

Homework: How We Assign and Mark It

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January 2009

[Original Draft]

I'm embarrassed to share this, but this actually happened in my classroom: A student came up to me and said that he didn't understand the topic I just taught. Admittedly, the lesson had not gone well, but I was very tired and had several students in front of him waiting for my responses to their questions. In a less than inspired act, I tossed the interrupting student a figurative pacifier: "Do the homework assignment. It'll be made clear to you."

Wow, that was *not* the thing to do. I was trying to compensate for bad teaching through the homework assignment. The student shuffled back to his seat feeling just as much a failure as he was prior to going for help – maybe more so because my response removed all doubt that he was on his own.

Homework is never given to students so they can learn the material the first time around. Solid learning should be achieved *before* the first homework assignment is uttered. Homework is given in order for students to practice, reinforce, and extend *what they already know*.

Think about that for minute. If we accept this premise, then we never give homework assignments unless we have evidence that students understand the material. Too often, however, teachers use vicarious assessments of one or two students to assess everyone in the class:

Teacher: Before getting started on the homework today, let's see if you remember everything. Jerel, give an example of the commutative property, please.

Jerel: $9 \times 5 = 5 \times 9$.

Teacher: Excellent. Wanda, how about an example of the distributive property?

Wanda: $4(2 + 3) = (4 \times 2) + (4 \times 3) = 20$.

Teacher: Great! Okay, you all seem to have this so everyone get busy with problems 1-30 on page 65.

'Not so fast. We need physical evidence from every student, not just two students. This can take many forms, including exit cards, personal interviews, sample problems completed, and quick summarizations. We need to know that every student

who practices the material understands the material correctly. Why? Because *practice makes permanent*. It may or may not make perfect.

If students practice content and skills incorrectly, it takes ten times the emotional and intellectual energy to go back and un-do that learning, and re-teach it correctly. If students are struggling or have only learned partially, it's wiser to cancel or significantly alter the homework for that evening, and re-teach the information the next day, then let them do our assigned practice. We monitor the whole class, including sub-sets of students within the room, and we give different assignments to different subsets, if necessary. What is fair isn't always equal in instruction, and it's the same for homework assignments. If some students don't have homework tonight while the rest of the class does, that's fine. We'll assign them homework to practice today's material after we've had a chance to re-teach them tomorrow, and the rest of the class won't have that assignment – the homework load was shifted by one day, but the learning is solid as a result. In a properly run, differentiated classroom, it is rare that everyone gets the same homework assignment.

Sidebar: It wouldn't make sense to say, 'Keep practicing until you understand' because practicing doesn't create understanding – just as giving kids a deadline doesn't teach time management skills." – Kohn p. 107

In addition to the idea that homework is practice of what is already known, there are eleven other homework mindsets, creating a full dozen, that lead to student success. Second of these dozen, homework should advance our subjects, not be just decorative or clerical. For example, some teachers ask students to get forms signed, cover their textbooks, or bring in a box of tissues for the classroom as homework assignments. These are very appropriate requests, but they should never be a part of a homework grade. What does bringing in a box of tissues have to do with learning square roots? Nothing. Homework should reflect practice or engagement with the material being studied.

Similar to this are art (or technology or performance) assignments that don't really advance students learning of the intended topic. When my son, Ryan, was in middle school, his teacher asked students to make a diorama and a travel brochure regarding a book they were reading. It took him three weeks of cutting, gluing, coloring, and re-cutting and re-gluing to make a scene from the book and a travel brochure recommending readers "tour" the book. When asked what the teachers were studying with this novel, his teacher said, "Character development and literary devices." Nowhere in the diorama or on the brochure did students interact with their learning of character development and literary devices. Ryan is not skilled in art. It was an endurance test for both him and us, his parents, and it bred resentment from the whole family. It did not advance Ryan's learning about character development or literary devices.

While there are some art, technology, and performance integrations that are very effective ways to process and assess learning, teachers should be careful and ask themselves: 1) How does this assignment create substantive interactions with the topic?, and 2) Is this assignment going to be effective for each of my students? If the

format of the homework assignment is not going to advance the student's learning, it should be replaced by one that does.

Third, if a student goes home and asks, "Mom, I'm supposed to do a report on phytoplankton. Can you tell me how to start?" we haven't prepared that student well enough. Homework should be done by students, not students and their parents. If students are not autonomous regarding the assignment, they're not ready to do the assignment. Do we occasionally have busy days in which we didn't prepare students for the assignment properly, and they need parental assistance? Sure, but it shouldn't be the norm.

