



## Performances of Understanding

### What are Performances of Understanding?

Imagine trying to learn how to drive a car from a book or from lectures given by expert drivers. You study diagrams showing the position of the accelerator, brake, and clutch pedals. You read about the process of releasing the clutch as the accelerator is depressed. You memorize the appropriate braking distances. An experienced driver explains how to gauge opportunities for merging into a stream of speeding traffic. You also hear lectures on how to parallel park. When you have read or heard about all of the various skills and techniques used in driving, you get behind the wheel for the first time and take your driving test.

Very few of us would pass the test under such circumstances. Certainly the books and lectures would have given us some information essential to driving a car, such as it is necessary to signal before turning or state law requires stopping for pedestrians in crosswalks. We might have memorized a great deal about the placement of the foot pedals and the "standard H" pattern of the stick shift. But we would not know how to use that knowledge judiciously in the infinite variety of circumstances which present themselves on the road at any given time. Without actual practice driving a car under a variety of conditions with ongoing coaching and feedback from a driving instructor, we cannot learn to drive well and safely.

Students learning in school settings need the same kinds of experiences. They might acquire pieces of knowledge from books and lectures, but without the opportunity to apply that knowledge in a variety of situations with guidance from a knowledgeable coach, they are not likely to develop understanding. **Performances of understanding**, or understanding performances, are the activities that give students those opportunities. Performances of understanding require students to go beyond the information given to create something new by reshaping, expanding, extrapolating from, applying, and building on what they already know. The best performances of understanding help students both develop *and* demonstrate their understanding.

### Key Features of Performances of Understanding

Performances of understanding are activities which require students to use what they know in new ways or situations to build their understanding of unit topics. In performances of understanding students reshape, expand on, extrapolate from, and

apply what they already know. Such performances challenge students' misconceptions, stereotypes, and tendencies toward rigid thinking.

**P**erformances of understanding help students build *and* demonstrate their understanding. Although a "performance" might sound like a final event, performances of understanding are principally learning activities. They give both you and your students a chance to see their understanding develop in new and challenging situations over time.

**P**erformances of understanding require students to show their understanding in an observable way. They make students' thinking visible. It is not enough for students to reshape, expand, extrapolate from, and apply their knowledge in the privacy of their own thoughts. While it is conceivable that a student could understand without performing, such an understanding would be untried, possibly fragile, and virtually impossible to assess. It is a little like the difference between a daydream about how you would like to behave in a particular situation versus how you actually behave when the situation arises: the daydream and reality might turn out to be similar, but then again they might not. So performances of understanding involve students in publicly demonstrating their understanding.

### **Examples of Performances of Understanding**

**F**ollowing are some examples of performances of understanding for units in different academic areas. Since performances of understanding are always connected to one or more specific understanding goals, the applicable unit-long understanding goals or goals (in statement form only) are provided with each example:

- *For an English unit with the understanding goal "Students will understand how to detect the clues (both obvious and subtle) that authors give about what their characters are like":*

Students pick one event described by Charlotte in *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*. First they write down all the things they can tell about Charlotte from the way she describes the event. Then they compare their answers with those of their classmates, noting and discussing the differences in interpretation. Second, students pick two other characters involved in that event and make up an entry for each of these characters' diaries. The object is for students to weave into each entry clues that will help readers understand who these characters are.

- *For a social studies unit with the understanding goal "Students will understand that history is always told from a particular perspective and that understanding a historical text means understanding who wrote it":*

Students compare two accounts of the beginning of the Revolutionary War—one that claims the British fired the first shot and one that claims the colonists

did. They then discuss why the two reports might be different and how they could find out what really happened. They use some of these strategies to figure out which (if either) of these accounts is the more plausible, then present their explanation to the class.

- *For a mathematics unit with the understanding goals "Students will understand how percentages can be used to describe real-world happenings" and "Students will understand how to represent numerical information in clear graphs":*

In small groups, students collect and compile data about school attendance over the course of two weeks. They calculate the percentage of students who fit various categories (percentage of students absent, percentage present, percentage tardy, and so on). They then create graphs to represent their data visually, collect feedback from the class, and revise their graphs accordingly.

- *For a science unit with the understanding goal "Students will understand how light and images are affected as they pass through 'everyday lenses' like magnifying glasses, telephoto camera lenses, and so on":*

Students experiment with a collection of concave and convex lenses and a flashlight. They try to find combinations of lenses that act like a magnifying glass, a telephoto lens, and wide-angle lens. They then draw diagrams to illustrate how light travels through these combinations of lenses.

## **Planning Performances of Understanding**

**Y**ou might begin planning by brainstorming ideas for possible performances of understanding. You could start by thinking about activities your students have done in the past that seemed especially productive.

