

Organizing Assignment Charrettes

Resources and Materials for Conducting An Assignment Charrette

Organizing Assignment Design Work On Your Campus

In its work tracking campus engagement with the [Degree Qualifications Profile](#) (DQP), the [National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment](#) (NILOA) observed growing interest in the design and use of assignments as central for assessing student learning. Unlike the popular model of assessment as a sampling of average student performance, the DQP calls for every graduate to meet all of the described proficiencies. The most natural and efficient contexts for achieving this are the projects, papers, and tasks that faculty regularly assign in the courses they teach. In short, the DQP puts assignments at the center of assessment ([Ewell, 2013](#)). With this in mind, NILOA has been working to foster the development and use of intentionally designed assignments through faculty-driven collaborative peer review processes.

Our goal in this work has been to promote an embedded, faculty-driven approach to assessment—through the assignments that faculty require of their students—that is integral to the teaching and learning process and therefore more likely to lead to improvements in student learning than “add-on,” compliance-driven approaches. Thoughtfully designed assignments can support learning-centered curricular and pedagogical reform and create clearer, more powerful pathways for students. And for faculty, working together on the design of assignments has turned out to be a powerful professional development experience while also elevating the intellectual rigor of assignment design.

Through the Assignment Library initiative, NILOA has organized and sponsored a series of assignment-design “charrettes” (a term borrowed from architecture education denoting a collaborative design process) for faculty from around the country who have applied to participate. This model has been field tested with 26 different assignment design events involving over 1,000 faculty and staff including the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Quality Student Learning, institutions exploring transfer focused on student learning, AAC&U VALUE rubric users, and student affairs staff exploring co-curricular assignments. What we learned from facilitating these events as well as information gathered from institutions hosting their own assignment conversations make up the resources presented in this toolkit.

The toolkit provides tools, materials, and resources that can be borrowed and adapted to local and regional circumstances. We hope you find them useful and we invite your feedback (<mailto:niloa@education.illinois.edu>) on how to add to and improve them.

Why Assignments?

The 2015 NILOA report, [*Catalyzing assignment design activity on your campus: Lessons from NILOA's assignment library initiative*](#), makes the case for the value of a focus on assignment design, and highlights features of powerful assignments. It describes the NILOA “charrette” model as well as adaptations and examples from campuses. In addition, [*Designing Effective Classroom Assignments: Intellectual Work Worth Sharing*](#), further explores the assignment design process for campuses. Moreover, campus support of assignment design conversations is growing, with 62% of institutions reporting facilitating faculty work on the design of assignments as an initiative currently unfolding on their campus ([Jankowski, Timmer, Kinzie, & Kuh, 2018](#)).

Attention to assignments as a context for assessment brings several benefits. A focus on assignments can engage faculty more fully in assessment and therefore increase the likelihood that results will be valued and used for improvement ([Jankowski & Giffin, 2016](#)). Assignments provide authentic evidence of student accomplishment, mitigating issues about student motivation to do their best work in assessment settings. Most important, intentionally designed assignments—transparent about purpose, task, and criteria for evaluation—lead to greater student success, especially for those who are underserved ([Winkelmes et al., 2016](#)).

The Importance of Alignment

A critical principle behind NILOA’s work on assignment design is the idea that powerful assignments advance (and assess) the learning outcomes the institution cares about, aligns intentionally with the evaluative criteria (i.e. rubrics), and is supported by pedagogical approaches which scaffold student learning over time (Figure 1).

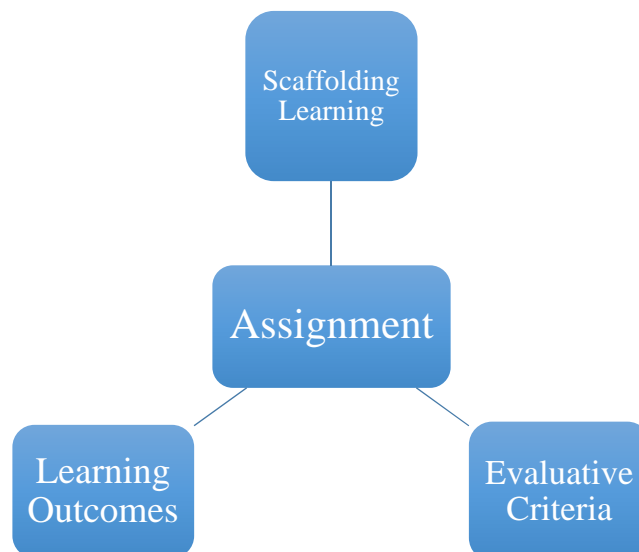


Figure 1. Assignment design relationships.

