

From Coverage Without Pity to Performance: World Language Curriculum and Assessment Exposed in the Light of Backward Design

Dr. Jennifer Eddy
Queens College, City University of New York

Synopsis: Even with the National Standards, New York State syllabus, and K-12 Performance Guidelines, language curricula seem to be textbook driven, perpetuating a curriculum of coverage. Activities and low-level skill drills prevail. These are tasks that often do not relate to true evidence of performance. This article discusses a design model that focuses on cultural perspectives for sustained inquiry and the purpose for performance assessment evidence and skills, and then examines our assessment system within the Communication standard. The model enables the teacher to make the paradigm shift from a coverage-burdened activity planner to an assessor, creating tasks to inform practice and demonstrate true learner performance, flexibility, and self-direction.

Curriculum of Coverage

The New York State syllabus for Languages Other Than English (Modern Languages for Communication, 1986) has 15 unit topics, 4 functions, and summative assessments at benchmark levels that serve as a perfect blueprint for a well-articulated language program. Our Checkpoint A Second Language Proficiency (SLP) and our Checkpoint B regents exam are assessments that can inform our practice. These exams provide a key summative piece within a diverse body of assessments. Assessments are responsive to and demonstrative of a design plan so that teachers have an account of what

students should know, understand, and be able to do. This further informs instruction and curricular goals, defining content and sequencing for subsequent classes and levels.

In spite of a well-conceived syllabus and assessment system, many world language teachers often do not recognize any disconnect between their classroom practice and what the Standards (National Standards in Foreign Language Education project, 1999/2006) entail for performance assessment. In spite of generous discussion on the Standards at conferences in the profession on Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities, teachers still believe that they “do” the Standards, retrofitting a heavily laden buffet table of content into a Standards framework. They often misunderstand the Communication standard, considered to be the most important in a language class, by confusing it with content. That being said, many teachers, mired in textbook coverage, do not recognize our syllabus topics as the big ideas with which to design a Standards-based curriculum.

Teachers often plan many activities that may or may not meet the Standards, with assessment considered last because very often materials and professional development seem not to guide teachers in performance assessment design. Many schools believe their textbook is the curriculum, but these books do not guide teachers in design of performance assessments. Classroom practice as well as assessment offer predictable prompts and formulaic mastery drills that present language decontextualized and in isolation (Adair-Hauck & Pierce, Glisan and Foltz, 1998; Sousa, 2000; Wiggins, 1998). These fall short in enabling a key shift the Standards desire for curriculum and assessment decisions. This shift can move the teacher from being an activity planner to an assessor for performance, constantly engaged in feedback with the learner. This kind of assessment, albeit indicated in the Communication standard, is often misunderstood. Many teachers still see instruction and assessment as separate, disconnected, and distinct.

Language acquisition implies understanding cultural perspectives, practices, and ideas with the ability to respond appropriately and flexibly in varying contexts (Doughty & Long, 2003). Curriculum materials often do not guide teachers and learners to explore recursive concepts on cultural practices, perspectives, attitudes, or cultural response to a given topic. Without a cultural anchor that could assign purpose and coherence to skills, teachers invest considerable energies in predictable drill practice in isolation, rather than

designing performance scenarios that demand flexibility and cultural perspective. What remains is the requisite paradigm shift from tests of rote memorization to assessments that require transfer of culturally embedded concepts and flexible application of a language repertoire for use in the real world (Eddy, 2007).

Designing for performance

To facilitate that shift is UC ADAPT (Eddy, 2005, 2006a, 2007a, 2007b), a curricular design model that reveals cultural practices and perspectives within recursive topics and themes, using them as the purpose for performance assessment evidence and higher selectivity of knowledge and skills. UC ADAPT stands for Uncovering Content: Assessment Design Aligning Performance and Transfer (Eddy, 2007a) and speaks to a feedback system that helps teachers plan to adjust, continuously informing their practice through assessment evidence. This design model uncovers our New York State syllabus content by unpacking the Culture standard first because cultural response to those topics in our syllabus drives the curriculum. Next, the Communication standard determines the mode of assessment evidence, so we use that standard to design the performance assessment tasks. From there, the teacher can make informed decisions on the knowledge and skills needed for that assessment and the instructional strategies and methodology that best match the desired result.

This model adapts the framework called “Backward Design” (McTighe & Wiggins, 2001/2005). With this design, instructors can unpack the Standards with reasonable and challenging expectations for our students, moving from coverage without pity to performance with a tangible outcome (Eddy, 2006). Backward Design (Understanding by Design) is a well-known design framework, appearing in professional development for many disciplines, but its adaptation to foreign language curriculum design and alignment to our Standards has not been done before UC ADAPT. The basic tenets of Backward Design require instructors to begin planning with the goals and the end result in mind: what true performance should look like. This idea may seem obvious; however, it is the reverse of how most educators plan their course. The typical plan is the textbook in the driver’s seat of the foreign language course, a litany of activities, and assessment last, but it often leaves the instructor and student not really knowing what the

intended results are and why all of it was learned in the first place. Students are left to guess what is important for a test and are comfortable with questions phrased only in a predictable and rehearsed manner, which is unrealistic in an authentic communicative setting.

Backward Design suggests that curriculum should be designed with 1) identify desired results, with key understandings, and inquiry in mind first, 2) what evidence or assessments students will perform to demonstrate those results, and then finally 3) the teaching and resources to guide students toward the goals you want them to attain (McTighe & Wiggins, 2004). Applied to language teaching and learning, these tenets lead specifically to the understandings we want learners to have and continue to build across the lifespan, and to what authentic performance should look like.

