Designing Your Project

Summing Up the Plan in a Project Sketch

To Prepare:

1. Return to the conceptual framework you created during your planning. Start a new page called "Project Sketch."
   - Make a final list of learning objectives for core subjects and allied disciplines.
   - Decide on the specific skills you want to address and roles that students will take in the project.
   - Consider how you will build students' project management skills, such as effective teamwork and time management.
   - Identify learning dispositions to foster, such as persistence or reflection.
2. Establish evidence of understanding. What should students know or be able to do to show that they have learned?
3. Plan the "vehicle" (the project theme, challenge, or narrative). What will students inquire about, do, create?
4. What are the first things you might say or do to get students' attention and build excitement for the learning ahead? What will captivate your students and get them asking questions?

At this point your project may be blurry around the edges. Great! If you were to design down to the last action right now, you might limit where students can take it.

Design Pitfalls to Avoid

Long on activity, short on learning outcomes. If students could learn as much through a brief lecture or by reading about the topic, then the project falls short.

Technology layered over traditional practice. Having students research a topic on the internet and then present it in an electronic slideshow is not a quality project–it is just a dressed-up version of a research report.

Thin thematic units. If the work is not interdisciplinary, collaborative, or rigorous, students are likely following the teacher's lead through a series of activities, rather than learning through rich inquiry experiences.

Overly scripted with many steps. Be wary of over-prescriptive project plans that have many discrete steps. You and your students may be following a recipe that leads to limited and predictable results.

Not enough focus on formative assessment. Assessment needs to happen early and often. Think about whether the project plan has phases with natural milestones and work products that offer opportunities for constructive feedback.

Assessment that doesn't feel authentic. Student work on projects should be assessed in a way that mirrors real-world measures of quality. Make sure students will have an authentic task or project, and an authentic audience for their efforts.

The Project Sketch

The project sketch is a synthesis of what you have thought about so far. Describe the project in a paragraph. Give it a title if that gets your ideas flowing. Write it again from another angle. This is a light, quick treatment, not a painting that captures every detail.

Share your project sketches with your colleagues. Together, ask hard questions and suggest ways to make each project better. Think of ways to capture students' interests and involve other teachers, school specialists, and experts from outside education.

Imagine the paths of inquiry teams might take as they make the project their own. Give your project a name or involve students in generating a project name later. An appealing name will give the project a "brand" and help generate buzz.

Sample Project Sketch

Here is a sample project sketch to get your thoughts flowing:

Microbes Ate My Driveway

SUBJECTS: Science, Math

DRIVING QUESTION: What is the best bioremediation strategy for mitigating oil on our school parking lot?

Equipped with a basic understanding of the hazards of motor oil to the environment, students study microbes, bioswales, and other bioremediation methods, and plan investigations that ultimately lead to recommendations for ridding the pavement of motor oil before it runs off into the groundwater system.