Authentic assessment

As I present lessons and plan for new ones, much of my planning depends upon my students’ knowledge of the previous lessons taught. In order to check this knowledge, I use various forms of assessment, including authentic assessment. Authentic assessments are specifically used for students who perform real world tasks (Biondo, 2001). By using authentic assessments I am able to gain insight into my students’ abilities to apply knowledge and skills in a meaningful way (Herrington, A., Herrington, J., & Glazer, E. 2002).

Authentic assessments vary dramatically from “traditional” forms of assessments such as multiple choice tests or true/false quizzes (Cullen, C., Barron, P., & science and mathematics network of central, O, o. (1994). Traditional assessments use indirect evidence gained from a student’s recognition of their knowledge. These types of assessments are teacher-structured and usually involved selecting a response or writing in an answer. On the other hand, authentic assessments use direct evidence by allowing students to perform a real-life task. This form of assessment is student-structured and focuses upon the students’ construction and application of knowledge (Cullen, et al. (1994).

Instead of using traditional assessments, many educators are opting to use various forms authentic assessments in their classrooms. Many educators have found that not only do students respond more positively to these assessments, but they also give a more accurate indication of a students’ deeper understanding of learned skills (Swaffield, S. 2011). As such, I too have opted to use authentic assessments in my own teaching practice. To showcase some of the authentic assessments I use in my classroom, I focus upon a specific unit assessment that my student perform each year. In this assessment students perform three tasks: researching their topic, constructing an essay, and presenting their projects.
In the fourth grade, New York State history is the focal point of the social studies curriculum. As such, Native American history, specifically the study of the Iroquois, is an essential part of any fourth grade classroom. Instruction of this subject is at times mundane and many students will be driven away from the subject permanently. In an effort to combat these tragedies, I created an Iroquois Unit Plan that contains several fun and engaging authentic assessments. This unit is typically taught at the beginning of the school year and for many students it is their first real experience with history. Therefore, providing students with authentic assessments that capture their interest, interact with the community, and include their families is essential to promoting a healthy and happy initial experience to history.

The first form of authentic assessment that I used on this unit was conducting research on a topic of choice. Proving students with a choice of topic and a choice of research tools is an effective way to understand their ability to conduct sufficient research. This part of the assessment stressed students’ research skills and indicated whether students were able or not able to perform the task. This form of assessment is authentic because students are able to use research skills to complete a task. The research piece measures both processes and product quality (Scott, 2000). Scott (2000) claims that performance products allow students to construct knowledge in real-world scenarios so that they can understand what they have learned. Since research is an essential part of the essay and project, students learn a great deal more about the Iroquois then they could accomplish within the class setting.

I implemented this task by having students learn and gain general knowledge of the Iroquois Nation and its significance to New York State through readings in class. After they completed this stage they were introduced to the project and given a list of potential topics to research and present. Then students used the local and school’s libraries and the internet as
resources for their research. The local librarian was informed of the project and placed relevant Iroquois books and articles on a separate table for the student’s convenience. Students had to reference all resources at the end of their essays. The quality of the sources and the way they were used in the essay and project were assessed. It is important to note that parents were invited to help students find sources, but were instructed to allow their student to write down the resources and correctly integrate them into their projects independently. Reflecting upon this part of the project, I want to create more time in school specifically for research. This would allow me to model research skills and guide them through their projects more effectively.

The next form of authentic assessment that I used within my “Native American” unit was a research paper. Having students write a research paper on a topic of choice is an effective way to measure students’ deeper understanding. Essays that provide students with a choice of a topic within a unit of study, allow students to explore their own interests. Furthermore, a paper that includes research, requires extensive engagement and a complex performance. An essay such as this is authentic because students use writing and research skills to create their own essay. An essay is another performance product that measures both processes and product quality and that allows students to construct knowledge in real-world contexts (Scott, 2000). Providing students with the chance to pick their own topic, research using the resources they found, and write an essay using their skills as a writer gave them the opportunity to create their very first research paper. Giving students independence on a writing piece, allows them to perceive a sense of ownership over their essay. Therefore, students show active engagement and strive to write their best.

In my classroom the writing project was a three-hundred and fifty-word essay based on the topic each student chose. For this assessment, each student researched a particular topic,
referenced at least six different sources, and wrote a coherent well-organized essay. Student assessment was based on the integration of quality research, organization and neatness, relevance to the topic, and overall writing skill. These qualities were scored with a teacher made rubric, which students received prior to writing their essays. According to Scott (2000) given students the criteria in advance is essential for effective assessment. The essay was due one week before the presentations of the projects. Reflecting back on this section of the unit, I again would like more class time to spend modeling and monitoring student progress on the essays. Lastly, essays were read to classmates and to parents during their project presentations.

