

Assignments Matter

Making the Connections That Help
Students Meet Standards

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Why Assignments Matter

I want to be as emphatic as possible: the impact of the actual, taught curriculum on school quality, on student learning, is indescribably important.

—Schmoker, 2006, p. 36

When considering the prospect of creating assignments, some people might ask, “Why bother?” Ruth Mitchell, who designed a protocol for analyzing tasks in her book *Front-End Alignment* (1996), has a good answer to this question and is well known by her colleagues for saying, “Students can do no better than the assignments they are given.” Just any assignment admittedly will not improve achievement, but well-crafted assignments hold the potential to make learning and teaching more focused and relevant because in the crafting process teachers must be deliberate and highly aware of the context, content, and charge involved in an assignment. Implementing well-crafted assignments is worth the effort. Indeed, my work with colleagues over the years in educational settings, including schools, districts, and states, suggests that assignments may well be the missing link in school reform efforts to improve student achievement.

Effects on Student Performance

More than a decade ago, I cowrote an article that discussed the lack of challenging tasks in classrooms and the impact that deficiency has on student

performance, and how, unfortunately, this pattern of weak tasks without content and clear purpose continues (Barth & Dougherty, 1997). Too many students, my colleagues and I observed, spent classroom time on activities, such as filling in worksheets, coloring maps, underlining textbook chapters, and listening to computer-activated lessons and read-alouds. In these settings, students were engaged in tasks with little relevant content, and often teachers could not tell us why they were teaching these tasks or what was actually at work in the tasks. For example, a task we saw repeatedly asked students to create book covers, an activity I still see today at all grade levels (although its cousin, the poster, may be more prevalent). As teachers analyzed what was learned and taught in this task, it became clear that the task asked students to spend more time on creating borders and lettering for their covers than on analyzing the themes and characters in the book. By using Mitchell's protocol involving a process of analysis called *Standards in Practice*, the teachers were able to understand that their tasks were unaligned to standards and did not help students learn the topics, issues, and questions embedded in a rigorous curriculum (Education Trust, 2006; Mitchell, 1996).

The Link Between Expectations and Achievement

According to Robert Marzano, "High expectations and pressure to achieve refer to establishing *challenging goals* for students" (2003, p. 35). The reverse is also true, in that low expectations and little pressure to achieve cause poor achievement. When teachers present students with low-rigor tasks, they create low achievement even when students do well on these tasks. In addition, such tasks contribute to the boredom students so often complain about when they spend too many hours on work that is routine and bland, often centered on discrete skills. In these situations, students miss opportunities to acquire basic skills in an intellectual environment that would allow them to apply those skills. When students perform low-rigor tasks, they are unsure of why they are doing them and how they will benefit, even if standards are posted on the wall. Such teaching results in damaging experiences for struggling students as well as their more skilled peers. According to national and international data, even strong students aren't progressing as much as they

can or should (Education Trust, 2008). If, on the other hand, assignments are taught with high expectations and pressure to achieve, then students gain the knowledge and skills they need to take on a wide range of environments and opportunities.

The Importance of Explicit Teaching

When assignments are not taught or are not taught explicitly, students lose out on the academic and intellectual experiences that assignments offer. According to Harvard researchers who have studied classroom dynamics, the “task predicts performance” (City, Elmore, Fieman, & Teitel, 2009, p. 30). If assignments are not of high quality and are not relevant to the curriculum, then learning will also be of low quality and loosely connected to the curriculum, if at all. Teaching and learning constitute a reciprocal process. Ineffective instruction is often distinguished by a loosely regulated plan, and students spend classroom time going through the motions of learning but not producing solid evidence of that learning. In these classrooms, the purpose for doing activities is lost, and learning loses energy and meaning. To coin a phrase, a lesson without an assignment is a lot like a carriage with no horse and no place to go. In contrast, a well-crafted assignment ensures that instruction will provide students with a goal and the power to get there, enabling them to engage in rigorous and interesting academic contexts as they acquire the content and skills necessary to participate in academic coursework. Most important, assignments create teaching and learning opportunities to think and learn about ideas, topics, events, and questions—about specific content in the curriculum. This is why a quality assignment is the hallmark of effective instruction.

Ms. H.’s classroom is an example of intentional teaching with assignments playing an important role. Ms. H. is a middle school English teacher who employs assignments to teach specific content and skills. In this example, she asked students to recommend a book to their peers, an assignment aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts (ELA) (the standards are discussed at length in the next section of this chapter). Her purpose was to teach students how to write a critical book review,

which is an assignment built around skills of critical thinking and argumentation. On the surface this seems to be a simple enough task, and in another classroom it may well have been given as homework, with very little direct teaching. As a result, students typically produce a long paragraph retelling parts of the book they liked but not producing a critical review.

