

### 3. Avoid grading practice (homework).

Homework is never to learn material the first time around. Successful teachers don't give homework unless their students have already mastered the concepts. If students have a partial understanding of something and we ask them to practice or rehearse the material in the homework assignment that night, we are doing them a disservice. They will learn it incorrectly, and it will take ten times the emotional and intellectual energy to go back and undo "bad" learning. This is a side effect of confabulation.

*Confabulation* is when the mind seeks the big-picture connections of something it has learned, and when it doesn't find all the pieces of the puzzle, it makes up information or borrows from other memories and inserts false information into the holes of missing understanding. The worst part is that the mind convinces itself that this entire picture is the original learning. It has difficulty detecting what was true and what was confabulated for the sake of the big-picture requirement. No matter what we do as teachers, our stu-

dents' minds will be trying to create the larger contexts in which all content and skills fit—regardless of whether we provide it.

Your brain is trying to make connections right now as you read these words: You're thinking about whether

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Rethink homework if it is a major reason kids are failing.

—Eileen Bendixen, secondary teacher

confabulation is true, whether it fits with what you know already, how it compares with other cognitive theory information you've received over the years, how you will categorize it in your mind, how you will use this knowledge when you work with particular students, who among your colleagues might be interested in hearing about this, and where the author is going next with this information. If you were a student of mine and we had several days together to interact on this topic, we'd be able to prevent a majority of misconceptions that arise in your thinking, and we'd tackle confabulated learning to the ground. Two of the greatest allies in the battle against confabulation are frequent assessment and revision of instruction.

Take this idea back to homework, assessment, and grading: Homework is given after students have mastered material. It's assigned so that students can practice, reinforce, elaborate, prepare, and extend their understanding, not to learn something "cold." We are skating on thin ice when a student says he doesn't understand something and we respond, "Do the homework assignment. It will be made clear to you."

Does this mean we occasionally give different homework assignments for different students, or take away homework entirely one evening for a subset of students? Sure. What is fair isn't always equal, and we're out to be fair and effective as teachers. The next night's homework for these students who didn't master the topic today includes material asking them to practice today's concepts as well as tomorrow's concepts. The rest of the class won't get this kind of homework tomorrow night. As long as we make a practice of extending this offer to everyone and students don't perceive that we significantly increase or decrease someone's workload over the course of a week, they'll accept the different requirements and timing.

The following brief descriptions establish a rationale for this premise: In differentiated classrooms, we don't grade homework. Homework is practice, not a demonstration of mastery, and letter grades are saved for declarations of mastery. Letter grades are given post-learning; homework is assessed *while* learning. Be clear, though: We must give feedback on homework, and we give feedback on homework without using grades. If we feel we need to grade the collective homework for a grading period in order to coerce students into doing it, a small percentage is the most we should apply. More about this later.

No adult would put up with being graded on his or her route to come to know a concept. Imagine an education professor who teaches a complex teaching approach and tells us that he will visit our classrooms in one month to evaluate our proficiency with it. "You have one month to practice this," he tells us. One week into that month, however, he shows up to see how we're doing, gives us some feedback, then adds, "I'll be using my observations of you today in your final grade at the end of the month." Many of us would cry foul in such a situation because we were just beginning to practice the concept; we weren't ready to demonstrate full proficiency.

This is analogous to putting a letter grade on a student's math homework. We taught students how to determine faces, edges, and vertices on eight different three-dimensional solids on Tuesday, and the student practices it that night. How fair is it to grade that student's practice with it? Wouldn't the grade be more ethical and accurate by first processing the practice attempts with the student, then giving more practice experiences, exploring the concepts further, providing more practice, building the student's automaticity with the concept, then finally declaring that tomorrow he or she will be assessed officially on the concepts to determine level of mastery?