This means aligning assignments to a variety of related elements. First, there needs to be a shared framework for the learning outcomes of interest. Learning outcomes may be institutional or program outcomes developed by your campus and/or proficiency frameworks developed beyond the campus, including the following:

1. The [Degree Qualifications Profile](#)
2. The Association of American Colleges and Universities' [Essential Learning Outcomes](#)
3. [Employability Skills Framework](#)
4. [Connecting Credentials Framework](#)
5. [National Association of Colleges and Employers](#) Career Readiness
6. [Council for the Advancement of Standards](#) in Higher Education (CAS)
7. [American Historical Association](#) Disciplinary Core
8. [National Communications Association](#) Learning Outcomes in Communication

Once a framework is agreed upon, the assignment design process explores the alignment of the assignment to the learning outcomes of interest ([Hutchings, 2016](#)) before examining the relationship between the assignment and the criteria of evaluation. This is especially important when an institution samples assignments from various courses that are then reviewed at an institution-level using a shared rubric. If the assignment is not aligned to the rubric, a limited picture of student learning may emerge ([McConnell & Rhodes, 2017](#)).

Finally, faculty and staff discuss the alignment of the assignment to instructional approaches to ensure student success in meaningfully completing the assignment as well as the amount of scaffolding and support needed depending on the level of challenge of the assignment ([Jankowski & Marshall, 2017](#)).

The NILOA Assignment Charrette process has been designed to explore questions of alignment between the various elements presented here. In addition to exploring these elements, faculty charrette participants outlined a list of features of effective assignments. These include:

Form:

- Simple and easily understood
- Focused, with minimum distractions from the main task
- Contains appropriate information needed to frame a good response
- Does not address too many learning outcomes

Content:

- Engages student interest and supports learning
- Provides opportunities for small successes within the main task (e.g. for partial credit)
- Provides opportunities for correction after feedback
- Is unbiased with respect to student backgrounds and circumstances
- Allows originality in response

Level of Challenge:

- Appropriately located on the developmental continuum
- Contains scaffolding appropriate to the level of challenge—more for beginning students, less for those at more advanced levels

Being clear about the alignment between the various elements of an assignment not only allow for us to understand student learning building from reliable evidence, but also supports student success ([Anderson, Anson, Gonyea, & Paine, 2015](#)). The work of the [Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education \(TILT Higher Ed\)](#), led by Mary-Ann Winkelmes, reinforces the importance of transparency between the task, purpose, and criteria to facilitate success for all learners.

A Final Note on Effective Assignment Design

Please keep in mind, there is no magic formula for what makes an assignment effective. They vary in all kinds of ways depending on the course context, student preparation, and the outcomes the assignment is designed to foster and elicit. For instance, a writing assignment for first-year students' needs more explicit directions and scaffolding than one at the senior level. That said, effective assignments are often characterized by at least some of the following features.

1. **Intentional:** An effective assignment has a clear sense of purpose. It is aligned with course, program and institutional goals for student learning.
2. **Clear to students:** Assignments and their purposes should be clear to students, who will benefit from understanding why they are being asked to undertake the task at hand and how that task (assignment) fits into a larger trajectory of their learning.
3. **Explicit about evaluation:** Additionally students should understand how their work will be evaluated. This might mean providing students with an evaluative rubric as part of the assignment, but other forms and formats for communicating expectations can be effective as well, including a statement of criteria for evaluation or examples of effective performance.
4. **Engaging:** Effective assignments present what composition scholar John Bean (2011) calls a “Task as Intriguing Problem” (TIP). That is, they engage and motivate students.
5. **Responsive to different ways of knowing and different assets that students bring to their work:** This might be accomplished by offering options in terms of format (student might write a paper, develop a website, or create and present a poster) or by drawing on student experiences in ways that reflect equity-mindedness and cultural awareness.
6. **Formative:** Effective assignments are designed and used in ways that provide students with useful feedback for improvement. This might mean working through multiple drafts, with feedback along the way. It might mean opportunities to self-assess and reflect on the process, with students asking “How might I have done better on this assignment?” Or, “How can I build on what I’ve done here?”

7. **Linked to and aligned with other assignments:** An effective assignment is not an island. It is connected to other assignments the student encounters in the same course but also to assignments in courses that precede and follow. When assignments are linked to one another in ways that are made explicit to students, they create more coherent, connected pathways for learning.
8. ***What would you add to this list?***

Adapted from December 17, 2015 Faculty Collaboratives webinar by Pat Hutchings, NILOA, and Susan Albertine, AAC&U [Catalyzing Collaborative Work on Assignment Design](#) (Recording) [Catalyzing Collaborative Work on Assignment Design](#) (slide pdf)

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