Students need daily exercise for their minds to function. The fourth homework mindset is to assign physical exercise or sports as homework in content subjects. And, if hours of homework are cutting into students' exercise time after school hours, change the homework assignments so that they don't. Seriously, in our English, Science, Foreign Language, Technology, and Math classes, we should be assigning homework like, "Play basketball for 45 minutes," "Walk two miles," "Toss a Frisbee with a friend for an hour," "Do 10 push-ups," and "Swim for 30 minutes." These activities will do more for students learning punctuation, electromagnetism, Latin, HTML, and supplemental angles than a lot of the assignments we give. We can still give those more sedate assignments, but monitor students' load so they can still get moving after school hours.

Speaking of time, the fifth mindset is the ratio that still works: Add a zero to the grade level for the number of minutes of homework assigned per night: 6th grade = 60 minutes, 7th grade = 70 minutes, 8th grade = 80. Be clear, though, that this is *all subjects combined!* Research in the books listed below indicates that after 50 to 100 minutes, depending on the student, doing homework has diminishing returns and can actually harm the school's mission to teach students. Extended periods of doing homework become unduly burdensome on the student and his family, and the whole enterprise becomes dysfunctional. As you consider time, however, remember that it's the type of homework or practice, not the number of minutes doing homework, that makes the bigger difference in students' learning.

Sixth, "No homework tonight" should be the default choice, not, "There is homework tonight." Reading Alfie Kohn's work got me thinking about this (see recommended books section below). Kohn says, teachers are on automatic pilot and assign homework because they think that's what teachers do. Some homework has merit, but a whole lot of it really doesn't advance our cause. This means we would never tell parents at Back-to-School night that students will have homework every night in our classes. This is inappropriate for several reasons:

- 1) We might have a substitute teacher one day who forgets assign the homework
- 2) An assembly, fire drill, or something else interrupts the class and we don't get to the homework assignment that day
- 3) We shouldn't be assigning homework just to assign homework.

- 4) We need to get over ourselves. Some of us claim that students must have daily practice with our topics or they will fall behind. This is a major misnomer. Research and anecdotal evidence don't support it. The mind, including our subconscious, needs time away from studying to assimilate the learning and come back to it later with a fresh outlook. Connections are still made. Students will flourish in math, music, and foreign language by taking a day or two away from them on regular basis.

Seventh, the homework we assign needs to be compelling. As Kohn points out, people learn better when they practice things they like to study or do; they don't learn much when practicing things they resent. (p.116) So, instead of asking students to define the vocabulary terms, ask them to consider the worth (utility, beauty) of each word and hold a "Word Bazaar" in which they barter for words to use. Norton Juster, author of, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, would be proud! Instead of answering comprehension questions about a history topic, ask students to read the material then write a rationale or speech as to why the topic should or should not be taught in schools, citing at least four key aspects of what they read in the textbook. Instead of doing multiple math problems on the first night of learning a new formula, ask students to build a physical model with moving parts (This could be as easy as paper shapes moved on a flat surface, objects on a string, or simple props moved in pantomime) that portray the concepts learned.

Sidebar: "Homework is like coming home and doing your taxes every night." – Bennett and Kalish, p. 18

Eighth, let's end the use of all homework passes in all classes. Our rationale for doing so is simple: We don't assign anything that's "skippable." If we did, it would be busy-work, assigned just to assign work. Homework should matter. Not doing it should result in something noticeably less in the student. If this isn't the case, the assignment isn't worth assigning, and we should choose the default, "No Homework tonight" mentioned above. If we want to reward students in some way, we can use "Homework Deadline Extension" certificates on which we've checked a box allowing a particular assignment to be turned in one, two, or three days late, depending on the level of the reward. This doesn't dilute the importance of the homework assignment. It still matters, students still have to do it, but it makes students feel as if they've earned a privilege.

Ninth, occasionally allow students to determine how best to practice the day's learning. Giving the options creates that important ownership young adolescents crave, and it can also teach self-advocacy. Given a choice of practice activities for homework, we can help them figure out which one will have the greatest impact on their long-term retention of the skills and content. This is especially effective if we take a few moments the next day and facilitate students' reflections on the effectiveness of his choices.

Tenth, everyone should turn in a paper regardless of whether or not they did the assignment. I found this one in Neila Connors' wonderful book, *Homework: A New Direction*. This way no one knows who did and did not turn in their papers as student file by the turn-in basket. If a student didn't do the homework assignment, he writes the following on the paper he submits:

1. Name
2. Date
3. Name of the Assignment
4. Why he didn't do it
5. Parents' names
6. Parents' daytime phone numbers

During the day, we call the parents and read directly from the student's paper as to why he didn't have his assignment. It might be for very legitimate reasons, of course, but now we have a clear record that all stakeholders can readily access and compare to see if there's a pattern that needs addressing. It's particularly effective, too, if the student makes the day-time call and reads his reasoning to his parents. .

