

**Homework is:**

**Where parents ensure that students help make up  
for the shortcomings of their teachers**

**Homework can be:**

**A useful pedagogical and inclusive tool to improve  
educational experiences and outcomes for all students**

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## 1.0 Introduction

There exists a separation of the two great powers in a child's life; family and school. Parents happily deposit their children at school in the morning, and collect their newly enlightened children in the afternoon, to return to the sanctuary of home. When homework is set, the parents diligently send their dearest to their bedroom to study. On the weekends, school is forgotten, and the child is free to go back to nature, or more likely, return to the television. And so is the idyll of academic home life continues, only to be briefly interrupted when the report card illuminates the effort that has occurred behind that closed bedroom door.

On the basis of this 'standard' arrangement, the media have begun to ask, how much homework is too much, and are providing assistance in "Getting the balance right" (Dolan 2004) and are giving 'guidance' to parents in conquering this necessary evil (ACA 15 March 2004). Either rogue teachers are calling for the abandonment of homework all together, or parents who do not have the time to help their children are being advised to engage the services of a tutor - after all, one million school students use at least one of the 76,000 tutors around the country (ACA 15 March 2004).

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.

## **2.0 Action Research Methodology**

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 in turn 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. These can include:

- Different informants or groups of informants (in this instance, three different classes were observed)
- Variations in the setting of data gathering (research stayed within the classroom, as no observations of the performance of homework in the home setting was possible)
- Information collected at different times (research occurred over a five week period)
- The same informant/s being used but in different settings (each class studied a variety of topics and carried out a number of differing homework activities)

The action research, therefore, is valid to a large degree in the ‘research’ sense, but lacking in the action component. A continual fine tuning of homework strategies over many weeks would be ideal, especially where the involvement of the busy parents in the homework is a necessary component.

### **3.0 The Issues**

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’.

Instructions were given regarding the assignment of homework to each of these classes:

1. Homework must be set after every lesson
2. Homework does not have to be gone through, rather it merely is to be checked for completion

### **3.1 General Observations**

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.

### ***3.1.1 Year 10 Science***

Homework was set to revise for a quiz, to be held later in the week. The students’ task was to research some information on science careers. The quiz itself involved groups of four students working through 20 questions. The group who achieved the most correct answers was to receive a prize. The students took up the challenge and actively competed against one another to come out the victors. Clearly the prospect of the reward and the competitive nature of the task had motivated them into action. Another contributory factor was the immediate fear of recognition of failure. Upon canvassing the opinion of six students, they all agreed that they did not want to appear a ‘failure’ or a ‘loser’ in front of their classmates.

Upon identification of this apparent relationship between reward and fear, and homework performance (completion and quality) a subsequent poster activity was set to provide more evidence of the presence of this relationship. Students were asked to create a poster highlighting a particular career in science. The best poster would receive a prize and would be put on display for the whole school. Poor quality or incomplete posters would be visible for the whole class to see. All posters were completed and all were of a very high relative (to their normal performance) quality. It was also evident that it was not simply a fear and reward relationship. Students appreciated the departure from the routine of answering short questions, based on the day’s lessons. This homework extended their knowledge and required broader thinking on the topics.

Peer review session also had a positive influence on the performance and quality of homework. Some homework was set, to be completed for the next day's lesson. In that subsequent lesson, students were to go through their answer, to explain what they had done and why. Other students were free to question and respond to each others comments. The teacher would only intervene if either the content or the activity was going astray. While there was an element of not wanting to "look stupid," the mere detachment of the task from the usual process appeared to be a motivating factor. One student commented that he wanted to do homework for these sessions because it was "their homework and not the teacher's."

### ***3.1.2 Year 11 Multi-Strand***

Observations for this class demonstrate the relationship between adequate completion of homework and subsequent performance in class. Generally a positive relationship between homework and achievement has been demonstrated. Students were asked to prepare for a class forum on the ethical issues associated with organ transplants. The research for this activity was conducted in class and was to be completed for homework. Students who had continued to research the topic at home performed well in the forum, revealing many useful insights and a good grasp of the material. Students who had not conducted further research often misrepresented facts or misunderstood the relationships between the factual elements of the transplant debate and the more complex relationships between those parties involved. A subsequent 'complex reasoning' test again revealed the relationship between students that had properly conducted additional study at home and those that had not.

