

Sponsoring Committee: Dr. Joseph Shosh, Moravian College
Dr. Jack Dilendik, Moravian College
Ms. Renee Boyer, Easton Area School District

**EFFECTIVE HOMEWORK STRATEGIES FOR A MIDDLE SCHOOL
ENGLISH CLASSROOM**

Erin C. Kratzer

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education
Moravian College
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania
2005

Copyright © 2005 Erin C. Kratzer

ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study documents the observed and reported experiences of eighth grade English students and their teacher when strategies to improve homework quality and increase homework completion are introduced and implemented. In this study, the teacher researcher explored the process of designing homework, established a classroom atmosphere where homework is understood and considered important, and motivated students to complete homework.

With the design of the study, the author focused on having a clear purpose, writing clear directions, incorporating student interest, and providing choices. In order to maintain a classroom where students comprehended assignments, the teacher established a routine, assisted student in understanding the purpose of each assignment, and invited students to assist in the development of homework. Along with these strategies, the teacher provided immediate feedback, after school help, and incentives with the aim of motivating students to complete their work.

The author found that many of these strategies worked for her students. However, being diverse in their learning abilities and motivators, each student worked better with different strategies and circumstances.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank all of the students in my English classes. Not only were they the focus of my study, their motivation and perseverance encouraged me to research, observe, report, and most importantly write. A knowing smile from one of them when they understood the homework, or a proposal for a homework assignment that they created, kept me focused on my intention and goal.

I am perpetually grateful for the guidance of Renee Boyer, my colleague, editor, committee member, and most importantly my friend. Throughout this process, she has offered unlimited support on many levels. Without a question or complaint, she edited, revised, provided suggestions, and most importantly listened.

Next, I would like to thank Dr. Joseph Shosh. Without his guidance and constructive criticism, I would not have enjoyed this process as much as I have. As my mentor and advisor, he was always available and prepared to deal with my most stressful moments. Furthermore, he shared his extensive methodological understanding, English content knowledge, as well as his experience with research and writing action research, to make it possible for me to write this thesis.

Dr. Jack Dilendik was amazingly helpful during the final element of my thesis. As a committee member, Dr. Dilendik thoroughly read and responded to

my work in a considerate manner. Furthermore, he asked insightful questions that provoked reflection and helped me to further evaluate some of my strategies.

The colleagues at my school and in my class have been another important source of strength and advice. Throughout this entire experience, Danielle Swartz was supportive as both a friend and researcher, as she was working through the same process. When I needed assistance to get rid of the “green lines,” Tyson Scott was willing. Others were there to help when my computer insistently shut down, or when I needed someone to listen on my search for the perfect word.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my husband and family. Not only did they listen to my gripes, complaints, and fears, but also they were there to celebrate my accomplishments when it was important for someone to care. My husband’s love, support, and patience when my time was so limited will be everlastingly cherished.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES.....	x
RESEARCHER STANCE.....	1
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
Self-Monitoring and Self-Assessment.....	7
Parent Involvement.....	13
Teacher’s Role.....	17
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.....	26
Field Notes.....	29
Surveys.....	30
Interviews.....	32
Bar Graphs.....	33
Running Record.....	34
Trustworthiness.....	34
Developing a Narrative.....	36
RESEARCH NARRATIVE: “FROM THE BEGINNING”.....	37
School and Student Profiles.....	37
The First Day of School.....	38
The First “Real” Assignment.....	40
Incomplete Assignments.....	44
Negotiation.....	44
A Discussion of the Study.....	45
I-Story Vignette: Arthur’s Voice.....	48
I-Story Vignette: Kayla’s Voice.....	54
I-Story Vignette: The Voice of Success.....	60

Tiona.....	60
Jason.....	61
Katrina.....	62
Pastiche: The Student’s Voices.....	65
Layered Story: Homework Completion.....	69
Cause.....	70
Effect.....	71
Poem: Parent Contact.....	75
Pastiche: Homework Reflections.....	79
Play: Student Interest.....	87
DATA ANALYSIS.....	94
FINDINGS.....	98
Teacher Presentation.....	98
Incomplete Assignments.....	103
Complete Assignments.....	104
THE NEXT ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE.....	113
REFERENCES.....	116
APPENDIXES.....	121
A Homework Contract.....	122
B Grade Report.....	123
C Homework Rubric.....	124
D Student Graph.....	125
E Agenda Book.....	126
F HSIRB Acceptance.....	127
G Principal Consent.....	128
H Parent Consent.....	129

I	Introductory Survey.....	130
J	Closing Survey.....	134
K	Homework Reflection.....	138
L	Interview Protocol.....	139
M	Class Expectations.....	140
N	Homework Card.....	141
O	Web Page.....	143

LIST OF TABLES

1	Marking Period 1.....	108
2	Marking Period 2.....	109

LIST OF FIGURES

1	Homework Reflection: Jose.....	28
2	Homework Reflection: Lucy.....	28
3	Student Goals.....	49
4	Vocabulary Assignment.....	57
5	Journal: Kayla.....	58-59
6	Verb Paragraph.....	85
7	Vocabulary Narrative.....	86
8	John Penry Paragraph: Tiona.....	88
9	John Penry Paragraph: Laura.....	88
10	Bins.....	95

RESEARCHER STANCE

I believe many students do their homework to “get it done” without understanding why it is given or how it can help them. Several students seem to think that homework is just another way to torture them. Of course, many students seem to view it as a necessary part of school, like a “to do list” that is thrown away as items are completed and deleted.

Since the beginning of my academic career as a learner, I have been assigned homework, and I have almost always completed it. However, since the beginning of my teaching career, I have been the person to assign homework, and I have plenty of eighth grade students who choose not to complete it. While reflecting on my first year of teaching, I realized that I could blame myself for some of the problem. I never took the time to ask myself why I was assigning homework; I always had it, so why shouldn't my students also have to do homework? So, when I was assigned to research a topic in my classroom that concerned me, I knew homework would be it. It was last fall that I formed my question: What are the observed and reported experiences of eighth grade English students when strategies intended to improve the completion and quality of homework assignments are introduced? During the summer, I decided to figure out why I gave homework and progress from there.

I have various reasons for assigning homework, including some for learning and others for building character. One of the most important reasons is

for students to practice what they have learned in class. Often I will present something to my students orally and then model and guide their practice in class. Their homework allows them to practice at home what they have learned at school. Another motive that I have is to ensure that all students are prepared for the next lesson. I hope that if they complete their homework, they will be prepared and ready to participate in the next class. Furthermore, I believe that homework helps students to develop responsibility and to manage their time. They have to write down their assignments, make sure they bring them home, and find the time to do everything assigned. Once I understood the many functions of homework in my class, I had to figure out why so many students were not doing it.

I blamed incomplete homework on the age group, lack of family support, apathy and irresponsibility, before I even considered that I could be a part of why some students were not doing homework. I decided I had to practice what I preached.

First, I believe it is important for students and the teacher to be organized. As a learner, I need to stay organized by writing lists so I can track what I need to do. Additionally, I organize my binder by sections so I can find a resource when I need it in order to complete an assignment more easily. As a teacher, it has been my experience that the students who use their agenda books to write assignments and have orderly folders, notebooks, or binders have an easier time completing

what is asked of them. Moreover, when students have not been successful in the past, I have worked out a plan with them to make sure all assignments are written down. I have checked their agenda books after class, and in most cases, they have their assignments the next day. Therefore, during the beginning of every period I ask my students to get out their agenda books and write down their assignments. I think this will help them to stay organized, which is a necessary part of increasing homework completion. After the lesson and before class is dismissed, I allocate time to look at the homework, read through directions, and answer any questions.

I believe that another important strategy in motivating students to complete homework is parent involvement. I put all my assignments with an explanation on Infotel, a phone service that parents and students can call from home to double check the work that I have assigned. This service also helps when students are absent. Plus, I make my email address available to parents at our annual open house program to increase parent involvement. I also send home progress reports every other week for students who have a 75% or lower, so parents are aware of their child's performance. By doing this, I hope to get parents involved with their child's homework if it is needed. Since homework accounts for approximately 25% of the grade in my course, all assignments are listed with dates and point values. I require my students to get these grade reports signed by their parents. If I do not receive a returned report, I make a phone call home. In the past, this has helped students improve their grades. Since homework in my

class has a clear purpose and relates directly to what I am teaching, this grade increase is often due to improved student achievement. Once parents are aware of their child's poor performance, there are often consequences at home if a child forgets his or her homework. Therefore, the student often makes a greater effort to complete it.

I have tried to make students accountable for their homework as well. Although it may not always be the best strategy, I grade some assignments for correct answers, check some assignments for completion, and simply use others to start a class discussion. This way, students do not know if they will receive a grade for right answers, for having the assignment completed, or for simply participating in class. No matter what I do, they need to have their homework finished to earn any type of credit. I believe that for many students this works because grades are their extrinsic motivation. I have also been known to give other extrinsic rewards such as candy, pencils, or bonus points for completing every assignment in a week's time. Unfortunately, these strategies are not effective with all of my students.

While most of the time, approximately 75% of my students complete their homework; I often believe the quality of the homework does not meet their respective ability levels. Even when grades are an extrinsically motivating factor, many of my students do not complete quality assignments. After talking to students, it seems that many think of homework as a waste of time instead of

valuable practice. While I make an attempt at explaining to the students why the particular homework was assigned so they understand the purpose of what they are doing, I hope that by getting students involved and giving them choices they will take ownership and fully comprehend the purpose. Once students understand the rationale, my expectation is that the quality will improve.

Still, while some of these strategies have helped, I have students on all academic levels who frequently do not do their homework. As each year passes, and I gain more experience, I think of new ways that I can motivate my students to complete their homework with good quality. This is a study that hopefully both my students and I will benefit from for years to come.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Homework as a central facet of the American public school experience benefits from widespread, although far from unanimous, professional and public support. Government reports note that homework is an important component of effective teaching and quality school programs (U.S. Department of Education, 1987). Also, many teachers, administrators, parents, and even students place a high value on homework (Callahan, Rademacher, & Hildreth, 1998; Rademacher, 2000).

Leading researchers Bryan and Sullivan-Burnstein (1998) point out “homework presently accounts for twenty percent of the time students spend on academic tasks...because there are positive relationships between homework and academic achievement” (p. 264). Furthermore, Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001) discuss how “homework is recognized as one indicator of successful schools and successful students” (p. 181). However, all researchers do not agree.

As Sandra Feldman (2004) explains, “If you want to start a lively discussion that brings out strong opinions in teachers, parents and students alike, bring up the topic of homework” (p. 6). Despite the popular belief that homework has a positive effect on students, some research addressing the efficacy of homework has described it as often “vague, uncertain, sometimes contradictory, and perhaps even thin” (Eagland & Flatley, 1985, p. 21). Most notably, there is disagreement about the effect of homework on academic achievement and school

performance (Epstein, Polloway, Foley, & Patton, 1993; Salend & Garjria, 1995). Yet, Harris Cooper, who is considered to be a homework expert (Tabor, 1996), emphasizes that homework has been proven to boost academic achievement, to develop strong study techniques, and to improve attitudes about school (Cooper, 1998). Self-monitoring, parent involvement, and the teacher's role are important components in assisting students to complete quality homework assignments.

Self-Monitoring and Self-Assessment

Researchers Tanis Bryan and Karen Sullivan-Burnstien (1998) studied the use of homework planners and completion graphs in first through fourth grade spelling and math classrooms. The teachers involved in the study sorted 123 children into four groups, including students with learning disabilities and homework problems, students with learning disabilities and no homework problems, students who are average-achieving without homework problems, and students who are average-achieving with homework problems.

One of the first strategies implemented by the teachers was the use of homework planners. Students used homework planners to increase their organizational skills. Teachers believed that this was a major difficulty that resulted in poor homework completion. Additionally, students used planners to improve their own self-management. Bryan and Sullivan-Burnstien (1998) reported that the teachers involved in the study asked students to contribute homework tips about "what makes homework easy" and "what makes homework

hard,” and they conducted an art contest related to homework (p. 271). Students then personalized the homework planners by including their own tips and selected drawings. The teachers asked for student involvement so the students would have a sense of ownership with the homework planners, and therefore they may be more likely to use them. Researchers compared the homework completion rates of students before and after homework planners to determine their effectiveness. The researchers found that homework planners had a “positive effect” on students with learning disabilities and average achieving students who had experienced homework problems in the past. Both average achieving and learning disabled students with homework problems completed “significantly more homework when given homework planners than those who were not given planners” (p. 272). Furthermore, students without homework troubles in the past continued to complete assignments just as they had prior to the introduction of the planners.

Planners, however, were not only used for organizing assignments. Parents received notification from the principal and teachers that students were going to use the planner, and they were invited to sign their child’s homework and send messages to their child’s teacher. Because of this, teachers reported positive feedback from parents, which was another beneficial outcome.

