Setting Rich Tasks for MAT Learners

Rich tasks cover basic areas of learning but also allow for extension far beyond them. Based on genuine exploration, intellectual excitement and challenge, making sure that the tasks you set in class are rich helps to expand your options and makes the learning more enjoyable for both learner and teacher.

Use these 10 key principles for identifying and setting rich tasks to make your lessons more stimulating for all learners.

1. Rich tasks develop from a common core of knowledge or skills

Rich tasks are based on a common core of work, generally one that would be covered by the class within their normal working day. The rich task provides for this basic level of learning but also offers opportunities for learners to move far beyond it.

The challenge is to take these common classroom tasks and to enrich them. The core will generally encompass an element of subject material that the class needs to learn about or learn to do, such as labelling the relevant parts of a flower.

2. Encourage genuine exploration of a topic with an element of open-endedness

Rich tasks encourage learners to explore the subject material, rather than merely provide an answer or complete a closely defined set task. Most rich tasks will have an element of open-endedness to them, to allow for the most able learners. This does not mean that there is no right solution or end product – rather, that there will be a range of them.

They may have an initial, well-defined task that all learners will be expected to achieve and then move on to more open-ended tasks, or the entire task may allow a wide range of possible responses.

There is generally no 'set' way of answering at least part of the task – learners will approach the task differently depending on how they learn and their current levels of knowledge and ability.

Socratic talk should be used to enable learners to elicit understanding, explore the meaning within the task and how it offers potential for learning. Depending on what they are used to, this may require some negotiation.

3. Develop 'authentic' expertise

A rich task generally enables learners to think and act 'in role'. Whether this is as a mathematician, scientist or writer, they support the development of expertise on the part of the learner, to explore a context from a particular perspective and to produce responses which enable them to develop their voice as a potential or emergent expert. For many of us, this is the wider objective of more able education: expertise in development.

4. Engage with a range of start and end points

Learners come to tasks from a wide range of backgrounds – some may have in-depth knowledge of a subject while others may have minimal knowledge; some will be interested, some not so keen. A well-planned rich task will allow for this, providing a range of choices that cater for all levels and abilities. By the end of a task all of the learners should have fulfilled the core requirement, while some of the learners will have gone far beyond this.

The more open-ended nature of a rich task allows for a wide continuum of responses, thus providing for a wide range of abilities. But at whatever level the student operates, genuine challenge needs to be available at all levels of ability.

5. Engage in higher-level thinking in a supportive environment

The open-ended nature of rich tasks will provide opportunities for higher-level thinking, if the classroom environment supports this approach. If teachers comment positively on work that goes beyond the bare minimum and are interested in different approaches to tasks, then learners will feel encouraged and supported in responding to rich tasks to the best of their ability.

In a tightly constrained class, where there is one 'right' answer and the teacher is the only authority, learners will focus on providing what they feel the teacher is looking for. This will limit the richness of responses. We often see in observations that rich tasks can be part of the means to develop a classroom in which risk-taking is seen as a safer option.

6. Develop critical thinking skills

Rich tasks will ask learners to analyse, synthesise and/or evaluate in the course of completing the task. Rich tasks are not about simple recall of facts or repetition of learned procedures; they require higher-level cognitive processing. Facts and procedures may be the starting point for some rich tasks, but they are not the end point.

Rich tasks encourage learners to think creatively, work logically, synthesise their results, analyse disparate viewpoints, look for common features or evaluate findings. This is not to say that rich tasks might not also include lower-level activities, such as knowing (learning) the parts of a plant, but this

knowledge will have arisen from or be activated by a process of questioning and enquiry.

7. Become more creative in their responses
Rich tasks give learners permission to be more creative in their responses – and creativity is strongly linked to giftedness. As with higher-level thinking, the level of creativity will also depend on the nature of the classroom – in a tightly constrained classroom learners may not feel that creativity is either allowed or welcomed.

Rich tasks also enable learners to appreciate the value of variety and differences in perspective – a really good example will also enable learners to see elements of beauty in a context, an elegant solution or the imaginative use of humour.

8. Exercise more self-direction through elements of choice
An element of choice, both in task and in end product, allows learners to work to their strengths and interests. Choices should be varied to ensure that learners encounter a wide range of tasks and products over the course of the school year.

If we look at just the synthesis level of say, Bloom's taxonomy, this will mean that learners may be asked to arrange, assemble, collect, compose, construct, create, design, develop, formulate, manage, organise, plan, prepare, propose, set up, write. The end product could be written or oral, a model or a PowerPoint presentation, an interview or a debate, allowing for a range of methods of assessment.

Choices allow learners to feel ownership of the task or tasks and research consistently shows that this, in turn, will increase their level of effort, engagement and enjoyment.

9. Become more interested and motivated
The range of choice and challenge in rich tasks make them inherently more interesting to learners. Tightly constrained tasks with a set endpoint tend to allow the learners no individuality in either their approach or their output. All correct answers to 65 x 2 will be the same. The interest is in the end product or solution, with little or no interest in the process for getting there.

In a rich task, learners have choices to make. Teachers will tend to be interested in how they arrived at their chosen endpoint and why they made the choices they did. All of this makes the rich tasks more interesting for both the learner and the teacher. We have often observed teachers surprised at the quality of work that learners produce as a result of such tasks.

10. Demonstrate what they are capable of achieving
Rich tasks can help in identifying able or gifted learners, particularly those who are 'hidden' or unidentified. Their open-ended nature and high levels of challenge provide opportunities for learners to show what they are capable of achieving.

They also allow a finer-grained analysis of individual strengths and weaknesses than tightly constrained tasks, linking to assessment for learning strategies.

A rich task enables learners to produce different kinds of products, to present their learning in a variety of ways and to be assessed at the level of their potential as well as their current attainment.