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**Teaching about diverse families through case studies and authentic performance assessment**

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# Teaching about diverse families through case studies and authentic performance assessment

## Abstract

Authentic performance assessment connects active learning pedagogy with assessment of student learning. For family sciences, authentic performance assessment presents an opportunity to evaluate knowledge and skills related to working with families within the classroom context. This form of assessment can be combined with popular teaching strategies, like using family case studies, to provide application and context for course content. This article reviews the literature on authentic performance assessment and its application in the family science literature, and provides an example of an authentic performance assessment in a course on understanding and working with diverse families. The discussion provides suggestions for instructors in family science considering a shift from traditional to authentic assessment.

## Keywords

diverse, families, case, about, studies, teaching, authentic, performance, assessment

## Disciplines

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## Teaching about Diverse Families through Case Studies and Authentic Performance Assessment

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**ABSTRACT.** Authentic performance assessment connects active learning pedagogy with assessment of student learning. For family sciences, authentic performance assessment presents an opportunity to evaluate knowledge and skills related to working with families within the classroom context. This form of assessment can be combined with popular teaching strategies, like using family case studies, to provide application and context for course content. This article reviews the literature on authentic performance assessment and its application in the family science literature, and provides an example of an authentic performance assessment in a course on understanding and working with diverse families. The discussion provides suggestions for instructors in family science considering a shift from traditional to authentic assessment.

*Keywords:* authentic assessment, performance assessment, case study, diversity

Education has a long history of connecting learning and assessment to real-world problems, with the recognition that the true measure of success is students' ability to apply their knowledge and skills in their lives as professionals and citizens. This was Dewey's (1925) philosophy of education, and remains the vital heart of modern experiential education. Pedagogical approaches that engage students in these types of learning experiences are a form of active learning variously called problem-based learning, project-based learning, or inquiry-based learning, falling within the larger constructivist tradition (Newmann, Marks, & Gamaron, 1996). Methods of assessment that align with this form of instruction by testing students' abilities to apply knowledge and skills are called authentic assessment or performance-based assessment (Chun, 2010).

Authentic performance assessment holds great potential for structuring and measuring student learning in family science. Instructors in family science have long been aware of the value of simulations, role plays, case studies, and other teaching strategies that bring real world application into the classroom. This robust tradition has valued active learning and authentic performance assessment, even when not describing the practice using those words. In family sciences, learning and assessment must take into account the skills and methods that students

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will need to work with families. Active learning and authentic assessment are means of connecting training with the types of situations and expectations professionals will encounter in the field.

This paper describes the key features of authentic performance assessment, discusses the value of this approach for the field of family science, provides an example of how these principles have been applied in a course about diverse families, and offers suggestions on how instructors might make use of this approach.

### **Authentic performance tasks as a method of learning and assessment**

Consider these two approaches to a course on diverse families. Course A offers lecture-based instruction, with required readings from a textbook. Class content focuses on knowledge of different cultures and other aspects of diversity. Student learning is assessed through examinations comprised of multiple choice, true-false, and fill-in-the-blank questions. These examinations evaluate whether students can repeat back information provided in the lecture or readings. Course B offers a mix of instructional approaches, including small-group learning, case studies, and simulations. Class content focuses on how students can be sensitive to culture and other aspects of diversity and how to demonstrate understanding and respect through their interactions. Student learning is assessed through written and oral assignments that mirror professional products. These assignments evaluate whether students can interpret information and apply it to scenarios based on real life. Course A reflects traditional instruction and assessment in a teacher-centered learning environment, while Course B reflects active learning and authentic performance assessment in a student-centered learning environment.

Authentic assessment emerged from dissatisfaction with traditional assessment, such as standardized testing, that was perceived as not capturing the type of learning valued in real life. Archbald and Newmann (1988) are credited with first applying the term “authentic” to learning and assessment (Cumming & Maxwell, 1999). To be an “authentic assessment,” the outcomes used in assessment must represent meaningful and significant human achievement with value beyond school (Archbald & Newmann, 1988). The term “authentic assessment” is often used interchangeably with “performance-based assessment” (Archbald, 1991). The concept of performance-based assessment emerged in the 1950s from vocational training and assessment methods that directly measured instructional lessons, such as a typing test for a typing course. Both terms are invoked to describe assessment modeled on real-world tasks and measuring important skills (Palm, 2008).

Anderson (1998) points out that experience and research verify the connection between assessment and what is taught and learned in the classroom. Assessment signals to teachers and students which learning goals are important, while assessment also attempts to capture what actually takes place in teaching and learning (Cumming & Maxwell, 1999). An instructor’s choice to use traditional assessment or authentic assessment relates to underlying philosophical beliefs and assumptions about teaching and assessment. Key differences in these approaches include understanding of the process and focus of learning and its relationship to assessment. Traditional instruction and assessment treat learning as a passive process, whereby novice

students memorize discrete and isolated pieces of information imparted by an expert teacher, who has sole control over what is taught and assessed. Assessment is used to document learning by classifying and ranking students based on demonstrated knowledge. By contrast, authentic assessment fits within an active learning paradigm, in which students make meaning of information and collaborate with the instructor in the process of learning and demonstrating the outcomes of learning. Assessment is used to promote practical problem-solving skills and encourage learning through feedback (Anderson, 1998).

