



**International Center for  
Leadership in Education**

RIGOROUS LEARNING FOR ALL STUDENTS

# **Authentic Performance Tasks: Strategies to Improve Learning and Literacy**

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Dr. Lissa Pijanowski is passionate about supporting teachers and leaders in creating compelling learning environments that reflect high expectations, promote student engagement, and produce results. Lissa's work with the International Center for Leadership in Education, a division of HMH Professional Services, integrates her years of school improvement experience and curriculum leadership in standards-based education.

Lissa has served as a public school educator for over 25 years and prior to joining ICLE served as the Associate Superintendent of Academics and Accountability for Forsyth County Schools. Her team was responsible for curriculum, instruction, assessment, academic support programs, professional learning, and workforce development. The district leveraged Rigorous Curriculum Design and Data Teams as essential components for implementation of the Common Core State Standards.

Prior to working in Forsyth County Schools, Lissa served as the Director of School Improvement at the Georgia Department of Education. At the GDOE, Lissa led regional school improvement teams to reduce the number of Needs Improvement Schools in Georgia through intense training on data analysis, performance standards, and focused improvement planning.

Through a commitment to her own professional development as well as her extensive professional learning work with adults, Lissa is committed to delivering engaging, practical, professional development experiences which result in immediate application to student learning. Lissa has presented at numerous national and state educational conferences and is a published author. Publications include articles in *Educational Leadership* and the *Journal of Staff Development*. Additionally, she has contributed to Center publications [Prioritizing the Common Core State Standards](#) and [Engaged Instruction: Thriving Classrooms in the Age of the Common Core](#). She holds a Doctorate of Education with a concentration in Organizational Leadership and Change, a Masters in Educational Leadership, and a Bachelor of Science in Education.

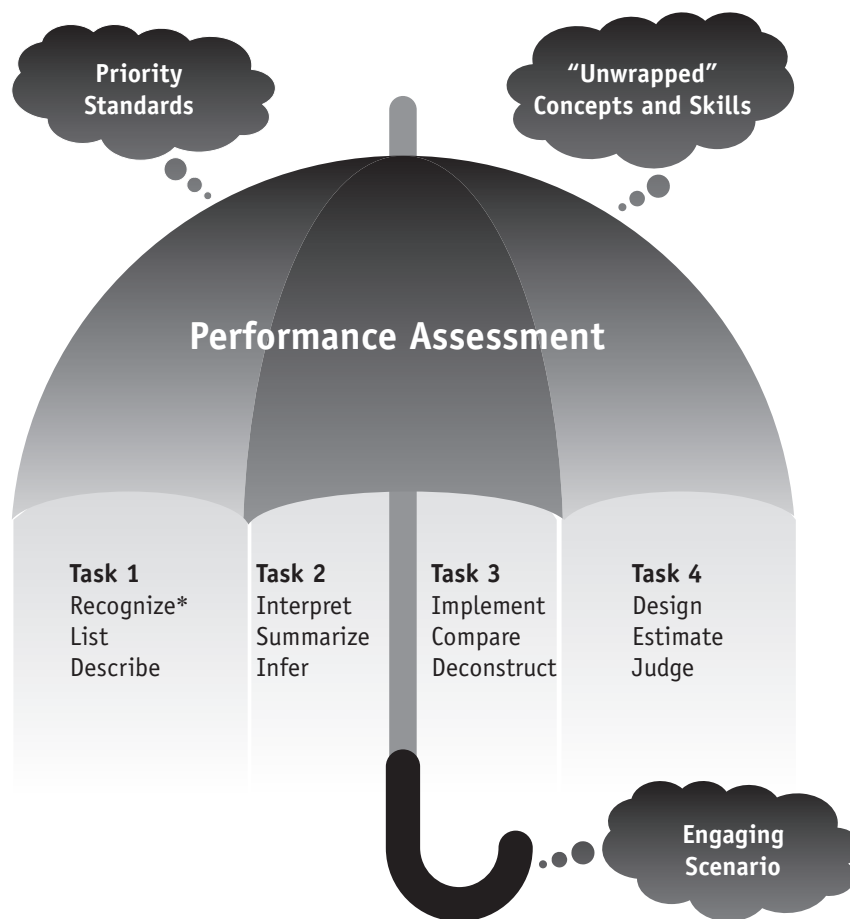
Although her work keeps her busy, Lissa's family is her priority. She is married and has three children. She enjoys supporting her kids with their sports and musical interests while making time to volunteer in schools, garden, and spend time outdoors with her husband.

