As a graduate student, I vividly recall the response to the question, “So, what are the latest trends in assessment?” The question was being posed to a leading expert in vocational assessment by another professional colleague. The setting was a morning cup of coffee and my interest was piqued. The answer was immediate and simple. Authentic assessment.

A decade has come and gone since that time and much has occurred, including A Nation at Risk, Goals 2000, SCANS (Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills), and more. Behaviorism has largely yielded to cognitivism, with associated interest in such things as constructivism, situated cognition, metacognition, and yes, authentic assessment.

Considerable work has been done over this past decade in the area of assessment. Around the nation, states have, with varying degrees of success, developed performance standards. In most quarters, there has been a genuine attempt to target higher-order thinking skills (e.g., critical thinking and problem solving) and to emphasize connections and synthesis over fact-based disciplinary content. Predictably, the results have been mixed, with concerns about such things as “learning the basics,” confusion about content, and concerns about assessment.

At the same time, much has changed. National curriculum standards, which have been developed for many of the disciplines (e.g., science, mathematics, geography, etc.), emphasize inquiry, problem solving, critical thinking, synthesis, and authentic contexts. Changes in assessment practices have also occurred. Most states and standards efforts are promoting the use of a performance component in addition to (or in lieu of) objective-based testing. At times, this has taken the form of constructed response items; in other cases, states and school systems have experimented with incorporating more extensive performance-based activities into the assessment process.

In many respects, this decade of intensive activity has served to validate much of what has been occurring for many years in vocational education. Consider emphases such as “hands on,” “lab-based,” coops, and internships. For years, considerable work has been invested in identifying competencies and subsequently molding them into behavioral objectives. Although some assessment remained focused on the testing of facts, there has also been a rather natural concern for observing (watching students while they do something) and evaluating the quality of completed tasks (i.e., judging projects against established...
To some considerable extent, many of the practices that have been typical in vocational education have emerged as alternative in the larger academic community.

At the same time, activity in the larger academic community is informing vocational education and the two have been drawn more closely together. Vocational education research and practice are being informed by the insights of cognitive learning theory. Those from traditional academic areas are looking to vocational educators for help with authentic contexts and activities. And both are learning more about the complex interactions and connections between authentic learning and assessment.

This monograph was conceptualized as a kind of contemporary retrospective analysis. All of the authors have, in various ways, conducted our professional work in areas that we would have a difficult time defining as either vocational or academic. Actually, it has been both. Collectively, we have worked actively and in various ways with the National Science Foundation, national and state departments of education, and the National Research Council. We have provided leadership to national standards projects and have been active with the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE, formerly the American Vocational Association). As such, we bring a rich and varied set of experiences and perspectives to this discussion of authentic assessment in vocational education. We like it that way and believe that this mix of experiences has enriched our thinking. Throughout the pages of this monograph, we have not attempted to restrict our vision to only those materials that are most applicable to vocational, career, or technical education. Rather, we have attempted to address the key issues from within our varied and mixed perspectives. Our sense is that this mirrors the best of what is occurring across education.

Basic Definitions

Before moving into an overview of the chapters, it will first be helpful to clarify some terminology related to assessment. Three commonly used terms are alternative, authentic, and performance assessment. Conceptually and in practice, these terms tend to describe similar things.

Alternative Assessment

Perhaps the least descriptive and useful is the term “alternative assessment.” As the term indicates, alternative assessments are essentially any assessment practices or tools that are different from traditional practice; more specifically, different from paper-and-pencil tests. A more informative approach is that taken by Neill (1997), associate director of the National Center for Fair and Open Testing. Neill has identified seven defining principles for new assessments developed by the National Forum on Assessment. These principles have received widespread support among educators and civil rights leaders, based on a desire for radical
reconstruction of assessment practices as well as an emphasis on student learning as central to assessment reform. The seven principles endorsed by the forum are as follows:

1. The primary purpose of assessment is to improve student learning.
2. Assessment for other purposes supports student learning.
3. Assessment systems are fair to all students.
4. Professional collaboration and development support assessment.
5. The broad community participates in assessment development.
6. Communication about assessment is regular and clear.
7. Assessment systems are regularly reviewed and improved.

Actually, there are many different definitions offered for alternative assessment and no single definition prevails. According to Hamayan (1995), alternative assessment refers to procedures and techniques that can be used within the context of instruction and can be easily incorporated into the daily activities of the school or classroom. Huerta-Macias (1995) contrasts alternative assessments with traditional testing by placing the emphasis on integrating and producing rather than on recalling and reproducing. These authors also note that the main goal of alternative assessments is to gather evidence about how students are approaching, processing, and completing real-life tasks in a particular domain.

