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BROOK LINE BOOKS

CHAPTER FOUR

Enhancing Assignment Completion for Academically Diverse Learners

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Many teachers are concerned over the growing number of students who fail to complete their assignments satisfactorily. Teachers often complain that assignment completion rates are low and that the quality of work that *is* turned in "on time" by their students is very poor. Failure to complete assignments is a major factor contributing to the poor academic performance and school failure of youth at risk and youth with disabilities (Davis, 1984; England & Flately, 1985; Gajria & Salend, 1995; Salend & Schliff, 1988). Poor assignment completion is also cited as being a criterion for student referral to special education programs (Bay & Bryan, 1992). The motivation and ability of students to complete assigned work are important because assignments represent a major vehicle for the mastery of content presented by their teachers.

As students move into secondary schools, they are increasingly expected to practice skills and content independently by completing a number of assignments outside of class. While during the elementary years, much time is spent in classrooms on practice activities to enhance the skills and knowledge being taught, the nature of secondary classrooms is such that teachers deliver instruction without allowing time for students to begin their work in class. These teachers

may assume two things with regard to their pre-established assignment completion procedures. First, they may assume that the type of work they are giving will be acceptable to their students. Second they may assume that their students have the wherewithal to do it. Unfortunately, many students do not value the kind of work they are expected to do, and they attach little meaning to it (Glasser, 1991). Additionally, many students lack effective and efficient assignment completion strategies for completing the work.

Teacher concern over the lack of student interest in schoolwork prompted the U.S. Department of Education to identify student motivation as one of its top research priorities for the 1990s (Cross, 1990). Apathy is high among students who often complain that the schoolwork they are expected to do is boring and has little relevance to their lives. In classrooms where the work they are expected to do *is* acceptable, you see highly motivated students who are looking forward to the task, asking about it, and showing a willingness to participate in it (Adelman & Taylor, 1983). According to Griffin (1988), teachers *can* create conditions that stimulate a desire to learn and grow and that consistently invite students to be motivated. Planning motivating assignments that meet the needs and interests of students is possible and necessary in order to enhance learning for all students in the class.

Teachers are also concerned over the number of students who fail to finish their work because they lack the necessary skills and strategies to do an adequate job (Delquadri, Greenwood, Whorton, Carta, & Hall, 1986; Deshler, Schumaker, Alley, Warner, & Clark, 1983). For example, some adolescents with learning disabilities (LD), and those at risk for school failure, may read below grade level, have difficulty expressing their thoughts and ideas in writing, and/or lack important organizational skills for completing tasks (Putnam, Deshler, & Schumaker, 1992). However, the challenge of responding to the needs of a diverse group of students extends beyond special education students who are included for long periods of time in general education. Teachers must also differentiate assignments to meet the needs of students achieving in the average, above-average, and below-

average range of academic performance as measured by teacher, school district, and state academic standards. This performance diversity may be attributed to individual differences among students in learning needs, culture, gender, life experiences, abilities, skills, language proficiency, beliefs, goals, personal characteristics or orientation, or values (Vance, 1995). Explaining assignments to academically diverse classes of students in a structured way is important and necessary so that students, who lack effective and efficient strategies for completing their work, will know what to do and how to do it in order to complete their assignments fully and correctly.

Throughout this chapter you will have an opportunity to visit Mr. Paxton, a 10th-grade social studies teacher, and meet some of his students. Mr. Paxton teaches in an economically, linguistically, and racially diverse urban school. He was once quite frustrated over the fact that his students failed to complete their assignments satisfactorily, thus they were falling farther and farther behind. However, Mr. Paxton learned routines for helping his students become more successful assignment completion strategists. Let's go back in time to see what you may have observed in three separate visits to Mr. Paxton's class *last year* (before he learned a better way to plan, present, and evaluate assignments with his students).

First Visit. The first time you visit Mr. Paxton's class, you note that he knows his content well and enjoys teaching. He tells you that his classes have grown in number from an average of 25 to 32 students since the beginning of the school year. He can depend on about one fourth of his students to pass with little or no difficulty. The remaining students in his classes vary in performance from average to low. Among the total group in this class, one student is gifted and talented, three students have specific learning disabilities, three have limited English proficiency, and two have serious emotional/behavioral problems that cause disruption for the class at times. Mr. Paxton states that he relies on various support teachers in the building to provide modified tests and assignments for these nine students.

As the students enter the classroom, they take their seats and wait

for class to begin. Mr. Paxton lectures most of the period while the students take notes. As a traditional long-term assignment for each unit of study, Mr. Paxton passes out a packet of about 20 photocopied worksheets for students to complete before the exam. The worksheets consist of multiple-choice questions, and short essay and discussion questions that accompany chapters in the book. He tells the students to turn the packets in right before taking the test. Shortly before the bell rings, Mr. Paxton jots down a page number or two on the board to indicate pages from the packet that he wants the students to finish before class the next day. Some students copy the page numbers down in an assignment book, and others rely on their memory to remind them to complete the worksheets before papers are to be exchanged in class for grading the next day. Mr. Paxton tells you that on the following day, after the papers have been graded, he will have the students call out their grades as he records them in his grade book.

Second Visit. The second time you visit Mr. Paxton's class, he gives the students a list of assignments to choose from that relate to a topic of study. He passes around a sign-up sheet, and each student is told to select a different assignment. The assignment list is interesting, but the directions on how to complete the various assignments are not very clear. One student is dissatisfied because the assignment she wanted to do was already chosen by another student before the list came around to her. Mr. Paxton tells the students that once they finish their assignments, they will share them during class. One of the students invites you to visit on the day the students are to share their final products.

Third Visit. The third time you visit Mr. Paxton's class, it is to watch the students present their completed assignments. You and Mr. Paxton both notice that some of the students have performed high-quality work, while others appear to have exerted little effort. After their presentations, Mr. Paxton reflects on some of the students' apathetic attitudes toward assignment completion. He is quite bothered by the fact that over the past few semesters a high number of his

students failed to turn their assignments in on time and/or complete them satisfactorily. He attributes this fact to the diversity among his students, yet he is unsure about what to do about it. While he cares deeply about his students and their success, he is uncertain about how to differentiate assignments for students in order to meet their individual needs.

As you can probably see, Mr. Paxton was in a quandary over how to best meet the needs of all of his students. Fortunately, much has been learned in recent years about student motivation and strategic instruction that can improve assignment completion procedures for teachers and students. As you proceed through the chapter, you will see that Mr. Paxton learned to rely on the integration of a number of approaches to teaching and learning that made a big difference in his life and in the lives of his students. Specifically, teachers can enhance learning for students through classroom assignments by: (1) planning assignments that all students can successfully complete and that are motivating; (2) presenting assignments to students in such a way that they know what to do and how to do it in order to complete an assignment to a high level of quality; (3) evaluating finished products in such a way that students understand how they performed and how they might improve in the future; and (4) integrating technology as a tool to enhance planning, presenting, and evaluating of assignment-completion experiences

PLANNING HIGH-QUALITY ASSIGNMENTS

The Current Nature of Secondary Assignments

Content-related assignments given in secondary classrooms consist of three types (Lenz, Ehren, & Smiley, 1991). The first type of assignment is a *study* assignment which requires students to prepare for a test or some type of class activity. These assignments focus on the process that students must go through to independently find, manipulate, and remember content information; they may not always end in a final product. An example of a study assignment would be to

complete an outline of important information the teacher previously presented in class and then study for a test.

The second type of assignment, the *daily work* assignment, is characterized by routine follow-up activities designed to promote practice and understanding of the content. Examples of daily work assignments would be the completion of questions or worksheets.

The third type of assignment, a *project* assignment, usually spans multiple days and often requires that the student extend or apply the content. Examples of project assignments include reports, themes, visuals, product, and/or presentations. Although these three types of assignments fall into separate categories according to their distinct features, they are not mutually exclusive in that each sometimes accomplishes multiple purposes.

Each of these three types of assignments can be completed individually, with a partner, or in a group, depending upon teacher expectations. These assignments can be further categorized according to where students are expected to complete them. Specifically, assignments completed inside the classroom are considered *seatwork* assignments, whereas assignments completed outside of the classroom are classified as *homework* assignments (Paschal, 1988).

Characteristics of Seatwork Assignments. Gartland and Rosenberg (1987) described seatwork engagement as academic learning time. They argued that these instances of academic learning time can only be meaningful if students work on attaining new learning through assignments that are appropriately matched to their assessed strengths and weaknesses. However, Jorgenson (1977) reported that seatwork assignments are often too difficult for students. Similarly, Anderson (1984), noted that many low-performing students do not always understand the purpose of assignments, and therefore, often focus on finishing an assignment for the sake of getting it done rather than learning important content.

Doyle and Carter (1984), on the other hand, discovered that students are often expected to perform low-level, routine work. This type of work is presented through daily worksheets that require

students to perform simple operations of word recognition through matching, reproduction of simple lists from chapter information, and practice on isolated skills not appropriately matched with important content; thus, little emphasis is placed on developing content understanding or meaningful applications through daily assignments. This research leads us to believe that the type of assignments given to many students in secondary classrooms may lack challenge and interest.

Dougherty and Barth (1997) maintain that poor and minority children, in particular, may be exposed to low-level assignments that are often boring. These researchers provide us with a snapshot of two typical assignments that were gathered from two separate secondary classrooms. In one city, eighth-graders were studying a social studies chapter on colonialism. The teacher wanted to give them an assignment that would build their reading comprehension and vocabulary based on new terms used in the chapter. She did not ask them to write their own definitions. Rather, students were asked to copy the definitions for the 12 words from the chapter's glossary. These 13- and 14-year-olds were then required to draw a picture for each word. The list included such words as "deism" and "smuggling."

The second assignment gathered by the researchers was from an eleventh-grade social studies class. The teacher assigned a "major project" about a famous person of their choice. Each student was supposed to spend an entire month studying a historical figure in depth. The culminating task, intended to show the results of the student's month long study, was to photocopy a picture of the person they had selected and glue it in the center of a poster board. They were then to write one or two sentences in each of the four corners summarizing what they had learned about the historical figure. The poster was the final grade for a five-week unit. Students who turned it in earned an A or B. Final products from the students consisted of a picture and five disconnected sentences.

When looking collectively at the kinds of assignments given to students in high-poverty schools, the researchers concluded that they shared four common characteristics. First, grades were based on process, not product. For example, if students turned in a neatly

produced paper by using the computer, they would get an A or B with little consideration for how their work addressed the content. Second, assignments rarely required research and its accompanying documentation and citation. While bibliographies were seen, they were rarely embedded into the paper. It was also discovered that whole paragraphs were copied from outside resources without proper citations.

