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[Newsletter](#)
[About Us](#)
[Home](#)

About Teaching Topics - Feature Article

[Topics](#)
[Feature Article](#)
[World Languages Teaching](#)
[Learner Diversity](#)
[Teacher Education and Certification](#)
[Language Learning Strategies](#)
[Assessment](#)
[Language Policy](#)
[Critical Languages](#)
[Reports and Publications](#)
[Institutes Highlights](#)
[Podcasts and Training Materials](#)
[Back to Newsletter](#)

Feature Article - May 2007

Unpacking the Standards: informing instruction through performance assessment

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What are key indicators of true performance and success in a language? Are real life situations always predictable? What do your assessment tasks ask students to do? Do your students forget, misunderstand concepts, or only can use material the way it was taught? Are you mired in the minutiae of a coverage driven curriculum? How do you know when a student really understands? What contexts will students likely encounter in a given culture and how will they respond given the practices and perspectives of that culture? How do you plan for instruction when the goal is performance?

These questions speak directly to what our National Standards imply for curriculum and assessment design. The Standards set the stage for language learning that goes beyond mastering language codes and lists of vocabulary in isolation; they signaled a paradigm shift in our field from reciting mechanized responses to emphasis on meaningful communication, authentic real life contexts, and cultural understanding. Individual states have further interpreted the Standards to include recursive unit themes and functions at benchmark levels (New York State, 1986).

In our experiences across the lifespan, issues reprise and resurface. We spiral concepts, skills, and lessons learned, applying them to different contexts and situations with flexibility and adjustment (Eddy, 2007c). We generally remember learning experiences when we know what the goal is and what the end product should look like, especially when we are given multiple opportunities to refine, check, and fine tune through quality feedback. We also remember more when we are engaged in hands-on, real life application. Because contexts and variables do change in real life, we need to demonstrate flexibility to adapt to these changes, and apply what we know to unanticipated situations on our own (Eddy, 2007a).

It is precisely this flexibility and high adaptability that is required when faced with new situations anywhere within a culture. Using a language appropriately in a given culture requires tolerance of new situations, dealing with incomplete information, and problem-solving with minimal or no cues all the time. (Eddy, 2006b) To understand a language and culture, one cannot rely on rules or a well rehearsed libretto (Eddy, 2007a). Rather, it is through exploration, true performance, and reflection via meaningful interaction. Tasks which echo these challenges will best prepare students for what people face using language outside the classroom. Performance assessment most closely resembles what the learner will be expected to do in real life as is appropriate to the culture.

The National Standards (National Standards in Foreign Language Education project, 1999/2006) or 5Cs are: Communication, Culture, Comparisons, Connections, and Communities. Our Standards can guide the teacher on curricular decisions and what performance assessment should look like. The Standards engage a shift to move the teacher from being a random activity planner to an assessor (Mc Tighe & Wiggins, 2004) for performance, constantly engaged in feedback with the learner. Many teachers still see instruction and assessment as separate and disconnected. Without a cultural anchor that could assign purpose and coherence to skills, they devote much time to predictable drill practice in isolation and random coverage rather than designing performance scenarios that demand flexibility and transfer of skills within a cultural context. This kind of assessment, albeit indicated in the Communication standard, is often misunderstood. What remains is the requisite paradigm shift from tests of rote memorization to assessments that require transfer of culturally embedded concepts and flexible application of a language repertoire for use in the real world. (Eddy, 2007a)

One possible tool to facilitate that shift is UC ADAPT (Eddy, 2004, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2007a, 2007b), a curricular design model that reveals cultural practices and perspectives within recurrent and reflective themes, using them as the purpose for performance assessment evidence and higher selectivity of knowledge and skills. The model addresses national standards and facilitates its performance based assessment system using a unique framework based on backward design (Mc Tighe & Wiggins, 2001/2005). UC ADAPT stands for Uncovering Content: Assessment Design Aligning Performance and Transfer. (Eddy, 2007a) UC ADAPT also speaks to a two-tier feedback system which helps teachers plan to adjust, continuously informing their practice through diverse assessment evidence and transparent criteria and strategies for continued progress to the learner. An articulated curriculum can explore these recursive themes that uncover cultural practices, perspectives, attitudes, and response (Eddy, 2007b). Inquiry on these topics can continue across the lifespan of the learner and be meaningful beyond the classroom.

UNCOVER THROUGH CULTURE

For the time being, set the Communication standard aside; we will get back to that later. That standard determines the mode of assessment and is the backbone of the assessment system. Let us turn to Culture and what the culture thinks, believes or says about a particular theme. What do you want learners to go away with and remember about the culture vis-à-vis the unit theme? How does your culture respond to ideas on family life, education, how it spends leisure time, or health? If that issue or theme had a moral, what would it be? Enduring Understandings are deliberately framed as the moral of the story. What would be a lesson learned regarding health care in the culture? Or what would you want your students to understand about how leisure time is spent in the culture. (Eddy, 2005) This design model uncovers content by unpacking the Culture standard first in Stage One, because cultural response to recurring themes drives the curriculum and gives purpose and coherence to knowledge and skills. UC ADAPT guides teachers in uncovering key concepts inherent to the culture studied, within themes that appear along the life-span of the people. Units are designed to explore how a culture responds to these themes. (Eddy, 2007b) Cultural practices, perspectives, and the products created by the culture are revealed as learners uncover the themes across levels in articulation, allowing for comparisons with their own cultures and application of interdisciplinary content to real life contexts encountered outside the classroom. From here, we develop Essential Questions that are at the heart of the culture, recur, and engage the learner in further inquiry. They are not meant to be answered in one class period but are large enough to be answered, revisited, and readdressed in greater depth and complexity as the learner's language develops over time. Once these are in place, you can design the performance assessment that will demonstrate learner understanding of these concepts.

