New Basics –

The Why, What, How and When of Rich Tasks

New Basics Project

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Queensland: The **Smart** State

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Education Queensland

This publication is the third in a series of documents to support trial schools participating in the New Basics Project.

This publication and other support material developed by the New Basics Branch are available for download from the New Basics website, http://www.education.qld.gov.au/corporate/newbasics

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET

The contents of this booklet do not necessarily have to be read in the sequence presented. The contents are a mixture of things theoretical and practical, technical and procedural.

PREAMBLE

It is assumed that the reader of this booklet is familiar with the contents of the previous two booklets, *New Basics: Theory into Practice* and *New Basics – Curriculum Organisers*.

New Basics: The Why, What, How and When of Rich Tasks is the third booklet in a series written for teachers in the 58 schools throughout Queensland on their four-year journey in the New Basics trial. For the 38 schools in Phase I, this journey commenced in 2000 and, for the 21 schools in Phase II, it began in 2001.

There are five practices that identify a New Basics school:

For Years 1 to 9 or part thereof, depending on the configuration of the school, the curriculum plan gives details of the what, when and how of the teaching–learning process.

1. The four categories of the New Basics are explicit in the school curriculum plan.
2. The school operates as a significant learning community.
3. Students and parents know about and value the particular Rich Tasks that are being worked towards and know which performance will be reported at the next juncture.
4. Teachers demonstrate Productive Pedagogies in action.
5. The school community is committed to maximising the use of electronic forms of communication and to the efficient use of the New Basics website.

This booklet contains information about Rich Tasks, the third practice listed above, and covers the following:

- why we have Rich Tasks
- what they are individually and as a collection
- how they were developed
- how they are planned for and experienced
- how they are assessed and reported on
- when all these things happen.

Assessment and reporting are discussed in passing in this booklet. For more details, see *Rich Tasks: Assessment, Moderation and Reporting*, a later booklet in this series.

RATIONALE

This document is available on the New Basics website.

Theoretical underpinnings

What follows is an adapted extract from the *New Basics Project Technical Paper*. The Queensland model of Rich Tasks draws on a range of ideas, including those of John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Paulo Freire and Ted Sizer, which are outlined below.

Dewey's theory of learning is that optimal learning and human development and growth occur when people are confronted with substantive, real problems to solve. His argument is that curriculum and instruction based on integrated, community-based tasks and activities engage learners in forms of pragmatic social action that have real value in the world.

The focus on the teacher as expert is central to Vygotsky's learning theory. He proposes that cognitive development does not proceed through innate, age-based developmental thresholds, but is the product of social and cultural interaction around the development and use of tools of a cognitive, linguistic and physical nature (and, more recently, of an electronic nature). Pedagogy occurs in a zone of proximal development where authoritative tool users – teachers acting as mentors – initiate and lead students as novices into the use of technologies. This structured introduction into using tools is called 'scaffolding'.

It has been shown that structured pedagogy can be used to enhance considerably the achievement of the most at-risk learners. This pedagogy could involve teacher-led, structured introduction to uses of technologies for print and oral language. Work could be structured around projects that demand students engage in the solution of a particular community-based, school-based or regional problem of significance and relevance to their worlds. It could involve training students to become social scientists, with a high premium placed on the collection, analysis and presentation of data.

Freire's work is premised on the assumption that the most authentic and powerful pedagogy is one that focuses on the identification, analysis and resolution of immediate problems in learners' worlds. Hence, his approach is referred to as problem-posing and problem-solving pedagogy. For Freire, students' learning to read and write is about learning to analyse the world around them, while the principal task of teachers is to facilitate an analysis of that world and the analysis of specific community problems. Freire argues that any pedagogy must be of demonstrable relevance to the immediate worlds of the students and it must enable them to analyse, theorise and intellectually engage with those worlds.

The first imperative of school reform, according to Sizer, is to give teachers and students focus and room for intellectually rich activities. These activities and their demonstration and exhibition are at the centre of the development of what Sizer calls 'mindful schools'. They become a focus for pedagogy and curriculum, a means of accountability and a celebration of the intellectual life of the school. Sizer argues that doing these rich tasks provides a stronger basis for accountability to parents, stakeholders and other teachers than is possible from standardised achievement tests or examinations per se. The demonstration of the tasks may engage the whole school community in their planning and presentation. The result, he argues, is crucial: instead of an enforced accountability agenda that students and teachers feel is imposed on them, the demonstration model provides public confirmation of mastery of important knowledges and skills for all involved in the rich tasks.