A third assignment characteristic noted by Dougherty and Barth (1997) was that high school students are routinely given easy assignments with little relevance. For example, they were asked to keep volumes of journals that had no explicit learning purpose, and consequently had nothing in them to show academic growth. Likewise, math assignments required students to do pages of computation and short story problems without real-world analysis or application.

The fourth observable characteristic had to do with assignment topics. For example, reading material was limited to textbooks or mediocre literary works. Writing topics required only reiteration, or description, with little opportunity for independent thinking. Additionally, science assignments consisted of multiple worksheets. While such accounts of school life are disheartening, there is hope that all students can learn to high levels when they are taught to high levels. If our goal is to close the achievement gap among diverse learners, taking a closer look at how to create better assignments that are linked to meaningful content seems a viable option.

Characteristics of Homework Assignments. Lee and Pruitt (1979) developed a conceptual model for classifying homework assignments. They set forth four major categories based on the purpose of the assignment in relation to learning the content: practice, preparation, extension, or creation. Practice assignments are designed to help students master specific skills and to reinforce material presented in class. Preparation assignments are intended to provide students with the necessary skills and/or knowledge for upcoming lessons. Extension assignments are those given to assist students in transferring new skills and ideas to new situations; extension assignments frequently require abstract thinking skills. Finally, creative assignments allow

students to cleverly integrate many skills and ideas to produce a product. Creation assignments often take more time to complete, resulting in students working on the assignment over several days or weeks. In developing these categories, Lee and Pruitt (1979) determined that homework is most effective if it allows students to extend their knowledge and be creative in the way they manipulate the content.

In a national study on teachers' homework practices, Connors (1991) found that only a minority of classroom assignments met the criteria specified by Lee and Pruitt (1979). Specifically, she administered a questionnaire on homework practices to 1,079 middle school teachers, 80% of whom represented 22 different states. Survey results revealed that the majority of middle-level teachers assigned only practice and preparation assignments. She also concluded that practice homework is often boring, dull, repetitive, and unimaginative. Connors (1991) recommended that students have an opportunity to apply their learning in a personal way rather than go through a daily ritual of completing worksheets aimed at completing simple problems or memorizing facts. Likewise, the most common form of homework—requiring students to read a chapter and answer questions at the end—is generally not enticing for students. Instead, Connors recommended that teachers be innovative in their approach to homework by getting students excited about the content, using students' suggestions, providing options, and not relying heavily on the textbook. While this study revealed the poor quality of homework assignments, the majority of respondents polled believed that homework had the potential of increasing academic achievement.

Palardy (1995) reported that in addition to its academic benefits, teachers assign homework because it teaches self-discipline. Additionally, he reported that while homework can fulfill people's expectations and expand the curriculum, it also has its associated problems. Problems with homework include completion difficulties, uncoordinated assignments, interference with important out-of-school activities, fostering of undesirable student behaviors and attitudes toward the assignment completion process, uniform assignments for all

students, and the lack of teacher feedback (Palardy, 1995).

Struyk, Epstein, Bursuck, Polloway, McConegy, and Cole (1995) conducted a study to examine the homework, grading, and testing practices used by teachers for students with and without disabilities. The study was prompted by teachers and researchers who were concerned about the integration of larger numbers of students with disabilities into general education classrooms at a time when reformers were calling for an increase in academic standards and accountability in those classrooms (Holcutt, Martin, & McKinney, 1990; Kauffman, 1989; Schumaker & Deshler, 1988). Given the fact that adolescents with disabilities receive about 60% of their academic credits in general education classrooms (Valdes, Williamson, & Wagner, 1990), it seemed appropriate to determine what secondary school teachers were doing in regard to homework practices.

Of the 352 teachers who returned the survey on homework practices, 76 were middle school teachers and 67 were high school teachers. Results indicated that homework is an integral component of general education curriculum and must be addressed if inclusion programs are to be beneficial to students with disabilities. It was learned that homework is typically assigned on a daily basis, and that the amount increases as students progress through the grades. Thus, one assumes that if each secondary teacher assigns homework daily, students who have four or five teachers may have from two to three hours of homework nightly (Struyk et al., 1995).

According to the teachers in this study, the predominant reasons for assigning homework to students were to practice skills already taught, to prepare for tests, and to complete unfinished classwork. Practice assignments appeared to be most helpful if assignments were designed to reinforce material learned in class so that students with disabilities could maintain newly learned skills. Enrichment activities and preparation for future class work were rated least helpful. Using a homework assignment sheet was also noted by the teachers to be very useful. While general education teachers indicated that they were responsible for adjusting homework assignments, only 25% of the teachers in the study had taken special education classes that focused

on adapting materials, and only 30% had participated in inservice activities relating to adaptations.

Checkley (1997), in a review of homework practices, claims that research supports a correlation between homework and student achievement and the development of critical skills. She also reports that there is agreement among educators that homework can help instill in students a sense of responsibility, accountability, motivation, and self-confidence. She concludes that homework for the modern age must be an approach that respects the lives of students. Such an approach would include the following: (1) multiple ways to complete an assignment; (2) ensuring students have access to every resource necessary to complete assignments; (3) opportunities to relate assignments to real life situations; (4) ways for students to record their daily assignments and plan for assignment completion; and, (5) coordination with parents in the planning and execution of meaningful and interesting assignments. Homework can be a powerful way to extend learning beyond the classroom if each of these conditions are in place.

IMPROVING THE NATURE OF SECONDARY ASSIGNMENTS

Fortunately, much has been learned in recent years that can guide teacher efforts to plan highly motivating assignments that their students will accept as meaningful and enjoyable. While the curriculum defines general parameters for what is to be taught, only teachers can determine what skills and knowledge must be emphasized as the content of a particular assignment. Additionally, when students perceive assignment completion to be meaningful, personally relevant, interesting and fun, and if the context supports and encourages personal control, then motivation to learn and self-regulation of the learning process occurs naturally (McCombs & Whistler, 1989).

Considering the Content of Course Assignments. If each assignment

is not linked to information to be learned in a particular unit of study, it is "busy work." Therefore, choosing the content of a particular assignment requires you to first examine the bigger chunk of learning to be completed and identify the most important pieces. Then, it is possible to identify the knowledge and skills that will be the target of the assignment. Rademacher, Deshler, Schumaker, and Lenz (1998) recommend the following steps to aid in the selection of assignments that will more likely engage students in meaningful ways.

1. Survey the content of the course and identify the big ideas and what is critical for all students to know. Create questions for a unit of study that reflect your decision. In other words, what do you want all students to be able to answer once the unit is complete?
2. Identify the structure of the information into a graphic representation, such as a content map that represents how you want students to think about the information. Place the big ideas at the top with the supporting categories that support the big ideas underneath.
3. Analyze your map and determine what knowledge (e.g. identifying the causes of the Revolutionary war, explaining the social conditions during the Depression) and what skills (e.g., writing a paragraph, multiplying decimals, locating resources in a library) need to be reinforced through extra practice in the form of an assignment.

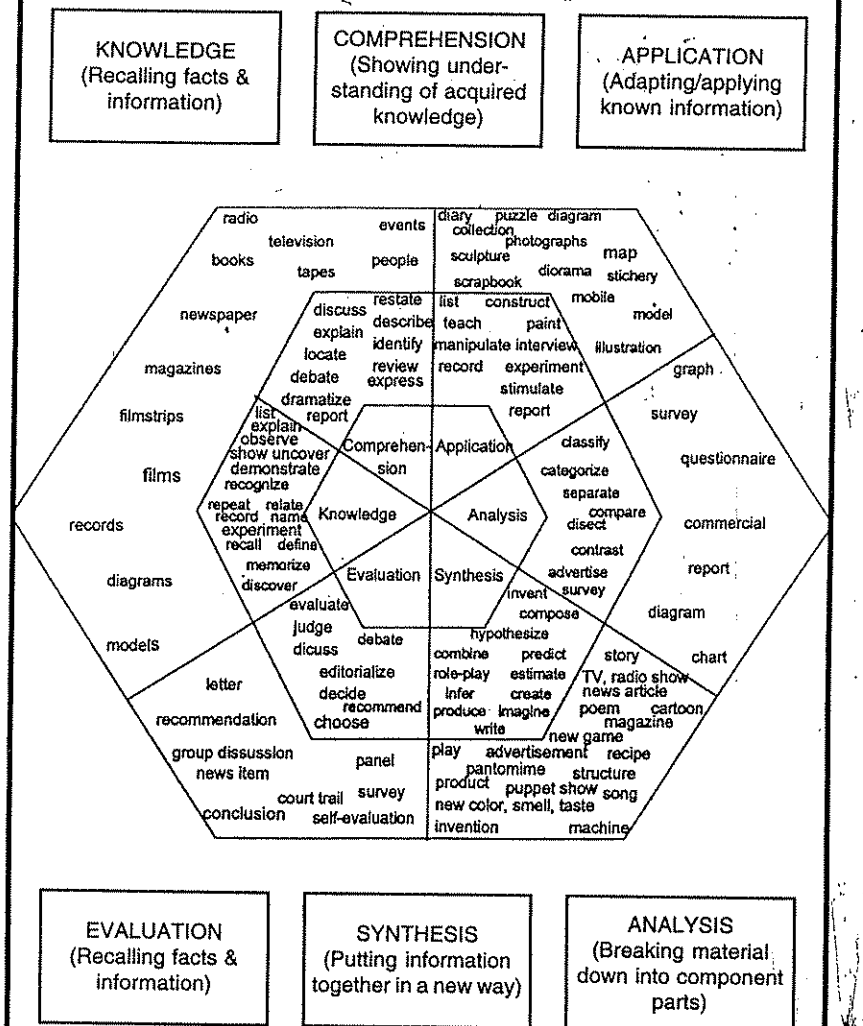
Preparing Individual Assignments. Once you have decided what content you want to reinforce through the use of assignments, you are ready to create a plan for each assignment that is different than the traditional worksheet format. While worksheets are appropriate on many occasions, students can become bored and uninterested in schoolwork if that is the only way to express what they have learned. The following questions are recommended to guide your decisions. Ask yourself:

1. *What do I want students to accomplish as a result of finishing this assignment?* (For example, you may want them to *know* the phases of the digestive system, or you may want them to *apply* their knowledge of the digestive process.)
2. *How will students accomplish what I intend for them to do in an interesting way?* (For example, to show they know the steps of the digestive system, they may *label* the parts of the digestive system on a diagram and then *explain* the function of each part to the class. Or, you may have students *solve* a real-life problem related to which part of the digestive system is not working.)
3. *Why is it important for students to know what I am assigning them to do?* (For example, knowing and understanding the function of the digestive system is important for understanding how the whole body functions and grows. Understanding the digestive system is important for good health and promoting healthy eating habits. Identifying the benefits of the assignment to students' lives is a recommended component of motivating them to actually complete the assignment.)

