

I-2: Convince students that they want academic success (“I Want”)

Design Real-World Assignments

In addition to the big goal that serves to encapsulate all of the work that your students accomplish during the year, teachers find it effective to develop shorter-term “motivating academic destinations,” or authentic tasks. Three essential characteristics of authentic tasks are that:

1. The end result is something that excites students.
2. The process clearly establishes the relevance of the knowledge and skills students learn.
3. Students must utilize the academic skills and information they have gained throughout the unit, or the year, to produce the end result.

Below are some examples of real-world assessments developed by highly effective teachers.

“Going Public”

Perhaps the most powerful type of real-world assessment is one in which the students “go public” with their work. Assign projects that require mastery and/or completion of academic objectives, while allowing students to:

- see themselves making a difference with the knowledge and skills they’ve acquired
- publish their work for a larger audience

Examples:

“I published books with my students on the history of our town during my first year and on hate crimes after September 11 during my second. Those projects required my students to learn all sorts of researching and writing skills, and my students were very motivated because they knew others were going to be reading and using their work!” --Andrew Mandel, Rio Grande Valley

Middle School Example:

Ms. Teguis teaches 7th grade in New York City. For a unit on environmental science, covering the effects of environmental pollution, she decided to focus on a current tragedy that directly affected her student population: the epidemic rates of childhood asthma in inner city America. She gathered articles about the phenomenon, rewriting the ones that were too advanced for her students, and distributing those written at an appropriate level. (To differentiate, she gave the original, more complex articles to her more advanced readers.) She ran several video clips from national news broadcasts highlighting the problem. She invited a local public health official to come speak to her students about the medical causes, symptoms, and treatments of the disease. She planned several lessons around the proposed explanations for the asthma rate increases in inner cities, including changes in the types of molds spurred by global warming, asbestos and building-related environmental hazards in urban homes, and unhealthy urban air masses caused by the burning of fossil fuel by cars, trucks and buses. To help her students understand the scope of the problem, she had them graph a comparison of asthma rates for the

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overall U.S. population and those of inner city minority children (who suffer from asthma at twice the rate). Finally, she let each student choose a final product from the following list:

- Write a letter to a local councilperson alerting them to the class’ findings (include detailed scientific explanations of the causes), and request a response that will detail what is being done, or will be done, to address the problem.
- Write an article for the school newspaper about the issue, including interviews with local students who suffer from asthma, and at least one interview with a public official.
- Compile data from the school nurse about the statistics of asthma sufferers in the school, and do the same for a Long Island suburban school. Compare the stats and include theories on why the rates differ. Create a wall display for your school that presents your findings.
- Draw up a list of widespread recommendations on what inner city families can do to protect their children from asthma, brainstorm the most effective way of distributing the list throughout the community, and then do so.

“Service Learning” Projects

Other real-world assignments link academic objectives to an initiative that meets a need of the community –such as:

- establishing a garden that helps students see botany at work
- creating a soup kitchen that requires students to maintain inventory
- interviewing senior citizens to capture the unsung voices of the Great Depression
- teaching civics to immigrants preparing for citizenship exams
- drafting and mailing brochures that highlight a community problem

Other Performance Tasks

There are many other types of real-world performance assessments that you might consider. Even if your students’ work won’t be published for an outside audience or directly serve a community need, you can design performance tasks that students find relevant and motivating.

Elementary Examples

Here are a few ideas for performance tasks in elementary school:

- Create different seating patterns with students. Challenge them to decipher the logic behind the pattern.
- Interview a local policeman and determine frequency of different types of crimes that he or she has investigated over the last year. Graph the results.
- Measure the area of the classroom floor. Use any materials available in the classroom to assist you.
- Compare the prices of the same product at different stores. Determine why the prices vary.

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- Design a travel brochure for tourists to your town.
- Develop a lesson to teach younger students.