**I**f you have already identified your understanding goals, look at the list of possibilities for performances of understanding that you have generated. Identify the ones that best seem to support those goals.

**I**f you have not identified your understanding goals yet, look at the list of possibilities and ask, "Why do I want students to do this?" This will help you to articulate your understanding goals. Once the goals have been identified, you can examine the performances again and perhaps revise them so that they more closely foster the understandings you consider most important.

**F**or the performances you select, think about how to build in opportunities for students to get feedback on and revise their work as they carry out those performances.

**W**hen you have generated a number of performances of understanding, try to

sequence the performances so that they occur throughout the unit, from the beginning to the end. Think about the following kinds of performances as you work:

- *Introductory Performances*  
These are the performances of understanding that usually come first in a unit. They give your students a chance to explore the generative topic a bit. They also give you an opportunity to gauge students' current understanding of the topic. The possibilities for connections between students' personal interests and the topic emerge from these explorations.
- *Guided Inquiry Performances*  
In these kinds of performances of understanding, students focus on developing their understanding of particular problems or aspects of the generative topic you feel are especially important. Guided inquiry performances typically occur in the middle of units.
- *Culminating Performances*  
These more complex, concluding performances of understanding give students a chance to synthesize and demonstrate the understandings they developed through the other performances of understanding.

Does your final contingent of performances of understanding for the unit include a variety of performances that give students a chance to develop and demonstrate their understandings in a number of different ways? If many of the performances are similar (for instance, if many performances require students to "explain in their own words" or to adopt and debate one side of a controversy), try revising some of them to allow for greater diversity in how students develop their understanding.

### **Teaching with Performances of Understanding**

**A**s students are engaged in performances of understanding, remind them of the understanding goals the performance should help them achieve.

**A**s students are engaged in performances of understanding, try thinking of yourself as a "floating coach," keeping a general eye on the progress of students and listening for common questions, confusions, and issues that should be addressed in large group discussions or lectures.

**A**sk students often to explain their answers, to give reasons, to offer supporting evidence, to make predictions in the process of discussions about or written reflections on the performances of understanding.

**P**rovide students with criteria by which the performances will be assessed and give them opportunities (especially in more complex performances) to assess their own and others' work and then to revise it before handing in a final product.

### **Common Questions About Performances of Understanding**

*Performances of understanding sound interesting, but what about basic skills? My students still need to learn to write complete sentences.*

Basic skills are important, and in classrooms that really focus on understanding, a lot of time is spent providing students with the practice and support they need to develop these skills. However, without understanding why those skills are important or when they are useful, students are not likely to learn them well or to use them in appropriate situations. Embedding basic skills in the context of performances of understanding allows students to see why such skills are important.

*My students already do a lot of hands-on activities in the classroom. Are these the same as performances of understanding?*

Perhaps. What is essential about performances of understanding is that they are closely tied to important understanding goals. For instance, having students play a game of "Jeopardy" in order to learn history facts might be considered a "hands-on" activity, but it is not a performance of understanding.

*What about typical activities like class discussions and writing papers—are these performances of understanding?*

They can be. If the paper is more than a mere report, if the student puts forth an opinion or point of view and defends it with evidence and arguments, she is certainly engaging in a performance of understanding. If the discussions require that students puzzle out new problems or questions, draw conclusions, make predictions based on evidence, debate issues, and so on, then the discussion becomes a performance of understanding for those students who are participating.

*Do students really need to do something in order to understand it?*

Sometimes I can tell by the lights in their eyes that they understand. That "light" might be due to the fact that they have just remembered that today is Friday and that this is their final class before the weekend! You may gather important clues about what students understand by interpreting their faces and gestures. Especially in the early "messing about" performances, such quick, informal assessments are useful for gauging when to shift focus or draw conversation to a close. However, the only way to know with certainty how much students understand is to ask them to carry out some task that requires them to go beyond what you have told them or what they have read in a textbook.

*What's the difference between performances of understanding and understanding goals?*

Understanding goals tell what students should understand. Performances of understanding are what students do to develop those understandings.

## Questions for Refining Performances of Understanding

- Do they require students to demonstrate the understandings stated in your understanding goals?
- Do they call for students to apply learning in new situations?
- Do they allow students to build *and* demonstrate understanding?
- Do they challenge students' misconceptions, stereotypes, and tendencies toward rigid thinking?
- Are they sequenced so that students can engage in them throughout the unit, from beginning to end?
- Do they allow students to demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways (written work, artistic endeavors, and so on)?
- Are all the Understanding Performances events in which students are creatively thinking and doing with their knowledge?
- Are the Understanding Performances student-focused and organized in the sequence: Mucking About (Exploring), Guided Inquiry, and Final Project of Synthesis?
- Are the Understanding performances well mapped to your Understanding Goals?

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