

Do Your Homework

Re-Thinking the Questionable Practice of “Rote Obligation”

By Bambi Betts

If there is anything about the place called “school” that can evoke a strong emotion from just about everyone, it is homework. Should we? Shouldn’t we? If so, when, how much, what kind? Should we assess it? Should it ‘count’?

Dozens of research studies have come to just about every conclusion we can think of. It has become an equity policy, a form of punishment, a weapon, a major tool (often the only one) for ‘teaching’ independent learning, and the subject of hours of debate at faculty and parent meetings.

Homework, at its core, is a concept— the notion of continuing the learning begun at school beyond the formal school day. It is not a separate, stand-alone practice, rather one of the strategies in the repertoire of instructional methods, ideally completely aligned with the learning principles and practices of the school.

Homework is simply a tool we use to extend learning, for those who may benefit from it, when students are outside the care of the school.

All our practices at school, including homework, are driven by an underlying ‘philosophy’—which hopefully by now is described as a set of learning principles or axioms rather than a set of beliefs (how many successful organizations are built on beliefs alone?).

The learning principles that would mostly likely drive any homework policy are that durable learning requires some independent, unguided learning opportunities; that learners learn differently and at different paces; that the more we practice something, the better we are likely to understand it or do it; and that feedback is an essential ingredient of learning.

Unfortunately, the homework practices in some schools seem to be based more on premises such as the following, which are not particularly about learning:

- that everyone must do homework (and frequently the same work or same amount), because everyone else does (the equity assumption).
- that parents expect it (the parents rule assumption).
- that students have to learn to work on their own (starting at five years old...).
- that there has to be a consequence for not doing it (“It is not about learning, it is about doing it”).
- that turning homework in is the biggest single indicator that a learner is becoming independent and responsible (for the record, turning or not turning in homework accounts for 10 to 50 percent of how students are ultimately ‘graded’).
- that it is OK for a student to practice a skill the wrong way as long as he or she does the work.

Before we even consider what homework should actually look like, let us remind ourselves that it is not an isolated activity. Effective homework relies on two essential classroom practices:

1. Making it clear and explicit to learners what we intend them to learn. If in fact we are meant to be learning something every day at school, then it should not be too difficult to make this clear to learners. We are becoming quite skilled, even with younger children, at this excellent practice of stating the learning goal, framing it as a question, being clear about what we can expect to learn.
2. Engaging students in authentic tasks—embedding the learning in contexts in which that learning actually ‘lives.’ If schoolwork is disconnected, decontextualized and non-authentic, then so will homework be.

Based on these two practices and the appropriate learning principles, a homework ‘policy’ could be as simple as this: the purpose of ‘homework’ is to encourage thinking about learning and improving the skills of independent learning. Each day, learners, together with their teacher, will think about one or more of the following. More mature learners will be guided to answer these questions themselves. For less mature learners, teachers will be directive, working toward the goal of each learner eventually self-directing his or her work at home.

- “Is there anything you feel you need to practice on your own that will help you feel more secure in the learning you are working on right now?”
- “Is there anything we have been learning that you find interesting and would like to spend some more time on tonight/this week?”
- “Is there anything you need to prepare to be able to continue to learn tomorrow?”
- “Do some thinking about what we have been learning today. Bring any questions or new ideas with you when you return tomorrow.”

When we modify practice, it is helpful to be clear about what will change and what will not. The practical changes we would plan for with such a policy would be:

- Homework would be fully differentiated— with regard to ‘what’ as well as ‘when’. Perhaps clusters of students would choose or be guided toward the same task, just as during differentiation in the classroom. Not all students necessarily would have homework every day; this is not an equity issue, rather a learning one.
- It would be student-driven as much as possible, increasingly so as students acquire the skill. Consider a 10-year old learning to play football. Does she limit herself to what the coach told her to practice? Over time, with increasingly less guidance, she learns what she needs to practice.
- All practice-related tasks would be based on authentic work; see the work of Fred Newmann for a description.
- There would be daily classroom time to capture the learning results from the homework and to give feedback as needed to individuals. In my own classes I called that time “capturing our learning”: five to 10 minutes each day to explore

what was learned, what misunderstandings occurred, what new ideas and questions arose. Part two of our 'capturing' session was "So what? What's next?" generally recorded in a 'Home learning log.'

- Teachers would actually use the formative data they gather on learners each day more effectively, to draft meaningful at-home experiences when needed.
- Homework would never be considered an assessment and would of course not be 'graded.' The running record kept by the learner in his "home learning log" becomes the record.

Of course, we hear the objections: How will I do this? Where will I find the time? Do you really expect me to keep that close track of each child's individual learning? That all-important teacher quality of open-mindedness will be very helpful. Let us redefine homework, away from a rote obligation that you need to "correct", and towards an opportunity, for those learners who might benefit from tailored practice, to explore, or simply to think.

Let us redefine it into a powerful tool in the instructional toolbox. And by the way—this is what we do in professions: we keep raising the bar as we learn more about our core business. In our case, learning.