Demonstrating Understanding
Performance Assessment

Products and Performances

The phenomenon of "teaching to the test" in large-scale assessment is familiar to teachers and, when standardized tests focus on recall of information in short answer or multiple choice, it can drive instruction to more effective methods of memorization over deeper learning. Supporters of the Common Core and Next Generation Standards, however, hope that changes in the manner of large-scale assessment of the standards will have the opposite effect: that it will encourage instruction that focuses on true understanding and application of knowledge.

Products and performance assessments emphasize what students can do or create, not just what they know. This type of assessment provides information about how students understand and apply knowledge, as well as their thinking and reasoning. Use performance-based assessments to make observations on a student's performance within a specific time frame and setting. Checklists, scoring guides and rubrics are created before the observation takes place and are then shared with students so that they know the requirements or necessary skills in advance and can prepare for them. This allows students the freedom to work on those skills or areas where they feel they might be weak.

When students create products, such as models, presentations, and publications, their work is authentic, resembling the kind of work that people do in real life. A carefully designed product assessment will require critical thinking and problem solving, the deep understanding of relevant concepts and the proficient use of appropriate skills. Product-based assessments also allow students to make some choices about format and topic so they can use their strengths and interests to support their learning.

Effective product and performance-based assessments must address several factors. Determining the purpose of the assessment is paramount to a successful assessment. To help focus on important aspects, ask the following questions:

- What concept, skill, strategy, 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)

After establishing the purpose, define the criteria to use to determine the success of the student's product or performance. The *Assessing Projects* application provides many examples that may prove to be very useful, but it is important to note that some of the criteria may include too many skills or concepts, or they may not fit the needs exactly. We recommend a review of the traits and descriptors and an adaptation for the purposes before applying any of them to performance-based assessments.

Airasian (1991, p.244) suggests completing the following steps when determining or adapting the criteria for a specific purpose:

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

Valuable information is gained about how to help students improve when utilizing these performance-based assessment strategies. Using the criteria determined in advance and observing the process as well as the product, provides for a careful analysis of student performance as well as opportunities to look for patterns related to teaching and learning goals. This allows for the modification or development of instructional practices to facilitate growth among all students. When analyzing collected data, questions to consider include:

- Did successful students use a different approach than less successful students?
- Were the less successful performers hindered by misconceptions and how might they have developed these misconceptions?
- Where in the process did students run into difficulty?
- What kinds of errors did they make?
- Are there certain traits that students have difficulty with?
- Are there consistent misconceptions across the class that need addressing?