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Differentiating Products

Unlike a sense-making activity, which is typically short and focuses on one, or just a few, key understandings and skills, a product is a long-term endeavor. Product assignments should help students—individually or in groups—rethink, use, and extend what they have learned over a long period of time—a unit, a semester, or even a year. Products are important not only because they represent your students' extensive understandings and applications, but also because they are the element of curriculum students can most directly "own." For that reason, well-designed product assignments can be highly motivating because they will bear their creator's thumbprint.

High-quality product assignments are also

ated classroom, teachers may replace some tests with rich product assignments, or combine tests and product options so the broadest range of students has maximum opportunity to think about, apply, and demonstrate what they have learned.

Creating High-Quality Product Assignments

A teacher crafts a top-rate product assignment with thought and care. A good product is not just something students do for enjoyment at the end of a unit. It must cause students to think about, apply, and even expand on all the key understandings and skills of the learning span it represents.

Once a teacher is clear on the knowledge, understandings, and skills the product must

and so on). Often, however, the teacher can use a product as a way to lure students into application of ideas and skills (e.g., using photography as a way to hook young adolescents on poetry). Sometimes a teacher can use a product assignment as a way to help students explore modes of expression unfamiliar to them (e.g., learning to create a museum exhibit, conduct a symposium, or develop a journal article as ways of helping students see how scientists communicate what they know). The very best product formats may be those with which students have a love affair at a given time (e.g., a 3rd grader, who was talented in music, wrote a musical to share information and understandings about the westward movement in the United States).

Then it's important for the teacher to determine core expectations for quality students to pursue in regard to the content in their products, how they should work on their products, and the nature of the final product itself. Students can add to and help the teacher modify the core requirements to address individual readiness, interests, and learning needs, but it is the teacher's job to know and communicate indicators of quality. Students seldom know how to extend their vision in pursuit of quality without help from adults or more expert-like peers.

Because the product assignment should stretch students in application of understanding and skill as well as in pursuit of quality, a teacher needs to determine ways in which she can assist the student in reaching a new level of possibility as the product assignment progresses. This sort of scaffolding allows students to find success at the end of hard work rather than overdoses of confusion and ambiguity. Teachers may arrange times for brainstorming ideas to launch the product, for workshops on conducting research or synthesizing findings,

