A SURVEY OF AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENTS USED TO EVALUATE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN NANDI CENTRAL SUB-COUNTY SECONDARY SCHOOLS, KENYA

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Authentic assessment can be an effective means in attaining transformative education because it seeks to discover whether students can apply what they have learned in the classroom and solve problems in authentic real life situations. This study is a survey of authentic assessment implementation in English instruction in secondary schools in Nandi Central sub-county. Data were gathered from 174 selected high school students in Nandi Central sub-county using a questionnaire. Results of the study showed that students have limited understanding about what authentic assessments is all about and not sure whether their teachers are intentionally applying them in their English classes. Further, this study discovered that the most common type of authentic assessments applied are group performances such as debate, panel discussion, and cooperative learning and also performance products such as drawings, illustration, posters and essays. The least applied authentic assessment techniques are portfolios, observations and interviews. One of the greatest benefits for the students is the development of their confidence to accomplish those real -life tasks assigned to them and also being actively engaged in worthwhile learning activities. It is recommended that teachers of English should undergo training in authentic assessment and be intentional in applying them in teaching and learning.

Keywords: Authentic, assessment, English, instruction, secondary schools

Introduction

Authentic assessment describes the multiple forms of assessment that reflect student learning, achievement, motivation, and attitudes on instructionally relevant classroom activities (O' Malley & Pierce, 2011). English language learners in Kenya and Nandi County are expected to grapple with the complexity of the syllabus which integrates English language and literature and covers very many broad areas and skills successfully (Muthiora, 2017). Yet states measure a years' worth of learning in a single exam. Authentic assessment can be an effective means in attaining transformative education by discovering whether students apply what they have learned in the classroom and solve problems in authentic real life situations (Williams, 2016). According to Mueller (2016), authentic assessments often ask students to analyze, synthesize and apply what they have learned in a substantial manner, and students create new meaning in the process.

Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2014) opined that if each school exists within a unique context and serves a unique population of students and families, then it makes sense that at least some of the school curriculum should be tailored to the local context and community, i.e., be integrated with the students' journey toward self-understanding. Often traditional assessments may not be sensitive enough to the needs of English language learners (ELLs), who are faced with challenging academic careers. Research clearly demonstrates that the quality of traditional assessments for students can be affected by unnecessary linguistic complexity or cultural biases in construction of items (Perin, 2011). The outcomes are likely to be unreliable, invalid, and insufficient for making important decisions regarding a student's academic career (Abedi, 2010).

Traditional standardized tests deaden teaching and inaccurately measure students learning. Rubenstein (2008) says the solution is to build a better test; tests that are more complex assessments, could paint a clearer picture of student learning and be the assessments to measure skills so urgently needed, aiming to gauge a child's readiness for the real challenges that await them and give the English educators incentives to teach kids in engaging ways.

Authentic assessment though a new concept for many responds to the contemporary trends in the education system, thus, a survey of authentic assessment its tools in English instruction in Nandi Central Sub-County secondary schools, Kenya is the essen-

tial link in transformative education (Glickman et al., 2014)) because it drives the curriculum.

Statement of the Problem

English results continue to reveal poor performance in Kenyan secondary schools (MOEST/KNEC, 2016). In the year 2015, a total of 522,870 candidates who sat for the KCSE examination English recorded (40.29%) pass. None of the 141 candidates who scored an average of "A" grade scored a straight A in English (Muthiora, 2017). This is a concern to many particularly because these results are used for student assessment and accountability purposes and finally placement into institutions of higher learning and job market. Since the traditional meaning of assessment limits the chances of highlighting the learners' abilities, stakeholders and institutions have started thinking seriously about finding further options and tools that reflect the goal of authentic assessment that can be used to make accurate judgments of learning results (Al-Basheer, Ashraah, & Alsmadi, 2014). Traditional tests cannot be used as the only effective strategy of assessment. This survey responds by exploring the field of authentic assessment and its tools and their perceived influence in examining students' English language knowledge in Nandi Central Sub-County secondary schools, Kenya.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of students' understanding of Authentic Assessment?
2. How frequent do teachers apply the following authentic assessments in English Instruction?
3. What is the level of engagement among students in terms of authentic assessment activities?
4. What are the important benefits of authentic assessments?
5. What are the drawbacks of authentic assessment?
6. What are the most important suggestions in order to benefit more in authentic assessments?