COMMUNICATE FOR PERFORMANCE

What does true performance look like? Consider what happens anytime we communicate: Interactions are non-scripted, information has gaps. Materials are not filtered, arranged cleanly or adapted. People always must sift through anything they hear or see to get precisely what they need to solve a problem or create a product of any use (Eddy, 2007b; Gardner, 1983/1993). The Communication standard (Glisan, Adair-Hauk, Koda, Sandrock, & Swender, 2003; Adair-Hauk, et. al., 2006) determines the mode of assessment evidence, so we use that standard to design the performance assessment tasks in Stage

Two (Eddy, 2004) These three modes aid in the shift from rote memorization and four skills in isolation to authentic performance. Mirroring authentic communication, they form the context and purpose for putting the skills to actual use. Culturally authentic materials made by and for the culture provide context for Interpretive Mode task. Active negotiation of meaning and solving information gaps via spontaneous, unrehearsed tasks characterize the Interpersonal Mode. In the Presentational Mode, students have time to consult resources, develop, and present an oral or written piece that has value or use to a culture. The Performance Assessment within this standard provides the learner with evidence of what it means to have your abilities tested in situations they may encounter in the target culture. This kind of assessment will require the learner to take stock of what they know and are able to do, and use that repertoire appropriately in a given situation. This means that the learner understands that situations change and flexibility is essential. Their ability to transfer knowledge and skills to new contexts not previously encountered is a key indicator of success in using a language (Eddy, 2007a).

DESIGN FOR TRANSFER

Transfer occurs when your students apply knowledge and skills on their own in new contexts and situations that have purpose or intent in the culture. Tasks designed within the three Communicative modes assess for transfer. The Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA) (Adair-Hauck, B., et. al., 2006) is the ultimate demonstration of transfer, especially because the feedback loop moves the learner toward improved performance and closes the gap between assessment and instruction for the teacher. With alignment to transfer, instruction can make that paradigm shift to performance (Eddy, 2006d). Transfer tasks are those which ask you to process and use knowledge and skills in new, different or unanticipated situations or contexts from how they were originally taught. Transfer requires inference, critical thinking skills, and negotiation of meaning; not just amassing of facts and completing a drill (Eddy, 2006). Do your tasks assess for transfer or are they drills? Drills have their place, but they cannot be confused with performance. Nor do all the drills in the world combined indicate what is required in authentic performance. Without transfer, the language learner often forgets, misunderstands, or only knows it in the rigid, predictable context in which it was taught. Performance assessment design engages the learner in transfer tasks with less reliance on cues or repeated drill. They teach the learner to expect variation. The evidence of understanding in a language class is flexible transfer. Transfer depends upon recurrent ideas that connect otherwise isolated facts, skills, and experiences for the students. When the learner can take these skills and apply them flexibly in new situations on their own, this demonstrates the best evidence for understanding and is the best indicator of success in a language (Eddy, 2004).

INFORMING YOUR INSTRUCTION

After designing the assessments, you can make informed decisions now on the knowledge and skills most worthy and needed for the assessment and instruction. You can be much more selective on what is essential, pushing back from the heavy laden table of content in a coverage driven curriculum (Eddy, 2006c). Now you can carefully choose what students need to know, be able to do, and transfer. With the performance assessment tasks designed and that goal in mind, your instructional plans will mirror those tasks, selecting what is required for the performance. The standards of communities, comparisons, and connections describe the knowledge, skills, structures, vocabulary, and resources required for doing the assessment. These outline what students should be able to do in situations outside the classroom, in communicating with people of the culture, and in comparing discoveries within the language and culture with their own.

MAKING THE SHIFT HAPPEN

The Standards provide reasonable yet challenging expectations for students. They emphasize performance, requiring assessment and instruction to move as one rather than separate entities, from preparing students for predictable responses to a goal of authentic performance. This model enables this paradigm shift, addressing those and other coverage issues that are the bane of activity driven curricula and repetitive item testing. Grammar and vocabulary are there, but they are carefully chosen to support the learner for a larger concept that assigns purpose and reason for the skills. Teachers can be more selective of the skills required for their assessments and plan instruction more mindfully, thus reducing the amount of unrelated material. In this model, the culture's story unfolds between grades and levels. As the learner develops in the language over time, essential questions about that culture continue to be answered. The National Standards are integrated goals that entail moving away from rote memorization of forms in isolation of context and toward flexible communication with other people in a variety of contexts and content areas with an understanding of other cultures. These goals surpass past practices in language teaching of mastering codes or linguistic systems and move the learner toward using the language in real life contexts within the culture. The model UC ADAPT offers teachers Standards based design tools to plan curriculum, assess for transfer, and inform future practice.

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Dr. Eddy will be presenting workshops throughout this summer with Dr. Grant Wiggins on Understanding by Design for educators in the field of World Languages. See: <http://www.authenticeducation.org/summerinstitutes>