

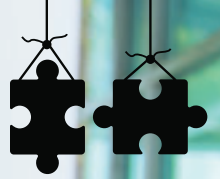
Choice & Relevancy

Autonomy and personalization in assignments help motivate and engage students

*By Joan Dabrowski
and Tanji Reed Marshall*

In order for students to achieve at high levels, they must be interested—emotionally invested—in their learning. This intuitively makes sense, because motivation, or the desire that propels one to do something, leads to engagement. A positively engaged student is attentive to his or her tasks, puts forth positive effort, persists through challenges, and advances ideas and understandings intentionally. An engaged student is a successful student.

Current college- and career-ready standards demand collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Reading, writing, and talking about complex topics and tasks demands strategic thinking and steadfast attention. Generating claims, solving complex problems, and developing and navigating arguments based on credible evidence is challenging work. It requires students to grapple with rich content, plan, organize, set goals, and be socially aware. Students—more than ever



before—need to be invested in and socially and emotionally connected to their learning. Engagement is essential.

Despite what is known and understood about student motivation, The Education Trust's recent review of more than 6,800 middle school assignments yielded disappointing results in the area of motivation and engagement. We looked closely at choice and relevancy—two powerful levers for engaging learners. Our premise is clear: Students should be given choice in their learning, and tasks should be relevant, using real-world experiences and examples for students to make connections with their goals, interests, and values. Few assignments, however, align to The Education Trust's motivation and engagement framework.

Why Assignments?

Assignments—the daily tasks we ask our students to do—are a powerful lens for viewing

teaching and learning. They represent what teachers know and understand about educational standards. They reflect how students experience a curriculum and reveal a teacher's expectations. It is this interaction—the engagement (or disengagement) with the curriculum—that The Education Trust considered when building the criteria for motivation and engagement as part of its Literacy and Math Assignment Frameworks.

We recognize that classroom environments and teacher-student relationships also influence motivation and engagement and concede these areas cannot be fully captured in a stand-alone assignment. We can, however, learn a great deal when we look closely at the content of an assignment and its design features. Thus, choice and relevancy within an assignment serve as insightful proxies for student engagement, since they hold the potential to ignite and propel student interest and enthusiasm.

Assignments for The Assigners

- Invite teachers to bring their most recent assignments and use The Education Trust assignment analysis guides to review assignments with an eye toward motivation and engagement.
- Avoid stereotypes (e.g., race, gender, religion, etc.) in addressing cultural relevance.
- Review school and classroom libraries for opportunities to diversify texts.
- Use assignments that engage students in critical dialogue to build knowledge, confidence, and students' social and emotional development.



LOOKING FOR MORE?

A longer version of this article can be found at www.edtrust.org.

Defining Choice

Providing choice within an assignment promotes the healthy development of student autonomy. Allowing students to have moments when they are “in charge” of their lives is central to their academic achievement and emotional adjustment, according to John T. Guthrie’s “Best Practices for Motivating Students to Read.” When students make decisions about their work, they are empowered to “own” it. And ownership of a task leads to self-direction and self-discipline, because students are personally invested in the outcomes.

Offering students choice supports a universally held goal in teaching and learning: We want students to become more capable independent learners. An opposite approach plays out when teachers control all aspects of the assignment or guide students in lockstep fashion through each step. In these scenarios, students are required to relinquish their power and decision-making, and teachers revert to controlling bodies or filling empty vessels instead of inviting students to learn with autonomy.

Choice in Assignments

The Education Trust’s framework assesses choice within an assignment in three areas: content, product, and process. In each area, students must be held to grade-level standards and pushed to think deeply and critically. The choices offered should be authentic, have clear boundaries, and be meaningful to students. Here’s how educators can differentiate assignments in each of three areas:

Choice in Content

- Broad topics are provided by teachers; students can narrow or specify their topic within the broader one.
- Students select texts and topics.

Choice in Product

- Students are given a choice of how they will present their learning: genre, structure, medium.