Authentic performance assessment asks learners to “demonstrate not only what they know, but also what they can do” (Bergen, 1993, p. 99). Newmann and Archbald (1992) note that an authentic achievement is one that involves production, rather than reproduction of knowledge; disciplined inquiry that builds in-depth understanding through connection to a prior knowledge base and integration between pieces of knowledge; and has intrinsic value to the learner beyond its use in evaluation. Assessments of authentic achievement must consider certain features: criterion-based standards that distinguish high from low performance; multiple indicators of quality, to assess skills in a particular area (e.g., oral communication) and/or to determine improvement over time; and the role of human judgment, which can affect the validity of assessment (Newmann & Archbald, 1992). Bergen (1993) identifies three aspects of good authentic performance assessment:

it is integrative, measuring many facets simultaneously; 2) it is applied, having the complexity of real world roles; 3) it may be individual but it is often group-based, and the performance of each group member is essential for success, as both individual and group performance effectiveness is evaluated (p. 99).

Authentic performance assessment fits with a constructivist approach to education. When they learn, students build mental models by linking the new information to their existing store of knowledge on the subject (Michael, 2006). Moving from a traditional assessment to authentic assessment approach necessitates changes to the role of instructor and students (Anderson, 1998). Instruction that enables authentic academic achievement is structured to be learner-centered (Paris & Ayres, 1994), promote higher-order thinking (Newmann et al., 1996), and appeal to various learning styles (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005). In contrast to traditional teacher-centered methods of instruction, this approach shifts the role of the student from passive recipients to active co-creators of meaning (Newmann et al., 1996). At the same time, it shifts the role of instructor to facilitator, and shares power over learning between instructor and students (Anderson, 1998).

Authentic performance assessment may be particularly beneficial for adult learners. Assessment of adult learners must take into account principles of adult learning, such as actively involving learners in learning and assessment processes; situating learning within its larger context of work, family, and community; and enabling learners to make meaning of knowledge from their varied life experience and backgrounds (Kasworm & Marienau, 1997). Authentic assessment can appeal to the adult learner by making the relevance of the assignment clear and encouraging a sense of ownership over the task (Rovai, 2004).

The premise of authentic performance assessment is supported by social learning theory (Bandura, 1997), which posits that learned behavioral responses manifest when appropriate to the social context, suggesting that behaviors learned through activities such as role plays and other simulations may be reproducible outside the practice context. The limited degree to which learners are able to generalize skills to different contexts is a significant consideration for pedagogy and assessment (Linn, Baker, & Dunbar, 1991). Social learning theory further identifies the central role of motivation in adopting new skills and behaviors. Authentic performance assessment has the potential to encourage student motivation, when the assignment is constructed in such a way that there is task clarity, relevance, and potential for success (Marzano, 1992). Students may feel more motivated to learn in class and beyond when the content is realistic and applied (Hancock, 2007).

### **Performance assessment and active learning in family science**

Authentic performance assessment addresses some of the key concerns raised by family science instructors regarding the challenges of preparing students for the messy, real-world context of working with families. Family science instructors are faced with the complex task of training students to work with a diverse array of families facing challenges and stressors. There is a need to develop awareness of diversity and cultural competence so that students may respond sensitively (Walker, 1993) to families in different life circumstances (Yazedijan & Kramer, 2006). Yet families are changing rapidly in the modern context, and bring a diversity of individual experiences as well as cultural identities (McAdoo, 1996). Growing inequality is another important area of consideration, as those born in lower economic classes have been increasingly trapped there (DeParle, 2012) and membership in the middle class has become more precarious due to changes in the U.S. economic structure (Kalleberg, 2011). These challenging and complex concepts can be flat and lifeless when kept within a context of traditional instruction and assessment. Teaching and learning about multicultural families has the potential to be a transformative experience. Family science education, to be effective, must encourage critical thinking and dialogue skills that will enable learners to build and enhance relationships with diverse populations (Allen, Floyd-Thomas, & Gillman, 2001). For applied educational subjects like family science, there is a need to use effective teaching strategies and assess the effectiveness of these techniques in terms of developing professional knowledge (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Enabling students to practice new skills through authentic performance tasks can also improve motivation by helping students to see how they can apply their learning in current or future professional practice (Teemant, Moen & Harris, 2012).

Performance assessment in family science can be used to measure individual student achievement, inform program development, or assess institutional effectiveness (Clauss, 2003). Competency-based assessment often uses evidence such as professional portfolios as a means of assessing authentic professional achievement (Ewell, 2002). Training future professionals based on professional competencies links with the notion of authenticity (Cumming & Maxwell, 1999). Performance assessment is increasingly used to assess major and general education outcomes. The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) assesses a variety of higher order learning outcomes

using performance tasks measured at the freshman and senior undergraduate levels, which are then used to calculate the change or value added by their undergraduate education (Chun, 2010).