Review of Literature

Authentic Assessment Overview

In a broader sense, assessment is the process of understanding and improving student learning (Whit-lock & Nanavati, 2013). As such, it is a recursive, perpetual process which can be either formal, when data is gathered and saved, or informal, when data is collected but not stored for later analysis. Traditional assessment requires learners to select answers in multiple-choice or matching questions, or to recall facts in fill-in-the-blank and short answer questions. It is usually norm-referenced and focuses on measuring the acquisition of a specific body of knowledge (Mueller, 2016). However, such summative assessments can also be a performance assessment that can be interdisciplinary and include the KDB (Know, do and be able to do) where students give exhibitions as their summative evaluation (Drake, 2007).

Studies conducted by O' Malley and Pierce (2011) revealed that simply testing an isolated skill or a retained fact does not effectively measure a student's capabilities. To accurately do that, an assessment method must examine his or her collective abilities, hence, the term authentic assessment describes the multiple forms of assessment that reflect student learning, achievement, motivation, and attitudes on instructionally relevant classroom activities. Unlike traditional assessments, authentic assessment is criterion-referenced involving backward planning in which teachers decide what students need to be able to do in order to show their mastery of the targeted knowledge and skills (Mueller, 2016). The students' use the same competencies that they need to apply in the criterion situation in professional life, which seems to define some assessments that use simulated contexts as authentic. Students assess themselves to life beyond the course.

They demonstrate student learning through their completion and afford opportunities to apply and demonstrate knowledge and skills in a practical context (Williams, 2016). Assessing authentic performances should become an integral part of the English instructional cycle, leading to students' achievement in English in Nandi Central Sub-County.

Types of Authentic Assessments

According to Mueller (2016), types of authentic assessment take many forms, all of which involve higher order levels of thinking, often task-based and analytical. Students might discuss books, write letters participate in debates or dramatic presentations, or keep journals (Leong, 2012). In language Arts, most types of student writing, including the revision and

editing stages, would fit into the authentic assessment model for example writing letters to story characters, creating story maps, or writing/delivering speeches in a political campaign.

According to O'Malley & Pierce (2011), authentic assessments measures that teachers of English can adapt for different situations include oral Interviews, story or test retelling, writing samples, projects/exhibitions, experiments/demonstrations, the constructed-response items, teacher observations and finally the portfolios. Other important types are self – assessment (Boud as cited in Kearney, 2013) which involves reflection and revision, peer – assessment (Topping as cited in Kearney, 2013), personal communication and performance assessments (Abedi, 2010) which are better reflections of criterion performances that are of importance outside the classroom i.e., they are said to be more authentic. Glickman et al. (2014) adds that information literacy programs may be comprised of problem-based learning, project-based learning and service learning. The types are many such that the biggest challenge may be choosing the best one for a particular unit of English study.

Benefits of Authentic Assessment

Williams (2016) posits that authentic assessment when used drives the curriculum. Students perform that have applications in real life, deepen their understanding and construct new meaning from what they already know (more analysis and synthesis of information) and apply that knowledge in a substantial manner to new situations. In comparison, Mueller, (2016), states that the traditional assessment focuses more on checking the cognitive learning level 1-3 (remember, understand and apply), while the authentic assessment focuses more on the level 4-6 learning (analyze, create and evaluate). Students develop reflective techniques by realizing the connection between assigned task and their individual lives. The elaborate projects in authentic tasks push them to take an active role in their learning process.

They generally: emphasizes what students know, rather than what they do not know; requires students to develop responses instead of selecting them from predetermined options; uses samples of student work collected over an extended period of time; stems from clear criteria made known to students and parents; allows for the possibility of multiple human judgments; relates more closely to classroom learning; teaches students to evaluate their own work; considers differences

in learning styles, language proficiencies, cultural and educational backgrounds, and grade levels (O' Malley & Pierce, 2011). Students will not see a benefit to cheating because the assessment activities will be very specific to a given context focusing on real world problems in very specific and local contexts (Williams, 2016). Authentic assessments may offer students who have been exposed to them.

