

Homework That Gets Done and Contributes to Learning

In this *Middle Ground* article, University of Missouri/St. Louis professor Cathy Vatterott offers suggestions for increasing the homework completion rate and getting a bigger instructional bang for the buck:

- *Provide a clear academic purpose* – Homework shouldn't present new knowledge; rather, it should enhance classroom learning by checking for understanding, practicing a skill learned in class, reviewing for a test or quiz, or previewing something students will learn soon.

- *Make it do-able* – “Homework that students cannot do without help is not good homework and is demotivating,” says Vatterott. “Homework should make students feel smarter, not dumber.”

- *Personalize* – Students should have choices and opportunities to gain ownership of the assignment.

- *Make it interesting* – Students are much more likely to complete homework when it is clear, interesting, and fun. “Middle grades students routinely complain about spaces too small to write in or too much information on a page,” says Vatterott. Some examples of good assignments:

- Write an op-ed piece defending a war, a theory, a method, a character, or an author.
- Create a lesson plan to teach the water cycle to students in a lower grade.
- Write a story or newspaper article showing you know the meaning of the 15 vocabulary words of the week.
- *Differentiate* – “One-size-fits-all homework does not fit all,” says Vatterott.

Homework can be differentiated by:

- Time – A 20-minute assignment for one student can take another student 60 minutes. One solution is to make an assignment time-based rather than task-based, for example, “Do as many problems as you can in 20 minutes, draw a line, and work longer if you'd like.”
- Difficulty – For example, fewer questions, or circling rather than writing answers. Many adaptations that teachers use for ELL or special-education students could benefit others as well.
- Scaffolding – Providing graphic organizers, word banks, multiplication tables, partially-completed math problems, and copies of class notes can make homework more do-able.
- Interest/learning style – For example, letting students choose which book to read or which aspect of a country's culture to research, or let students choose how they will demonstrate what they have learned – a report, poster, or video.

- *Decriminalize grading* – “Homework should not cause students to fail,” says Vatterott. “If homework carries too much weight in determining students' grades, students may fail even though they have demonstrated mastery on tests and in-class

assignments.” Holding students accountable for homework should mean insisting that they finish rather than giving them a zero. Some possible policies:

- Have a Zeros Aren't Possible policy – all work must be completed.
- Use homework to check for understanding and give feedback.
- Don't kill motivation or course grades by being too punitive.
- If possible, don't give grades at all; give credit for completion only, not correctness or accuracy.
- Count homework 10 percent or less of final grades.
- Be somewhat lenient on lateness; allow re-dos or give “incomplete” grades.

Vatterott suggests ways of checking homework every day: (a) A quick visual check (these got it, these didn't) with immediate follow-up instruction for the students who didn't;

(b) Student self-check (got it, not sure, didn't get it) with follow-up instruction for the latter two groups; and (c) Peer review – students meet in groups, compare answers, ask each other questions, and report back to the teacher.

- *Solve problems* – When students don't complete homework, figure out why.

Reasons might include academic, organizational, motivational, situational (too many distractions at home, too many after-school activities), or personal (depression, anxiety, family issues). Solutions might include:

- Let some students keep a copy of the textbook at home.
- Assign “homework buddies” to work with or call for help.
- Set a maximum amount of time to work on each assignment.
- Prioritize assignments.
- Give all assignments for the next week on Friday, due the following Friday.
- Stagger due dates for each segment of long-term projects.
- Allow parents or students to call the teacher at home if necessary.
- Once a week, have students clean out lockers and reorganize their folders.
- Coordinate core-subject homework assignments and limit the number of tests and projects at any given point in time.

• *Provide support* – “Instead of trying to teach kids responsibility, let's force them to practice responsibility,” says Vatterott. Some schools have ZAP (Zeroes Aren't Possible) after-school programs four days a week, with mandatory early intervention for students who aren't turning in homework on a regular basis.

“Five Steps to More Effective Homework” by Cathy Vatterott in *Middle Ground*, August 2010 (Vol. 14, #1, p. 29-31), no e-link available; the author is at vatterott@umsl.edu