Enhancing Assignment Completion in Academically Diverse Vocational Classes
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Abstract
This article describes methods and procedures for (a) planning assignments in vocational settings that will meet the special learning needs of all students in the class and (b) teaching students a self-checking process to evaluate their own work for quality before turning it in to the teacher. In cooperation with Individual Education Plans, the planning component of The Quality Assignment Routine provides vocational special needs educators an additional tool to better facilitate learning in diverse vocational classrooms.

Introduction
Many teachers throughout the country are concerned about 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 is poor. 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. Research clearly supports a correlation between homework and student achievement (Mercer, 1991).

Unfortunately, apathy is high among some students, who often complain that the schoolwork they are expected to do is boring and has little relevance to their lives (Glasser, 1991). However, in classrooms where the work is acceptable, one finds highly motivated students who look forward to the task, ask about it, and show a willingness to participate in it (Adelman & Taylor, 1983). Establishing assignment-completion procedures that incorporate a way to plan interesting assignments seems a viable option for ensuring that students will be motivated to complete them. Expecting students to evaluate their own work for quality is also an important aspect of ensuring that assignments they turn in will earn good grades.

Purpose
The purpose of this article is to describe methods and procedures for (a) planning meaningful and motivating assignments in vocational settings that will address the needs of diverse learners and (b) teaching students a self-checking process to evaluate their own work for quality before turning it in to the teacher.

Assumptions
Vocational teachers may assume two things with regard to their preestablished assignment completion procedures. First, they may assume that the type of work they are giving is acceptable to their students. In other words, each assignment is viewed by their students as authentic work that will yield positive outcomes and be relevant to their needs and interests in today’s world. According to the Southern Regional Education Board (1995), authentic assignments in vocational classrooms should have a real-life context, require that students apply knowledge rather than memorize discrete facts, demand that students extend their learning beyond the information given, and involve students in developing criteria for assessment.

Teachers may also assume that their students have the wherewithal to complete the assigned work fully and correctly. For instance, teachers may predict that students will be able to write down important information to do the assignment, create a plan for completing it, and then be able to check it for quality before handing it in to be graded. Student involvement in setting criteria and self-judging their homework is a critical self-assessment skill for improving grades. It is also a vital job skill needed in the future workplace (Jones, 1995). Assignment-completion procedures that include the expecta-
tion for student self-evaluation will enhance self-management, an important skill for both students and adults. Teaching students how to check their work against a set of quality criteria is especially important for those students with special needs, who may lack reliable assignment completion strategies. For example, many adolescents with learning disabilities (LD) lack important organizational skills for efficiently and effectively completing their homework (Putnam, Deshler, and Schumaker, 1992).

In addition to differentiating assignments for special education students with learning and/or social - emotional difficulties, teachers must also create assignments to meet the needs of vocational education 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, and/or values (Vance, 1995).

Assignment Selection

All assignments should be aligned with curriculum goals and objectives for a particular course. While the curriculum defines parameters for what is to be taught, teachers determine what skills and knowledge must be emphasized as the content of a particular assignment. If an assignment is not linked to information to be learned, it is “busy work.” Therefore, choosing the content of a particular assignment requires an examination of the larger block of learning to be completed and an identification of the most important pieces. It is then possible for teachers to identify the knowledge and skills that will be the target of a meaningful assignment.

To make assignments more motivational for students, teachers should consider those that differ from the traditional worksheet format. Although 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. Teachers must always ask themselves three questions when preparing interesting assignments:

1. What do I want students to accomplish as a result of finishing this assignment?
2. How will students accomplish what I intend for them to do in an interesting way?
3. How is working on this assignment important to the students’ lives?

The third question is especially important to answer and convey. Students often do not see the value of the work they are expected to do in school (Glasser, 1991). Therefore, identifying the benefits of the assignment to students’ lives is a recommended component of motivating them to actually complete the assignment.

Student motivation to finish assigned work may also increase when teachers offer reasonable choices to students on how to complete their assignments. In order to provide acceptable options to students, teachers can rely on information they gather from student interest surveys (Vance, 1995), learning style preferences (McCarthy, 1982), and multiple intelligence theory (Armstrong, 1994). When teachers apply these methods, they are more likely to operate from a growth paradigm, which focuses on what their students can do in order to succeed in school. 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 can achieve commensurately with their normally-achieving peers when given opportunities to do so (Armstrong, 1994). Including students in the construction of assignments also increases the probability that they will complete them on time and at a high level of quality (Rademacher, Cowart, Sparks, & Chism, 1997).

The Quality Assignment Routine (PLAN)

In order to adopt a new set of assignment planning procedures, some teachers have learned to rely on the planning component of the Quality Assignment Routine (Rademacher, Deshler, Schumaker, & Lenz, 1998). This instructional routine contains methods and procedures for planning, presenting, and evaluating assignments with academically diverse learners in content classes. It is representative of the content enhancement approach developed and researched at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning. Content enhancement, an approach to teaching, 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. The planning steps (referred to as PLAN) of the Quality Assignment Routine can be used to enhance the nature of assignments given in diverse vocational classrooms.

