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Making Homework Central to Learning
 Cathy Vatterott

If grading homework sends the wrong signal about its purpose, what can teachers do instead?



Last year, a Texas high school decided it was no longer going to grade homework. Students, focusing only on their grades, thought that meant they no longer needed to do homework. They failed to realize that neglecting homework might affect how well they did on their exams. At midterm, many more students than normal received Ds and Fs on their report cards. Parents were upset, and the school was forced to revisit its decision.

This cautionary tale reveals two flaws in U.S. schools' typical practice of grading homework. First, both students and teachers tend to view homework grades as rewards for working rather than as feedback about learning. Second, students fail to connect homework to assessments, not realizing that homework is "practice for the game."

U.S. teachers lead the world in their predilection for grading homework. In a study of educational practices in 50 countries, almost 70 percent of U.S. teachers said that they used homework assignments to calculate student grades, compared with 20 percent of teachers in Canada, 14 percent in Japan, and 9 percent in Singapore (Baker & LeTendre, 2005). It's worthwhile to ask whether the hours spent scoring student homework and calculating it into grades pay off. This study said no; in fact, it found a negative correlation between grading homework and increased achievement:

Not only did we fail to find any positive relationships, the overall correlations between national average student achievement and national averages in the frequency, total amount, and percentage of teachers who used homework in grading are all *negative!* (pp. 127-128)

As schools move toward standards-based grading, more teachers now view homework as formative assessment and choose not to count it toward students' overall grades (O'Connor, 2009). Yet the practice is so entrenched that many teachers and parents are uncomfortable with not grading homework. Why?

Three Reasons Teachers Continue to Grade Homework

Teachers commonly give several reasons for grading homework, most of which reveal confusion about both homework's role in learning and what grades should represent. Let's look at three of these reasons and the questionable foundations underlying each one. Then, because homework is important, let's consider three grounded practices for keeping homework a central part of learning.

"If I don't grade it, they won't do it."

This is a common teacher lament. Many teachers believe grades *cause* students to do homework. One could argue that the story about the Texas school proves that grades are an incentive to do homework; I argue that it really shows that teachers have oversold grades to students as the indicator of a task's worth.

We often say students are addicted to grades, but many teachers and parents are equally addicted. Teachers equate grading with valuing a task; parents say that grades reinforce the message that "assignments should be taken seriously," revealing an attitude that only graded tasks are worthy of serious effort.

But many ungraded tasks are clearly valued in U.S. schools. We expect students to take notes during lectures, do group work, and participate in discussions, yet we don't grade all these actions. They are expectations, just as, in many other countries, completing homework is an expectation.

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The belief that the carrot of a grade entices students to complete work is an illusion, one with roots in behaviorism and a negative view of learners (Vatterott, 2009). At its core, it negates students' intrinsic drive for mastery (Cushman, 2010; Pink, 2009) and implies that homework is inherently distasteful. As Daniel Pink (2009), puts it, "We're bribing students into compliance instead of challenging them into engagement" (p. 174). In addition, grades only motivate students who are motivated by grades—and some students couldn't care less.

"Hard work should be rewarded."

Closely related—and also behavioristic—is the belief that effort should be rewarded and that grades are the way to do so. Grades allow teachers to reward compliant students and punish students who don't do homework. But, like giving points for bringing classroom supplies or selling candy for the fund-raiser, rewarding students for doing homework inflates their overall grade so that it doesn't truly reflect learning.

"Homework grades help students who test poorly."

Homework grades also reward students who work hard but, for whatever reason, cannot master assessments. These grades often enable students who consistently turn in homework (done correctly or not) to receive passing grades even though they haven't shown mastery of the content on assessments (Vatterott, 2009).