# Performance Assessments

## Performance Assessments:

A \_\_\_\_\_ of several related performance tasks, \_\_\_\_\_ that progressively develop and reveal student \_\_\_\_\_ of the “unwrapped” concepts, skills, and Big Ideas.

### The Big Picture



Whole and Small Group Instruction throughout Tasks 1–4

Increase in Rigor/Difficulty

Advance in Levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy

Incorporate Nonfiction Writing

*\*Note:* The verbs listed above represent examples of verbs within Bloom’s six levels of cognitive processes  
Adapted from Diana Greene, Deputy Superintendent, Marion County, FL.

# Engaging Learning Experiences

Authentic performance tasks require students to use skills, strategies, and knowledge learned while completing a real world task that an adult would need to perform in his personal or professional life. It requires the student to explain, apply, or synthesize their knowledge to show true understanding through a multiple step process/project. The project is a quality piece that presents justifiable information or answers that can be used for further learning, investigation or research. It is outlined with clear task objectives, and has a rubric or other document that guides the completion of work and is used for the final evaluation of the project. Some authentic assessment projects could be:

- Data Collection and Analysis to solve a real world problem
- Using historical events to present solutions in order to solve a present world problem.
- Pretending to be another person (maybe historical) in order to explain how one feels, thinks or perceives life.
- Investigating a hypothesis by running a number of scientific experiments.
- Architectural building or diorama reproductions

The best assessments always teach students and teachers alike the kind of work that most matters; they are enabling and forward-looking, not just reflective of prior teaching. When students know before hand what will be expected they can perform their best.

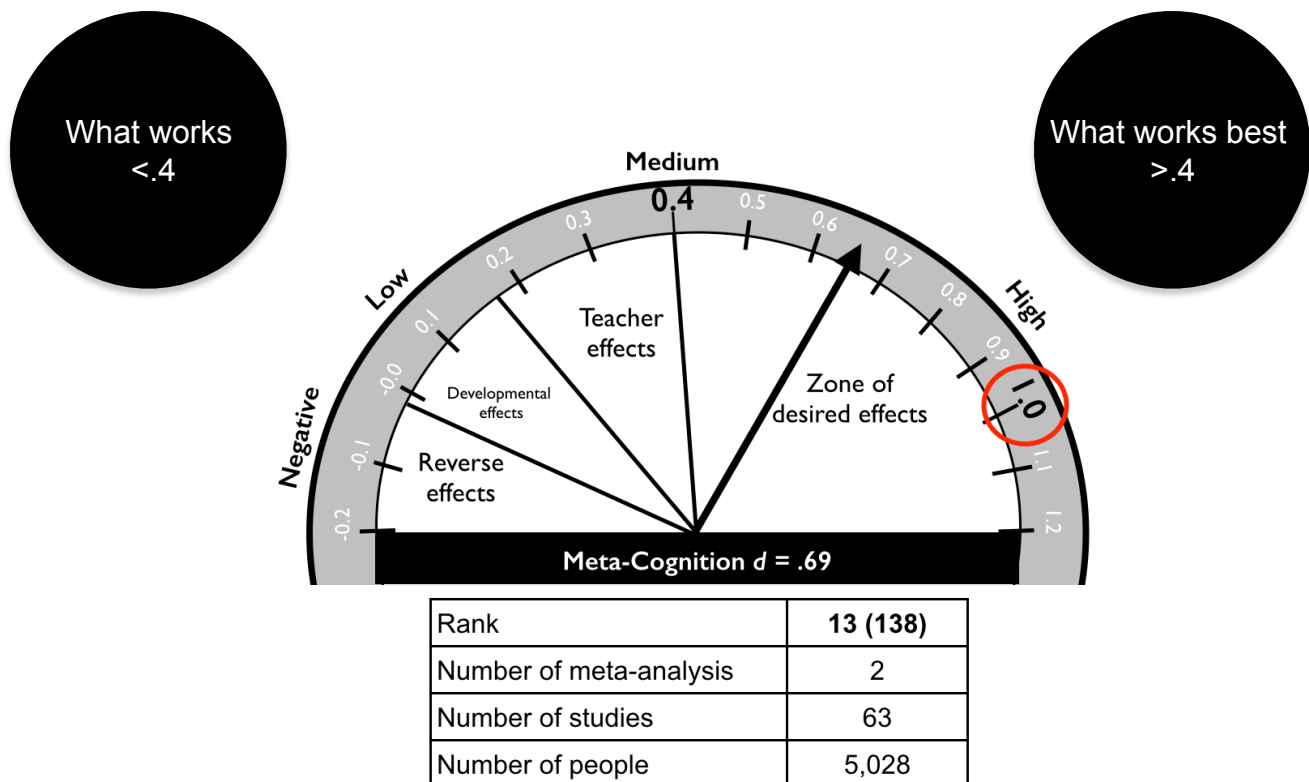
In real life we do often know what is expected and we prepare accordingly. In authentic performance assessments, when we give students a rubric and defined expectations, they can rise to the occasion. If the assessment is properly designed, it will allow students time to think through and study the issues and not just regurgitate classroom information. It will allow the struggling student time to learn and the quick to remember to apply.

