

# After All These Years: Still Not Keen About Homework

A principal reflects on his own experiences as a student in grade nine and offers practical reasons why homework may be over-rated.

by Peter Jory

In the ninth grade, after a particularly unimpressive report card, my parents (both educators) exiled me to my room for an hour of mandatory homework every school night. My drawing really improved, as did my content knowledge on sports cars, the Boston Celtics, *Dungeons and Dragons*, and Paulina Porizkova, but I confess I did little in regard to studying or assignment completion during that time. Keep in mind, this was years before smart phones, the Internet, or *Call of Duty*. I think we had two channels, there certainly wasn't a TV in my room, and I still wouldn't do homework!

Years later, as an English teacher, I quickly figured out that if I assigned homework at the end of class, the top achieving students did it all, the average students did some of it, and the students I was most worried about did little or none of it. If I took the time to sit down and discuss with students why work wasn't done I would get some decent reasons, things that were out of their control. Organization was an issue, some lived in crowded conditions and lacked a quiet place to work, some would try to do it then get

stuck, and some had an excuse that felt quite familiar to me: "It's boring, and when I am at home I want to do other things." I don't think I would have told my teachers their work was "boring" when I was in school — but I appreciated the honesty. It didn't make much sense to continue with a practice that made students resent me and my course and broadened the already significant gap between my top and bottom achievers.

I soon stopped assigning work at the end of class, and tried to mete out a reasonable amount at the beginning, so the students at higher skill levels could stretch themselves in regard to quality instead of quantity, but everyone could get it all done by the end of class if they worked at it. I tried to make the lessons as interesting as possible, adding cooperative activities to offset the grammar drills. I started to see the value of the learning environment, how a group could influence individuals in a positive way, and how my circulating and checking in with students made a difference to what they accomplished. When students closed their books and said, "I'll just do it for homework," I started tell-

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ing them I didn't want them to have homework, and they needed to do it now, with us, while I was there to help.

There was no "down time" in my class. Students who finished that day's work before class was over were given time to revise ongoing written projects, prepare for the next quiz, start the next assignment, or if they were caught up and successful in the class, they could read quietly or finish something from another course. I got a lot out of my students with these expectations, and if you were to poll them I am sure they would remember me as one of the more demanding teachers they had. This despite the fact they were never assigned homework.

Now as a principal, especially one who has been pushing an achievement agenda for the last three years, you might think I have changed my position on homework, but I really haven't. My understanding of educational research and instructional practice has grown, but I haven't come across anything compelling that shows how assigned homework improves learning for any but the most confident and supported students.

Let me qualify that statement though. When I talk about assigned homework, I am not talking about regular reading with a parent for younger students or independent reading for older ones. Literacy requires practice, preferably with material the student enjoys. (This may have been the hidden benefit of the time I spent in exile!) Mastery of math concepts and computational

skills are surely helped by flash cards or math games and extra practice helps. I also believe a high school student in courses leading to university will need to spend extra time learning the material if they want to achieve, get used to working independently, and maximize their options for the future. Students who miss class time should make up key assignments, but they will often need to have some support to do that — such as pre-arranged lunchtime or after school help sessions to make sure they are able to keep moving forward. All that considered, I believe that in the vast majority of cases, assigning work to students to be completed outside of class time without any support has little positive effect, and can even be counterproductive for some students.

Changing requires a simple questioning of our belief systems as participants in the education system. I think it's time to replace the beliefs that drive assigned homework, such as: "practice makes perfect," "completion shows learning," and "compliance indicates engagement" with some more complex thinking, and begin using the strategies that research indicates work for all learners, including:

- discussing the course outcomes with students
- thoughtful lessons designed for outcome mastery
- opportunities for guided practice in partners or groups
- frequent and specific feedback
- time for students to reflect on their learning, and
- more flexibility in regard to how students may demonstrate their learning.


If engagement is high enough during class time, students will learn more than enough to be successful,

and further learning will be sparked by interest and some time to process what happened in class. It is time to pay less attention to how much work our students have done, and more attention to where our students are in their learning and what we are doing to help move them along the continuum.

I'm not about to issue any kind of "No More Homework" edict at my school. Ideally, teachers, along with parents and students, need to reflect on these issues with the support of our professional learning community, decide what works best for the learning in their classes, then work at an appropriate pace to replace familiar strategies with more effective ones over time. The great thing about my VP and I still having some teaching time, aside from having more direct student contact, is that we get to experiment in practical ways with

instructional concepts like the ones listed above, share what worked and what did not work with our staff, and support them as teaching colleagues.

This has been one of the most enjoyable facets of our tenure at the school, and has been much more effective than simply standing on the sidelines issuing advice and quoting research. One topic we can never engage in, however, is how to get kids to complete homework. We don't assign any.

**Postscript:** My parents and I had a good laugh over the article when I first posted it online. Pop said he didn't think there was any way I could be "up there" all that time and still not get any work done. I told him, "You clearly underestimated my resolve." I attribute most of the achievement gain that occurred the following year to paying more attention in class — a concept now known as student engagement. 

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This is a slightly edited version of a blog entry posted by Peter Jory, Principal, Lake Cowichan Secondary on his blog, *I Have an Opinion About Learning* (<http://peterjory.blogspot.com/>) You can follow him on Twitter at @PeterJory and email him at [pjory@sd79.bc.ca](mailto:pjory@sd79.bc.ca)

## References and notes for Kaser & Halbert

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**Case studies** from NPBS and AESN 2010-2011 are available on the website [www.noii.ca](http://www.noii.ca) Case studies from the Healthy Schools Network are available at [www.healthyschoolsnetwork.org](http://www.healthyschoolsnetwork.org) **For a description** of the Glenview work, see Kaser & Halbert, *A Cross Grade Learner Conversation*. Chapter 5 Earl, L. and Timperley, H. eds. (2008). *Professional Learning Conversations – Challenges in Using Evidence for Improvement*. **For comprehensive** *Best Evidence Syntheses on School Leadership and Student Outcomes and on Teacher Professional Learning* see [www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515)