### ***3.1.3 Year 10 SOSE***

When homework did depart from the normal classroom activities, it was completed enthusiastically and well. Students in this class were required to construct something from the medieval period. A number of students revealed to me their reasons for enjoying this task. According to one student "we all hate writing ... it is boring and we do it all day ... building something is fun and you can do it and watch TV." Other activities involved students relating past events to things that were happening in the news today. In general these tasks were also completed on time and to a high standard. A similar observation was made with tasks where the students were asked to imagine they were a Crusader, 'what would they have done and why'. Where the activities were relevant to the students own world and experiences in it, the homework was done well.

## 4.0 Research

As I have discussed in the research methodology, action research is an iterative and cyclical process. The fuzzy question of, simply ‘homework?’ has been investigated through the use of ‘fuzzy methods’ – observations and teaching, which in turn have led to some ‘fuzzy answers’ namely, there is an apparent relationship between variations in homework set and variations in performance (completion rates and quality). Hence the first iteration, or cycle has been completed. In the clarification process of the second iteration, it is necessary to confirm the observations and relationships that are apparent, through an analysis of existing academic research in this area. What do the experts say about homework? How do their conclusions relate to my findings? And from this, what action can be taken in the next iteration (the action plan itself) to ‘improve homework’. Essentially this can be summarised by two questions: Why have homework? and Does homework work? Ancillary to this is an identification of what is the ideal form for homework (if there is such an ideal).

### 4.1 Why Have Homework

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

Forster (1999) looks beyond this policy and identifies a number of other reasons. One study she cites discusses the opinions of parents as to the role of homework. The majority of parents saw 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.”

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.

#### **4.2 Does Homework Work?**

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

- Homework IS better than no homework at all (p.14)
- The older the students, the greater the benefit from homework (p.14)
- Science and social studies benefit most from homework (p.15)
- There is a positive correlation between the amount of homework (number not length) and performance (p.16).
- Homework, as opposed to school supervised study is better, especially for older students (p.17).
- Homework is useful for students with special needs but must be appropriate (not too long or complex) (p.21).
- 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) (p.31).

- 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 (p.35).
- Assignments need not be individualised within the class (p.37).
- Provision of feedback has no correlation with achievement (p.39-40).
- Provision of rewards can increase completion rates of homework (but no mention of quality) (p.40).
- There is either a weak relationship or no relationship between watching television and performance (p.42)
- Parent involvement has been shown to have positive and negative implications, although this can b e accounted for by parents providing greater assistance to struggling children (p.44).

From the point of view of this study, it will be taken that there are a number of positive outcomes for students when it comes to being set and doing homework. The implication of this for the action research in this instance is that, the possibility of no homework will not become part of the action plan. Subsequent iterations of the action research process will consider all approaches to homework and tailor them to the specific class situations.

### **4.3 Suggestions for Good Homework**

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:

- 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
- 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
- It develops and extends the core learning skills of inquiry and independent study.

Homework should include practice exercises, preparatory homework and extension assignments, and should “recognise” and utilise technology where possible and equitable (DET 2000b, p.4).

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:

- 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

## 5.0 Action Plan/Analysis

In this section, material from Section 3 ‘The Issues’ and Section 4 ‘Research’ will be drawn together. In the following table, what should and should not be present in homework policy or methodology is compared with that which was observed in practice at Concordia College. On this basis recommendations for subsequent changes (actions) can be made.

<b>Recommended Approach</b>	<b>Concordia Approach</b>	<b>Compliant</b>	<b>Action to implement</b>
Reinforces and extends class work	Homework routinely involves completing in class activities at home. However, these are little more than ‘busy work’ and tend to repetition.	No	Ensure the homework that is set, is not just more of the same, and builds upon class work. This can involve focussing on particular aspects that have been superficially covered in the in-class material, or allowing students to address issues that have not been covered.
Challenging and purposeful but not too demanding	Homework activities that I observed were of a standard equivalent to that studies in class. The challenge came in what the students perceived as an excessive amount.	No	Closely monitor student performance in in-class activities and ensure that the homework set is of an equivalent standard. Alternatively (or additionally) more general questions can be set, allowing students to demonstrate their own abilities (also good for special needs).
Parent/Guardian involved in formulation and implementation	No evidence was obtained to demonstrate any parental involvement in the formulation of homework	Not Observed	Consult with parents/guardians in the formulation and implementation of homework. This can include meeting in the unit planning stage, or asking for regular feedback from parents on the homework as it is sent home [this is the ideal and cannot actually be done in the course of the observation/participation period].
Students encouraged to take responsibility	Homework was strictly assigned, with firm instructions and tight deadlines. No scope was given to students to manage the process, especially as most homework was an overnight requirement.	Partial	Consult with students as to the content and distribution of homework throughout each semester. Set homework over longer periods to allow students to manage their time.
Teacher expectations well communicated	The teachers always communicated the requirements of the assigned work for the night but did not elaborate upon what they viewed as appropriate time, or upon procedural matters	Partial	Communicate with students not just what is required in the piece of homework at hand. Communicate the broader goals of homework, clearly defining what learning outcomes are expected at various ‘waypoints’ throughout the semester.

Homework routine well established	Homework was assigned in every class and was expected to be completed for the next. This routine adversely affected the students in providing no variety, and creating boredom.	Yes but with negative impacts	Set out in writing clear guidelines as to what is expected in duration and frequency of homework. Also give students instructions in how to do homework; how the students are best to conduct homework time in the home.
Suitable amount	The assignment of homework in every lesson was excessive, and pointless as it failed to build upon or extend that what was taught in class.	No	Determine the amount of homework being set in all the other classes that the students are participating in, determine the learning outcomes that need to be achieved and assess the abilities of each student. A suitable amount can then be calculated for each student.
Students' other commitments considered	No evidence of this being a relevant consideration was observed.	~	In setting a suitable amount of homework, the extra-curricula commitments of each student need to be identified and taken into consideration.
Marked promptly and accurately	Only summative assessment items were routinely marked. Other homework was either checked for completion only, or was not checked at all.	Partial	All homework that is set must be reviewed for compliance with instructions and the extent to which learning outcomes can have been demonstrated.
Feedback and follow-up provided	Minimal feedback was provided. Homework was simply checked for completion, with students occasionally given the opportunity to ask questions.	Minimal	Provide detailed and useful feedback to students for all homework submitted.
Not given as a punishment	Uncompleted work has to be completed as homework, including unfinished homework	Partial	Never give homework as a punishment. Through association, by making homework a punishment, students will come to view it in negative terms, and be less motivated to complete it.
Penalties not awarded for non-completion/ submission	Detention (at lunch or after hours) either as an opportunity to complete the homework, but sometimes involving picking up rubbish. Repeat offenders are sent to 'time-out' to write an explanation of non-completion	No	Homework should be 'framed' as something the students' do for their benefit. Homework should be voluntary and motivation for completion can be developed through communicating with parents and students as to the benefits.
Considerate of special needs and other differences	No differentiation of homework on the basis of needs or other difference.	No	Tailor homework to individual students.

## 6.0 Reflections and Outcomes

It is immediately obvious from a number of these recommendations that immediate action (or at least action with immediate results) is not possible. A number of actions that can be implemented are required to be implemented from the start of the school year, and gain real value by being applied continually over longer periods of time. The students of each class need to be better understood. In that I mean that the initial getting to know you activities at the start of the year could be expanded to truly get a better picture of all possible contributory elements to a students performance of and preferences for different types of homework.

Another factor to be considered is the relationship between what is best in the particular classroom and what could realistically be implemented within the existing administrative and policy framework of the school, and that is within expectations of the relevant school boards and parent groups. While the above table does provide many useful recommendations that can be applied in many situations, they have been developed specifically in response to the specific situation observed at Concordia College. Changes such as those described, especially in relation to an individualised approach (either on a student to student basis, or specific to the particular class), cannot realistically be applied individually. As such, many of the strategies in the table above would require a whole of school approach, with regular inter-class consultation necessary to gauge possible conflicting timelines or workloads..

## 7.0 Conclusions

While an apparently negative picture is painted of how Concordia College approach homework, its approach is common amongst many schools, where the pressures and guidelines on the processes and quantum of homework are external to the classroom. Teachers are not free to apply homework as they best see fit, school policy and parental expectations, together with tradition dictate how homework is perceived and enacted. The action research paradigm is an ideal tool to assess homework, as any proposed changes can be implemented and their effects subsequently reviewed and refined. The risks being minimal, where homework is being applied in an already wholly ineffective and non-ideal way.

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