pate what is necessary to lift the student's sights and build bridges to attaining lofty goals.
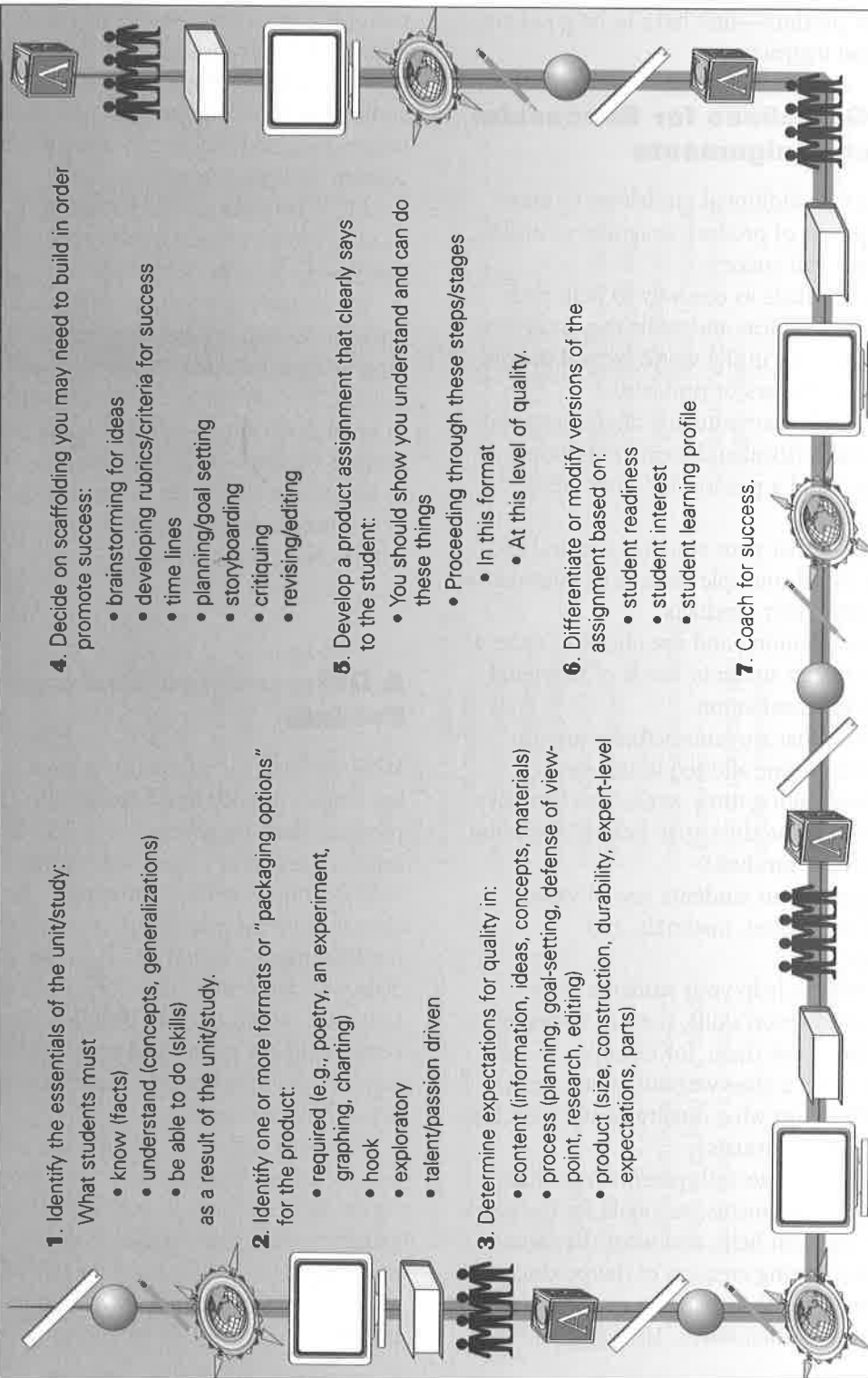
Finally, it's time for the teacher to present the product assignment (in writing, orally, on tape, with icons, through models, or with some combination of these). The assignment should make clear to students what knowledge, understanding, and skills they must include in their work; the stages, processes, and work habits they should demonstrate as they work; the option(s) for expressing their learning; and what quality will look like. Within this structure, there should still be maximum room for individual interests, modes of working, personal quality goals, and so on. The trick is to balance the structure needed to focus and guide students, and the freedom necessary to support innovation and thought.

Only at this point does it become time to differentiate the product assignment. Teachers and students can make adaptations of the core product according to student readiness, interest, and learning profile. Some teachers also like to have a "let's make a deal" product choice through which students can propose alternatives to the teacher's design, as long as the alternative leads students to grapple with key information, understandings, and skills that are at the essence of the assignment's purpose.

It's really helpful for a teacher to coach for quality throughout the product span. Invite students to talk about their ideas, progress, glitches, ways of solving problems, and so on. Share your own excitement about their ideas. Clarify what quality means. Talk about how successful people work. Build a sense of personal ownership of work as well as group appreciation of the varied approaches and ideas of members of the group.

Figure 13.1 (see next page) summarizes components of effective product design, includ-

Figure 13.1
Creating a Powerful Product Assignment

1. Identify the essentials of the unit/study:
What students must
- know (facts)
- understand (concepts, generalizations)
- be able to do (skills)

as a result of the unit/study.

2. Identify one or more formats or "packaging options" for the product:
- required (e.g., poetry, an experiment, graphing, charting)
- hook
- exploratory
- talent/passion driven

3. Determine expectations for quality in:
- content (information, ideas, concepts, materials)
- process (planning, goal-setting, defense of view-point, research, editing)
- product (size, construction, durability, expert-level expectations, parts)

4. Decide on scaffolding you may need to build in order to promote success:
- brainstorming for ideas
- developing rubrics/criteria for success
- time lines
- planning/goal setting
- storyboarding
- critiquing
- revising/editing

5. Develop a product assignment that clearly says to the student:
- You should show you understand and can do these things
- Proceeding through these steps/stages
  - In this format
    - At this level of quality.

6. Differentiate or modify versions of the assignment based on:
- student readiness
- student interest
- student learning profile

7. Coach for success.

It is the teacher's job to **make explicit** whatever you thought was implicit.

process, or product—first have to be good curriculum and instruction.

Other Guidelines for Successful Product Assignments

Here are a few additional guidelines to maximize the power of product assignments and to build for student success:

1. Use products as one way to help your students see the ideas and skills they study in school being used in the world by real people to address real issues or problems.