Furthermore, the researchers reported that self-monitoring of homework completion through student graphing produced immediate improvements in homework achievement (Bryan & Sullivan-Burnstein, 1998). Teachers set aside

five to ten minutes to collect homework. During this time, students acted as monitors and checked one another's homework for completion. Students were then given time to fill in their color-coded graphs. Students colored red if homework was not completed, green if it was completed on time, and yellow if it was completed but late. At the end of each week, teachers did a spot check for accuracy. Students were then given the opportunity to show their parents the graphs during conferences. Bryan and Sullivan-Burnstein reported that students showed significant improvements in homework completion when graphing was introduced. Parents, students, and teachers commented on its practicality and time saving qualities.

Trammel and Schloss (1994) used similar self-monitoring and self-assessment strategies. In their study involving students between the ages of thirteen through sixteen, students graphed their performance and also evaluated their own assignments. The program required that students chart homework completed for each assignment. Researchers created an assignment sheet for the students to record each assignment for a particular school day. Teachers checked the sheet, like a homework planner, on a weekly basis. Educators used modeling and guided practice to teach the participants to complete the assignment sheet properly. In the next phase, teachers helped students to complete the graphs and display their progress. Every three days, students were required to set individual goals for homework completion. They were allowed to establish any goal level as

long as it was the same level or higher than the previous goal set. In the final phase of this self-monitoring process, performance graphs were removed as well as the assignment sheet requirement. Each student was responsible for maintaining his or her assignment sheet without external motivators like rewards and visual reminders.

Trammel and Schloss (1998) found that these self-monitoring techniques were effective in increasing the number of assignments completed. Furthermore, teachers reported an improvement in attitudes related to homework, and students believed that the extra effort put into self-monitoring was valuable. Students became motivated to succeed when they saw their progress in the graph. Therefore, they strived to improve quality and complete more assignments. Intrinsically, self-monitoring was meant to improve quality as well as completion, and the researchers found that it did both.

In her book *I Read It But I Don't Get It*, Cris Tovani (2000) offers additional support for students' self-monitoring. Although her book focuses primarily on developing reading comprehension strategies, Tovani (2000) writes that "for too long, teachers have been expected to monitor every aspect of their students' comprehension" (p. 9). She continues by pointing out that students gladly relinquish control of their academic performance to teachers and parents. For this reason, students need to monitor themselves and take charge of their academic performance. Throughout the book, Tovani (2000) provides suggestions

for the teacher to help guide the student to monitoring his or her own reading process. Some of these suggestions include understanding the purpose for a reading selection, knowing when and where confusion starts, learning strategies to fix confusion, and being able to choose which strategy is appropriate. Many of these approaches apply to homework in my classroom since reading is such a vital aspect of the eighth grade English curriculum. Additionally, if students are able to discover the source of their confusion in text, they will hopefully be able to do this with homework assignments that confuse them even if they are not directly related to reading. Finding the point of confusion is the first step in fixing it. This will lead to students be more motivated to complete assignments and create better quality assignments.

Fran Claggert (1996) suggests that students use portfolios as a way to self-monitor. She portrays the classroom portfolio “as a way of helping students become aware of and take responsibility for their own learning” (p. 110). Students can create homework portfolios to take responsibility for their homework assignments. Claggert (1996) writes, “We must give students time to think about and respond to the way they work and what they produce if they are going to have a valid and ongoing awareness and record of their learning” (p. 111). Through homework portfolios, students will organize their assignments, reflect upon them, and evaluate their work. Once this is done, students will be able to see their progress and pitfalls in a more constructive fashion in order to improve their

homework completion in the upcoming semester or school year. As a whole, Claggert (1996) believes portfolio work means “staying open and selecting, taking risks and revising, sharing and reflecting, accepting and assessing” (p. 131). In completing this process, students can examine their homework process as a whole and see their growth over time.

Joyce Rademacher (2000) also suggests that teachers include students in the assessment process as a way of teaching them to monitor their own homework quality and completion. Rademacher (2000) researched a ninth grade language arts classroom with the assistance of Ms. Sparks, the teacher. Ms. Sparks utilized a PACE rubric, designed by Rademacher to rate each completed assignment, according to the PACE criteria: prompt, arranged neatly, complete, and edited. First the students evaluated their own work using this rubric, and then the teacher evaluated and returned the work using the same rubric. Ms. Sparks allowed time for conferencing and urged the students to revise their work in order to hand it in again. The teacher put emphasis on homework as a process instead of a final product. As a result of conducting this type of assessment, Rademacher (2000) notes that students’ homework quality improved, as they were able and willing to continue improving and learning from their assignments. Rademacher (2000) remarks, “Because rubrics clarify expectations, they yield better feedback and students can subsequently improve the quality of their work” (p. 152).

Parent Involvement

Many researchers agree that parent contact and communication are helpful in improving homework quality and completion (Anderson & Gottschalk, 2004; Bryan & Sullivan-Burnstein, 1998; Trammel & Schloss, 1994). Parents play a primary role in the homework process; however, by the time students reach middle school, parents often have less of a role in their child's academic life. Still, many teachers believe that a key element of homework is effective home-school communication with parents and families (Polloway & Epstein, 1994).

Lee Canter (1987) outlines the importance of notifying parents about a homework policy immediately. He thinks that by having them sign this policy, they will be more able to help their children succeed. Canter (1987) writes, "The policy establishes a firm foundation for homework by stating expectations for everyone involved in the homework process" (p. 5). There are many aspects to a successful homework policy. The first thing that he suggests should be included is a rationale for assignments. Canter (1987) points out that a teacher cannot assume that parents or students are aware of the many benefits of homework, and therefore teachers should explain why they are planning on giving assignments. The next part of the policy should explain the types of homework that will be assigned. Canter (1987) believes that it is important for the teacher to state that he or she will only assign homework that the students will have the ability to complete and it "will require only those skills students have already learned in

class” (p. 6). Next, students and parents should be notified about the frequency of assignments and the amount of time it will take to complete the assignments. Furthermore, the homework policy should provide guidelines for when and how students are to complete homework, state that the teacher will keep a record of assignments completed and not completed, explain how assignments will affect a student’s grade, and inform parents that the teacher will both positively reinforce students who complete the work and punish students who do not complete the work. Finally, the homework policy should clarify what is expected of the parent. He suggests that the teacher should let parents know that they should make homework a top priority for their children, make sure they provide a quiet environment, establish a daily homework time, provide positive support, and contact the teacher if problems arise.

Kevin Callahan, Joyce Rademacher and Bertina Hildreth (1998) also suggest parent contact as a way to improve homework quality and completion. However, their study involved parents to a greater degree than Canter suggests. They attempted to teach parents to incorporate a home based, self-management program to improve homework performance and academic achievement (Callahan, Rademacher, & Hildreth, 1998). During a ten-week period, the parents of 26 sixth and seventh grade students from two middle school programs for at-risk youth received instruction and employed self-management and reinforcement strategies to increase the homework and academic performance of their children.

Student and parent training and data collection took place at the school. The students, with the parents' guidance, were self-monitoring the time spent on homework, self-recording the number of correct and incorrect problems, self-reinforcing by determining the number of points they earned, and self-instructing and goal setting by choosing to do an alternative form of the same assignment or to move forward. Parents gave positive reinforcement and could even assign bonus points to their children. Additionally, they kept track of the same things as their children in order to compare after the assignment was completed. Through an examination of surveys, interviews, student work, completion rates, homework quality, and observation, the researchers determined that both homework completion and homework quality increased significantly while the strategies were in use. The percentage of completed homework assignments increased for 20 of the 26 participants. Callahan, Rademacher, and Hildreth (1998) found that although some parents may be unable or unwilling to help, parent involvement does increase completion and quality of homework since they are able to motivate their own children.

Salend, Duhaney, Anderson, and Gottshalk (1998) propose that the Internet is another way to reach out to parents, and they describe the benefits of creating a website for parents and students to check for homework assignments. They present a case study of Ms. Anderson's middle school English class. By using the Internet, Ms. Anderson hoped to raise the awareness of the importance

of homework for both students and their families. As students and families began to feel comfortable with the site, she added more features. Ms. Anderson thought that her classroom website improved assignment completion as well as communication with parents. She received numerous positive responses from her “digital feedback” box on her website. Furthermore, the rates of completion rose in her classroom.

Additionally, if students and parents have access to the Internet, they can email the teacher to ask questions when they are working on the student’s homework at home. While the teacher may not read the email that evening, he or she will know when a student is having difficulties. In a case study presented by Salend, Duhaney, Anderson, and Gottshalk (2004), one teacher noted “an improvement in her students’ homework completion and an increase in her communication with families” when she used email (p. 65). Since many parents are familiar with technology, this is one easy way for them to contact the teacher and ask questions. Moreover, the authors suggest that some parents are more likely to email a teacher than make a phone call or schedule a conference, thus increasing the much needed communication.

In his book *Ending the Homework Hassle*, John Rosemond (1990) offers a contrasting point of view. He believes, “Homework is a responsibility that rightfully belongs to the child, not the parents” (p. 24). He suggests that parents implement a homework management system that strengthens responsibility, self-

sufficiency, and self-esteem. To simplify this, he describes two types of parenting in relation to homework: parent participants and parent consultants. Rosemond (1990) explains that parent participants “enable the child to become dangerously dependent upon their continued presence and help where homework is concerned” (p. 26). They do this by hovering over the working child, assuming responsibility for success as well as failure, and sending negative messages such as, “I don’t trust you to do an adequate job of this on your own” (Rosemond, 1990, p. 28). On the other hand, a parent consultant, is available when needed, assigns responsibility, encourages independence, and sends positive messages. Some components of this suggested program for a parent to be a consultant rather than a participant include having the child do homework in a private personal place rather than a more public place like the kitchen table, staying away from the homework unless the child asks, and setting a reasonable time-limit for homework to be accomplished. Rosemond (1990) suggests that teachers provide these suggestions in the homework policy.

Teacher’s Role

Many researchers agree that the teacher’s role in developing homework is vital if students are expected to complete and learn from each assignment (Canter, 1987; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Killoran, 2003; Polloway, 1994; Rademacher, Cowart, Sparks, & Chism, 1997). Most research examines what students do, and whether and how the completion of homework or time spent

affects student achievement or success in school (Canter, 1987; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Killoran, 2003; Polloway, 1994; Rademacher, Cowart, Sparks, & Chism, 1997). Yet, the homework process begins with teachers who choose the topics and content of assignments to help students meet particular learning goals. Therefore, teachers not only assign homework, they design homework. Designing homework requires teachers to consider the purposes, format, and other elements of assignments that will engage students and help them to succeed (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Many theorists approach homework from different points of view.

Isabel Killoran (2003) examines how four different theories of development applied to homework completion can change the reason and intervention a teacher uses in a classroom. The four theories that she examines are behaviorism, constructivism, maturational theory, and ecological systems theory.

Killoran explains that a behaviorist would identify the homework problem as being an issue of reinforcement. Lee Canter (1987) offers more detail about the behaviorist teacher's role in designing and assigning homework by providing five steps to giving effective homework assignments. He starts by explaining that the ultimate quality of the homework program depends on the effectiveness of the assignments that are given. The first step in doing this is to determine the learning objective of the homework assignment; it is important to determine if the objective of the homework is to review and practice, prepare for an upcoming

lesson, apply skills learned in class to another situation, or integrate a variety of skills into a long-term assignment. The next step is to make sure the homework assignment fits the learning objective. Canter explains that assignments fall into four categories: practice, preparation, extension, and long-term. For each type of homework, there are guidelines to make the assignment effective. The third step is to introduce homework assignments clearly; this is an integral step so students understand what they are supposed to do. Canter suggests that the teacher discuss the purpose of each assignment with the student, give clear, concise directions, write assignments in the same place every day, show samples when it is appropriate, and allow students to start the homework assignment in class. Since Canter believes that it is important to assess every assignment, he suggests different ways to grade the work to save time for the teacher.

A constructivist, as Killoran (2003) explicates, assumes that the child should be the initiator of activity and be responsible for interacting and manipulating the environment, and therefore the student creates and completes his or her own assignments. For example, if a student is not completing his or her homework, a constructivist might say that the work is not at a level where the child can construct knowledge, meaning that the work is too difficult for him or her. This could be fixed by giving the student work that he or she is able to do. Vygotsky (1978) suggests that students learn best when educators are able to discover and utilize the zone of proximal development. He writes, “Thus, the zone

of proximal development permits us to delineate the child's immediate future and his dynamic developmental state, allowing not only for what already has been achieved developmentally but also for what is in the course of maturing" (p. 87). When students think the homework is too easy, they may complete it, but they often do not benefit from it. This concept may be better understood when compared to a foot race. Vygotsky explains, "When running a race, a child can be highly agitated or distressed and little pleasure may remain because she finds it physically painful to run, and if she is overtaken she will experience little functional pleasure" (p. 103). When students think an assignment is too hard, they often do not complete it because it takes too long. However, if teachers create assignments that touch on students' prior knowledge and present just enough of a challenge, they are more likely to complete the work and benefit from it.

