



Homework

Improving Homework
Approaches
and
Improving Learning
Through Homework

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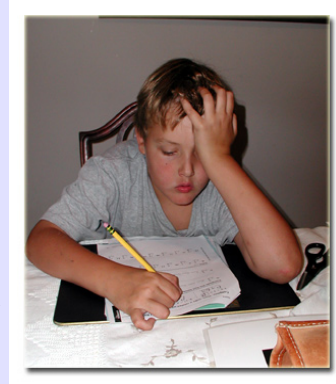
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Setting the Scene - Research

Action Research

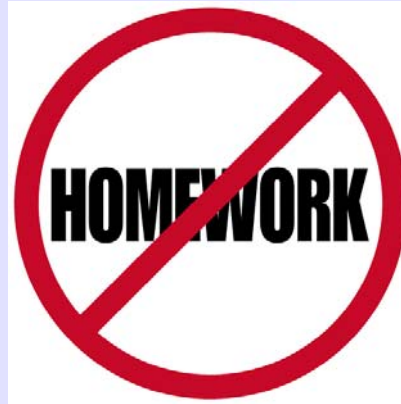
The extent to which homework is completed, how well it is completed, and the opinions of these students, together with assessments of their relative performance were used in determining how important homework was in achieving learning outcomes in the 3 classes being studied. From these observations and analyses, suggestions for appropriate homework content, timing and performance (how and when it should be done) were made. Some preliminary findings about homework, along these lines, were made during the period of observations at Concordia, and some resulting changes are suggested.



This study will clearly demonstrate that the issue of homework occupies three realms. Homework is an issue for teachers, in that evidence here shows minimal relationship to pedagogy and that it has much more to do with time management. Homework is an issue for students, in that the type of homework set has major implications on the rate of completion and subsequent performance in in-class activities. Homework is an issue for the parents, upon whom much of the responsibility for ensuring student compliance with the set tasks falls. Homework is significant because “over the five years of secondary education, appropriate homework can add the equivalent of at least one additional year of full time education” (Hargreaves in Stern 1997, p.7). This paper will also demonstrate that student and media perceptions of homework (negative in general) are greatly divergent from academic research that clearly identifies much potential and real success for homework in achieving good learning outcomes (Cooper 2001).

Observations and discussions with students at Concordia College will provide the basis of this action research. From these experiences, the extent to which homework is completed, how well it is completed, and the opinions of these students, together with assessments of their relative performance will be used in determining how important homework was in achieving learning outcomes in the 3 classes being studied. From these observations and analyses, suggestions for appropriate homework content, timing and performance (how and when it should be done) will be made. Some preliminary findings about homework, along these lines, were made during the period of observations at Concordia, and some resulting changes were ready to be implemented. An assessment of these will also be made.

Setting the Scene Research cont.



- 3 Classes were observed at Concordia College, Toowoomba.
- These were, Year 10 Science, where the topic of 'Invisible Waves' (physics) was being taught, Year 11 Multi-Strand Science, where the topic was 'Organ Transplants', and Year 9 SOSE, who were studying the Middle Ages, and especially 'The Crusades'.

Concordia is a private Lutheran coeducational school in Toowoomba, country Queensland. As a pre-service teacher, I was involved in observing and teaching 3 classes. These were, Year 10 Science, where the topic of 'Invisible Waves' (physics) was being taught, Year 11 Multi-Strand Science, where the topic was 'Organ Transplants', and Year 9 SOSE, who were studying the Middle Ages, and especially 'The Crusades'.

During the observational stage of the professional experience a number of general observations were made regarding students feelings towards, and performance of homework. Students generally complained about the requirement to complete homework. A number commented that it was either boring, excessive or both. Some who felt that it was "a waste of time" refused to complete it. In the three classes an average of 80% of students completed their homework, although general measure of the quality of that homework was recorded. Of the students that usually completed their homework, a note was provided from home, as an explanation of the failure to submit. These were generally received from the 'better' students. According to one teacher, homework was primarily set for two reasons. First, it was school policy (or an expectation of the school) that homework was set after every class as the parents expected their students to receive some. Second, homework was a necessity to get through the material that had to be covered. When the class fell behind more homework had to be set to catch up. As such, homework was rarely an extension to the material taught in class, rather it merely reflected more of the same.

Setting the Scene – Research cont.

