When I was fresh out of graduate school and had just moved to New York City, I taught sociology by day and wrote plays at night. At one point I had the students in my social inequality class working on a performance task and an actor working on a new scene for a play that was being produced off-off-Broadway.

And both in the classroom and on the stage they were struggling. At first, I couldn’t understand why: The performance task scenario connected directly to the reading, and the play’s dialogue was necessary to move the plot along. But the student and the actor characterized their frustration in the same way: “I’m having a tough time doing this because it doesn’t feel very real.” And I wanted to figure out why.

**What Are Performance Tasks?**

If we want students to practice and prepare for challenges they might eventually face, there are a number of useful strategies to connect academic learning to the “real world.” One is to ask students to complete what are variously called *performance tasks, case studies, simulations, or project- or problem-based learning units* (hereafter referred to generically as “performance tasks” or “tasks”). (For additional details on performance tasks and their use in the classroom, see “Taking Teaching to [Performance] Task” in the March/April 2010 issue of *Change*.)

Performance tasks present students with complex, real (or realistic) situations, often asking them to assume the role of individuals who need to make decisions or solve problems and thereby experience the complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties confronting those individuals.

Mimicking the situations faced by real persons, performance tasks may include information that is partial, misleading, unreliable, or contradictory—and, unlike more self-contained academic exercises, the volume of information may be overwhelming. To successfully complete a task, students must distinguish pertinent from peripheral information, valid from invalid claims, and reliable from unreliable data.

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Problems to be solved might be ambiguous and complex. To complete such tasks, students must first determine what the problems are and parse the relevant context and parameters. Many tasks have no single “correct” answer; in those cases, students have to identify the range of possible solutions, decide on courses of action, justify them, and identify possible unintended consequences and barriers to implementation. They might also have to identify missing information that would enable them to make better choices.

Performance tasks may challenge students to take on roles that they are unfamiliar with or ask them to adopt perspectives with which they disagree. Ideally this leads them to compare their own positions with those held by others, better understand persons with opposing perspectives, and possibly even change their minds.

Performance tasks serve as a reminder that the real world is not artificially divided up by academic disciplines. To respond to an oil spill near protected wetlands, for example, students need to use concepts and investigative strategies drawn from biology, environmental studies, sociology, economics, and political science. Tasks help students experience the struggle of making sense of authentic, complicated issues and give them an opportunity to practice taking on the types of challenges they are likely to face once they leave the academy.

There are numerous educational benefits to the use of performance tasks. They encourage active learning and help students practice skills such as critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and problem solving, as well as communication, collaboration, and metacognition—all while learning academic content.

By bridging the gap between theory and practice, tasks also have the potential to increase students’ desire to learn. They can make learning come alive, illustrating theories or concepts through engaging examples that require deeper investigation in realistic settings.

**How Are Performance Tasks Theatrical?**

There is something highly theatrical in the way that performance tasks represent the real world in the context of the classroom. With a field trip or an internship, the student is faced with the sights and sounds of the real world—an experience analogous to film. A movie made about a trek to the North Pole might feature sweeping aerial shots of massive, wind-swept ice sheets and pressures ridges, with booming echoes of cracking glaciers or the eerie sounds as ice floes rub against each other underwater. Similarly, when students go on site—in another country or in a laboratory, away on an archeological dig or in an internship across the street—they are immersed in the rich details of the real world.

But a task requires a different level of engagement from students, making it more analogous to a stage production. Like a play, it necessitates a significant suspension of disbelief, and it requires the actors and the audience to fill in the blanks. A play about the aforementioned Arctic trip might begin with a wash of bright lights illuminating a small sign placed on an empty stage with just the words “North Pole” written on it. In this quiet moment, almost inexplicably the audience feels a collective chill. Similarly, students completing performance tasks, armed with mere sheets of paper, can become wealthy captains of industry, disenfranchised immigrants, or inquisitive scientists.

When done well, live theater can engage the audience at multiple levels. Think of Julie Taymor’s hugely imaginative stage production of *The Lion King*, in which the actors wear stylized masks and manipulate puppets. The audience can see both the actor and the animal, and they are invited to appreciate the craft on exhibit.