In contrast, Killoran (2003) describes how one who believes in the maturational theory focuses on children's developmental levels and would therefore suggest that if a child is not doing his or her homework, he or she is not developmentally ready. As Green and Gredler (2002) explain, Jean Piaget includes some components of the maturational theory in his philosophy. Piaget's focus lies in, "the various reconstructions that an individual's thinking undergoes in the development of logical reasoning" (p. 56). Piaget is a proponent for group and individual situations in which one's views are challenged and must be defended since he believes this will lead to the development of objectivity in

thinking only if the child is developmentally ready (Green & Gredler, 2002).

Furthermore, Piaget noted the difficulty of this process for the teacher, but argued, “intellectual development depends on the constructive activity of learners with all its errors and all the extra time it seems to consume” (p. 56).

The final theory Killoran (2003) presents is entitled ecological systems and focuses on the child’s interaction with numerous systems. The child and these systems interact causing change. For example, if a student is not completing her homework, it is possible that she is being bullied outside at recess and wants to stay inside with the teacher. She is able to stay inside if she does not do her homework; therefore, in the ecological systems mode of thinking, if the teacher is able to control the system that is in work while the student is out at recess, this will affect the student’s completion of homework. The teacher may control the system in the example provided, by first examining the problem, and then attempting to solve it by stopping the bullying behavior.

John Dewey (1938), writing from a progressive point of view, says, “Wholly independent of desire or intent, every experience lives on in further experiences” (p. 27). The way students view homework now is a result of their past experiences. One way to change this view and make it positive, if it has negative connotations, is by providing positive homework experiences. Dewey (1938) suggests, “. . .if an experience arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person over

dead places in the future, continuity works in a very different way” (p. 38).

Dewey writes this after pointing out that a series of mis-educative experiences can lower a student’s “later capacity for growth” (p. 38). Homework experiences in the past may have done this to students. Certain positive experiences associated with assignments a teacher gives can help students in the future. For example, a student may have a personal connection with an assignment and enjoy completing it. This positive experience may improve the student’s view on homework.

In addition to educational philosophers, other researchers note concepts that seek to ground the theory in practice. Rademacher (2000) points out, “What teachers say and do as they present assignments can make a significant difference in their students’ ability to complete their work satisfactorily” (p. 152).

Rademacher continues to note other tactics for the teacher to consider when assigning homework such as immediate teacher feedback, student choice, variation in assignments, appropriate level of difficulty, and complete directions (2000). By incorporating any of these ideas, she believes that students will be more intrinsically motivated to do their work because they understand the purpose.

Rademacher, Cowart, Sparks, and Chism (1997) suggest that motivating students to complete homework is one of the key roles that the teacher must take. The authors propose a creative way to do just this. In a case study involving a sixth grade teacher in a large urban school district, the teacher performed a group

interview to determine what students thought would be required of them if they were to complete quality assignments. She then explained to them that students she chose would be working with her to help create meaningful assignments. This “assignment expert team” used the “Quality Assignment Planning Worksheet” to develop what students would do, determine why they were doing it, consider relevance to students’ lives, provide clear directions, and uncover possible pitfalls. Furthermore, they used the “Assignment Idea Chart” to design homework that would be different from a typical worksheet format. This collaborative effort resulted in a positive outcome. Both the teacher and the students were enthused with the process. Additionally, the researchers compared the rate of assignment completion and grades on assignments before and at the end of the research study, and they noted a great increase in both. There were twenty-two zeros before the interventions and only nine at the end, showing that this method of designing homework prompted more students to complete it. While the results for this research are positive, Rademacher, Cowart, Sparks, and Chism (1997) conclude that “it is likely that learning and motivation will increase for all students in the class when teachers give high-quality assignments with student choices and when teachers provide ways to include students in the planning of some of their work” (p. 17). Consequently, it seems that sometimes the teacher’s role needs to be that of a facilitator when designing homework instead of the main designer.

Besides many of the ideas that Rademacher presents, Lisa Delpit (2002) writes, “When students’ interests are addressed in school, they are more likely to connect with the school, with the teacher, with the academic knowledge, and with the school’s language form” (p. 45). If the assignments relate to the students in some way, if they are able to see a connection to their lives, they will be more motivated to complete the work with good quality. Vygotsky (1978) agrees and in reference to writing proposes, “A second conclusion, then, is that writing should be meaningful for children, that an intrinsic need should be aroused in them, and that writing should be incorporated into a task that is necessary and relevant for life” (p. 118).

In addition to considering the design of an assignment, the classroom teacher must also consider the purpose of each homework assignment. Joyce Epstein and Francis Van Voorhis (2001) provide a review of the purposes of homework that have been identified by educators in survey research. The first purpose summarized was practice. Many teachers give homework to provide students opportunities to practice what was taught in class. Another purpose for homework is preparation. Some teachers may assign homework to ensure that each student is ready for the next lesson. Also, homework may increase student’s involvement in learning if the point is for greater classroom participation. A further function for homework may be for personal development. This type of homework helps to build student responsibility, perseverance, time management,

confidence, and feelings of accomplishment (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Sometimes, homework may be assigned to guide and promote parent-child or parent-teacher or even student-student relationships. These researchers point out that no matter what the purpose is, it needs to be known so everyone involved has the same goal. By having and understanding the reason, as noted by many researchers, teachers and students will have greater success and less frustration.

While many researchers and theorists provide different viewpoints on a teacher's role in designing homework, there is no one right way to do it. As Killoran (2003) points out, a teacher must seek a fit with his or her philosophy.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

My experiences with homework assignments as a student who had to complete them and now as teacher who has to design them have varied greatly. Although hard to believe, I recognized the value of some homework as I progressed through my academic career. However, as a teacher, I have learned that not all assignments will benefit every student as they are intended to do. There are many purposes for homework, including independently practicing an assignment, preparing for the next lesson, inciting responsibility, reviewing a unit, and expanding and extending a lesson, among others. Regardless of the type of assignment, if students choose not do their homework or put forth effort in completing it, this choice may hurt their academic performance. After realizing that, at times, students do not complete their work in my classroom, I decided that homework was to be the focus of my action research study. My question soon evolved to, “What are the observed and reported experiences of eighth grade English students when strategies intended to improve the completion and quality of homework are introduced?”

I designed my research study to help improve my personal creation of assignments, as well as to increase students’ completion of homework with elevated quality. I implemented various types of homework assignments as they fit my curriculum, while trying to find ways to reach learners of different learning styles. As I developed assignments, I made sure that I clearly explained the

purpose and that the directions were precise and comprehensible. In addition to planning purposeful, clear assignments, I utilized Infotel, a way for parents to review homework over the phone, and a class web site where I posted announcements, homework, tests, quizzes, essays and long-term projects. To increase parent contact, I asked them to sign the homework contract (see Appendix A), and I sent home a grade report (see Appendix B) every other week for students with a 75% average or below. Additionally, I made phone calls and emailed parents throughout the school year, and I tried to provide an open environment so both parents and students would feel welcome talking to me. Finally, I adapted my instruction in order to give students quick feedback, whether it was through a verbal review of homework, a graded assignment, or individual conferencing.

Student involvement and responsibility in the study were intended to be strong as well. I assisted students in their use of self-monitoring devices by reviewing the generalized, universal homework rubric (see Appendix C) and guiding them to rate themselves. Additionally, I led the students in graphing their assignments (see Appendix D). Also, I reminded students to use their agenda book, a day planner, to write and organize all of their assignments (see Appendix E). Furthermore, I asked students to write and verbally make reflections about homework and their progress up to this point (see Figures 1 and 2). Jose and Lucy were two students whose written reflections focused on homework.

I can improve my grade by studying harder, do all my journals. Even if the homework is late I should still hand it in.

Figure 1

I can improve my grades by making up work missed by studying for tests, and not missing so much school. It seems like I miss a lot of days and work at school. It would help my grade though if I make up all the work I miss while I'm out.

Figure 2

Once I developed the design of my study, and before I formally collected data, I shared my action research proposal with my teacher research support group and Moravian College's Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB). The HSIRB read and reviewed my proposal to ensure trustworthiness, security, and

confidentiality of my students. With my proposal, entitled “Effective homework strategies for a middle school English classroom,” I earned an expedited review (see Appendix F). Once the board accepted my plan and the principal and students returned the consent forms (see Appendixes G and H), I began formal data collection.

As a teacher researcher, I collected my data mostly using qualitative methods because I found that it complemented my work as a teacher (Maclean and Mohr, 1999). However, parts of my study called for quantitative data collection when students’ grades were considered. In the following section, I will describe the methods that I used to gather data throughout my study.

Field Notes

I used field notes as the primarily method of data collection for my study. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) define field notes as “the written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks” (p. 74). Arhar, Holly and Kasten (2001) define them in this way because “They are taken in the field - the classroom or school setting” (p. 140). My field log, a thickly filled, three-inch binder, contained both participant observations as well as reflective memos. Since I am an active member in the classroom, many of my classroom observations are actually participant observations. As I taught the students, I wrote notes on a clipboard that I carried with me at all times. This is how I was able to transcribe quotes from the students. During a regular week, I completed three to four

participant observation entries. At times, I observed the entire class period, while on other occasions I focused my observations on only one part of the lesson, on the routine, specific students, verbal directions of an assignment, students' questions, and a lesson or unit introduction. The same day as the observations, I typed a narrative form of what I examined. In these narrative versions, I converted the list of observations and chicken scratch from the clipboard into a story of my class period, and I included personal reflections, observer comments, quotes, and questions. As Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Patton (1991) recommend I kept my observer commentary, or my personal thoughts, feelings, and inferences, apart from the straightforward observations by separating them with brackets. I also wrote reflective memos that focused on my own teaching practices in the classroom. Additionally, I wrote reflective memos days after I took notes in the classroom because I could not write them the same day due to students' needs or teaching responsibilities. In addition, I added reflective memos to my log when I did not take specific notes during the class period, but I felt it was necessary to record the day's events. I agree with Arhar, Holly and Kasten (2001) who believe that "reflection is a key element in the evolving repertoire of scholars" (p. 137).

Surveys

In addition to field notes, I collected data through surveying my students (see Appendix I). All five of my eighth grade English classes completed a survey at the end of September and another at the beginning of January (see Appendix J).

Through the survey results in the beginning of the school year, I hoped to gain a better understanding of students' thoughts and feelings on homework. I conducted the second survey at the end of the second marking period, and it was more specific to homework policies in English class. I hoped that the survey results would in some way direct me toward any difficulties the students had that I may not have been able to observe directly.

To construct and implement the survey, I used a free online program called Zoomerang, accessible at <http://info.zoomerang.com/>, which allowed me to select a variety of question types. For the majority of the questions, I used a horizontal choice of responses consisting of “never, sometimes, almost always, and always.” I also provided open-ended questions for students to type their responses without any constraints. These two types of questions were helpful in seeing trends in students' thoughts as well as hearing the voices of different students. The final part of the survey had multiple-choice questions regarding personal information.

After the first marking period, I also asked my students to complete a homework survey/ questionnaire in class (see Appendix K). This student survey requested the students to consider their least and most enjoyable assignments as well as the least and most helpful assignments using a numeric rating scale which lends itself later to statistical analysis (Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001, p. 151). The second part of the sheet included a questionnaire. Questionnaires are “written

questions requiring responses about facts attitudes or values” (Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001, p. 153). I designed this survey/ questionnaire in order to determine the students’ overall feelings about specific types of homework.

Interviews

I also conducted formal, focus group, and critical incident interviews as part of my study data. My preliminary individual formal interviews occurred after the surveys when I was able to select students with routine homework completion and incompleteness (see Appendix L). I conducted interviews during grade conferencing as the rest of the class was working independently on vocabulary. This afforded students and me some privacy, and it was my intent that no students should feel left out, since I spoke privately with everyone. During the formal individual interviews, I asked questions that guided but did not control or direct the student to specific answers (Burnaford, Fischer & Hobson, 2001). Overall, I hoped that the interviews would bring out a general view of the students’ feelings toward homework. During this interview time, I also conducted participant checks and discussed any individual concerns. Ely, Anzul, Friedman, and Gardner (1991) write, “It seems to us that the effort to check and to discuss must be made. Particularly important is the shared discussion and what this can do to inform and to establish collegiality” (p. 166-167).

Focus group interviews were often unplanned; however, they followed a similar structure to the individual interviews. These interviews often occurred

when a class as a whole did tremendously well or overwhelmingly poorly on a homework assignment. As Arhar, Holly and Kasten (2001) point out, students may be more reluctant to speak to a teacher one on one. Therefore, during a focus group interview, I often asked for volunteers to answer a crucial “teachable moment” question. These are often routine questions that are necessary in order to facilitate understanding of homework responsibility.

