

# Authentic Assessment Toolbox

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## Definitions

A form of assessment in which students are asked to perform real-world tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills -- Jon Mueller

"...Engaging and worthy problems or questions of importance, in which students must use knowledge to fashion performances effectively and creatively. The tasks are either replicas of or analogous to the kinds of problems faced by adult citizens and consumers or professionals in the field." -- Grant Wiggins -- (**Wiggins, 1993, p. 229**).

"Performance assessments call upon the examinee to demonstrate specific skills and competencies, that is, to apply the skills and knowledge they have mastered." -- Richard J. Stiggins -- (**Stiggins, 1987, p. 34**).

## What does Authentic Assessment look like?

An authentic assessment usually includes a task for students to perform and a rubric by which their performance on the task will be evaluated. Click the following links to see many examples of authentic tasks and rubrics.

- **Examples** from teachers in my Authentic Assessment course

## How is Authentic Assessment similar to/different from Traditional Assessment?

The following comparison is somewhat simplistic, but I hope it illuminates the different assumptions of the two approaches to assessment.

### Traditional Assessment

By "traditional assessment" (TA) I am referring to the forced-choice measures of multiple-choice tests, fill-in-the-blanks, true-false, matching and the like that have been and remain so common in education. Students typically select an answer or recall information to complete the assessment. These tests may be standardized or teacher-created. They may be administered

locally or statewide, or internationally.

Behind traditional and authentic assessments is a belief that the primary mission of schools is to help develop productive citizens. That is the essence of most mission statements I have read. From this common beginning, the two perspectives on assessment diverge. Essentially, TA is grounded in educational philosophy that adopts the following reasoning and practice:

1. A school's mission is to develop productive citizens.
2. To be a productive citizen an individual must possess a certain body of knowledge and skills.
3. Therefore, schools must teach this body of knowledge and skills.
4. To determine if it is successful, the school must then test students to see if they acquired the knowledge and skills.

In the TA model, the curriculum drives assessment. "The" body of knowledge is determined first. That knowledge becomes the curriculum that is delivered. Subsequently, the assessments are developed and administered to determine if acquisition of the curriculum occurred.

### Authentic Assessment

In contrast, authentic assessment (AA) springs from the following reasoning and practice:

1. A school's mission is to develop productive citizens.
2. To be a productive citizen, an individual must be capable of performing meaningful tasks in the real world.
3. Therefore, schools must help students become proficient at performing the tasks they will encounter when they graduate.
4. To determine if it is successful, the school must then ask students to perform meaningful tasks that replicate real world challenges to see if students are capable of doing so.

Thus, in AA, assessment drives the curriculum. That is, teachers first determine the tasks that students will perform to demonstrate their mastery, and then a curriculum is developed that will enable students to perform those tasks well, which would include the acquisition of essential knowledge and skills. This has been referred to as *planning backwards* (e.g., **McDonald, 1992**).

If I were a golf instructor and I taught the skills required to perform well, I would not assess my students' performance by giving them a multiple choice test. I would put them out on the golf course and ask them to perform. Although this is obvious with athletic skills, it is also true for academic subjects. We can teach students how to *do* math, *do* history and *do* science, not just *know* them. Then, to assess what our students had learned, we can ask students to perform tasks that "replicate the challenges" faced by those using mathematics, doing history or conducting scientific investigation.

### Authentic Assessment Complements Traditional Assessment

But a teacher does not have to choose between AA and TA. It is likely that some mix of the two will best meet your needs. To use a silly example, if I had to choose a chauffeur from between someone who passed the *driving* portion of the driver's license test but failed the *written* portion or someone who failed the driving portion and passed the written portion, I would choose the driver who most directly demonstrated the ability to drive, that is, the one who passed the driving portion of the test. However, I would *prefer* a driver who passed both portions. I would feel more comfortable knowing that my chauffeur had a good knowledge base about driving (which might best be assessed in a traditional manner) and was able to apply that knowledge in a real context (which could be demonstrated through an authentic assessment).

### Defining Attributes of Traditional and Authentic Assessment

Another way that AA is commonly distinguished from TA is in terms of its defining attributes. Of course, TA's as well as AA's vary considerably in the forms they take. But, typically, along the continuums of attributes listed below, TA's fall more towards the left end of each continuum and AA's fall more towards the right end.

Traditional -----	Authentic
Selecting a Response -----	Performing a Task
Contrived -----	Real-life
Recall/Recognition -----	Construction/Application
Teacher-structured -----	Student-structured
Indirect Evidence -----	Direct Evidence

Let me clarify the attributes by elaborating on each in the context of traditional and authentic assessments:


**Selecting a Response to Performing a Task:** On traditional assessments, students are typically given several choices (e.g., a,b,c or d; true or false; which of these match with those) and asked to select the right answer. In contrast, authentic assessments ask students to demonstrate understanding by performing a more complex task usually representative of more meaningful application.

