

Characteristics of Effective Homework

Summary: Designing or choosing homework can be one of the least enjoyable parts of a teacher's day, especially when its effectiveness is unclear. In an article for *Educational Leadership*, Cathy Vatterott, an education professor at the University of Missouri – St. Louis, discussed the five key hallmarks of effective homework that promotes maximum student learning.

Practical Applications

Vatterott highlights the following five elements:

- **Purpose.** While teachers know their purpose behind giving a homework assignment, “our goal is to give students methods that are purposeful for *them*, methods that work for *their* learning styles.” Consider giving the students choice in how they complete the assignment. Also, teachers should consider whether the assignment is at the right level of thinking to reach the outcome they want (e.g. is copying definitions of words getting at the vocabulary learning you want?). Lastly, is the homework giving the teacher feedback about student understanding and misunderstanding?
Keep in mind: “practice is more effective when distributed in small doses over several days and weeks.”
- **Efficiency.** Make sure that homework assignments minimize non-academic time (e.g. cutting, gluing) or, if they have non-academic pieces, have carefully spelled out rubrics and outcomes. There are often more efficient ways to reach the same goals, especially leveraging technology.
- **Ownership.** Giving students' ownership over homework is key to building motivation. Providing for student choice, asking students for their input in creating or choosing assignments, and shying away from absolute demands (e.g. read X number of pages) go a long way.
- **Competence.** Quite simply, “to ensure homework is doable, teachers must differentiate assignments so they are at the appropriate level of difficulty for students.” This can be done easily by providing time-based homework instead of task-based (i.e. do as many problems as possible in 30 minutes instead of complete these 50 problems). Clearly structured and scaffolded, easy-to-read instructions can also be very helpful.
- **Aesthetic Appeal.** So long as it doesn't go too far and create a less academic task, having visually pleasing homework increases the chances it will be completed. Ideally, homework should have “less information on the page, plenty of room to write answers, and the use of graphics or clip art [to] make tasks look interesting and inviting.”

Conclusion and Citation

Homework has the potential to be a powerful learning tool, but it has to be designed and/or chosen thoughtfully if it is to advance student learning.

Vatterott, C. “Five Hallmarks of Good Homework.” *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 68 (Aug. 2011), pp. 10-15. <http://bit.ly/r5tPqL> (free).