

Promoting Learning

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

HOME ASSIGNMENTS

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Home assignments are an extension of instruction. It is related to teaching and learning, not to discipline in the sense of classroom disruptions or social irresponsibility.

PURPOSE

Home assignments provide opportunities to practice and improve skills or gain further knowledge or understanding. Home assignments also teach lessons that cannot be measured, such as self-discipline, perseverance, and time management. Home assignments teach how to begin a task, complete it, and be responsible for the outcome.

CONSIDERATIONS

Especially at the elementary grades, home assignments need to be tempered with considerations for other demands on young people's time. Home assignments have modest influence on achievement in the early grades. When the amount and number of assignments becomes overwhelming, negative attitudes about school and learning result. Assignments should be short, interesting and easy to complete by students. Leave the more demanding work for the classroom.

More than 100 studies have shown that it is not until middle school that home assignments begins to pay off.

ASSIGNING

In order to make home assignments more attractive, offer the choice of two assignments. Be sure students understand the purpose of the assignment. Periodically, have a short discussion of the benefits. Ask for input from students. Explain what you believe students will learn or accomplish from an assignment, and then ask for suggestions.

Assignment should be focused. For example, rather than asking students to write about an open-ended theme from a novel that the class is reading, ask them to pick one character and explain why that character behaved in a particular way.

SCAFFOLDING

Assigning a chapter to read before it is discussed is almost useless. The practice works only if the teacher does some pre-teaching by providing a cognitive map—an organizing scheme or scaffold. A scaffold is a frame built before constructing something. Building a scaffold for students makes it easier for them to make sense of what is being read. Give them clues about the chapter. Then, when they are motivated enough to read, they will enjoy the satisfaction of discovery.

Another approach is to teach students to preview or “multipass” by passing through the chapter looking for organizers before reading it. This scanning includes headlines, subheadings, bold print and italics, chapter summary, pictures and graphs, objectives, chapter questions, and vocabulary words that are listed.

REDUCING THE CORRECTION OF HOME ASSIGNMENTS

Since we learn best by teaching, have students become teachers. For example, before the teacher checks any essay, at least two other people should check it. When final papers are submitted, they will be of higher quality and more enjoyable to read. Also, when papers are submitted, refrain from correcting them. Instead, make a comment such as, “You have a spelling error in this paragraph.” “Check for noun-verb agreement in this sentence.” Using abbreviations will save even more time. This “grappling” encourages self-correction and self-evaluation.

Save time with arithmetic by selecting only five problems to correct, rather than checking all answers. The problems may be the last five or any five problems. When students submit their papers, correct only these pre-selected problems. Looking at only these will give enough indication of whether or not more time needs to be invested in the lesson or with selected students.

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