In contrast, Ms. H. used a template from the Literacy Design Collaborative (or LDC, an effort funded by the Gates Foundation in 2009–11 to develop a national literacy strategy) to develop the following prompt:

Would you recommend *Green Angel*, a novel, to your peers?
After reading and analyzing this modern-day fairy tale, write a critical review in which you address the question. Support your review with evidence from the book.

She then taught the students, step by step, the skills and strategies they needed to employ to produce a critical review. The result was that students learned the difference between retelling and a critical review: how to make a claim and support it with a set of reasons based on the genre and elements of fiction. Their work was consistently well developed and well expressed. Having learned how to construct a basic argumentative essay in the language of the discipline, these students were positioned to take on even more challenging prompts.

Ms. H.'s thoughtful instruction more than suggests that the value of assignments as a way to manage and deliver instruction serves both teachers and students. Somewhere we got sidetracked away from this classic way of teaching, and in many classrooms it is hard to find assignments as defined in this book, except in advanced placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and some honors courses. That leaves thousands of students without the benefit of assignments. Instead instruction is typically focused around activities, programs, textbooks, workbooks, and homework. In such low-demand settings, students tend to do one thing at a time—a worksheet on Monday, a spelling test on Friday—rather than accomplish a cycle of learning in which they apply skills and content.

A simple calibration exercise helped my colleagues and me provide data to show staff what, in fact, everyday instruction was composed of and that assignments were not commonly employed in classrooms. One particularly revealing calibration showed a middle school staff that only one task out of more than a hundred could be classified as an assignment—a science lab report. The vast majority of this sample of tasks consisted of worksheets; many involved grammar, computation, spelling, and elementary wordplay skills and were clearly unaligned to middle school standards. These data provided at least part of the explanation for this school’s struggle to improve achievement.

Like these surveys, a DataWorks calibration analysis of tasks gathered in California similarly showed that tasks are too often unaligned. In their analysis, only half of 5th grade tasks were aligned to standards, and alignment decreased in higher grades (Fiello, 2005). This is sobering news.

It is not a stretch to predict that low-rigor instructional experiences produce weak outcomes and the achievement gaps we are witnessing in the performance data (Education Trust, 2008). If students spend their school day repeating, retelling, writing paragraphs, and filling in blanks rather than applying those skills to explore interesting questions and issues or to solve problems, they won’t achieve to new levels. The good news is that teaching that produces low achievement can be changed. Following Richard Elmore’s commonsense advice, you can change the task to produce better results since the “task predicts performance” (2010, p. 4). Assignments, well crafted and well taught, can help you and your students make that transformation.

The Common Core State Standards for ELA

In the current educational environment, the emergence of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects and their equivalent in mathematics represent new educational terrain for teachers and students. The CCSS differ from the last decade’s standards in that they are contextualized and compact, and they emphasize the role of literacy in all core subjects. These

standards cannot be taught superficially; they are not long lists of discrete skills, to be checked off in a lesson plan or assessed only on quizzes. They demand that students acquire academic skills that they apply across the disciplines, particularly those involving analyses of ideas and texts, reading a range of texts of sufficient complexity, and writing in response to reading (Conley, 2011). Students will also need to apply other literacy skills in language usage, speaking, and listening to support and enhance their abilities to communicate what is learned. As well, students will need to acquire cognitive skills in logic and reasoning as readers, speakers, and writers. The work for teachers, then, is to transform the CCSS into practices that enable students to become literate, independent, and critical thinkers. The draft frameworks for two CCSS assessments—one from the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC; available at www.parcconline.org) and the other from the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC; available at www.k12.wa.us/SMARTER/)—reinforce these academic skills.

A report written by David T. Conley, who has long researched the alignment between high school and college curriculums, emphasizes the role of college readiness in implementing curriculum, stating, “These standards are not geared to what should or does occur in high schools as much as to what will be expected of students in college” (2011, p. 7). In addition, in his book *College Knowledge*, Conley (2005) has documented the frequency and types of papers and the amount of reading that college coursework requires. Papers of 5 to 10 pages were common, as was reading more than 10 texts. High-performing students read and wrote almost twice as much as the national average.