# The Big Picture and Performance Tasks

Suppose you have an opportunity to combine the very best research with respect to effect size-what would that look like for students?

According to *Visible Learning* (Hattie, 2009), schools that **doubled** their performance followed a similar set of strategies:

- Set incremental goals (.56)
- Analyzed student data (
- **Used formative assessments and performance tasks (.90)**
- Collaboratively reviewed evidence on instruction (.60)
- Used instructional time more productively (.44)



# Authentic Performance Task Design Sequence

## 1. Select Unit of Study Topic

- Identify a three-to four-week unit of study that is *topical* (focused on a specific portion of a larger subject or discipline), *skills-based* (emphasizes application), or *thematic* (makes connections to other topics within the same discipline or to completely different disciplines).
- *Topical* examples: solids and liquids (science); story elements (reading); estimation (math)
- *Skills-based* examples: converting fractions to decimals; editing and revising; making text connections
- *Thematic* examples: (life cycles, impact of war, art and multimedia)

## 2. Identifying Matching Priority and Supporting Standards

- Find the grade- or course-specific standards that match that unit of study.
- Selections should be a combination of Priority and Supporting Standards.

## 3. “Unwrap” the Priority Standards and Create a Graphic Organizer

- Underline the key concepts (important nouns and noun phrases) that students are to *know* in the Priority Standards *only*.
- Circle or CAPITALIZE the skills (verbs) that students are to *do*.
- Organize the concepts students on a graphic organizer (outline, bulleted list, chart).
- List each of the skills with parenthetical or side-by-side concepts, i.e. IDENTIFY (main idea).
- Identify the *approximate* level of Bloom’s Taxonomy or Webb’s Depth of Knowledge that reflects the level of thinking skill rigor of each “unwrapped” skill and its related concept.

## 4. Decide the Big Ideas

- Big Ideas often contain a student benefit for learning the standards in focus (i.e. “Knowing the difference between facts and opinions helps me decide whether something I read is true or not”).
- Examine the concepts listed on the graphic organizer.
- Ask: “What connections or main understandings would I want students to gain as a result of learning these ‘unwrapped’ concepts? What would I want them to remember long after this unit of study ends?”
- Brainstorm three to four Big Ideas or enduring understandings, and write them as complete sentences.
- Consider how students might say these Big Ideas in their own words.