Since its original development in the 1950s, Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) has been one of the most widely used systems for describing students' higher level thinking processes. There are six levels in the Taxonomy that are arranged in a hierarchy from simple to more complex. The thinking required within each broad category is as follows: *Knowledge* demands the recall of facts and information; *Comprehension* requires showing understanding through acquired knowledge; *Application* involves adapting and applying known information; *Analysis* includes breaking material down in component parts; *Synthesis* is concerned with putting information together in a new way; and, *Evaluation* has to do with judging the outcome of a particular event or situation. Understanding what students are required to do within each of the Bloom's thinking level categories can help you plan more challenging and interesting assignments.

Figure 1, the Assignment Idea Web, was created to help you plan

Figure 1: Assignment Idea Web



Information in the center and second section of this web was adapted from *Taxonomy of Educational Objective for the Cognitive Domain* (Bloom, 1956).

interesting assignments in each of the six thinking domains. The center part of the web depicts each of the six thinking domains according to Bloom (1956). The center part of the web lists thinking processes students may go through if they are expected to perform a particular task in one of the domains. The outside section of the web gives interesting assignment ideas that will match each domain and thinking requirement.

Adapting Assignments to Student Interests and Needs

Getting to Know Your Students. Implicit in the literature is the assumption that motivation plays a crucial role in academic success (Mehring & Colson, 1990). Many educators contend that motivation affects learning and learning affects motivation (Sprinthall & Sprinthall, 1987). Student motivation to learn is high in classes of diverse learners when students function as members of learning communities. Researchers at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning maintain that "learning communities" exist when students learn within a cooperative, diverse, interdependent group. There are three basic assumptions related to forming learning communities for the types of diverse learners we met in Mr. Paxton's class (Vance, 1995).

The first assumption is that teachers will make every effort to develop and use mechanisms to get to know and to form relationships with each member of the learning community. Clearly, the goal of getting to know students is something that most teachers value. Initial information can be gathered in a beginning-of-the-year questionnaire that students might complete for homework or as a seatwork assignment.

- Name, nicknames
- Parent or caregiver (s) names
- Siblings' names and birth order
- Towns and states in which the student has lived
- Places the student has visited

- Hobbies and interests
- Pets
- Most favorite activities outside of school
- Most favorite kinds of assignments
- Student's current job
- Involvement in school activities student would like to experience
- What the student expects to learn
- Concerns the student has about the course
- Things that help the student learn

For students who may have difficulty completing a written questionnaire due to limited English proficiency, an individual interview may be conducted. The following year after your earlier visits to Mr. Paxton's room, he decided that he would have his students work in pairs to complete an informational form. Each person then introduced his or her partner to the class and shared some of the personal information with the group.

The second assumption (Vance, 1995) in forming a learning community is that teachers will take time to know their students as individuals, which means to gain an appreciation of the commonalties and differences among students in terms of learning needs, culture, world view, life experiences, skills, language proficiency, beliefs, goals, personal characteristics, and values. In terms of cultural differences, this is especially important because, by the year 2000, the minority population will increase from 39% to 50% in the public schools (Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990). By the year 2010, people of color will be a majority in Texas, New York, and Florida (U.S. Census Bureau, 1992). The more information we have about a student's cultural group, the easier it will be to personalize instruction.

In the ideal learning community, students and teachers will learn to accept and appreciate one another's differences, while also recognizing the commonalties we share. Dean, Salend, & Taylor (1993) recommends that teachers emphasize the following points in class-

rooms where cultural diversity prevails: (1) Every culture is important within the total group. (2) There are similarities, as well as differences, among cultures. (3) Cultures are better understood when they are an integral and ongoing part of the curriculum. (4) Cultural stereotyping is avoided because individual behavior varies within cultures. (5) Families and individuals experience their culture in personal ways.

The third assumption (Vance, 1995) for forming positive learning communities is that teachers will use their knowledge of students to plan and implement instruction and assignments that are inclusive and responsive to diverse learning needs within the community. If educational equity is to exist within the learning community, teachers must apply effective teaching strategies that capitalize on the unique learning and social characteristics of each individual.

Platt and Olson (1997) offer the following techniques to help meet the needs of adolescents from all cultures who may be at risk:

(1) Personalize instruction and assignments so that attention, support, and recognition is possible.
(2) Emphasize the importance and relevance of studying a particular topic and its link to the world of work.
(3) Give well-structured assignments that can be completed in cooperative groups.
(4) Offer a variety of ways to demonstrate learning so as to cater to numerous learning styles and ability levels.
(5) Evaluate student progress on assignments and give timely and frequent feedback.
(6) Base grades on other demonstrations of knowledge other than traditional paper and pencil examinations.
(7) Give concrete examples and/or models of new kinds of assignments students may be expected to complete.

Applying Multiple Intelligences. Some educators find Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI; Gardner, 1983) helpful in making their students more well-rounded, making school more engaging and motivating, and enabling more students to succeed.

Psychologist Howard Gardner, in his book, *Frames of Mind* (1983), argued that our traditional conception of intelligence—as primarily linguistic and logical abilities—is too narrow, and that all human beings actually have seven distinct intelligences. His definition of intelligence is "the ability to solve problems or to create products, that are valued within one or more cultural settings" (Gardner, 1993, p. 37). By cultivating a broad range of the seven distinct intelligences, teachers can uncover hidden strengths among students who may not excel at verbal or mathematical tasks. Thus, a multiple intelligences approach to teaching and learning recognizes and respects the different ways in which students learn and are assessed. Figure 2, Planning Assignments Based on Multiple Intelligence Theory, lists each of the seven intelligences, an explanation of each, and example assignments that may be constructed based on a particular type of intelligence.

Figure 2
Planning Assignments Based on Multiple Intelligence Theory

Course: *English* Unit: *Prejudice*

Type of Intelligence	Definition	Example Assignments
Spatial	The ability to perceive the visual-spatial world accurately and to perform transformations upon one's perceptions	Work with artistic media (paints, clay, colored markers, pens, etc.) to express an idea or opinion; for example, what you think the 21st century will look like without prejudice. Visualize yourself in a different period of history and have an imaginary conversation on prejudice with someone from that time.
Bodily-Kinesthetic	Expertise in using one's whole body to express ideas and feelings, and facility in using one's hands to produce or transform things	Design and play a game of charades using common statements or comments surrounding prejudice. Play non-competitive games that involve physical activity and a lot of motion; for example, learn names of historical figures that have had an impact combating prejudice and use pantomime and/or physical gestures for others to identify them.

Figure 2 (Continued)

Type of Intelligence	Definition	Example Assignments
Musical	The capacity to perceive, discriminate, transform, and express musical forms	Use singing to express an idea; for example, rewrite the words of a popular tune to tell a story about a family that has experienced prejudice. Create a rap to practice a sequence of events to be remembered for a test on prejudice.
Linguistic	The capacity to use words effectively, either orally or in writing	Read a favorite story about prejudice and write a new ending. Make a speech on a topic surrounding prejudice about which you have a great deal of interest and excitement.
Logical-Mathematical	The capacity to use numbers effectively and to reason well	Create a convincing, rational explanation for something that is totally absurd; for example, the benefits of the square basketball in preventing prejudice during team games. Participate in an activity requiring use of the "scientific method"; for example, if you are not a cook, try making brownies from scratch following a recipe. Compare each ingredient and action to ingredients and actions that create human prejudice.
Interpersonal	The ability to perceive and make distinctions in the feelings, moods, intentions, and motivations of other people	Work with five members of a group to plan interesting assignments on prejudice for the class. Work with members of a class committee to design a mini workshop on sensitivity training to prevent prejudice.
Intrapersonal	Self-knowledge and the ability to act adaptively on the basis of that knowledge	Write a written reflection detailing your own prejudices and how they might be overcome. Identify your thinking strategies regarding ways to combat prejudice in the workplace.

Note: Intelligence types and definitions were adapted from *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom* (Armstrong, 1994) and from *Seven Ways of Knowing* (Lazear, 1991)

It is important to note that the MI theory has broad implication for all children, including special education students, who participate in assignment completion activities in the general education setting. Because MI theory requires teachers to focus on what students *can* do in order to succeed in school, it is considered to be a growth paradigm. Thus, while acknowledging their learning difficulties, teachers who operate from this paradigm are more likely to regard students with special needs as basically healthy individuals who are able to achieve commensurately with their normally-achieving peers when given opportunities to do so (Armstrong, 1994). For example, while Jamie, a young man with autism, cannot communicate clearly, his teacher recognizes his gift of music. Billie, a student with LD, has great difficulty with reading and writing tasks, but his teacher gives him opportunities to exhibit his special drawing and designing gifts. Amy, a young adolescent with mental retardation, has great difficulty with abstract thinking tasks, but her teacher expounds upon her acting ability. And Juan, a student with cerebral palsy, has difficulty with motor tasks, but his teacher capitalizes on his exceptional linguistic and logical-mathematical aptitude.

Assessing the multiple intelligences of your students is possible through informal inventories, such as the "Checklist for Assessing Students' Multiple Intelligences" (Armstrong, 1994). Other ways to gather information about your students' multiple intelligences include keeping anecdotal records, looking at school records, talking with other teachers, talking with parents, setting up special activities and observing student participation, and asking the students themselves. Students are the ultimate experts on how they learn best. Many resources are available through the Internet to help teachers apply multiple intelligence theory in their classrooms.

Integrating Learning Styles with Multiple Intelligences. Another factor to consider when planning assignments is students' learning styles. Learning styles are students' individual approaches to learning. Over the years, you have probably developed at least one way of learning that seems to work best for you. This way of learning is your

learning style. You may also have realized that you move from one learning style to another, depending on the task.

Most learning-style theory has its roots in the psychoanalytic community while multiple intelligence theory is the fruit of cognitive science. Whereas learning styles theory is primarily concerned with the personal *process* of learning, multiple intelligence theory centers on the *content* and *products* of learning (Silver, Strong, & Perini, 1997). Considering both styles and intelligences when planning assignments can help students learn in many ways.

Various informal tests may be administered to determine a students' learning style preference and make instructional recommendations. For example, if a student is considered to be a "visual learner," instruction that stresses visually oriented materials and techniques is recommended. Mercer and Mercer (1998) report that while this approach has been used in special education for many years, it is beginning to gain momentum in general education.

Silver, Strong, and Perini (1997) reviewed the work of a number of learning style researchers. They concluded that even though learning style theorists interpret the personality in different ways, they have two things in common. First, learning style models are concerned with how individuals absorb information, think about information, and evaluate the results. Second, learning is a personal, individualized act of thought and feeling. In addition to these two commonalties, most learning style advocates agree that all of us practice a mixture of styles as we live and learn, and that our styles flex and adapt to various contexts.