The final type of interview that I performed was a critical-incident interview. According to Arhar, Holly and Kasten (2001), “Critical incidents are events that are turning points or especially revealing moments that, when uncovered, provide insights for both interviewer and interviewee” (p. 155). Additionally, as the interview developed, I looked for concepts as they emerged in the students’ dialogue. One example of a critical-incident interview occurred during an after school detention with a student who blatantly refused to do work.

Bar Graphs

I created bar graphs to show the completion rates of different types of homework assignments and to compare homework completion from the first marking period to the second. The bar graphs helped me to understand what assignments students were more likely to complete. This statistical information is part of the whole story, and I used it to make inferences about my students’ homework completion tendencies and habits. However, as Maclean and Mohr

(2001) identify, “Statistical information is part of classroom context, but fails to tell the whole story” (p. 49).

Running Record

I kept a running record of homework assignments as another method of data collection. Arhar, Holly and Kasten (2001) define a running record as “recording regularly occurring events” (p. 140). I recorded homework data on a regular basis in my grade book. These data aided in showing me completion rates. Additionally, when I graded assignments for correctness, the point value I assigned was indicative of the homework’s quality.

Trustworthiness

To ensure that my study was trustworthy, I endeavored to triangulate my data. In order to do this, Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson (2001) suggest “conscious intersecting of multiple methods for data collection” (p. 70). I did this through my relentless, insistent observations and note taking. I also tried to gain a better understanding of my students’ mind-sets in the beginning and end of my study through the survey. I allowed for students to become involved in the study, through interviews, negotiations and conferences. Furthermore, I collected quantitative data on homework completion and quality through point values of homework assignments in my grade book.

To give them voice, I asked students both separately and as a group for advice in developing assignments. Furthermore, I asked students to respond to my

initial interpretations through a process of participant checking (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, & Gardner, 1991). As I observed and took notes for my participant observations, I asked the students questions to check my inferences. Examples of questions include, “Is this what happened?” “So you are saying...” or “Do you mean...” By doing this, I did not have to rely solely on my own interpretations.

I also checked my data with my teacher support group at Moravian College and with colleagues at my school. These teachers provided both reassurance and advice about how to adjust my design and methods as the study progressed. Furthermore, they often read my interpretations and provided their own insights. Finally, and most importantly, as Maclean and Mohr (1999) advocate, “The research group’s supportive atmosphere makes it possible for teachers to be honest about what goes on in their classes, about the problems and successes...” (p. 23).

Long-term involvement also assisted in my study’s reliability or trustworthiness. It has taken approximately nine months to move from the point of designing and researching my study to the stage of reporting my findings. Five of these months were spent collecting data. Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson (2001) report, “data collected over time can affirm or challenge what you believe you are finding” (p. 71). Additionally, since my data collection was complete by mid January, I frequently reviewed my data to see if my impressions were logical, providing the case for a trustworthy study.

Developing a Narrative

I used the data that I collected to tell my story and my students' stories of homework completion. Ely, Anzul, Friedman, and Gardner (1991) point out, "The writing of a qualitative research report demands the creation of a narrative" (p. 169). This narrative took on various forms including a play, anecdote, poem, pastiche, and a vignette. During the play, I set the scene for the classroom and introduced the characters, my students, as the dialogue occurred in the classroom setting. I used the poems as a reflective analysis of my use of figurative language, as well as an illustration of parent input in my classroom. A pastiche is a compilation of data put together to create a theme. I utilized the narrative pastiches in my study to visualize the students' diverse feelings about homework. Vignettes however, often depict one scene that is often a critical incident. Arhar, Holly and Kasten (2001) write, "Vignettes and portraits are representations of life on paper" (p. 242). In particular, I used a vignette to illustrate one student's ultimate disgust with homework, three students' successes with homework, and one student's motivating factor. It is important to note that these narrative forms are also analytic methods in their own right.

RESEARCH NARRATIVE: “FROM THE BEGINNING”

School and Student Profiles

The school district in which this study took place is comprised of a mixed urban, suburban and rural area of approximately fifty square miles. My school was a middle school for seventh and eighth graders with approximately 730 students in each grade. As an English teacher, I had five classes and 118 students who all participated in this study. Four of my classes were leveled college preparatory students, who were expected to have a goal of attending college at some point in their academic careers. Students were placed in these classes based on teacher recommendation, parent request, and student work. These classes had approximately twenty-five students in each class. The majority of the students in these classes were white, but there were at least two to six minorities of different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds in each college preparatory class. Generally, the college prep students were academically successful, achieving average to above average grades. However, inconsistency in homework completion prevented many of the students from academic excellence both in their general performance and grade.

One of my classes, the lowest track of students, was entitled “language arts.” Out of these sixteen students, ten carried labels such as Special Education, English as a Second Language, or Emotional Support, and they required support services or special adaptations in the classroom. Additionally, this class was

comprised of mainly minority populations. Most of the students in language arts did not have a track record of academic success, and they earned below average to average grades. While many factors were clearly in play, at least some of the below average performance was due to incomplete homework assignments and/or the lack of organization and responsibility that sometimes accompany incomplete assignments. Teaching eighth grade English in an economically, socially, and culturally diverse school, I realized that homework was not always a priority in the students' busy lives. For this reason, and because I thought that if my students complete their homework regularly they would have better academic success, I decided that I would focus my action research on improving homework completion and quality in my classroom.

The First Day of School

The first day of school was a day to meet the students, try to remember some names, and begin the routines in my classroom, all in the shortened time period. On this particular first day, I had one extra challenge: to give my students a homework contract. I was not sure how my students would react. Not only did they have to remember to get my classroom expectations sheet signed, but also they had to remember to have their parents read and sign the homework contract. Having both students and parents read the contract was the first hurdle.

As my new students walked into the classroom, I assigned them a seat and took attendance. After this, I started the routine that I wanted to continue

throughout the school year ahead. I asked the students to get out their newly acquired agenda books that they had received in homeroom. I explained that they would need their agenda books every day, and then I pointed to the area on the black board where the assignments would be located. On this day, they had to write “parent signatures” in their agenda books to remind them to get the classroom expectations sheet and the homework contract signed. As I walked around the classroom while they were writing their assignments in their empty books, I felt that I had an excellent start. No one had lost his or her agenda book between homeroom and first period; all the students had a pencil with which to write, and they were all doing as I asked.

After I was confident that the students had copied their assignment, I distributed the classroom expectations sheet which described the materials needed for this class, behavioral expectations, and the grading system for the year (see Appendix M). I asked students to volunteer to read the different sections and asked the students if there were any questions. The only questions I received had to do with the materials needed for the class. For the next order of business, I distributed and reviewed the homework contract, an agreement between the students, parents, and me that describes my rationale for homework, the type of homework that I assign, the guidelines for completing homework, homework’s effect on students’ grades, and consequences when homework is not completed. At this point, I briefly mentioned that I was conducting an action research study

on homework completion and quality in my classroom. With blank looks, the students passively followed along as I read the homework contract, and they did not ask any questions as the shortened period was drawing to a close. At the end of class I asked, “What is due tomorrow?”

In a monotone choral voice, a couple students chimed, “Get our parent signatures.” Reviewing assignments at the end of the class period would become part of our classroom routine.

The following day most of my students returned the classroom expectations sheet and the homework contract with signatures. However, there were a few students who needed further reminders. This time, there was not a penalty, but I warned them that I would call home if I did not receive the papers the next day. Though I shouldn’t have been surprised, I had to call two parents in order to get the appropriate forms returned.

The First “Real” Assignment

On the second day of school, I looked forward to giving my students the first “real” assignment. I considered parent signatures classroom business; however, this assignment needed clear directions and required student input and creativity. I didn’t think they would find it torturous; I was hoping they might even enjoy it. The beginning of class started as it had the previous day, with agenda books and a review of the assignments. On this day, I directed students to write, “parent signatures,” if they had not already handed them in. Additionally,

students wrote “folders.” In the beginning of class, I explained to the students that they simply had to take home their plain manila folders and turn them into masterpieces with either their first or last name as an acrostic using words to describe themselves. I clearly wrote the directions on the board and explained them. I also clarified the purpose of the assignment by telling them that this folder would be used as the classroom folder for the rest of the year. Plus, their folders would allow me to learn more about my students, including their personalities and their work ethic. Whether the student is a creative artist or not, I can still tell if he or she actually put effort into the task. Although I did not direct them to do so, some students used the remaining few minutes to start laying out their work. Some started by penciling artwork while others got out a scrap piece of notebook paper and began to create their acrostic.

Most students seemed to like this assignment, which they had two days to complete at home. As each class walked out of my room, I felt that I had accomplished what I had set out to do: assign a purposeful assignment that the students enjoyed, put effort into, and would complete. A sense of relief overwhelmed me.

Unfortunately, when I collected the folders, I thought that I must have missed something. After reflection, I realized that any strategy I tried would not be a quick fix. Nor would this be easy. While most students completed this assignment, it looked as though some had done it during homeroom or lunch. This

should not have surprised me, but it did. My hopes were high, and I was let down. I realized I had a long way to go.

It turned out that this was not an understatement. The next strategy that I implemented in my classroom had to do with parent contact. I asked students to write their contact information, including their parents' names, on an index card, and I explained that I would contact their parents any time I felt it was necessary to do so. Needless to say, this did not go over well with all students. Still, they dutifully filled out the necessary information.

Since quick feedback is so important, by the fifth day of school I was prepared to return the folder assignment. Before I did this, I introduced the homework rubric and self assessment to the students. Prior to distributing the rubric, I asked what they thought a homework assignment should include for full credit. One student volunteered, "It should be on time."

Another raised his hand and chimed in, "It should be all done."

I inquired, "What do you mean?"

He said, "You know...like you shouldn't skip anything...unless you don't get it."

As I told the students that these were all important characteristics of quality assignments, I distributed the rubric. I noted that some of their homework characteristics were in the rubric. Students then took turns reading the top line of the rubric. Once this was done, I asked them if they understood how to rate their

homework. I was surprised that they simply accepted this extra responsibility without questioning me.

When I went on to distribute the self-assessment sheet, one student incredulously asked, “Do we really have to do this for EVERY assignment?” This was my original intention; however when the student asked with such amazement, I questioned my strategy. Regardless, I told them to keep the rubric and the self-assessment sheet in a safe place so that they could easily find them with other assignments. While this only took my CP students three or four minutes to understand, I spent approximately ten minutes helping my language arts students assess themselves. One even stated that he didn’t want to be wrong. I repeatedly explained that you could not be wrong when assessing yourself, as long as you had proof of your evaluation. Still, many were concerned and wanted me to check what they had done. While I thought students would give themselves the best score, many of their scores varied greatly. Individually, students explained why they had taken a point or points off. I was pleased that they were taking the time to do this. After the self-evaluation was completed, students passed their folders forward for me to collect. Every student in both classes handed in a folder, but at first glance, it was obvious that some did not meet the criteria and were hastily done.

Incomplete Assignments

The next strategy that I introduced did not go over nearly as well, and I waited to introduce it until I felt it was needed. By the time we got to the first writing unit, I realized that “homework cards” were likely to prove useful (see Appendix N). In a moment of frustration, and without warning my students, I explained the new procedure. I announced to the class, “Students who did not complete a homework assignment have to fill out the card and explain why they did not complete the assignment and ask their parents to sign it.” While some students looked at me in awe, this strategy incorporated the much needed parent contact and also held students responsible for the work that they missed. I explained that I would accept late work for partial credit as long as the homework card was completed. I proceeded to give the three students who missed the assignment homework cards, and only one student had a comment. With an incredulous look on his face, Colin asked, “Do we have to do this *every* time we miss an assignment?” I replied yes.

Negotiation

Due to flooding in my school district’s community, we had a two-hour delay the entire next week. Up to this point, I had been able to allow students to start most of their homework assignments in class; however with two-hour delays this became impossible. Therefore, I did not continue many of the strategies I had previously introduced. I spent less time focusing on routine and organization, and

I gave the students less personal attention for incomplete assignments as well as less attention for assignments that showed hard work. By midweek, the students were aware of this change more than I was, and they finally broke free of their indifferent attitudes toward assignments in my class. One student proclaimed, “I feel really rushed through all of this. I just don’t get the assignment.” That is when I realized I had to revert to the strategies I had introduced in order for students to get the most out of the unit. I also realized that I was doing what I always vowed that I would not: putting quantity over quality. At that point I told the students to draw an arrow in their agenda books, moving the assignment on the board for tonight’s homework to the following day. This was our first successful negotiation in class.

A Discussion of the Study

I finally received official notification of the acceptance of my HSIRB proposal, and I decided to talk to my students in more detail about what I was studying. First, I reminded them that I was performing an action research study in my classroom, and I gave out consent forms. I read the form aloud to the class and explained that I needed them to sign it and ask their parents to sign it if they wanted to participate. After reviewing the consent form, I invited students to discuss what my study was about. Conrad said it was about “kids.”

I asked, “What about kids? Kids doing what?”

Ally announced, “Homework!”