Drawbacks to Authentic Assessment

There are several challenges. Authentic assessments are new to most students who may be suspicious and some authentic forms of assessment can be time-consuming (O' Malley & Pierce, 2011). This is because the work to done is more time-consuming; applying, analyzing, evaluating, and, creating usually take more time than reciting and restating (Whitlock & Nanavati, 2013). Other big hurdles are money and politics (Rubenstein, 2008).

Authentic assessment may also not be fair or equal to all especially LEP students after they are mainstreamed, to use the same instructional strategies as with native English speakers (O' Malley & Pierce, 2011) due to inadequate English skills. Further, teachers often fail to note cultural and linguistic differences that can affect how LEP children learn. More criticism generally involve both the informal development of the assessments and difficulty in ensuring test validity and reliability and minimizing evaluator bias given the subjective nature of human scoring rubrics as compared to computers scoring multiple-choice test items (Mueller, 2016). There are doubts that more complex tests can be done on a large scale and being made comparable from year to year could be too impractical.

Solutions to Authentic Assessment

There are some solutions to appropriately assess all English students. Specific assignments or tasks to be evaluated and the assessment criteria need to be clearly identified at the start (Whitlock & Nanavati, 2013). It may be best to begin on a small scale introducing authentic assessments in one area (for example, on homework assignments) and progress in small steps as students adapt while providing a fair bit of handholding to students.

Technology is key to revolution to manage the expenses and time (Rubenstein, 2008). Another

is fighting the political battle to convince states that it's practical, affordable, and clearly better than today's exams and it matches the demands of the twenty-first century plus pumping the Federal money into pilot projects to help states create richer assessments. To ensure fairness, accommodate LEP students well after they are mainstreamed (O' Malley & Pierce, 2011) and whenever possible, according to Mueller (2011), make evaluation criteria explicit to students and rubrics be constructed well. A study by Whitlock and Nanavati (2013) suggested that ensuring curricular validity, and minimizing evaluator bias starts with: articulating learning outcomes; designing learning activities and assessments; establishing evaluation criteria; deploying activities and implementing assessments; and finally reflecting and revising. Teachers of English implement changes, and continue this cycle for improvement of learning via assessment.

Methods and Procedures

Research Design

The research used was descriptive survey design to describe the status of authentic assessment as implemented by teachers in Nandi Central County in evaluating English learning.

Population and Sampling Techniques

The target population constituted secondary school students in Nandi Central County. According to the district quality Assurance and standards officer, there are 60 registered public secondary schools in Nandi Central County. To ensure proportionality, random sampling technique was used to select the sample. 30% of the schools were sampled to give a total of 18 secondary schools. Ten students per school were randomly selected from the fourth form.

Research Instruments

Data was collected using researchers' designed questionnaires on a Likert scale of 5 = Strongly Agree;

4 = Agree; 3 = Uncertain; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly Disagree. The researcher reviewed the related literature to develop the questionnaires which were validated by experts in the Education Department at UEAB. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of reliability which acts as an effective tool to ensure reliability of the instrument was conducted. The result showed that the questionnaire used for this study was reliable with a reliability coefficient of .886.

Data Gathering Procedures

The researchers obtained permission to collect data from the County Director of Education Nandi County and from the Ministry of Education. They administered the instruments and met slight challenges during collection of questionnaires. The researchers carefully explained the study to the respondents. One hundred and eighty (180) questionnaires were distributed and 176 filled-in questionnaires were received from the participants.

Statistical treatment of Data

The collected data was analyzed using SPSS utilizing weighted means to address all research questions.

Results and Discussion

Research question 1: What is the level of students' understanding of Authentic Assessment?

Table 1 presents the level of students' understanding of authentic assessment. Results show an overall mean of 3.32 (uncertain) which implies that students are not fully aware of what authentic assessments. This finding corresponded with O' Malley and Pierce, (2011) who stated that authentic assessments are new to most students.

Table 1

Students' Level of Understanding in Authentic Assessment

		Mean	Interpretation
1.	I know about authentic assessment.	3.34	Uncertain
1.	I understand authentic assessments done for the subjects that I am involved in.	3.61	Agree
1.	I can discuss with my colleagues in building the instruments for assessment.	3.28	Uncertain
1.	Our teachers have taken us through the building of instruments for an assessment	3.06	Uncertain
	TOTAL	3.32	Uncertain

Research question 2: How frequent do teachers apply the following authentic assessments in English instruction?