In performance tasks too, there is no need to hide the artifice; when they are done well, students are willing to go along for the ride, simultaneously experiencing the challenge of solving an authentic problem but also maintaining an awareness of the learning that is occurring. Students may then be able to consider their own metacognitive strategies as they work on the problem.

In the acting domain, the “Method” coach Constantin Stanislavski asked actors to consider the “magic if” as a starting point for creating inspiration. Players are to ask, “What would I do if I were in these circumstances?” This enables actors to achieve truth onstage, despite the obvious artifice.

Faculty aim to have students do the same as they engage in a performance task: What if I were a doctor diagnosing this patient who had contradictory test results? What if I were curating a museum exhibit and faced likely protests over a controversial piece I plan to include?
THE TEN QUESTIONS
Having established this analogy, I will now enumerate ten questions educators might ask themselves in order to ensure that the tasks they develop maximize the impact they have on student learning, and I will show how they are similar to the ones playwrights ask in creating a play.

#1: What Type Is It?
Reviews/revues, follies, and burlesques combined music and theater in a series of disconnected skits; musical numbers were for the most part interchangeable and not linked to any driving narrative. The first successful “modern” musical came in 1943 with Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Oklahoma! This show established a new model in which song and dance were integrated into the show and advanced the storyline.

If the course for which a performance task is being developed is a survey of topics (e.g., one week is spent studying the rain forest, the next week the desert, and the following week the ocean) where the order of topics is not important, it is more like a revue. But if the course is driven by a narrative (e.g., one week is spent studying the Dred Scott decision, the next how the Lecompton Constitution was rejected, and the next how this all prompted John Brown’s raid of Harper’s Ferry—all leading up to the Civil War), the metaphor of a modern musical might be more apt.

In determining the relative centrality of the performance task, consider the analogy of whether a musical number makes sense on its own. One could perform “You’re the Top” outside of Anything Goes and it wouldn’t be denuded of its meaning; remove the song from the show, and the production too would still make sense. However, take the “Laurey Makes up Her Mind” ballet out of Oklahoma! and there’s a significant hole in the plot. The audience would not fully understand why she is afraid of Jud.

So consider the performance tasks’ role in the course. Could they be removed without disrupting the overall flow? Are they relatively interchangeable? Are they an interesting diversion but not integral to the course’s learning objectives? Do they blend seamlessly with other instructional strategies? Adding or removing a performance task about the desert would probably not have a deleterious effect on the subsequent study of the ocean, but a performance task about Dred Scott could critically inform students’ understanding of the factors leading up to the Civil War. The performance task’s degree of integration affects the value students place on the task and their motivation to engage with it more fully.

#2: What Is the Focus?
Hamlet begins with a ghost wandering the castle ramparts and ends with a sword fight during which virtually every main character dies. Shakespeare very carefully chose those starting and ending points, as well as the events leading from one to the other. For a performance task, consider whether it conveys the most interesting, compelling, relevant, important, or perplexing aspects of the case.

Of course, what is important is a matter of perspective. In Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two couriers sent by the king to spy on Hamlet, are minor characters, but they get their full story told in Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. It’s possible to be creative about whose perspective is adopted as the focus for a performance task as well. What would be learned instead, for instance, if a task about a successful company were presented from the perspective of an administrative assistant?

#3: Why Is It Being Used?
In asking whether a task should be included in a course, valuable insights emerge when we consider Broadway musicals. In them, characters find themselves in situations where words are not enough. The characters are so full of joy or anger or love or some other powerful emotion that they have to burst into song and dance. In West Side Story, Anita simply cannot understand why Maria could still love Tony, and so she finally has to sing, “A boy like that, who killed your brother, forget that boy, and find another.”

Jukebox musicals often violate these rules or create diversions from the narrative’s flow in order to squeeze in a song (typically from a pre-existing catalog). In the short-lived Broadway production of Good Vibrations, a musical based on the tunes of the Beach Boys, the audience let out a collective groan in anticipation of what was coming next when the character Eddie introduced his friends to his new girlfriend Rhonda. Consider then what happens when a performance task is introduced that doesn’t connect to the course’s narrative.

