

## The Power of Performance Assessment

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### Performance Assessment and Student Learning

With advancements in educational technology and the desire to measure higher-order thinking skills, it is no longer sufficient for students to complete only traditional multiple-choice tests. Selected-response tests often favor lower-order recall and thinking skills over complex and higher-order skills (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2014). With only multiple-choice tests, it is difficult to truly understand what a student is thinking, planning, and reasoning without observing evidence of their skills and abilities. **Performance assessment technology can empower districts to gain deeper insights into student learning that were previously unattainable.**

### Diverse Districts with Common Goals

School districts across the country all aspire to touch the life of every student by meeting them where they are and empowering them on a path to success. As students matriculate, content can become more complex, and the very nature of performance assessment can appear challenging to execute as part of daily instruction. The school schedule may limit teacher access to useful data that informs instruction. The schedule may also limit opportunities to give crucial feedback to students in a timely, consistent manner.

Shrinking budgets and competing priorities compound the issue. Districts may default to multiple-choice assessments alone because of the perceived efficiencies in scoring and recording results. Many education leaders agree that performance assessment is a viable, rigorous, and instructionally beneficial

method for assessing student knowledge, skills, and abilities in classroom contexts. **This paper will examine the background, research, and practical applications of performance assessment to better understand its benefits in the classroom.**

### What is Performance Assessment in an Educational Context?

Performance assessment measures student learning in an authentic and actionable way. Skills demonstrated on a performance assessment are reflective of actual skills learned in the classroom. Assessments allow students to demonstrate their knowledge, using processes and methods that are congruent with skills they use every day. Assessments can serve in both formative and summative contexts to support student success (Hofman, 2015). Students can show what they know, and educators can see rich evidence of student learning.

**Performance assessment is especially useful in areas where students can showcase their ability to synthesize, create, and problem-solve.** While all subject areas are suited for performance assessment, subjects that lend themselves particularly well include English Language Arts, Math, Science, Foreign Languages, Music, Arts, Engineering, and Career and Technical Education classes.

Performance assessments are particularly useful to support student learning when embedded into the curriculum (Hofman, 2015). **Embedding performance assessments directly into the curriculum allows for streamlined teaching, instruction, and assessment without intruding on classroom time.**

Embedded performance assessment also supports good instruction, and research suggests the format of assessment impacts instructional approaches:

- A test with multiple-choice items leads to instruction that uses multiple-choice for learning,
- A test with performance assessment leads to more project-based or open-ended work products. (Stecher, 2014).

When teachers use open-ended, problem-based, and project-based approaches to learning, they prepare students to successfully complete a performance assessment. With new technologies, performance assessments are a more realistic option for all educators to leverage, as part of their instructional strategy on a more regular basis.

## How do performance assessments differ from traditional assessments?

Traditional assessments such as multiple-choice assessments, when used as the only type of assessment have limitations for student assessment. Performance assessment allows for the demonstration of skill, while traditional assessment may be limited to demonstration of knowledge only. Additionally, performance assessment removes the chance of getting the right answer through guessing alone. The probability of correctly guessing the answer to a multiple-choice item with four choices is 25%. A student may not know the concept but can still get the item correct. Performance assessment allows for students to answer correctly, not because they guess, but because they confidently know the content.

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Performance assessment is different from traditional assessment because it gives students freedom to show their knowledge in ways that traditional assessments cannot. In performance assessments, students are given a problem to solve, a prompt to respond to, or a task to complete. For instance, a prompt might ask students to write a persuasive essay that requires a student to take a stand and back up their point with well-reasoned arguments. Students can respond using their own insights and ideas. Performance assessments are structured in a way encourages deeper engagement by eliciting elaboration, questioning, synthesis, and justification.

Many districts are moving toward standards-based grading and performance assessments. Performance assessments make it possible to evaluate standards that have traditionally been difficult to assess with only multiple-choice assessments. Hence, tasks are being incorporated more frequently into assessments.

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A performance assessment uses either an analytic or a holistic rubric to rate student responses. Traditional assessments typically assign points based on right or wrong answers. Performance assessments—and specifically analytic rubrics—allow for partial credit scores and for ratings to be assigned along a scale, not just based on a right or wrong answer.

**Analytic rubrics can highlight specific strengths and areas for growth along a continuum; they are highly supportive of learning and growth within a formative assessment program.** Analytic rubrics divide a content area into domains for assessment. Each domain is scored independently of the others. One analytic rubric for a writing assessment may have six domains, thus creating a more comprehensive view of students' understanding.

When well-designed and conducted as part of a larger assessment, performance assessment promotes a high-level of objectivity, fairness, and equity. Unconscious bias can be removed from the rating process when more than one rater participates in scoring. One teacher may hold unconscious bias about a student or group of students—such as that girls are better writers than boys. If this bias is unconscious, the teacher is likely unaware that their marking could unfairly advantage female students and disadvantage male students.