If we grade students' practice or their steps in coming to know a concept, the final grade is not accurate. It does not represent pure mastery. It represents what the child knows and is able to do as well as all the practice attempts and immature understanding of the concepts along the way. We don't do this in the "real" world of adults where we're always given the highest grade that represents our mastery. Past, occasionally inaccurate explorations are not held against us. We should afford the same courtesy to young adolescents and adolescents.

The most important response to a student's homework assignment is feedback, not grades, and grades in general are poor forms of feedback. Some teachers claim, however, that students will not do homework assignments if they are not graded.

This notion is false. There are many ways to make homework compelling without resorting to grades, but those ideas are beyond the purview of this book. If readers are interested, let me recommend the works of Robert Marzano (1992, 2000), Ken O'Connor (2002), Neila Connors (2000), and Harris Cooper (2001) as well as the chapter dedicated to the topic in my own book, *Day One and Beyond* (2003).

I ran across a teacher in New York state a year ago who counts daily quizzes as 50 percent of the final academic grade. These quizzes have a few questions, and they are completed during the first few minutes of every class. They are based on the previous night's reading. The teacher claims that students won't do the reading unless they know they will be quizzed on the material the next day, so those grades count heavily in order to motivate reluctant students.

I asked this teacher what his grades represent. He said, "Mastery of the material." Then I asked him whether the grades on these quizzes represent mastery of the material or just that students did the reading—a work habit. He said they indicated both.

I disagree. After students read something, they need time and expertise to help them process the information. At a minimum, the teacher should have helped them interpret and apply the information learned in the previous night's reading and given them more practice with the material before ever considering a formal assessment for mastery. The teacher's grades don't reflect what students know and are able to do. Fully half of the grade's declaration in

this situation is based on whether a student did what was asked, not what he or she understands. The grade can no longer be used to document progress, provide feedback, or inform instructional decisions.

Daily quizzes that are announced in advance and given to make sure students do homework are more likely to invite students to cheat than to be declarative assessments of learning. They are more about compliance than standards. We may or may not agree with this sentiment for each of our quizzes, but it makes sense to reflect on their use: Are we giving this quiz to keep students “on their toes” and working, or are we giving the quiz to assess student learning and provide feedback? Is it both? Do we give quizzes in order to catch students making mistakes with their time and learning, or to truly aid their growth? And, of course: Is the quiz going to yield accurate information about students’ proficiency? In reality, it’s normal to use quizzes as both cattle prod and thermometer, but we should lean toward the thermometer.

What if there are other factors impacting a student’s ability to complete homework assignments? Some of my students over the years have been in charge of their younger siblings because their parents worked four jobs between the two of them. The parents didn’t arrive home every evening until after ten. My students in those families were in charge of dinner, bathing little brothers and sisters, and laundering their clothing, as well as discipline and making sure everyone’s homework was done. By the time everything was done, they were exhausted. Some even worked in local businesses after school prior to going home to those responsibilities. The eight pages of reading about the Spanish-American War, the sinking of the USS *Maine*, and the rise of yellow journalism that I assigned students to read and summarize for homework pales in importance under such conditions.

John Buell, coauthor of *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning* (2001), reminds us that homework is unfair to impoverished children. He says they do not have the tools, resources, and school focus required to make homework a useful learning tool. Quite often, they are in survival mode, not able to think beyond how to get food, clothing, and medicine for themselves and their families, let alone contemplate the symbolism and character dynamics in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, a novel to which they have trouble relating as it is. This isn’t to say impoverished students shouldn’t be taught these things or that they should have serious intellectual requirements for them lessened to any degree. In fact, for many impoverished children, it is the highly challenging intellectual pursuits, and the stories of other cultures and people, that provide momentary escape from the palpable despair of daily poverty and impetus for surmounting their conditions. Highly challenging, academic work has been proven over and over again to be among the most powerful ways to respond to children of poverty. Wright’s *Black Boy*, Conroy’s *The Water Is Wide*, and Meier’s *The Power of Their Ideas* provide clear examples.