Sizer uses the term 'exhibition', which hails from 18th century academic life. As practised then, it was an occasion of public inspection when some substantial portion of a school's constituency might show up to hear students recite, declaim or otherwise perform.

The Queensland model of Rich Tasks

The Queensland model of Rich Tasks is not a call for integrated, holistic teaching. It is a call for a rigorous intellectual focus for student work that cuts through a crowded and potentially diffuse curriculum. It also focuses a large proportion of the school's organisational capacity on intellectual engagement and relevant work, the two characteristics that research identifies as necessary for improved outcomes.

A Rich Task is a culminating performance or demonstration or product that is purposeful and models a life role. It presents substantive, real problems to solve and engages learners in forms of pragmatic social action that have real value in the world. The problems require identification, analysis and resolution, and require students to analyse, theorise and engage intellectually with the world. In this way, tasks connect to the world outside the classroom.

A Rich Task is the culmination of three years' work. It is not a short-term 'project'. Not only is the quality of the product important but also the intellectual strategies that are acquired by the student in the processes leading up to the completion of the task.

As well as having this connectedness, the tasks are also rich in their application: they represent an educational outcome of demonstrable and substantial intellectual and educational value. And, to be truly rich, a task must be transdisciplinary. Rich Tasks have relevance and power in new worlds of work and everyday life. It is important that they have recognisable face value with educators, parents and community stakeholders as being significant and important. Finally, it is crucial that tasks be rich in developmental, cognitive and intellectual depth and breadth to guide curriculum planning across a significant span of schooling.

Transdisciplinary learnings draw upon practices and skills across disciplines while retaining the integrity of each individual discipline. This is not the same as the traditional interdisciplinary approach that seeks links between disciplines often via thematic learning.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A RICH TASK

In summary, a Rich Task:

- is an integrated intellectual and linguistic, social and cultural practice
- represents an educational outcome of demonstrable and substantive intellectual substance and educational value
- is transdisciplinary
- draws on a range of operational fields of knowledge
- engages knowledges and skills from at least two of the New Basics clusters
- is problem-based
- connects to the world beyond the classroom
- has face value for educators, parents and community stakeholders
- has sufficient intellectual, cognitive and developmental depth and breadth to guide curriculum planning across a significant span of schooling
- enables flexibility for schools to address the local context
- has reasonable workload expectations for teachers.

Although Rich Tasks vary in the intensity of what is expected of students, all of them:

- draw from academic scholarship and connect to sensible decisions in a prudent world
- draw on topics widely accepted in history, science, mathematics, home economics and so on
- ask for straightforward analyses and the possession of ingenuity
- ask for analyses that go beyond the data presented (that is, ask the student to do autonomous creative work)
- call for realistic decisions and defences of those decisions
- involve topics of interest to people in that age group
- require judgments that most young people would expect of thoughtful citizens
- depend, in some cases, on the judgment of adults monitoring the process (for example, by defining terms or shaping contemporary meaning).

KEY TO THE DIAGRAMMATIC REPRESENTATION OF A RICH TASK

The fold-out page contains a skeleton task with various features labelled, and accompanied by explanatory notes.

Study the fold-out page (attached to page 21) before dissecting the Rich Tasks proper.

At the time the original Rich Tasks were composed, they were described in words in a general way, under a heading, as a selective string of activities that students would undertake. There was no intention that a verbal description would fully convey the meaning and intent of a task. The purposes and directions for, and relationships among, activities in each Rich Task are conveyed by means of a diagram.

Flowchart for the task specs

In order to highlight the sustained and focused activity that the task involves, *active verbs* are used for describing the aspects of the task.

The task specs (specifications) are given as an annotated and embellished flowchart. The profile lays out the task's scope and the sequence of the components of the task. It also declares which components are the assessable demonstrations.

The use of a flowchart for the task specs reinforces the notion that a Rich Task is:

- multifaceted (that is, the task engages the student in a variety of activities)
- sequential and integrated (that is, for the task to be meaningful and rich, some aspects of the task must be done before other aspects; few aspects of the task can be completed without consideration of what else has been done or is yet to be done).