Assignments are excellent vehicles to prepare students for the routines and demands of college work. High school students who learn how to write arguments in response to reading, for example, will clearly be better prepared than those who fill out worksheets or produce cut-and-paste research papers. In the process they can build a strong grade point average that is academically meaningful. A grade point average is a strong predictor—better than scores on admissions exams—of first-year success in college coursework (Noble & Sawyer, 2004). That is, coursework consisting of assignments aligned to

college readiness—in which students are prepared for the volume of reading, essays, and reports they will have to do in college—makes their high school years even more beneficial (ACT, 2006).

By crafting assignments with close attention to alignment to the CCSS and to your own state standards, you and your colleagues in the core disciplines can help students become high achievers and be ready for college or careers. As a middle school teacher whom I worked with stated, “My students are doing better and more challenging work since I started giving assignments.” To align your assignments with the CCSS, you and your colleagues should strive to do the following:

- Teach literacy skills in all content areas.
- Teach students to comprehend and critique a variety of texts and ideas.
- Write prompts that ask students to write or orally explain in response to reading.
- Include speaking and listening as a means of comprehending and communicating.
- Expect that students will use and write language to communicate appropriately for an audience and a purpose.
- Require evidence from texts and credible sources.
- Create opportunities for students to use and manage technology to learn and produce their own products.
- Write instructional plans that document and plot the teaching that transforms an assignment into learning.

Reflection Activity: Compare the “old” standard to the CCSS for 8th grade. How do their expectations for learning differ?

- *Old standard:* By the end of the 8th grade, students will identify the main idea and supporting details in what they have read.
- *CCSS standard:* Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

Making Assignments Matter

Aligning your assignments with the CCSS and state standards is certainly a major step in making assignments matter. But in addition to the benefits of alignment, assignments, along with instructional plans, also matter because they document teaching and learning, providing tangible feedback for both teachers and students about learning at different stages of the instructional cycle. Assignments engage students in purposeful work each day of the cycle, from introduction of a prompt to production of a product. You can test all you want or engage in entertaining activities, but students learn when goals are clear and relevant and they are challenged to think. Assignments are a vehicle to do just that.

By inserting assignments into a teaching routine, you can take an immediate step to heed Elmore's advice, noted earlier, to "change the task." A switch from a long sequence of *activities*, such as worksheets and other one-dimensional tasks, to well-crafted and well-taught *assignments* ups the challenge for heftier performances as prescribed in the prompt, the rubric, and the product (each of which is discussed in detail in the following chapters). This seemingly simple switch to assignments causes a ripple effect that not only changes the kinds of tasks students engage in but also changes the larger curriculum by creating a higher degree of coherence. Unlike teaching that consists of a series of activities, an assignment involves a cycle of learning, in which students progress through a sequence of steps that lead to a product. This product is evidence of learning constructed around a specific purpose and context—writing an essay to compare government policies or building a scale model for a local shelter, for example. In this way, assignments activate the research and practice theories on effective instruction. During one of our LDC sessions, a group of teachers new to assignment-making admitted that their early assignments "weren't that good." Nevertheless, they reported to researchers who monitored the project that students still performed better and showed a higher degree of involvement than in the past (Research for Action, 2011).

Artifacts of Teaching

Assignments by their nature provide outputs in the form of products and documented instruction; they are necessary artifacts of effective teaching, and, as a report by a national organization states, “Effectiveness is best defined as the practical outputs of teaching” (Jupp, 2009, p. 1). Well-taught assignments as outputs of teaching matter not only in the classroom but also in the broader view of the profession because assignments help teachers improve their practice and aim to do what effective teaching also aims to do—succeed in teaching students what they need to know and be able to do. Madeleine Hunter (1993) gave us her now classic list of criteria that define effective teaching, and it includes the same features found in assignments: alignment to standards, focused instruction, guided practice, and closure. Laura Goe (2009), a researcher who has studied teacher performance models for the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, recommends the inclusion of assignments in teacher performance reviews. This recommendation makes sense because assignments are *evidence* of outcomes as well as the production of outcomes.

To meet expectations for effectiveness, a teacher makes many decisions, deciding what to teach and which strategies, methods, and resources—whatever it takes—will best guide learning until students acquire targeted skills and internalize content. Charlotte Danielson has observed that “a teacher makes over 3,000 nontrivial decisions daily” (1996, p. 2). Assignment-making can assist teachers in making these decisions and developing coursework that systematically provides outputs to demonstrate effectiveness. Unlike assessments, which provide documentation *after* instruction, assignments evidence how well teachers make instructional decisions and choices in the teaching moment. Because teachers have control over the inputs in an assignment and the process of teaching them, they can manage instruction and pacing to ensure better outcomes.

Despite their importance and usefulness in the educational environment, assignments have not been studied historically as artifacts of classroom teaching. Instead, educators have tended to focus on instructional strategies