Table 2

Frequency of Teachers' Application of Certain Authentic Assessments in English Instruction

	Type of Authentic Assessment	Overall Mean	Interpretation
1.	Graphic Organizers	2.78	Sometimes
1.	Performance/Product-based		
a.	Drawings and illustrations	3.78	Often
a.	Business/informal letters	3.56	Often
a.	Biographies/autobiographies	3.46	Sometimes
a.	Essay/writing samples	4.40	Often
a.	Book reviews	4.14	Often
a.	Making Questionnaires/Survey	3.74	Often
a.	Making posters/advertisements	3.20	Sometimes
a.	Agenda/Minute writing	3.69	Often
1.	Portfolios	3.58	Often
1.	Journals/logs	3.32	Sometimes
1.	Self-evaluation	3.39	Sometimes
1.	Peer evaluation	3.38	Sometimes
1.	Observations	3.41	Sometimes
1.	Interviews	3.74	Often
1.	Presentations	3.78	Often
1.	Creative performance exhibitions	3.20	Sometimes

Table 2 shows the frequency of applying authentic assessment strategies in English instruction. The results demonstrated that almost all items had exceeded the middle point of the mean score. Some strategies were perceived by the students to be applied sometimes (2.50 – 3.49) which implies average use while others were applied often (3.50 – 4.49) implying high usage. This implies average and almost high rating or marginal applications of these strategies in English instructional discourse which is worth noting because teachers' application of certain authentic assessments in English instruction is of great benefit to the learners. A move toward more authentic tasks and outcomes improves teaching and learning (Williams, 2016). Students see themselves as active participants, who are working on a task of relevance. This shift in emphasis may result in reduced test anxiety and enhanced self-esteem.

A closer look at the types of Authentic Assessment perceived by students to be used often revealed that portfolios scored the lowest (3.58), while essay/writing samples and book reviews had a high means of 4.40 and 4.14 respectively indicating that teachers apply them often. Examples in English include complex performances like creating complex products such as term papers a work of art where it is the level of quality of the product that is looked at although the process of creation may be evaluated too (O' Malley & Pierce, 2011).

Eight types of authentic assessments fell between 2.50 – 3.49 denoting sometimes, meaning they were perceived by students to be used sometimes. This affirms that these techniques are used by teachers marginally. However, item 1, "Graphic Organizers" had a low mean score (2.78). This indicated that the majority of the respondents did not use graphic organizers in English instruction frequently. This finding did not align with Leong (2012) who suggested that teachers should use these as a resource for determining a student's previous knowledge and visualizing the thinking process of an individual student. Teachers who do not use certain authentic assessment tools are likely to fall short of assessing students' achievement in English Instruction well. Drake (2007) in her book envisioned that an interdisciplinary assessment tools (checklists, rubrics, classroom tests, Maps, self-assessments, peer assessments, graphic organizers, concept maps, portfolios and conferences) accompany an interdisciplinary assessment task and are used to measure levels of achievement. Products such as newspaper articles, poems, Flow charts, persuasive writing, dance, a brochure, debates etc., meets certain criteria to be acceptable.

Research question 3: What is the level of engagement among students in terms of authentic assessment activities?

Table 3

The Level of Engagement Among Students in Terms of Authentic Assessment Activities

Level of Engagement of Students in the Implementation of Authentic Assessments	Mean	Interpretation
1. My teacher gives us the chance to share in deciding the criteria we use in the rating scale.	3.44	Uncertain
1. My teacher gives us the opportunity to choose our assessment style.	3.28	Uncertain
1. My teacher asks us to do group work evaluation.	4.26	Agree

The level of engagement among students in terms of authentic assessment activities was ranked as agree or uncertain. It was gratifying to note that students tended to agree that in their schools: there teacher asks them to do group work evaluation by a high mean of 4.26. Davey (2014) stated that the learners interact with people with a higher ability level as learning occurs. Also, students tended to be uncertain on two items in relation to "My teacher gives us the chance to share in deciding the criteria we use in the rating scale" with a mean of 3.44 and "My teacher gives us the opportunity to choose our assessment style" with a mean of 3.28. This indicated that even though the level of engagement among students was generally good, there were some weaknesses, to be improved. Whenever possible, according to Mueller (2011), evaluation criteria, should be made explicit to students; written in language that is easily understood by a wide audience and rubrics, tools for communicating evaluation criteria, be constructed well. Furthermore, educators should also embrace the differences that all children bring with them because fairness does exist when assessment is appropriate, personalized, natural, and flexible, and can be modified to pinpoint specific abilities and function at the relevant level of difficulty, and when it promotes a rapport between teachers and students (O' Malley & Pierce, 2011).