2. Talk with your students often about the need for both critical and creative thinking. Help them build a passion for ideas being pursued.

3. Require that your students use and synthesize or blend multiple sources of information in developing their products.

4. Stress planning and use check-in dates as needed to match students' levels of independence. Zap procrastination.

5. Ensure that students actually use the entire block of time allotted to the project (rather than waiting three weeks and five days of a monthlong product span before beginning to work on the product).

6. Support your students' use of varied modes of expression, materials, and technologies.

7. Be sure to help your students learn required production skills, not just necessary content. Don't ask them, for example, to do a debate or teach a class without giving them clear guidance on what quality would look like in each of those formats.

8. Communicate with parents regarding time lines, requirements, rationale for the product, how they can help, and what they should avoid doing during creation of the product.

out of the poster-report-mobile rut of products. Figure 13.2 lists just some of the possibilities.

10. Use formative (during the project) and summative (after the project) peer and self-evaluation based on the agreed-upon criteria for content and production.

11. Whenever possible, arrange for student products to be viewed by someone other than just you.

12. In sharing products, remember that having every student share with the whole class may be unduly time-consuming—and even uninspiring, unless you've taught students how to be high-quality presenters. Using exhibits, sharing groups of four, individual presentations to key adults who serve as mentors or audiences, and so on can be great alternatives to whole-class presentations.
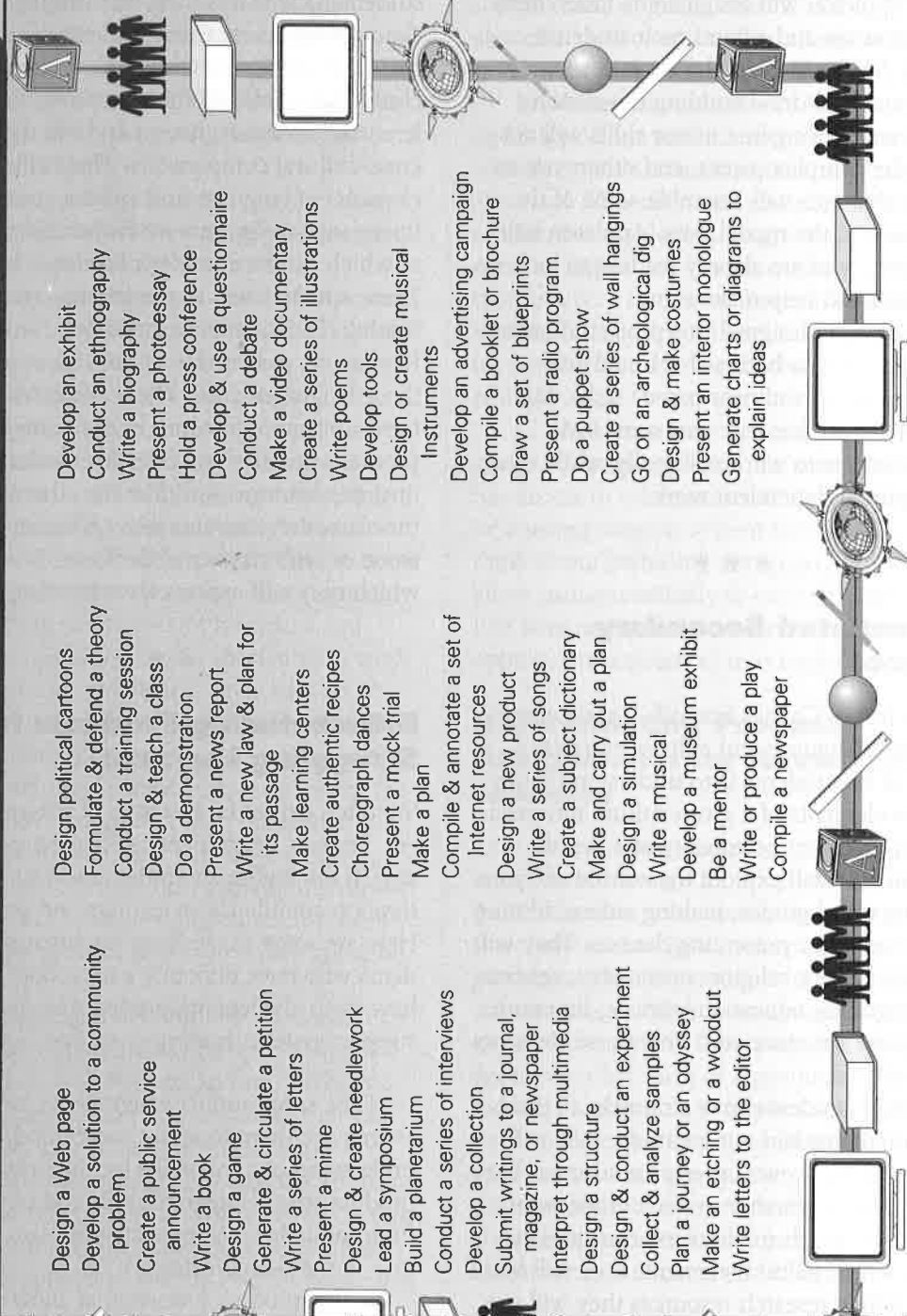
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A Differentiated Kindergarten Product