I then asked the class what I had done up to this point to help them complete their homework. I thought it would be interesting to see their point of view as to what was helping them complete homework in my classroom.

Without raising his hand, Conrad replied, “We’ve done journals and other stuff...like worksheets and essays.”

I concurred and wrote those items on the board. I encouraged the students to think about what else I had done in the classroom that related to homework. Five students raised their hands.

Ashley volunteered, “You tell us every day to check the board right when we sit down. Then we are supposed to write stuff in our agenda books...does that count?” More hands went up as I wrote agenda books on the board.

I called on Jason, an outgoing football player in the first row who said, “We have to rate ourselves on our homework every time we hand something in or you check it.”

I then wrote this on the board. Before I called on the next student, Jason asked, “So does this mean you use our stuff in your study?”

I carefully explained how pseudonyms would be used and then further clarified that I would be analyzing some of their work and even including samples in my research report, but only if they opted to be participants in my study. Other students had their hands up, so I moved forward.

I called on Colin, a student who, had handed in his signed papers late, had taken three days to get his book covered, and had not had his rough draft done on the due date. He said, “We have to fill out homework cards AND get our parents to sign them if we don’t have our homework on time. I hate that.” I did not remark on the last comment and instead wrote homework cards on the board.

When the students seemed out of answers, I reminded them that I also started the webpage (see Appendix O). I told the students that today they were going to the computer lab to view the web page and take a survey relating to their completion of homework. Afterwards, they were supposed to go to the “Educational Links” part of the page where I put practice web page links, and practice for the test the following day.

Once in the computer lab, I gave the students a sheet with directions for how to get on the web page and to the survey. Although some students needed my assistance, most of the time their peers helped them. I explained to the students that I wanted them to answer honestly. I then let them know that I would have no clue who gave what answers. Some students took longer than others, but I soon realized that some were simply taking their time and truly considering their answers while others were reading quickly and leaving short comments.

At the end of class, I asked Jason and Conrad what they thought of the survey. Jason said, “I didn’t like the typing part.”

Conrad commented, “I put ‘always’ for everything. Homework takes me away from football.”

If I didn’t already recognize it, I now knew for sure that this was not going to be easy. Coming from different backgrounds with various sets of priorities, many of my students either did homework or they did not. Many of them claimed not to know why they did or did not do it, but most of the students claimed not to see the value or to see the benefits of appropriate, purposeful homework assignments.

Therefore, the story continues with five different students. The first, Arthur, is an incredibly bright student with a penchant for laziness.

I-Story Vignette: Arthur’s Voice

Arthur had a detention for being disruptive and disrespectful to me. During class, he refused to get out his agenda book in order to write down assignments. When I repeated my request a third time, he threw the book he was reading on the ground and shouted, “Can’t you see I am trying to do something?” I asked him to see me outside in the hallway in order to calmly discuss his behavior, and he refused. He then put his head down and chose to not participate in class. I allowed him to do this so he would not further distract other students. Additionally, when Arthur’s mood was explosive, as it was on this day, I found that this was the best way to handle it. At the end of the period, I asked him to wait, and I gave him a detention.

During his detention, I asked Arthur to copy a paragraph about respect and to define a number of words within that paragraph. Additionally, I asked him to set goals for himself in order to be a better all-around student (see Figure 3). Unfortunately, he only wrote what he thought he should do. He did not write what he wanted to do. While he was doing this, I informally asked him questions about his progress in English class.

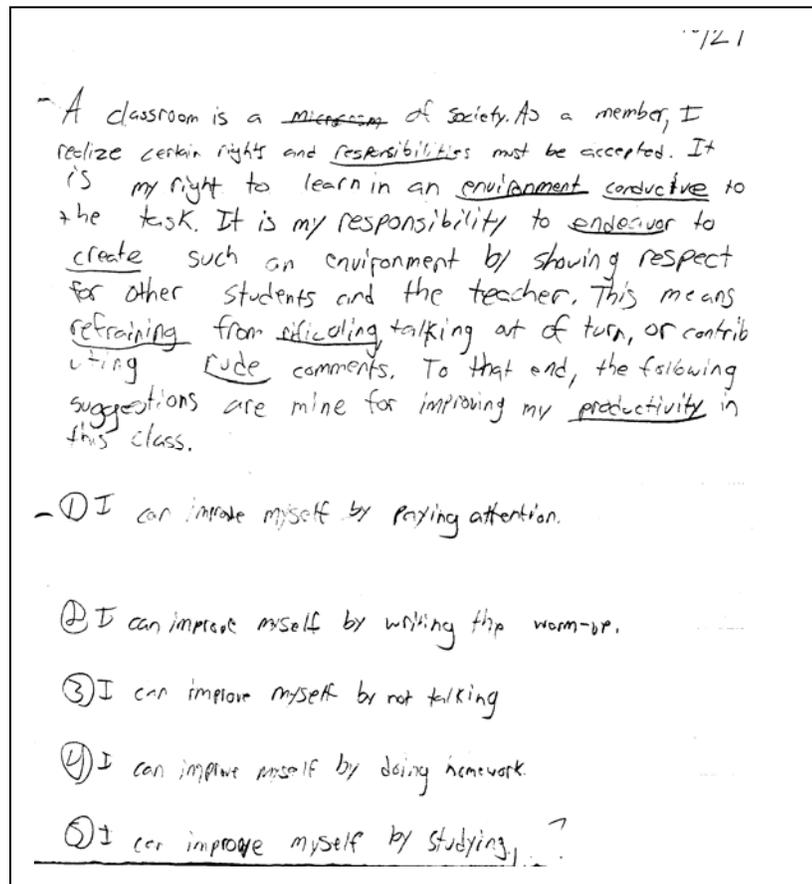


Figure 3

I created an I-story vignette based on the informal interview data from this detention. In addition to the interview data, I incorporated other quotes from Arthur during various classes. After I wrote the I-story, I asked Arthur to participant check during a study hall. Before I gave him the story, I reminded him that I was writing my thesis. I then explained that I wanted to write a story about him using a different name in place of his. I paused and asked him if he understood. He nodded affirmatively and said, "So, let me get this right, there will be a chapter about me?"

I confirmed, "Yes," and questioned, "Is that ok?" Again, he nodded. I then asked, "Before I send this to my teacher, could you do a favor for me?" He nodded again. "I just need you to check and make sure that this is representative of what you said during your last detention. You may not remember your exact words, but please just make sure I have it right." He agreed.

After reading the first part of the I-story, he declared, "It sounds like something I would say." After he finished reading it, he quietly stated, "That's right."

I asked, "Would you change anything?"

He replied, "I'm not proud of it, but yeah, I'm sure I said it." He then asked if he could put his head down the rest of the period.

I don't really do homework in most of my classes, not just yours. In most of my classes, it's so easy I get bored so I just chill and take the test. Anyways, I passed last marking period, and I didn't hafta spend any time at home doing work. I can't hang out with my friends then. It's just a pain. Then I have to remember, and take it home, and then I have to do it. I just don't care enough.

Why do you have to check homework? In Math class he doesn't count homework so I have a 95 and I sleep or read my book. I like it better there. He doesn't bother me. When you bother me, I feel like I have to do something, even if it isn't good. I feel like you act like my mom. Yeah well, I have to get to football. My parents won't care as long as I am passing.

I know I can improve myself by paying attention. I can improve myself by not talking...that way I will understand what the homework is. Maybe if I could make up my own journal assignments I would like them better. I can improve my grade and myself if I did the homework. I can improve myself by caring. But I don't.

I have tried many strategies to work with Arthur. In addition to the strategies I've already discussed, I conferenced with him on numerous occasions, called his mother, talked to administration, discussed his apathy with his coaches, offered incentives, and even gave detentions. He never seemed to be phased by

any of it. Both marking periods, Arthur just passed. Also, both marking periods, Arthur missed over half of the homework assignments.

He was aware that I was trying to help him, yet he said I nag him. However, it seemed this “nagging” just might have helped him through his eighth grade year in my class. Unfortunately, nagging was neither my goal as a teacher nor my goal as a researcher. I certainly did not enjoy this power struggle.

To me, this vignette suggests that the homework strategies that I implemented will not work across the board. Obviously, Arthur was more concerned about sports and friends than he was about school, in particular English class.

However, he had potential. When Arthur did his work, especially writing or anything with reading comprehension, it was exceptional. But, there was no pattern in the assignments that he chose to do, other than the fact that he worked at the end of the marking period when he realized he was failing.

I tried to compromise with Arthur. It is obvious to me that he loved to read as long as he chose the topic, the length, and when he did it. He often attempted to read as I taught. Although I would not allow him to do this, I did permit him to write journals on his novels instead of the journals that I assigned. I also suggested he write summaries and critiques of the books to make up for homework assignments that he missed. Finally, I stayed after school to work with him one on one multiple times for purely motivational purposes.

After writing the I-story about Arthur, I came to some tentative conclusions as well as plans for the future. When I assigned Arthur something, he often chose not to do it. However, if it was his own idea, he completed work and even stayed after school for attention and help. He seemed to have difficulty with authority, especially from me.

Therefore, I decided to make an attempt to allow him to make some of his own choices making certain that there was a connection between those choices and what the class was doing. For example, Arthur did not want to write the response to *Nightjohn* in his journal. He said, "I don't even get what the book is about. It's stupid. Can I write about that?" I told him that he could write about that, but I suggested that he reread the chapter independently before he did that. He took my advice and read the chapter as well as the entire book in a day during study halls and lunch. Once he read the whole book, he asked me if he could review each chapter and write his own journals. Arthur met the objectives for this lesson, and he exceeded them, because he made the decision himself.

From Arthur, I have learned about strategies to use with other recalcitrant students. While I continued to try all of the ideas that I attempted with Arthur, having choices seemed to benefit him most. He liked when the work was his own idea. Therefore, for Arthur, as well as others, I plan on increasing the number of meaningful choices in my classroom. One way to do this, of course, is through homework assignments.

While each assignment certainly has its own purpose, there are often various ways for students to meet that purpose. In the design of each assignment, I hope to find multiple ways for students to complete it. For example, in my next unit with vocabulary, which is often described as “boring” and “unhelpful,” I plan to offer different assignments. Students will be able to find their word outside of the classroom in print and present it to the class, write their own sentences with the words, create a vocabulary quiz for their classmates, write a story using ten of the fifteen words, or complete the vocabulary worksheet that I originally planned. This way, students will learn the vocabulary words in a way that best suits them. Hopefully, Arthur, and students like him, will appreciate this opportunity and therefore complete one of the choices.

The concept of choice along with personal connection is helpful for any level student. The next student, Kayla, averaged an 80% on her assignments in English.

I-Story Vignette: Kayla’s Voice

Some students always did their work; some never completed an assignment. Then there were the students who miss one here and there. It affected their grade but not so much that their parents noticed or cared. The majority of my college prep students missed two to four assignments a marking period during the study. I attempted to explain that they were not only missing points for the assignment, but also missing out on the purpose for the assignment. One way that

I found to remedy these incomplete assignments was giving students choice so they could complete the assignment by incorporating something that interested them.

One student in particular took advantage and excelled when I began to incorporate more choice in my assignments. Kayla was a shy student who often doodled during grammar lessons. She seldom talked to her peers unless they spoke to her; however, she was always interested in conversing with her teachers. It was through our everyday conversations, which I often transcribed after she left for lunch, that I collected the data to write this I-story vignette.

I'm not too sure why I miss assignments. I'm sorry if it makes you disappointed with me. I guess I just have my mind somewhere else. It really isn't that I forget. I will go home, get out my agenda book, notebook, pencil, worksheet, and book, sit down at the kitchen table, and get right to work after school. Then, before I know it, I end up looking out the window thinking of my next story, or the book I am half way through and dying to finish. Sometimes, I just start to draw. You like the drawings, don't you? That's when I make them...during homework time. Later, after dinner, I plan on going back to work, but that's when I am allowed to go on the computer and play *Halo* or read my book. Sometimes Elaine will come over, and we'll work on our story. I know it's not right, but eventually I forget about your homework. Then, I come to class, and

you say get out your homework and I feel really bad. I always plan on doing it,

and I promise myself I won't miss another assignment, but I do.

I really like journals, though. They help me relax. I love to write, especially when I get to pick what it is about. I also love to read. I read all the books in the Redwall series for this class. I even read stories that I wouldn't normally read. They weren't that bad. I also like to do projects with books and stuff. I just don't like grammar. I think I am a pretty good writer. Why do I have to do those practice worksheets if I don't need practice? I mean, I guess I should practice more, but I think I am pretty good. Vocabulary is kinda boring unless you let us write a story or sentences using the words. That is when I really learn them. Then I try to use them in the story I am writing.

Kayla often chose not to complete grammar worksheets, yet it wasn't because she didn't care or didn't want to do well. She also did not complete vocabulary fill in the blank sentences. However, when Kayla had the opportunity to incorporate her interests within any assignments, she excelled above my expectations. In this vocabulary assignment, for example, I asked students to put the vocabulary words into a paragraph about their favorite hobby (see Figure 4).