This model looks at the Standards differently, putting Culture at the forefront of unit design and placing the Communication standard second as the assessment system it was designed to be. UC ADAPT guides teachers in uncovering key concepts inherent in the culture studied, within themes that appear through the language program in our syllabus and along the lifespan of the learner: family life, leisure, personal identification, meal taking, health and welfare, education, and house and home, to name a few. Units are designed to explore how a culture responds to these themes (Eddy, 2007b). Grossman (1991) speaks of cultural literacy as deep understanding of cultural groups, not limited to tangible products of the culture—music, foods, holidays, and so on—but to include values, norms, and patterns: the practices and perspectives of a culture. Effective design provides an in-depth, long-term, and integrated cultural understanding within the curriculum (King, 1983). Critical thinking skills (Walsh, 1988) are essential to widening the cultural lens; encouraging flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, and willingness to change one's mind; and asking the why, who, when, where, and how of a culture. Egan (1992) characterizes learner development based on how the learner gains access to and engages with the world. In the Mythic layer, ages four or five through nine to ten years, learners seek moral and emotional categories to make sense of their world or else “knowledge will be simply meaningless” (Egan, 1979). In the Romantic layer, ages nine to ten through fourteen to fifteen years, learners understand best when new concepts, perspectives, and practices are connected to big ideas and qualities with which they can

associate. It is here that the learner develops a sense of identity and awareness of the other. A cultural concept that is very different from the learner's experience can be made memorable and accessible to a student when focused on a big idea, quality, or moral statement that can transfer to other principles or concepts in real life. These ideas, concepts, and perspectives are at the heart of the culture and have value outside the classroom. Knowledge, skills, vocabulary, and grammar are now associated with the idea and are learned for a purpose, shifting the focus from mimicry and memorization to learning the language with an intention and a usable goal. The learner is more motivated to be accurate when he or she is interested in material that is worthy of understanding. These ideas tend to recur over the lifespan of the learner, appearing in different contexts and requiring varying levels of sophistication and flexibility.

In this model, Culture is not limited to discussion of facts or tangible products. Cultural practices and perspectives are revealed as learners uncover the themes across the checkpoints in articulation, aligning purpose for knowledge and skills as comparisons with their own cultures and application of interdisciplinary content to real-life contexts encountered outside the classroom. The Culture standard aligns with Stage one in UC ADAPT and the Backward Design framework.

From there, the Communication standard determines the assessment mode (Glisan, et. al., 2003) (Glisan, Adair-Hauck, Koda, Sandrock, & Swender, 2003) and Stage two of UC ADAPT, with how learners demonstrate their understanding of the topic as is relevant to the culture. The Communication standard (ACTFL, 1996/1999; National Standards, 1999/2006) is composed of three modes: Interpretive, Interpersonal, and Presentational. By design, these modes move the learner from rote, memorized skills to authentic performance. Moreover, as a summative assessment, the Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA) (Adair-Hauck, 2006; Glisan, et. al., 2003) cycles the three mode tasks around the unit theme, each task motivated by the previous, using culturally authentic materials. At each step, a feedback loop between the teacher and students ensures that the students understand what they know, what they are able to do, and what areas they need to improve to reach the performance goal. These three modes aid in the shift from rote memorization and four skills in isolation to authentic

performance. Culturally authentic materials made by and for the culture provide context for the Interpersonal Mode task. Active negotiation of meaning and solving information gaps via spontaneous, unrehearsed, unanticipated tasks characterize the Interpersonal Mode. In the Presentational Mode, students have time to consult resources, develop, and present an oral or written piece that has value or use to a culture.

These tasks promote transfer, the goal to use language flexibly, in new, unanticipated, unscripted, real-life situations other than within the context they were previously taught. (Eddy, 2007; McTighe & Wiggins, 2001/2005). Transfer requires inference, critical thinking skills, and negotiation of meaning, not just amassing of facts and completing a drill. Without transfer, the language learner forgets, misunderstands a concept, or only knows it in the rigid, predictable context in which it was taught. Performance assessment design engages the learner in transfer tasks with less reliance on cues or repeated drills. They teach the learner to expect variation. Using a language appropriately in a given culture requires high adaptability, tolerance of new situations, dealing with incomplete information, and problem solving with minimal or no cues (Eddy, 2006b). Tasks that echo these challenges will best prepare students for what people face using language outside the classroom.

Conclusion

UC ADAPT helps teachers design for the Standards within our New York State syllabus, creating reasonable and challenging expectations for students, moving from coverage without pity to performance. Uncovering content through cultural understanding of our syllabus topics helps to ease the pressure of coverage that is the bane of activity-driven curriculum and repetitive item testing. Grammar and vocabulary content are there, but they are carefully chosen to support the learner for a larger concept that will give purpose and reason for the skills. Teachers can be more selective of the knowledge and skills required for their assessments and plan instruction more mindfully, thus reducing the amount of unrelated material.

With UC ADAPT, teachers are facilitators, responsive to student performance rather than coaches of drill and transmitters of facts. Thus, the students engage in a shift from a dependent, inert consumer of rote content to critical, flexible, self-directed language learners. As implied in our syllabus and Standards, effective curriculum and assessment design moves students from mechanical drills to tasks that require self-selection, negotiation, flexibility, autonomy, and critical thinking, indicative of true performance.

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Dr. Jennifer Eddy is an assistant professor of world language education at Queens College, CUNY. The program prepares teachers using Backward Design, performance assessment, and UC ADAPT. She is a consultant to states and school districts on curriculum and assessment issues.