

CRITICAL DESIGN QUALITIES OF STUDENT WORK

1. ***Content and Substance.*** Learning to read and to write complete sentences, for example, is not the same as learning to write persuasively and to read critically, thoughtfully, and well. Educators should commit themselves to designing work that engages all students and helps them attain rich and profound knowledge. If such profound mastery is limited to students who are more socially or economically advantaged—or otherwise already capable of high-quality intellectual work without as much teacher effort—then the dream of democracy cannot truly be realized.

2. ***Organization of knowledge.*** Students are more likely to be engaged when information and knowledge are arranged in clear, accessible ways, and in ways that let students use the knowledge and information to address tasks that are important to them. This doesn't mean that all content must be inherently interesting or relevant to students: They will learn many important things in school that they may not care about at the time. Content should be organized so access to the material is clear and relatively easy, and the students' work has enough attractive qualities to keep them engaged.

3. ***Product focus.*** Work that engages students almost always focuses on a product or performance of significance to students.

4. ***Clear and compelling standards.*** Students prefer knowing exactly what is expected of them, and how those expectations relate to something they care about. Standards are only relevant when those to whom they apply care about them.

5. ***Protection from adverse consequences for initial failures.*** Students are more engaged when they can try tasks without fear of embarrassment, punishment, or implications that they're inadequate. (Unfortunately, current school structures and grading practices often make this difficult to achieve).

6. ***Affirmation of the significance of the performance.*** Students are more highly motivated when their parents, teachers, fellow students, and other "significant others" make it known that they think the student's work is important. Portfolio assessments, which collect student work for scrutiny by people other than the teacher, can play a significant role in making students work "more visible."

7. **Affiliation.** Students are more likely to be engaged by work that permits, encourages, and supports opportunities for them to work interdependently with others. Those who advocate cooperative learning understand this well and also recognize the critical difference between students working together and students working independently on a common task, which may look like group work but isn't.

8. **Novelty and Variety.** Students are more likely to engage in the work asked of them if they are continually exposed to new and different ways of doing things. The introduction of computers in writing classes, for example, might motivate students who otherwise would not write. New technology and techniques, however, shouldn't be used to create new ways to do the same old work; new forms of work and new products to produce are equally important.

9. **Choice.** When students have some degree of control over what they are doing, they are more likely to feel committed to doing it. This doesn't mean students should dictate school curriculum, however. Schools must distinguish between giving students choices in what they do and letting them choose what they will learn.

10. **Authenticity.** This term is bandied about quite a bit by educators, so much so that the power of the concept is sometimes lost. Clearly, however, when students are given tasks that are meaningless, contrived, and inconsequential, they are less likely to take them seriously and be engaged by them. But if the task carries real consequences, it's likely that engagement will increase. What teacher, for example, hasn't noticed that students prepare more diligently for a performance they know their parents will attend? Likewise, students who produce a documentary video on the Civil War are likely to be engaged in a more authentic learning experience than those who listen to a series of lectures on the war, with the sole goal of passing a test.

—Phillip C. Schlechty