

Bringing HOMEWORK INTO **FOCUS**

*Tools and Tips to Enhance
Practices, Design, and Feedback*

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Introduction

Homework is an interesting topic. Students, parents, and educators often have opinions about the practice that are in direct opposition. There is research to support that homework has benefits. There is also research that indicates benefits are lacking. Harris Cooper (2007) states that much of the impact homework has on achievement is dependent on the age of students. Other factors include the amount of time spent doing homework, the content, and the feedback given. Even among educators, viewpoints are contradictory. Regardless of our feelings about homework, the practice is alive and kicking in most of our schools. As a result, it is advantageous to create the best possible approaches to homework design and implementation.

This book will:

- Provide a global picture of the purpose of homework
- Create and evaluate quality assignments
- Evaluate considerations when assigning homework
- Relate grading practices to homework
- Promote collaborative team discussion and action

Homework is a topic that we take for granted. It is often assigned out of habit rather than as a result of careful thought and consideration. That is not a criticism; rather, it is meant to build awareness that homework should be given with caution, care, and consideration.

Focus and Organization of the Book

Quality homework design is the focus of this book. However, the purpose of homework, whether or not to assign homework, and the grading practices connected to homework are all addressed as well. Although the term *homework* is used throughout, the practices discussed are true of any work assigned to students.

Each chapter is organized to incorporate new learning, provide tools to organize thought, evaluate practices, or demonstrate ideas. Following each chapter is a section devoted to collaborative team discussion.

The topics and contents are as follows:

- Chapter 1 discusses the four types of student work and clarifies the purpose of each from an assessment perspective.
- Chapter 2 describes the four components important to designing quality homework.
- Chapter 3 concentrates on recognizing and designing quality work to ensure student understanding.
- Chapter 4 discusses considerations to determine when and if homework should be given.
- Chapter 5 clarifies grading practices as they relate to homework.
- Chapter 6 assists the reader in taking the next steps and viewing positive practices, evaluating current practices, and working to close the gap between current practices and the desired state.

Although the title for this book refers to homework, it may help to consider that homework most often refers to any work done outside of the classroom. Where the work is completed is typically not relevant. However, the purpose of the task is incredibly relevant and changes the focus of the intent and outcome of the work. The descriptions of the type of student work are valid no matter the location in which a student is working, whether inside or outside of the classroom. It is the type of work that gives us direction as to how to respond to the outcome, not the location in which it is completed.

Importance of a Team Approach

When teachers work collaboratively to improve their practice, the result is beneficial to students. In a professional learning community (PLC) approach for example, authors Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas W. Many (2010) reveal that a PLC is “an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 11). The collaborative team discussion questions at the end of each chapter will assist in this process.

Types of Work and Their Purposes

Over the years, I have heard dozens of reasons for the assignment of homework. Class was cut short, and there wasn't enough time to finish the lesson. Without homework, students will lose skills over a vacation period. Poor student behavior, poor test performance, or poor preparation for advanced placement calls for additional homework. Students need homework to practice a skill or prepare for a test. Homework is a way for students to practice skills addressed during class, or homework is an extension of the school day. Homework provides discovery work for students (Guskey & Bailey, 2001). The list goes on. However, reasons are not the same as purpose. Ultimately, purpose defines the reason and why it is important for the student to engage in the task.

The word *homework* is just as global in scope as generic adjectives such as *good*, *big*, and *nice*. Often we fail to more clearly define the purpose of the homework for both the students and ourselves. Are we assigning a task that will provide information about the readiness level of students for the next unit? Are we asking students to do some introductory work so they are ready for class the following day? Are we assigning practice work to ensure that students have a better understanding of concepts or processes introduced in today's class? Is it also possible to assign a task or project that sums up the skills and concepts learned while providing evidence that students can demonstrate their understanding of recent lessons?

In this chapter, we will assign purpose to homework by dividing it into four main types of student work.

1. Diagnostic
2. Introductory
3. Formative
4. Summative

Diagnostic Work

Diagnostic work serves to identify what students know in advance of a unit of study. It provides students with the opportunity to demonstrate their background knowledge, which is likely necessary for success in the upcoming unit. For example, assessing the understanding of factors in math might precede work on simplifying fractions. Similarly, evaluating students' knowledge of the concepts of cause and effect would be valuable information to have prior to beginning a social studies unit that concentrates on the causes and effects of certain historical events like World War I, for example. Diagnostic work does not need to be extensive, but it does need to supply the information required for a teacher to make decisions on next steps. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 provide an illustration of diagnostic assignments.

<p>1. Describe or illustrate the word factors using the number 24.</p> <p>The factors of 24 are any two numbers that when multiplied together equal 24. They would include 1×24 and 2×12.</p>		
<p>List the factors of the following numbers.</p>		
<p>2. 6</p> <p>1×6</p> <p>2×3</p>	<p>3. 15</p> <p>1×15</p> <p>3×5</p>	<p>4. 16</p> <p>1×16</p> <p>4×4</p> <p>2×8</p>

Figure 1.1: Example of diagnostic work—simplifying fractions.

When reviewing the students' work on finding factors, this form will illustrate whether or not a student understands the concept and whether or not a student can illustrate his or her understanding. It can be used at the beginning of a unit of instruction to evaluate basic understanding prior to going on to numbers with several factors. The student is asked to complete three examples to ensure that he or she is able to repeatedly get a correct response. In the case of this student, he was able to complete numbers two through four accurately. In number one, although he was able to talk about the meaning of a factor, he failed to list all of the factors of twenty-four. This could mean he either didn't know them or just didn't include them. This student may need additional opportunities to demonstrate his understanding of factors with larger numbers like thirty-six, sixty-four, or one hundred.

Read the following examples. List the cause and the effect.	
<p>1. Mrs. Biggs opened her umbrella when the clouds appeared to burst and the rain poured down.</p> <p>Cause: Rain poured down.</p> <p>Effect: Mrs. Biggs opened her umbrella.</p>	<p>2. Jessica rode her bike to the baseball game. When she arrived, it was time to start practice. She quickly grabbed her glove and ran to the pitcher's mound.</p> <p>Cause: It was time to start practice.</p> <p>Effect: Jessica grabbed her glove and ran to the pitcher's mound.</p>
Write two examples of cause and effect. After the example, separately list the cause and effect in the example.	
<p>In example 1, have the cause come before the effect.</p> <p>Mindy's ice cream was melting so she ate it quickly.</p> <p>Cause: Ice cream was melting.</p> <p>Effect: She ate it quickly.</p>	
<p>In example 2, have the cause follow the effect.</p> <p>The bunny hopped away quickly after seeing the snake slither through the grass.</p> <p>Cause: Snake.</p> <p>Effect: Bunny hopped away.</p>	

Figure 1.2: Example of diagnostic work—cause and effect.

As the teacher reviews student responses, he or she can quickly evaluate student understanding. Does the student understand that in a sentence or group of sentences the cause does not need to precede the effect? Can the student write sentences in which the cause comes before the effect and other sentences where the cause comes after the effect? The assignment can be used to evaluate whether students can identify cause and effect in something they read, whether they can write a quality sentence illustrating cause and effect, and whether or not they can order the cause and effect in different ways. The directions in this graphic organizer can become more sophisticated depending on the age of the student. For example, it may be preferred that the student write a short paragraph. With a young student, an illustration may be preferable.

Students' performance on diagnostic work also identifies their strengths and challenges, which the teacher then uses to build lessons that correspond to the associated needs. Such diagnostic work might include specific questions addressing the content. For example, a teacher can use a tool similar to figure 1.3 when beginning to teach a standard that addresses components of a story—plot, character, and setting—to assess prior knowledge. Because the standards are the basis for what is taught in any subject at any grade level, starting with a standard will pinpoint the target on which the lesson or assignment is based. Any story familiar to the student can be chosen for the task. The clarity of students' responses and the depth of the information provided will help the teacher plan next steps. As a result, teachers will be more knowledgeable of not only the students' understanding of the vocabulary used but also of their ability to provide focused, detailed information. This type of diagnostic tool is also versatile for elementary and secondary schools because the content is connected to the grade level or course.

The student responses based on the story of Little Red Riding Hood show that the student has a basic understanding of the word *plot*, is unsure of what *characteristic* means even though the student is able to provide some examples, and is able to give a fairly detailed example of how setting is important to the story. When describing the plot, the student is superficial in the response. This could mean that she needs to refer back to the story to provide some specific events, or it could mean that she needs additional instruction or exemplars regarding expectations for a good response. Diagnostically, however, the student shows that she has a basic understanding of plot, character, and setting.

Diagnostic work can also be more global in nature, requiring students to list what they know about a given topic as is often done in the popular KWL graphic organizer. A KWL can have several variations; for instance, it can require students to list what they *know* (K), what they *want* to know (W), and how they want to *learn* about the topic (L), rather than the usual approach of listing what they have learned postinstruction. For example, if the next U.S. history unit involves the American Revolution, basic information about what the students already know can be collected and used when planning next steps. The purpose of diagnostic work is to evaluate what students know so that teachers can incorporate those data into what needs to be taught, thus influencing the lesson design. Figure 1.4 (page 8) provides an example of a typical KWL.

The information provided by the student in this KWL immediately tells the teacher that although his knowledge base is limited, the student has an interest in the topic that goes beyond names and dates. The student was able to articulate some

Think of the story of Little Red Riding Hood in order to complete the following tasks.	
1. In your own words, define the word plot as related to the plot of a story.	The plot is what happens in the story. It tells the beginning, middle, and end. It helps the reader understand what is happening and why it is happening.
2. What was the plot of the story?	Little Red went to Grandma's house and Grandma was replaced by a wolf.
3. Define characteristics .	A characteristic is a character in a story.
4. Describe three characteristics of two characters.	Little Red is cute, but probably not real smart because it took her too long to figure out Grandma was really a wolf. She is a girl, and she is probably seven. The wolf is mean and has big teeth. He wants to destroy Little Red.
5. Where did the story mostly take place, and why was the setting important to the story?	The main action took place in Grandma's house because that's where the story really became exciting. It needed to be in Grandma's house otherwise Little Red might not have been fooled so easily. But in this case, she was expecting to see Grandma so it probably fooled her more than it would have somewhere else.

Figure 1.3: Example of diagnostic work—plot, character, and setting.

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specific things he wants to know more about. These components, like how the revolution impacted families, can be incorporated into the lessons that follow. Perhaps the W section can be the basis of some personalized learning and students can design some research that they would be interested in completing and presenting.

If the teacher finds an extensive list of information that the student already knows about the KWL topic, differentiation will be needed. What additional information can the student learn about the topic? How can she gain a deeper understanding beyond what was listed? Is there a group of students with the same basis of understanding who might work together? Can learning be personalized to meet their needs? The final column, L, can be used as an assessment following the unit.