

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

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School/Grade: Byram Hills High School / 11

SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context:

There are three participants in this 2017 Investigators of Practice action research project. The participants all teach the 11th Grade United States History courses offered at Byram Hills High School. The roles of the participants include two general education and one special education teacher. The general education teachers' primary focus is on the development and delivery of content area lessons while the special education teacher's focus is on the specially designed skill instruction and implementation of individual education plan (IEP) accommodations and modifications. One of the general education teachers has four sections of the US History course, the other has three sections of US History, two of which are Consultant Teacher (CTS) classes with the special education teacher. This action research project is completely foundational in nature and could be expanded upon with further research, as well as strategies for implementation of ideas regarding homework and homework completion in the future.

With its long history of being an important component of learning and schools, the concept of homework has become so ingrained in the culture and tradition of schools that it is often thought of as beyond reproach. The practice is thought of as an important means of supporting the curriculum and providing additional opportunities for students to access curriculum, it teaches responsibility, and is a sign of a rigorous curriculum. However, these beliefs surrounding homework are being called into question more frequently as the nature and culture of schools, students, and families have evolved. According to Vatterott, forces driving this evolution include diversity in parenting styles, economic backgrounds, and family structures; changing beliefs about the role of academics and school outside the school day; and shifting priorities and a move toward balancing school with other aspects of life as opposed to school being the primary responsibility of a student. In addition, the increasing role of technology in the modern classroom are having profound impacts on the ways that our students, digital natives, approach learning.

Action Plan:

For our action plan we focused on exploring the the impact of students' perceptions on the purpose of homework. Our research question was: *"How will students awareness of the purpose of homework help them as learners?"* Generally we found that both US History teachers have

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lessened the amount of homework assigned to students over the last two years, and therefore, wanted to explore how students perceived the purpose of homework assignments given in our respective classes, and its overall impact on student success.

For our inquiry we focused on Cathy Vatterott's *Rethinking Homework*, especially the chapter entitled "Effective Homework Practices." Vatterott states that "we must consider the purpose of the homework task--how it relates to what is learned in the classroom--and what type of learning is desired." To attain student feedback on student perception on the purpose of homework, we developed a homework survey for students to complete. Our survey was divided in three categories:

- Purpose of Homework
- Reflection of Learning
- Motivation

Here is a sampling of some of the questions we posed to students:

- What do you think the purpose of homework is?
- Do you typically find homework to be meaningful?
- Do you prefer homework that sets you up for the next day's lesson (example: gives you background information) or do you prefer homework that has you practice what you learned in class? Why?
- If you usually complete homework assignments, what motivates you to complete them? If you do not always complete assignments, why not?

Vatterott proposes that "homework typically supports learning in one of four ways: pre-learning, checking for understanding, practice, or processing" (p. 96). For the purpose of our research we explained to students that pre-learning assignments are those that provided students with some background before the following day's lesson. Assignments that were based on checking for understanding are assignments in which students were to explain a the historical-significance of a topic or individual. Practice-based assignments are assignments that are more rote based, and are usually more post-learning activities. Lastly, processing-based assignments are more reflection-based, in which we may ask students to share an evaluation, make an analysis, or create a product.

As a group, our foundational research was centered on the work of Cathy Vatterott. Cathy Vatterott's book, *Rethinking Homework: Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs*, gave us a myriad of information about homework culture, homework practices, and homework strategies. In addition, we also read Myron Dueck's, *Grading Smarter Not Harder*.

Results:

The responses from our survey yielded some interesting results. One big take away for us was that

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higher achieving students tended to like homework which taught them something new/prepared them for the next day's lesson. Lower achieving students tended to like homework that reviewed that day's lesson. Another interesting factor observed from the survey results was how much homework has evolved in the 21st Century, especially given the fact that the majority of assignments were posted and submitted via Google Classroom, and the majority were media-based, utilizing online videos or links to important articles and documents. Since our students are "digital natives," there seemed to be a strong reliance on internet resources and/or platforms to complete their homework assignments.

