

Excerpted from Thomas Moorcroft, Kristen Desmarais, Kathleen Hogan, and Alan Berkowitz. Authentic Assessment in the Informal Setting: How It Can Work for You. *The Journal of Environmental Education*. Vol 31 (3) Spring 2000: 20-24.

## **Essay and Scaffolded Essay Assessment**

Essay assessments pose complex questions to students and ask them to write a response exploring all aspects of the topic. This method requires students to plan out their responses, include as many relevant points as possible, and support each idea. A benefit of this type of assessment, when compared to traditional standardized tests, is that by examining the logic behind students' responses, the assessor has an opportunity to analyze the reasoning behind answers.

A variation of essay assessment, scaffolded essay assessment can be used to reduce the apparent size of the assessment task. Scaffolded essay assessments pose specific questions that require a more in-depth response than a one-word or single-phrase answer but are not as complex a response as an entire essay. Students must support the answers they provide.

The term scaffolding is used here to refer to the act of providing information that will help focus students' attention on what should be included in their responses. In scaffolded essay assessment, a larger essay question is broken down into several prompts that require short answers to ensure that students are being tested on their knowledge of the subject material, and not on their abilities to create and remember a mental outline of the appropriate way to answer the question. This technique breaks the overall task down into manageable parts, providing students with the chance to succeed at several shorter tasks in contrast to grappling with one enormous one. This technique is not unlike verbal scaffolding during classroom discussions, where teachers "prompt the learner's active reflection and construction of ideas".

Scaffolded essay assessments yield insights into the reasoning underlying students' ideas, as does essay assessment. By focusing students' attention on the specific needs for an appropriate response, the assessor can increase the overall effectiveness of the assessment. Scaffolded essay assessment lends itself well to use in informal education program assessments.