

Authentic Assessment

Artifacts, Presentations, and Rubrics Validate Learning

Written by Sue Snyder



Schools that focus on student engagement and 21st century skills deliver transdisciplinary, project-based learning experiences. Their students participate in setting learning goals and have agency over the ways they explore big ideas. Authentic assessment flows naturally from these projects, providing students with a voice in self-assessments. When learners co-create the assessment rubrics, they have a comprehensive view of how project artifacts, presentations, and work processes are evaluated.

When teachers' and students' learning goals are multidimensional, covering emotional, social, interpersonal, and cognitive skills, assessments must collect relevant evidence in those dimensions. "Students are so much more than a standardized test. We need to tap into their strengths," says Coebie Taylor-Logan, principal of Journey Elementary School in Casper, Wyoming. "Authentic assessments start with the belief that kids will grow, and that there are ways to show that growth. To effectively assess teachers and students, goals and learning strategies must be aligned and authentic."

What Constitutes Authentic Goals and Assessments?

The American Psychological Association's *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (2014) recommends multiple types of evidence for any goal or objective and states that assessments connecting evidence must match the intended and desired types of behaviors, skills, and understandings. Taylor-Logan agrees: "We

want students to be well-rounded in many ways and help them explore, investigate, and find their passion. How do we capture the skills and understandings that demonstrate their creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication skills and put them on the path of lifelong learning? How do we convince teachers and the community that those 'learning-how-to-learn' skills can be gained by embedding factual content within these broader goals?"

She explains her school's commitment to arts integration, an approach

that honors student discovery and authentic assessment: "I've observed how art teachers do this naturally. When arts specialists co-plan with classroom teachers, the practice becomes embedded schoolwide."

The Arts-Integration Connection

Arts integration is a transdisciplinary approach that encompasses multiple areas' standards. Students learn about and through the arts as they create, present, respond, and connect. The unique nature of the arts requires students to actively communicate evidence of their understanding as they create and present or perform. While all of the arts provide assessment opportunities

that are embedded in the learning process (formative) and as culminating documentation of learning (summative), visual art *makes thinking visible* through artifacts. For example, students at Journey Elementary School learned about ancient Egypt by creating topographic maps and conducting performances dressed in clothing authentic to the period. The artifacts they created and the performances they presented documented their use of new vocabulary and their understanding of place and time.

Rubrics Based on Learning Goals and Processes

Project-based learning requires an assessment reboot. When real-life problems are explored in authentic ways, students drive their research and project formation. Quizzes and classic tests that look for one right answer do not suffice. Teachers and

creatED STUDENT STEAM PROJECT RUBRIC Based on the creatED™ Project Planning Framework

	BLAST-OFF BRONZE STARTING 1 POINT 	RAZZMATAZZ DEVELOPING 2 POINTS 	SONIC SILVER STRETCHING 3 POINTS 	GOLD FUSION EXCELLING 4 POINTS 
GEARING UP	<input type="checkbox"/> Tries, but coming up with ideas is hard. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Helps ideas grow. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Asks good questions and connects ideas. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Helps others understand ideas so the team blossoms. 
PREPARATION	<input type="checkbox"/> Starts planning, but gets stuck. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Plans ways to use materials. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Helps the team plan ways to use materials and design project. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Serves as thought leader. <input type="checkbox"/> Asks important questions. <input type="checkbox"/> Helps others use materials and design project. 
COLLABORATION	<input type="checkbox"/> Finds it hard to work together. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Needs more practice listening to others and building on their ideas. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Works well with others and is open to others' ideas. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Helps team assign jobs. 
IMPLEMENTATION	<input type="checkbox"/> Needs help creating and presenting project. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Helps team create and present project. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Goes beyond the assigned job to help team create and present the project. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Leads team in project design. <input type="checkbox"/> Connects the project to real-life situations and other topics being studied. 
REFLECTION	<input type="checkbox"/> Gets frustrated and needs help figuring out why. <input type="checkbox"/> Needs practice listening to others. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Needs to think about how to work together. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Helps others see possibilities and achieve results. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Serves as a team leader by listening to others. <input type="checkbox"/> Thinks about and helps others see ways to work together better. 

Rubrics that use visuals to represent a continuum of growth enable young students to self-assess their work.



students need to align the project goals with learning objectives and multiple disciplines' standards and use these as anchors for the assessment rubrics. A well-crafted rubric sets criteria for excellence, shows a continuum of progress, and addresses the outcomes as well as the work process.

At Penrose Elementary School in Colorado Springs, Colorado, principal Tamara Sobin wanted to inspire teachers to address 21st century skills and project-based learning. She asked, "What does creativity look like?" and gave teachers time to co-develop a rubric that explored a continuum of increased creative thinking for students. "It is difficult for teachers to step back and not drive the project," Sobin explains. The continuum helped them identify progress.

Gretchen Bitner, the school's project-based learning coordinator, found that as teachers used more creative teaching strategies, students showed a readiness to take ownership of their learning. "The seven-year-olds outsmarted us. They led us!" reports second-grade teacher Marilyn Aaland. Students helped develop rubrics to assess their presentations, which included song, dance, improvised plays, visual artifacts, and data visualization.