So, the question whether the task is introduced when the course material has to “sing”—when the readings and other activities just don’t suffice. If the class has read materials that describe how life as an undocumented citizen is stressful, they probably won’t learn much more from a task that has a sole purpose of illustrating that life as an undocumented citizen is stressful. In the world of theater, David Mamet calls this “putting a horse costume on a horse.”
Performance tasks can focus on the seemingly small and idiosyncratic details that humanize a topic’s larger meaning.

#4: Is It Human Sized?

When a course tackles huge issues such as race, politics, or the environment, it is in danger of staying at the 30,000 feet level, and students may only understand and be able to discuss the topic at the grand conceptual level. But a play about, say, race that presented two characters just talking would likely be off-putting to an audience.

The drama of the specific instance is most compelling: A Raisin in the Sun focuses on the story of the Younger family in the Washington Park subdivision of Chicago’s Woodlawn neighborhood. We’re reminded that characters experience issues of race as humans. So how might a unit on sexism include a performance task that zoomed in on a conflict between two individuals?

A performance task need not focus only on grand historic events. Consider “It Couldn’t Please Me More” from Cabaret, where Herr Schultz, an elderly Jewish fruit-shop owner, has given his landlady Fräulein Schneider a pineapple. Although on the surface there doesn’t seem to be anything particularly momentous about such a gift, when it’s seen as a first token of affection between two shy older people in the midst of an economic depression, we realize the importance of the exchange. Performance tasks can focus on the seemingly small and idiosyncratic details that humanize a topic’s larger meaning.

In compelling drama, there is usually conflict and an obstacle. Would the story of the star-crossed lovers of Romeo and Juliet be as compelling if the Montagues and Capulets got together every weekend for a friendly game of mah jongg? An engaging performance task could highlight a specific unresolved tension in the field as well as the factors that prevent an easy solution.

Performance tasks, to be realistic, need to reflect the fact that in the real world, one rarely has all the time, money, information, or other resources needed to solve challenging problems. Consider a performance task that starts with “You are a scientist who needs to plan a research study. Assume you have all the staff, lab equipment, and resources to execute this project...” If real-world, authentic obstacles aren’t baked into the performance task, students might not be prepared to tackle actual problems, which have such constraints, in the future.

#5: Is It a Comedy or a Tragedy?

It may seem natural to use performance tasks to examine the rise of the successful company or the triumph of a heroic individual or group. But there are other stories to tell, both in theater and in performance tasks.

In fact, at times there is a fine line between a comedy and tragedy. Shakespeare’s plays exemplify this: He might start them with something that upsets the normal state of affairs (such as the shipwrecks that open both Twelfth Night and The Tempest) but demonstrate that the ending is not a given. The characters in those two plays find a happy or a sad ending depending on how the issues get resolved. And a minor difference can determine this outcome: if only Juliet had awakened in time, she and Romeo could have lived happily ever after.

A performance task too can have a happy or sad ending, and seemingly insignificant factors can determine that ending. How might a series of performance tasks help to demonstrate this? For example, they could portray three individuals or organizations that start out at the same place but end up in radically different circumstances, depending on their choices or the environmental factors they face.

#6: When Should It Be Used?

During the pre-Broadway run of the musical “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum,” the creative team found that audiences just weren’t laughing. According to reports, they realized that the show’s lifting original opening number, “Love is in the Air,” set the wrong tone; the audience was primed to expect a romantic comedy rather than the bawdy farce that followed. The creative team replaced the song with the more raucous “Comedy Tonight,” which more clearly signaled the low comedy that was to follow, and then the audience laughed through the rest of the show.

It’s helpful to be reminded that a performance task at the beginning of a unit, semester, or year can set the tone for the learning that will follow. Start with a highly political performance task, and students will be primed for a political discussion; start with a more technical performance task, and students may understand future content from that perspective.

#7: Is It Realistic?