Research question 4: What are the important benefits of authentic assessments?

Table 4

Benefits of Authentic Assessments

	Mean	Interpretation
1. Authentic assessment strategies are helpful in monitoring our processing skills.	4.15	Agree
2. Authentic assessment strategies are beneficial to our problems solving approaches.	4.18	Agree
3. Authentic assessment strategies can be used to monitor our competence in particular areas while simulating learning activities.	3.99	Agree
4. We build our confidence in our ability to successfully accomplish tasks on our own in subsequent similar situations.	4.22	Agree
5. Authentic assessment strategies can be extremely beneficial to the special needs student populations.	4.13	Agree
6. They are also instructional allowing us to actively engage in worthwhile learning activities within the classroom.	4.22	Agree
7. They are more interesting and reflective of our daily lives.	4.11	Agree
8. Authentic assessments are also more conducive to evaluating higher-order thinking skills than objective type assessments.	4.07	Agree
9. Authentic assessment can be successfully used with students of varying cultural backgrounds, learning styles and academic ability.	4.02	Agree
10. We, students, also assume a larger role in the assessment process than through traditional testing programs.	3.53	Agree
11. This involvement in authentic assessments is more likely to assure the evaluation process reflects course goals and objectives.	4.03	Agree
12. Our parents will more readily understand authentic assessments than the abstract percentiles, grade equivalents and other measures of standardized tests.	3.52	Agree
13. Authentic assessment encourages our investment in the learning process by making the outcomes more readily applicable and more meaningful.	4.00	Agree
14. Authentic assessments give us a choice in how we complete our assignments which can increase our motivation and engagement.	3.98	Agree

Referring to table 4, it was gratifying to notice that all students acknowledged or tended to agree at a mean ranging from 3.52– 4.22 which means that authentic assessments benefitted them. This shows that the benefits of authentic assessments were widely appreciated according to students' view. Apparently, that was good for students' performance in English.

Research question 5: What are the drawbacks of authentic assessment?

Table 5

Drawbacks of Authentic Assessments

	Mean	Interpretation
1. Authentic assessments are not fair/equal due to cultural and linguistic differences that can affect how we, students, learn.	2.76	Uncertain
2. We have difficulty accepting differences and appropriately accommodating all our needs in relation to authentic assessments.	2.77	Uncertain
3. Students have limited awareness of authentic assessments strategies.	3.32	Uncertain
4. They do not take those authentic assessments seriously.	2.54	Uncertain
5. Authentic assessments are new to most of us and we are always suspicious.	3.34	Uncertain
6. Our teachers face difficulties in implementing and developing authentic assessment tools to assess our progress.	3.51	Agree
7. Our teachers lack experience in preparing authentic assessment plans.	3.52	Agree
8. Managing its time-intensive nature is challenging to us.	3.34	Uncertain
9. Ensuring curricular validity and minimizing evaluator bias is a challenge to us.	3.09	Uncertain
10. Authentic assessments are expensive to plan for and administer.	2.97	Uncertain

From Table 5, students stated that their teachers lack experience in preparing authentic assessment plans by a mean of 3.52; and their teachers face difficulty in implementing authentic assessment plans by a mean of 3.50. The students tended to agree which is high showing that there was a serious weakness. Apparently, that was not good for students' English performance.

Additionally, the mean of 3.30, on "students have limited awareness of authentic assessment strategies", tended towards uncertainty which is average. So, it was surprising to throw the glance on that item. This was a deep message saying that the students have limited awareness of authentic assessment strategies. That becomes a serious issue especially in form 4 when students have to study to write their final exams thus need to be taught through some experiences.