As Penrose teachers started "letting go," students invented new ways to explore and assess their work. For example, fifth graders developed projects about human body systems. They teamed with medical students from the nearby University of Colorado School of Medicine. Bitner explains, "Through an engineering process, using design thinking and problem-solving skills, students creatively utilized recycled materials to fashion representations of the body systems. Because they had created a rubric at the outset, they held themselves accountable to a very high standard and referred back to this rubric often."

Student-Created Rubrics Frame Self- and Peer-Assessment

Rubrics show students their strengths and motivate them to reach higher levels of performance. When adults trust students to create assessment rubrics, the message conveyed is "We share responsibility and accountability." The more familiar students become with rubrics, the more agile they become in developing and modifying them. Start by outlining the objectives and the roles students will serve in their self- and peer assessments. For example, students who create rubrics:

- Make decisions about what they assess;
- Consult with teachers who facilitate inquiry as co-learners;
- Examine artifacts and presentations for evidence of content knowledge and collaborative work strategies;
- Elevate their questioning to reach higher-order thinking skills;
- Demonstrate social and emotional skills as they participate in peer coaching; and
- Participate in, or lead, family conferences to share their assessments of their work.

High Expectations Lead to Exemplary Results

When adults have high expectations, students rise to the occasion. "When

you ask students to assume leadership roles, they step up!" reports Michelle Start, academic coach at Lehigh Acres Middle School in Florida. Students in Lehigh Acres design challenges for themselves, often as learning games for others to solve. Students must build the curriculum concepts into these problem-solving challenges. They use peer reviews to respond, listen to one another's arguments, and defend ideas while learning the art of negotiation. They often ask one another, "I understand what you're saying about [this], but what about when [that] happens?"

Students who have been involved in more than one project do not let classmates settle for the mundane. Instead, they seek ever-more-clever ways to embed mysteries and puzzles into learning and assessing curricular content. "Students accept the challenge. They seek out peers with the expertise they need. They create smart rubrics and use them to ask important questions. They explain themselves aloud, often discovering mistakes as they talk. This prepares them with practical skills for the 21st century," Start explains.

Lehigh Acres Middle School principal Neketa Watson adds, "Our students would say that learning



Students presented artifacts. Community members helped assess the projects using student-created rubrics.



tough topics is more fun and interesting now. Learning theory is difficult, but when you have a self-created artifact in your hand, explaining it is less abstract, and this enables students to make connections with the real world.” This new emphasis on student-led authentic assessment is highly valued by students. In fact, a student alumnus bemoaned, “Where was all this last year? How come we didn’t get to learn this way when I was here?”

Growth Mindset and Evaluation

While project rubrics and artifact investigations are best practices, sometimes paper-and-pencil tests are necessary. Learning objectives in schools must include understanding content knowledge and should include inspiring the mindsets that build lifelong learner dispositions. School policies on testing can allow for learning from mistakes so that assessment affects not only the immediate school experience but also learners’ attitudes about themselves and their failures.

Carlos Gramata, principal at Hillside Elementary School in Livingston, New Jersey, opines that if schools really embraced the growth mindset approach to learning, “we would change grading practices and never let children feel that they have

failed a math test. Letting students demonstrate what they have learned from getting wrong answers would bring the growth mindset into practice and policy.”

At Hillside, when students are not successful on a math test, they have an opportunity to retake it. The first step is the student’s authentic self-assessment, noting what went wrong. “Was it procedural? Did they read the question wrong? Or was it a simple calculation problem that a review of the work process would fix? Then students can retake the test. Usually their analysis has solidified their understanding, and they really learn the material from reviewing their mistakes,” Gramata explains. “Parents, with explanation, are supportive. Especially when we emphasize that our overall goal is for students to be great self-assessors who take responsibility for their learning,” he adds.

Tryday: Give It a Try!

Implementing authentic assessment is hard work and “never goes the way you think it will. It seems to never end as learning spirals toward growing interests. But I can’t think of any teacher who wouldn’t do it again!” exclaims Sobin. Taylor-Logan echoes this sentiment: “We all live with standardized tests, but we can’t let the tail wag the dog. In Colorado,

teachers are assessed according to a state teacher rubric, and my teachers are hitting it out of the park! And our students are so well-informed that they aced their standardized tests. Their success is rooted in our commitment to project-based learning and authentic assessment, which we know deepens understanding.”

School leaders know that any change can be challenging. At the outset, some teachers need an on-ramp to gain experience. At Eva Wolf Elementary School in Las Vegas, some teachers had difficulty integrating creativity into daily learning activities. As a simple, shared experience, the entire school turned Friday into “Tryday.”

On this day, teachers incorporate new arts-integrated strategies across content areas. They rely on the suggestions and support from the school’s Creative Leadership Team, a group of teacher leaders who share ideas during staff meetings and provide professional development and coaching to colleagues. Once teachers witnessed students’ increased motivation, reduced behavior issues, and deeper learning, they were eager to weave arts integration and authentic assessment into daily learning experiences. 🌊

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Tips for Using Authentic Assessment:

- Focus on student needs during assessment design and decision-making. Ask students and families for input throughout the process.
- Make a long-term commitment to shift toward authentic assessment. Change is slow when it runs deep. Provide professional development and highlight promising practices from your school and others.
- Plan rigorous projects that are relevant and provide students with agency over what and how they create.
- Develop the authentic assessment plans and rubrics at the outset. Honor artifacts and performances as genuine opportunities to see what students know and can do.
- Celebrate successes. Challenge yourselves to achieve greatness.