Authentic performance assessment offers some attractive benefits to teaching family science. Classroom-based performance tasks can be a cost-effective teaching strategy, a significant consideration within the current educational context. It can be less intensive and time consuming than community-based learning courses (Yazedijan & Kramer, 2006), while bringing a simulation of real-life into the classroom. This method can therefore be practical for courses that are taught by lecturers as well as core faculty. Second, performance assessment can be linked with the development of professional competencies. Competency-based approaches require students to demonstrate the ability to apply knowledge relevant to professional work (Ponzetti, 1995). Third, performance tasks can be designed to appeal to different learning styles, improving students' ability to retain information and modeling ways of presenting information to future clients using a variety of modalities (Marotz-Baden, Osborne & Hunts, 2000).

Pedagogical examples of authentic performance assessment and problem-based learning demonstrate how these approaches can be used to foster student learning. Sandifer-Stech and Gerhardt (2001) provide an example of authentic performance assessment in their description of two courses, "Family Law and Public Policy" and "Parenting." For the Family Law and Public Policy course, student teams are asked to create family policy for a company and develop authentic products of consultant presentations, needs assessment documents, and professional conference seminar proposals. For the Parenting course, students explore the concept of a multi-generational parenting heritage by producing newspaper articles, as well as developmentally appropriate toys and developmentally appropriate parent/child activity descriptions. The assessment criteria used are not described. Teemant, Moen & Harris (2012) provide three vignettes for problem-based learning assignments, appropriate for courses in family sciences. The vignettes include developing intervention programs and training modules. Students are required to draw on theory and evidence-based practices in designing their projects, and present their final projects to the class, as though their classmates represented a group of key decision makers and stakeholders. While all three assignments include authentic products and performances as part of the projects, the recommended assessment methods are not mentioned.

Case studies and simulation, popular teaching strategies in family science, are approaches to active learning that fit well with authentic performance assessment. Case studies have been lauded as modeling a way of teaching and form of interaction appropriate for students to adopt in their professional work (Marotz-Baden et al., 2000). Case studies have also been described as a teaching strategy that promotes critical thinking by asking students to utilize concepts in authentic ways; for example, by having students develop intervention strategies and present to their classmates in a simulated staff meeting (Long, DeGenova, Strouse, & Voegel, 1996). Certain design features of case study projects appear to be the most influential for learning; in particular, complexity, structure, and level of challenge. Complexity makes a task challenging, yet tasks that are too complex can negatively influence students' performance by making it more difficult to process all the elements of the project and develop solutions. Students are more likely to encounter ill-constructed problems in their future professional work, and skills developed for dealing with well-structured problems do not appear to transfer to ill-structured ones (Berge, Ramaekers & Pilot, 2004).

The family science literature features many examples of case study and simulation projects. Koropecj-Cox and colleagues (2006) developed case studies of families with various demographic makeups, including of family structure, race/ethnicity, and income, then asked the groups to work through the ramifications of scenarios that happen to their families about employment changes, new relationships, and illness or dependency, and then present a summary of their discussion to the class. Crosbie-Burnett & Eisen (1992) developed profiles of intact families, assigned each family to a group, and members of the group assumed the persona of a member of the family and role-played this part throughout the semester. Simulated family groups met outside of class each week to work through instructor-assigned scenarios, including marital dissolution and custody proceedings, and kept journals summarizing each of the family's interactions and analyzing these dynamics based on theories studied in class.

Combining case studies and simulation with authentic performance assessment can enable a powerful form of learning and a meaningful form of assessment. When combined, these elements can bring together the type of real-life family scenarios that students may encounter in the field, while enabling students to begin practicing professional roles within family science. Discussion will now turn to an example of how authentic performance assessment was combined with a case study project to teach undergraduate students about how to understand and work with diverse families.

### **Using case studies and authentic performance assessment in a course on understanding and working with diverse families**

A case study project with a performance assessment is used as the central assignment for an undergraduate course entitled, "Understanding and working with diverse families." The course examines the experiences of families with children in American life, drawing on research and theory from a variety of disciplines, including sociology and psychology. Topics explored include dimensions of diversity (such as family formation, race/ethnicity, and class); theories on families; and challenges that families face. Special attention is given to application of knowledge in the areas of family engagement, involvement, and support, particularly as families interact with their communities and social institutions such as schools and social services.

This course is part of the Child and Adolescent Development (CAD) major at San Francisco State University. In addition to a core curriculum of child development classes, students select one of the following concentrations: early childhood; school age child and family; youth work and out-of-school time; and policy, advocacy, and systems. Students go on to careers and graduate school in many fields, including early childhood care and education, elementary education, youth work, public administration, and social work. The family course is designed to meet the competencies of the CAD major, which in turn are based on professional competencies of child and adolescent-serving fields, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National School-Age Care Alliance, and the Community Network for Youth Development. The broad CAD competencies are development of knowledge and skills in the areas of diversity and social justice; developmental knowledge and application; professionalism and communication; and assessment, evaluation, and evidence-based practice.