Research on the effectiveness of learning style theory is mixed. While it is recommended that educators not rely heavily on formal tests to determine learning style strengths and weaknesses, it is helpful to know your students' learning style preference and the conditions under which the preference exists (Mercer & Mercer, 1998). One way to classify learning styles is according to four modality preferences: visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic. The major benefit in learning about your student's modality preferences is so that you can align assignments to the way(s) in which they prefer to learn, thus increasing motivation to complete a task.

For example, individuals who are *visual* learners recall what they see, follow written or drawn directions well, and learn by observing people, objects, and pictures. Visual learners may prefer assignments that allow them to use computer graphics, perform visual puzzles, look at or design maps, charts, graphs, diagrams, cartoons, posters, or bulletin boards. *Auditory* learners recall what they hear, follow spoken instructions, and learn by listening and speaking. Assignments for auditory learners may include talking, interviewing, debating, participating on a panel, asking and answering questions, or making oral reports. *Tactile* learners recall what they touch, follow instructions they write or touch, and learn by manipulating objects. Appealing assignments for tactile learners might be sketching, playing board games, building models, constructing dioramas and relief maps, setting up experiments, or tracing objects and information. *Kinesthetic* learners, on the other hand, recall what they experience, follow instructions that they perform or rehearse, and learn when engaged in physical activity. These types of learners may prefer playing floor games, assembling or disassembling objects, building models, participating in fairs, setting up experiments, acting, or role playing.

McCarthy (1996) studied the work of several researchers to develop the 4MAT System, a model of learning styles. The 4MAT System is a four-quadrant model of teaching to four different learning styles using right- and left-mode techniques. The incorporation of right- and left- mode techniques take into account how the two halves of the brain process information. For example, certain kinds of processing seems to favor the right mode: visuospatial, holistic, gestalt, subjective. Certain other kinds of processing favor the left mode: analytic, sequential, discrete, objective. McCarthy (1982) claims that educators need to develop teaching methodologies that will effectively teach to *both* modes. A theoretical underpinning of this model is that human beings perceive and process information experience and information in different ways, and that our learning styles are formed by our own perceiving and processing.

The four types of learners as described in the 4MAT System

model include imaginative, analytic, common sense, and dynamic (McCarthy, 1992). *Imaginative* learners perceive information concretely and process it reflectively. They prefer to learn by sensing, feeling, and watching. *Analytic* learners perceive information abstractly and process it reflectively. They learn best by thinking and watching. *Common sense* learners perceive information abstractly and process it actively. Their choices for learning are thinking and doing. *Dynamic* learners perceive information concretely and process it actively. They prefer to learn by sensing, feeling, and doing. Informational resources and training opportunities for the 4MAT model are available on the Internet.

It is significant to note that proponents of multiple intelligences and learning styles theory acknowledge the importance of good, solid teaching skills. For example, McCarthy (1982) claims that it is important for teachers to select key concepts to be learned across a particular course or grade level. As educators who believe in these theories teach those concepts they will focus on how students learn and the unique qualities of each learner (Guild, 1997). Far too many students are not succeeding in school for a variety of reasons. Thus, application of multiple intelligences and learning theories through assignment planning offers more students an opportunity to learn and be successful.

Incorporating Choice Theory. Choice theory teaches that we are all driven by four psychological needs that are embedded in our genes: the need to belong, the need for power the need for freedom, and the need for fun (Glasser, 1998). According to Glasser, we have specific pictures in our minds of how we want these needs met. Each person's pictures are different depending on his/her personal experience. Choice Theory, once called Control Theory (Glasser, 1986) is being taught by many educators throughout the country who have participated in Quality School training provided by the William Glasser Institute. Many of Glasser's concepts of how to create a quality school can be found in The Quality School (1990) and in The Quality School Teacher (1994).

Clearly, Glasser focuses on what quality is, how we teach it, and how we influence ourselves and others to self-evaluate and improve upon what we do. Glasser's reference to quality classrooms and quality schoolwork gives us some insight on what assignment completion procedures are necessary in order to create quality classrooms and motivate students to produce quality schoolwork.

According to Glasser (1990), the basic human needs of students must be met in order for students to engage themselves in academic learning. He offered the following suggestions on how to build quality instructional settings that foster nurturance of the four basic needs of belonging, power, freedom, and fun. First, to help students develop a sense of belonging, Glasser suggested that teachers build caring, cooperative environments where teachers and students work together to improve their work. Second, to foster a sense of power, he recommends that teachers recognize students in positive ways, provide them with opportunities to be noticed and looked up to by their peers, and help them experience the feeling of power that results in doing a high-quality job. Third, to develop a sense of freedom, he recommended that teachers provide students with choices on what to learn, how to learn, and how to demonstrate competency on what they have learned. Finally, to develop a sense of fun, he recommended that teachers make learning fun by interjecting humor and laughter, and also provide assignments that are enjoyable and satisfying.

In reference to motivating students to do quality work, Glasser (1998) claims that we must focus on life skills — speaking, reading, writing, calculation, and problem solving because all of these things satisfy needs. Additionally, we must involve all students in quality learning and eliminate coercion and criticism. For example, the practice of forcing students to acquire knowledge or memorize facts that have little or no value in the real world should be eliminated. Grading practices should also be closely examined because multiple failures and low grades may cause students to rebel to the point that they quit working altogether. Our goal should be to nurture a love of lifelong learning in all students, not destroy it.

Another important aspect of encouraging quality work by stu-

dents is to make them part of the decision-making process (Glasser, 1990). Involving students in the planning and self-evaluation of their finished work can cause students to have more power and control over their own learning. One way to do this is to have the students set a rubric for each of their assignments. Before turning in their work, students can show and explain their work, self-evaluate it according to the established rubric, improve it based on recommendations from peers and/or the teacher, and redo it for a quality grade.

Using the Content Enhancement Approach. In order to adopt a new set of assignment completion procedures for his diverse learners, Mr. Paxton decided to adopt an instructional routine, *The Quality Assignment Routine*, from the Content Enhancement series (Rademacher, Deshler, Schumaker, & Lenz, 1998). Content Enhancement is an approach to teaching that involves making decisions about what content to teach, manipulating and translating that content into easy-to-understand and easy-to-practice formats, and presenting it in memorable ways (see Chapter Two of this volume). As we learned at the beginning of our chapter, assignments represented a major vehicle for Mr. Paxton's students to learn content, yet many students failed to take advantage of this learning opportunity. As a result of his frustration, Mr. Paxton was determined to create assignments that were meaningful and more motivational for students. In addition, he concluded that he needed to structure his assignment directions in such a way that his students knew what to do in order to complete their assignments fully and correctly. Thus, to help him design more meaningful and motivating assignments, Mr. Paxton learned to use the planning component of *The Quality Assignment Routine*. The key phases of this routine are described in the paragraph below.

The planning procedures in *The Quality Assignment Routine* are based on what researchers proclaim to be the characteristics of assignments that secondary students enjoy completing. Importantly, it is also includes what *students* perceive to be the characteristics of a high-quality assignment. Prior to the development of the routine, academically diverse groups of middle school students were asked to

participate in focus group discussions to identify the factors that contribute to student completion of assignments at high rates and high levels of quality (Rademacher, Schumaker, & Deshler, 1996). Some of the characteristics they described were identical to those noted in the literature. Also, students with and without learning disabilities were in close agreement on the importance of each of the following characteristics.

First, the **purpose** of the assignment needs to be clear, and students need to understand the benefits that are related to completing the assignment. In other words, the work needs to be seen as **authentic** work that will yield positive outcomes for the student. Second, the assignment needs to appear to be **personally relevant** for students in today's world. It needs to relate to their interests and concerns. Third, it needs to be **optimally challenging** to students; it should not be too hard or too easy. Students should feel that they can complete the assignment given what they consider to be a reasonable amount of effort. Fourth, it needs to represent **variety**. Too much of the same thing is deemed "boring" by students.

A fifth characteristic identified by students and teachers is that a great assignment allows students to use their **creativity**. Students enjoy opportunities to make personal investment in their work. Sixth, a great assignment promotes **interaction** among learners. Last, but *most importantly* according to students, it allows students to make **choices**. Students want a feeling of autonomy as they do their school work.

Additional factors that promote student completion of the assignment at high levels of quality were also identified by students. While these factors become important during the time an assignment is presented to students, they must be considered ahead of time so that nothing is omitted that will hinder successful completion by students. For example, **directions are clear and well organized**. In order for directions to be complete, they must include the **action steps** to do the work, the **supplies/resources** needed, the **grading criteria**, the **due date**, and the **point value** of the assignment. Also, during the planning process it is important for teachers to consider any **pitfalls** students

might encounter on the assignment, as well as determine a date for when the finished assignment can be discussed.

Returning to Mr. Paxton's class, we see that during the planning process he tried to create interesting assignments that all students in the class could complete. This was a challenge, considering the diversity of his class. Thus, during the planning process, Mr. Paxton had to think about the interests and skills of his students, consider the problems they faced when they had to complete an assignment independently, and make adjustments accordingly. For example, he knew that the reading range in his class was from the fourth to above the twelfth grade level, that some had difficulty writing simple sentences while others were capable of writing long papers. He also knew that the support they received at home varied from none to a great deal.

However, with careful planning, Mr. Paxton thought he could allow students to select an appropriate book at their reading level and to choose among a variety of options with regard to reporting on the content of the book (e.g., presenting an oral report, writing an advertisement, or creating a test over the book content). With a little creativity, he believed he could make the assignment interesting and fun. As a result, the majority of students would not only be able to complete the assignment, they probably would enjoy the assignment. He realized that as more book reports were completed, more reading would be done. As more reading was done, students would become better readers, their vocabulary would grow, and they would become better learners. Thus, the whole purpose in taking time to plan assignments was to ensure that more of his students would engage in authentic academic tasks that would help them become better learners, more skilled, and more knowledgeable about the world.

Mr. Paxton followed four steps to create meaningful and motivating assignments for his students. The mnemonic device, "PLAN," was created to help him and other teachers remember each step of the planning process. He used The Quality Assignment Planning Sheet to guide his thinking through each of the "PLAN" steps. An example of the worksheet Mr. Paxton completed as he created an assignment

as part of a unit on Ancient Greece is depicted in Figure 3 on the next page.

As you can see from Figure 3, the "P" step on the worksheet prompts teachers to **Plan the purpose of the assignment.** In thinking about the overall purpose, teachers ask themselves what students will accomplish as a result of completing the assignment (the knowledge or skill to be gained), how they will do this (how to accomplish the purpose specified), and why it is important (benefits to future learning in students' lives). Note how Mr. Paxton completed the "P" step on the worksheet in Figure 3.

