

Teacher's bookshelf: Rethinking Homework

SHORT ARTICLES

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Nine years after releasing Rethinking Homework: Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs, US education professor Cathy Vatterott is back with a second edition. The former teacher and principal says much has changed since the original publication, but the debate over whether school homework should be seen as essential, alienating or even harmful is an enduring one. Rather than eliminating homework all together, she suggests a new paradigm to guide educators in setting tasks that work for all students. In this extract for Teacher readers – taken from a chapter on effective homework practices – Vatterott discusses the importance of making tasks relevant and giving students more control over their learning.

‘Students are often unmotivated to do homework because they do not perceive it as important. It’s just a task to do with no personal relevance or individuality.

‘What’s wrong with this picture? In many classrooms, students feel little or no ownership of their learning in general – we teach, we assign tasks, we test, and students are the passive receptacles (Wiliam, 2016). They have no stake in the outcome – it doesn’t mean anything to them – because it’s not about them. As long as learning and homework are being “done to” them, the goals are ours, not theirs (Kohn, 2006). As a teacher once said, “I’ve never heard of a child not doing his work; it’s our work he’s not doing” (Vatterott, 2015).

‘Think about all the imperfections we accept from very young children as they learn skills like feeding and dressing themselves. We instinctively realize that messy high chairs and snow boots worn in summer are less important than mastery of the skill and the pride that comes with it. We fully understand the freedom that is required for children to take ownership of those tasks. Yet when it comes to academic learning, we often fail to appreciate the innate desire for mastery or trust the child’s knowledge of how to get there. So we assign a single task as homework and expect all students to comply. And voilà! Learning occurs. Except when it doesn’t (Vatterott, 2014) ...

‘... Like those milestones in early childhood development, student ownership of homework is not perfect, but it is powerful. When students know themselves as learners and how they best learn, and when they are free to connect personally with the content, learning becomes joyful and intrinsically rewarding and need not be incentivized.

‘How is student ownership of homework achieved? It starts with choice (Anderson, 2016). Homework choice can be as limited as asking students to “pick any 10 of these 30 problems to solve,” as specific as having students work only on learning targets that they are struggling with, or as wide open as a self-selected, self-designed project. Students may not have a choice about the learning goal, but they can almost always be given a choice as to the path they take to reach the goal. For instance, suppose the learning goal for all students is to memorize their multiplication tables. The homework might look like this:

1. Create your own method to memorize your multiplication tables. Some ideas other students have tried include reciting, making note cards, drawing a grid or a color-coded chart, or creating a rap song.
2. Share your idea with the class tomorrow.
3. Practice your method this week.
4. Evaluate how well your method worked after the no-count quiz on Friday.’

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Rethinking homework: Best practices that support diverse needs, 2nd Edition, by Cathy Vatterott, published by ASCD, is out now. Learn more about this book and ASCD by visiting www.ascd.org (<http://www.ascd.org>).

References

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In this extract, Dr Cathy Vatterott discusses the importance of giving students more control over homework tasks. Think about a recent homework task you set for your students. What was the learning goal? Was it important for students to take the same path to that goal? How could you have introduced student choice about the path taken?