The “Understanding and working with diverse families” course is restricted to juniors and seniors in the CAD major. The course is offered each semester, with a maximum enrollment of 40 students. Students must have completed pre-requisite coursework. Pre-requisites consist of two lower-division child development courses: a basic applied child development course and a course on child development in the context of family and community. In addition, students must have completed a lower division written English composition course. This prior coursework prepares students with a basic knowledge of children and families that enables a more advanced level of instruction and application in this course.

Students are assigned by the instructor to groups of 5-6, with the goal of creating the most diverse groups possible. At the beginning of the semester, students write a brief description of themselves and their families of origin and procreation (if any), noting their own characteristics related to the dimensions of diversity emphasized in the class. Students majoring in child and adolescent development at San Francisco State are highly diverse, and represent a wide variety of ages, socioeconomic levels, countries of origin, and racial/ethnic backgrounds. The instructor distributes students to groups based on these background characteristics, insuring group heterogeneity. The purpose is for members to provide different perspectives for working with the case study family, based on their own backgrounds. In the third class session, students are notified of their group assignments and are asked to meet. They introduce themselves to each other by describing their family backgrounds.

Half of students’ final grades in the class consist of their individual and group work on a semester-long project related to a family case study. The family case study project has four components: 1) a group paper, consisting of a case study and genogram; 2) an individual response paper, reviewing and discussing research articles on the family case study demographic factors; 3) a second individual response paper, on research related to a challenge the case study family is facing; and 4) a group presentation summarizing the response papers and what the research and theories reviewed suggest about implications for working with the case study family. The remainder of the course grade consists of mid-term and final essay exams, a paper based on interviewing a diverse set of parents about their parenting beliefs and goals, and class participation. Students are given the following initial instructions and criteria for the family case study assignment:

Overview: This semester, you will be on a simulated multi-disciplinary professional team learning how best to engage, communicate with, involve, and support a particular family. You and your team need to understand the family to be able to provide them with the highest level of services and support. With your help, the family will cope with the challenge they are facing; without your help, the family may experience serious crisis. Each member should identify his or her role on the multidisciplinary team; roles may include (but are not limited to) therapist, social worker, teacher, or family advocate. You and your colleagues will develop a profile of the family, with a genogram diagramming family relationships. Individually, each member of the group will review research and write two response papers, one on the family’s demographics and another on a crisis faced by the family. At the end of the semester, you will make a group case presentation summarizing your research and recommendations for working with this family.

The first portion of the family case study assignment is a case study narrative and a genogram. The class plays a dice game to assign demographic factors to each group, for its case study family. Each group receives three demographic factors, based on U.S. census designations and data: 1) Race/ethnicity; 2) Family structures; and 3) Income and assets. For each group, the instructor rolls two dice to assign a demographic factor, and then eliminates that option when it has been assigned. The class ends up with a variety of diverse family profiles (See Table 1). The purpose of assigning family characteristics in this way, rather than instructor assigned or student selected characteristics, is to avoid stereotyped family profiles. Rolling the dice to come up with the demographic descriptions of the families creates some unexpected, but still realistic, combinations. Combining various demographic background factors allows students to learn about the concept of intersectionality (Walby, Armstrong & Strid, 2012) in terms of how families may face multiple social inequalities, due to race, class, immigration status, disability status, and sexual preference. (See Table 1).

The first portion of the case study assignment is modeled on the authentic performance task of writing a case study or clinical vignette, together with a genogram that diagrams family members and their relationships. Students work together in class and by email to develop their case studies. Students are also asked to conduct research on the professional role that they select, and have a discussion in class with their groups about the responsibilities associated with various professional roles. At the end of each class session, in a quick write assignment, students are asked to discuss their reactions and questions about that day's class. In these quick writes, many students reported great enjoyment in the opportunity to be creative and envision a backstory about the family's history, relationships, health and mental health status, occupations, schooling or caregiving arrangements, and goals. Grading criteria for this assignment are to describe all required elements of the family's story and correctly apply genogram symbols; the assignment is graded pass/not pass, with the opportunity to resubmit until a passing grade is achieved.

The case studies developed by the students serve two purposes for the class: learning tools for in-class activities and context for their individual and group assignments. As learning tools for in-class activities, the case studies provide opportunities to apply concepts explored in class. For example, in a class session on family systems theory, students define roles, rules, and subsystems for their case study family. In a class session on involving families in education, the class discusses the high-income and low-income case study families, and contrasts the barriers these families might encounter to involvement in schools. The students then discuss how to address these barriers from the perspective of educators.