**Contrived to Real-life:** It is not very often in life outside of school that we are asked to select from four alternatives to indicate our proficiency at something. Tests offer these contrived means of assessment to increase the number of times you can be asked to demonstrate proficiency in a short period of time. More commonly in life, as in authentic assessments, we are asked to demonstrate proficiency by doing something.

**Recall/Recognition of Knowledge to Construction/Application of Knowledge:** Well-designed traditional assessments (i.e., tests and quizzes) can effectively determine whether or not students have acquired a body of knowledge. Thus, as mentioned above, tests can serve as a nice complement to authentic assessments in a teacher's assessment portfolio. Furthermore, we *are* often asked to recall or recognize facts and ideas and propositions in life, so tests are somewhat authentic in that sense. However, the demonstration of recall and recognition on tests is typically much less revealing about what we really know and can do than when we are asked to construct a product or performance out of facts, ideas and propositions. Authentic assessments often ask students to analyze, synthesize and apply what they have learned in a substantial manner, and students create new meaning in the process as well.

**Teacher-structured to Student-structured:** When completing a traditional assessment, what a student can and will demonstrate has been carefully structured by the person(s) who developed the test. A student's attention will understandably be focused on and limited to what is on the test. In contrast, authentic assessments allow more student choice and construction in determining what is presented as evidence of proficiency. Even when students cannot choose

their own topics or formats, there are usually multiple acceptable routes towards constructing a product or performance. Obviously, assessments more carefully controlled by the teachers offer advantages and disadvantages. Similarly, more student-structured tasks have strengths and weaknesses that must be considered when choosing and designing an assessment.

**Indirect Evidence to Direct Evidence:** Even if a multiple-choice question asks a student to analyze or apply facts to a new situation rather than just recall the facts, and the student selects the correct answer, what do you now know about that student? Did that student get lucky and pick the right answer? What thinking led the student to pick that answer? We really do not know. At best, we can make some inferences about what that student might know and might be able to do with that knowledge. The evidence is very indirect, particularly for claims of meaningful application in complex, real-world situations. Authentic assessments, on the other hand, offer more direct evidence of application and construction of knowledge. As in the golf example above, putting a golf student on the golf course to play provides much more direct evidence of proficiency than giving the student a written test. Can a student effectively critique the arguments someone else has presented (an important skill often required in the real world)? Asking a student to write a critique should provide more direct evidence of that skill than asking the student a series of multiple-choice, analytical questions about a passage, although both assessments may be useful. 

### Teaching to the Test

These two different approaches to assessment also offer different advice about teaching to the test. Under the TA model, teachers have been discouraged from teaching to the test. That is because a test usually assesses a sample of students' knowledge and understanding and assumes that students' performance on the sample is representative of their knowledge of all the relevant material. If teachers focus primarily on the sample to be tested during instruction, then good performance on that sample does not necessarily reflect knowledge of all the material. So, teachers hide the test so that the sample is not known beforehand, and teachers are admonished not to teach to the test.

With AA, teachers are *encouraged* to teach to the test. Students need to learn how to perform well on meaningful tasks. To aid students in that process, it is helpful to show them models of good (and not so good) performance. Furthermore, the student benefits from seeing the task rubric ahead of time as well. Is this "cheating"? Will students then just be able to mimic the work of others without truly understanding what they are doing? Authentic assessments typically do not lend themselves to mimicry. There is not one correct answer to copy. So, by knowing what good performance looks like, and by knowing what specific characteristics make up good performance, students can better develop the skills and understanding necessary to perform well on these tasks. (For further discussion of teaching to the test, see [Bushweller](#).)

### Alternative Names for Authentic Assessment

You can also learn something about what AA is by looking at the other common names for this form of assessment. For example, AA is sometimes referred to as

- **Performance Assessment** (or Performance-based) -- so-called because students are asked to *perform* meaningful tasks. This is the other most common term for this type of assessment. Some educators distinguish performance assessment from AA by defining performance assessment as performance-based as Stiggins has above but with no reference to the *authentic* nature of the task (e.g., [Meyer, 1992](#)). For these educators, authentic assessments are performance assessments using real-world or authentic tasks or contexts. Since we should not typically ask students to perform work that is not authentic in nature, I choose to treat these two terms synonymously.
- **Alternative Assessment** -- so-called because AA is an *alternative* to traditional assessments.
- **Direct Assessment** -- so-called because AA provides more *direct* evidence of meaningful application of knowledge and skills. If a student does well on a multiple-choice test we might infer *indirectly* that the student could apply that knowledge in real-world contexts, but we would be more comfortable making that inference from a direct demonstration of that application such as in the golfing example above.

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