

# CREATING MORE EFFECTIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS: THE CHALLENGE OF AUTHENTIC INTELLECTUAL ENGAGEMENT

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How well do our school-based writing assignments challenge students to do the kinds of intellectual work that real writing demands? A growing body of literature emphasizes the need for writing assignments that ask students to engage in authentic intellectual work. Yet large scale national studies in restructuring schools have shown that writing instruction lacks an authentic engaging component.<sup>1</sup> But what about the nature of writing in schools that have been deemed successful? Is there something different about writing instruction in these schools? Are assignments in successful schools challenging students enough to engage in authentic intellectual work? Using a framework of Authentic Intellectual Engagement, we explored the nature of writing assignments in one typical high school with a reputation for success that wasn't plagued by major academic or social issues. As expected, we found some excellent examples of assignments which rated high on the criteria for authentic intellectual engagement; however, we saw many opportunities for teachers to use the authentic intellectual engagement framework to push students even farther in their thinking and writing. Our hope is that by looking at the example of this one school, we all can see ways to improve our writing assignments and rise to the challenge of providing authentic intellectual engagement for all our students.

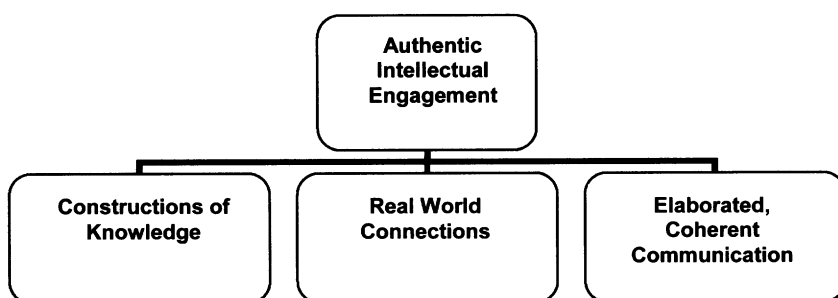
## **Defining Authentic Intellectual Engagement**

Authentic intellectual engagement sounds like something every teacher would want to strive for, but what is it really? In the early 1990s, Fred Newmann and colleagues at the University of Wisconsin-Madison began researching authentic intellectual approaches to teaching and learning in restructuring schools. According to Newmann and Wehlage, authentic intellectual tasks have three characteristics: they ask students to construct knowledge rather than reproduce information; they require students to engage in a process of disciplined inquiry; and they have value beyond school (8). Newmann and associates began their process of thinking about authentic intellectual work in school by first considering the thinking and problem solving that adults do. As Newmann says, “We looked for common features in the cognitive work done by adults successful in [many] fields that might distinguish their work from the work usually done by students in schools.” For Newmann, students need to be responsible for cognitive work that cannot rely on mere memorization and rote recall. Students must show they can apply their understandings to real world situations and can communicate their comprehension of that concept to out-of-school audiences. As Lindblom points out, “School writing is often completely disconnected from and unlike writing done for the world outside school. This disconnection has encouraged development of a separate set of rules for writing that operate only in school or among those for whom school writing is treated as real writing” (104). Conversely, authentic intellectual activities ask students to think deeply about topics, issues, and situations which have real importance in their own lives.

Newmann and his colleagues first developed specific rubrics to measure authentic intellectual achievement in mathematics and social studies (Newmann and Wehlage 10). Then in the mid 1990s, Newmann joined a group of English content specialists [including one of the authors] for the Chicago Annenberg Project, intended to examine authentic intellectual work in schools undergoing reform supported by the Annenberg Foundation. For

this work, the team developed criteria to measure authentic intellectual achievement in writing assignments and student work in writing gathered from English and language arts classes. These original criteria and rubrics can be found in the *English Journal* article “Authentic Intellectual Achievement in Writing” by Sisseron, et al. From that initial undertaking with the Chicago Annenberg Project, this group of colleagues has worked with other projects including Annenberg sites around the country, the National Writing Project, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to modify and refine the rubrics to measure authentic intellectual engagement in writing assignments and student work in writing.<sup>2</sup> Our evolved model includes three distinct features for engaging literacy activities. These activities ask students to construct knowledge; to communicate in elaborate, coherent ways; and to communicate to real audiences for real purposes (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1**



It is not surprising that previous research shows that when teachers give assignments that ask students to produce authentic work, students produce authentic work (Newmann, Lopez & Bryk 30-31). Research also shows a positive correlation between performing well on authentic intellectual tasks and performing well on standardized tests (Newmann, Bryk & Nagaoka 25). These

findings indicate that one major key to improving student writing performance is improving writing assignments and providing students with opportunities to write in response to authentic, engaging assignments.

