"Student as Author"

Supportive Prompts & Accommodations (Allowed)
vs.
Directive Prompts that Violate the Construct Being Tested (Not Allowed)

What does *"independent performance"* mean for an alternately assessed student?
An area of assessment for alternately assessed students that sometimes causes confusion is *independence*. Knowing that students with significant disabilities (those who take the alternate assessment) have a variety of difficulties with motor control, communication, attention and sensory regulation, the concept of *independent performance* can mean something very different than "*doing a task completely on one's own."*

Supports are a necessary and appropriate part of life for students with disabilities and therefore should be available when taking assessments. Supports are meant to break through the barriers of the disability so that the student can participate and engage in academic problem solving activities. *Supportive prompts* can take many forms. Augmentative communication for students with limited verbal communication, a touch on the shoulder to stimulate movement to initiate the task for a student with attention and/or motor difficulties, the choice from an array of answers for the student whose motor difficulties inhibit writing, all can be seen as *supportive prompts* that break the barrier of the disability without "giving" the student the answer. In each case, these supports permit the student to solve academic problems and show what he or she knows academically. These supports do not get in the way of a student showing authorship and genuine engagement with the academic problem solving process. Instead, these supports free up the student to engage that process using the access and communication skills she/he has available. The *supportive prompt* only gives the student the necessary tools to allow him/her to demonstrate knowledge – but nothing more. For most of us, reading glasses are becoming a necessary and appropriate supportive prompt. These corrective lenses do not do our reading for us – *they permit us to do our own reading for ourselves*. That's what an appropriate supportive prompt should do and that's what independence looks like for someone who needs such a support during an academic test.

Contrast that with the *directive prompt*, which leads the student to (or hints at) the correct answer rather than paving the way for them to answer on their own. Examples of *directive prompts* would be hand-over-hand assistance that leads the student to pressing the "right" button on an AAC device or even verbal prompts such as "The answer begins with T," when there is only one T word available.

D*irective prompt*s violate the learning construct that we are trying to assess. Such intrusive and excessive supports get in the way of the student actually authoring his own solutions to academic problems and actually prevent the student from showing us what he or she really does know and can (*or could*) figure out for himself with the appropriate accessibility or communication devices. This happens when the support provided doesn't allow demonstration of the skill being assessed. For example, if you provide a

calculator when the student is being assessed on manual calculation of basic math facts, *this* would violate the construct. In this example, the only skill being measured is the ability to use the calculator correctly not the ability to demonstrate complete mathematical reasoning and accuracy in solving the problem. However, if she had a well designed communication board, she could indicate through her board the methods and procedures she wanted to use to solve the problem. With the right (non-directive) communication support, she could use her own 'scratch paper' system to figure out the answer for herself. Who says she can't calculate?

Another example of a directive prompt would be providing a written model of a word for the student when taking a spelling test. Here the student only needs to copy the word and does not – really is not permitted to- demonstrate an ability to spell or use sound/symbol correspondence. It simply gives the student the answer. This would be a violation of the construct and considered a *directive* prompt.

These types of *directive* prompts don't allow the student to demonstrate his/her knowledge. It is more reflective of creating learned helplessness rather than giving the student the tools needed for them to be more self-reliant while demonstrating their own knowledge.

When collecting assessment data, credit should be given to all correct answers that include *supportive prompts* but credit is questionable and will not be granted when *directive prompts* are used. When directive prompts are used it is usually painfully clear that the student was NOT the author of the academic work. The goal of educating students with disabilities is to allow them to learn academic content and be given the supports needed for them to express that knowledge. It may not always be pretty, but providing appropriately matched supports is vital to their success.

The following is an excerpt from the NECAP Accommodations Guide for 2010-11. It applies equally well to students who take the grade-level general assessment as it does to students who take the alternate assessment:

The Appropriate Use of an Accommodation: Finding the Balance

There is an important distinction between instructional accommodations and testing accommodations. Supports provided at the beginning of the instructional process are designed to help students' first experience, learn, and practice a new skill. The long term purpose of **instructional accommodations** or other early supports is to ultimately help the student *learn to become as fluent and as independent as possible* in performing that skill. For this reason, instructional accommodations should incorporate a scaffolded *fading process* that provides much more support early in the learning process as skill acquisition is just beginning. Later in the instructional process the need for early levels of support should be challenged or tested to see how much control can be assumed by the student. The intensive supports used very early in instruction may at times greatly

simplify or may even *modify* the skill the student is learning. These supports may help to guide, shape, and successively approximate the student's behavior to ensure that he or she experiences some early success while moving closer to real skill performance. When planning instructional supports, the path to student independence must always be kept in mind. Plan with the end in mind, always move toward independence.

As effective instruction continues, early intensive supports (or modifications) are faded, allowing the student to demonstrate the academic skill with increasing independence. As higher levels of skill independence are achieved, supports are faded back further still until **the least intrusive accommodation** or, perhaps even full independence is achieved. The least intrusive accommodation is the level of support that will allow the student to demonstrate the skill in the most independent manner possible for that student.

For example, if a student has a certain type of visual processing difficulty, he or she may need (for some years) to use a straight edge to guide visual tracking while reading, but eventually learns to perform the actual reading task with full independence to the extent of his or her capability. At the point of testing, this student no longer has a person holding the tracking tool or reading the passage to him or her. This has become the independent responsibility of the student; yet remaining student needs for support are still being met. Independent use of the visual tracking tool has become the least intrusive accommodation for the student at this point.

Testing accommodations should be those accommodations that *are the least intrusive accommodations possible* to meet the needs of the student while *allowing the maximum level of independence possible* for that student. They represent the current balance point the instructional fading process has achieved. Testing accommodations, therefore, represent the highest point of independent skill acquisition that has been achieved with that student *to date* through the instructional process. Testing accommodations do not necessarily represent the instructional end point, but they do represent a point in time that lies beyond the earliest phases of skill acquisition. Some skill independence should be seen if instruction has been effective. Teams must remember to carefully consider *long term independence* and thoughtfully design the process of fading supports when choosing and planning instructional methods.

The key is finding the right balance of supports for a given student and actively, consistently, and constructively supporting the growth of student independence.