Frames and assessable demonstrations

As much as space allows, the relative sizes of the solid frames and the extent to which they are placed in the foreground indicate the relative contribution that each facet of performance makes to a student's overall grade for the task.

A *dotted frame* around a description indicates that, while this aspect of the task will need to be done (and evidence to this effect might need to be collected), the student is not required to demonstrate the extent of achievement on this aspect.

A *solid frame* around a description indicates that student achievement on this aspect of the task is to be demonstrated and will be directly assessed.

It follows that the *assessable facets* of a Rich Task are the set of such directly assessed *demonstrations*.

The assessable outcomes will be graded in terms of *qualities* that are communicated in a variety of ways: embedded in the task descriptions themselves; explicated in the frame annotations – the brief explanation of what constitutes high-quality performance in the corresponding demonstration; communicated in the *relationship pointers*; implied, in that they are performance qualities known to be valued within the targeted repertoires of practice.

It is vital that teachers and students alike are made aware well in advance as to what constitutes high-quality performance on a Rich Task.

Trade-offs across facets will result in the overall grade – allowing higher than required performance in one facet to compensate for lower performance in another.

Text arrow

The text in the bulb on the arrow indicates relationships between task components that students must deal with as an integral part of the task.

Relationship pointers

These are the thin black arrows that link two or more frames.

Clouds

Prompts (in the shape of clouds) indicate the values that underpin the corresponding framed activity, telling students what things have to be kept in mind. The advice contained in the cloud is for guiding students and motivating them into producing work of a high standard.

Task identifier

YEAR X RICH TASK #Y–SHORT NAME shows the year level (X) at which the standards for completed work are pitched and also indicates the mandatory reporting juncture. It gives the task number (Y) within the suite for that particular three-year span followed by the title of the task.

Task description

The student will … is the synopsis of what students are to do in undertaking the task. A focus here is the nature of the assessable demonstrations for this task (that is, the ways that students will show what they know and can do). This task description appears in the upper centre of the flowchart under the task identifier.

New Basics referents

New Basics referents appear in the top left-hand corner. These are the New Basics clusters of practice that students must master in order to undertake the Rich Task. They appear under the four New Basics categories and are sometimes written so as to highlight the particular aspects of the New Basics that the Rich Task is designed to develop.

Targeted repertoires of practice

Targeted repertoires of practice appear in the bottom left-hand corner. These are the repertoires which must be acquired by students and which culminate in the Rich Task. Some repertoires are highly specific to the particular task or task component, whereas others have more universal application in a transdisciplinary activity.

These targeted repertoires involve explicit teaching and articulation of standards. Often, repertoires are drawn from subject disciplines or real-life fields of endeavour. Teaching and learning do not have to be confined to the targeted repertoires. Additional repertoires may be selected.

Ideas, hints and comments

Ideas, hints and comments appear in the top right-hand corner. These are snippets with various purposes, sometimes for students, sometimes for teachers. For example, they might point to information sources, suggest parallel activities, explain some terms used in the task specs, provide further insight into what is expected for high-level performance, or suggest strategies for developing a certain repertoire of practice.

Task parameters

Task parameters appear in the bottom right-hand corner. These are specified in order to:

- maintain the match between task and targeted repertoires of practice and operational fields
- encourage efficient and focused demonstration of student outcomes
- ensure that, across a suite of tasks, students have a range of ways that they can demonstrate their achievement
- acknowledge that teachers across different schools need a shared understanding of the intent and details of each task so that they have a common basis for channelling students' efforts and assessing student work.

Task parameters include the following:

- whether the task or task component is to be done individually, in pairs, in trios, or in groups of a larger size
- an estimate of the task intensity (related to difficulty and complexity, time to be devoted to the task, volume of material to be produced)

The nature of the parameters depends on the nature of the task. For example, they may indicate requirements relating to whether certain aspects of the tasks are to be carried out by students working individually or in groups, in a controlled assessment space or not, with or without certain levels of teacher assistance, and so on.

The parameters also clarify any other requirements, such as the means for teachers to validate that certain activities have actually been carried out along the way; for example, the need for individuals to keep a diary of their contributions to a group task.

The task intensity is given in the belief that some tasks will require more effort, concentration, rigour and skill than others. Often, any or all of these would require more time for the task to be completed.

- an indication of the number of available grades for assessment, each grade corresponding to a described standard.