## **Case Study of One High School**

Our data come from Riverview High School, one of three high schools in a district with a solid reputation for having “good schools.” The schools perform well on standardized tests and stakeholders are pleased. According to the district’s Fact Sheet 2005, “In a national independent study from parents and employers, the [school district] was rated in the top 15 percent of preferred school districts in the nation” (“[School District]: A Great Place to Live and Learn”). The Fact Sheet goes on to report how the schools in this district exceed state and national norms on multiple measures including fourth, eighth and tenth grade achievement tests; third grade reading tests; ACT tests; Advanced Placement coursework; and graduation rates. The Fact Sheet notes that the district average ACT of 22.5 is higher than both the state average of 22.2, which is one of the highest in the nation, and well above the national average of 20.9. Additionally, the district reports that high school students in this district “exceed the state average, in some cases by a two-to-one ratio, in the number of advanced placement and foreign language classes taken.” At 21.5, Riverview High School has a slightly lower average ACT score than the district, yet the school has a reputation for its quality English program.

## **Data Collection**

Data were collected at Riverview in grades ten and twelve. Seven self-selected teachers participated in the study. We collected the teacher-determined “most challenging” writing assignment for the class in October/early November, December/January, and spring. Teachers submitted a total of 22 assignments. In addition to the assignment itself, the teachers provided a

description for the context of the assignment (See appendix A). Teachers also supplied any grading rubrics and other supporting materials. Most teachers provided a brief description of the context for the assignment as well as rubrics and supporting materials such as handouts, peer review sheets, and example assignments.

Each assignment was scored by two trained coders on the three Authentic Intellectual Engagement criteria (See appendix B)—Construction of Knowledge; Elaborated, Coherent Communication; and Real World Connections. When there was a difference in the scores, the coders negotiated the score for the assignment.

## Findings

While this is a small data set, it is interesting to look at what these teachers, self selected and sharing what they perceived to be their most challenging assignments, can show us about authenticity and engagement as defined by this model. Summary results of the data are displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Construction of Knowledge				Elaboration			Real World Connections		
Substantial & Complex	Substantial	Some	None	Assertion & Support	Assertion OR Support	Not Extended	Real World & Delivered	Real Audience & Purpose	To Demonstrate Academic Competence
0	12	10	0	10	12	0	0	5	17

## Construction of Knowledge

First, authentic, engaging activities ask students to construct knowledge rather than merely reproduce information. Too often, much of what students are asked to do in classrooms is to repeat information gleaned from textbooks or provided by the teacher. In contrast, when confronted with new tasks, adults are rarely able to just reproduce information available elsewhere. In

authentic tasks, students interpret, analyze, synthesize, or evaluate information in order to generate and explore these new ideas. In addition, in highly engaging assignments, students do complex constructing of knowledge. Activities that promote high-level construction of knowledge ask students to continually build on their new knowledge through a series of constructive tasks. Overall, the essence of construction of knowledge is that students are required to interact with and make sense of information, rather than just learn what the text or the teacher have to say and return that information unchanged.

In general, the assignments in the study asked students to construct knowledge. All of the assignments called for at least some construction of knowledge and slightly more than half of the assignments called for substantial construction of knowledge. In the tasks, students were asked to interpret, analyze, synthesize and evaluate information in order to come to new understandings. Many of the assignments which scored in the substantial category for construction of knowledge were traditional literary analysis papers. For example, students were asked to analyze a particular character in a text; examine the cause and effect relationships within a text; compare and/or contrast characters, themes or settings from two or more novels; or persuade a reader that characters' actions were or were not justified.

Interestingly, even the assignments which fell into the category of some construction of knowledge had the potential to require substantial construction; however, often much of the thinking that would have constituted constructing knowledge was done by the teacher, as a whole class, or in groups. For example, students discussed themes in August Wilson's *Fences* together in groups and then wrote a paper about what they had discussed. The support of group work was important for helping students to learn how to do higher level thinking. However, once students are on a path to more complex thinking, they need opportunities to demonstrate that they can construct knowledge on their own. If these were the most challenging assignments students were given in a particular time period, then we can assume that students weren't expected

to use what they learned from the group activity to then demonstrate their ability to do their own thinking on another assignment with a different text. In an attempt to help and support students, many teachers' assignments didn't leave enough space for students to do meaningful interpretation, analysis, synthesis or evaluation of information on their own. The purposeful teaching of the writing process was good. However, in general, many assignments were over-scaffolded, not leaving room for exploration. For example, in several assignments, students were given a prescribed format for how to write their papers, including not only the five steps to essay writing but also the framework for what topic should be addressed in each paragraph.