One of my hobbies is reading my Guardians of Ga'Hoole books. They are about a barn owl named Soren, his sister Eglantine, and their ~~mained~~ brother Kludd. Kludd wears a metal mask to hide the scars and is the evil leader of Tyto owls called the Pure Ones. Kludd wants to rule the owls world, but is veering out of his way to kill Soren and Eglantine. Soren and Eglantine live at the great owl named Eglryb. They also live with hundreds of other owls including their best friends Gylfi, Digger, Martin, Primrose, and Twilight. In the first book, as chicks, Soren and Gylfie are wantonly stolen from their families to go to a place called St. Aggies Academy. After they escape, then to Gylfie's enterprising mind they meet Twilight and Digger. In the second book, they all journey to the Great Ga'Hoole Tree. In the third book, Iryb is captured by Kludd and his band and Soren rescues him. There he first battles Kludd and Kludd avowes to kill him.

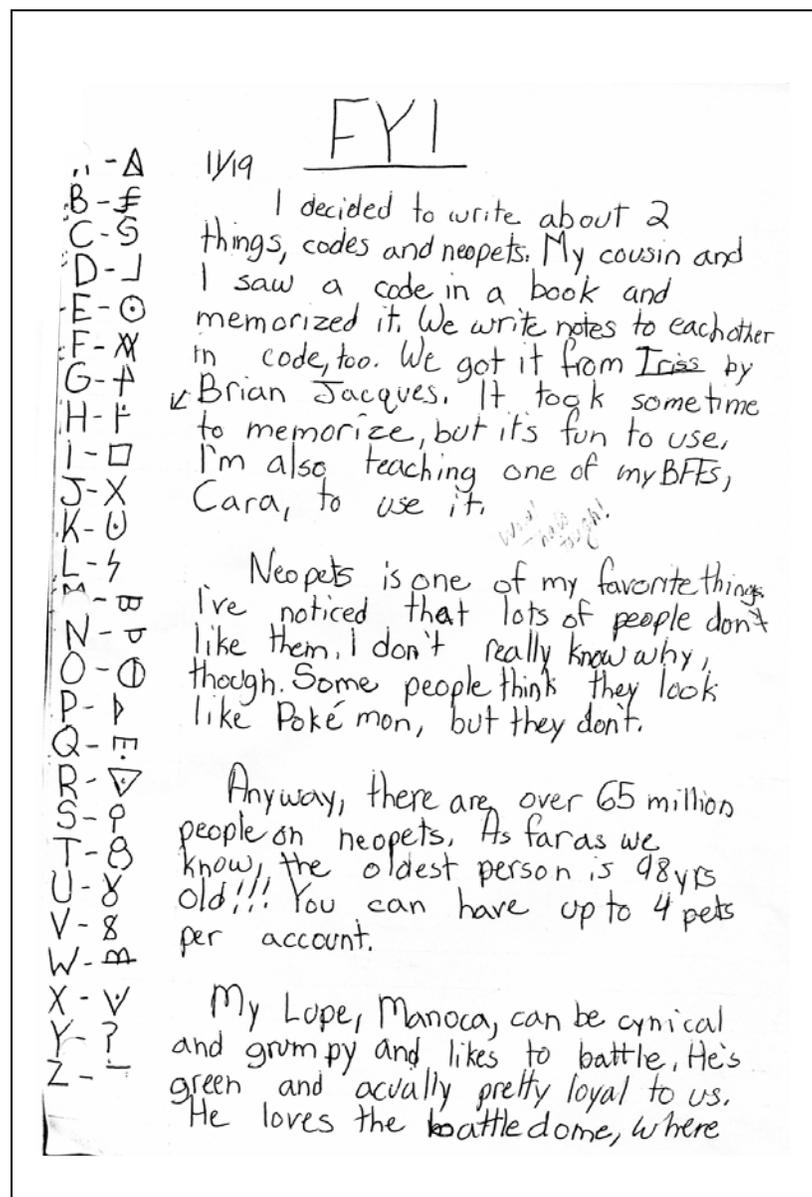
In the fourth book, Kludd's ranks grow and he lies siege to the Ga'Hoole Tree. First the Ga'Hooleians win, but Kludd is still alive. In the fifth book, Kludd's mate, Nyra tries to kill Eglantine, but she escapes. Finally, in the sixth book, the Pure Ones take over St. Aggies and the Ga'Hooleians attack them and win.ü

Figure 4

Kayla fulfilled the requirements by utilizing the words and underlining the context clues. Additionally, she clearly wrote about her hobby and had no problem writing more than what was required. Finally, and most importantly, Kayla turned in the assignment with a smile on her face and said, "Just wait until you read this!"

The other assignment that Kayla wrote exemplified her interests. Every other week, I gave my students a journal. Sometimes I provided the topic, and

other times, I gave students the opportunity to choose. Kayla often wrote enough to earn full credit; however, when the topic was “FYI,” she outshone anything she had ever written. In addition to her careful description, she included illustrations so I would know what she was talking about. Furthermore, although I have only included two pages, she wrote six on her chosen topic (see Figure 5).



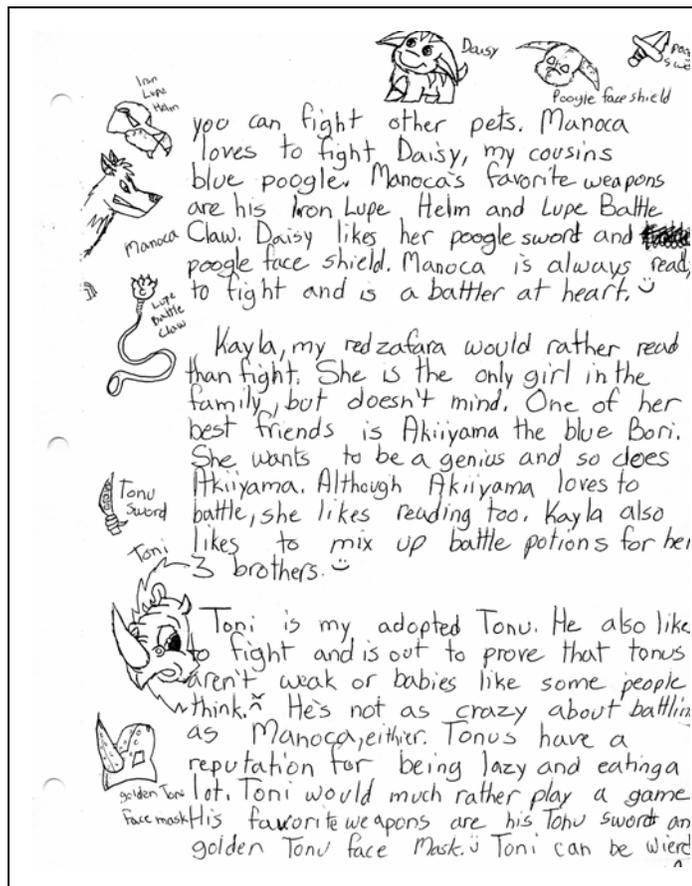


Figure 5

From Kayla, I have learned the importance of providing students with various choices in each assignment. While some students would prefer to be given a topic to write about, or a specific worksheet to do, others have distinct interests. If they are not given a chance to incorporate their interests, they will never clearly see how their interests can relate and apply to English and how English can relate and apply to their interests. This may mean that they will never reach my expectations or meet their academic potential.

However, the next group of students was incredibly successful when it came to homework, albeit for different reasons.

I-Story Vignette: The Voice of Success

I created the following I-story vignettes based on the formal interview data that I obtained during a study hall. I chose to focus on the interview of these students because they are the only ones, out of all of my students, who did not miss an assignment at the close of my data collection period. In addition to the interview data, I incorporated other quotes from these students added to my field log from various participant observations conducted throughout the first two marking periods. After each interview, I participant checked the students' responses by reading the responses back to them.

Tiona

I have never missed an assignment because I listen to the teacher. I am very organized, and I always use my agenda book. I think Mrs. Kratzer gives clear directions, and a lot of the homework is easy. I want to do well in school so I can go to a good college. Doing homework is just part of that. If I don't do my homework, Mrs. Kratzer will get mad at me, and so will my mom.

Also, I'm black, in case you haven't noticed, and I think a lot of people don't expect me to do well. I want to prove them wrong. Not Mrs. Kratzer, though. She respects me as a student. Maybe that's why I do well.

More than any other student, Tiona was conscientious and extremely organized, constantly highlighting and organizing her homework. Additionally, she was an auditory learner, so as long as I gave clear verbal directions, she remembered. Tiona knew that I respected her and had high expectations for her. Also, she thought my classroom environment was positive and reported that she succeeded in this type of environment. However, I believe that she would succeed anywhere due to her intrinsic motivation.

Jason

I didn't really know that I never missed an assignment. I have to do my homework. For me, it is an easy way to get points because I don't always do good on tests. I want to get a good grade. I'm not pressured to do good, but my parents care a lot because my mom did good but my dad didn't and he wants me to do better than him. Also, if I don't do my work, my grade won't be good and I can't play sports. My parents don't want me to let it get below an 80.

I didn't really use my agenda book all the time. I have a system. Usually I remember, but when I pack up my bag to go home, Laura helps to remind me. She has a locker next to me. Sometimes when I get home, I check Infotel or that site you made. If I completely forget, I check with Conrad in homeroom. Usually he is doing his work then.

Jason was an athletic eighth grade college prep student with supportive parents. While he was not as consistently conscientious as Tiona, he was motivated to succeed. He had to keep his grades up because of sports, and also because he had a father who expected him to earn an 80% or better to continue to play sports. From this, Jason had a lot of extrinsic motivation. Jason also had intrinsic motivation; he wanted to do well. He was often embarrassed if he did not do well on a test or quiz. If he thought he did not put full effort into a homework assignment that I collected, he often told me and even asked me if he could redo it.

On top of being a busy student athlete, Jason had to deal with a learning disability. He had an Individualized Education Plan that required special modifications for the classroom setting. Some of his adaptations included the use of his agenda book, untimed testing, retesting, grade improvement opportunities, and alternate test sites. Jason frequently chose not to take advantage of the opportunities that were available to him. As it is evident in his I-story, Jason seemed to find his own way of achieving success.

Katrina

I do my homework because we are supposed to. You don't really assign that much, and what you give us makes sense. It's really not that hard. I check the board everyday; I write it in my agenda when you tell me. When you give us time

to do it, I work. I like English class. I guess I really like it because you reward people when they do what you ask, and they are punished when they don't do it. I just think that if teachers don't enforce their rules, kids won't take them seriously.

My parents don't really get involved. I am responsible for my homework.

It's not up to them. I mean they are supportive and will help me when I am confused, but they don't tell me when to sit down and when to work. I guess they used to when I was younger, but I get it now. I don't really ever check the website because most teachers don't update it. I like your web site. Those links really help me when my parents aren't home.

Katrina was a mature student who had goals of earning a spot in honors English the following year. Doing homework was often easy for her. She did what I requested, asked a question when something was not clear, and always completed her assignments. Katrina didn't see why that was complicated, and she often rolled her eyes at other students when they forgot their assignments. Since she aspired to become a teacher herself, she closely observed what teachers did. She commented in her journal that it didn't seem hard. Her advice for a teacher was to "Follow through on what you promise, whether it is a punishment or reward." She wrote, "If you don't at least do that, your students won't respect you and neither will their parents." Fortunately, she believed that I followed through and found that it worked for her.

Katrina's parents were involved with her academic career; however, they gave her most of the responsibility. It seemed that they taught her accountability and responsibility when she was young. However, she proudly told me that she usually didn't need their help anymore.

There are several themes that run through all of these students' I-stories as well as the stories of other successful students in my classes. They all seemed to realize that homework had a purpose and not completing the work would defeat that purpose. Additionally, through parent communication and the students' voices, it was obvious that their parents were involved in their academic careers. Yet, these parents were not overbearing. One other trait that these successful students had was organizational skills. Each of them had their own way of organization, whether it be using an agenda book, relying on a friend, or checking Infotel or the website. While they did not all use the same methods, Tiona, Jason, and Katrina found ways to stay organized, so they could efficiently complete their work and remember where they put it when it was time to hand it in to me. Furthermore, they were intrinsically motivated to complete the work assigned to them.

After hearing the voices of individual students, the next part of my story focuses on my students as a group. After analyzing a survey that I gave towards the beginning of my study, I learned more about how my students felt about homework.

Pastiche: “The Students’ Voices”

Research projects are the best homework assignments!

It takes up a lot of my free time and can be a hassle.

Doing homework keeps me busy, and I also learn something.

Sometimes it makes me bored.

You get the feeling of doing work on your own.

Homework is bad when the teacher gives you no information.

It is a good study guide.

There is no need for extra work.

Homework is positive when you do more than just copy out of a book.

You lose time to hang out with your friends.

Homework is a chance to understand what you did in class that day.