The "L" step on the worksheet prompts teachers to **Link the assignment to student needs and interests.** To help with this step, teachers think of the acronym "HALO." "HALO" stands for *H*igh, *A*verage, or *L*ow performing students, and *O*ther students whose unique needs must be kept in mind in teacher planning. The four questions in this section of the worksheet cause teachers to think about the motivational factors that can be built into the assignment so that students will want to do it. The first question is, "How can this assignment be made *personally relevant* for students?" In other words, what choices can be given to the students or what elements can be built into the assignment so the assignment becomes more meaningful to students as a group or to each individual? To answer this question, consider choices that relate to the students' physical, intellectual, social, emotional, cultural interests or characteristics.

The second question in the "L" section of the planning sheet to be answered is "What are some personal *options/choices* I can offer students for completing the assignment?" In other words, what options exist for how the assignment is to be completed. Options may fall into the following categories: (1) format, such as choosing whether the final product is completed as a written report, an oral report, a diagram, a picture, a poster, or a role-play; (2) content, such as allowing students to select the assignment topic based upon their interests, or certain questions to answer and not answer; (3) location, such as choosing whether they will complete the assignment in the library, at home, or in study hall; (4) resources, such as allowing

Figure 3: The Quality Assignment Planning Sheet

COURSE World History
UNIT Ancient Greece

The *Quality* Assignment Planning Worksheet

P

1. WHAT WILL STUDENTS ACCOMPLISH?
Analyze why the ancient Greek culture was destroyed.

2. HOW WILL THEY DO THIS?
By creating a journal from the perspective of someone who lived in ancient Greece.

3. WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT? (BENEFITS)
So we can understand why such a highly developed civilization fell apart, and prevent the same thing from happening to our own civilization.

L

1. HOW CAN THE ASSIGNMENT BE MADE PERSONALLY RELEVANT FOR STUDENTS?	2. PERSONAL CHOICES FOR VARIATION AND CHALLENGE?	3. PITFALLS TO SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF WORK?	4. SOLUTIONS TO THESE PITFALLS?
Choose 1 aspect of Greek life that interests you (e.g., sports, art, politics, religion)	With partner or by self: Diary or audio tape: Athens/Sparta	1. Diary format 2. Find/use tape recorders	1. Show sample diary 2. Tell where to get/how to use tape recorders

A

ACTION STEPS	RESOURCES	GRADING CRITERIA (PACE 1, 2,...)
1. Choose interest 2. Review resources 3. Outline events 4. Create diary or tape recording	Class notes Textbooks Library books Magazine articles Movies Imaginations	1. 7 entries--put date 2. 3 statements/entry 3. choose 1 good & 1 bad thing @ your interest; write @ in ea. entry

DUE DATE: May 18 POINTS: 100

N

DATE TO REVIEW ASSIGNMENT OUTCOMES: May 22

RESULTS: Common error: volume control on tape recorders needed to be louder. Instructions on volume control.

RESULTS: Students had difficulty completing on time. Next year, set an intermediate deadline for handing in outline of 7 days.

From: Rademacher, J.A., Deshler, D.D., Schumaker, J.B., & Lenz, B.K. (1998). *The quality assignment routine.* Lawrence, KS. Edge Enterprises.

students to use computers, encyclopedias, textbooks, imaginations, or other people; (5) amount of social interaction, such as allowing students to choose whether they complete the assignment by themselves, with a partner, or in a small group; and (6) the due date, which means allowing students to choose from one or two announced dates by which all or part of the assignment must be turned in.

The third question is: "What are the *pitfalls* students might encounter as they try to complete the work?" In other words, considering a given assignment and the students' abilities, what obstacles might prevent students from completing the assignment successfully? For example, the presence of unknown vocabulary, an unfamiliarity with the type of assignment, and/or students' limited access to needed materials. Identifying these pitfalls is critical if you are to ensure that students do not get "hung up" while they are trying to complete an assignment independently.

The fourth question to ask yourself in the "L" section of the worksheet is "What are *solutions to these pitfalls*?" Here, you identify solutions to the identified pitfalls and jot them down. Note how Mr. Paxton completed the "L" section of the planning sheet in Figure 3.

The "A" step in planning assignments is to **Arrange clear directions.** As you will note on the planning sheet in Figure 3, there are three columns to complete: *Action Steps*, *Resources*, and *Grading Criteria* that includes (PACE 1,2,..), *Due Date*, and *Points*. In the Action Step column, teachers are to identify a few sequential steps to completing the assignment in a quality manner. In the Resources column, teachers list all potential resources that students might need to complete a quality assignment.

In the third column of the "A" section, teachers list the grading criteria that will be applied to the completed assignment, plus the assignment due date. The word "PACE" at the top of the third column refers to four standard requirements that will be applied to every assignment: the assignment must be Prompt (handed in on time), Arranged neatly, Complete, and Edited. The numbers "1,2,.." refer to any additional requirements associated with the assignment. (A full explanation of this self-checking process is found on page 190

of this chapter.) At the bottom of this column is a space for the assignment due date and the number of points the assignment is worth. This step in the planning process is important in order to structure assignment directions in such a way that students know everything that is required in order to produce quality work. Note how Mr. Paxton completed the "A" step in Figure 3.

The "N" step in PLAN is to **Note evaluation date and results.** This section on the planning sheet contains space for reviewing the appropriateness and outcomes of the assignment after the students' work on the assignment has been graded. To complete this step, teachers are prompted to complete the section by specifying a date for *reviewing* the assignment with students some time after the assignment is due and after it has been graded. The *Results* section of the worksheet is provided in order to record any common errors that were observed and to record any changes that might be recommended the next time such an assignment is given. Note this section that Mr. Paxton completed in Figure 3.

It is now early November in the following year of your earlier visits to Mr. Paxton's class. Mr. Paxton has used the Quality Assignment Planning Worksheet several times to plan assignments and is feeling rather comfortable with the basic procedures. He noted that when his students were given choices on how they could complete some of their assignments, that their motivation to complete those assignments increased. He also noted that the rate of assignment completion and quality of work on those particular assignments had improved. As a next step in his planning process, he has decided to invite a small group of students to help him plan assignments for an upcoming unit of study on Ancient Greece. Involving diverse learners in the planning of assignments for the whole class can result in positive outcomes in terms of assignment completion rate and improved grades (Rademacher, Cowart, Chism, & Sparks, 1997). Let's check with Mr. Paxton again to learn the results of his efforts.

Fourth Visit. As you walk down the hall, you see Mr. Paxton with a small group of five students. He is inviting them to attend a meeting

to be conducted during his next planning period. As you approach them, they beckon to you. After greeting you, they invite you to attend their meeting and you accept.

As you enter the classroom, the students tell you to have a seat and take notes if you like. They inform you that they have been chosen to be "Assignment Expert Team" members, and that Mr. Paxton has selected them to help him plan assignments for the class during the next unit of study on Egypt. You immediately note the diversity in the five-member team seated around the small conference table. One student has a learning disability, one student has been referred to the office on numerous occasions for truancy, one student from Puerto Rico has limited English, and the other two are considered to be average to above-average performers in most of their classes. Mr. Paxton hands you a set of written guidelines he has prepared for you so that you can see the process he is following to engage the students in assignment construction. As he proceed with the lesson, you can see how he is adhering to the following Assignment Expert Team Guidelines:

1. Explain that the purpose of the meeting is for students to help plan a high-quality assignment.
2. State student expectations to participate and share ideas.
3. Briefly describe the upcoming unit of study on which the assignment will be based.
4. Share the Assignment Planning Sheet and the Assignment Idea Web with students.
5. Tell students the purpose of the assignment.
6. Engage students in constructing the assignment's directions, the options or choices that can be built in for completing it, the grading criteria, the supplies and resources to be used, and when the assignment will be due.
7. Determine whether the teacher or one of the students will explain the assignment to the class.

In summary, student motivation to complete assignments may

increase when teachers focus on planning meaningful and interesting assignments. Assignments are only meaningful when they are aligned with critical content that must be learned and mastered. Student motivation to complete assigned work may also increase when teachers offer reasonable choices to students on how to complete their work. In order to provide acceptable options to students, teachers can rely on information they gather from student interest surveys, learning style preferences, and multiple intelligence theory. Planning high quality assignments for and *with* students increases the probability that students will complete their assignments on time and at a high level of quality. As a result, learning for all students will improve.

PRESENTING ASSIGNMENTS TO STUDENTS

Simply improving the nature of secondary assignments may not solve the problem for many teachers who claim their students are not motivated to do the work and/or complete their work satisfactorily. While providing students with meaningful and satisfying assignments is the first factor to consider, the way in which teachers explain and give feedback on student performance is also important. Assignment explanations with active involvement by students is another critical variable in understanding the quality of schoolwork as it is performed by academically diverse learners. Thus, student behaviors and teacher behaviors during assignment presentations must be clearly delineated.

Critical Learner Behaviors

Winne and Marx (1989) claimed that three conditions must be met in order for students to perform a particular task. First, students must attend to the information as it is being presented by the teacher. Second, they must understand the intent and particular expectations of the assignment as it is explained by the teachers. That is, they must perceive the assignment in the same way the teacher does. Finally,

students must be able to independently and successfully carry out the operations that will result in a satisfactory product. While giving clear directions for an assignment is the responsibility of teachers, making decisions about whether or not the directions are clearly understood becomes the personal responsibility of the student. To work independently, students must make sure they record important information for doing the assignment and devise a plan for satisfactory and timely completion of the work.

While clear directions for assigned tasks are important for all learners, they are especially critical for students with learning disabilities and other low achievers, as these students are known to possess ineffective/inefficient strategies for assignment completion (Hallahan, Gajar, Cohen, & Tarfer, 1978; Torgenson, 1977). A strategy is a guide to planning, execution and evaluation of performance on a task and its outcomes (Deshler, Schumaker, & Lenz, 1984). A good strategy is concerned with self-regulation, is a way to promote independent learning, and is often guided by a memory device to help students recall the strategy. All students can benefit from applying effective and efficient strategies for assignment completion to increase the likelihood that they will meet the demands of the assignment.

WATCH is a strategy developed by Glomb and West (1990) to help students with behavior disorders complete their assignments accurately and on time. The steps are:

W= Write down the assignment, the due date, and any special requirements in an assignment planner.
A = Ask yourself if you understand the assignment, and ask for clarification if necessary.
T = Task-analyze the assignment and schedule the task over the days available to complete the assignment.
Ch = Check each task as you can do it with CAN (substrategy):
  C = Completeness
  A = Accuracy
  N = Neatness

Archer and Gleason (1992) developed a similar four-step strategy to help students complete their assignments as part of their *Advanced Skills for School Success* series. The authors of this series have created a number of study skills and strategies to help students independently meet the demands of secondary settings. The steps for completing assignments include:

Step 1: *Plan it.*
- Read the directions carefully.
- Circle the words that tell you what to do.
- Get out the materials you need.
- Tell yourself what to do.