## 5. Write the Essential Questions

- What questions could the teacher ask students at the *beginning* of the unit of study that would lead students to discover the Big Ideas on their own by the *end* of the unit? (i.e., Essential Question: When do I need to find an actual answer as compared to an estimated answer? Big Idea: Whether you find the actual answer or only an estimate depends on the situation – what you’re trying to figure out.)
- Create three or four Essential Questions, possibly including a “one-two punch” question that combines a recall question with a higher-level question, such as: What are literary devices? Why do authors use them?
- Check: Are your Big Ideas the desired answers or responses to your Essential Questions?

## Authentic Performance Tasks Design Sequence

### 6. Plan the Performance Tasks

- Look again at your “unwrapped” Priority Standards skills and corresponding Bloom/Webb levels.
- Look also at the identified supporting standards for the unit of study.
- Brainstorm what students could DO in three or four performance tasks that match those levels.
- Write a very short description (synopsis) of each task.
- Order the tasks to reflect the increasing complexity of skills. These tasks will be distributed throughout the unit of study in this order.
- See published examples of performance task synopses at various grade levels (*Making Standards Work* by Douglas Reeves, *Rigorous Curriculum Design* by Larry Ainsworth).

### 7. Detail the Performance Tasks • Write out the *full details* – the complete task directions – of what students are to do for the first task synopsis.

- Make certain that the tasks are not merely “fun learning activities” but are true standards-based tasks that mainly emphasize the “unwrapped” concepts and skills of the unit’s Priority Standards but also represent the concepts and skills of the unit’s Supporting Standards.

- S** Which standard(s) (priority/supporting) will this task address?
- Q** What Essential Question(s) and corresponding Big Idea(s) will this task target?
- U** Which “unwrapped” specific concepts and skills will this task target?
- A** How will the students apply the concepts and skills? What will they do and/or produce?
- R** What resources, instruction, and information will students need in order to complete the task?
- E** What evidence of learning will I look for to show that I know all of my students have conceptually learned the concepts and skills—the standard(s)?
1. Students meet proficiency or higher on Task 1 rubric.
  2. Students respond to Essential Question(s) with Big Idea(s) in written or oral format.
  3. Other evidence:
- D** How can I differentiate the application and/or evidence to meet the varying needs of my students?

### Evaluating Task Design and Development

- Is the task planned for students an authentic application of knowledge and skills in the standards and related indicators?
- Is the student required to utilize higher-order thinking processes? How?
- Will proficient performance of tasks demonstrate student attainment of the standards and indicators?
- Will your sequence of tasks develop student understanding of Essential Questions?

- Repeat process for remaining tasks

## Authentic Performance Tasks Design Sequence

### 8. Identify Interdisciplinary Connections

- Review the planned performance tasks.
- Identify standards in other content areas that connect to each of those tasks. This will help students see how these are *authentic* tasks, reflective of real-life situations that are not usually limited to one content area only.

### 9. Plan an Engaging Scenario

- Brainstorm an authentic scenario (real-life situation) that will “hook” student interest and motivate them to active involvement in the planned performance tasks.
- Include the “SCRAP” elements to make the scenario complete.

- S** What is the situation?
- C** What is the challenge?
- R** What role(s) does the student assume?
- A** Who is the audience (preferably an external audience)?
- P** What is the product or performance the student will demonstrate and/or create?

- See published examples of effective engaging scenarios (*Making Standards Work* by Douglas Reeves, *Rigorous Curriculum Design* by Larry Ainsworth).

### 10. Create the Scoring Guides

- Highlight in the task directions of the first performance task exactly what students are to do (i.e., “Provide three examples from the text”). Use those same phrases in the scoring guide criteria so students see the intentional match between the task directions and how their finished product will be assessed.
- Write the criteria in specific, measurable, observable wording for the level of “Goal” or “Proficiency”.
- Next write the criteria for “Advanced” or “Exemplary” beginning with the phrase: “All Goal/Proficient criteria met PLUS:”
- Then write the “Progressing” level criterion: “Meets \_\_\_\_ of the Goal criteria”. This keeps the student’s focus on the Goal criteria and provides feedback of what the student must yet do to meet those criteria.
- Lastly, write the “Beginning” level criteria: “Meets \_\_\_\_ of the Goal criteria” and “Task to be repeated after re-teaching/additional help from teacher.” This again keeps the student’s focus on the Goal criteria and provides feedback as to what the student must yet do to meet those criteria. The second of the two criteria communicates to the student the heightened expectation that s/he is not yet finished with the task.
- Repeat the process for the remaining performance tasks.



