

# Performance Tasks: Characteristics and Possibilities

This primer offers characteristics of a performance task, offers ideas about different types of tasks, and provides a link to example tasks for further perusal.

## Performance Tasks vs. Predictable Tasks

For many years, teachers have designed assessments for which certain students could virtually assure their success. Students who study tend to do well on these assessments. However, even those students who do not possess all lecture notes, may not have completed all homework assignments, and may not have participated in class discussions could perform well too. Why?

Teachers may say it is because those students are merely “good at taking tests.” Students who are successful on traditional tests and exams are actually good at:

- memorizing pertinent facts (in the language used by the teacher)
- internalizing the way the teacher structures content and questions, and perhaps
- predicting the question types the teacher will use.

In sum, students who are good at predictable tasks tend to do well on the types of tests where “studying” is useful. Studying is merely code for mimicking the idiom of the teacher’s own presentation.

If students respond to a recall-based assessment item, such as a multiple choice or fill-in-the-blank question, there is a correct answer that a rater can determine simply by looking at the answer key. In a situation where students must produce a more complex response, either in one sitting or perhaps over an extended period of time, some response variety is expected. In this situation, we need a more descriptive and even multi-faceted instrument to assess the work product. These types of assignments, prompts and questions are sometimes referred to as *performance tasks*. Where the work product is more involved, the task tends to be described in more depth as well (though not always).

A single, common definition of the *performance task* is elusive, however we propose the following for consideration:

*Students do not already know, and cannot easily predict, the outcome of a performance task prior to the commencement of the task.*

*Indeed, the teacher may not be fully aware of all of the possible outcomes.*

## General Characteristics of Performance Tasks

At this juncture in assessment history, the performance task is receiving particular attention from policy makers vis-à-vis national and international standardized exam development. The Common Core State Standards, for example, will be assessed in part using performance tasks that are currently under development.<sup>1</sup> While many standardized state and national tests have included performance tasks in the past, some feel that their ability to uncover a richer picture of student learning than traditional, single-correct-response items has not yet been optimized in this arena. The jury is still out on the Common Core Assessments; it is not clear whether the data generated from these tests will shed significantly more light on student learning. In many ways, classroom teachers have a better chance of designing performance tasks that will support their understanding of student learning and progress.

**Figure 1: General Characteristics of Performance Tasks**

***Performance Tasks:***

- *include any type of assessment of student learning except those where a single correct answer is required (e.g., multiple choice, matching, etc.);*
- *may require students to demonstrate depth and sophistication within a narrow band of concepts and skills;*
- *may require students to demonstrate the synthesis and integration of different sets of concepts and skills;*
- *are judged on the basis of descriptive performance criteria designated by teachers, assessment designers, students, or a combination of these players; and*
- *typically are assessed using rubrics.*

Figure 1 offers a general set of characteristics that may be useful when describing performance tasks. The prior section unpacked the nature of the first bullet point. The remaining bullet points demonstrate intrinsic relationships to both curriculum and instruction.

## Depth and Sophistication: The Lonely Criteria

The obvious reason why teachers tend not to assess for depth and sophistication is that they do not teach for it. The pressure to “cover” curriculum in superficial ways prompts many teachers to believe they are not doing their jobs properly if they do not attend to every learning objective, standard or textbook chapter designated for their course. The dirty little secret is that the vast majority of teachers don’t cover what they intend to anyhow. Nonetheless, the list of topics and sub-topics defining a course tends to be about the only clear aspect of a teacher’s job description

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<sup>1</sup> New York participates in the PARCC consortium, one of two groups of states tasked with designing assessments based on the Common Core State Standards. Current information about assessment development and deployment may be found at <http://www.parcconline.org/about-parcc>

as far as curriculum is concerned. Teachers understandably attend to that which is concretely defined for them, and view curriculum coverage as their primary duty.

Some administrators understand that curricular or standards coverage is not sufficient, and possibly not necessary, for student learning. Curricular coverage may not reap any gains in student achievement (the jury is still out). Administrators may plead with teachers to abandon the textbook and “go deeper” with certain topics or issues in order to engage and excite students. Teachers blame a lack of time for their inability to heed this request—but it is not the conceptual knowledge alone that presents challenges. A less obvious reason why teachers tend not to teach or assess for depth and sophistication is student deficits in critical thinking and other academic skills.

In order to treat a topic more deeply, we must teach students how to utilize a variety of skills and give them time to practice. Performance tasks that require the demonstration of these forgotten or assumed skills make this type of performance task quite lonely. Skills related to critical reading in the subject area, discussion & active listening, experimental design, solution design, information procurement (research), information management, academic writing, collaboration, time management, and the use of productivity software are all skills that could be required in order to tackle an in-depth or advanced task.