Step 2: *Complete it.*
- Do all the items.
- If you can't do an item, ask for help or go ahead to the next item.
- Use HOW:
  H = Heading
  O = Organized
  W = Written neatly

Step 3: *Check it.*
- Did you do everything?
- Did you get the right answers?
- Did you proofread?

Step 4: *Turn it in.*

Mr. Paxton expects his students to use the "REACT" Strategy to help them listen to and record the assignments they receive during his assignment explanations. "REACT" is part of *The Quality Assignment Routine* (Rademacher, Deshler, Schumaker, & Lenz, 1998) that can be taught to students in order to specify what they are to do during the time their teachers are presenting assignments. Another visit to Mr. Paxton's classroom is in order so that you can learn more about this strategy from one of his students.

Fifth Visit. As you enter the classroom, you notice that Mr. Paxton is in the middle of giving an assignment on Egypt that the Assignment Expert Team helped him develop by using the Quality Assignment Planning Sheet. The atmosphere this morning is a lot different from the one you experienced last year on your initial visits to observe Mr. Paxton giving assignments to his class. This time, each student has an assignment planning notebook open to record the assignment information.

As you circulate among the students, you also notice that a few of the students, including Juan, has a small bookmark on his desk that lists the REACT Strategy steps. Juan smiles at you and begins to softly explain what each of the step of the strategy cues him to do. The "R" step reminds him to *R*eview the directions he has just written or been given. The "E" step cues him to *E*xamine whether the directions are complete. To be complete, Juan tells you he must make sure he writes down a few action steps to get started, the resources or materials required for completing the assignment, any student choices or options offered by the teacher, the special requirements he must fulfill on the assignment to do a quality job, and the assignment due date.

The "A" step is one that Juan points out as being particularly helpful for him because it reminds him to *A*sk questions to better understand the directions. He states that sometimes he finds the directions confusing, or that some information may be missing from Mr. Paxton's directions that will prevent him from completing the assignment to Mr. Paxton's satisfaction. The "C" step, according to Juan, is also beneficial because it requires him to *C*reate a plan for how he will get the assignment completed. For example, by using the strategy, he has learned to think ahead and plan time to complete his work promptly, to break the assignment into component parts and predict how long each part will take, and to schedule time to complete the work. The "T" step is to help him think of ways to improve his work. It is during this step that he must *T*arget some goals to do better work, or else match his past performance that earned him a good grade. Later, you reflect on Juan's comments and realize that Mr. Paxton has taught his students some valuable lessons in how to

approach a learning task that will be beneficial to them throughout their lives.

Critical Teacher Behaviors

As described in the educational literature, instructional time involves both teacher-directed instruction and directions for students to work independently, with seatwork and homework constituting the two major forms of independent practice (Gartland, 1990; Gartland & Rosenberg, 1987). The teachers' responsibility in directing assignment completion is to make sure that assignment explanations contain all the necessary information for their students to do an adequate job. Thus, teachers can benefit from devising a routine way to explain assignments that will incorporate the elements of an effective assignment presentation.

Lenz and Bulgren (1991) recommended that teachers induce learning and task completion for students who may possess poor strategies for completing assigned tasks by conceptualizing and presenting assignments as individual lessons. In doing so, they suggested that teachers use the following eight steps. First, teachers might provide an advance organizer by announcing the assignment and stating student expectations for the lesson. This is important for activating the students' attention to the assignment that is about to be given. Second, the teacher can give the assignment, state the evaluation criteria, and explain how the assignment is to be completed. Third, the teacher can model for the student and/or give examples of how each step of the assignment should be completed. Fourth, the teacher might check to see that students understand the directions as they have been explained. Fifth, the teacher can lead the students to do part of the assignment as a group to get the process started. Sixth, time in class might be allowed for working on the assignment. Seventh, the teacher should be prepared to re-explain or reconfigure the assignment if a student appears to be lost or confused after attempts to help have failed. Finally, the teacher can give a post-organizer to summarize the directions and remind students of assignment completion expectations.

Similar recommendations on how to better explain homework assignments have been offered to teachers by researchers. For example, the literature suggests that teachers (a) inform students of the assignment, its purpose, and how it is to be graded (Brophy & Alleman, 1991; Salend & Schliff, 1988); (b) involve students in the explanation process by having them make suggestions on how to accomplish the purpose of the assignment (Brophy & Alleman, 1991); (c) check for student understanding by asking students questions about the directions given (Salend & Schliff, 1988); (d) allow students to begin the work in class so it can be monitored by the teacher for accuracy (Connors, 1991; Cooper, 1989; Salend & Schliff, 1988); (e) conclude the assignment-completion process with some type of feedback on student performance after the work has been completed (Brophy & Alleman, 1991); and (f) interject strategies for motivating students to learn throughout the assignment completion process (Brophy, 1987; Brophy & Good, 1986).

Students who are acquiring English as a second language, such as Juan, will also benefit from structured assignment explanations in content classes. Northcutt and Watson (1986) suggest that when teaching lessons to students who may lack English proficiency they provide a clear focus, introduce the information in a concrete way, use modeling techniques, provide opportunities to practice the skill with students, and restate the purpose of the new information. Other ways to enhance assignment explanation routines for students who may be just acquiring English is to use gestures and visuals, simplify grammar and vocabulary, slow the pace of the presentation, use repetition, record assignments and/or make copies of the assignment directions for students (Richard-Amato, 1988).

Meece (1994) provides some suggestions to consider during assignment presentations for students with learning problems that might affect the learning outcomes. It seems these suggestions would also apply to all students who may have difficulty with assignment completion. According to Meece (1994), one or more of the following six ideas might be employed: (1) dividing the assignment into

chunks and establishing timelines for each chunk; (2) extending the time to complete assignments; (3) allowing students to work in groups to complete parts of assignments; (4) requiring students to paraphrase important information that is needed to complete the assignment; and, (5) reducing the amount of copying required to record important assignment directions.

One way to decrease the amount of copying for students is to provide them with a handout of the assignment directions. Another way is to teach them a number of abbreviations to be used as they record information into an assignment notebook. Hughes, Ruhl, Rademacher, Schumaker, & Deshler (1995) developed an assignment planner for students that incorporates a table of common abbreviations students in secondary classrooms may use as they record their assignment information. Figure 4 on the next page depicts a list of those abbreviations.

Mr. Paxton decided to use the presentation component of *The Quality Assignment Routine* (Rademacher, Deshler, Schumaker, & Lenz, 1998) as his routine way to present assignments to his students. This part of the routine seemed a likely option for helping him guide each student in his class to think about the assignment as he gave them clear directions on how to complete it. Importantly, he thought the presentation procedures were a good way to engage the students during his presentations in a positive and constructive way.

Presentation Component Overview. The presentation component of *The Quality Assignment Routine* (Rademacher, Deshler, Schumaker, & Deshler, 1998) is based on what researchers claim to be highly important explanation factors by teachers. Importantly, like the planning component described in the previous section, it is also based on what *students* believe teachers should say and do in order to help them complete their assignments well. When diverse groups of learners met in focus group discussions prior to the development of the routine, they said that in order to do a good job on an assignment they needed **clear, well-organized directions, models or examples** of completed assignments, and a clear explanation of the **grading**

Figure 4: Assignment Notebook Abbreviations

Subject Area Abbreviations		Other Common Abbreviations	
Algebra	Alg.	Chapter	Chp.
English	Eng.	Definition	Def.
French	Fr.	Each	EA.
Geography	Geog.	Essay	Ess.
Geometry	Geom.	Even	Evn.
German	Ger.	Grading Criteria	GC
History	Hist.	Handout	HO
Language Arts	LA	Materials/Resources	M/R
Math	Mth.	Notebook	Nbk.
Reading	Rdg.	Numbers	Num. or #
Science	Sci.	Page(s)	Pg(s).
Social Studies	SS	Paragraphs	Para. or ¶
Spanish	Span.	Points	Pts.
Problems	Probs.		
Questions	Qs or ?		
Sentences	Sent.		
Textbook	Txt.		

From: Hughes, C.A., Ruhl, K.L., Deshler, D.D., & Schumaker, J.B. (1995). *The assignment completion: Instructor's manual.* Lawrence, KS: Edge Enterprises, Inc.

criteria. Students also said it was important for the teacher to give them **time to work** in class and give them timely **feedback.** All these factors are included in the presentation component of the routine.

Prior to using this part of the routine, Mr. Paxton conducted two lessons with his students. During the first lesson he and the students talked about the concept of "quality" and how they were expected to evaluate their own work before they handed it in to him. During the second lesson, he taught students how to participate in his assignment explanations and use the "REACT" Strategy—the strategy for thinking about and planning how to complete the assignment as described in the previous section. At the conclusion of his lessons, students knew how to state what quality work was, how to use a self-checking process for ensuring quality work, and how to use the REACT Strategy.

Initial Presentation Steps. The Cue-Do-Review sequence is the instructional sequence Mr. Paxton uses to explain a new assignment and get students to begin using it. During the Cue Phase, he draws students' attention to the new assignment and what they need to do by: stating that an assignment is about to be given, prompting them to record the assignment in their notebooks, and specifying what else they need to do, such as listen to the instructions, use the "REACT" Strategy and get started on the assignment.

During the Do Phase of his assignment explanation routine, Mr. Paxton implements the steps of REACT in an interactive way. That is, Mr. Paxton and his students co-construct the assignment directions as they go through each step.

Sixth Visit. As you visit Mr. Paxton's classroom again, you see him proceed through the Cue-Do part of the routine by using the following linking steps. As you observe, you are very impressed with the partnership-building that has developed between Mr. Paxton and his students since he has been more actively engaging them in his assignment presentations.

- Announce the assignment and its purpose.
- State clear instructions (as students write them in their assignment notebooks).
- Stop for students to use the REACT Strategy (add information to their notebooks, ask questions, set goals, etc.).
- Investigate student understanding.
- Give start-up time and offer help.
- Note expectations for students to evaluate their assignments for quality work.

Mr. Paxton explains that the Review Phase of his assignment explanation routine is done after he and the students have checked their work against a set of pre-established grading criteria. He states that during the Review Phase he gives the students feedback, and they conduct discussions on the finished assignment and its outcomes.

Knowing the importance of this aspect of assignment completion, you ask Mr. Paxton and his students if you may come back and visit on the day they are reviewing a particular assignment.

In summary, what teachers say and do as they present assignments to their students can make a significant difference in their students' knowledge of how to complete their work satisfactorily. During this phase of assignment completion, it is important to do everything possible to present clear instructions to students, give them time to ask questions and get answers to their questions, give them time to try out working on the assignment, and provide them with feedback about their initial attempts on the assignment. Students who traditionally have difficulty completing assignments need time to receive help so that they can get started doing the assignment successfully before they leave the classroom to complete the task independently. Teaching students how they are to attend to and record assignments in an assignment notebook is also recommended so that all students are better equipped to work on an assignment outside of the classroom. Once students finish an assignment, it is necessary to ensure that students understand how they performed on the assignment and how they might improve in the future. Thus, the assignment completion cycle is not complete until assignment evaluations are conducted.