# Creating the Tasks

## SQUARED

Process for creating performance tasks

- **Standards:** Which standard(s) will this performance task address?
- **Questions:** What are the essential questions the task will target?
- **Unwrapped:** Which “unwrapped skills and concepts will students demonstrate through this task?
- **Application:** How will students apply the concepts and skills? What will they produce or perform?
- **Resources:** What resources will students need?
- **Evidence:** What evidence will I need to see to verify mastery?
- **Differentiate:** How can I differentiate the application to meet the learning needs of all?

<b>S</b> tandards			
<b>Q</b> uestions			
<b>U</b> nwrapped Concepts and Skills	SKILLS	CONCEPTS	DOK
<b>A</b> pplication			
<b>R</b> esources			
<b>E</b> vidence			
<b>D</b> ifferentiate			

# Creating the Engaging Scenario

## S.C.R.A.P.

Process for creating an engaging scenario

- **Situation:** The context of the engaging scenario
- **Challenge:** The challenge or problem that the student encounters
- **Roles:** The careers and authentic jobs that the student assumes
- **Audience:** The person or group to whom the students present the results of the challenge
- **Product or Performance:** What is produced by the students upon completion of the assessment

Situation	
Challenge	
Roles	
Audience	
Product	
Full Description	

# Creating Specific Tasks: Staircase to Complexity

## Elementary Example

Task	Product or Performance: What will students to do demonstrate their understanding of the “unwrapped” priority standards?	DOK
1	Sequence story strips	1
2	Create a flow chart that retells key details	3
3	Create a story map	3
4	Create a puppet show from a different point of view	4

## Secondary Example

Task	Product or Performance: What will students to do demonstrate their understanding of the “unwrapped” priority standards?	DOK
1	Create a Cornell Notes research booklet	1
2	Write a research article for a journal	3
3	Create a multi-media presentation with speaker’s notes	3-4
4	Give an oral presentation with multi-media visuals	4

# Hess' Cognitive Rigor Matrix & Curricular Examples: Applying Webb's Depth-of-Knowledge Levels to Bloom's Cognitive Process Dimensions – M-Sci