For the second portion of the family case study assignment, students individually write a research response paper on their case study's family demographic makeup. The students draw their research from a library of peer reviewed journal articles, available on the class website. This library includes a number of articles on each of the demographic factors of the case study families. For example, for case study number two (see Table 1), students would choose from articles on Pacific Islanders and multigenerational families. Students communicate within their groups to minimize overlap in the articles that they choose for their response papers, so that a wide breadth of research and theory can be covered in the final presentation. This process has generally gone smoothly, with the group members deciding on how to allocate the articles in a

fair manner, taking into consideration article characteristics like length and perceived difficulty. The paper assignment is to review three articles, summarizing the main points of each article and then commenting on it. Students are asked to discuss their reactions to each article, how the article connects with class material, and information from the article that could inform working with families.

Similar to the previous assignment, the third portion of the family case study assignment is a response paper written individually by each student. This is initiated mid-way through the semester when the instructor provides each group with a scenario that includes a major stressor their families will experience. These scenarios are modeled on challenges facing American families, covered in the class (see Table 2). For example, in the group for case study number two (see Table 2), students would choose articles on the family's challenge of a death of a family member for response paper 2. The same assignment and grading guidelines apply as with the first response paper. (See Table 2).

The instructor grades the two response papers using a criterion-referenced rubric that includes evaluation of content, application, and writing skills (See Figure 1). The rubric has a point range for each item, as well as a space for instructor comments on how the paper reflected or did not reflect each aspect of the criterion. A paper that would meet the standard of 'excellent' would summarize three articles and make a clear connection between research findings, class material, and how this information could be used in specific ways to work with families. For example, a student taking the perspective of a therapist and writing about the impact of divorce on children might describe how she would use research findings to inform specific questions, notice certain behaviors, and provide certain types of support for the children and parents. A paper that would meet the standard of good would also identify implications for working with families, but the methods of application might be more general and less nuanced than an excellent paper. For example, a student might state that a research finding made them wonder about a particular aspect of family functioning, but not identify how they might act upon this question. Below these standards, students typically demonstrate a difficulty or absence of translating research findings into concrete practices. (See Figure 1).

The final presentation pulls together the knowledge and skills that students have learned in the course through an authentic performance assessment. This group presentation is an authentic performance task modeled on a professional case presentation, which occurs in social work, education, health and other professional settings. In a case presentation, professionals formally present on a client's background and service plan. Each group makes a maximum fifteen minute presentation, using a PowerPoint presentation as a visual aid. The presentations cover the following points: 1) Description of the family's background and demographics; 2) Discussion of the family's strengths; 3) Summary of the challenge the family is facing; 4) Discussion of the main findings from the response papers; 5) Application of research and theory to inform insights into how the group could best work with the family; 6) Description of recommendations/treatment plan to work with the family.

Grading on the final performance task takes into account two forms of evaluation: an assessment of each student's contribution by their group and an assessment of the case presentation by the class. Each student completes an assessment of his or her group members,

commenting on and rating their participation on group work, using a scale of: 10=Little to no participation; 20=satisfactory participation; 30=excellent participation. These points are averaged with the points assigned by the class, to determine each student's final grade on the assignment. Assessment of the case presentation is conducted by peers, which is in keeping with the real-world referent of this performance task. Since the students as future professionals will present cases to groups of their peers, assessment by their peers on this assignment simulates the context of a professional case presentation. The class evaluates each group case presentation using a rubric (see Figure 2). The students' final grade on this portion of the assignment is determined by averaging the class evaluations from the completed rubric with the rating of their participation by their group members. (See Figure 2).

This course has been taught in two consecutive semesters. In evaluations completed at the end of each semester, students reported high overall satisfaction with the course and made several comments about the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that they had developed in the class. Representative comments about knowledge included: "I have gained insight and knowledge pertaining to how to work with families concerning certain subjects that are of high demand while working with children and families." For development of new skills, several students commented that they had learned strategies for communicating, supporting, and involving families in education. Representative comments about skills included: "I have acquired more tools for how to involve families in their child's education and how to better communicate with a whole range of diverse families." A recurring theme in the students' comments regarding attitude was increased confidence and being more open-minded about diverse families. Representative comments about attitude included: "I feel more confident, equipped, and sensitive when working with families and children of different backgrounds." The primary concerns expressed by students have related to challenges about translating research findings into strategies for working with families and unequal participation of group members; these challenges are discussed in the next section.

### **Discussion**

This four-part case study assignment meets the criteria established by Newmann and Archbald (1992) and Bergen (1993) for an authentic achievement and authentic assessment. One criterion is the production, rather than reproduction of knowledge; in this assignment, student groups create new products, including a case study, genogram, research papers, and a case presentation. This contrasts to a traditional assessment approach, where students are asked to reproduce the content of the class through exams that require parroting back information. The assignment involves disciplined inquiry that sequentially builds understanding. As the student groups construct their family case studies, each member independently reviews research to understand the family's background and challenge, and then the group comes together to integrate information into a professional product. Beyond evaluation for this class, this learning experience offers students the additional value of learning a utilitarian skill with practical application in professional work, by developing the case presentation. The project is integrative, measuring skills including interpreting research, identifying applications of research findings, and making practical recommendations for working with families, in addition to writing and oral presentation skills. Students select a real world role as a member of a multi-disciplinary team

(e.g., teacher, social worker) as a perspective for discussing implications of research and how they might apply findings to support their work with families. Finally, they work together as a team to integrate information from across the students' papers and to make recommendations for working with families, with both their individual and group performance evaluated and factored into their grade.