None of the assignments in the data set scored in the highest category of construction of knowledge where students were asked to engage in multiple, complex constructions of knowledge. In the highest category of construction of knowledge, students are asked to complete multiple, interconnected constructions of knowledge, using knowledge they have constructed as a basis for further, deeper understandings. If we think about the way adults must use reasoning to solve problems, they often must engage the complexity of a problem or issue. While the majority of the assignments in this data set required students to do a substantial amount of construction of knowledge, often the analysis or reasoning they were asked to do was simple and focused on right or wrong answers rather than engaging the complexity of issues.

## **Elaborated, Coherent Communication**

The second criterion for authentic, engaging literacy activities is that students demonstrate knowledge through elaborated, coherent communication. Tasks that emphasize elaborated communication require extended writing defined as more than a paragraph at the middle or high school level. In addition, elaborated tasks ask students to make assertions, such as claims, conclusions or generalizations, and then support those assertions with appropriate and valid evidence.

All assignments submitted for the case study asked students to engage in extended writing. It is good news that teachers' perceptions of the most challenging writing they are asking students to do is extended writing that requires students to produce more than a paragraph. About half of the assignments asked students to make assertions and support those assertions while the other half asked students to provide either assertion or support, but not both. For the most part, in the assignments requiring only assertion or support, the teacher provided the assertion and students were expected to develop support for that teacher-given assertion. In terms of elaborated, coherent communication, the key to engagement with the communication of ideas is that students complete both sides of the contract – making a clear assertion and then providing coherent, organized and well-developed support for that assertion.

Overall, the assignments and the evaluation materials provided by teachers in this data set emphasized form over ideas. Specifically, the five paragraph essay ruled the day, even to the point in several assignments where students were given an almost fill-in-the-blank outline of the five paragraph model. When students are asked to communicate in authentic intellectual ways, form should follow ideas. Genres of writing are more than formats, more than empty vessels into which content can be poured. While the five paragraph essay can be a beneficial way to help students visualize and systematize how the writing process works and what parts make up a “good” piece of writing, by tenth grade, students should be making decisions about how to communicate their ideas to audiences based on specific writing purposes.

## **Real World Connections**

The final criterion for authentic, engaged literacy activities is that students make real world connections through their writing. Tasks that emphasize these connections require that students take on plausible writing roles that they could reasonably assume now or in the future; tasks demonstrating strong real world



connections ask students to take on realistic, not pretend, roles. In addition, tasks ask students to go beyond the demonstration of academic competence and instead write for authentic purposes. Finally, students are required to submit their work to real audiences.

Writers in authentic rhetorical situations plan their compositions by asking: Am I confronted with an issue or problem that calls for writing? What exactly is this issue or problem? Who needs to know what I feel, think, believe, and/or know about it? Who am I as a writer in this situation? What kind of voice, stance, and tone do I want to employ? What conventions of arrangement, format, and style do I want to follow? Accordingly, students should be asking the same questions as they go about the process of writing in order to form the habits of thought of an expert writer.

Most assignments in the data set emphasized demonstrating academic performance rather than making real world connections through writing. In 17 of the 22 assignments, the tasks accentuated academic performance rather than authentic connections. Most of these 17 assignments were traditional literary analysis papers. Of the five assignments which scored moderately on the Real World Connections rubric, four were some type of personal writing which allowed students to explore how issues and ideas raised through reading or discussion impacted them. For example, after reading the novel *Go Ask Alice*, which explores issues of teenage addiction and loneliness in diary form, students did journaling to explore these same issues in their own lives and explore how the author of the diary found herself in these situations. The final paper which scored moderately on real world connection is discussed next.

### **An Engaging Assignment: Censorship and *Catcher in the Rye***

The assignment in Figure 2 represents much of what was good about the assignments in the data set. It was given in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade

class in March after students had completed reading the novel *Catcher in the Rye*. As the assignment notes, this book is often met with controversy, and there have been many attempts through the years to censor it. For this assignment, the teacher asked the students to join in this ongoing conversation regarding the value of the book for teenage readers and the objections which have been raised against it. Students were to write persuasive letters to school officials expressing their opinions regarding the censorship of the book.

The assignment clearly asks students to construct knowledge and communicate in elaborated, coherent ways. Through interpretation, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of information and ideas, students are to develop a clear argument regarding the censorship of *Catcher in the Rye* and use prior knowledge and research to support their reasoning. Students are to embrace the complexity of the censorship issues rather than just to see censorship as a black or white issue. Additionally, students are given clear guidance that they must make an assertion and support that assertion with specific evidence.