The term alternative assessment provides an umbrella for a variety of nontraditional assessment methods and techniques such as direct assessment, authentic assessment, and performance assessment (Butts 1997). However, given the growth and refinement that have occurred over the past decade, the term suffers from a lack of precision.

**Authentic Assessment**

Authentic assessments are essentially those that embed assessment in real-world contexts. Wiggins (1993) describes authentic assessment as tasks and procedures in which students are engaged in applying skills and knowledge to solve “real-world” problems, giving the tasks a sense of authenticity. He goes on to define authenticity as that which replicates the challenges and standards of performance typically facing writers, businesspeople, scientists, community leaders, designers, and technical workers. To design an authentic assessment activity, teachers must first decide what are the actual performances that they want students to be good at and then they must decide how they can frame learning experiences in a meaningful context that provides the connections between real world experiences and school-based ideas (Lund 1997).

A number of criteria have been used to define and describe authentic assessment. Among these are the following (Lund 1997; Wiggins 1993):

- Engaging and worthy problems or questions of importance to students,
- Replicas of or analogies to the kinds of problems faced by adult citizens and consumers or professionals in the field,
• Tasks that require the student to produce a high-quality product and/or performance,
• Transparent or demystified criteria or standards,
• Response-contingent challenges in which the effect of both process and product/performance determines the quality of the results,
• Emphasis on “higher-level” thinking and more complex learning,
• Evaluation of the essentials of performance against well-articulated performance standards often expressed as rubrics, and
• Assessments so firmly embedded in the curriculum that they are practically indistinguishable from instruction.

At a minimum, authentic assessments are those that require real-world applications of skills and knowledge that have meaning beyond the assessment activity (Archbald and Newmann 1988). However, a review of the criteria listed here shows that the concept also has been extended to include complex performances, creation of significant products, and accomplishment of complex tasks using higher-order cognitive skills.

Performance Assessment or Performance-Based Assessment

At the most basic level, performance assessment involves asking students to do something and then observing and rating the process and the finished product against predetermined criteria or a standard. As with other terms used to describe the various forms of assessment, other definitions of performance assessment tend to blur this distinctive meaning. For example, Herman (1999), associate director of the National Center for Research on Evaluation Standards and Testing, states that the “essence of performance assessments—whether in the form of open-ended questions, essays, experiments or portfolios—is that they ask students to create something of meaning” (online, n.p.). Herman continues by observing that good performance assessment involves complex thinking and/or problem solving, addresses important disciplinary content, invokes authentic or real-world applications, and uses tasks that are instructionally meaningful. Stated in this way, performance assessment sounds very much like authentic assessment.

In reality, the distinctions among terms are probably relatively small and probably insignificant. For our purposes in this monograph, we have chosen to use the term authentic assessment, since it tends to draw the boundary more broadly than performance assessment (authentic assessment typically involves some form of performance) and more precisely than alternative assessment (which typically includes everything but traditional testing).

Overview of the Monograph

The four chapters that comprise this work address distinctively different aspects of authentic assessment. In chapter one, John Schell discusses the theoretical underpinnings of authentic assessment. Whereas vocational education has a long history of behaviorist-oriented, competency-based education, authentic assessment has increasingly been informed by contemporary cognitive and sociological
learning theory. An important focus of the chapter is on the value of authentic learning and assessment practices as a mechanism for promoting learning transfer. In the second chapter, Brian McAlisterr provides a review and synthesis of what the research literature has to say about the value of authentic assessment. This “value question” has two important dimensions. First, the question is asked about the inherent value of authentic assessment as an approach to assessment. The second question has to do with the effectiveness of authentic assessment as a mechanism for enhancing and promoting student learning. Chapter three moves to the more pragmatic end of the continuum. After an initial discussion of three key concepts associated with authentic assessment (connecting, reflecting, and feedback), John Scott provides a comprehensive overview of the “tools” that are commonly used for authentic assessment. In the final chapter, Marie Hoepfl addresses one of the more perplexing issues associated with authentic assessment: the issues and challenges of using authentic practices for large-scale, high-stakes assessments.

We have enjoyed the discussions that led to the development of this monograph. We hope that you will enjoy it and that it will serve to extend your thinking about the nature of assessment in general and authentic assessment in particular.
Authentic Assessment (Custer)