Mrs. Appleton's kindergartners have been studying neighborhoods and communities. As a final product, they are going to research, design, and build a portion of their town, showing its neighborhoods and communities. The whole class is working as a group to create and share the final model, which will be quite large. The class will make some decisions and do some tasks as a whole, such as deciding the basic contents of the model and making "blank buildings" that will be turned into representations of actual buildings later.

Students will select other facets of the work based on their interests: Everyone selects one community member to interview as a way of gathering data, some students have selected to make signs for buildings, and each student

Figure 13.2
Product Possibilities

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
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 a news report
Write a new law & plan for its passage
Make learning centers
Create authentic recipes
Choreograph dances
Present a mock trial
Make a plan
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
Conduct a debate
Make a video documentary
Create a series of illustrations
Write poems
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
Present an interior monologue
Generate charts or diagrams to explain ideas

Mrs. Appleton will assign some tasks, however, to draw on and extend each student's strengths. Students more skilled with measuring will measure and draw building dimensions. Students with strong fine motor skills will cut some of the complex pieces, and others not so skilled in that area will assemble some of the larger pieces of the model. Mrs. Appleton will ask students who are already reading to look up information and help make signs.

She carefully designed this project to ensure that all students do both self-selected and teacher-selected (readiness-based) tasks. Mrs. Appleton also makes sure that some tasks require students to work collegially, while other tasks require independent work.

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Differentiated Secondary Products

Students in Mr. Garcia's Spanish II class are working on language and culture projects. A goal for all his students is to understand more fully how elements of a given culture interrelate and form a distinct personality of a people. Many students will explore the culture of Spain by writing travel guides, making videos, filming documentaries, or presenting dramas. They will investigate history, religion, economics, celebrations, geography, education, climate, literature, art, language structure, and how those elements are interrelated.

Although students have a number of product requirements laid out for them, they will add some of their own criteria for success. They also can choose whether to work alone or in a small group, which mode of expression they will use, which cultural elements they will focus on, and which research resources they will use.

students, Spanish is their first language. Mr. Garcia wants these three students to work with the same concepts as the other students in the class—but to stretch their thinking, he will differentiate their assignment and ask them to do cross-cultural comparisons. They will examine elements of language and culture across at least three language groups other than Spanish, none of which can be a modern Romance language. These students will examine languages such as Swahili, Farsi, Chinese, Japanese, Hebrew, and Russian, as well as the cultures from which those languages arise. These advanced students have a bit more freedom in designing their final products and the processes for reaching their final destinations. And like the other students in the class, they can also select whether to work alone or with peers and the form through which they will express their learning.

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Differentiating Products for Struggling Learners

We often expect far too little of struggling learners. Product assignments are a great place to stretch our sights for students and to help them develop confidence as learners and producers. Here are some suggestions for ensuring that students who have difficulty with school tasks have both challenging products to create and support systems leading to success.

1. Be sure product assignments for all learners require them to apply and extend essential understandings and skills for the unit or other product span. (Integrate skills and other goals from individualized educational plans [IEPs] into rich product formats.)

2. Use product formats that allow students

3. Give product assignments in smaller increments, allowing students to complete one portion of a product before introducing another.

5. Think about putting directions on audio or video tape so students can revisit explanations as needed.

6. Prepare, or help students prepare, time lines for product work so that tasks seem manageable and comfortably structured.