Additionally, this assignment was one of the few assignments in the data set which scored higher on the real world connections rubric. While it did not score in the highest category, which requires students to actually deliver the writing to the intended audience, the assignment did ask students to write for a real audience for a real purpose. The task asks students to engage in writing for a reason other than just the demonstration of academic competence. Certainly, the assignment would be more authentic if the school board in this district were considering censoring this book, or even some other book. Teachers and students can take advantage of those types of authentic situations when they arise in

## Figure 2

### Censorship and *Catcher in the Rye* English 10

*Catcher in the Rye* has been the subject of numerous censorship attempts in the fifty-some years since its publication. A brief history of those attempts can be read at the following website: <http://www.euronet.nl/users/los/censorhistory.html>

For this assignment you need to write a letter to a school official expressing your opinions regarding whether or not the novel should be censored and in what way. (You may wish to censor it for certain ages; you may think it should be allowed in the library, but not be assigned for required reading; you may think it should be completely banned from public schools.)

The introduction of your letter should make clear your purpose. Indicate why you are writing and what you wish to have done.

Your body paragraphs should each focus on a single argument or reason. (Paragraphs should have unity.) Each argument or reason should be made clear in a topic sentence. Each reason or argument should be supported with specific examples from life or from the book. Use transitions within and between paragraphs to improve the flow of your letter.

Finally close with a restatement of your position and a strong final statement. You may wish to indicate the benefits of following your advice or the negative consequences of ignoring it.

In this assignment, you must demonstrate not only your ability to develop a persuasive argument, but also your ability to write in an established business letter format. On the reverse side of this letter, you will find a model that you can follow.

Because the recipients of such letters are often influenced not only by what you say, but also by how clearly and accurately you say it, you should make your letter as perfect as possible in following the conventions of English grammar and usage.

the community. However, perhaps the class could have researched to see if the book were facing censorship in other communities and addressed and delivered their arguments to that specific situation.

## **Implications for Future Work**

The good news about engagement and authenticity from this set of assignments from one school is that students are being asked to construct knowledge and to write in extended ways. In addition, teachers are engaged in the purposeful teaching of the writing process and are working to scaffold students as they learn to become more sophisticated writers. In looking at the whole data set, we see the potential to create even greater opportunities for students to authentically engage in meaningful writing tasks. While students were asked to construct knowledge, student inquiry and thinking tended to focus on right or wrong answers instead of engaging the complexity of ideas. In addition, teacher-provided evaluation materials and assignment directions emphasized form over ideas, and many assignments were over-scaffolded, not leaving students room for exploration and engagement with complex ideas. Finally, assignments accentuated the demonstration of academic performance rather than making authentic connections. In all, these limitations made writing more of a mechanical than engaging endeavor.

We are not surprised that we found good, but not stellar, writing assignments at this school. All the pieces are in place at Riverview to really engage students in meaningful, authentic writing. Based on these findings, we recommend several changes for this school and encourage other high school English departments to think about how these changes might impact the authentic intellectual engagement of their students.

First, we recommend that teachers work to emphasize a greater balance between engaging complex ideas and communicating in correct form. We understand the impulse to master issues of correctness and form. However, form and content cannot so easily be separated. Students need to come to

understand that form is dictated by content, not the other way around. Pitching about for a third point to fulfill the five paragraph essay contract, when no good third point exists, is counterproductive. Instead, consider having students write multigenre papers (Romano) where they explore one topic in depth in many genres. Not only would this approach encourage more complexity and depth in student writing, it would also introduce students to many different forms for expressing themselves.

Second, teachers should provide more opportunities for students to write for real audiences and purposes. Students can demonstrate academic writing competencies when they are writing real texts for real people. Form and grammar need not be emphasized before students write for real audiences. We suggest instead that form and grammar will improve when students are engaged in writing real texts for real audiences. We do not stop toddlers from talking because they have not yet mastered all the subtleties of English grammar. Neither should we limit high school students' opportunities to write for real situations because they are not yet expert writers. The world is full of real audiences for our students. They can write letters to the editor of school, local and national newspapers. They can write to companies that produce products they use. They can create brochures to be distributed by local businesses or agencies.

Finally, we recommend that teachers work to address all three criteria together in assignments to enhance overall student engagement. In the data set, we found excellent examples of assignments which rated highly on one of the criteria. Clearly teachers are working on the various aspects of engaging tasks, but not integrating all the aspects in each assignment in order to make a task truly engaging. While the need to break down the concepts to deeply address each area may be necessary, students need more opportunities for complex, multidimensional writing projects that can serve to engage them at all levels.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See AIR/SRI reports regarding work with Authentic Intellectual Engagement in Gates Foundation schools. See Bryk, et al, for information regarding research in Chicago Annenberg Schools. See Newmann, Secada, & Wehlage for information regarding research from the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools.

