Authentic Assessment for Basic Clothing Construction: The Practical Final Exam

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Authentic assessment seeks to evaluate a student's competency by using practical assessment situations that demonstrate mastery of learned knowledge and skills. In comparison to traditional assessment methods that typically use examinations that include such question forms as multiple choice, true or false, and matching, authentic assessment complements the traditional approach by testing a student beyond the understanding of basic course concepts through the application of their skills in real world problem settings (Mueller, 2014). The assessment should fully involve the student through complex cognitive function and should develop or evaluate skills and abilities that will be valuable after the assessment is completed (Frey, Schmitt, & Allen, 2012). One dimension of authentic assessment that is underutilized in universities is student self-assessment. Students completing an authentic assessment are encouraged to assess their own skills, abilities, and product. The ability to self-assess is an important skill in the workplace where workers regularly face situations that must be assessed, a decision made, and then self-evaluate their decision (Custer, 2000).

One area suited for authentic assessment in Clothing and Textiles education is in learning basic sewing and apparel construction skills. Such basic courses develop a student's problem-solving and motor skills through hands-on activities such as instructor-guided sewing sample development and sewing projects. Although hands-on and practical by nature, these activities fall short of true authentic assessment as the instructor is instrumental in guiding the students step-by-step through the process. As such, a final exam was developed at an Eastern university for a basic clothing construction class in which students construct a small sampler bodice within the allotted final exam period. The instructor-designed sampler contains multiple key techniques that reflect the skills needed for success in future sewing projects such as a centered zipper, princess seams, neckline facing, and a variety of seams and seam finishes.

Students are introduced to the parameters of the final exam during the first course session and are encouraged to prepare and practice throughout the semester. Resources such as sample bodices and pattern pieces are likewise available for analysis and practice within the classroom on the very first day; a preparation guide and the exam rubric are also posted on the course LMS. Although the techniques that are part of the exam are listed on the preparation guide and rubric, students are responsible for determining the proper order of construction operations and are encouraged to work and practice with their fellow classmates up until the final exam is administered. As new sewing techniques are introduced, the instructor reminds the students that taking notes on techniques would be advantageous while also encouraging them to keep revisiting the sample bodices and exam preparation materials. Students are also allowed to ask the instructor questions related to the exam but only in a Yes/No format. For example a student

may ask “Is it wise to insert the zipper as one of the first steps of the construction process?” but not “When do I insert the zipper?” Prior to the final exam, students provide the instructor with a piece of fabric and fusible interfacing so each student’s final exam bodice pieces can be prepared. Also, practice sessions are scheduled during the last couple of class periods and extra outside lab times are made available.

At the two hour final exam students are allowed to use their textbook, class notes, course sewing sample book, and any order of operations they created as part of analyzing the bodice. They are also allowed to reference the sample bodices provided by the instructor as well as ones they created as practice. The students are still allowed to ask the instructor Yes/No based questions but are *not* allowed to talk with their classmates. Before they are given the pre-cut and marked fabric and interfacing pieces, the students must show the instructor that their sewing machine and bobbin are unthreaded as the threading of the machine is part of the exam. Academic integrity is maintained by the instructor who creates a special mark on the bodice pieces to ensure students don’t submit a practice bodice instead of the one sewn during the final exam period.

Student reactions to the idea of sewing for their final exam are mixed. Students who recognize the need to practice (or “study”) for the exam typically pay more attention in class and take every opportunity to analyze the sample bodice and practice. In fact, the prior skill level of a student seems to have no influence on exam success; students who have had previous instruction in sewing still need to analyze the construction and practice the sewing techniques just as much as those who have had no experience. Students who do not practice but have previous experience do not fare well in comparison to inexperienced students who are dedicated to exam preparation. Furthermore, students who wait until the end of the semester to start analyzing and practicing its construction, often find themselves overwhelmed and unsuccessful. Another instructor for the same course has experienced similar student results using this same final examination method.

In conclusion, the instructors who have used this authentic assessment have found it has great value as it promotes critical thinking, professional responsibility, and applies skills learned. It will continue to be utilized in the future as it motivates students to take greater ownership of their learning and enables them to be prepared for future projects.

References:

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