

Does Homework Help?

"I like a teacher who gives you something to take home to think about besides homework." Lily Tomlin

Criminal justice may take the form of compensation, incarceration or corporal punishment and its purpose may be deterrence, retribution or rehabilitation. Homework, likewise, comes in a variety of forms and is assigned for a variety of purposes - and for generations of students, the similarities between punishment and homework may not end there. Homework is a virtually universal component of instruction and because of that it deserves our scrutiny.

To some extent, the rationale for homework assignments varies according to the subject. In a math class, for example, homework may be seen as a way to provide practice and make certain operations and calculations a matter of habit or routine; in a literature or history class, it may be a way for students to read material that they cannot read during class time; in an arts class, it may be seen as a way to afford more time and a more amenable environment than the classroom for the creative process.

Pedagogical philosophies may also play a role in the type of homework assigned. Teachers with a behaviorist leaning may believe that reinforcement is the key to learning and favor repetitive drills, while those more inclined toward experiential learning may prefer more open-ended problem-solving projects. Teachers may also assign homework without any specific purpose in mind other than to keep students busy or because it is mandated by the curriculum or textbook.

In *The Homework Myth*, Alfie Kohn, backed by extensive research, argues that much of the homework assigned is not only unproductive, but counter-productive. For most of us, the word homework does not conjure up a very pleasurable activity. It is, rather, synonymous with drudgery and obligation. Frank McCourt, acclaimed author of *Angela's Ashes*, makes that point in his memoir *Teacher Man*. Noticing that one type of writing his students excelled at was the creation of forged excuses for their absences, McCourt exploited their penchant for imaginative prose of this kind by asking them to compose excuses. The students loved the task and as he recounts, *"They said, 'More, more. Could we do more?' I was taken aback. How do I handle this enthusiasm? There was another epiphany or a flash of inspiration or illumination or something. I went to the board and wrote: 'For Homework Tonight.' That was a mistake. The word homework carries negative connotations."* By labeling something that students enjoyed as homework, he inadvertently turned it into a chore that they recoiled from.

Language teachers assign homework for a variety of reasons and whether the underlying rationale is that reinforcement is necessary or that learning is achieved by doing, it is clear that involvement in language activities beyond the limited period of class time enhances learning and promotes the creation of neural synapses that constitute learning. The onerous nature – and reputation – of homework, however, negates to a large extent its usefulness. If students regard homework as an unpleasant chore, they may not do it or not do it well. Regardless of our pedagogical proclivities, most of us would agree that students become better readers by reading, better writers by writing and so on. We therefore, want our students to spend as much time as

possible outside of class reading and writing and engaging in other language activities. But if the onerous character of homework discourages students from engaging in language-building activities, it hinders rather than promotes progress.

Let's consider some typical types of homework assigned in language classes. One common kind of assignment is repetitive drills, especially for grammar reinforcement. Students may have to fill in words, choose from a number of possible answers or transform a sentence in a given way. In class the following day, students may submit their homework for a grade or give their answers in class. A typical reading assignment often involves a text that students have little interest in topped off by comprehension or vocabulary questions. For writing, students are often asked to compose or revise essays on set topics following specific rules (such as writing in a particular rhetorical mode or using topic sentences, a specific number of paragraphs, specified vocabulary words or specific syntactic elements) to be graded or returned with all errors marked in red. These kinds of assignments, replete with tedium and tension, yield questionable results and demonstrate why homework has such a bad rep.

What kinds of homework would be more helpful and effective in encouraging students to engage in useful language activities outside of class? First of all, we would do well to eschew a "no pain, no gain" attitude about homework and in fact, avoid the term "homework" altogether since it is so fraught with negative connotations. Promoting enjoyable, entertaining activities that involve language use is a start. Removing elements of pressure, anxiety and criticism related to out-of-class activities is also crucial. Helping students identify activities that appeal to them rather than imposing activities on them also brings us closer to achieving the goal of getting them to work on their language when they're not in class.

Instead of keeping students' faces buried in workbooks, we should promote out-of-class activities that involve authentic interaction and communication such as conversing with others if the target language is used outside of the classroom or computer-based chats or talks if it is not. Entertaining TV or radio programs, movies, magazines and web sites provide livelier alternatives than more academic texts and listening materials. Journals for self-expression or research and interviews in preparation for in-class writing should prove more enjoyable to students than spending hours agonizing over a blank page in an attempt to compose a directed essay. Most important of all, finding out what students like to do and helping them discover language-building activities that converge with those tastes help assure that students will actually spend time productively rather than perfunctorily and grudgingly working on imposed homework.

Some teachers may insist that students only benefit from doing precisely those things that they don't like to do and persist in reinforcing the negative image of homework. If, however, we are truly interested in furthering the language abilities of our students, we will attempt to change the nature of homework into something attractive and appealing so that students engage in real language use and develop a liking rather than a loathing for such activities as reading and writing. By removing the *work* from

homework, we can reduce its onerousness, prevent it from appearing to be a form of punishment, and transform it into a useful tool for achieving our common goals .

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