American theater is dominated by realism, a set of conventions that truth can be communicated best through literal representation on stage. Ibsen pioneered work in modern realistic drama; in his plays, he eschewed soliloquies and asides and motivated all exposition and dialogue.
A Medley of Performance Tasks

The various types of musical songs parallel the range of performance tasks.

Overture: An overture provides an instrumental introduction to a show and includes melodies and motifs that the audience will hear throughout the production. An overture performance task can serve a similar function, presenting a problem or a case that previews the concepts that students will have the opportunity to learn. It can also motivate that learning, in that students get a glimpse of what they will eventually know or be able to do.

“I Am”: An “I Am” song (like “I am the Pirate King” from The Pirates of Penzance”) serves the purpose of introducing a character and can illustrate how the characters define themselves relative to a challenge. In an “I Am” task, students might be asked to solve a problem that helps them make sense of what it means to take on that role.

“I Want”: In the “I Want” song (such as “Wouldn’t it be Loverly” from My Fair Lady), typically positioned towards the beginning of a musical, one or more of the main characters sing about their motivating desires (most love songs are “I Want” songs) and why they decided to act now, despite obstacles. An “I Want” performance task can explore an individual’s incentive for taking action. If students are to assume the role of a businessperson, community activist, voter, or scientist, they have a chance to consider what they are hoping to achieve and what about the historical, cultural, social, or economic context made this the moment when they determined to achieve it.

Dueling “I Want”s: A more complex task juxtaposes “I Want” stories, such as the five-part harmony reprise of “Tonight” in West Side Story. Multiple “I Want”s can shed light on the motivations, for example, of a policy maker seeking economic growth who conflicts with a community group seeking environmental sustainability. Such a performance task can help students learn how to resolve competing demands, or to recognize when they cannot.

Cameo: In a musical, the cameo song features a relatively minor character performing a standout song (like Gladys performing “Steam Heat” in The Pajama Game). A cameo task can highlight the problems solved by a person not typically thought of as central to a larger effort: What problems do museum maintenance staff solve when there is a major art installation, or what crucial decisions are made by interpreters working at the UN?

The Reprise: In some musicals, a song will be reprised a number of times (such as “Let Me Entertain You” in Gypsy as Louise grows from innocent child to seductive stripper). In a course, performance tasks can be structured to illustrate changes over time (e.g., first having students solve a problem as a newspaper reporter, then as desk editor, and finally as editor-in-chief). Performance tasks can also illustrate how problem solving might change as the context changes (e.g., an entrepreneur will behave differently when the economy is doing well than during a downturn).

Climax: When characters reach an emotional climax, the musical number can help amplify the moment (such as “You Can’t Stop the Beat” in Hairspray). A performance task too can highlight analogous key moments: when a major scientific discovery is made, when a fight for civil rights is won, or when a personal victory is secured. The performance task can illustrate the challenges leading up to this climax or explore the complex decision making required after it is reached.

So just as a mother would not naturally greet her son by saying, “Hello, Dashel, my twenty-year old son who has been at Stanford University studying linguistics,” a character in a performance task might not reveal all the relevant details. Real people have veiled motivations and hidden emotions. A performance task should contain only information likely to be available to that character in the real world, requiring students to seek out or ask for what’s missing.

Realism emphasizes cause and effect, and plays from this tradition honor chronological narratives. But there are variations on this model, such as Margulies’ Dinner with Friends, in which he tells the story through flashbacks, or Pinter’s Betrayal, which uses reverse chronological order. Use of these approaches in a performance task can help to highlight the causes that led to a particular outcome.

#8: Does It Present “Real” People?

Be mindful of the characters who populate a performance task. Imagine a scenario that started, “You work for a nonprofit organization developing a new program to support needy children in the community. An unscrupulous mayor cuts all funding because he only seeks to serve the affluent members of the city.” Does it make sense that the mayor would have such a nefarious approach to public policy?

It’s helpful to be reminded that in theater, as in the real world, all individuals are the heroes of their life stories. So a challenge to students in working through a task could be to consider how the actions of a seeming “villain” could make sense from her or his perspective.