Selected student responses - Purposes of homework:

- I always find homework to be meaningful because it allows me to apply exactly what we learned in school to a worksheet or essay that tells me whether I should be studying that topic more, or if I shouldn't. Homework is the base of in-school learning, as it reinforces all in-school learning with problem solving at home.
- I prefer homework that has you practice what you learned in class because I like being able to review what was discussed in class to make sure I understand what was taught. I don't prefer homework setting up for the next day's lesson because I often become confused doing the homework.
- The purpose of homework is to reinforce what you learned in class. It is to make sure you further understand what was talked about in class. Yes I do find homework to be meaningful and helpful in understanding a topic.
- I think the purpose of homework is to test one's knowledge of what they learn in class and to give more practice to learn the material even better. Homework is meaningful because it provides students with the chance to improve on what they learned in class on any given day.
- I think that homework has one of two purposes. The first is practice. Practicing what is learned in class is very important. If a teacher were to make all homework optional, still do most/all of the homework. I only wouldn't do it if either, a) I had a ton of other work or b) I really hated the class. I would say that practice is a meaningful form of homework. The second, much more rare purpose for homework is for teaching. A few teachers will give you the homework of reading the textbook to learn the material and then never teach in class. This is not meaningful. It is an excuse for the teacher to not do their job. Lessons should be taught in class, not at home.
- I think the purpose of homework is to keep going over the work that you are doing in class to know it well when it gets to a test. I find some of it meaningful when it is review for a test.
- When you complete your homework, do you understand why you are doing it? Sometimes and other times I think to myself why do teachers give homework after 7 hours of school
- What do you think the purpose of homework is? Do you typically find homework to be meaningful? It is to make sure you are learning in school. I think hw is good and bad because when we get home we should be relaxing not doing hw but then we are also doing hw that we learned in school.
- I prefer homework that provides practice for what we learned in class because it helps to

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solidify the information in my mind while homework that gives me background information on something unlearned often confuses me when I haven't been taught it yet.

- I prefer homework that has you practice what you learned in class because it allows you to completely immerse yourself in that specific topic, and determine what you know well and what you need to practice. This will then allow you to seek help before any large assignments testing your knowledge on that topic.

Selected student responses - Reflections on learning:

- I feel in math you should get more review because there is a lot of memory for equations. And also science because it is a lot of memory.
- knowing that this could help me better understand the curriculum and prepare me for the exam motivates me to complete my homework.
- I think that some classes definitely require more homework than others. A math or science class needs practice problems every night, while a English or social studies class requires an essay to be written every few weeks.
- I much prefer practice to background information. As discussed above, homework that simply gives background information usually results in the teacher not teaching. What is the point of having class if the only thing the teacher does is give you worksheets or problems in the textbook? Material should be taught in class, not at home.

Selected student responses - Motivation:

- What motivates you to them? If you do not always complete assignments, why not? Just getting it over with and having time to chill out.
- I complete all of my homework assignments because it is a great grade booster
- I think their should be a homework completion grade factored into my average but not a grade of how well I do on the assignment. I think this because having it factored into an average will motivate more people do it and seek out more practice on a certain topic.
- Yes, I think that homework should be factored into your average because it serves as a responsibility assessment. It shows if a student is truly committed to learning and doing well in school, as well as showing if a student needs more help in the subject of study.

Implications:

Our study yielded some interesting conclusions. First, we found that students were equally divided regarding the types of assignments they believed to be purposeful, or that they preferred. Half of our students preferred assignments that were practice-based. These assignments would allow students to recall information learned from the preceding lesson, and allow them to review content they just learned. Interestingly enough, we found that most of the students who preferred practice based assignments were students who were currently struggling with the course. The other half of students surveyed preferred assignments that were preparatory in

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nature for the following day's lesson. These students preferred assignments that would present new information they would learn in the next day. On average, we found that these students were mainly higher level thinking students. Another interesting result from the survey dealt with student motivation. The answers truly varied on what motivated students. Some students were motivated by the grade, while others sought to simply expand their learning. Due to time constraints in our study we could not further explore this topic, and felt it could become it's own action research question.

If we were to expand upon this research in the future, we would focus on the following questions:

- To what extent does grading impact student motivation to complete homework?
- Which type of homework assignment is more beneficial for students in a US History classroom; pre-learning assignments, or practice-based assignments?

The primary means of data collection used on this project was a Homework Survey that required narrative/anecdotal responses from students regarding purpose, component of learning and motivations behind homework completion. The students were given class time to complete the survey without the teachers being present and were incentivized by extra credit on the next exam for full completion. Based on the responses to the survey, there is an appearance that different learner profiles approached, viewed, and saw value in homework assignments very differently. The learner profiles referenced are not rigidly defined classes but were loosely viewed as struggling students, average student, and high flyer students. While the narrative/anecdotal responses were interesting, valuable, and drove the interventions that were selected, it was challenging to digest the volume of data to see if any actual trends existed. One area for further development would be a data collection mechanism, such as a survey that facilitates easy manipulation and display of the data. Initial brainstorming indicated that a likert rating scale (similar to Connors or BASC) might be appropriate for this purpose.

References

Dueck, M. (2014). *Grading smarter not harder. Assessment strategies that motivate kids to help them learn.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Vatterott, C. (2009). *Rethinking homework: Best practices that support diverse needs.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.