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CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Assessing Students, Not Standards*.

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MANY WAYS TO SHOW LEARNING

Giving students choices in how they show their learning is a matter of equity and validity.



Learning Intentions	Success Criteria
I'm learning about the distinction between tasks and skills and understandings.	I can differentiate between tasks and skills and understandings in the context of teaching and learning.
	I can argue the importance of focusing on skills and understanding instead of tasks.

Source for bullseye icon: [istock.com/Fourleaflover](https://www.istock.com/Fourleaflover)

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Learning Intensions	Success Criteria
I'm learning about the concept and implications of threats to validity in assessments.	I can describe how identified threats to validity can act as barriers for students during assessments.
	I can identify potential threats to validity in my assessments.
I'm learning about the diverse methods students can use to express their skills or understanding.	I can explain the importance of providing multiple options for students to express their understanding or skills.
	I can map a skill or understanding from a standard to multiple tasks that allow students to showcase their learning.

WHAT WE ASSESS VERSUS HOW WE ASSESS IT

When I first started out as a teacher, I spent a great deal of time using standardized instruments to assess the developmental progress of young children with developmental delays. An instrument I used countless times was the Battelle Developmental Inventory, and one of the tasks on this assessment involved prompting the child to stack nine small cubes into a coffee cup. But stacking blue wooden blocks isn't particularly engaging, and even with my best efforts, some children simply weren't having it. I hadn't tricked them into thinking this was fun, and we all know that if a young human has made up their mind not to stack the blocks, it's all over.

Did this unwillingness to play my game mean the child didn't have the skills I was trying to see with the blocks? Of course not. In reality, I didn't know if they did or didn't have the skills. But if I kept observing the children as they went about their usual play, I could see how they interacted with other toys and objects and look for evidence of the

same skills. I could watch how they put together a puzzle, built with different blocks, and held a crayon.

The lesson here is that the task of stacking blocks wasn't all that important—it was only *how* we assessed the skills. In fact, you can go your whole life without ever stacking blue wooden cubes in a coffee cup and be just fine. And unless you were a teacher administering the test, you probably haven't.

So why did we use this test item? Well, it was a way to check the child's skills—the *what* of our assessment. By observing how they picked up and manipulated the blocks, we could tell what type of grasp they were using, whether they had strong spatial matching skills, and, most importantly, whether they were willing to persist through a challenging task. These skills, the *what*, are what matter most. The activity? Well, that was just the *how*. And there are a whole lot of ways to measure the *what*.

Understanding how to separate *what* we assess from *how* we assess is necessary for accessibility, equity, and even measurement validity. Let's take these one at a time, but first, I have an exercise for you. This is much more meaningful when it happens with a group, but you can go through the exercise by yourself.



ACTION







How I Show My Learning Best

Everyone reading this book has an area of expertise. Even if you are a brand-new teacher, you have expertise. In fact, new teachers have the most current training! And those of you who have been teaching for decades clearly have deep expertise from your experience as well. From this area of expertise, identify a skill or understanding you could teach to adults.

Now, I'm going to give you six options for how you could teach that group of adults. Think about each of these and ask yourself two questions: If I did it this way, would I be able to show what I know well? Put a checkmark next to those. Next, ask yourself which, if any, would be a disaster for you. Are there any that would cause you not to do well at all? Put an X by those. When you finish, if you're working with a group, compare your answers to the other people in the group.

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<input type="checkbox"/>		Take a multiple-choice test.
<input type="checkbox"/>		Record a presentation in a TV studio.
<input type="checkbox"/>		Present a TED talk to 5,000 people.
<input type="checkbox"/>		Publish a book or journal article.
<input type="checkbox"/>		Present a webinar using Zoom.
<input type="checkbox"/>		Dialogue informally with a small group.

When I do this as an activity with large groups of teachers, I notice four patterns every time:

1. No one way works best for everyone.
2. No one way is the worst for everyone.
3. Informal conversation is really popular.
4. Lots of people say that a test would be the worst.

During the activity, you probably identified one or two methods for showing your expertise that may not work for you. It may be that if you were on stage in front of 5,000 people, you'd be totally paralyzed with stage fright. (For most of us, this one is a no-go.) Would your poor performance mean that you were less of an expert? Of course not! You still have the same expertise, no matter what situation you're in. It's just that if I were to assess your knowledge by having you deliver a televised presentation, and you do terribly, then that wasn't a good assessment for you—it wasn't valid for you. But every time I ask the question about large-group speaking, a few hands go up, usually the assistant principals, ready to deliver a TED Talk. For those outliers, speaking on stage in front of thousands would be no problem. For them, that method is a valid assessment of what they know.

Essentially, validity in assessment is the extent to which you assessed what you were trying to assess (American Educational Research Association [AERA], American Psychological Association [APA], & National Council on Measurement in Education [NCME], 2014). Obviously, we all want assessments that measure the skills and understandings we teach. What's the point, otherwise? Yet every day, in most every school, there's a lot of effort put into assessing learning in ways that simply aren't valid.



FROM THE CLASSROOM

Mrs. Gupta's Science Class

Mrs. Gupta, a seventh-grade science teacher, wanted to assess her student's ability to design a scientific experiment. She decided to give students a real-world scenario to test their skills. She presented a problem in which a local farmer was trying to find the best fertilizer for his crops. The students had to design an experiment to test the different types and measure their effects on plant growth.

One student, Eemeli, approached the problem by researching the different types of fertilizers available and their effects on plant growth. He then designed an experiment in which he tested three different types of fertilizers on three identical plants and measured their growth over a period of 4 weeks. He carefully documented each step of the experiment in a lab report, including the materials used and the data collected.

Another student, Michael, took a different approach. He decided to test the effects of different amounts of fertilizer on plant growth. He designed an experiment in which he used the same type of fertilizer but varied the amount used on each plant. He also documented his experiment in a lab report and included a graph to show the correlation between the amount of fertilizer used and plant growth.

To assess their learning, Mrs. Gupta had the students present their designs to the class. Each student explained their experiment and the results they obtained. The class then discussed the strengths and weaknesses of each design and how they could improve them. Through this assessment, Mrs. Gupta was able to measure her students' ability to design a scientific experiment and gather data to support their hypotheses.

This seems like a fine assessment, right? The students all apply their skills in designing an experiment to a real problem and then present

their designs. But was Mrs. Gupta *really* able to measure these abilities? Was this a valid assessment? Well, that depends.

These patterns we saw in the last activity are true for kids, too. They're no different from us—they're just younger and less experienced in showing their learning. For some students, speaking in front of the class feels like the pressure of a TED talk. If a student does poorly, this could be because they lack skills in designing experiments, or it could be because the fear of presenting got the best of them. *What* we assess and *how* we assess it are two different matters. We don't want the way our classroom assessments are constructed to get in the way of *what* we are measuring.



PERSONAL REFLECTION

The Understanding vs. The Task

Reflect on Mrs. Gupta's science class. Her aim for assessment (the *what*) was to evaluate students' ability to apply their understanding of designing an experiment. The task she gave students (the *how*) was to present their designs to the class. For an upcoming unit, what skill or understanding will you be teaching (the *what*)? What is the specific task you normally use to assess this (the *how*)?

What I'm going to teach:

How I usually assess this:
