

Real-Time Teaching

Homework in Secondary Classrooms: Making It Relevant and Respectful

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Teachers in secondary schools routinely assign homework to students for the purpose of practice. If it were really practice of familiar concepts, this might work to strengthen students' level of understanding. Unfortunately, in too many classrooms, homework is assigned on concepts that are not yet understood. In many instances, as the MetLife survey on homework demonstrated, secondary teachers "very often or often" assigned homework because they ran out of time in class (Markow, Kim, & Liebman, 2007, p. 30).

For example, think about the teacher who, after having introduced the concept of calculating slope to her mathematics students, immediately assigns 15 odd-numbered problems for homework. What do you predict would be the resulting student behaviors? As you might imagine, there are four typical student responses to this type of homework assignment. The labels we use for them come from teachers' perspectives, often without understanding the underlying issues:

- *Completers*, who take the work home and get it all done and done correctly. Typically these students already understand the content, and if not, they have extensive family support for doing homework. These are the students that teachers welcome in their classrooms.
- *Slackers*, who, for whatever reason, do not complete the homework. These students do not have the necessary supports at home, they give it a try and get confused, or they have so many responsibilities that they run out of time. Irrespective of the reason, the teacher gains no data about these students' level of understanding and subsequently moves on with the next lesson.
- *Bewildered*, who give the homework a try and do most of it incorrectly. Despite the popular adage that practice makes perfect, it really does not: Practice makes permanent. Now the teacher has data that the student did not understand the practice and has to spend class time reteaching this content, which ends up compromising the next lesson and leads the teacher to say, "I can't cover all of the curriculum or meet the individual needs of so many students."
- *Cheaters*, who copy the homework of a peer in an effort to please the teacher and not fall behind in class. The teacher believes that the student understands the content and moves on with the lesson. In the meantime, the student may have little understanding.

Typical homework practices are only successful for the completers, those who probably did not need to do the initial homework because they already had a

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reasonably good grasp of the content. The other students, for reasons including a lack of knowledge or home support, are missing opportunities for valuable practice and thus not really learning the content well.

These examples are not intended to suggest that homework should be banned from secondary school classrooms, but rather that it should engage students with concepts previously taught by the teacher and should not be dependent on either parent or financial supports for completion. The goal of homework should be to broaden and deepen students' level of understanding of knowledge, observed by the teacher to have been learned as a result of purposeful instruction or experience.

Importance of Planning for Homework

The following three categories, which illustrate reasons for factoring homework into the lesson design, offer examples of real classrooms in which teachers understand the value of homework as a dimension of instruction. Notice how each illustrates that well-planned homework supports and expands students' learning.

Fluency Building

One of the ways that homework can be used in responsive classrooms is to allow students to build their fluency with the skills and strategies that have been taught. The most obvious way to implement this homework practice is through at-home reading. English teacher Heather Anderson asks her students to read every night and to log their reading. Importantly, her students read texts that they have selected and can effectively comprehend. This ensures that the focus is on both comprehension and fluency. These texts are often related to a classroom theme being studied.

For example, when recently studying "A Life of Value to Whom?", students explored the positive and

negative effects of information sources on their and others' self-perceptions. The purpose was to promote discussion about how they were or were not influenced through incoming information, and the need to evaluate and act on it to make healthy choices for themselves and others. They discussed ideas after independently reading many self-selected texts, including newspaper articles, *Hamlet's* "To Be" Soliloquy, *A Psalm of Life* by H. W. Longfellow, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, and *It's Not About the Bike* by Lance Armstrong. They developed their fluency and comprehension because they had opportunities to read widely from texts that they were able to read. This homework assignment supported and grew from the daily classroom activities.

Carol Jessop's students also write letters to her about the books they are reading, but those letters are completed at school. In these letters, students discuss their understanding of the text and the content standards being taught.

English, however, is not the only subject where fluency building for comprehension is important. Mark Sampson assigns homework practice using word sorts in his biology class. Students take familiar technical words home and create open-ended sorts. Students are encouraged to sort and re-sort the words several times to reinforce their understanding of the various ways that the words, previously introduced in class, can be used and combined. For example, during a unit on ecology, student Amal sorted words first by predator and prey, then by organisms that live on land versus in the water, and then by autotrophs and heterotrophs. Doing so ensured that Amal's fluency with the words increased. The next day in class, he was proud to share his sorts with a partner.

Spiral Review

Regularly reviewing previous learning is important for long-term retention and use (Medina, 2008). This has important implications for homework given that learning and remembering require regular activation of the content, not just immediate application. Too often, content from previous months is forgotten and teachers lament the need to reteach what they have already taught.

In Jessica Estrada's Algebra II class, students are not assigned problems that demonstrate the in-class learning that occurred; rather, they have practice and

application assignments several times per week that review the entire course. Importantly, students have a few days to complete the homework so that they can schedule it around other family commitments. These assignments are designed to promote conceptual links; for example, the homework might include numbers 23 and 28 on page 284, numbers 13 and 17 on page 144, numbers 39 and 41 on page 67, and a written summary about the steps used to solve each problem. (Math teacher Dina's instructions for writing in mathematics are included in Figure 1.)

