Common Sense and Homework

I’ve read at least 100 articles about homework. I have found that research on homework is ambiguous, and controlling its variables is a colossal task. Homework isn’t a single thing and its applications are far from consistent. While proponents and opponents of homework battle, little is being done to bring widespread and beneficial change.

Often, teachers use homework to reinforce standards or sometimes assign it as an afterthought without regard to these standards. Some teachers believe it is essential to learning, while others assign it because doing so is expected. When teachers give numerical grades for homework, those grades can have a dramatic effect on final averages (or median scores). Frequently, homework is not even corrected, but checked off as done or not. Those checks are somehow converted to grades that might count as 25 percent or more of a student’s final grade.

Typical articles about homework address its application as an instructional tool, yet articles rarely approach these critical questions: Is homework a formative or summative assessment? How does homework affect grades?

Formative vs. Summative Assessments

Understanding the distinction between formative and summative assessments is crucial to good instruction, but many teachers do not know the difference. Homework assignments, in my view, clearly meet the standards for formative assessments. Formative activities are those tasks done while learning new material, such as worksheets, discussions, and ungraded pop quizzes. In other words, formative assessments are those daily activities that generally include common, instructional activities that teach specific objectives, and are best used for the purpose of diagnosis and practice. One must understand that assessment doesn’t always require a grade. Too often, formative assessments count more than summative ones.

Formative assessments help teachers determine who is taking advantage of learning opportunities. Assessing such activities is best done in a nonstressful manner—for example, by using comments like “good,” “needs improvement,” and others that indicate specific strengths and weaknesses. The actual percent of the grade (if one is given) should not overwhelm the weight of summative assessments, which should be the primary source of numeric grades.

Summative assessments are intended to examine student success in learning a new unit or a large block of material after instruction has been completed. They are generically referred to as tests or quizzes, although essays and special projects may be summative as well. During a grading period, only a few summative assessments are necessary because they cover a lot of material. Teachers should strive to develop expertise in developing summative assessments. They should evaluate their tests by student scores and frequently missed items. Student performance on every test or quiz administered is a reflection of a teacher’s instruction.

Grading Homework

Our system of education has engendered a pervasive faith in homework, even though its benefits are unclear. Grading it can create a kind of double jeopardy. If students receive recorded scores for homework and are formally tested on the same material for which they receive another score, then they receive two grades on the same material. The summative grade is polluted by a formative grade.

I have no wish to abolish homework. Certainly, as part of the total learning process, it can be a valuable tool for learning. If we understand homework’s status as one of many instructional methods available, why must we grade it far beyond its value? Indeed, why grade it at all? (Exceptions might be important projects or essays that require time at home to complete.) We should also note that the increase in homework (51 percent since 1981, according to a recent University of Michigan study) seems to have done little to increase...
learning. Furthermore, nations whose students perform better than the U.S. on standardized tests (e.g., Japan) tend to give less homework. Students in nations who give more homework than us perform worse.

Methods of Improvement

The following suggestions are presented as possible solutions to homework improvement:

- Review the abundant research on homework;
- Establish homework policies within districts that improve consistency;
- Set a reasonable limit on the amount of homework given, and consider not giving homework on weekends or holidays;
- Offer school and district staff development on the use of homework;
- Keep parents informed regarding student involvement in homework;
- Always review homework in class and point out the learning objectives to which it is connected;
- When developing summative assessments, be sure that a significant sample of concepts were assigned as homework previously;
- Try to offer choices in homework assignments; and
- Encourage completion by giving assignments that are fun, interesting, and motivating.

We must remember that teaching is about helping students learn. Teachers should take care to apply the wisdom of the experts who spend enormous time and effort to clarify instructional processes. Students should view homework as a necessary activity that will be evaluated when it appears on summative assessments. Homework should clearly benefit the learning process and not be done because of teacher threats to lower a grade or call a parent.

We must be courageous enough to assess ourselves and our sacred cows if education is to improve. Homework is one small part of instruction. Let us boldly evaluate its place as a tool for teaching. We haven’t enough time to spend on practices that produce minimal learning. Redefining the role of homework will not be easy and it will take time, but it is essential to the modernization of instruction.

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References


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