



Students Deserve Rich Test Questions

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Whether large-scale programs or teacher-made classroom tests, assessments that include rich questions yield better information about what students know and can do. Rich test items reflect real-world (authentic) contexts and assess higher-order thinking skills. Unfortunately, several factors are causing some states to turn away from rich items. Teachers should avoid going down the same road.

The first factor that states face is the efficiency demanded of high-stakes accountability testing. Mandates for increased testing and accelerated reporting of results are leading states to seek ways to cut costs and streamline schedules. Reducing the use of extended, constructed-response questions may be an attractive option. It is important to remember, however, that research in the early 1990s revealed that heavy reliance on multiple-choice items in high-stakes tests has negative instructional impacts.

A second factor is the result of what is generally a good thing: the need to assure strict alignment between tests and content standards. The down side is that standards revolve around content, instead of cognitive skills. The higher-level skills that rich items measure usually involve multiple constructs, even multiple content standards. This poses a challenge to alignment reviewers who might think test items should address single constructs, facilitating the assignment of items to reporting categories. The result is all too often the rejection of higher-order questions during the review process.

Finally, the push to make tests accessible to *all* students might cause tests to lose authenticity. For example, some people would argue that reading passages should be printed in a single, large font. That practice would cause passages to lose the look and feel of authentic reading material from sources like newspapers,

magazines, textbooks, or even the Internet. Accessibility is a very important issue, and need not compromise the richness of assessments. Experts in universal design for assessment are the first to point out that in making tests more accessible, the constructs intended to be measured—including the application of higher-order skills in authentic contexts—must be preserved.

State testing programs can take various steps to avoid these potential obstacles to the use of rich items. Among these options are:

- cleaning up student information data files before response information is added (more post-administration time is currently devoted to cleaning up data files than to scoring constructed-response items);
- sharing costs by collaborating with other states on test development; and
- modifying content standards to better address higher-order thinking skills.

While some states may not be choosing these options, there is no reason for classroom tests to exclude rich questions. Students need and deserve opportunities to demonstrate the breadth and depth of their knowledge. It is therefore important that teachers hone their own skills in creating rich tests and using test results. Sound professional development will help them.



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