EVALUATING ASSIGNMENTS WITH STUDENTS

Few topics in education are more controversial than grading, reporting, and communicating student learning. According to Guskey (1996), there are three premises on which to base our conversation surrounding the evaluation of student learning. First, the primary goal of grading and reporting is communication. The purpose of that communication should be to relate high-quality information to interested persons in a form they can understand and use effectively. Second, reporting is an integral part of the learning process only when it identifies where additional work is needed. Finally, the need for more detailed communication about student learning is critical as the

goals of schooling become more complex.

Current education reform efforts, which advocate reporting how *all* students such as the ones in Mr. Paxton's class are doing against high, uniform standards brings the issue of grading practices to the forefront (Wiggins, 1994). Teachers are increasingly concerned over how and on what standards to measure the academic performance of students from varying cultures and backgrounds, as well as students with learning disabilities who are required by law to have unlimited access to the general education curriculum (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997).

As educators turn their attention to better ways of evaluating student performance, they are beginning to consider alternative forms for communicating student learning. Watts (1996) divides alternative forms of assessment for communicating student learning into four categories. Category one is visible evidence of student growth and achievement. This can be accomplished through methods such as portfolios, exhibitions, displays of work, presentations, and videos to send home. Category two is a ranking or rating of student achievement against clearly stated, predetermined standards. Methods that support this category include work sampling, rubrics, and report card checklists. Category three is evidence of learning through self-assessment or peer evaluation. Category four includes opportunities for two-way communication through conferences. During such conferences, what is known is not what something says to the other person, but reflects an understanding that is constructed between all parties in the conversation. One or more of these methods might be viable options for secondary teachers to consider in their quest for a better way to evaluate learning outcomes. In particular, the use of rubrics, self-assessment procedures, and two-way communication conferences are known to be effective throughout the assignment completion process.

Designing Rubrics. A rubric is a scoring guide used to evaluate the quality of student responses on assigned work. For example, rubrics can be used to check whether or not certain criteria were met on

assignments such as written compositions, oral presentations, or science projects. Appropriately designed rubrics can contribute greatly to the development of quality work. When teacher and students develop rubrics together, the expectations of the task can be explored.

Popham (1997) describes rubrics as having three essential features; evaluative criteria, quality definitions, and a scoring strategy. Evaluative criteria are used to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable responses, can vary from rubric to rubric, and can be given equal weight or be weighted differently. Examples of evaluative criteria includes such elements as mechanics, word choice, supporting details, etc. Quality definitions describe the way in which student responses are to be judged. For instance, if mechanics is an evaluative criteria, it must be clearly explained to students. Thus, students must understand that to meet that criteria they must make sure their finished assignment shows evidence of handwriting that is dark enough to read, letters that are legible and well formed, and that spelling, punctuation, and grammar are correct. The scoring strategy used with a rubric can be either holistic or analytic. While holistic scoring takes all of the evaluative criteria into consideration for a quality score, an analytic approach requires the scorer to render a score for each criterion that may not be part of the overall score. Certainly, the use of rubrics requires teachers to be much more precise about the criteria for evaluating student work.

Because rubrics clarify expectations, they yield better feedback to students so that the quality of their work can be improved. Using rubrics with lower achieving students is beneficial because these students are able to see the concrete ways they can improve their work to meet a high standard. Thus, they are more likely to have the incentive to push themselves harder. Once students understand and internalize the criteria in a rubric, they can also help to develop rubric criteria, use the criteria to assist their peers in revising their work, and assess their own work (O'Neil, 1994). Teaching students how to evaluate their own work for quality is an important part of ensuring that the assignments they do turn in will earn them a better grade. Rubrics can become tools for encouraging the self-evaluation process.

Prompting Self-Evaluation of Assignments. A personal quality associated with job skills of the future includes self-management. For example, workers must be able to assess their own knowledge and skills accurately, set specific and realistic goals, and monitor their progress toward a goal. They must work hard to reach goals, even if the task is unpleasant, and they must produce quality work (Jones, 1995). Teachers can help students develop self-management skills through their established assignment completion procedures. Students who learn to manage their academic behaviors learn critical life skills that are important for future employment.

Self-management requires self-regulated learning. However, many students with learning problems have difficulty with self-regulation (Rooney & Hallahan, 1985). As a result, they have greater difficulty working independently. Self-regulation is an essential component of being able to function independently as a successful student and as an adult. Independent learning can be fostered when students are involved in goal setting, selection of assignments, and self-monitoring of progress (Wang, 1987).

Self-evaluation is the component of self-regulation that teaches students how well they are doing. Mercer and Mercer (1998) recommend three steps for teaching self-evaluation that can be incorporated into assignment completion procedures. The first step is to discuss the importance of evaluating one's own work and the benefits of doing so, such as determining whether or not satisfactory performance has been achieved. The second step is to model how to conduct a self-evaluation. During this step, the teacher demonstrates using a particular progress form designed to judge performance, and then has the students model the behavior to make sure they understand. The third step is to have the students practice and provide feedback. During this step the student practices to proficiency with comments from the teacher on how well they are doing.

In the lesson Mr. Paxton conducted prior to his implementation of the presentation component of *The Quality Assignment Routine*, he taught each of his students how to use a self-checking routine to evaluate their own work for quality. The rubric he and the students constructed together during his lesson regarding quality work was called "PACE 1,2..." This simple checklist system was designed to help him organize verbal feedback to be given on finished work. Group verbal feedback is provided to all individuals within the class. Individual feedback can be given to individual students as necessary.

The word "PACE" refers to four standard requirements that Mr. Paxton and his students agreed upon would be the *standard* requirements to be applied on all assignments. They agreed that the assignment must be **Prompt** (handed in on time), **Arranged Neatly** (no stray marks, even margins, well organized), **Complete** (all directions followed, all questions answered), and **Edited** (mechanics okay, ideas clear, content accurate). The **"1, 2 ..."** following "PACE" refers to any *additional* requirements associated with a particular assignment—for example, including a picture with a poem, creating a computer graphic to support an idea, etc.

Students were required to mark their finished assignments with "PACE 1, 2 ..." and make a check mark or a zero on one of the two lines below each letter and number. The second line was for Mr. Paxton to place a check mark if he was in agreement with how the student graded his finished work. Figure 5 on the next page gives options on how to use the "PACE 1, 2 ..." checklist system.

Conducting Two Way Communication Conferences. A valuable, but sometimes time-consuming form of communication is the two-way conference. A constructivist approach indicates that just as knowledge of subject matter content is constructed by the learner in interaction with people and the environment, so can knowledge about what students have learned as a result of a particular assigned activity (Watts, 1996). The process of learning about assignment completion should be considered as important as learning the content. Thus, discussions regarding the quality of assignments and the outcomes associated with assignment completion should be a regular part of classroom activities (Lenz & Bulgren, 1991).

Assignment discussions can be referred to as interactive instructional conversations (Saunders, Goldenberg, & Hamann, 1992).

Figure 5: Options for Formatting the "PACE" Requirements

Option 1

P	___	___
A	___	___
C	___	___
E	___	___
1*	___	___
2*	___	___

Option 2

P	A	C	E	1*	2*
___	___	___	___	___	___
___	___	___	___	___	___

*key words

From: Rademacher, J.A., Deshler, D.D., Schumaker, J.B., & Lenz, B.K. (1998). *The quality assignment routine.* Lawrence, KS. Edge Enterprises.

During such conversations, the following teacher behaviors and student behaviors are recommended (Goldenberg, 1992; Saunders, Goldenberg, & Hamann, 1992). First, although the teacher has an initial plan on what to focus the discussion on, the teacher is also responsive and helps the students explore their ideas. Second, the discourse is connected in that the teacher asks questions and students answer, but interactive turn-taking also occurs. Third, the discussion occurs in a non-threatening atmosphere with the teacher encouraging risk-taking and serving as collaborator more than evaluator.

Regardless of what evaluation process is used, giving feedback to students on completed work is important (Brophy & Alleman, 1991; Connors, 1991; Glasser, 1998; Palardy, 1995; Platt & Olson, 1997; and Rademacher, Deshler, & Schumaker, 1996) and can result in improved academic performance if properly applied (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Hamlett, 1994; Kline, Schumaker, & Deshler, 1991; Lloyd & Keller, 1989). Grades, coupled with verbal feedback, brings closure to the assignment completion process

Effective Feedback for Enhancing Assignment Completion Performance. Without effective feedback, students will be unable to improve their performance in a way that satisfies the requirements for a particular assignment. Clearly, all learners need feedback from appropriate sources in order to guide their future independent study and learning efforts (Serna, Schumaker, & Sheldon, 1992).

In order to be effective, assignment feedback must be closely aligned to established grading practices. Many teachers base grades for special education students on such behaviors as merely handing in an assignment regardless of its quality, attending a certain number of classes regardless of the students' level of participation, and consistently taking notes in class. These methods may not be effective for two reasons. First, grades based on effort are simply too vague to provide much valuable information. Second, students with disabilities quickly learn that all the teacher requires of them is to stay out of trouble and that the teacher really doesn't care whether they learn anything or not (Gersten, Vaughn, & Brengelman, 1996).

The goal of feedback should be to provide your students with information about their performance so that it leads to improved performance and increased independence (Lenz, Ellis, &.Scanlon, 1996). Effective feedback is both positive and corrective. For example, in a review of research on effective feedback, Lenz, Scanlon, and Ellis (1996) concluded that feedback should include praise and information about what was done *right* during a particular task. Also, feedback should focus on correct behaviors and identify *specific errors.* Thus, teachers will focus the students' attention on the types of behaviors correctly performed, as well as types of errors made and how to avoid them (Howell, 1986; Kea, 1987; Kline, 1989).

In addition to timely feedback on assignments that is positive and corrective, it is also important to include a goal setting component. Goal setting places more responsibility on students to do what they need to do in order to improve their work based on the feedback they have been given. By having students set goals, you can also ensure they understand the desired behavior that is necessary to improve their work (Deshler, Schumaker, & Lenz, 1984; Ellis, 1985; Seabaugh & Schumaker, 1981) on particular assignments.

Learning to use feedback effectively can be of great benefit to

students with learning problems in order to guide their performance on assignments. Kline, Schumaker, and Deshler (1991) developed and tested an elaborated feedback routine with students with learning problems and found it helped students achieve their learning goals in a timely and effective manner. They concluded that feedback procedures represent learning opportunities for students and teaching opportunities for teachers. Essential features of feedback are included in the following mnemonic:

- Find the score. (Explain the grade.)
- Enter the score. (Use a graph and goal setting to make it concrete and meaningful for students.)
- Evaluate the score in terms of the goal.
- Determine errors by examining the pattern.
- Begin error correction. (The teacher models a similar problem.)
- Ask the student to apply the correction procedure.
- Close out the session by giving positive feedback on the correction.
- Kick back and relax.