This defense of grading homework is particularly troublesome because it reveals three problems inherent in the bigger grading scheme. First, if grades are averaged, high scores for homework completion tend to mask poor performance on other measures. Second, when homework is counted in a student's grade, we mix practice and checking for understanding (formative assessments) with actual demonstrations of learning (summative assessments) and produce a murky picture of progress. Finally, many teachers have a limited view of options for assessing learning beyond homework and tests. In working with schools, I find that many teachers have little insight into how classroom assignments can be used as assessments or how to analyze them to check whether learning has occurred. In one school that stopped grading homework, a teacher asked, "What will we do about retakes now that all grades will be tests?"

What to Do Instead

When justifying why homework should be graded, teachers often say "But homework is *important*." Yes it is, but behaviorist solutions such as grades fail to validate the most important purpose of homework—to help students reach their learning goals. The Texas story tells us that educators have failed to make the connection for students between doing homework and reaching particular learning goals. It's not about homework's value for the grade, but homework's value for learning. It's not about the student's responsibility for a task, but the student's responsibility for his or her learning.

In schools in which homework isn't graded, it is still marked for correctness, and students still receive specific feedback. Students are still responsible for completing assignments outside class—and some students still fail to complete them. Such schools use interventions similar to those employed by schools that grade homework. Teachers may call parents, pull students from other classes to complete their work, or make available after-school programs in which students can catch up on homework.

Even though teachers at Glenn Westlake Middle School in Lombard, Illinois, no longer count homework in students' grades, students still understand that homework must be done, teachers still document which work has been completed and when, and teachers still give learners feedback about their homework. Explaining this fact to parents was a big part of the transition. Glenn Westlake's principal, Phil Wieczorek, met with parent groups several times:

The parents had a lot of misconceptions. We had to explain to them this did not mean there was not going to be homework. Homework would still be looked at, kept track of, and given feedback. It just wasn't going to be averaged into the student's grade.

The first draft of Glenn Westlake's new report card gave students a grade for their academic work in each subject and an *O*, *W*, or *N* for homework, participation, and organization in that subject (*O* indicated *often demonstrated skill*, *W* indicated *working on development of skill*, and *N* indicated *needs improvement*). The school has now switched to one column for the academic grade and one column labeled *Responsibility for learning*, in which students receive a 1, 2, or 3. Each department at each grade level decides which learning tasks are included in the *Responsibility for learning* section. In social studies, for instance, students are evaluated on note taking, number and quality of homework assignments completed, and group projects.

If teachers are to move away from grading homework, they must take a fresh look at the purpose of homework. Three practices, which some pioneering schools are now trying, can help us move toward a learning-focused mind-set.

Practice 1. Evaluate each assignment to determine whether to grade it.

Schools that still wish to grade *some* homework should separate homework into formative and summative assessments. Formative assessments, such as practice with math problems, spelling, or vocabulary, should not be factored into the overall course grade. Summative assessments, such as research papers or portfolios of student work, may be. Many district policies outline these differences in their grading and homework policies, such as this guideline from the Rockwood School District in Eureka, Missouri:

Homework is an important part of teaching, learning, and parent involvement in the Rockwood School District. Student work should always receive feedback to further student learning. Teachers will exclude homework from the course grade if it was assigned for pre-assessment or early learning guided practice. Homework assigned as a summative assessment may be included in the course grade based on curriculum guidelines.

The Washington-Saratoga-Warren-Hamilton-Essex Board of Cooperative Educational Services, which provides educational programs and services to school districts in New York, created a "Homework Decision Tree" (available at www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_201111_Vatterott_Flowchart.pdf) to help teachers decide which homework to grade. This group has assisted districts with assessment and grading topics for nine years; it designed the decision tree because questions continually surfaced about how much homework should count in a grade.

Practice 2. Tie homework to assessments.

