Introduction

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.

—W. B. Yeats

When I think of my own 13 years of K–12 education, I realize that most of my learning experiences were the "filling of the pail," with only an occasional "lighting of a fire." Most of my learning experiences involved sitting in rows of seats, listening to the teacher, and independently completing worksheets. The learning experiences I remember that would fall into the category of "lighting of a fire" include bringing our cat Fluff to school for show-and-tell in first grade; sewing together a patchwork apron with pink, blue, and flowered patches; creating an ink drawing of a forest that was published in the middle school arts publication *Black on White*; constructing a six-bottle wine rack for my parents; writing a research paper on mountain lions; dissecting a frog; writing a research paper on Reaganomics and the "trickle-down effect"; and writing a poem using alliterative verse after reading *Beowulf*. In all of these cases, I was either learning through application or demonstrating what I had learned through application. This is the essence of performance tasks, the application of knowledge and skills. What learning experiences from your K–12 years of education do you remember favorably? How do they compare to mine?

Standards: Then and Now

With the 2016–2017 school year, the educational standards movement in the United States came full circle. The movement started as a responsibility of the individual states in the 1990s, and by 2010 the federal government stepped in and pressured states to adopt

certain standards, specifically the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), as a condition of applying for Race to the Top grant funds. With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act at the end of 2015, the standards that students need to attain were once again up to each state. Just to bring all readers up to speed, since there is a growing influx of new and younger teachers as baby boomers retire, I offer below a brief history of the standards movement. The standards are at the core of all performance tasks, and if we truly want every student to succeed, we need high-quality standards for students to attain.

History of the Standards Movement

A year after I graduated from high school, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk* (1983), which asserted that the U.S. education system was plagued with "mediocrity" and had lost sight of the "high expectations and disciplined effort" needed to provide a high-quality and enriching education. That research paper was the trigger for a series of educational innovations, initiatives, political policies, and laws, all intended to improve the quality of education in the United States. As a result of the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, which was the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the standards movement began. States individually created and adopted grade-span (K–2, 3–5, 6–8, 9–12) standards and conducted assessments in grades 4 and 8 and once in high school (Flach, 2011).

Then, on January 8, 2002, under the watch of President George W. Bush and Secretary of Education Rod Paige, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was signed into law, and the Age of Accountability was born. Periodic assessments were now replaced with grade-specific assessments in math and reading for grades 3–8 and one assessment in high school. The birth of adequate yearly progress (AYP) occurred with NCLB, all in the name of closing the achievement gap between Caucasian students and their African American, socioeconomically disadvantaged, English language learner, and special education counterparts. If a school failed to meet AYP for two or more years, it was forced to implement a series of measures that were intended, in the eyes of the federal government, to support the school (Klein, 2015). The measures, however, were more punitive than helpful. This was accountability in action.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 was signed into law by President Barack Obama, and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was the mastermind behind the Race to the Top grants

funded by the act, which were intended for state education departments. States needed to address four priorities in their applications in order to be considered for Race to the Top grants, and one of those priorities was adopting the Common Core State Standards, which were in the process of being developed (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The Race to the Top grants enticed states to adopt the standards in hopes of filling their education coffers, as funds were being depleted as a result of the recession that started in 2008. Initially, only 44 states and territories adopted the CCSS (Flach, 2011).

During the 2014 and 2015 school years, there was a lot of turmoil over the Common Core State Standards as well as the Next Generation Assessments (created by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers), which went online in the spring of 2015 to measure student progress on the CCSS. Numerous articles were published in both educational journals and news outlets, some criticizing and others promoting the CCSS and the Next Generation Assessments. Parents started to rise up against the Next Generation Assessments by opting their children out of taking the tests and urging other parents to do the same. The CCSS and the Next Generation Assessments were running into problems across the country as parents began organizing and states began to reconsider the adoption of the CCSS. Luckily, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which was the grounding legislation for all of the subsequent acts, was up again for reauthorization, and by midsummer Congress was closing in on a final agreement. It could not have occurred at a better time.