Each step in PLAN guides the thinking of teachers to create meaningful and motivating assignments that all students
can complete satisfactorily. This task can be challenging, considering the diversity of some vocational classes. For example, in some classrooms, reading achievement may range from the 4th to above the 12th grade level. Some students may have difficulty writing simple sentences, while others are capable of writing long papers. Other students may lack proficiency in the English language. Some may have learning, emotional, and/or physical disabilities that require adaptations. Some may have low motivation to learn. However, with careful planning, teachers can allow students to select an appropriate trade 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, or writing an advertisement for the book). With creativity, teachers can make assignments more interesting and fun. Because as more reading is done and more assignments are completed, more learning will occur. The purpose in taking time to plan assignments is to insure that students will engage in authentic tasks that help them become better learners, who are more skilled and more knowledgeable about the world of work that they will eventually encounter.

**Using the PLAN Steps**

The following is an explanation about how to use each step of PLAN in a course titled Business Computer Information Systems. The teacher in our example (Mr. Chism) followed the PLAN steps by completing a Quality Assignment Planning Sheet form from *The Quality Assignment Routine* (see Figure 1).

**Plan the Purpose of the Assignment.**

Mr. Chism referred to the state curriculum guidelines, which listed the essential knowledge and skills that his students were to acquire during his course. As a result, he decided to develop a unit of study on desktop publishing technology. At the conclusion of the instruction, he expected all students to be able to (a) identify technologies available for desktop publishing, (b) identify customary standards and styles of desktop publishing, and (c) create desktop publications by importing text and graphics.

In thinking about the overall purpose of an assignment appropriate for the unit, Mr. Chism asked himself what students would accomplish as a result of completing the assignment (the skill or knowledge to be gained), how they would do this (how to accomplish the purpose specified), and why it was important (benefits to students' lives). As indicated in Figure 1, Mr. Chism decided that he wanted his students to use Microsoft Word skill to apply desktop publishing technologies (knowledge gained from the lessons he had taught). In order for this to occur, he decided to have the students create an original instructional manual. It was hoped that students would benefit from this assignment in the future, because they may be expected to train and assist others by creating a set of instructions in the workplace. In addition, knowing how to develop instructions is an important skill in all areas of daily living.

**Link Assignment to Student Needs and Interests (HALO).**

"HALO" in this step stands for High, Average, or Low performing students, and Other students who may receive support outside the regular classroom. The questions that should be answered are:

1. How can this assignment be made personally relevant for students?

What choices can be given to students or what elements can be built into the assignment so that the assignment is more meaningful to students as a group or to the individual? To answer this question, Mr. Chism thought about the physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and cultural characteristics of his students. Knowing that their future vocational interests varied, he decided to let them explore and develop an occupational topic of their choice. This activity allowed students to practice the research skills they were learning in science class. Since the beginning of the year, Mr. Chism had been working with other teachers to integrate academic and vocational-technical education. As a result, each teacher on his cross-disciplinary team was beginning to think of ways to convey to each other what they were teaching. This collaborative effort enabled students to recognize the connections between what they were learning in his class and in other subject areas. Teachers started to work together to plan interesting assignments. As a result, students could acquire and apply core understandings across each of their respective courses.

2. What are personal choices for variation and challenge?

What options exist for how the assignment is to be completed so that students will be more motivated to finish it? Options may fall into the following categories: (a) 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; (b) content, such as allowing students to select the assignment based upon their interest, or certain questions to answer and not answer; (c) location,
**Figure 1**

*The quality Assignment Planning Worksheet*

**Course:** Business Computer Info. Systems / **Unit:** Desktop Publishing Technology

**P**

1. **What will students accomplish?**
   Use Microsoft Word to apply desktop publishing technology.

2. **How will they do this?**
   Create an original instructional manual.

3. **Why is this important (benefits)?**
   Student may need to develop a set of instructions in the workplace. Knowing how to develop instruction is important in all areas of daily life.

**L**

1. **How can the assignment be made personally relevant for the student?**
   Explore and develop the occupational topic for the manual.

2. **Options/choices?**
   Groups/pairs/alone; oral/written presentation; personal timeline; lab/home.

3. **Pitfalls to successful completion of work?**
   Difficulty with logical sequencing of instructions.

4. **Solutions to these pitfalls?**
   Teach how to sequence instructions. Conduct small group problem solving with feedback.

**A**

**Action Steps**
1. Create timeline
2. Develop format
3. Develop content outline
4. Pilot instrument
5. Finalize the instructions

**Supplies/Resources**
- Class notes, textbook, journalism teacher, parent and teacher examples, city and school libraries, laptops, Microsoft Word

**Grading criteria (PACE 1, 2...)**
1. Customary publishing standards
2. Text layout
3. Graphics
4. Creativity
5. Spelling Grammar

Due date: 5/15/ Pts: 100

**N**

**Date to review Assignment Outcomes**

Results
Extend class time: 15 hours. 8 min. Help students monitor timeline activities. Develop checkpoints to give feedback. Rough draft...

