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ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Performance Tasks or Projects? Complementary Approaches for Student Engagement

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Abstract
Performance Task—or Project?
Eight Dimensions for Profiling "Performance Tasks" and "Projects"
Qualities of Effective Performance Tasks and Projects
The Stepping Stones Students Need

Though they aren't created equal, both experiences can result in meaningful learning.

Abstract ·

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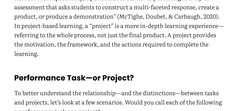

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The terms "performance tasks" and "projects," in the context of project-based learning (PBL), are familiar to today's educators. Like fraternal siblings, they share many common qualities, yet they are not identical twins. Eight key dimensions can help underscore the differences and similarities between performance tasks and projects, so educators know how to use each of them appropriately. We believe that shorter, more structured performance tasks can naturally serve as stepping stones to more comprehensive project-based learning.

In essence, a performance task asks students to apply their learning in some fashion. More specifically, a performance task is "any learning activity or assessment that asks students to construct a multi-faceted response, create a product, or produce a demonstration" (McTighe, Doubet, & Carbaugh, 2020). In project-based learning, a "project" is a more in-depth learning experience—referring to the whole process, not just the final product. A project provides the motivation, the framework, and the actions required to complete the learning.

Performance Task—or Project?

To better understand the relationship—and the distinctions—between tasks and projects, let's look at a few scenarios. Would you call each of the following a performance task or a project?

- Students play the role of community garden planners in a city. They calculate lot and plot sizes and amounts of soil needed, create a site map, and consider water and fertilizer needs for various plants that could be grown. They create a flyer and a presentation that would be appropriate for an audience of community members. (Source: Defined Learning)
- Students read three fairy tales that all have the same general pattern. They are asked to write a story that includes all the characteristics, and general pattern, of a fairy tale. They then read their story to a kindergarten reading buddy and teach him/her about the characteristics and general pattern of a fairy tale. (Source: Marzano, Pickering, & McTighe, 1993)
- Students act as a consumer advocate researchers who have been asked to evaluate the claim by the Pooper Scooper Kitty Litter Company that their litter is 40 percent more absorbent than other brands. Students develop a plan for conducting the investigation that must be specific enough so that the lab investigators could follow it to evaluate the claim. (Source: McTighe, 2021)

The correct answer for each scenario isn't always obvious. Rather than trying to pigeonhole any example into an either-or category, we propose that performance tasks and projects can be more fruitfully examined according to a set of dimensions along a continuum (McTighe, Doubet, & Carbaugh, 2020). Then, we can profile any performance task or project according to where it falls along the scale of the dimensions.

Eight Dimensions for Profiling "Performance Tasks" and "Projects"

1. Time Frame: *How long will students be involved in this task or project (including time for presentations and evaluations)?*

> 2-4 class periods
>
> 5-10 class periods
>
> More than 2 weeks

Generally speaking, a performance task is of shorter duration and less complex than a project. However, tasks and projects may not always be too far apart. For example, some performance tasks may take several days, and some projects may take two weeks.

2. Degree of Authenticity: *To what extent is the task authentic (realistic challenge or issue; genuine product/performance; authentic audience; real-world constraints)?*

> Inauthentic/decontextualized
>
> Simulates an authentic context
>
> Totally authentic

Performance tasks may involve "higher-order" thinking and transfer application, yet not be particularly authentic to the world beyond the classroom. Often, performance tasks *simulate* an authentic context in that they set up a realistic situation, role, and/or audience. Some PBL projects may also be simulations, but most tend to be more authentic as students tackle genuine issues and produce authentic products/performances for a real audience.

3. Integration of Subjects: *To what extent is the task interdisciplinary?*

> Single discipline
>
> Integrates two subject
>
> Multi-disciplinary

Performance tasks are often focused on a single subject, although tasks in science and social studies often include a "communications" component (e.g., written, oral, multimedia, or visual), and thus may be considered interdisciplinary. Since project-based learning typically focuses on authentic issues, it is far more likely that projects will involve multiple disciplines.