The Standards Now

On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The touted coup for the legislation is that it relinquishes a fair amount of the federal government's control over the states and diminishes the role of the U.S. Department of Education. It is not clear yet how much control will truly be relinquished, but the pendulum is swinging back to the states having more control and decision-making powers concerning education, including standards and assessments (Klein, 2016). Thus, it will be up to state legislatures and state departments of education to make decisions that will focus education on student learning, embracing teachers and administrators as the professionals they are rather than instituting demoralizing legislation that penalizes instead of supports

them. States still must retain high standards, but they do not have to be the CCSS—this freedom is a key piece of the 2015 legislation.

Even though Ohio, Missouri, and Maine abandoned the CCSS before the adoption of ESSA, states should not make hasty decisions on the CCSS. The standards were developed to meet certain criteria, which they have largely achieved. As the Common Core State Standards Initiative (n.d.) states on its website, the standards are:

1. Research- and evidence-based

2. Clear, understandable, and consistent

3. Aligned with college and career expectations

4. Based on rigorous content and application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills

5. Built upon the strengths and lessons of current state standards

6. Informed by other top performing countries in order to prepare all students for success in our global economy and society

If the CCSS meet all these criteria, what are the reasons to change from the CCSS and spend time and money at the state level to develop a different set of standards or revert to previous state standards?

An Opportunity for Change

There is currently an opportunity for states and their departments of education to reflect on the significant changes that have occurred over the past few decades and learn from those experiences. Accordingly, in the 2016–2017 school year, some states transitioned to new standards, with full implementation of these plans to take place in the 2017–2018 school year (National Conference of State Legislatures, n.d.).

At no other time in education have we known more than we do now about what works *best* in schools, as well as how the brain learns. We have the research to support what works best, so what is preventing schools and districts from acting on this knowledge and making the changes that are necessary to close the achievement gap and promote student progress and growth for all students? The most influential research in this area has been conducted by

Dr. John Hattie and published in his book *Visible Learning* (2009), which will be elaborated in Chapter 1. Hattie has applied his research to practice in the classroom, resulting in the publication of his book *Visible Learning for Teachers* (2012). It is through Hattie's work and my own study of visible learning that I have come to understand the assessment-capable learner and the attributes of such a learner. Assessment-capable learners (also discussed in depth in Chapter 1) are actively involved in their learning; they have a sound understanding of what they are learning and how they are progressing in their learning, and they are able to determine what they need to learn next.

The "fire" in me is roaring at this time because so many of the attributes that an assessment-capable learner exhibits can be nurtured and developed through the planning and implementation of performance tasks, whether they are used as learning experiences or as assessments. I just wish that I had known more about performance tasks and assessment-capable learners when I first started teaching.

Passion for Performance Tasks

My first experience with performance tasks—and I am using the term loosely—which I still remember clearly, was during my first year as a teacher at the Wellsville Middle School in the Southern Tier of New York. I was hired to teach seventh-grade social studies about three days before school started; I was to be a long-term sub (filling in for someone who was ill), responsible for teaching American history from exploration up to the Civil War. At times, I had students work in small learning groups, but what was most memorable was engaging them in tasks as their learning experience rather than as an assessment. A performance task can be the learning experience and not just an assessment of what students have learned—and that is the main premise of this book. Typically, when I used a performance task for learning content and processes, students also took a unit test at the end of the instructional period. A performance task, in my view, has students applying what they are learning as a means to learn (formative), or it can also be an application of what students have learned (summative), and the task is relevant because it makes the learning real.

Two performance tasks used during that year stand out in my mind 25-plus years later, and both were used as means for students

to process their learning, not as assessments. The first performance task was the creation of a class "colonial newspaper" for which the students served as the reporters. Each student had to do some type of research and writing on colonial life and events to include in the newspaper, which we printed on 11-by-17-inch tabloid paper. As students were engaged in their learning through the performance task of being reporters for a colonial newspaper, the classroom was alive! The students were motivated to learn, and they were in control of their learning.