Memorable performances can demonstrate this. Al Pacino’s recent turn as Shylock in The Merchant of Venice was lauded for an interpretation that showed how the actions of the seemingly heartless banker actually make sense from his perspective, and Fiona Shaw’s portrayal of Medea helped audiences see that the character’s murderous behavior emerged not out of evil but from love for her husband.
When constructing performance tasks, it’s important to make sure that the actions of people portrayed in the scenario make sense; alternatively, students can be challenged to figure out the individuals’ motivations to see how the behaviors stem from those of “real people.”

#9: Are We Invited In?

Some Broadway shows include a musical number where the full orchestra swells, the massive set rises from the stage, and the star effortlessly belts a high C at the end of a ten-minute tap-dance routine in which she is perfectly synchronized with the cast of thirty surrounding her. She signals, “I’m a highly trained professional who has been taking dance classes since birth and have a conservatory-trained voice, so just sit back and watch.”

In other shows, a character might be in the middle of a scene, and then dialogue turns into lyrics and the actor sings and dances around the stage the way most folks in the audience do when they find themselves at home alone. Here, the actor invites you into the show by indicating “It’s not that difficult, and you could join in if you wanted to.”

A performance task could require the high level of knowledge and skills necessary to take on a challenging problem with significant stakes (e.g., serving as a negotiator during an international political crisis). But it could also be one in which such capacity isn’t required (e.g., helping to defuse a difference of opinion between co-workers) that anyone might wander into.

#10: Is the Ending Earned?

In the theater, there’s a principle called “Chekov’s Gun,” best exemplified in Uncle Vanya. At the end of the play, a character grabs a pistol that has been onstage throughout and attempts to commit homicide. Here, the seemingly irrelevant suddenly becomes relevant. In making a case for foreshadowing, Chekhov cautioned against including unnecessary elements in a play: “One must not put a loaded rifle on stage if no one is thinking of firing it.”

A culminating performance task should require students to call on all the learning acquired in the course. A seemingly insignificant concept or skill that students have learned early in the term might become crucial for solving a problem at the end. At the same time, students should not be asked to learn anything that has no significant value within the context of the course, outside of class, or later in life.

With too obvious foreshadowing, it may not be clear whether students figured out the relevance of the material or instead were able to assume they were supposed to use it. If the students learn about feminist phase theory and are immediately given a task in which the use of that theory is key, they may have had a chance to practice now but might not necessarily know to do the same in the future when faced with a similar problem.

So if the intent is to see if students are able to determine which knowledge and skills to use in a performance task, it might be a good strategy to leave some tempting elements in the case that they might want to use but shouldn’t. However, a theater truism applies here: If you have a naked penis on stage, no one will look at anything else.

A tradition in musicals is to have an “11 o’clock number” like “Brotherhood of Man” in How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying, which is a show-stopping song that occurs towards the end. The song signals to the theater-goers that the show is nearing its conclusion and can give them something to hum as they leave the theater. In that spirit, I offer one more bonus idea as number 11:

#11: Once You Know the Rules, Know When to Break Them

The ten questions presented above can help make the design and use of performance tasks more meaningful and supportive of learning. But there are many effective exceptions to these “rules.” Gatz offers the entire text of The Great Gatsby with a story that unfolds over an eight-hour production. Sleep No More is an interactive theatrical experience currently being performed in a series of empty warehouses in New York. It presents a version of Macbeth without words; the audience is free to wander throughout five floors to discover and create the narrative of the show. These theatrical structures violate many of the ideas presented above, but they stay true to a key theatrical tenet: The focus should be on the audience’s experience. And in much the same way, it is important to focus primarily on the experience of and learning gains made by students.

As I learned from the students in my classes and the actors in my plays, they’ll tell you if something actually feels real, and it is unusual to get things right the first time. But if we think of performance tasks, like theater, as constantly evolving, we realize that the key is to listen to students like a playwright listens to an audience and to constantly improve. Given that, I offer one final piece of advice to educators who want to improve their performance tasks: The list of questions presented here is just a start, so come along and listen to the pedagogy of Broadway.