Choice in Process

- Students are given freedom to design their course of action and sequence their steps as they work on an assignment.
- Students may work alone or with their peers.
- Students manage their timelines and deliverables, with teacher support as needed.

Defining Relevancy

Motivation and engagement interact with an individual’s lived experience (e.g., beliefs, values, determination, interests). In our framework, the personal realm is actualized through relevance: the connection to and value students perceive in a given assignment. This perception can either spark interest or lead to disengagement.

Researchers agree that having interest in a task or topic spurs powerful emotions, stimulating areas of the brain that can positively influence cognition. Thus, paying attention to the relevancy of an assignment is a vital step in ensuring students are authentically motivated and engaged in learning. What makes a task relevant? The Education Trust focuses on three questions in its assignment analysis work:

- Is it useful to the learner?
- Does the content interest the learner?
- Is the content presented by someone the learner knows and trusts?

When students believe an assignment is useful for their lives—present or future—they engage. When they have interest in the content, they engage. Additionally, when students encounter new or unfamiliar content presented by a trustworthy, caring

Questions of Relevancy

- When, where, and how do students have choice in their assignments?
- When students have choice, how is rigor maintained?
- Are students given opportunities to bring their ideas, opinions, and experiences to the assignment? If not, what adjustments can you make to allow for this?
- How can assignments in my classroom offer students the opportunity to experience rigorous content that's unfamiliar in a way that feels relevant?



teacher or peer who displays genuine passion for the topic—and for teaching the topic—they engage.

Teachers bring relevancy to assignments when they share rigorous content using themes across disciplines, cultures, and generations; consider essential questions; and explore universal understandings. Additionally, using real-world materials and current events in daily assignments creates relevance. Perhaps most importantly, when an assignment connects with students' values, interests, and goals, it holds authentic meaning. Here's how to achieve relevancy in assignments:

Themes, Essential Questions, and Universal Understandings

- Explore complex concepts through universal themes and essential questions.
- Use inquiry-based teaching as a way to build knowledge and help students make connections.
- Incorporate real-world events (local/school community, national, global).

Connect With Student Values, Interests, and Goals

- Personal
- Collective
- Cultural (avoiding stereotypes)

Where Do We Go Next?

If we are committed to the idea that student motivation and engagement will lead to improved academic achievement, we suggest three next steps:

- 1. Know and value students.** Educators must keep students in the forefront when they design and implement daily assignments. When they do so, students will feel valued and be more likely to persist and thrive even when the tasks are complex. A curriculum must consider the holistic development of our young people. Choice and relevancy are what students need.

- 2. Review and refine the curriculum.** Educators must look closely at units, lessons, and assignments in every class or course. Using a tool such as the Assignment Analysis Guide, teachers (or teacher teams) can review and analyze where choice and relevancy occur within the current curriculum. More broadly, educators should consider new curricular approaches that embed relevancy and choice (e.g., project-based learning, performance tasks, simulations, inquiry-based learning).
- 3. Support teacher capacity.** Teachers might need professional learning that focuses on identifying the salient ideas and themes in different content areas. They might also need guidance on where and how to include meaningful choices within an assignment. Teachers might also need time with colleagues and pedagogical experts to learn more about their students—who they are, what they value, and what they need and want to experience. This support is crucial if we expect daily assignments to change.

Motivation and engagement in assignments support the overarching goal of improving student outcomes. When teachers consistently offer rich assignments giving students choice in content, product, and process, students can find the learning ownership needed to stay engaged and achieve at high levels. Educators have the responsibility to meet students, teach them, engage them, and motivate them where they are and ultimately to bring them forward in ways that are meaningful and productive. This is possible, and we should expect no less. **P**

Joan Dabrowski is assistant superintendent for teaching and learning in the Wellesley (Massachusetts) Public Schools.

Tanji Reed Marshall is senior practice associate for P-12 literacy at The Education Trust.