Middle School Examples

Here are a few ideas for performance tasks in middle school:

- Test the ground water of a nearby brook to determine if it is drinkable.
- Have a local ER doctor visit the classroom to discuss the most common types of accidents resulting in ER visits. Divide the class into groups and have each group create a public service campaign to help prevent these occurrences.
- Watch a 30-minute sitcom. Rewrite the last 10 minutes of it to change the ending.
- Select a television advertisement for a cleaning product. Use the product and determine the accuracy of the ad’s claims. Write a report detailing your findings.
- Your school owns a large, undeveloped lot adjacent to the playground that is currently unused. Working in groups of three, propose a new usage for the lot, draw to-scale plans, and create a realistic budget. Make a presentation to the school board to convince them to enact your group’s idea.

High School Examples

Here are a few ideas for performance tasks in high school:

- Watch a movie in a theater, or on TV or video. Choose three main characters and write a story about the three of them, putting them in a new situation different from those shown in the film OR take a main character from a well-known film, and write a story where that character interacts with the main character from another well-known film.
- Identify a mystery chemical.
- Select a vaccine that could help save lives in a developing country that lacks quality medical services. Research the costs of the vaccine per dosage, determining which drug companies make the vaccine and compare costs to find the least expensive version. Determine the other expenses you would need to distribute it to all the children in the designated country. Your research needs to include reliable statistics about population, infection rates, and costs of transporting, housing and feeding medical staff to the country. Determine how many lives would be saved each year by distribution of the dose. Gather all your information, and write a persuasive letter to an appropriate governmental official, making an argument for why your plan should be enacted. Find comparable budgetary expenditures in the Federal Budget to compare what the same amount of money is already being used for.
- How fast was a car moving before it crashed if it left 18 feet of skid marks?
- Pretend that a doctor is being sued for malpractice. Explain the details of the case. First, write the closing arguments for the defense lawyer. Then, write the closing arguments for the prosecuting lawyer.
- Analyze the election data for your county or voting district for the last 50 years for governorships, congressional races, senatorial races and presidential races. Devise a system to chart or graphically represent the results of all the races. What patterns of voting can you identify? Does one party dominate over another? Was it always this way or are new voting patterns emerging? Present your findings to local party leaders from both major parties and seek

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their ideas about the causes of new local voting patterns or the enduring roots of consistent local voting patterns. Be prepared to present your findings’ to Mr. Larsen’s 11th grade Civics class.

General List of Possible Performance Tasks

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Design a Web page ▪ Develop a solution to a community problem ▪ Create a public service announcement ▪ Write a book ▪ Design a game ▪ Generate & circulate a petition ▪ Write a series of letters ▪ Present a mime ▪ Design & create needlework ▪ Lead a symposium ▪ Build a planetarium ▪ Develop tools ▪ Design or create musical instruments ▪ Develop an advertising campaign ▪ Compile a booklet or brochure ▪ Draw a set of blueprints ▪ Present a radio program ▪ Do a puppet show ▪ Create a series of wall hangings ▪ Go on an archeological dig ▪ Design & make costumes ▪ Write poems ▪ Conduct a debate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conduct a series of interviews ▪ Develop a collection ▪ Submit writings to a journal, magazine, or newspaper ▪ Interpret through multimedia ▪ Design a structure ▪ Design & conduct an experiment ▪ Collect & analyze samples ▪ Plan a journey or an odyssey ▪ Make an etching or a woodcut ▪ Write letters to the editor ▪ Design political cartoons ▪ Formulate & defend a theory ▪ Conduct a training session ▪ Design & teach a class ▪ Do a demonstration ▪ Present an interior monologue ▪ Generate charts or diagrams to explain ideas ▪ Make a video documentary ▪ Create a series of illustrations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Present a news report ▪ Write a new law & plan for its passage ▪ Make learning centers ▪ Create authentic recipes ▪ Choreograph dances ▪ Present a mock trial ▪ Compile & annotate a set of Internet resources ▪ Design a new product ▪ Write a series of songs ▪ Create a subject dictionary ▪ Make and carry out a plan ▪ Design a simulation ▪ Write a musical ▪ Develop a museum exhibit ▪ Be a mentor ▪ Write or produce a play ▪ Compile a newspaper ▪ Develop an exhibit ▪ Conduct an ethnography ▪ Write a biography ▪ Present a photo-essay ▪ Hold a press conference ▪ Develop & use a questionnaire |
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Source: Tomlinson, C. (2001). How To Differentiate instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 89.