4. Direction: *Who will direct the task or project?*

> Teacher directed
>
> Teachers with some student self-direction
>
> Student directed

A typical performance task specifies exactly what students need to do. Even "open-ended" tasks are nonetheless directed, and the students simply respond to a prompt. Project-based learning, on the other hand, often requires students to direct some (or most) of the project. Students may be the ones to identify a need, an issue, or a problem that serves as the launchpad for the project.

5. Extent of Teacher Support: *To what extent will students receive support from a teacher?*

> No support
>
> Some support
>
> Extensive support

Performance tasks may be used for assessment purposes, in which case the teacher is not supposed to provide support other than orienting students. Performance tasks may also be used for instructional purposes, in which case teachers may provide some support, in the form of monitoring, feedback, and facilitation. This is true for some types of independent student projects, too. For a more complex performance task and often in PBL, students may receive extensive support from the teacher, such as team formation and management, coaching the inquiry process, conducting lessons and activities, providing resources, and offering ongoing feedback via formative assessments.

6. Student Choice: *To what extent will students have choices regarding any of the following (no choice, some choices, extensive choices)?*

> Task topic, problem, issue
>
> Product(s)/performance(s)
>
> Audience(s)
>
> How and with whom they work

Some performance tasks simply specify what students need to do without allowing any choice, whereas others will include opportunities for students to choose things like the target audience or final product. Projects tend to be more open-ended and longer-term, thus enabling more choices along the way in addition to the final product(s)/ performance(s).

7. Performance Mode: *How will students work?*

> Individually
>
> Some group & some individual work
>
> All work done collaboratively

Performance tasks are often presented as assignments or assessments intended for individual students. However, some tasks may include a component in which students work with a partner or small group. It is much more likely that projects will require teamwork, and that the students will be assessed on how well they work in groups, in addition to being evaluated on the quality of their culminating product(s) or performance(s).

8. Evaluation of Student Product(s)/Performance(s): *Who will be involved in evaluating student products and performances?*

> Classroom teacher only
>
> Team of teachers
>
> External evaluators/experts

When performance tasks are used for assessment, the classroom teacher generally evaluates the students' performances based on a set of criteria or scoring rubric(s). On occasion, a team of teachers will work together (e.g., in a professional learning community) to evaluate students' performance on a common task. In contrast, one of the hallmarks of PBL is that students are often evaluated by others, such as fellow students, community members, and/or by a panel of adults that may include experts in the field.

Qualities of Effective Performance Tasks and Projects

Regardless of where they fall along the continua, quality tasks and projects need to meet certain qualities to make sure that the juice is worth the squeeze. Figure 1 presents criteria for a well-designed performance task (McTighe, 2020), and Figure 2 lists the six attributes that students should experience in a quality PBL project (**Framework for High-Quality Project Based Learning**). You'll notice similarities.

TIP

TIP

The Stepping Stones Students Need

Let's return to the rhetorical question: Is this a *performance* task or *project*? Indeed, there are often shades of grey along the eight dimensions' continuums, and there is no "right" answer to where a task or project should fall. The choices suggested by the eight dimensions should take into account other considerations, including:

- The learning goals—content standards in academic disciplines, competencies identified in a Profile of a Graduate, habits of mind found in a mission statement.
- Age and experience of the learners.
- Organizational factors—available time, schedules for both students and teachers, availability of resources.
- The experience levels of teachers in facilitating tasks and PBL.

A jump into full-blown project-based learning may be challenging in the beginning. It takes time for teachers to develop the skill sets needed to facilitate long-term, student-centered projects. Similarly, students need instruction, guidance, and opportunities to develop the skills and dispositions necessary for effective project implementation. Thus, starting with shorter and more structured performance tasks can serve as natural stepping stones, making the leap to PBL more accessible and effective. Regardless of where a task or project falls on the various dimensions, both serve as vehicles for actively engaging learners in relevant applications leading to deeper learning.

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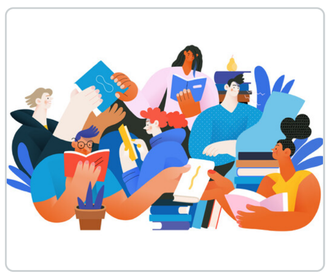

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