Tasks differ in the number of available grades for assessment and reporting because this is more than just an indicator of task complexity. The number of available grades takes into account the prime intentions of the task and the degree to which differences in achievement can be recognised or are worth recording.

Teachers' estimation of the duration of the entire task might or might not incorporate the time for explicit teaching of underpinning skills and concepts that would usually occur before culmination in the task.

In estimating time required, teachers should take the following points into account:

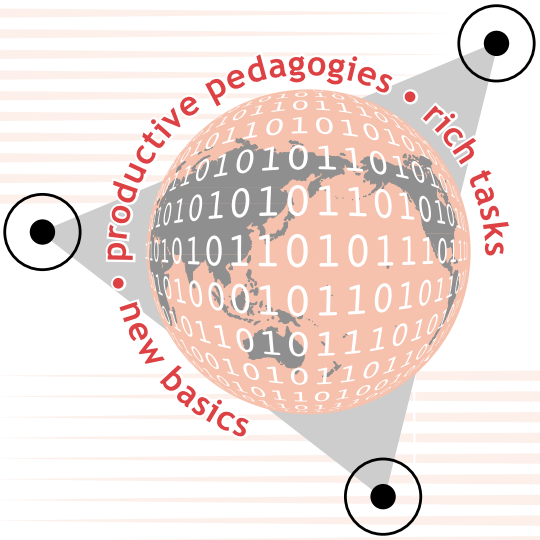
- The tasks are designed for efficient and focused demonstrations of what students have achieved.
- The tasks vary in workload (and they shouldn't feel like a whole series of weekend assignments).
- The time spent on a task cannot afford to be so long that students (or teachers) lose direction or become bored.
- What standard should students aspire to?

APPENDIX 3:

Stages in the Rich Task cycle

The model for development, assessment, moderation and reporting has seven phases. The listing below implies that these phases occur in a conceptually ordered sequence, in part for purposes of convenience of description. In practice, the phases are recursive and overlapping, with some repeated. The last three phases are discussed in detail in a later booklet in this series.

1. *Develop and refine a bank of tasks using the New Basics as guiding principles.*	This involves creating tasks (within Education Queensland using existing technical expertise with trial school teacher input) according to the documented characteristics of a Rich Task, together with draft standards descriptors. More tasks than are required for a set for a given three years should be created so that selections can be made from the bank.
2. *Select a balanced suite of tasks for each of the three-year spans.*	This involves evaluating balance across New Basics categories and subheadings, targeted repertoires of practice, and key operational fields of knowledge that the tasks invite students to engage in and use. This also involves publishing high-quality production versions of the tasks, represented diagrammatically, online and in a document, and accompanied by desirable features for assessment.
3. *Immerse teachers in the suite of tasks for a particular three-year span and ensure that there is a common understanding of the assessment criteria.*	This involves several days at cluster, district or state level, in which teachers go beyond the written version (in words or diagrams, on paper or electronically) of the Rich Task. Through structured sessions and face-to-face dialogue, they come to a shared understanding of what is required of students and what is to be valued by teachers in judging the standard of student work. Immersion occurs at the beginning of a three-year span.
4. *Set standards for student performance on each of the completed Rich Tasks.*	This involves convening panels to scrutinise the indicative standards descriptors written at the same time the tasks were composed. Since the tasks are transdisciplinary and connected to the wide world, panelling of their desirable features requires expert panellists with a range of sensitivities and understandings, ideally covering the following: disciplines or key learning areas; transdisciplinary understandings; expertise in pedagogy at the particular age level; practitioners in the community; expertise in standards-based assessment; and familiarity with the New Basics Framework.
5. *Assess the standard of student work on the completed Rich Tasks.*	This requires teachers to match the student work to the standards descriptors and make a judgment as to the quality of that work, possibly including trade-offs.
6. *Obtain evidence of student achievement.*	This includes setting up opportunities for teachers to share their experiences of the pedagogy–assessment interface at annual conferences; making decisions about evidence to submit or for other teachers to consider; organising public exhibitions of mastery and deciding which samples to take; organising teachers from other schools to ratify the original judgments; and negotiating and consulting about the application of standards to student work where necessary.
7. *Report on standard of student performance on each Rich Task at each key juncture.*	This involves expressing the overall standard of student performance on a Rich Task as a coded grade and compiling school reports according to a standardised format.



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