There have been certain challenges associated with the experience of teaching the class. The most difficult aspect of the assignment for the students has been translating research findings into strategies for working with families. Given that the undergraduate students in the course had little professional experience on which to draw, this is no surprise. Indeed, family science practitioners in the field often struggle to understand and incorporate research that could inform their practice. One reason is that journal articles reporting on findings from research studies are often written using scientific jargon and mathematical language that is difficult to understand for the non-scientist. Family practitioners need training on how to identify and interpret research studies (Small, 2005). Discussing how to interpret articles and apply findings to the case study families has provided teaching opportunities, as students asked questions and explored what particular research implications meant within the professional roles they had selected. Another challenge involved occasional problems arising from the student work group dynamic, which is not uncommon for problem-based learning projects (Dolmans, DeGrave, Wolfhagen & Van der Vleuten, 2005). While students mostly worked out problems about sharing the workload amongst themselves (or held group members who made smaller contributions accountable in the peer-assigned grade), one group experienced a high level of conflict early on in the assignment and had to be separated, with three of the original members remaining together, and the other two working independently. The two individuals working independently were asked to develop case studies and write response papers, like the student groups, but were given an alternate assignment instead of making a final presentation. Instead, these two students completed a written family service plan. It is helpful for instructors planning an assignment of this nature to be prepared for contingencies in case an assigned student group does not work out.

The authentic performance assessment described in this paper has certain limitations, which should be kept in mind by instructors considering such an approach for their own teaching. First, the assignment applies to a specific type of work with families, best characterized as family case management (Myers-Walls, Ballard, Darling & Myers-Bowman, 2011). With modifications, this assignment could be used to fit courses on family life education, family therapy, and other modalities of working with families. For example, the perspective could be shifted and students could be encouraged to assume the identities of the family members to facilitate role-plays on family dynamics for a course on family therapy; Browning, Collins & Nelson (2008) provide guidelines on how to develop such an assignment. Second, the assignment is appropriate for students at a certain level of education. Asking students to construct a case study, conduct relevant research, and develop a case plan with recommendations for working with a family would not be recommended for first year majors. This approach is most suitable for advanced undergraduates, who have prior coursework covering basic concepts in family sciences and are ready for more advanced concepts and application to a real-world context. Likewise, this approach may not be sufficiently advanced for graduate students, who may be ready for learning experiences that involve application of concepts in the field, through community service learning or internships. Third, this assignment has so far lacked a pre-test, post-test assessment of

students' knowledge and skills regarding working with diverse families, making it difficult to quantify gains in knowledge and skills. The development of such an instrument is planned for the next iteration of the course. In addition to capturing individual student learning over the course of the semester, such a tool could be used by child and adolescent development or family studies programs as a measure for how students perform on competencies in the major, for program review by the university.

Additional evidence is needed on the value of authentic performance task assessment in family sciences. Much of the empirical research on authentic performance task assessment has been within the K-12 educational context (see, for example, Newmann et al., 1996). A metaanalysis of the effect of assessment on learning in problem-based instruction found almost all studies in higher education were conducted within medical education (Gijbels, Dochy, Van den Bossche, & Segers, 2005). Research has found that learners have difficulty generalizing skills to different contexts (Linn, Baker, & Dunbar, 1991). Given the complexity of working with families, this may particularly hold true for the field of family science. Studies should test the assumption that authentic performance assessment overcomes this challenge by determining whether students are able to apply classroom-developed skills in the field, through structured learning experiences like internships and community service learning.

### **Suggestions for implementing performance task assessments in family science**

Instructors considering a shift from traditional to authentic assessment might consider adapting a current course to include one or more performance tasks, possibly with a case study teaching methodology. Considerations include the content of the course and how this might be enhanced by through an active learning and authentic assessment approach, how to design meaningful performance tasks, and how to structure the assignment to promote student motivation and accountability.

Using case studies with authentic performance assessment can be particularly beneficial for exploring the topic of diverse families. The case study families give context for discussing challenging issues related to diversity, circumventing feelings of discomfort (Ramos & Blinn-Pike, 1999) and fostering sense of security to discuss charged issues (Burgess et al., 1996). Giving students a chance to think about application in response to a specific family with a combination of demographic factors, such as race/ethnicity, class, and family formation, can help avoid stereotypes and misrepresentations of oppressed groups (Walker, 1993) while also recognizing multiple diversities and the ways individuals combine cultural influences to develop personal identities (McAdoo, 1996).