The second performance task I used as a learning experience was one focused on the American Revolution. Students worked in small groups and selected an event that led up to the American Revolution or was a key event during the Revolution. They then needed to research the event and present what they learned to the rest of the class; they could choose how they presented their information. One group knocked their presentation out of the park by reporting live from the Battle of Bunker Hill using the school's closed-circuit TV. This was about the time of the Iraq-Kuwait War, and that was the first time students had seen television reporting from the battlefield, with gunfire in the background. The students creatively modeled what they saw on real television by taking on the roles of television news reporters and reporting the news to the citizens (their classmates). Between the colonial newspaper performance task and the Battle of Bunker Hill presentation, I was able to further clarify how a performance task is defined.

These two performance tasks were not perfect by any means, but they led me to develop my own definition of a performance task, which is succinctly stated in Chapter 1. I did not have a model to follow to create or implement the tasks; I just used my best judgment based on what I had learned as an education student and first-year teacher. I often reflect on all I could have done to make these engaging learning experiences even more powerful, given what I know now. As the saying goes, hindsight is 20/20. These two performance tasks, in their infancy, sparked a "fire" in me about planning learning experiences for my classroom that would be relevant and motivating to students. I want to provide you with a process that can guide you through the development of performance tasks and accompanying scoring guides that will challenge and motivate students to want to learn and keep on learning even if it is difficult. By using performance tasks for learning and not just assessment, you can develop assessment-capable learners in your classroom.

Organization of This Book

Following this introduction, this book is organized into seven chapters:

- Chapter 1, "The Lasting Power of Performance Tasks," establishes a rationale for planning and creating performance tasks to use in your classroom.
- Chapter 2, "Building the Base: Begin With the End in Mind," focuses on standards, as they are at the center of every performance task. When it comes to any aspect of instructional planning and assessment, the standards are always the shining star.
- Chapter 3, "Building the Base: Learning Progressions," introduces the idea of learning progressions and makes connections to a few different practices with which you may already be familiar, in order to meld what you already know with something that may be new.
- Chapter 4, "Building the Base: Going SOLO!," discusses the SOLO (structure of the observed learning outcome) taxonomy and how it can support the creation of learning intentions and success criteria that build progressively from surface learning to deep learning.
- Chapter 5, "Performance Task Attributes," introduces the topic of how to create high-quality performance tasks that students will be motivated to complete and that will leave them wanting more. This chapter is not placed earlier in the book because before you plan a performance task, you should work through Chapters 2–4, which establish the base for the performance task.
- Chapter 6, "Scoring Guides, aka Rubrics," reviews scoring guides with the aim of providing some new insights that you can develop for your performance tasks.
- Chapter 7, "Implementation Considerations," is intended to help you with the implementation of performance tasks in your classroom, school, or district—or, for that matter, across a state. Why not think big?

As you progress through the chapters, you will encounter examples, mainly from core subject areas representing elementary and secondary grades, that will support your understanding of the key points of the concepts being discussed. Each chapter ends with a list of a few key takeaways, followed by a few questions for you to reflect

upon. You will also have online access to a performance task planning template to complete a performance task as you read the book if you choose to do so. Consider allotting some additional time to reflect as well as to develop your own performance task as you are reading through the chapters. Chapter 2 is where you will start applying your learning by creating a performance task, if you choose to do so.

My hope is that as you read this book you will use the online planning template to create your own performance task and that you will try it out in your classroom. If you are an administrator, instructional coach, or other educational professional who does not have your own classroom, seek out a willing colleague who does have one to try your performance task with your support. When you implement performance tasks in your classroom, they will sound different and function differently than in other circumstances, so it is important to read the final chapter to ensure the success of your hard work in creating a performance task. It could potentially be a very important chapter for you no matter what your position.

I hope that once you engage your students in the completion of a performance task that you have created, you will feel like it is "the lighting of a fire" for both you and your students. Are you ready to be revved up about teaching and student learning through performance tasks?