

Teaching Tip: Tasks vs. Activities

Tasks and activities are similar but not equal. In both cases, students are active in the classroom: moving around, talking, doing, building, seeing and so on. However, a task is different than an activity in that it has an ending point. A person doing a task knows when it is over. For example, if I ask you to empty a dishwasher, I am assigning you a task because you will know when the dishwasher is in fact empty. You will feel a sense of accomplishment and you will no longer worry about my request once it is completed. However, if I simply ask you to clean the house, which is an activity, you will not have these same feelings of confidence and completion. How will you know when the house is in fact clean? How will you know if you did a good enough job? Where will you start? When will you end? It is impossible to know. Crisis looms.

For these very reasons, tasks are superior to their activity cousins. Tasks send a message of inherent “compleatability”. Tasks are clear, defined and doable. Even a student who does not know the right answer or end product of a task can still participate in that task with a sense of confidence and completion. I encourage teachers to develop a task attitude and vocabulary.

Below is a list of tasks and activities. Sort them into either category. Here’s a clue. Verbs such as decide, sort, and generate often indicate a task. Verbs such as discuss suggest activities. My answers are on page 175.

1. “Hey you guys! Tell me how you feel about the Tsunami crisis.”
2. “With your partner make a list of eight ways that you could spend \$100.”
3. “Find the tallest person in the room.”
4. “Talk about your opinion on abortion.”
5. “Some churches baptize adults only; some churches baptize people of all ages. If you agree with the first group, go to that side of the room. If you agree with the second group, go on this side of the room. If you don’t know, have a seat in this area.”
6. “We are going to go on a nature walk. We are going to walk Longwood Trail. Get your jackets and we’ll meet in the parking lot.”
7. “Open your Bibles and find three people in the Bible who had to deal with a lot of suffering.”
8. “Discuss the election with your group. Make sure you think about every side of the debate.”
9. “I have handed out a number of newspapers and scissors. Please take eleven minutes to look at the newspapers and find one story that is very interesting to you.”