Mr. Paxton decided to use the evaluation component of *The Quality Assignment Routine* (Rademacher, Deshler, Schumaker, & Lenz, 1998) as his routine way to evaluate assignments with his students. This part of the routine seemed a likely option for helping him incorporate the use of rubrics, self-evaluation procedures, and two-way conferences that included the elements of effective feedback. The purpose of this phase of the routine is to ensure that students understood how they performed on the assignment and how they might improve in the future.

Evaluation Component Overview. The evaluation procedures in the *Quality Assignment Routine* are based upon what the literature claims to be effective evaluation and feedback guidelines. Importantly, it adopts the notion that students will unlikely improve the quality of

their work unless given opportunities to do so (Glasser, 1990). The elements contained in this phase of the routine completes the assignment completion cycle for both teacher and students. It is during this time that the Review part of the Cue-Do-Review is conducted.

The Review Steps. The Review steps are conducted after an assignment has been scored by both teacher and students against the "PACE 1,2,.." set of uniform criteria. As you recall the last time you visited Mr. Paxton (during an assignment presentation), you asked to be invited back during the time he reviewed the finished assignments with the class. Let's go once more to Mr. Paxton's class to learn how he conducts assignment evaluations with his students.

Seventh Visit. As you enter the classroom, Mr. Paxton is handing out the assignments that were finished and then scored with "PACE 1,2,.." Mr. Paxton walks over to you and shows you one of the assignments that was rated by a particular student and himself using the "PACE 1,2.." checking routine. He said that in this particular case, he and the student had agreed on all but one of the quality criteria. He also said that as he checked all of the papers the day before, he analyzed student error patterns and correct responses so that he could give positive and corrective feedback. Mr. Paxton then goes to the front of the class and begins talking to his students about their finished work. In so doing, he first reviews the requirements for the assignment. Second, he explains which requirements were met well by the class and which ones were poorly met. Third, he engages the students in a conversation on how they can make appropriate corrections to improve their work. Finally, he extends two offers to the students. The first offer is to submit their corrected work to improve their grade by the following day. The second offer is to provide assistance to anyone who would like individual feedback on their assignments. Juan and Carla raise their hands and ask if they might meet with Mr. Paxton after school to clarify what must be done on each of their assignments in order to improve their grade.

After class, you talk to Mr. Paxton and tell him how impressed you are with the assignment completion procedures he is using and has taught his students to use. Mr. Paxton thanks you and says that as a result of his efforts, he has gotten to know his students very well. He is particularly pleased to see how the rate of assignment completion has gone up for the low performing and special needs students in his class, as well as their grades. However, he tells you that Carla, one of his gifted and talented students, and Stacy, a student with learning disabilities, were still not progressing as well as he thought they should have due to many problems with organizational planning. Therefore, he referred them to one of the teachers in the Academic Achievement Center (AAC) to provide those students with more intense instruction regarding assignment completion. As a result they were being taught *The Assignment Completion Strategy* (Hughes, Ruhl, Deshler, & Schumaker, 1995). Figure 6 shows the steps of *The Assignment Completion Strategy*.

TECHNOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR ENHANCING ASSIGNMENT COMPLETION

Teachers who use technology in the classroom have found it to be a powerful tool in guiding their students to become critical thinkers and independent learners. With access to computers, students can practice reading, writing, and math skills, as well as publish their own stories and create computer presentations. As we move rapidly toward an increased use of computer technologies, it becomes imperative to examine ways that technology can be integrated into assignment completion expectations so as to benefit *all* students in the learning community.

For students with limited English proficiency, the use of computers can promote literacy skills. The same features of computer technology that promote literacy are also helpful for students with learning disabilities, and those at-risk for academic failure (Fite, Ramos, Estrada, & Rivers, 1998). For example, students can write,

Figure 6: Assignment Completion Strategy

Step 1: Psych Up
- ❑ Prepare your forms.
- ❑ Prepare your mind.

Step 2: Record and Ask
- ❑ Write the assignment using abbreviations.
- ❑ Think about it.
- ❑ Ask Questions.

Step 3: Organize
- ❑ Break the assignment into parts.
- ❑ Estimate the number of study sessions.
- ❑ Schedule the sessions.
- ❑ Take your materials home.

Step 4: Jump to It
- ❑ Take control.
- ❑ Take materials to your study spot.
- ❑ Tell others about your plan.
- ❑ Survey the assignment.
- ❑ Set goals.
- ❑ Set up a reward.

Step 5: Engage in the Work
- ❑ Follow the instructions
- ❑ Note any questions.
- ❑ Get help if you need it.

Step 6: Check the Work
- ❑ Check the requirements.
- ❑ Check the quality.
- ❑ Store the assignment.
- ❑ Reward yourself.

Step 7: Turn It In
- ❑ Take it to class.
- ❑ Listen for and follow instructions.
- ❑ Record the date.
- ❑ Praise the effort.

Step 8: Set Your Course
- ❑ Record your grade.
- ❑ Evaluate your assignment.
- ❑ Think about future goals.

edit, and revise original works on the computer without the frustration encountered by completing these processes in a more traditional format. To add personal relevance to an assignment, students might utilize their computer skills to compose and illustrate their own storybooks. Carefully selected software can also ensure a task is not so hard that a student cannot complete it or so easy it is boring. Choosing software programs that provide students with specific knowledge of results can keep them motivated to remain on task. However, in addition to well-designed software programs, schools of the future will include two-way communication systems that will connect

people across places and time. One tool that is becoming more readily available in the Internet. While the Internet may open the door for many students, it is the teacher that determines the best way to integrate it into curriculum and instruction so that all students reap its benefits.

Benefits to Internet Users. The Internet allows thousands of teachers and students to reach each other directly and gain access to quantities of information previously unimaginable. Using the Internet can make classrooms more student centered and collaborative. Assignments become more student centered when learners are allowed to research and connect with something that engages their curiosity and stimulates further exploration. Collaboration is stimulated when students of varying cultures, ages, and social classes are encouraged to build networks of understanding though e-mail. As more and more schools are connected through the Internet, teachers and students have a chance to communicate their work and ideas with the world.

Requiring students to learn and use the Internet when completing assignments will also help them acquire many of the skills they will need to prosper in the information age. These necessary skills include the ability to gather, analyze, and synthesize information from a variety of resources, and use technology as a tool for solving problems. These skills, in combination with the ability to communicate effectively with diverse colleagues, will empower students to be successful in the workforce of the future.

Becker (1995) completed a study of Internet usage among 21 of the United States and the District of Columbia. As a result, he reported the perceived benefits to students whose teachers incorporated Internet activities into the curriculum. First, students applied themselves for longer periods of time and took on more responsibility for their own learning. Second, "average" performing students communicated and produced products equivalent to "above average" performing students. Third, students worked more collaboratively among their peers with their expertise more equally distributed. Fourth, students took more interest in world events, foreign cultures,

and societies, with a deeper understanding of the ideas they encountered. Finally, students had more interest in understanding the "adult" world, such as scientists and business people they had connected with, and were able to better communicate with them on a personal level.

Internet Assignment Ideas. As you have learned throughout this chapter, Mr. Paxton has incorporated many research-based procedures into the assignment routine he has chosen to implement with his students. As he learns more about how to use the Internet, he can use it wisely to plan, present, and evaluate assignments with his students. The following general ideas are offered as possible ways to integrate technology into Mr. Paxton's assignments in order to promote Internet usage by his students (Becker, 1995).

1. Search for specific information online.
2. Browse the network using Gopher or a World Wide Web browser.
3. Become an electronic penpal with someone.
4. Take an "electronic field trip" to a museum, science center, or to visit an adult conducting a scientific or creative activity.
5. Publish a group or individual assignment on the network.
6. Conduct a science investigation with a class in another location.
7. Conduct a writing project with a class in another location.
8. Participate in a "cultural exchange."

CONCLUSION

Although assignments represent a major vehicle that can be used to help students learn content, many students fail to take advantage of the learning opportunity. It can be difficult to plan assignments for student enrollments that are becoming increasingly diverse. For example, today's classes may include students judged as high-,

average-, and low-achieving, as well as students who are considered to be gifted, students with disabilities, students with limited English proficiency, and those who are at risk for school failure. While the most commonly tried solution to these challenges involves tailoring instruction to the mythical mean of the class, research has shown that it misses more students than it hits. Teachers need instructional approaches that are not only effective, but acceptable to both teachers and students.

In adopting assignment completion procedures for academically diverse classes, it is recommended that teachers create a classroom learning community in which covering the curriculum is never as important as ensuring all students and teachers are working together in a supportive setting to learn what is considered critical about the curriculum and for life. Such a community will support students in becoming strategic learners, capable of creatively and effectively processing information. Inasmuch as the information age is resulting in rapidly changing knowledge bases, today's students must learn "how to learn" so that they can be independent learners and performers after they leave school and can deal with new knowledge as it emerges.

Teachers have opportunities to develop strategic learning in *all* students when they involve students in the learning community of the classroom by participating in the design of their own assignments that will motivate them to learn more about the topics at hand. While planning meaningful assignments is important, so is presenting assignments to students in such a way that they understand what they are asked to do, a prerequisite for learning. And, the assignment completion cycle is not complete unless students are involved in the evaluation of their own work, prerequisite for a community for learners. Powerful knowledge can be constructed when teachers and students work and learn together through high-quality assignments.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Facilitating Transitions from Elementary Through High School

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As Mrs. Morgan finished entering her last set of grades into her grade book, she paused for a moment to reflect on the past school year. This fifth-grade class had challenged her as a teacher. She had never dealt with such a wide range of abilities, interests, backgrounds, and personalities. She thought back to this very same time last year, when she and the other fifth-grade teachers had met with the fourth-grade teachers for several hours in an effort to prepare for the incoming fifth-graders. The fourth-grade teachers discussed each student's interests, abilities and family background. Because of this meeting, Mrs. Morgan had been able to spend the summer planning and preparing for them. Also, because the fourth-grade teachers had been available throughout the year to discuss students, brainstorm ideas on how to effectively reach particular students, and share ways to communicate with their families, the year had gone well. In just two more days, the fourth- and fifth-grade teachers would meet again to discuss next year's students.

Knowing how these meetings had helped her prepare for new students, Mrs. Morgan wondered how the various sixth-grade teachers at the junior high school would prepare for the students who were leaving her fifth-grade classroom. She worried about how well some of her students would adapt to the change of having multiple teachers and no longer having one specific teacher to monitor their overall progress. Would they have an