Eleventh, it's time to stop giving homework over the weekend and over long-holidays. Yes, the verdict is in: homework done over winter or spring vacation usually doesn't result in learning. It imbues the vacation atmosphere with grim menace, sparking angry survival modes in both parents and children whose health is better achieved by enjoying each other's company and taking respite from the daily grind. It's true: the homework done on the last day of a student's holiday or Sunday night before returning to school Monday rarely moves learning into long-term memory. We get more out of students during the school week when students have constructive relationships with family members and others over the weekend. We can still assign homework Friday afternoon, but it's not due until Tuesday.

Finally, whatever we do, there must be feedback on homework assignments. This is so central to homework's impact on student learning, it makes assigning anything without providing feedback close to a complete waste of time. Marzano and others have the research citations on this (see below), but the fact remains that if students receive feedback from themselves, their classmates, their teachers, or someone else, they learn dramatically more from the homework experience. So, in the same planning breath we use to design our homework assignments, we need to ask ourselves, "...and how will students receive descriptive feedback on this?"

Once we've established why and how we assign homework, we turn to how we should grade it. In short, don't.

Homework is what we do to learn the objectives and meet the standards; it is not a final decree of proficiency for any objective or assessment. Grades, on the other hand, reflect a summative declaration of what we know and are able to do regarding a standard. Just as we don't weave your months and years of homework completion (or not) into your teacher licensure exam scores, we don't weave homework into a student's final test score. We don't want the score to be raised or lowered by how many practice assignments you did prior to the exam. The routes we take to mastery will vary from person to person, but the important and honest testimony comes at the end of the

learning – what have you carried forward as a result of this class? That’s what grades are supposed to report.

Go ahead and mark homework as completed with relative proficiency or not, earning a check, check-minus, zero, a 2, 1, or 0, or something similar. And if it was completed (reported only as a “Work Habit”), was it completed with enough student engagement to have been an effective learning practice for the student? If so, give full credit. If not, partial or no credit is given. All of this is formative, of course: homework is what we do in route to mastery, but not a statement of final mastery itself.

Kohn would disagree with me but my experience still indicates that useful homework assignments yield development in students’ learning. If students do the assignments, they learn more than they would otherwise. The key term, however, is, “useful.” If students can demonstrate 100% mastery weeks or more down the road without doing any of the homework practice we assigned, then the assignments weren’t useful, and we have the problem, not the student. We should have assigned practice that mattered. In such situations we have no right to lower the academic grade if we have clear and consistent evidence of students’ mastery via summative assessments. The homework completion grade has no bearing on the final grade, particularly if such a grade skews the accurate report of what the student learned – either higher or lower. Accepting this premise, most schools are moving toward a policy in which homework counts 10% or less in the overall grade. Even 10% is a distorting influence in the final grade, however. I invite you to make the same move if you’re not already there. Your grades or marks will be far more accurate, useful, and ethical.

Be sure of what is being promoted here: Mark your students’ homework papers, and record those marks. Just remember, however, that they do not indicate mastery. They are marks indicating completion as students practiced their learning, nothing more.

There are new books on homework coming out every year. Many of them are great for book study groups:

- Bennett, Sara, Kalish, Nancy; *The Case Against Homework: How Homework is Hurting our Children and What We Can Do About It*, Crown Publishers, 2006
- Connors, Neila. *Homework: A New Direction*, National Middle School Association, 1999
- Cooper, Harris. *The Battle Over Homework, Second Edition*, Corwin Press, Inc., 2001
- Kohn, Alfie. *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing*, Da Capo Press, 2006
- Marzano, Robert, et al. *Classroom Instruction That Works*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001

- Wormeli, Rick. *Fair Isn't Always Equal: Assessment and Grading in the Differentiated Classroom*, Stenhouse Publishers, 2006

One last provocation from reading and reflecting on Kohn's arguments: What would our lives as teachers be like if we didn't assign or grade homework? How would we teach differently so students were sure to learn the material while in class, and over the course of a week? Are we relying too much on our homework assignments to do our teaching for us? And what hobbies, sports, vocational training, and family time could students explore with the hours now spent on completing homework assignments? In the yearnings of the student within each of us, there's some truth waiting to be recognized. It may be time to listen to it and do the ethical thing: make homework worth doing and mark it appropriately.