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Implementing Performance Assessment in the Classroom

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Introduction

If you are like most teachers, it probably is a common practice for you to devise some sort of test to determine whether a previously taught concept has been learned before introducing something new to your students. Probably, this will be either a completion or multiple choice test. However, it is difficult to write completion or multiple choice tests that go beyond the recall level. For example, the results of an English test may indicate that a student knows each story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. However, these results do not guarantee that a student will write a story with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Because of this, educators have advocated the use of performance-based assessments.

Performance-based assessments "represent a set of strategies for the . . . application of knowledge, skills, and work habits through the performance of tasks that are meaningful and engaging to students" (Hibbard and others, 1996, p. 5). This type of assessment provides teachers with information about how a child understands and applies knowledge. Also, teachers can integrate performance-based assessments into the instructional process to provide additional learning experiences for students.

The benefit of performance-based assessments are well documented. However, some teachers are hesitant to implement them in their classrooms. Commonly, this is because these teachers feel they don't know enough about how to fairly assess a student's performance (Airasian, 1991). Another reason for reluctance in using performance-based assessments may be previous experiences with them when the execution was unsuccessful or the results were inconclusive (Stiggins, 1994). The purpose of this digest is to outline the basic steps that you can take to plan and execute effective performance-based assessments.

Defining the Purpose of the Performance-Based Assessment

In order to administer any good assessment, you must have a clearly defined purpose. Thus, you must ask yourself several important questions:

- What concept, skill, or knowledge am I trying to assess?
- What should my students know?
- At what level should my students be performing?
- What type of knowledge is being assessed: reasoning, memory, or process (Stiggins, 1994)?

By answering these questions, you can decide what type of activity best suits your assessment needs.

Choosing the Activity

After you define the purpose of the assessment, you can make decisions concerning the activity. There are some things that you must take into account before you choose the activity: time constraints, availability of resources in the classroom, and how much data is necessary in order to make an informed decision about the quality of a student's performance (This consideration is frequently referred to as sampling.).

The literature distinguishes between two types of performance-based assessment activities that you can implement in your classroom: informal and formal (Airasian, 1991; Popham, 1995; Stiggins, 1994). When a student is being informally assessed, the student does not know that the assessment is taking place. As a teacher, you probably use informal performance assessments all the time. One example of something that you may assess in this manner is how children interact with other children (Stiggins, 1994). You also may use informal assessment to assess a student's typical behavior or work habits.

A student who is being formally assessed knows that you are evaluating him/her. When a student's performance is formally assessed, you may either have the student perform a task or complete a project. You can either observe the student as he/she performs specific tasks or evaluate the quality of finished products.

You must beware that not all hands-on activities can be used as performance-based assessments (Wiggins, 1993). Performance-based assessments require individuals to apply their knowledge and skills in context, not merely completing a task on cue.

Defining the Criteria

After you have determined the activity as well as what tasks will be included in the activity, you need to define which elements of the project/task you shall to determine the success of the student's performance. Sometimes, you may be able to find these criteria in local and state curriculums or other published documents (Airasian, 1991). Although these resources may prove to be very useful to you, please note that some lists of criteria may include too many skills or concepts or may not fit your needs exactly. With this in mind, you must be certain to review criteria lists before applying any of them to your performance-based assessment.

You must develop your own criteria most of the time. When you need to do this, Airasian (1991, p. 244) suggests that you complete the following steps:

1. Identify the overall performance or task to be assessed, and perform it yourself or imagine yourself performing it
2. List the important aspects of the performance or product.
3. Try to limit the number of performance criteria, so they can all be observed during a pupil's performance.
4. If possible, have groups of teachers think through the important behaviors included in a task.
5. Express the performance criteria in terms of observable pupil behaviors or product characteristics.
6. Don't use ambiguous words that cloud the meaning of the performance criteria.
7. Arrange the performance criteria in the order in which they are likely to be observed.

You may even wish to allow your students to participate in this process. You can do this by asking the students to name the elements of the project/task that they would use to determine how successfully it was completed (Stix, 1997).

Having clearly defined criteria will make it easier for you to remain objective during the assessment. The reason for this is the fact that you will know exactly which skills and/or concepts that you are supposed to be assessing. If your students were not already involved in the process of determining the criteria, you will usually want to share them with your students. This will help students know exactly what is expected of them.

Creating Performance Rubrics

As opposed to most traditional forms of testing, performance-based assessments don't have clear-cut right or wrong answers. Rather, there are degrees to which a person is successful or unsuccessful. Thus, you need to evaluate the performance in a way that will allow you take those varying degrees into consideration. This can be accomplished by creating rubrics.

A rubric is a rating system by which teachers can determine at what level of proficiency a student is able to perform a task or display knowledge of a concept. With rubrics, you can define the different levels of proficiency for each criterion. Like the process of developing criteria, you can either utilize previously developed rubrics or create your own. When using any type of rubric, you need to be certain that the rubrics are fair and simple. Also, the performance at each level must be clearly defined and accurately reflect its corresponding criterion (or subcategory) (Airasian, 1991; Popham, 1995; Stiggins, 1994).

When deciding how to communicate the varying levels of proficiency, you may wish to use impartial words instead of numerical or letter grades (Stix, 1997). For instance, you may want to use the following scale: word, sentence, page, chapter, book. However, words such as "novice," "apprentice," "proficient," and "excellent" are frequently used.

As with criteria development, allowing your students to assist in the creation of rubrics may be a good learning experience for them. You can engage students in this process by showing them examples of the same task performed/project completed at different levels and discuss to what degree the different elements of the criteria were displayed. However, if your students do not help to create the different rubrics, you will probably want to share those rubrics with your students before they complete the task or project.

Assessing the Performance

Using this information, you can give feedback on a student's performance either in the form of a narrative report or a grade. There are several different ways to record the results of performance-based assessments (Airasian, 1991; Stiggins, 1994):

- *Checklist Approach* When you use this, you only have to indicate whether or not certain elements are present in the performances.
- *Narrative/Anecdotal Approach* When teachers use this, they will write narrative reports of what was done during each of the performances. From these reports, teachers can determine how well their students met their standards.
- *Rating Scale Approach* When teachers use this, they indicate to what degree the standards were met. Usually,

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one meaning "skill barely present" and five meaning "skill extremely well executed."

- *Memory Approach* When teachers use this, they observe the students performing the tasks without taking any notes. They use the information from their memory to determine whether or not the students were successful. (Please note that this approach is not recommended.)

While it is a standard procedure for teachers to assess students' performances, teachers may wish to allow students to assess them themselves. Permitting students to do this provides them with the opportunity to reflect upon the quality of their work and learn from their successes and failures.

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Descriptors: *Criteria; *Educational Assessment; *Evaluation Methods; Feedback; *Performance Based Assessment; Sampling; Scoring; Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Student Evaluation; Teaching Methods

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