

Rich Tasks - what and why

In a classroom, the type and design of the task is very influential, and has a considerable impact on other elements of the system. Just contrast "Listen to teacher for 20 minutes" with "In groups find out all you can about this in order to help class Y learn".

Current development of a more flexible, skills-oriented curriculum has recognised the concept of "rich tasks". While many of the easily accessible examples are in mathematics, this is only a small part of the picture.

Below, I suggest some of the characteristics of rich tasks and the reasons why they are important



Generative, Compositional, Emergent.	Rich tasks are not all defined at the start. They are open-ended and therefore require learners to be active, making choices, choosing strategies and so on. This increases engagement
Authentic	Rich tasks are real tasks which would be recognisable in the world outside the classroom. This increases motivation, especially for those learners who are likely to be disengaged.
Performance	The culmination of a rich task is a performance or product of some appropriate sort. This calls out the skills which will be necessary, and also provides a display of mastery as an authentic assessment.
Consequential	A rich task can be designed to have an effect in the world. This develops intentionality for learners, as their goal becomes an applied goal.
High-level, Reflective	A rich task demands a meaning-oriented approach which builds thinking. If the qualities and skills developed are to be transferable, then review and reflection are required

Rich tasks are very often collaborative tasks, to be handled in small groups where the skills may be developed. At best they may be jigsaw tasks, where every learner has a part to contribute and a larger whole is created than the sum of the parts. This generates interdependence and community amongst learners

A few examples from the Queensland "New Basics" Curriculum:

Students will investigate a threatened Australian plant or animal and the extent to which it is at risk. They will use this investigation to take constructive action and create a persuasive and informative multimedia presentation. (Yrs 1-3)

Students will explore change in, and diversity of, twentieth century lifestyles, with particular reference to the nature of work, by recording oral histories from various members of their own community, including people in a variety of cultural groups. They will use the oral histories as the basis for a presentation that portrays significant changes in work practices in the past and predicts how work practices might change in the foreseeable future. (Yrs 4-6)

Students will identify, explore and make judgments on a biotechnological process to which there are ethical dimensions. They will identify scientific techniques used, along with significant recent contributions to the field. They will also research frameworks of ethical principles for coming to terms with an identified ethical issue or question. Using this information, they will prepare pre-conference materials for an international conference that will feature selected speakers who are leading lights in their respective fields. (Yrs 7-9)