The easiest way to tie homework to assessments in students' minds is to allow them to use homework assignments and notes when taking a test. Another method is to correlate the amount of homework completed with test scores. One teacher does this by writing two numbers at the top of each test or quiz—the student's test score and the student's number of missing homework assignments. This not only helps the students see the connection, but also shows the teacher which students are not benefiting from a specific homework task and which students may know the content so well that they don't need to do homework. Patricia Scriffiny (2008), a teacher at Montrose High School in Colorado, makes the connection explicit:

When I assign homework, I discuss with my students where and how it applies to their assessments... Some students don't do all of the homework that I assign, but they know that they are accountable for mastering the standard connected to it.
(p. 72)

At McNally High School in Alberta, Canada, teachers don't grade homework. They think carefully about which homework tasks will help prepare students for both formative and summative classroom assessments and offer those tasks as options to students. Some formative assessment tasks may be assigned as homework; others may be completed in class. Students decide whether completing the task will further their understanding of the topic.

In English 11, for example, students decide which homework and formative tasks they need to complete. For instance, a student who has demonstrated mastery of all standards for oral presentations with his or her first formative oral presentation may choose to not complete other formative assessments of oral presentation skills. Having more choices about assessment helps McNally students feel more ownership of learning and become more engaged.

English 11 teachers send home a monthly feedback form that shows the number of points a student earned on each of 19 formative assessment tasks and 5 summative assessments. The number and type of assessments may vary based on the teacher's judgment of student needs. There is no minimum number of formative assessment tasks students must complete; they are only required to submit summative work. Both formative and summative assessments are weighted as 0 percent, but because there is no overall grade on the monthly profile, students and parents have to look at all the assessments to get the big picture of how a student is doing in the course. Students don't receive an overall grade until the end of the course.

Figure 1 (p. 62) shows a partial list of the formative and summative tasks for this class. If students don't complete a set of homework assignments and then fail the related summative assessment, they must go back and complete all the formative tasks before they can retake the assessment.

Figure 1. Sample Monthly Feedback Form for English 11

This form shows a partial list of the assessment tasks one student performed while taking English 11 at McNally High School. The middle columns show the student's score on each task, the number of points possible on each task, and the percent this student got correct. The final column shows the class's average score on each task. These formative tasks count as "0" toward the final grade, but the form gives students an overall picture of their performance. Summative tasks are weighted at the end of term based on teachers' professional judgment.

Classroom formative assessment	Weight	Points earned	Points possible	Percent correct	Class average on this task
Reading comprehension	0.0	25	45	56%	53%
<i>Forrest Gump</i> persuasive	0.0		15		57%
Personal response to poetry	0.0	5	5	100%	78%
<i>Catch Me If You Can</i> literary exploration	0.0	19	25	76%	66%
Summative assessments					
Persuasive response	0.0	12	15	80%	65%
Literary response to text	0.0	20	25	80%	65%

Oral presentation	0.0	11.5	12	96%	69%
Source: McNally High School, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Used with permission.					

Practice 3. Focus on demonstration of learning, not task completion.

McNally High's homework system, like other standard-based systems, respects students' innate drive for mastery, autonomy, and purpose (Pink, 2009). Perhaps because of this, students are motivated to do their best on assignments. "Teachers can't believe students are actually asking if they can redo a piece of work to improve it," says McNally's principal Dale Skoreyko.

When homework is graded, teachers spend an inordinate amount of time and effort chasing makeup work. As Hugh O'Donnell (2010), a retired social studies teacher and consultant, explains, "If it's simply a matter of homework not completed by a student who scores high in the test on that subject matter, what's the point of hassling the kid or reducing the grade?" All homework doesn't necessarily *have* to be made up; it makes sense to prioritize homework for students who need more work on relevant concepts. When the focus switches from working to learning, students understand that they can improve their final grade by demonstrating mastery, not through the "Hail Mary pass" of an extra-credit assignment two weeks before the end of the semester.

Teachers and administrators need to put forth solid effort to help teachers determine how to assess student learning and how to know when learning has occurred. Rethinking the deeper purpose of homework and adopting policies that reflect that purpose are healthy first steps.

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