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Expanding the Role of Homework Assignments

In a previous essay titled *Don't Overlook Homework Assignments – They're Simple, but Powerful* ⁽¹⁾ I argued the merits of homework assignments and traced the evolution of such assignments in several of my courses. Homeworks offer simple yet effective mechanisms to motivate students to read materials prior to class in order to facilitate more thoughtful class and group discussions. In other settings, homeworks provide useful practice for students on difficult material. Review of possible solutions to problems coupled with further discussion of subtle points where students might have misunderstandings hopefully lead to better understanding which translates into better performance on exams.

Homeworks can also be used as vehicles for students to reflect on exam or assignment performance with an eye toward discovering what they did well, what they did not do so well, and as a means to helping them discover what they might do differently in the future.

Homeworks are designed using a consistent format and are not directly graded. Rather, student submissions are counted using a simplified scoring system and at the end of a term, using a generous scale that doesn't require perfect or complete submissions for all homeworks, students receive a modest contribution to their overall grade in the course. Model solutions are posted after homework submissions are due and further notes or observations are often posted separately once there has been time for review and analysis of individual submissions and classroom discussion.

Empowered by Ernest L. Boyer

Many educators seriously think about their teaching and student learning. Educators are reflective by nature and look for ways to improve the classroom experience as well as to provide students with not only knowledge, but skills that will enable them to make good use of that knowledge. Many educators are aware of the results reflected in numerous surveys such as those commissioned by the National Association of Colleges and Employers or the Association of American Colleges and Universities as well as pieces published periodically in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. The message that comes through loud and clear in such publications is that future employers look for students to have numerous 'soft skills', yet these skills seem lacking in many recent college graduates. Employers expect students to think critically, communicate clearly, answer questions directly, be adaptable in their approach to managing priorities and solving problems, and to possess the negotiation and teamwork skills necessary to work productively with diverse groups of individuals.

One could argue that Ernest Bower *set us free!* Influential works such as *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* ⁽²⁾ and *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* ⁽³⁾ helped launch a liberating era in which instructors (and administrators who evaluate instructors) came to realize that scholarship was much more than just basic research. The *scholarship of teaching* can and should be viewed as an equal partner to the *scholarship of discovery*, the *scholarship of integration*, and the *scholarship of application*. The relevance of this to the matter at hand lies in the recognition that as instructors we can directly attempt to teach students soft skills and, if nothing else, make students more aware of the importance of soft skills as we go about the normal business of teaching our classes.

Extending Homeworks Even Further

It's not uncommon to have group projects in many classes and the value to students of such activities is well documented. Group projects in an academic setting are not, however, without their problems. Instructors have to decide whether to assign students to specific groups or allow students to self-select. Creating the optimal size group for a given project can sometimes be a challenge. And, of course, eventually most projects are graded or evaluated and that leads to interesting questions such as whether all members of a group receive the same grade or whether there are individual grades or at least contributions to the overall project grade that reflect work done by individuals. Students are not always happy with their groups and some students often object that their grade in the course can be severely affected by the grade given on a group project.

For these as well as other reasons I've typically offered students the chance to complete and submit a group evaluation at the conclusion of a group project. Questions vary depending on the nature of the project, but typically I allow students the chance to assess their own performance on the project as well as that of each of the other members of the group. If their ratings for others are significantly positive or significantly negative, I ask them to support their ranking(s) with comments. Again, depending on the project, I might ask students to comment on the work they saw produced by other groups if that was relevant or I might ask them what general lessons they learned from the activity or I might even ask if they 'had fun' with the assignment. In addition to giving students a chance to provide concrete input to the grading process, such an evaluation also provides students with a chance to be reflective.

This all sounds fine, but as with more traditional homeworks, a fundamental question is simply – “how do we get students to take evaluations seriously and to actually do them?” In the past, I published an evaluation after a group project was done and invited students to submit their comments. A small number of students did that, but many students simply ignored the evaluation. I moved on to indicate that submission of an evaluation would give students some credit toward the instructor’s overall subjective opinion of them. That proved to be too vague. But by combining lessons learned from developing the previous homework model along with a twist unique to group projects, I think I’ve arrived at a happy medium in which the vast majority of students now do submit thoughtful and complete evaluations. Rather than treat the evaluations as separate from the group project, I issue them under the title of “homework”. Students gain credit toward their homework grade by completing the evaluation. In order to “convince” students that I really do take the evaluations seriously and that I want them to take the evaluations seriously as well, I came up with a *twist*. Everyone in a group receives a common base grade for the assignment. A portion of the grade on the project stems directly from completing the evaluation. If all members in the group submit evaluations, everyone in the group receives full credit toward the project grade for the evaluation component. My hope is that peer pressure works and that each student makes an effort to motivate each of their partners to make sure they submit evaluations. If one or more individuals do not submit evaluations, then a grade differential is applied.

Some fine tuning may be needed. The number of points for submitting evaluations has to be significant enough so that (a) a small penalty can be applied even to students on a group who do submit evaluations and (b) a large enough penalty can be applied to students who fail to submit their evaluations. Just to provide some context, on a one hundred point assignment, I currently count the evaluations as eight points if all group members submit evaluations. In cases in which one or more students do not submit evaluations, those that do receive six points instead of eight and those who do not submit receive zero points for the evaluation component. Loss of two points doesn’t change an overall project grade, but loss of eight points probably does!

More Lessons Learned

Teaching is a work in progress. As thoughtful instructors, we should always be on the lookout for ways to leverage successful techniques we’ve used in the past. As I’ve learned over the years, homeworks offer me mechanisms for getting students to think and reflect. When I think about individual assignments and what deliverables they might call for, I sometimes need to consciously remind myself that there may be hidden opportunities to increase student participation and, more importantly, to give students opportunities to practice the kinds of soft skills that are so useful once they leave school. I suspect that I would have arrived at this juncture in any event, but due to Ernest Boyer’s profound influence on colleges and universities, I am motivated to take the time to document and share my ideas. My hope is that others may benefit from learning from my take on the use of homeworks.

Notes:

- (1) Etlinger, H.A. 2012, May. “Don’t Overlook Homework Assignment – They’re Simple, but Powerful.” *National Teaching & Learning Forum* 21 (4): 5-7.
- (2) Boyer, E.L. 1987. *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*. New York: Harper & Row.
- (3) Boyer, E.L. 1990. *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Special Report for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.