**Results**
Before final copy. Students like being creative and choosing their occupational topic.
such as choosing whether they will complete the assignment in the library, at home, or in study hall; (d) resources, such as allowing students to use computers, encyclopedias, textbooks, their imaginations, or other people; (e) 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 (f) the due date, which means allowing students to choose from one or two announced dates by which all or a part of the assignment must be turned in.

Knowing that his students enjoyed working in groups or in pairs so that they could help one another, Mr. Chism offered this option for the assignment. Other choices that met the reading levels and learning styles of his students included oral or written presentation, development of a personal timeline, use of the lab, or working at home. Mr. Chism presented these options because he knew that some of his students expressed information better orally, that goal setting could be reinforced as students created a timeline, and that those who were not skilled in Microsoft Word could get help in the lab. Lab time for students to work on this assignment also compensated for the fact that some students did not have computers at home.

3. What are pitfalls students might encounter as they try to complete the work?

Mr. Chism thought that some of the students would be unable to logically sequence a set of instructions and he made note of this on the planning sheet (see Item 3 of the L section of Figure 1). The solution to that pitfall could be to demonstrate how to sequence directions. He could also direct students to work in small groups to problem-solve and give feedback on their own directions (see Item 4 of the L section of Figure 1).

Arrange Clear Student Directions.

As shown on the planning sheet in Figure 1, there are three columns to complete: Action Steps, Supplies/Resources, and Grading Criteria, which includes PACE 1, 2,..., Due Date and Points. In the Action Steps column, teachers identify a few sequential steps for completing the assignment in a high-quality manner. These action steps become important during the explanation of the assignment so that students can follow through with what is required. Involving students in naming and explaining the action steps can clarify any misunderstandings about what they must do in order to do a satisfactory job. Mr. Chism listed five action steps to include in his assignment explanation (create project timelines, develop format, develop content steps, pilot instructions, and finalize instructions). The “A” section of Figure 1 shows Mr. Chism’s notes.

The Supplies/Resources column lists the material and human resources that students might need to complete the assignment. As indicated in Figure 1, Mr. Chism listed class notes, textbook, journalism teachers, city and school libraries, examples from parents and teachers, and Microsoft Word as resources students might utilize. During his assignment explanation, Mr. Chism asked students to name potential resources. He then told students where those resources were located and how they could be used.

In the Grading Criteria column, of the “A” section, teachers list the grading criteria that will be applied to the completed assignment, as well as its due date. The word PACE at the top of the third column refers to four standard requirements that Mr. Chism expected his students to meet on every assignment handed in: The assignment must be Prompt (met due date), Arranged neatly (no stray marks or smudges, even margins, good organization), Complete (all directions followed, all questions answered), and Edited (free from mechanical errors, clarity of ideas, accuracy of content.)

The numbered list under “grading criteria (PACE 1, 2...)” section
A, Figure 1 enumerates the assignment's additional requirements. In this case, Mr. Chism expected the students to check their work for quality based on use of customary standards and styles; text layout; graphics layout; creativity; and spelling and grammar checks.

**Note Evaluation Date and Results.**
The final section on the planning sheet contains spaces to review the assignment's appropriateness and outcomes after the students' work has been graded. Teachers are prompted to complete the section by specifying a date to review assignment outcomes with students some time after the assignment is due and after it has been graded. In the Results section, teachers record any common errors that they have observed, and note possible changes the next time such an assignment is given.

As shown in Figure 1, Mr. Chism reviewed the completed assignments with his students on May 19. Based on student performance, he decided that the next time he gave this particular assignment he would extend time to work in class to 15 hours, help students monitor timeline activities, provide more feedback on each completed part, and expect a rough draft before a final grade. Mr. Chism could file this assignment away until the following year with the expectation that his reflective comments on this section of the planning sheet would help him to create a better assignment/completion experience for his students.

**Using the PACE 1,2,... Checklist**

*The Quality Assignment Routine* (Rademacher et al., 1998) contains a lesson for teachers on how to teach students to evaluate their own assignments for quality before handing them in. At the end of the lesson, students are taught to mark their assignments with PACE 1,2,... in a specified place on the assignment (See Figure 2). They draw two small lines under each letter and number. The top line indicates whether or not the student has met the quality criteria. Students make this notation. The bottom line, for teachers to check, indicates whether they believe that the quality criteria were met. By using this process, teachers like Mr. Chism can organize individual and group feedback based on whether or not the assignment was representative of quality work. Figure 2 illustrates how Mr. Chism and one of his students evaluated her assignment according to the preestablished grading criteria.

**Summary**
Research supports a correlation between homework and student achievement (Mercer, 1991). Homework should respect the lives of students while developing an inner sense of responsibility, accountability, motivation, and self-confidence. Homework for the modern age should include multiple ways to complete an assignment, an opportunity to relate assignments to real-life situations, and opportunities for students to plan for assignment completion that will encourage self-evaluation of the finished product.

This article presented vocational educators with a new approach to planning classroom assignments that accounts for the unique needs of all students in the class. The PLAN steps and the PACE 1,2,... Checklist offer teachers additional tools to facilitate learning in the vocational classroom. Certainly, with these tools, students will be provided with assignments that can bridge the transition between the classroom and the 21st century workplace.

**References**


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