

To Homework or Not to Homework
The Costly Effects of Homework on Learning

Millennials stroke again with a new revolution in the matters of the educational system. Their quest is to reduce the amount of homework or, if possible, give it up all together. Is this another New Age, shaky attack aimed towards the traditional, or are they actually on to something and having less homework does help improve learning?

Having this in mind, I went on my own quest and came across decades of research that provided substantial evidence for the importance of homework in the process of learning. Old resources, such as the study of Sullivan and Sequeira (1996) argued that we cannot but benefit from completion of homework, provided that the particular homework assigned falls under the *purposefulness* criterion, which they further described as “relevant, creative, meaningful, involving and of quality”. Baer (2014) explained how creativity stands as an important factor in critical thinking, where divergent thinking, a key aspect of creativity, enriches the palette of solutions for a specific problem. When the amount of information required to complete homework assignments exceeds the student’s level of comprehension, creativity becomes obstructed by performance anxiety and dysfunctional attitudes such as “I am not smart enough to do this homework”. Are millennials battling with psychological disorders over time abusing homework?

Science already proved us how important homework is in the process of learning, but when does it become a table-turner, encouraging incompleteness, dysfunctional attitudes, and even depression? As a psychotherapist in formation, I use homework in cognitive-behavioral therapy sessions to help improve the outcome of a certain intervention in a treatment design, and its benefits have long been proved. But what is the differentiating factor, besides the specificity of content? As practitioners, we make sure our homework assignments come as an aid to better understand and practice what we teach our clients in therapy, we stress on the importance of it

being completed, pointing out the reason behind every exercise and its positive results, we do not use concepts that have not been explained, to say the least, and we also take into account our clients' schedule for in no way are we to overwhelm them with work they have neither the time, nor the motivation to do. Are educators failing to do the same in class, or is it a matter of feedback? Feedback plays a crucial role when it comes to homework as a learning instrument; students need to be told whether they did well or not, and what should they work on more. It is important to verify if the subjects taught in school came through, thus homework becomes a double-way feedback: on one hand, for the professor, who receives the opportunity to evaluate his skills as an educator and, on the other hand, for the student, who receives validation for his work and further instructions on how to improve it. Without feedback, homework is purposeless.

What would less homework actually do for learning? When students average approximately 3.1 hours of homework each night, according to a Stanford study (Galloway, Conner & Parker, 2013), does it really matter if the assignments are purposeful? Pope and colleagues' study showed strong correlations of homework with stress, reduction of health - especially sleep deprivation- and less time for family, friends and extracurricular pursuits. They also concluded that students tend to be alone most of the time because of the amount of content they need to cover outside the classroom. Less homework thus enables them to lead a healthy life, both physically and socially, not to mention psychologically and academically.

Learning as a cognitive process cannot be unfolded without concept formation, a deep understanding of content and critical thinking; purposeful homework serves as catalyzer for all the aspects mentioned. On the other hand, busy homework can hinder learning, therefore, it is my view that on a functional-dysfunctional continuum, assignments should not fall further than the middle - less could be more and more can be less.

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