<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to our many partners who have worked on these rubrics through the years and have generously provided funding for these projects. These partners include David Jolliffe, Kendra Sisserson, Annie Knepler, the Consortium on Chicago School Research, the Chicago Annenberg Foundation, the National Writing Project, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

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**APPENDIX 1**  
**WRITING ASSIGNMENT COVER SHEET**  
**2004-2005**

Teacher Name: \_\_\_\_\_

School: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade Level: \_\_\_\_\_

Collection Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Copy of Assignment**

Please attach a copy of the assignment given to students, any supporting documents you would like to share, and any available evaluation materials for the writing assignment. If you provided the assignment orally, please write down what you said to the students.

**Teaching and Learning Context**

I know that assignments don't stand alone on a piece of paper. You do a great deal of explaining, contextualizing, elaborating—in short, teaching—related to what is written on the attached page. In a brief paragraph or two, please explain the teaching and learning context for this writing assignment. Discuss briefly the activities you worked on in class, what other concepts or ideas you were studying simultaneously that contributed to this work, how long you spent on this assignment, etc. Feel free to use the back of this sheet.



## APPENDIX 2

### SCORING CRITERIA FOR ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS ASSIGNMENTS

#### Assignment Criterion 1: Construction of Knowledge

Commentary: This criterion examines the extent to which tasks call for student work that moves beyond the reproduction of information to the construction of knowledge. Tasks that emphasize construction of knowledge require students to do more than summarize or paraphrase information they have read, heard, or viewed; these tasks require students to generate or explore ideas that are new to them through interpretation, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation of information. Some tasks ask students to construct knowledge and then to use this new knowledge to generate additional new understandings.

4 = The dominant expectation of the task is that students move beyond reproduction of information by engaging in at least two linked constructions of knowledge. That is, the task **EXPLICITLY** calls for students to construct knowledge **AND THEN** use the first construction to stimulate an additional related knowledge construction.

3 = The dominant expectation of the task is that students go beyond reproduction of information to construct knowledge—to generate and explore ideas through interpretation, analysis, synthesis, **AND/OR** the evaluation of information.

2 = There is some expectation that students demonstrate interpretation, analysis, synthesis, **AND/OR** the evaluation of information for part of the task, **BUT** these skills are not the dominant expectation of the task and some of the work can be accomplished through reproduction of information.

1 = Students can satisfy all or almost all of the requirements of the task by reproducing information they have read, heard, or viewed.

#### Assignment Criterion 2: Elaborated Communication

Commentary: This criterion examines the extent to which tasks call for student work that demonstrates elaborated communication. Tasks that emphasize elaborated communication require extended writing and ask students to make an assertion and then support it with evidence. These tasks ask students to make an assertion by stating a claim, drawing a conclusion, and/or suggesting a generalization and then to support the assertion with evidence.

4 = The task requires extended writing and asks students to make an assertion—stating a claim OR drawing a conclusion OR suggesting a generalization—AND to support the assertion with evidence offered by examples, details, illustrations, facts, AND/OR reasons.

3 = The task requires extended writing and asks students to EITHER make an assertion—stating a claim OR drawing a conclusion OR suggesting a generalization—OR to support a given assertion with evidence offered by examples, details, illustrations, facts, AND/OR reasons.

2 = The task requires only one paragraph of writing that does complete a thought.

1 = The task is a fill-in-the-blank, multiple-choice task or short answer task where the task requires only one or two sentences, clauses, or phrases that complete a thought.

#### Assignment Criterion 3: Real-World Connections

Commentary: Tasks that emphasize real-world connections require that students take on plausible writing roles, achieve real-world purposes, and submit their work to real audiences. These

tasks prompt students to take on roles that they could reasonably assume now or in the future. They go beyond the demonstration of academic competence to real-world applications.

4 = The task requires students to take on a real-world role. The task also calls for a product that achieves a purpose beyond the simple demonstration of academic competence. In addition, the task requires that work be submitted to an audience other than teachers or students as graders.

3 = The task requires students to take on a real-world role. The task also calls for a product that achieves a purpose beyond the simple demonstration of academic competence. There is no requirement that the work be submitted to a real audience.

2 = The task requires students to take on a role, but one which students could not realistically assume now or in the future. The primary purpose of the task is to demonstrate academic competence to teachers or students as graders.

1 = The task does not specify a role for the student. The primary purpose for the task is to demonstrate academic competence.

