

TASKS

BEFORE

APPS

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INTRODUCTION

From the day I put pencil to paper to outline each of the chapters in this book to the moment this book sits in your hands, the landscape of digital tools has changed. Technology's rapid evolution over the course of months, not years, is a reminder of how important it is to keep our goals for student learning front and center. This book was designed to put the learning first, to help you leverage the power of technology to place *tasks before apps*.

As a classroom teacher, I was continually amazed by the possibilities a new website or app offered my students. Digital tools opened up a world of content for students to access and ways for them to explore and apply the information and ideas that were once confined to their textbooks. As educators, we have the opportunity to leverage digital tools to address more than a list of objectives—to teach the transferable skills we strive to ensure that each child masters.

Tasks Before Apps was designed to help educators take traditional lesson design to the next level by providing inspiration and actionable ideas for technology integration in K–12 classrooms. This book places emphasis on three overlapping, intertwined categories: creation, curiosity, and collaboration. As students *create* a product, they dive into content, demonstrate understanding, and make a shareable creation. When we honor and cultivate *curiosity*, students explore their personal interests, wonder about the world around them, and see our time together in the classroom

as relevant and purposeful. When students *collaborate*, they learn to think critically, compromise, and develop a skill set essential for success both inside and outside school.

This book outlines a way to examine your current practice and infuse tech-rich experiences to (1) turn students into creators, (2) honor students' curiosity, and (3) provide opportunities for collaboration. Although I've called out so many of my favorite digital tools throughout this book and included vignettes in which other educators share their own favorites, this book is designed to help you focus on your learning goals, design rigorous tasks, and choose the right tools for your students. It's not about the latest tablet or the fastest laptop but about designing learning experiences that use the power of technology to reach every learner. To that end, I've included forms and templates in Appendix A to support you in your planning and goal setting. (For added utility, these forms can be downloaded at <http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/books/Burns2017forms.pdf>. Use the password "Burns2017118019" to unlock the PDF.)

Digital tools let us capture student voice, change the way students interact with the world, and provide an audience for children of all ages. When technology is partnered with rich learning experiences in a thoughtful, purposeful manner, we can elevate traditional instructional practices to prepare students for the world of today and tomorrow.

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THOUGHTFUL TASK DEVELOPMENT

When I first implemented a one-to-one iPad program in my classroom, all I could think about were apps. Was there an app that could solve this problem, fix this issue, help to do this? I thought I was on the hunt for the perfect app—but when students held those tablets in their hands, I quickly learned that I was really looking for much more than a single application.

Thoughtful technology integration that places “tasks before apps” should be a goal for all teachers designing learning experiences for their students. In beginning our journey, we must start by asking, What is the task? What are our expectations for the learners in our classroom? How will we help them explore the content we are charged with teaching?

Task Development 101

In this book, the term *task* describes an experience during which students create a product that demonstrates their mastery of learning goals. As the educator in your classroom, you will determine the learning goal for students based on their needs, interests, a set curriculum, and/or local standards. With this learning goal in mind, you will identify the success criteria students must meet to show their knowledge of content, and design a learning experience accordingly. This does not need to be a one-size-fits-all task; we'll explore ways to honor student voice and choice throughout this book.

The tasks you design for students will vary based on a handful of factors, including content area, grade level, and your access to different resources. A larger task might address several learning goals and require a deep dive into content over a period of a few weeks. A smaller task might connect to a single learning goal and be completed within a daily lesson. In this chapter, my aim is to help you identify learning goals and formulate a plan for thoughtful technology integration.

Designing Rigorous Learning Tasks

As educators, we want to foster students' ability to persevere in solving challenging problems, and we can encourage this by designing tasks that facilitate deeper learning experiences. Author and educator Barbara Blackburn defines *rigor* as "creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels, in which each student is supported so he or she can learn at high levels, and each student demonstrates learning at high levels" (2013, p. 13). Teachers can maintain high expectations for students while also ensuring that supports are readily available.

Before directing students to open an app on their tablet or pull up a website on their laptop, pause to ponder the following questions:

- At the end of today's lesson, what should students understand? (*Learning goals*)
- How will I know for sure if students understand? (*Expectations*)
- What would I like students to accomplish today? (*Learning experiences*)

Without a clear answer to the first question, it is impossible to design a rigorous task. *Learning goals* help you determine *expectations* and create *learning experiences* for students. Thinking backward in this manner—identifying the *learning goals* before *learning experiences*—will help you plan for daily lessons and entire units of study.

Setting a Purpose for Learning Tasks

When we set a purpose for learning, students understand *why* they are completing a task. The *why* tells students how a learning experience in the classroom connects to the real world. With technology tools, students can reach a large audience and apply what they've learned in real-world contexts. They can record their voices as they interview an expert on climate change, create a slideshow of images from a field trip, or design a tutorial that shows other kids how to solve a long-division problem. Teachers who choose learning goals thoughtfully can connect technology to learning goals with a purpose and create learning experiences that their students view as relevant both inside and outside the classroom.

When we place tasks before apps, our priorities move front and center. Thinking of the purpose of a task rather than focusing on available apps helps us make sure students are learning skills they can use at any point in their life—even when technology changes. Using digital tools in the classroom should help students acquire skills they can use in the future with or without the current technology at hand.

Throughout this book, we'll look at the ways teachers can energize traditional learning experiences by adding relevance and purpose. We'll also examine how technology tools can help teachers reach students by differentiating tasks to address individual needs with greater ease. There are many ways teachers can use technology to unlock the potential of students who may have difficulty showing what they know in traditional ways. Students who are conversationally proficient in English and working on their writing skills can benefit from voice-to-text technology, for example, and those who need extra scaffolding might receive support from their teacher more efficiently on personal digital devices.

