

PRODUCT DIFFERENTIATION

Product options abound. To have value as assessment tools, however, product assignments must align to learning objectives and result from a threefold concerted effort: collect appropriate evidence to document learning, involve options that merit the time and energy required, and balance realistically between a single learning pathway and an excessive plethora of choices.¹

Product options deserve a thoughtful review. Educators worry that some adults may inadvertently over-assign products most related to their own strengths and passions. Still other teachers spend exorbitant amounts of time and energy seeking new products that their students have not experienced. They misinterpret *variety* to mean fun and end up on a product treadmill trying to find something new, sadly, sometimes inviting more fluff than the substance that might document achievement. Exemplary products have an audience beyond the grading pen and stem from authentic tasks—representing the work of practitioners in a field. Teachers also seek product assignments that can be efficiently prepared and involve students in respectful, equitable work.

To increase efficiency when determining appropriate product assignments, create a list of products applicable to the curriculum and learning standards. Reflect upon the developing list and ponder which product options:

- Are most appropriate for the students' ages, learning profiles, and interests.
- Are most applicable to the content.
- Actively engage students in applying and transferring acquired skills.

- Promote depth and complexity of content.
- Have diagnostic value.
- Are respectful, equitable work.
- Promote continuous learning success.
- Stem from authentic problems and audiences.
- Require available materials and appropriate amounts of time.
- Encourage variety in applications.
- Are most enjoyable to facilitate.²

Students vary dramatically in their learning modalities. To engage more students more of the time, classroom-learning tasks need to offer as wide a variety in the types of products assigned as the variety represented by the students' learning profiles. Assessment becomes responsive when appropriate options present students with choices for demonstrating what they know and are able to do.³ Research supports that students are more successful in learning tasks that respond to their readiness levels and incorporate their modality strengths. McTigue and O'Connor (2005) advise, however, that teachers "allow choices—but always with the intent of collecting needed and appropriate evidence based on goals" (p.12).

Hence, products promote assessment and differentiation opportunities when they integrate students' best ways to learn and evolve from the curriculum and learning standards as authentic ways to demonstrate applications.

THE PRODUCT GRID

Teachers need a system for product options that enables them to customize assignments effectively and efficiently. A product grid is one example of such a system. Participating teachers compliment the product grid system as

¹ McTigue, J. & O'Connor, K. (2005). Seven practices for effective learning. *Educational Leadership*, 63 (3), 10-17.

² Adapted from Kingore, B. (2004). *Differentiation: Simplified, realistic, and effective*. Austin, TX: Professional Associates Publishing.

³ Erickson, H. (2007). *Concept-based curriculum and instruction for the thinking classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

a tool that helps more efficiently differentiate learning experiences and product assignments.

A product grid customizes a list of multiple products appropriate to a class by encoding each product to learning modalities. As product options are determined, they are listed in alphabetical order for quick reference. Each product is then coded to the modalities primarily required by the student to complete the product.

In addition to matching the best ways for students to learn, the objective of a product grid is to replace simple answer sheets that require little thinking with tasks that encourage active mental engagement and challenge students to generate responses. To advance learning, the products must connect to content and invite students to apply and transfer acquired skills. The intent is not to entertain students but rather to engage them so appropriately in learning experiences that enjoyment results. Experienced teachers report that these products also serve as springboards for increased discussion and interaction among students.

The following code appears in the product grid examples. As appropriate, vary the product grid so it is more applicable to students' needs by developing additional codes, such as codes for students' interests.

Modality codes

V	=	Visual
O/A	=	Oral/auditory
W	=	Written
K	=	Kinesthetic

The teacher develops and uses a product grid to more accurately prescribe a specific product appropriate to a student's learning profile, product preferences, and learning objective. The intent is to match product assignments to students' prior knowledge and learning capabilities.

When a teacher skims a general product grid and a desired modality is not engaged, the teacher ponders how the task might be varied to incorporate that need. For example, when a student makes a booklet about a topic, oral/auditory modes are not required. To address the needs of a highly auditory learner, a teacher might vary the task by: 1) Allowing the student to record the booklet as a read-along book for others, 2) Inviting the student to read the booklet to another class, or 3) Arranging for the student to work together with another student to produce the booklet. In this manner, a product grid assists teachers' objective to select product assignments that orchestrate all of the modes of learning.

Most listed products are self-explanatory; however, some merit examples for clarification and to prompt additional application ideas. While many different content-related applications are possible, some suggestions are offered for specific products on each content list.

A Product Grid Blank

A blank form for a product grid is provided so teachers can organize their instructional product options. Alphabetically list the products that are developmentally appropriate to the students, most applicable to teaching, and useful to integrate learning standards. Then, code each product to the learning modalities primarily required by students to complete and present that product.



Avoid losing any promising instructional possibilities when brainstorming product ideas. Write quick notes of any application ideas that emerge. Focus on what students should learn and demonstrate as a result of this product experience.