



All teachers employ activities because that is how teaching ignites learners' interest, stimulates their understanding, and helps them learn how to perform a skill or see how something works. However, no matter how good these activities are, they are weak or ineffective on their own because doing something without a context is like being in a boat without a rudder, leaving students in the moment rather than progressing down a path toward a goal. Take, for example, reading aloud, a frequently used practice. Just reading aloud doesn't help students much unless the activity is set in the context of a specific act of communicating. For example, if reading aloud is integrated into an assignment that asks for students to participate in a readers theater for parent night, then reading with a strong, clear, fluid voice makes sense and has consequences (in this scenario, most likely applause).

The architecture of an assignment promotes thinking about content. According to Briars (2011), an assignment is a kind of task that influences "learners by directing their attention to particular aspects of content and by specifying ways to process information." You craft an assignment by placing it on three pillars: a prompt, a rubric, and a product. The *prompt* challenges students to explore content in some way, using skills to produce evidence of learning. An effective prompt sets the stage for thinking about something. Some assignments may even provoke students to see others and ideas differently. The *rubric* describes the expectations for a response to the prompt. The *product* demonstrates learning as both a process and tangible evidence. Together these three features of an assignment support teaching and learning.

An assignment differs from other tasks because it consists of a prompt, a rubric, and a product, which together set a clear purpose and process for engaging in academic work. An instructional plan supports and delivers the assignment. Assignments, unlike assessments or activities, are intentionally *taught*. They are not merely given, as in "I gave an assignment," or assigned as homework for someone else to teach or for students to figure out themselves. Instead, when well crafted, assignments become centerpieces for demanding and interesting learning experiences. Even more powerful than a single assignment is a series of assignments. If students engage in connected assignments, they acquire the content and skills that allow them to progress over the year and from course to course with confidence. Schools and districts that teach together, collaborating on one or more common assignments, build consensus and collaboration in ways that self-contained teaching cannot