Unfortunately, it was deplorable to notice that these important learning strategies were partially in use or non-existent. As a result, they spent more time in other assessments instead of concentrating on authentic assessments that reflect real world situations. So, how can a student who didn't engage in authentic assessments for practices get a good result in English National Exam? There is a significant relationship between schools' authentic assessments inputs and student's academic performance (Abedi, 2010; Williams, 2016). Open-ended assessments improve the chances for ELL students to engage with language production and learning, offering unique opportunities for ELL students to express their knowledge in

a broader sense than the limited linguistic opportunities given to them in traditional multiple choice items.

Rubenstein (2008) also stipulated that children will achieve more when teachers build a better test; tests that are more complex assessments, ones that, if tied more closely to curriculum and instruction, could paint a clearer picture of student learning and be the assessments to measure skills so urgently needed, aiming to gauge a child's readiness for the real challenges

that await them. All in all, the authentic assessment strategies in selected secondary schools in Nandi Central Sub-County were generally in critical state and may have surely a negative impact on student performance.

Research question 6: What are the most important suggestions in order to benefit more in authentic assessments?

Table 6

Solutions to Implementing Authentic Assessments

Suggestions	Mean	Interpretation
1. Our teacher should embrace the differences that all of us bring in order to educate us according to our own needs.	3.71	Agree
2. To ensure fairness exists in our authentic assessment strategies, our teacher needs to make them appropriate, personalized, natural and flexible.	3.81	Agree
3. Our teacher should modify our authentic assessments to pinpoint specific abilities and to function at the relevant level of difficulty.	3.87	Agree
4. Teachers should make sure there is a good rapport between him/her and the students to ensure good cooperation.	3.79	Agree
5. Our teacher should attend workshops and training courses for teachers from different specializations to increase level of awareness of the implementation of authentic assessments.	3.60	Agree
6. Our teacher should provide us training to prepare us to cope with the new ways of authentic assessments.	2.77	Agree
7. Our teacher should make efforts to welcome the possibility of assessment strategies that can empower us to take control of our own learning.	3.56	Agree
8. Our teacher needs to clearly identify specific assignments or tasks to be evaluated and the assessment criteria at the start.	3.77	Agree
9. Teachers should begin on a small scale introducing authentic assessments in one area and progressing in small steps as we adapt.	3.66	Agree

Table 6 shows the most important suggestions in order to benefit more in authentic assessments was perceived by students at a mean ranging from 3.66 – 3.86 (Agree) indicating that students welcomed suggestions in improving authentic assessments implementation in English instruction; a good thing for the students' performance in English.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings in this study concluded that the students in the selected Nandi sub-county secondary schools in Kenya had a low understanding on authentic assessments. It reached the conclusion that the frequency of teachers' applications of certain authentic assessments in English instruction ranged from

average usage to high usage. It is worth noting that the average/high usage obtained was not based on teachers' alignments of their assessment with AA, due to the fact that the very items that referred teachers' assessments to AAs e.g. graphic organizers and portfolios exhibited a lower mean score while mere products like essay writing samples and book reviews exhibited higher mean scores. Clearly most of the teachers did not use AA tools while building the instruments for an assessment. The marginal usage indicates that they refer to their students' abilities and responses in constructing assessment instruments.

The level of engagement of students in the implementation of authentic assessments was concluded to be average sometimes and high at other times which was generally good although some weaknesses were noted. The benefits of authentic assessments were observed to be high. Furthermore, the study concluded the drawbacks of authentic assessments to be high showing that there was a serious weakness in their utilization by the teachers and average for students who were not sure and possibly had limited awareness. Finally, the study reached a conclusion on the most important suggestions in order to benefit more in authentic assessments in English instruction to be high meaning that the students welcomed the suggestions. Given the benefits of authentic assessments, the students rating at this stage should be very high though.

The study recommended that administrators/principals should build a high awareness among the teachers on the integration of AA into English learning and conduct trainings on designing AA tools and usage of multiple assessment methods. They should provide professional development efforts to teach providers how to integrate what is learned from authentic assessments into effective English curriculum. Teachers of English should: undergo training in authentic assessment; be intentional in applying them in teaching and learning; make use of available tools that have been developed by researchers and practitioners. The study recommends that secondary school Students of English should take an active role in their own learning in authentic environments, through the elaborate projects in authentic tasks.

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