It is useless.

Homework helps me get ready for an assignment, test, or quiz.

Too long, writing cramps, tired.

It teaches me how to be organized.

It puts a lot of stress on me.

It can be a lot of fun sometimes.

After reviewing the survey results, I realized that students' feelings about homework were not as negative as I had initially thought they would be. In my reflection, I believed that there were some things that I could try to increase homework completion.

Many students felt that their homework took too much time out of their day. This made me wonder just how much time should be devoted to homework. I decided to ask my classes. One student said, "Well, it kinda depends on what else I have that night."

I questioned, "What do you mean?"

Louisa replied, "Well if I have cheerleading, I run out of time, and sometimes if my favorite TV shows are on, I try to do my homework during commercial breaks, but it might not get done."

I then asked her, "So, what is a fair amount of time for homework?"

"I guess like 15 or 20 minutes for each class would be ok." She paused to consider her response. "But it would be ok if like teachers could take turns, and we could have one night off in a class. Then it would only be like an hour every night." Louisa chomped down on her gum, adding, "Yeah, that would be ok; I could do it." I then told her to get rid of the gum.

This sounded fair and possible for me, but in my middle school setting, I could not control what other teachers did. It would have been helpful to have team teaching, so teachers were more aware of what our students had to deal with, but for the time being, the only thing that I could do was listen to my students when they talked about homework, projects, and tests that other teachers assigned them. By listening to their comments, sometimes directed toward me, other times to each other, I could then negotiate with them when assignments were due and what was required of them.

Many students also claimed that there were too many distractions while they were trying to complete homework. Since their homework couldn't keep their attention, I realized I needed to create assignments that particularly connected to my students. Possibly, if this connection were stronger, they would be less likely to get distracted.

My college prep students thought that they could usually do their homework without a reminder from a parent or guardian, and usually they did not need the help of someone else. This signified that their homework was easy enough for them to do. However, there were a few students who did need the reminder. This was where I felt my website and Infotel would help.

Interestingly, the survey showed that the students, in general, thought that homework was important, whether it was graded or not. They seemed to

understand the importance of each assignment for the purpose and not simply the grade. However, this was not always visible in class.

Forgetting homework seemed to be a common problem among my students. After reviewing the survey results, I realized that working with students to use their agenda books to stay organized would likely prove helpful.

Unfortunately, I knew I could make sure they used their agenda book during my class, but once they left, it would be difficult to make sure they used it at the end of the day when they were collecting their materials or at home when they began their homework.

Overall, the students' responses showed me that they wanted assignments that would help to prepare them for a quiz or test. If there were no clear reason, the students claimed they were less likely to complete the work. On the other hand, they wanted assignments that were "fun" and "creative." This could be difficult to do for a teacher creating assignments, but I planned on trying my best.

Students also commented that homework could be more important for students when teachers give feedback. I tried to give next day feedback on homework assignments. Plus, students wanted more than a numerical grade. In journals, I always tried to write comments and give a completion grade. They seemed to like this because they felt their work was valued. In the future, I planned on doing this with more of their homework. Feedback can also be given verbally the following day in class. When teachers did not go over assignments,

students thought it didn't really matter. However, when teachers reviewed the previous night's homework in class, it became more obvious why it was important.

Overall, students commented that they wanted shorter assignments with clear directions. Often, as reported in the survey, students did not complete the work because it "takes forever" or they "don't get it." By making sure there were clear directions and by giving shorter assignments, I thought students would be more likely to complete them.

After participant checking with my students, it was evident that both my college prep and language arts students agreed with these results. However, the lower tack of students generally completed less homework.

Layered Story: Homework Completion

In my language arts class, my students often have more trouble completing homework than their college prep counterparts. This class level, which is homogeneously grouped, is the lowest performing based on their classroom performance and teacher recommendation. On one day, my students were not particularly focused because of a pep rally scheduled that afternoon and an adjusted schedule. I asked the students what they would be able to focus on that day, and Kevin asked, "Can we have a study hall period to do some English stuff?" After reading aloud from the story we were working on, I gave them time to work and reminded them where they were supposed to be in the comprehension

packet that accompanied the story. By their looks of relief, I felt that the students seemed satisfied with this decision. I expected all of them to be caught up on their work by the following day without a problem, especially because they were given time in class to work. I was wrong.

The following day, only four out of sixteen students were caught up on the comprehension questions that I gave for homework and class work. I immediately assumed why the students had not done their work, and I had a plan, including consequences, to get the students back on track. However, my students had a much different perspective. To illustrate this dichotomy, I created a layered story. My students and I saw things much differently, and we needed to find a way to compromise.

In the “Cause” section, I described what I thought to be the reasons students were not doing the work. I added what the students said in class to explicate their point of view. Within the “Effect” section, I explained what I thought would be the best way of handling the students who did not complete the homework on time. However, the students did not agree.

Cause

They didn't do their work because they are lazy.

“I had to mow my grandma's yard and do other chores for her. I just lost track of time and then she made me go to bed.”

Do they ever listen to me when I ask them to write their assignments in their agenda books?

“I wrote it in my agenda book; I just forgot.”

It really isn't that hard. Just read the story and answer the questions.

“This is so boring. Why can't we do something fun with the story?”

How could they possibly be so irresponsible? Put the work in your bag, take it home, do it, and bring it back.

“My cat peed on my backpack, and I have to carry everything around. I think I dropped the packet somewhere.”

Effect

I'm going to call their parents and tell them they haven't completed the work.

“My mom works nights, so she can't help me at all.”

I'm just going to move on. I know 12 of them don't have it, but how am I ever going to finish?

“There are a lot of dumb questions. I mean, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but do we have to do all of them so you know we understand? Can't we just talk about some stuff?”

I know, copy assignments. What a waste of time, but how are they going to learn?

“Maybe you could let the ones who did the work play Word Dojo, and the ones who didn't do the work could do it now.”

Ugh! I am so frustrated!

"Ugh! I am so frustrated!"

By writing this layered story, I was able to better understand my students' points of view. Yes, the students did not do their work, but the purpose that I set for this assignment did not match the assignment. I gave this homework so the students could check their understanding after reading the novella *Flowers for Algernon*. Also, I wanted to check their responses, so I knew what they did not understand. However, I asked many more questions than necessary, and some of the questions asked students for their opinions. The students made it clear that this was too much work if I wanted them to complete it with effort. Negotiation was necessary.

Automatically, I had assumed that the students did not do their work because they chose not to do it. I did not stop to think in my frustration that they might not have completed their work because they couldn't. Some of my students did have legitimate reasons. This showed me that I needed to ask students why they did not complete their work. It also helped me to realize that I need to ask students to write me a note explaining why they did not complete their work and determine late penalties from that point.

As far as the design of the assignment, this one needed revisions. While the questions in the comprehension packet were helpful in checking for student

understanding, they were not all necessary. Some, as mentioned previously, asked for student opinion. One student pointed out that these could be discussed in class, and he was right. Other questions were frivolous. Students complained that remembering some of the details I asked them about were unnecessary in understanding the story. They were right. Based on students comments, and my reflection, I changed the assignment for next year.

Prior to this experience, I often assumed that students were simply careless or lazy when they did not complete their work. However, it became obvious through students' explanations that sometimes they did not do their work because they were taking care of more important things. I do not state this to put less of a priority on schoolwork, but to point out that other duties may be more important to some students and their families. Sometimes, students have responsibilities with family that cannot be pushed aside for homework. While these valid reasons need to be confirmed by a parent phone call, I have learned that it is important to give students a chance to explain themselves. Often, I have realized they will be quite honest when they do not have a suitable excuse.

It is also a mistake to automatically assume that students have parents who are available and involved with their schoolwork. It is so easy to call parents and ask them for support in helping their child to succeed. Unfortunately, parent involvement, particularly in my lower level classes, is often absent. As one student stated, "My mom works nights so she can't help me at all." He

elaborated by explaining that his father does not live with him, and his mom wakes up in time to feed him and his two brothers dinner and go to work. Therefore, when he needs help, it has to be at school. For this reason, I tried to be more available during his study halls and even after school, so he could get the assistance he needed.

As one of my students pointed out in the layered story, sometimes, punishment is not as effective as reward. She said, “Maybe you could let the ones who did the work play *Word Dojo*, and the ones who didn’t do the work could do it now.” My automatic response to students not completing their homework has been punishment of one form or another. Yet, I have recognized that it is not always as important to move on in the curriculum, as it is to reward the students who have completed their homework with quality. Although students cannot always expect a reward, it is important to take the time to provide incentive, whether it is talking to them, giving a reward, or taking time to play a word game. Most important for me, however, is to acknowledge student learning.

Finally, it is important to note that I was not the only one frustrated. The students were frustrated with schoolwork for many reasons. They may not have been interested in the assignment. Possibly, they did not understand the work and had no one to help them. They may not have had the time to do the work, or they may have had more important responsibilities. Because of our joint frustration, there were times when I, as the teacher, needed to be prepared to negotiate with

my students, adjust the assignment, create a new one, or replace homework with class work so the students were able to learn. While some students' parents are involved, some are not. However, parental involvement as a whole can be incredibly helpful to the students as well as the teacher.

Poem: Parent Contact

Parent reaction to emails and phone calls from me, their child's English teacher, varied greatly. Some were happy to hear from me while others were more likely to assign blame. I attempted to make contact with the parents of my students in various ways. The least complicated thing to do was create and regularly update my classroom website. I added assignments and announcements on a weekly basis. Additionally, I included links for students to visit for extra help. Both parents and students enjoyed this feature. This was evident through emails from parents and from comments students made during class. Specifically, students enjoyed the link I provided for grammar and writing help. Another tool that I used was Infotel, a phone service that the district uses to inform parents about assignments, tests, and essays. I updated this on a weekly basis as well. I also sent home grade reports every other week for students whose grades averaged 75% or below. This way, parents could see exactly where the student needed to focus in order to improve his or her grade in English. I gave students bonus points if they returned them the following day and a copying assignment if it was late. With a copying assignment, students have to write a sentence about their infraction multiple times. In this particular case, I asked students to write, "I will have my progress report signed on time because my parents need to be aware of my grades in order to help me succeed to the best of my abilities in Mrs. Kratzer's class." If the student did not bring it in signed by the third day, I called home and gave the students a detention. Finally, I emailed, called and had conferences with parents. These were, by far, the best ways to communicate because they were more personal and often more specific.

By analyzing parent contact through writing a poem, I've realized that parents chose and were able to be involved in their child's academic life to varying degrees. Some believed it was their fault when the child did not complete his or her work. Others blamed the teacher. While parent contact was most often incredibly helpful, too much could become counterproductive, as in the case of one student in particular, who blamed his mother every time an assignment was not completed. The parents most helpful to me as a teacher were those who checked in occasionally via email, calls, Infotel, or website. These parents wanted their child to do the work even if he or she had missed an assignment and could not receive credit for it. Finally, there were parents who were not involved, or

shared little concern; these parents thought it was my responsibility to contact them at all times, whether their child was doing well, average, or poorly. They shared this belief by complaining to me long after the marking period was over. Even when I did contact them, there were many times that there were no evident changes in the student's work habits. When they found out that work was not completed, these parents asked for extra credit, even though their child had not done the work assigned.

In the following poem, I have illustrated some of the contact that I have received explicating all types of parent involvement. Additionally, I've included my immediate reaction to the parent comments.

Parent: Well I slipped.

Teacher: Why is it up to you?

Does he know when it's due?

I really need to know what is expected of him each week.

He should have it in his book.

Does he ever look?

I know this will help me keep him in check.

I will email you every week.

Your son's homework I do seek.

I would like to know if he has been turning in homework assignments.

Sit down and talk to your son.

He should know if the work is done.

Thanks for your communications regarding his English grade.

I try my best.

Your son has progressed.

Just wanted to let you know the website is an excellent tool for parents.

One more way for you to know,

What your daughter can do to grow.

I would appreciate it if you would keep me in the loop.

It's so easy to forget.

200 students I have met.

I will be sure to closely monitor his agenda book.

I remind them every day.

He needs to find his own way.

I was told I was not doing my job because I was making him do his homework.

Don't let your son tell you who's the boss.

I've tried so much; I'm at a loss.

If he doesn't do his work, I can make him do it anyway.

What a great plan.

Of this, I am a fan.

Could I ask you to send home some extra grammar worksheets?

Extra work! How great!

Her daily work I would appreciate.

Through contact with many of these parents, I have learned that often the parents' past experiences with education affect their contact with their child's teacher. Occasionally, the student may have had mis-educative experiences, and the parent is trying to prevent that from happening again. As one parent mentioned in a phone call, some parents "didn't do good in school and don't know how to help." From this, I have learned that it is important to make early contact with parents in a welcoming manner.

Although I wanted to encourage parent involvement, it still came down to the simple fact that it was the student's responsibility to complete the work. We made it half way through the first marking period, and I wanted to know what else the students had to say about homework in my class, especially after having participating in the study up to this point.