Revised Bloom's Taxonomy	Webb's DOK Level 1 Recall & Reproduction	Webb's DOK Level 2 Skills & Concepts	Webb's DOK Level 3 Strategic Thinking/ Reasoning	Webb's DOK Level 4 Extended Thinking
<b>Remember</b> Retrieve knowledge from long-term memory, recognize, recall, locate, identify	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recall, observe, &amp; recognize facts, principles, properties</li> <li>Recall/ identify conversions or among representations or numbers (e.g., customary and metric measures)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Specify and explain relationships (e.g., non-examples/examples; cause-effect)</li> <li>Make and record observations</li> <li>Explain steps followed</li> <li>Summarize results or concepts</li> <li>Make basic inferences or logical predictions from data/observations</li> <li>Use models /diagrams to represent or explain mathematical concepts</li> <li>Make and explain estimates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use concepts to solve <u>non-routine</u> problems</li> <li>Explain, generalize, or connect ideas <u>using supporting evidence</u></li> <li>Make and justify conjectures</li> <li>Explain thinking when more than one response is possible</li> <li>Explain phenomena in terms of concepts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relate mathematical or scientific concepts to other content areas, other domains, or other concepts</li> <li>Develop generalizations of the results obtained and the strategies used (from investigation or readings) and apply them to new problem situations</li> </ul>
<b>Understand</b> Construct meaning, clarify, paraphrase, represent, translate, illustrate, give examples, classify, categorize, summarize, generalize, infer a logical conclusion (such as from examples given), predict, compare/contrast, match like ideas, explain, construct models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluate an expression</li> <li>Locate points on a grid or number on number line</li> <li>Solve a one-step problem</li> <li>Represent math relationships in words, pictures, or symbols</li> <li>Read, write, compare decimals in scientific notation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Select a procedure according to criteria and perform it</li> <li>Solve routine problem applying multiple concepts or decision points</li> <li>Retrieve information from a table, graph, or figure and use it solve a problem requiring multiple steps</li> <li>Translate between tables, graphs, words, and symbolic notations (e.g., graph data from a table)</li> <li>Construct models given criteria</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Design investigation for a specific purpose or research question</li> <li>Conduct a designed investigation</li> <li>Use concepts to solve non-routine problems</li> <li>Use &amp; show <u>reasoning, planning, and evidence</u></li> <li>Translate between problem &amp; symbolic notation when not a direct translation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Select or devise approach among many alternatives to solve a problem</li> <li>Conduct a project that specifies a problem, identifies solution paths, solves the problem, and reports results</li> </ul>
<b>Apply</b> Carry out or use a procedure in a given situation; carry out (apply to a familiar task), or use (apply) to an unfamiliar task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Follow simple procedures (recipe-type directions)</li> <li>Calculate, measure, apply a rule (e.g., rounding)</li> <li>Apply algorithm or formula (e.g., area, perimeter)</li> <li>Solve linear equations</li> <li>Make conversions among representations or numbers, or within and between customary and metric measures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Retrieve information from a table or graph to answer a question</li> <li>Identify whether specific information is contained in graphic representations (e.g., table, graph, T-chart, diagram)</li> <li>Identify a pattern/trend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compare information within or across data sets or texts</li> <li>Analyze and draw <u>conclusions from data, citing evidence</u></li> <li>Generalize a pattern</li> <li>Interpret data from complex graph</li> <li>Analyze similarities/differences between procedures or solutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analyze multiple sources of evidence</li> <li>analyze complex/abstract themes</li> <li>Gather, analyze, and evaluate information</li> </ul>
<b>Analyze</b> Break into constituent parts, determine how parts relate, differentiate between relevant-irrelevant, distinguish, focus, select, organize, outline, find coherence, deconstruct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Retrieve information from a table or graph to answer a question</li> <li>Identify whether specific information is contained in graphic representations (e.g., table, graph, T-chart, diagram)</li> <li>Identify a pattern/trend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Categorize, classify materials, data, figures based on characteristics</li> <li>Organize or order data</li> <li>Compare/ contrast figures or data</li> <li>Select appropriate graph and organize &amp; display data</li> <li>Interpret data from a simple graph</li> <li>Extend a pattern</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><u>Cite evidence and develop a logical argument</u> for concepts or solutions</li> <li>Describe, compare, and contrast solution methods</li> <li>Verify reasonableness of results</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gather, analyze, &amp; evaluate information to draw conclusions</li> <li>Apply understanding in a novel way, provide argument or justification for the application</li> </ul>
<b>Evaluate</b> Make judgments based on criteria, check, detect inconsistencies or fallacies, judge, critique				
<b>Create</b> Reorganize elements into new patterns/structures, generate, hypothesize, design, plan, construct, produce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brainstorm ideas, concepts, or perspectives related to a topic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generate conjectures or hypotheses based on observations or prior knowledge and experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Synthesize information within one data set, source, or text</li> <li>Formulate an original problem given a situation</li> <li>Develop a scientific/mathematical model for a complex situation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Synthesize information across multiple sources or texts</li> <li>Design a mathematical model to inform and solve a practical or abstract situation</li> </ul>

# Designing Tasks Checklist

Use the following checklist to ensure your performance tasks include all essential components.

**Designing Tasks Self-Check Form**

Design Considerations	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4
Tasks allow students to develop understanding				
Tasks address the Essential Questions				
Tasks provide evidence of student learning				
Tasks focus on "unwrapped" Priority Standards				
Tasks incorporate nonfiction writing				
Tasks include an external audience				
Tasks can be modified for learner differences				
Tasks are authentic				

# Notes, Ideas, Resources, etc.