Action research Methods

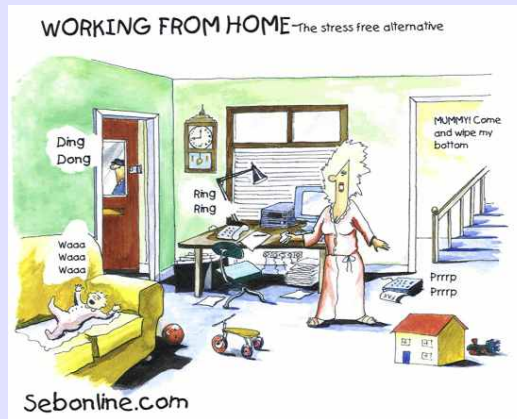
- It is an iterative and cyclical process of action research – whereby fuzzy questions, propagate fuzzy methods, which propagate fuzzy answers, which inturn help resolve less fuzzy questions etc (Dick 2003)
- More like ‘participative research as no real scope for action



Action research is not applied in its true sense (or perhaps ideal sense). The research here could better be described as participative. As a trainee teacher, my involvement was in both observing the activities of the ‘regular’ teacher and also for teaching the class. As such, I could in no way be considered the ‘objective observer’ of more traditional qualitative research methodologies. Similarly the standardised and predetermined approach of traditional research was also lacking. Observations during the normal course of observations and teaching make up the basis of data collection for this paper. The ‘action component’ here comes from my ability to implement strategies based on my preliminary findings. These were, however, greatly restricted by the rigid framework of the schools curriculum, the requirements of the supervising mentor teachers, and the lack of time. As such no subsequent reflection upon supposed actions will be made. Likely actions to be implemented will be identified and discussed but were not implemented (and probably could not be, even by a teacher employed at the school observed).

The supposed iterative and cyclical process of action research – whereby fuzzy questions, propagate fuzzy methods, which propagate fuzzy answers, which inturn help resolve less fuzzy questions etc (Dick 2003) – was given little opportunity to cycle beyond one revolution. Little opportunity was found to address the issue of dialectics. In this 3 realmed issue, only opinion and observational data was obtained in relation to students, and to a lesser degree the teachers. The role of the home environment and parents could only be extrapolated from what actually occurred in the classroom. Dick (2003) calls for two or more sources of information in the creation of the dialectic.

What is Homework cont.



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- From a educative point of view homework can include any activities undertaken at home that contribute to overall learning

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Why Have Homework



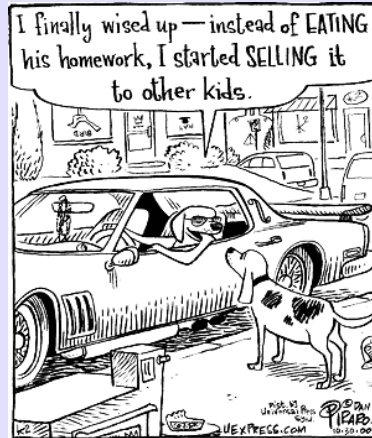
It bridges the gap between learning at school and learning at home. It reinforces work done in class. It helps develop skills such as research and time management. Homework helps to establish the habits of study, concentration and self discipline. Parents/caregivers have the opportunity to see the progress of their child. Homework provides challenges and stimulus to gifted and talented children.

The New South Wales Department of Education (2000a) clearly answers this question. To them homework is important because it:

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Why Have Homework cont.

Homework can result in “immediate achievement and learning,” long-term academic success, non-academic outcomes, and greater parental appreciation of and involvement in schooling. The negative effects include “satiation,” “denial of access to leisure time and community activities,” cheating and “increased differences between high and low achievers.”



Cooper (2001, p.7) identifies both positive and negative consequences of homework. Positive effects are categorised under four headings. Homework can result in “immediate achievement and learning,” long-term academic success, non-academic outcomes, and greater parental appreciation of and involvement in schooling. The negative effects include “satiation,” “denial of access to leisure time and community activities,” cheating and “increased differences between high and low achievers.”

From my observations, these considerations were not in the minds of the teachers under observation. Homework was set because school policy and tradition insisted that they had to set it, because parents expected it and because they had no choice to set it because they ran out of class time to fit in all the material they were expected to teach. This raises questions of time management and indoctrination, as well as changes in institutional thinking. An orientation towards these goals, and away from compulsion must be a necessary first step in making homework, relevant and useful.

Why Have Homework cont.

The majority of parents see homework as “teaching children about responsibility.” It helps students to learn to “work independently” and to “become better organised.” It was also concluded that homework can lead to “academic success.” Benefits to the home and parents were also considered in this study, in that “homework can create a firm partnership between parents and children in relation to children’s learning.”