The next authentic assessment piece that students were graded on was the hands on piece of the project. After students had picked and researched their topic of choice, they began creating two crafts of the Iroquois to go along with their presentations and essays. Students were given a choice of twenty different craft projects that they were to complete independently. For each craft, I also provided a description and general instructions on how to create the crafts; however, most students went beyond these. Student crafts ranged from the traditional long house to cooking the actual foods the Iroquois ate to quivers made from real leather and seashells. Students were scored on the relevance of the crafts to their topics, the research of the craft, and the overall quality. This was again scored using a teacher made rubric, which was given to students prior to the assignment. Again, parents were invited to help students on this part of the project, but were instructed to allow their student to complete the majority of the work on their own. Reflecting back on this project, I should provide more materials for the students to construct the craft in the event that the student does not have those resources at home.

The final authentic assessment that I use is a presentation of handmade projects about the unit. In this type of assessment, students are graded on their ability to showcase their knowledge
of what they have created and how they relate it to our unit of study. This form of assessment is authentic because students are using their knowledge of a topic and their public speaking skills to present their project their peers, community, and family. Presentations and live performances are effective assessments because they allow students to demonstrate their knowledge of a specific skill (Scott, 2000). Modeling the proper procedure for giving a presentation, taught the students how to participate in a formal presentation.

The final authentic assessment that I use was the presentation piece of the project. A week after students submitted their essays, students brought in their two crafts and any notes or posters that they created into class. During the normal social studies period, students took turns presenting their topic along with both of their crafts. Students typically talked five to ten minutes at a time. Scott (2000) claims that presentations should always be assessed on the quality of the work and the demonstration of the skills. Therefore, students were assessed on the information presented, professionalism, organization, and quality of their public speaking skills. I again graded this by using a teacher made rubric that students received a few days prior to the performance. At the end of the day students arranged the classroom into an exhibit to display their projects. Students’ families, community members, and the entire elementary school came into the classroom as they pleased and viewed the projects. Students then used their presenting skills to display their projects in a “science fair” type atmosphere. Reflecting upon this section of the project, I want to review the procedures for listening to others presentations as well as the preparation for giving a formal presentation.

The use of rubrics was a critical authentic assessment tool that I used throughout this unit. Marzano, Pickering, and McTighe (1993) indicate that rubrics are among the most common method for student self-assessment. Therefore, my class was able to check themselves on how
well they met the standards for each area of the project. With each stage of the project, I made sure that I shared the contents of the rubric with the students by discussing the contents of the rubric and modeling bad and good essays. Scott (2000) says that clarifying the expectations in this way ensures that students understand their task. By providing rubrics for most of the aspects of the overall project, I was able to communicate the specific outcomes and performances so that students would come to an acceptable result. I believe the use of these rubrics allowed my students to learn what it takes to create a respectable essay, presentation, and project. Reflecting on my use of rubrics, I would like to create a rubric with my class. I believe that taking part in the rubric creation process will further my students understanding of the expectations.

Conclusions

Authentic assessments are an essential part of any education. However, with the growing trend towards formative and traditional styles of testing, children are missing an important opportunity for growth. Skills that are otherwise untouched during the school year are commonplace in projects such this Iroquois project. As an educator, I strive to replace as many traditional tests with authentic assessments in the hopes that my students will develop higher levels of thinking. It is my hope that in the near future lawmakers, administrators, and all others in the field of education will place most of the emphasis of testing on authentic assessments.

Standards

Standard 2 states that teachers need to provide opportunities to explore and experience diversity. I accomplished this goal by allowing my students to research and study the Iroquois culture. As my students discovered facts about the Iroquois culture, they compared it to their own, discovering that there are a diversity of people living in New York State. Standard 2 also states that students need to be active members of their classroom, school, and community. I
accomplished this goal, by allowing my students to present their findings to all these groups. During their presentations of their reports and projects, students showcase and explain their work to other students, their family members, community members, and other teachers. This aspect of the project provides them with a sense of belonging to a larger community of learners. **Standard 2** also states that students need to accept other perspectives and respect their differences. This goal is accomplished by having all my students listen to each other’s essays and presentations. In this way they will understand that they all have different interpretations of Iroquois and that each perspective is valued.

**Standard 6** states it is essential that teachers involve families and the community within my teaching practice. I accomplished this goal by making provisions for the essay and crafts to be mostly constructed at home. For instance, I contact the local librarian and they provide a table of hand-picked books about the Iroquois. The students have the option to go to the local library and use this resource. **Standard 6** also states that my students need to have meaningful and positive experiences with the community. I accomplished this goal by inviting the local community to come to our 4th Grade’s Native American Museum. In this way students are able to enjoy the positive experience of showing their work to community members. **Standard 6** also states that students need to learn to live with all people within their schools, local community, and the world. I accomplished this goal by having my students complete research and write about the Iroquois. With knowledge and understanding for a new culture comes respect. After the projects were finished, I believe that my students have a greater appreciation and acceptance of the Iroquois as people, which persist to this day.
Reflection


