

Celebrations of Learning: Why This Practice Matters

Excerpt from Leaders of Their Own Learning

Celebrations of learning are more than a display of student work and more than a party at the end of the year. The events compel students to reflect on and articulate what they have learned, how they learned, questions they answered, research they conducted, and areas of strength and struggles. They are powerful opportunities to make learning public.

High-Quality Work

At the center of celebrations of learning are high-quality products and performances that reflect the content and skills that students have learned. Typically, products are modeled after real-world formats, guided by professional models, and created for an audience beyond the classroom. For example, during a study of the Civil War, a traditional school assignment might be a report on an aspect of the war—not a bad assignment, but not necessarily motivating for high-quality research or compelling to students and the community. In this case, the audience for the work is really the teacher. By contrast, if students followed their study of the war by researching local sites that were a part of the war and prepared professional brochures or interpretive signs that could teach the community about it, there would be a genuine audience and a reason for the community to take interest in the work.

Students are supported in producing high-quality work in preparation for celebrations of learning and take their work through multiple drafts. With feedback from teachers, professionals, and peers, students are motivated to meet rigorous standards and engage in revision. It is clear to students why the product matters, and they are held to high expectations.

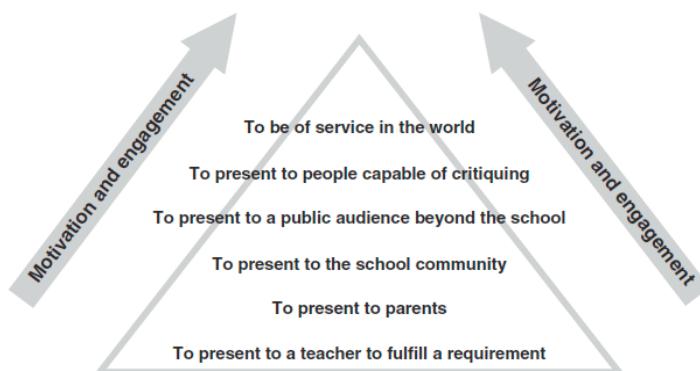
Authentic Audience

Celebrations of learning are created for an audience beyond the classroom. Preparing work to be shared with the public—the authentic audience—motivates students and creates a purpose for them to care about the quality of their work. Presenting work to an authentic audience also raises the stakes and sets the expectation that all students, not just a select group, will share their high-quality products. It motivates students to push themselves as learners. Caitlin LeClair, seventh-grade social studies teacher at King Middle School in Portland, Maine, reflects on her students' experience interviewing local citizens and writing their stories during a study of the Civil Rights Movement:

“The experience students had with their interviewees created an emotional connection to the content that they cannot get in the classroom or from books and research. It motivates them to work hard to write their stories and present their work to their interviewees.”

An authentic audience demonstrates for students that their work is real and important and increases their motivation and engagement (see Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2 Hierarchy of Audience



Communicating Learning

Celebrations of learning feature students as the communicators. They are front and center, articulating their learning, the process of learning, and their strengths and struggles. These skills are strongly emphasized in the speaking and listening strand of the Common Core State Standards, and celebrations of learning are a powerful way for students of all ages to master these standards. Being effective communicators is essential to Common Core success and will support college and career readiness for all students.

Reflection

In order for students to effectively communicate their achievement and learning, they must have regular opportunities to assess and articulate their progress toward learning targets. Regular reflection on progress creates opportunities for students to set goals and become partners with their teachers in meeting the standards. To help prepare students for a celebration of learning it is essential for them to reflect on key learning experiences. Journals are a great tool to house reflections and can accompany student work at a celebration of learning to help illustrate parts of the learning journey.

Common Core Connections

- Celebrations of learning are an ideal way to meet the Common Core speaking and listening standards at all grade levels. The introduction to the literacy standards states, “The Common Core Speaking and Listening Standards require students to develop a range of broadly useful oral communication and interpersonal skills. Students must learn to work together, express and listen carefully to ideas, integrate information from oral, visual, quantitative, and media sources, evaluate what they hear, use media and visual displays strategically to help achieve communicative purposes, and adapt speech to context and task” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 8).
- Preparing for a celebration of learning requires that students know their standards-based content, independently use higher-order thinking skills such as synthesis or transfer to interact with audience members about that content, and cite evidence that demonstrates their learning.
- The standards require students throughout the grades to engage in research projects—very often the central focus of a celebration of learning. Students present their research and give evidence-based descriptions of their results.
- Celebrations of learning open the door for meaningful conversations among families, students, and teachers about standards and achievement.