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Does Homework Work

- Homework IS better than no homework at all
- The older the students, the greater the benefit from homework
- Science and social studies benefit most from homework
- There is a positive correlation between the amount of homework (number not length) and performance
- Homework, as opposed to school supervised study is better, especially for older students
- Homework is useful for students with special needs but must be appropriate (not too long or complex)
- There is a positive correlation between the amount of time a student spend on homework and outcomes, although the effects are less for science and social studies)

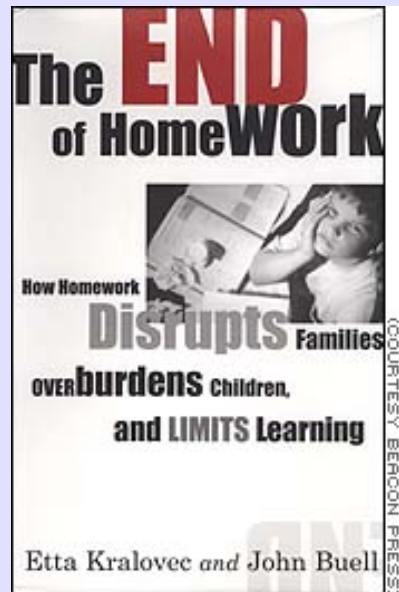


Cooper (2001) has provide a definitive resource as to the question of whether homework works. His findings can be listed as:

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Does Homework Work cont.

- Homework based on material to be studied or that had previously been studied, is of more use than homework based on material from that days classes
- Assignments need not be individualised within the class
- Provision of feedback has no correlation with achievement
- Provision of rewards can increase completion rates of homework (but no mention of quality)
- There is either a weak relationship or no relationship between watching television and performance
- Parent involvement has been shown to have positive and negative implications, although this can be accounted for by parents providing greater assistance to struggling children



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Homework is Useful When

- It reinforces and extends class work and consolidates basic skills and knowledge
- It is challenging and purposeful, but not so demanding that it has adverse effects on the student's motivation
- Parents or caregivers are involved in the formulation and implementation of the school's homework policy
- Students take responsibility for their homework, supported by their parents or caregivers
- It is well coordinated and teacher expectations are well communicated



There is a consensus of opinion that “appropriate homework is less about set hours, than engaging tasks that extend classroom learning and, wherever possible, tap into the children’s interests” (Dolan). Seemingly in recognition of these previous two sections, the New South Wales Department of Education (2000b, p.3) has identified a number of scenarios where homework is most beneficial, thereby providing suggestions for what makes good homework. Homework is useful when:

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Homework is Useful When cont.



- It is set on a regular basis and establishes a routine of home study
- Teachers set suitable amounts of homework which are varied and at an appropriate level considering the age, stage of schooling and capabilities of students
- It takes into account students' home responsibilities and extracurricular activities such as clubs, sport and part-time employment
- It is marked promptly and accurately
- Feedback and follow-up are provided regularly to students
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Homework should include practice exercises, preparatory homework and extension assignments, and should “recognise” and utilise technology where possible and equitable (DET 2000b, p.4).

Homework Should Not Be



- Finishing off what the teacher didn't get done in class
- A punishment
- The same for everyone at all times
- Unchecked
- Drill (more of the same)
- Done in only one evening
- A matter of penalty if it's not done
- Extra practice for someone who is already experiencing difficulty
- Feast or famine

Zammit (1997, p.44) takes the opposite approach and provides a list of 'Should Nots' for teachers. Although the book is targeting primary teachers, the content is still relevant. From the list, a number of elements of the Concordia policy and reality of homework are evident. In many instances they represent the inverse of the DET 'homework is useful' guidelines above. So homework should not be:

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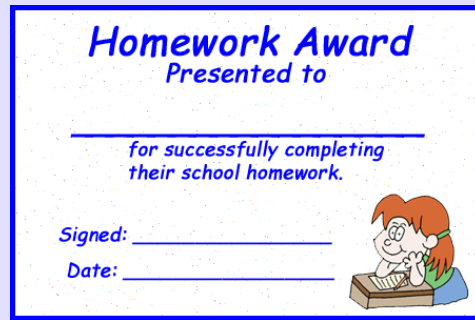
Sending the Message Home

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Sending the Message Home cont.



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The Future of Homework

- Despite calls to the contrary homework is useful, worthwhile and necessary
- Technology (online learning, discussion forums etc) could facilitate greater and more equitable learning opportunities at home



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Technology (online learning, discussion forums etc) could facilitate greater and more equitable learning opportunities at home