting an investigation in science, developing a computer program to demonstrate functions in mathematics, analyzing source documents to compare and contrast different historical points of view in social studies, developing a*

multi-media presentation in English class, acting out a character in a theatrical production, or completing a painting in an arts class. The products of performance assessment can be of many types. They also typically require a checklist, a rubric, or some manner for scoring students' responses to them.

## Major types of performance assessment

There are two major types of performance assessment: events and tasks. This division is somewhat arbitrary, and it is determined by the time needed for assessment and whether students are provided the opportunity to revise or improve their initial responses. Both types of performance assessment require students to carry out some activity.

**Performance Event** – This is an on-demand performance assessment on which students are given little or no time to rehearse before performing or responding, and limited opportunities to improve their initial performance. Such assessments may take a class period or less to administer.

**Performance Task** – In this type of performance assessment, students have days, weeks, or months to prepare a response. The resultant work may be lengthy and comprise multiple parts, involving multiple responses of different types to multiple prompts. Embedded in the task may be written-response items, presentations, papers, student self-reflections, performances, and so forth.

## Why performance assessment is useful

This type of assessment is useful because students are asked to prepare a unique response to one or more prompts included in the assessment. This item type helps educators see what students are actually able to do – not just what they may know. Well crafted performance assessments will help teachers gauge the levels of student understanding,

help the teacher to correct any student misunderstandings, and provide instruction needed to move thinking and learning along.

In addition, this type of assessment can provide interesting and informative learning opportunities in themselves to students, especially if students are asked to create a response to a prompt that is not highly structured. The assessment process can promote deeper student learning about the assessment topic, which is one reason why using performance assessment can help drive improved student learning and higher student achievement. These assessments can also have the advantage of improving student engagement in their learning since loosely-defined performance assessment may present so many different and interesting ways for students to respond.

## Challenges in using performance assessment

There are several challenges in developing and using performance assessments. First, because these assessments can be so “meaty” (high quality assessments such as these may contain many parts), they take more time and effort to administer. In addition, these assessments can take more time to score, since students are creating responses to

the prompts (multiple prompts in some cases). This requires more instructional time to administer the assessments, and more teacher time to score student responses. These challenges may increase the cost of using these items since teachers may need to be reimbursed for additional non-instructional time needed to score student responses.

## Overcoming the challenges

There are several ways in which the challenges might be overcome. First, if a pool of performance assessments is developed, teachers could be asked to select only a handful of them for use, and to spread out their use throughout the school year. This will help to both reduce the burden of assessment administration and better embed the assessments when instructionally relevant. Scoring costs can be “rationalized” by considering these as opportunities for professional learning on the part of educators. By collaborating on scoring, teachers can sharpen their understandings of what high-quality student performances look like and improve their ability to gauge the extent of student understandings of the key concepts assessed.

### References

Kahl, S & Hofman, P. (2013). *Curriculum-Embedded Performance Assessment for Deeper Learning and Accountability*. Dover, NH. Measured Progress

## To learn more

### Performance Assessment: Fostering the Learning of Teachers and Students

Voices in Urban Education (VUE) 2017, No. 46  
(Annenberg Institute, 2017)

[vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/46](http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/46)

### Re-balancing assessment: Placing formative and performance assessment at the heart of learning and accountability

Peter Hoffman, Bryan Goodwin, Stuart Kahl (McREL, 2015)

<http://bit.ly/2Sh3Jf3>

### The Best of Both Worlds

Jack Schneider, Joe Feldman, and Dan French (Kappan, Nov. 2016)

<http://bit.ly/2uZnjnd>

The Michigan Assessment Consortium's Assessment Learning Network (ALN), is a professional learning community consisting of members from MI's professional education organizations; the goal of the ALN is to increase the assessment literacy of all of Michigan's professional educators.

To see examples of performance assessments, visit [maeia-artsednetwork.org](http://maeia-artsednetwork.org)