Authentic tasks can be more challenging for students and instructors than traditional assignments for a number of reasons, including being more realistic, open, demanding, and meaningful. However, these aspects of design must be balanced in a way that enables student success. For example, tasks should be structured enough so that students have direction and are able to get started, but not too structured so that the problem seems simplistic (Berge, Ramaekers & Pilot, 2004). Instructors designing authentic performance assessment for case study projects are encouraged to consider:

1. How authentic is the case? To which extent does the case resemble cases from students' future professional academic practices? To which extent is the case in touch with students' experiences and daily lives?
2. How complex and open is the task? Are there many issues and uncertainties involved in the problem? Are there extensive relationships among these issues? Is there a unique solution to the problem or are there various alternative solutions to be considered?
3. How well-structured is the case? Are there useful concepts, theories and methods available to support finding solutions? Are there any hidden aspects of the problem?
4. Is the case challenging? Do the students consider the problem genuine and worth finding a solution? Do they find the content of the problem interesting? Does the task demand any effort? Can the problem be solved within the available time? (Berge et al., 2004, p. 2).

Additional considerations for designing an effective case study project include group size, group formation, and grading. Burgess and colleagues (1996) suggest that the optimal number of students in a group is five or six; large groups tend to perform more poorly, with more problems with connectedness and organization, while small groups tend to increase student commitment to the project and minimize the risk of cliques or one person overshadowing the group. Within-group heterogeneity, with variation in gender and ethnicity, can provide different viewpoints and perspectives on assignments that can enhance learning. Having the opportunity to determine many of the characteristics of the family case study can increase student interest and motivation in the project. Grading can be developed with an eye to minimizing the free rider effect of the group relying on the most active members to complete the work; one way to do this is to have more than one grade on the assignment that takes into account group members' assessments of each other's contributions (Burgess, Wilderson & Kanarr, 1996).

Families today come in many forms, and today's students must be tomorrow's trained and ready professionals. Instructors in family science need to prepare students for the real-world families they will meet, which is challenging in a traditional teaching environment. Authentic performance assessment improves upon traditional forms of assessment (papers and exams) by mimicking the types of activities that students will engage in as professionals. Students are able to practice the skills and behaviors in a context that simulates their future work with families. This method of assessment is a logical extension of the type of active learning strategies, such as problem-based learning, already embraced by family science instructors.

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Table 1

*Demographic Factors for Family Case Study and Final Configurations*

| Case study | Race/ethnicity <sup>1</sup>   | Socio-economic status <sup>2</sup>  | Family formation  |
|------------|---|---|---|
| 1          | Asian American  | \$20,000 to \$29,999,<br>Renting, public transportation                                     | Gay couple, one adopted child (5 years old), two foster children (6 and 8 years old). 8 year old has been diagnosed as emotionally disturbed.                         |
| 2          | Pacific Islander  | \$40,000 to \$49,999,<br>Renting, 1 used car  | Extended family, single father, has one child with autism spectrum disorder (10 years old), lives with both grandparents. Mother deceased. Father is in the military. |
| 3          | Mixed<br>race/ethnicity:<br>Native American,<br>African American &<br>Caucasian | \$50,000 to \$59,999,<br>Renting, 1 new car with<br>car payment, 1 used car                 | Heterosexual couple, first marriage, two children (13 and 15).  |
| 4          | Caucasian/European<br>American  | \$80,000 to \$89,999,<br>Home owner with<br>mortgage, 1 or more new<br>car with car payment | Single mother, had her child as a teenager, child is now 12 years old, father is not consistently involved. Child has been diagnosed with a learning disability.      |

|   |                  |   |  |
|---|------------------|---|--|
| 5 | Hispanic/Latino  | \$100,000 to \$109,999,<br>Home owner with<br>mortgage, 1 or more new<br>car with car payment     | Blended family, two children from<br>previous marriage (7, 9) and one<br>child of both parents (infant).   |
| 6 | African American | \$140,000 to \$149,999,<br>Home owner with<br>mortgage, 1 or more new<br>cars purchased with cash | Lesbian couple, two children<br>conceived through in-vitro<br>fertilization (2 years old, 4 years<br>old). |

*Note.* Read down the column for list of demographic factors and across rows for final family configuration (during first course offering; family configurations change each offering).

<sup>1</sup>Source: U.S. Census Bureau racial categories, <http://www.census.gov/population/race/> <sup>2</sup>Based on: U.S. Census Bureau, Detailed occupations and median earnings: 2008, [http://www.census.gov/people/io/files/acs08\\_detailedoccupations.pdf](http://www.census.gov/people/io/files/acs08_detailedoccupations.pdf)

Table 2

*Family Challenges Assigned to Student Groups*

| Case study* | Challenge facing case study family   |
|-------------|--|
| 1           | Parent loses job [in a school] due to district education cuts.   |
| 2           | Parent [in the military] is killed by an IUD while in Afghanistan.   |
| 3           | One parent discovers the other has been having an affair and files for a divorce.  |
| 4           | Parent is diagnosed with breast cancer.  |
| 5           | Parent's immigration papers were not filed correctly, and Homeland Security has apprehended parent for deportation to country of origin. |
| 6           | Parent has been feeling isolated and depressed and begins to develop a substance abuse addiction.  |

*Note.* \*Case study number refers to family case studies from the first offering of the course, and corresponds with Table 1.

