

Chapter 58

Assessing Experience: Performance-Based Assessment of Experiential Learning Activities

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ABSTRACT

Performance-based assessments are more than just skill development. They are part of evaluating relevant experiences that lead to the maturation of professional dispositions. A goal of performance-based assessment is that as learners—such as teacher candidates—meet the challenges of a performance-based assessment they become deeply cognizant and metacognitive of the level of commitment it takes to be an effective teacher. This chapter argues that at its core performance-based assessment is experiential learning. The chapter reports and compares the findings from two case studies in order to develop a theoretical model for a performance-based assessment of experiential learning. The model, called the Performance-Based Assessment Cycle, weaves David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory with features of performance-based assessment. The Performance-Based Assessment Cycle is centered on the development of evaluating relevant experiences through a process of doing, concluding, connecting, and renewing.

INTRODUCTION

It is field trip time and a small group of 10 elementary students file into the Map Room of an old, but spacious two-story clapboard house. The house—nicknamed “the Texas Medallion”—is one of a dozen buildings that make up Millard's Crossing Historical Village. The elementary students are there to meet historical characters from Texas history. Lera Millard Thomas, the first woman elected to the United States Congress from the State of Texas, is one of those characters. She stands silently looking out the Map Room's far window. She has a cane in her hand and pill-box hat on her head. Lera Millard Thomas is being played by a teacher candidate who is part of the historical village's “living” wax museum.

A bell sits on a display table in the Map Room. An index card taped on the bell invites the students to ring the bell. One student gladly obliges. The bell rings and the teacher candidate playing Lera Millard Thomas suddenly wakes up. She strikes her cane on the oak floor and starts in:

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I see you've rung my bell and since I'm in a good mood I guess I'll take the time to introduce myself. My name is Lera Millard Thomas and this whole area you're trouncing through is my family's land. There used to be a railroad track that ran right up the road and that's why it is named Millard's Crossing. I was born and raised here. I was the only girl in a family full of boys and my parents said I was the difficult child, but I always had a goal and was going to make it happen. I never let anything get in my way. The only person who could even match my fire was my husband, Albert Thomas.

Oh, Albert Thomas was a great man. He was elected into the House of Representatives and we moved to Washington, DC. As Congressman, Albert helped to bring the Space Center to Houston. We were best friends with President Lyndon B. Johnson and Lady Bird Johnson. My Albert passed away during his 16th term in office. I was asked to run in a special election and fill his seat as representative. I did so gladly and I became the first Congresswoman elected from Texas to serve in the United States Congress. I was the best person for the job if you ask me.

The teacher candidate playing Lera Millard Thomas finishes her speech with a brief description about the restoration of the Millard's Crossing property. Still in character, she thanks the kids for coming and firmly reminds them to be careful with all of the historical village's artifacts. With a good thwack of the cane on the oak floor, the Lera Millard Thomas turns her gaze toward the window and goes still.

Purpose

The vignette above captures an example of experiential learning in social studies. The experience allows for the discovery of historical characters from a “living” history perspective. Yet, how does one begin to assess what the elementary school students gained from this experience? Additionally, what about the teacher candidate? How can the teacher candidate's role as a historical character be assessed? The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the relationship between experiential learning and performance-based assessment. As part of that purpose, the chapter examines the aforementioned questions.

The chapter has four main objectives. First, the chapter examines the literature to define the contours of performance-based assessment and experiential learning. Second, the chapter presents a conceptual framework for integrating performance-based assessment and experiential learning, which is based on David Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory. Third, the chapter summarizes the author's empirical research studies related to experiential learning in social studies. Two case studies are examined. One case study describes teacher candidates' perceptions of experiential learning; the other study case investigates veteran elementary school teacher candidates' perceptions of experiential learning. The two studies are compared to report on similarities and difference between the two educator groups. Fourth, the chapter concludes by developing and discussing a conceptual model—called the Performance-Based Assessment Cycle—for a performance-based assessment with an experiential learning focus. The discussion section includes implications for teacher education. The recommendations are both research-related and practitioner-oriented.

Context

The larger premise of this entire book is that performance-based assessments are a critical component of teacher education. Indeed, with the public demand for a professional cadre of teachers, performance-

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