When a second rater is used in the performance assessment scoring process, a second evaluation can be used as an objective counterbalance; it can illuminate areas of bias for the teacher and safeguard fair scoring for the student. Two teachers reviewing each student response ensures students are evaluated on their actual abilities, not on characteristics, such as gender, race, or ethnicity; scores are based on achievement alone.



## Key Advantages to Performance Assessment:

- Better measure of complex and higher-order skills
- Measures student learning in an authentic and actionable way
- Encourages deeper student engagement
- Create a more comprehensive view of students' understanding.
- Enables students to transfer knowledge and skills to real-world situations
- Fosters professional development opportunities for teachers and staff



Deeper Student Engagement



More Comprehensive Measurement



Meaningful, Authentic Results

## What Does the Research Say About Performance Assessments?

When implemented thoughtfully, performance assessment can yield trustworthy validity and reliability evidence of student learning (Lane & Stone, 2006). Because so many subject areas lend themselves to performance assessment, the assessments can yield evidence of greater construct validity.

- **In a writing test, a student can construct a response rather than select a correct answer.**
- **In a science assessment, students can submit parts of a lab report or science experiment for review.**
- **In an art assessment, students can submit an actual drawing that showcases shading techniques rather than just recall techniques in a multiple-choice format.**

Each of these work products allow for more authentic construct validity compared to a selected response test where the correct answer is merely identified (Brookhart & Nitko, 2018).

Modern learning theories that promote inquiry and construction of knowledge are well aligned with performance assessment methods (Brookhart, 2018). A skilled teacher can create a learning experience where students build their own knowledge and can transfer that knowledge to novel situations. A well-designed performance assessment enables students to transfer their knowledge and skills to real-world situations. Performance tasks are simply better suited than traditional multiple-choice to measure the complexities of contemporary knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Besides aligning with contemporary education methods, performance assessments promote student motivation. When students get to choose what response they reply to, they can select how they present their work, the arguments they wish to

make, and the facts they call upon to back up their points. The ability to exercise some creative and intellectual control over the outcome can help increase engagement and motivation during the assessment.

## How does performance assessment best support instruction?

There is little question that performance assessment will give all students a more personalized voice in the classroom. Feedback from performance assessment also empowers students to grow from where they are to where they aim to be. Feedback is the most impactful influence on student learning outcomes (Hattie & Timperly, 2007).

Performance assessment helps students and teachers answer the important questions in learning (Hattie & Timperly, 2007):

- What goals am I working toward?
- How am I progressing?
- What are the greater possibilities for learning?

The feedback from performance assessments—especially those used for formative purposes—surpasses the feedback one can get from multiple-choice items that rely on recall. **The feedback from performance assessments help students understand where they are academically, and next skills they need for growth.**

Performance assessment within the instructional process has advantages for teachers. Preparing for performance assessments could be more professionally fulfilling for educators, because best practices they use in their classroom instruction align with best practices in assessment. Teachers benefit from designing performance assessments, evaluating and rating responses, and reviewing assessment results. Review of student work is shown



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to be a valuable method to support teacher professional learning and school improvement initiatives (Little, et al., 2003). When teachers collaborate around the task of analyzing student work, the practice—in and of itself—becomes highly student centered. When teachers work together to uncover differentiators of “good” work from “advanced” work and compare responses to agreed upon exemplars, new insights about the teaching and learning process emerge. Furthermore, educator participation in performance assessment fosters professional learning communities and calibrates high expectations among teachers.

## The Future of Performance Assessment

The benefits of performance assessment can yield breakthroughs in student learning. By aligning classroom best practices with assessment methodology, empowering students with choice, and creating motivating assessments for student, districts may realize new frontiers in student achievement. While this type of transformation doesn't occur over night, each step toward a comprehensive assessment program is progress.

*MZD's innovative platforms combine the advantages of a robust and easy-to-use scoring platform with evidence-backed learning and assessment practices.*

New technologies by MZD offer groundbreaking solutions never before available to districts. MZD's innovative platforms combine the advantages of a robust and easy-to-use scoring platform with evidence-backed learning and assessment practices. The ability to design and flawlessly execute common performance assessments is finally here..

## References

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## More About MZD, Inc.

MZD, Inc. was founded in 2015 in Iowa by a group of individuals who collectively have over 75 years of experience in the online assessment and performance scoring industry. MZD is focused on a single mission: delivering solutions that make performance assessments a reality for organizations of all sizes. The first product, OSCAR, was launched in 2015 and is currently in use with leading districts and test assessment organizations throughout the country. In 2018 OSCAR won the Audience Success Award at the 2018 ATP Conference's Innovation Lab. Since then, MZD has expanded its product suite with ADAM™, an assessment authoring, delivery, and management platform, and OSCAR Classroom™, a collaborative teacher-based performance assessment management platform. More information can be found at <https://mzdevinc.com>.

Districts and organizations interested in MZD and its innovative assessment platforms can email [contact@mzdevinc.com](mailto:contact@mzdevinc.com) or call 319-855-7694.