Figure 1

*Rubric for Response papers 1 & 2*

| <b>CATEGORY</b>                           | <b>Excellent</b>   | <b>Good</b>  | <b>Needs improvement</b>  | <b>Below expectation</b>  | <b>Points and comments</b> |
|---|--|--|---|---|----------------------------|
| <b>Content= 20 points</b>                 | Demonstrates understanding of the each article and summarizes main points. Discusses how information from the articles could be applied to working with a family. Provides concrete examples related to engaging, communicating, involving, and/or supporting families. Integrates class concepts.<br><b>(20-19)</b> | Summarizes main points of articles. Discusses how information from articles could be applied to working with a family and mentions class concepts, but examples are vague or not concrete.<br><b>(18-16)</b> | Some aspects of the summary and application to working with families are unclear or insufficient.<br><b>(16-12)</b>     | Missing summary of articles and/or application to working with families.<br><b>(11-6)</b>                   |                            |
| <b>Use of evidence= 10 points</b>         | Draws on 3 or more research articles. Provides evidence for each argument, with reference to the text. Uses quotations sparingly and generally puts information in own words to demonstrate understanding.<br><b>(10-9)</b>  | Paper integrates 2 sources. Draws on text to support argument, with few direct quotations.<br><b>(8-7)</b>   | Paper integrates 1 source. Uses text to support argument, but makes excessive use of direct quotes.<br><b>(6-3)</b>     | Paper does not incorporate articles or theories. Does not refer to text to support arguments.<br><b>(2)</b> |                            |
| <b>APA format= 3 points</b>               | APA format is correctly used for all citations and references<br><b>(3)</b>  | Roughly a quarter or less of citations and references use APA format incorrectly.<br><b>(2)</b>  | Roughly half of citations and references use APA format incorrectly.<br><b>(1)</b>                                      | APA format is not used for citations or references.<br><b>(0)</b>   |                            |
| <b>Organization= 3 points</b>             | Information is organized with well-constructed paragraphs and thoughtful transitions that show how ideas are connected.<br><b>(3)</b>  | Information is organized with well-constructed paragraphs and some transitions.<br><b>(2)</b>  | Information is organized, but paragraphs are not well-constructed and clear transitions are not provided.<br><b>(1)</b> | The information appears to be disorganized.<br><b>(0)</b>   |                            |
| <b>Style= 3 points</b>                    | Sentences are well-constructed with varied structure.<br><b>(3)</b>  | Most sentences are well-constructed and there is some varied sentence structure in the paper.<br><b>(2)</b>  | There are issues with sentence variation or construction.<br><b>(1)</b>   | Most sentences are not well-constructed or varied.<br><b>(0)</b>  |                            |
| <b>Introduction/ Conclusion= 3 points</b> | Paper includes an introduction that previews the paper contents and a conclusion that summarizes the main points.<br><b>(3)</b>  | An introduction and conclusion are included and recognizable, but do not sufficiently preview or summarize the paper.<br><b>(2)</b>  | Either an introduction or conclusion is missing or incomplete.<br><b>(1)</b>  | There is no introduction or conclusion - the paper begins and ends abruptly.<br><b>(0)</b>                  |                            |
| <b>Mechanics= 3 points</b>                | No grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.<br><b>(3)</b>  | Almost no grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.<br><b>(2)</b>   | A few grammatical spelling, or punctuation errors.<br><b>(1)</b>  | Many grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors.<br><b>(0)</b>  |                            |
| <b>TOTAL= 45 points</b>                   |  |  |   |   |                            |

Figure 2

*Rubric for group case presentation*

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>PRESENTATION MEETS REQUIREMENTS:</b>          |  |
|  | Describes the family’s background and demographics   |
|  | Identifies the family’s strengths and the challenge the family is facing   |
|  | Discusses the key findings from the response papers  |
|  | Applies research & theory to inform insights about working with the family   |
|  | Describes recommendations/treatment plan to work with this family to engage, communicate, involve, and support them.                                       |
| <b>OVERALL QUALITY OF PRESENTATION:</b>          |  |
|  | The discussion is clear and easy to follow   |
|  | Research and theory is used to support discussion  |
|  | Time is used appropriately, with the length of the presentation and pacing suitable for the amount of information (i.e., does not feel rushed or too slow) |
|  | Engages audience through eye contact, humor, and other means   |
|  | PowerPoint is attractive and easy to read and understand   |
| <b>PLEASE LIST STRENGTHS OF THE PRESENTATION</b> |  |
| <b>PLEASE LIST AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT</b>         |  |

*Note.* Scale: 0=not observed; 1=needs improvement; 2=satisfactory; 3=excellent