7. Use miniworkshops on particular product skills such as taking notes in research, conducting interviews, drawing conclusions, editing, and so on. Many students will benefit from options to attend such miniworkshops, including some students who struggle academically.

8. Support students in finding appropriate resources by setting up interviews, bookmarking Internet sites, creating special book boxes or shelves of readable sources on related topics, tape-recording summaries of key ideas and information, enlisting media specialists to work with students at established times, and so on.

9. Provide templates or organizers that guide students through each step of doing research.

10. From time to time be sure to review the big picture of the product with the students—asking them to reflect on why it's important, what they are learning, how parts of the product fit together to make a big picture of meaning, how the product relates to what's going on in class, and so on.

11. Where students find tasks daunting think about joining (or having specialists join) individuals or groups in an ad hoc, advisory capacity—meeting at pre-established times for consultation, coaching, and guidance.

12. Work with students to target portions of rubrics that reflect their individual needs, focusing both yourself and students on goals that seem challenging and worthwhile for particular emphasis.

13. Help students analyze models of effective products from prior years so that they develop awareness of important components of the product, language skills to think about the elements, and concrete illustrations of what good work looks like.

14. When students do not have resources and support for product completion outside of school, provide time, materials, and partnership at school. This may take place before or after school, during class, during released time from class, at lunch, or even on weekends. It's important for every student to have an adult support system that speaks of belief in the student and investment in making sure the belief becomes reality.

15. When students speak a primary language other than English, be sure the student has access to information in his first language, or a strong support system for translating. Also, think about including a stage in the time line to allow students initially to express ideas in their first language and then to translate them (with appropriate assistance) into English.

Differentiating Product Assignments for Advanced Learners

As is the case with content and process, the idea with product design for advanced learners is to ensure that learners actually have to stretch their information base, understanding, thought processes, planning and production skills, and self-awareness. Product assignments that are quite challenging in these ways for many students often fall short of a genuine challenge for students highly able in a given subject. Moving the "equalizer buttons" (see Figure 8.1, page 47) over toward the right as you modify product assignments for these learners is your goal. Here are a few principles useful for adapting product assignments for advanced learners.

1. Be sure to structure product assignments for advanced learners so that they're being stretched forward on a number of the learning

continuums—complexity, independence, transformation, abstractness, multifaceted solutions, and great leaps of insight.

2. Consider having advanced learners study the key issues or questions across time periods, disciplines, or cultures.

3. As much as possible, include advanced-level research, such as advanced materials, multiple materials, primary sources, original documents, and student-conducted original research.

4. Consider using mentors to guide the work of advanced learners so that the students are stretched in content and quality by someone who knows the area of study at an advanced level.

5. Consider letting advanced students begin their projects earlier than other students if the complexity of their products warrants it. Working on their products might then become an ongoing assignment when they compact out of classwork and when they do not need to do the homework practice important for other learners.

6. Whenever possible, have each advanced learner work with a mentor—someone who works avocationally or professionally with the topic being explored.

7. Let each advanced learner help you develop criteria for expert-level content and production. Work together to determine issues that experts would feel must be dealt with in the product exploration, ways in which those issues should be dealt with, and procedures and standards for production that would be important to an expert. Use these as benchmarks for student planning and assessment.

8. When it would be helpful to do so, have advanced learners' products assessed by an expert in the field on which the product is based. In some instances, expert assessment is

ideas prior to completion of the product. In other instances, *summative* or end-stage assessment by an expert is useful for advanced learners who want to test their product against genuine high standards. It is often the case that teachers lack some of the knowledge and skills of a professional in a given area of study. Helping advanced learners gain access to those skills and understandings is an important way of ensuring that they stretch their capacity instead of continuing to be rewarded for "doing what comes naturally."

Final Thoughts on Differentiating Products for All Learners

The ways to design, support, and assess challenging product assignments are endless. Just remember to provide written guidelines, which may be lengthy at times, so students have adequate structure, challenge, and clarity of purpose and expectations.

Differentiating product assignments in a mixed-ability classroom is beneficial for several reasons. If all products relate to the same key information and understandings, then all students can share in conversations among individuals, small groups, and the whole class. This can occur even as students work in ways that address their *own* readiness levels, interests, and learning modes. By offering variations on well-designed products with core commonalities, teachers encourage all students to draw on their personal interests and strengths. In these ways, all students can grow from appropriate challenges. At the same time, the teacher retains focus on those curricular components he or she deems essential to all learners.

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