With careful planning, teachers can identify a narrow band of skills that are most pertinent to an in-depth study and can prepare students by giving them time to practice them alongside conceptual learning. With a more singular focus, the necessary skills may be identified more easily.

Examples of performance tasks that require **depth and sophistication** include:

- *Author studies*, where students compare several works of a single author
- *Biographical studies*, where students explore decisions and ideas that led an individual to success, failure, fame, infamy, fortune or destitution—or simply formed his/her life journey
- *Genre studies*, where students pick a single genre and compare several works across time, cultures or perspectives
- *Data set queries*, where students explore a single large or rich data set from a variety of angles and perspectives
- *Longitudinal experiments*, where students design and execute a long-term experiment requiring several data collection episodes and different modes of analysis
- *Design challenges*, where students design, test and redesign a solution to a problem
- *Multiple-variation challenges*, where students propose different variations on a theme (e.g., poetry, fine arts, culinary arts) or multiple solutions to the same problem (e.g. math, physics, engineering, economics, political science)

Sadly, even students in upper-level, honors, or advanced courses do not possess these critical thinking and academic skills, despite pleas from university professors, government, and industry.

Teachers of these courses tend not to devote classroom time to teaching them. This may not be entirely their fault.

Even when end-of-course exams that rely mostly on predictable tasks are not required, school communities demand that courses end in a purchasable standardized test whose tasks are largely predictable (SAT II, IB, AP, Cambridge, etc.). The test designers have made sure that many administrators, teachers, parents and students believe that a standardized test validates student learning and quality teaching. This sentiment, of course, invites the marketplace to design more predictable tests and make more money. While there is expertise available to design standardized tests that are performance-based, these are quite costly and decrease profit margins.

## Synthesis and Integration

Performance tasks that require a variety of skills and concepts, but may not require particularly sophisticated demonstrations of any one skill or concept, tend to fall into this category. These types of performance tasks work well after multiple topics, chapters and skills have been taught and practiced over a period of time. Some refer to this as a systems thinking approach. Without a coherent program of studies that tracks skills and concepts horizontally and vertically, performance tasks that require an accumulation of knowledge and skills sets cannot be designed with fairness. This design flaw leads us to miss opportunities to celebrate powerful synthetic and integrated student learning.

With careful planning, teachers can identify global and local issues that require students to weigh multiple perspectives and integrate concepts across disciplines. This is the work of policymakers, corporate executives, national leaders, scientists and filmmakers. With a broader focus, we invite students to decide which skills and concepts are most important to deploy in a given situation.

Examples of performance tasks that require **synthesis and integration** include:

- *Determining an unknown*, where students use a variety of techniques and concepts to solve a mystery, determine the identify of an unknown substance, or classify a newly-discovered species
- *Case studies*, where students immerse in a real or fictitious event to examine implications or outcomes
- *Real-time role plays*, where students respond to a posed issue or problem in real time as a character or themselves
- *Town hall meeting*, where students must address different perspectives on an issue in order to make a decision that is cost-effective, just and ethical
- *Interdisciplinary portfolio development*, where students collect their own work over an extended period and analyze a variety of features to determine strengths and weaknesses within and across disciplines

*Without a coherent program of studies that tracks skills and concepts horizontally and vertically, performance tasks that require an accumulation of knowledge and skills sets cannot be designed with fairness.*

## Descriptive Performance Criteria

In order to assess student performance, criteria must be defined and shared. In some cases it is enough to say, “I know you have met the criteria if your bridge successfully carries the required load without collapsing.” However, most teachers feel that other parts of the journey, not merely the outcome, are worth assessing. In these cases we can use descriptive criteria to help students understand what we mean by success on a performance task. To be truly descriptive, it is helpful to articulate a continuum of quality so students understand the difference between “excellent” and “not so great.” Students want to know this, and often cannot determine the difference without help. With performance tasks, where outcomes are unpredictable, it is not only supportive but necessary for the teacher to describe clearly the assessment criteria at every level of performance. In this way, teachers communicate to students how much the outcome itself matters (i.e., “Did you solve the problem?") relative to the demonstration of pertinent skills and knowledge along the way.

For further explanations of rubrics that may be used to assess performance tasks, consult the *Rubric as Text* primer that is part of this series.

A nice introduction to performance tasks from well-regarded organizations:

<http://pals.sri.com/tasks/index.html>