Chapter 14
Best Practices for Authentic Assessments in Learner-Centered Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Although not new, many believe authentic assessments need to be used more frequently than traditional objective assessments in classrooms of all types and at all educational levels. Authentic assessments are subjective, provide a better picture of student learning, and require students to perform tasks more similar to what they will be required to do in the real world. While completing the assessments students also improve skills and apply knowledge from content learned in previous situations. Authentic assessments can be used to evaluate knowledge as well as soft and hard skills. Rubrics are frequently created and used by the teacher to evaluate these assessments.

INTRODUCTION

Authentic assessments have been used for many years. However, there is still some question as to what they are, how they can be used, and what the benefits of their use are. This chapter will start with quickly defining the learner-centered classroom and then move to more thoroughly defining authentic assessments. The advantages and disadvantages of authentic assessments will be detailed. Finally, some creative ways of using authentic assessments to assess both skills (soft and hard) as well as knowledge will be presented.

BACKGROUND

As Mueller, considered by many to be a leading expert on authentic assessments, (2014e) said, “We do not just want students to know the content of the disciplines when they graduate. We, of course, want
them to be able to use the acquired knowledge and skills in the real world” (para. 2). Assessments that allow teachers to see that students can use the knowledge and skills in this real-world way are authentic assessments.

While many people support the use of authentic assessments (Callison, 1998; Frey, Schmitt, & Allen, 2012; Lombardi, 2008), there are some teachers who do not understand the importance of such assessments, or do not understand how to use them, or believe that they are too difficult to use in their classrooms.

While there may be some disadvantages to the use of authentic assessments, most of the research supports the use of authentic assessments because of their many benefits. Both the benefits and disadvantages will be discussed below.

LEARNER-CENTERED CLASSROOM

Learner centered “can be understood as the combination of a focus on individual learners with a focus on the best available knowledge we have about learning and the teaching practices that support learning for all teachers and students alike” (McCombs & Miller, 2007, p. 16). Supporters of the learner-centered classroom believe it to be the best type of classroom for the students because it allows each learner to be more involved with their own learning and believe it to allow the learner to reach higher levels of learning.

According to McCombs and Miller (2007), “when teachers are being learner centered, their practices won’t look the same from day to day, class to class, department to department” (p. 120). Assessment is one of those practices that will and should look different in the learner-centered classroom. Assessment in the learner-centered classroom should be exactly what it sounds like it should be—learner centered. The learner should be more involved with the assessment process and each student’s assessment may look different. The assessment should not just be an objective test.

Effective learning takes place when learners feel challenged to work toward appropriately high goals; therefore, appraisal of the learner’s cognitive strengths and weaknesses, as well as current knowledge and skills, important for the selection of instructional materials of an optimal degree of difficulty. Ongoing assessment of the learner’s understanding of the curricular material can provide valuable feedback to both learners and teachers about progress toward the learning goals. (McCombs & Miller, 2007, p. 62)

McCombs and Miller (2007) went on to discuss the importance of high standards and formative and summative assessment. “Setting appropriately high and challenging standards and assessing the learner as well as learning progress—including diagnostic, process, and outcome assessment—are integral parts of the learning process” (p. 62). Teachers can use authentic assessments during the learning process (formative assessment) as well as at the end of the learning process (summative assessment). As with traditional assessments, the summative assessment is frequently more demanding for the student.

One form of assessment recommended for the learner-centered classroom is authentic assessment. Authentic assessment is a “form of assessment in which students are asked to perform real-world tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills” (Mueller, 2014d, para. 1).

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