Spiral review is not limited to mathematics. Following a school-wide focus on plagiarism, the first unit of study in the ninth-grade English class is on persuasive techniques. Over the course of the rest of the school year, students are periodically asked to use their understanding of common persuasive techniques as part of their homework. For example, Marcus Merrell asked his students to find examples of repetition and appeal to authority in magazines and to bring those examples to class for a discussion scheduled for Friday of that week.

Spiral review also occurs regularly in Jesse Patterson's art class. When students analyze works of art, they are required to use all of the previously learned terminology appropriate to the medium. For instance, while learning about pointillism, students were asked to select a work of art from a collection their teacher had linked on a webpage and to use familiar terminology to analyze this technique. Students used their previous knowledge about perspective, angle, lines, light, and so on in their written analyses.

Extension

Providing students with learning opportunities that extend from their interests, bases of knowledge, and experiences illustrates responsiveness and also models continuous learning. Some of the best extension assignments allow students to integrate their knowledge across different disciplines.

For example, our students are very concerned about budget cuts for education, particularly because this will affect their access to college. As a homework assignment, they were asked to write letters to their elected officials sharing their concerns and offering possible solutions. To do so, they needed to research the bills being proposed, understand the legislative system, and

Figure 1 The ABCs of Homework

- A. How did you start?
Explain in detail all the steps used in solving the problem.

- B. Where did you get stuck?
Where did you have difficulty deciding what to do?
Write your question(s).

- C. What resources were used for help?
Write the person's name, or state the book or Internet page used.

Then continue writing out steps.

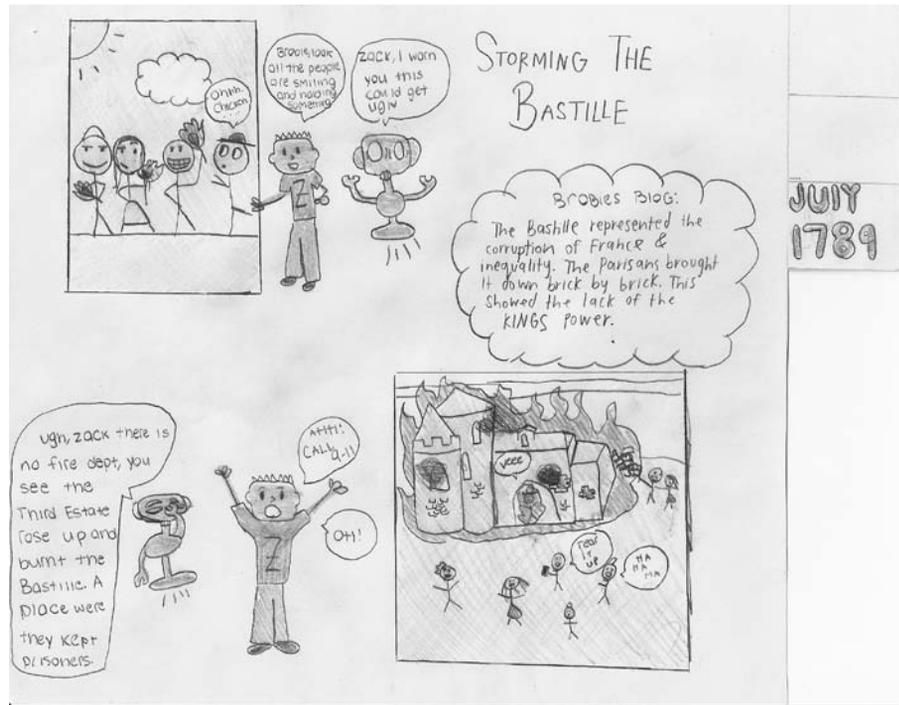
identify their representatives at several layers of government. In addition, they used argumentation and persuasion in their writing, balancing their ethos, pathos, and logos arguments to make their points.

Extension assignments can also come in the form of personal projects that allow students to investigate a topic more deeply. For example, Jo Schaefer invites her world history students to create a graphic novel version of the French Revolution. This extension assignment for 10th graders has components such as the following:

- Simple and clear language—in other words, written so that a seventh grader could understand it
- Cover page or title page with author biographical information
- Pictures on each page that are colorful, neat, organized, and relevant
- Dialogue that demonstrates understanding of this period in history
- Important facts about the major events in the French Revolution

A sample page of Isaiah and Marina's graphic novel can be found in Figure 2. This project allowed students to share information with one another and to explore a topic in greater depth. Having said that, it is important to note that the exploration was based on significant teaching and learning inside the classroom before the project was assigned.

Figure 2 Sample Page From Students' Graphic Novel on the French Revolution



A Look Ahead

The research evidence on homework is mixed. There are studies suggesting that homework is effective and studies suggesting it is not (Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006; Marzano & Pickering, 2007). Perhaps research studies are muddled because of the different types of students involved in the study and unclear information about the type of homework assigned. Homework is not likely to be effective if it is not completed nor is it likely to help if the student does all of the problems wrong. Homework might help when it is the practice of familiar concepts.

As was shown in each of the examples we have shared, the teachers did not assign homework as an afterthought, but instead as a well-integrated dimension of their instruction. It was the independent practice that occurred only after the students were well prepared, and it was also an integral dimension of what was to follow in class. Our goal as teachers should be to release responsibility to students based on our knowledge about their understanding, such that they can be successful when they assume control of their

learning. In that case, they will take what they learn with them for the rest of the lives.

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