The tasks we develop for students can acknowledge and celebrate the changing world. As we take charge of the content we want students to learn,

we can package the information into experiences that are memorable, meaningful, and transferable to other contexts.

Creating a Plan for Classroom Success

All you need is the plan, the roadmap, and the courage to press on to your destination.

—Earl Nightingale

A *learning goal* is what you want your students to understand or experience by the end of a lesson or unit. A daily lesson might have one learning goal, or a single learning goal might be addressed over the course of several lessons. A unit or month-long investigation of a topic might have several. You might use a frame like “Students will be able to . . .” (SWBAT) when composing learning goals.

Identifying your learning goals before a unit or lesson is essential. It helps you understand what your students will explore through direct instruction, supported group activities, or independent practice. Knowing your learning goals also helps you figure out what to look for when checking to make sure students demonstrate mastery, or *get it*, as you teach a lesson and review student work after a lesson is complete. A clear understanding of your learning goals also lays the foundation for thoughtful technology integration. (Visit the following website for a video overview of the SWBAT approach to designing goals: <https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/making-lesson-objectives-clear>.)

A unit is composed of a set of learning goals and expectations for student understanding. In *The Understanding by Design Guide to Creating High-Quality Units*, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe present a curriculum-planning framework to give educators “a way of thinking purposefully about curricular planning” (2011, p. 3). Keep long-term results in mind as Wiggins and McTighe do to establish clear learning goals over the course of a unit. Identifying student expectations for a unit of study can help you integrate digital tools in a thoughtful, purposeful manner.

Educators can honor and elevate successful past practices through the thoughtful use of technology tools. Examine the goals of the unit you have

in mind and determine how technology can best be used to help students create products that demonstrate their understanding. This might mean having students design interactive timelines in a high school history class, for example, or supporting students as they create tutorials for solving math problems in an elementary math classroom. Activities such as these can be threaded into existing units or learning activities.

To help develop our thinking around using technology for deeper learning experiences, I use the ACES framework, which I first presented in my 2016 book *Deeper Learning with QR Codes and Augmented Reality*. The elements of the framework are as follows:

- **Access**—Students can easily and efficiently locate content hosted online to find information, answer questions, or connect with others.
- **Curate**—Students interact with resources handpicked by their teacher that relate to course content, student interest, or the individual needs of learners.
- **Engage**—Students use technology tools to build transferable skills during hands-on learning activities that require them to create products and collaborate with others.
- **Share**—Students have an authentic audience for their learning, setting a purpose for their work and connecting their creations to the world outside the classroom.

Creating a Unit Plan

Let's first think about a unit as a whole. For example, if your goal is to have students develop an understanding of the scientific method by conducting an experiment, there are places in this unit where technology tools can elevate the experience. In this scenario, you could include a task for students to develop questions for a Skype visit with a scientist from a university lab, or use online collaborative documents to share the results of their experiment. As the facilitator of your students' learning experiences, you are thinking of the overall mission for the unit first, then working backward to integrate technology in a way that will support your end goals.

Figure 1.1 (p. 8) shows a sample unit plan using both the SWBAT sentence starter for setting goals and the ACES framework for integrating

Figure 1.1

Sample Unit Plan Using SWBAT and ACES

Unit Title: Hands-On with the Scientific Method

Learning Goals: Students will be able to

1. Distinguish the different components of the scientific method.
2. Plan an experiment by gathering information from multiple sources.
3. Conduct and document the steps of a scientific experiment.
4. Summarize their learning process using multimedia resources.

Overarching Mission: To develop an understanding of the scientific method by conducting an experiment.

Culminating Task: Students will create an e-book to share on our class blog that documents the steps they took while conducting an experiment.

Expectation: Students will complete all steps of the scientific method, use domain-specific vocabulary, and create a digital product.

Technology Integration: Digital tools will be used to

- Introduce key terms through a multimedia scavenger hunt.
- Demonstrate the scientific method in action.
- Connect with an expert through videoconferencing.
- Capture student work through images and video.
- Organize student summaries and media to create an e-book.
- Share student creations on a digital platform for a partner class to view.

Potential Tools:

- Book Creator (*new for students, used last year*)
- Kidblog (*students have accounts/pages*)
- iPad camera (*one device for each group*)
- Nearpod (*one device each for lesson*)
- Skype (*use teacher-created account*)

The ACES Framework: Technology will elevate this unit by helping students to

- Access resources by virtually connecting with an expert through a Skype call.
- Curate content by organizing it and supporting media into an e-book.
- Engage with learning by capturing hands-on experiences as they happen.
- Share with others by publishing an e-book on the class blog for the partner class to view.

technology tools. In developing such a plan, it is important to examine the steps students will follow when completing a task and identify where digital experiences will fall in the sequence of a unit.

Another way to think about how you will embed technology into your unit is to examine the *process* leading to task completion. In this scenario, you are thinking more generally about the mission of your unit and ways in which you can use technology to elevate student learning experiences. Brainstorming in this manner can provide a vision of where digital experiences will fall into the sequence of your unit. As you begin to think about where you are taking your students and the product they will create, you can plug in ideas along this pathway (see Figure 1.2).

The example in Figure 1.2 can be tailored to different grade levels. Students in 1st grade might explore the scientific method using terms like *prediction* instead of *hypothesis* and try out an audio tool to record their summaries; 10th graders might locate experts and address the

Figure 1.2 Embedding Technology into Units

Unit Title: Hands-On with the Scientific Method

Overarching Mission: To develop an understanding of the scientific method by conducting an experiment.

Task: Students will create an e-book to share on our class blog that documents the steps they took while conducting an experiment.