Pastiche: Homework Reflections

I asked students to complete a reflection on their homework assignments in the first marking period (see Appendix K). First, they rated the homework that was the most helpful to them up to this point. I provided five different types: reading assignments, grammar homework, journals, practice worksheets, and vocabulary. They rated them from one, the most helpful, to six, the least helpful. Additionally, I included a section for students to comment on their choice. Next, students rated the assignments that they enjoyed the most. Again, there was a comment section. The last section of the reflection survey included four open-ended questions, where I asked students to write about their best and worst assignments. I invited students to explain why they opted to complete their homework and why they did not. Overall, the college prep and language arts classes shared similar responses.

I chose to write this in the form of a pastiche to highlight major differences across student responses. However, it is important to note that overall

there seemed to be a general consensus concerning the most and least helpful assignments as well as the most and least enjoyable.

I enjoy writing about stuff in a journal.

I don't like what I have to write about.

Our journals are the best because they are kinda fun.

I don't like all that writing.

Journals are a good time to reflect and have fun.

I just don't see how they help me.

With journals, you can't be right or wrong.

Every other Friday?

I think the vocab and the worksheets are the most helpful.

Vocabulary is so boring.

I enjoy vocabulary because it's easy.

Vocab just takes me forever!

vocab is the least boring assignment.

Vocabulary just doesn't help me as much.

If I don't get it, I can learn from the worksheet.

All worksheets-I can't stand them.

Practice worksheets are helpful because they prepare us for tests.

The grammar worksheets are very hard.

I can get into the subject or chapter when I get a good worksheet.

Practice worksheets are kinda boring to most people.

I do my homework...

-  so I can learn.
-  so I understand.
-  so I don't get a detention.
-  so it doesn't lower my grade.
-  to study for a test.
-  to get a good grade.
-  to improve my education.
-  because sometimes they are fun.
-  so the teacher knows you get it.
-  to show how much I know.
-  to learn the basics.

I don't do my homework...

-  when I don't get it.
-  because I don't feel like it.
-  if forget to do it.

- ☛ when I get frustrated.
- ☛ if it's boring.
- ☛ if it's too long.
- ☛ because it's tiring.
- ☛ when I'm too lazy.
- ☛ because I hate it.

Based on their comments, many college prep students remarked that practice worksheets were the most helpful type of homework, because they saw a direct connection between these worksheets and the tests. They seemed to think these helped them achieve better grades. Additionally, according to the students, they were easy to understand, and we always went over them the next day. Therefore, there was immediate feedback.

However, the least enjoyable homework assignment for my college prep students was the practice worksheets. Based on their comments here, they felt this way because they were “boring” and had no connection to things they cared about or were able to relate to personally.

The worst assignments dealt with grammar and usually directly related to worksheets. Without a clear connection to their lives, most students didn't consider these assignments to be enjoyable.

On the other hand, students found journals to be the least helpful. One student wrote, “They just don’t help us learn.” They didn’t see a connection between the journals and practicing their writing skills because I did not take points off for grammar and spelling. Surprisingly, journals were their most enjoyable homework assignment. Students reported that they enjoyed the opportunity to express their feelings and learn about themselves. Furthermore, most students seemed to like the fact that there is no right or wrong in a journal as long as they wrote about a topic.

After these reflections were completed, I knew I had to make further adjustments in many of my assignments for the second marking period. I continued assigning journals, following the same routine as I had always done. The only change I made with journals was my assessment. While I still did not take points off for grammar or spelling errors, I used the editing symbols that I use on their formal essays and had them review and rewrite any words that were spelled wrong or grammatical errors that needed to be fixed. Additionally, I gave them a “pass” post-it for the third and fourth marking period, where they could choose to write and not worry about their journal entry being corrected. This way, students who were overly concerned about making multiple corrections but still wanted to write could use their post-it.

In relation to practice worksheets, the student identified these as the most helpful but also the least enjoyable assignments, so I also tried to make some

changes in the second marking period. I still gave worksheets, but not nearly as many. Instead, I tried to create assignments that related more to the students. For example, instead of giving them a worksheet to locate and determine the correct pronoun, I had them write their own paragraphs for other students to find the correct word choice. Their comments in class suggest that they like this much better. Also, I noticed that many students referred to their grammar textbook to try to “trick” other students. Another assignment I gave to join writing and grammar focused on irregular verbs. I asked students to use five irregular verbs to write about their worst school experience (see Figure 6).

I made similar adjustments to the vocabulary assignments. Instead of the traditional bookwork, I designed assignments to help students connect the vocabulary to the real world. For example, in one unit, I asked students to find a vocabulary word from the unit in a newspaper, magazine, or novel. I mixed another vocabulary unit with my narrative writing unit and asked students to include ten of the fifteen words in their narrative stories (see Figure 7).

Verb Paragraph -

11-30-01

My worst school must have been in fourth grade when I met my new teacher, Mrs. Dagon. People said she was nice but her other students told of horrible things about her. I heard that once she got so mad at a student she had thrown a desk across the room, just to scare him. At that time I was pretty scared but this wasn't the only story about her. There was another story about her, it was that one time she got so mad at a kid she had broken off a limb from a desk and chased him out of the class. Now I was petrified with fear of the fourth grade, good thing I was with my best friend Jorge. We have grown up together since the beginning and we were the best of friends. Gladly the fourth grade wasn't even all that bad but something worse was about to happen. At the end of fourth grade my mom had me transferred to public school, and I eventually stopped talking to Jorge. Our friendship had fallen apart and I haven't seen Jorge since the last day of school in fourth grade.

SAVING TO H

Figure 6

In the following example Katrina does an exemplary job of combining the vocabulary with the narrative unit.

In The Heart Of Southern Alabama...

On a bright sunny day with the clouds roaming high, around the early 1900's in the heart of southern Alabama two sisters, Harriett and Scarlet, of African descent were both pondering their thoughts while contently picking cotton in a field. The thought being, " I wonder where we would be today if it weren't for our saviors Isabella and Abraham?" A life for the two sisters goes on. As they *vied* their way through the hardships of life...

"Oh my Harriett, where are they taking us? Our house, mother and father they're all gone, why us, why?" exclaimed Scarlet.

"Scarlet, I'm scared for our lives," Harriett shouted.

We must be strong, never do we let down! Never show our weaknesses, we will get through this together," Harriett frantically explained.

As Harriett and her sister were taken from their homes in Africa and now are awoken from the smells of the ocean, noises of uncertainty, and panic have set in. They have found themselves somewhere in foreign surroundings that their not used to.

Harriett exclaims, "we are in a cellar of a boat," in a soft, frantic voice unheard.

They look through a peep hole on the side of the boat all they see is light, it's cold, damp and the two sisters are scared and quite uncertain of their destination. Next to them they find a man.

"Hello!" Says Harriett glad to see they're not alone, "my name is Harriett and uh... uh oh yeah this is my um sister Scarlet, she's not feeling very well right now please excuse her temper. And um who might you be?"

Figure 7

By making these changes in my lesson, I tried to avoid many of the students' excuses for not doing homework. While I cannot transform their outlook on homework when they admit that they "hate all of it," by helping students to see connection to the real world and purpose for completing an assignment, I hope to increase completion, and in turn, their learning.

With one assignment in particular, I was able to draw on students' previous knowledge and ability to understand as well as pique their interests.

Play: Student Interest

After reading and watching *Flowers for Algernon*, I asked students to read and respond to an article from *Time* magazine involving a mentally retarded man who was accused of rape and murder. In *Flowers for Algernon*, the protagonist Charlie Gordon has an IQ below 70 and chooses to have an operation to increase his intelligence. Charlie gets the operation and becomes a genius, but the effects fade. Along with the story, we discussed the moral implications of the surgery, as well as the choice a mentally retarded man was given. After comparing the written story to the movie, I gave students the article about John Paul Penry. The article focuses on the debate surrounding the execution of a mentally retarded man. We began reading the article in class, and I asked the students to finish it for homework. Specifically, I asked the students to finish reading the article and write an opinion statement with at least four sentences to support the opinion. Many students did more than what I expected (see Figures 8 and 9). Tiona and Laura

are two students who exceeded my expectations. This was a transitional lesson that moved the class into the persuasive writing unit.

John Penry

I think that John Penry should still die. I think this because he's killed somebody before. He only went to jail and didn't get the death penalty. I don't think he learned the lesson he was supposed to learn. Even though he's mentally retarded, he should still take responsibility for his actions. A lot of people have problems when they are kids. They don't go kill people. It isn't fair for him to be in jail while Pamela Moseley is dead and her family has to deal with it.

Figure 8

11/16
My opinion on John Penry
I think that John Penry should die. He may be mentally retarded but he should know that hurting someone else is wrong. He might have been set-up. You also still have to take into consideration that his mother abused him and he thought it was right to do the same. Here is why I think Penry should die.
If he gets out of jail he may hurt someone else since he has already hurt two people. If you just keep him in jail, he may be hurt and made fun of, it would be a mess. My final reason is that he brutalized and raped her. He had taken her whole life away and her kids growing up without a mother. If something happens to the dad they would have to be separated and adopted.

Figure 9

Students seemed excited about the article after we began reading it. Those who were doodling or holding their head up with their hands were no longer doing so. As I discussed the assigned homework, I had full attention from the class. The following day, I checked the homework by sight, and we had a class debate concerning the topic. Every student had completed his or her homework assignment. In all four of my college prep classes, no one missed, forgot, or chose not to do this assignment.

In order to illustrate the enthusiasm of my class, I have opted to dramatize the lesson. All of the student and teacher dialogue is taken from a participant observation entry included in my field log.

SCENE: *This is a first period college prep class. While the students are said to be “college bound,” the homework completion rate does not always show that. After completing the daily routine and reviewing homework for the evening, the teacher asks the students to get out their homework so she can check it. The teacher then quietly walks around the room checking homework for completion as the students are writing their warm-up in their notebook. The teacher arrives at TIONA’s desk.*

TIONA: I typed it; I thought it was pretty interesting. Do you have an update for us?

TEACHER: We’ll talk about it after our debate.

JASON: Wait! I have mine, too! Did you see how much I wrote? Wait...a debate?

(The teacher nods her head and smiles at him.)

BEN: I don't think I have ever written so much! Did you see mine?

LAURA: *(whispering)* Do you think he should be killed?

AMANDA: *(whispering)* I don't know...that was a hard decision. Pay attention before we get in trouble.

LAURA: But what did you write?

(AMANDA passes her paper to LAURA for her to read.)

(The class continues to discuss examples of onomatopoeia for the warm-up.)

CONRAD: When are we going to talk about Penry?

TEACHER: As soon as we are done with this.

CONRAD: I think we are done. WE want to do this. *(holding up the Penry article)*

TEACHER: Are there any other questions about onomatopoeia? *(A few students shake their heads.)*

CONRAD: Nope. We're good on that! Let's talk about our homework.

TEACHER: Ok. We are going to have a debate based on what you read and responded to last night. If you believe Penry should be executed, sit on the right side of the room. If you believe he should be punished in some other way, sit on the left.

LAURA: *(raising her hand)* What if we're not sure?

TEACHER: If you are not sure sit in the middle and choose a side when you are ready.

(The class moves to the appropriate sides, and it is pretty even.)

TEACHER: Ok, you are all jury members during John Paul Penry's sentencing. I, Judge Kratzer, put in your hands what is going to happen to Mr. Penry. You may begin.

CONRAD: *(enthusiastically)* Conrad reporting for duty, your honor. I respectfully have decided that Mr. Penry should be fried for his actions. It is clear that he knew what he was doing in this murder since he said himself, *(checks the article)* "I told her that I...hated to kill her, but I had to so she wouldn't squeal on me."

BEN: Yeah! And you know he was in trouble before. Just cause he's retarded doesn't mean he doesn't know it was bad.

ALLY: Charlie Gordon never hurt anyone. He even cried when Algernon the mouse died. Having a low IQ does not mean you can get away with murder.

CONRAD: Hey, that was tricky. I mean, I completely agree. If that were my mother that he killed, I would not be happy to know that he was still alive in prison, and I couldn't see my mom again.

AMANDA: *(sitting on the other side of the room talking to Conrad)* But, what if he was your brother? Don't you feel bad for him? I mean...

CONRAD: (*interrupting*) My brother wouldn't do that.

AMANDA: Let me finish. If you knew him, whether he was your brother or not, don't you think you would rather have him in a hospital where he could get help?

TIONA: Definitely! It says here (*referring to the article*) that he was abused when he was little. He didn't get to go to school after first grade. And, his mom made him drink his own pee. Don't you feel bad?

LAURA: OK, I think I know now. I feel bad, like Tiona said, but he raped and killed a woman! You can't just let him go.

AMANDA: I am not saying let him go. I just don't think he should be killed. He still believes in Santa.

LAURA: Oh. I don't know.

CONRAD: Think about in school. If a low kid hurts someone, he doesn't get a different punishment.

LAURA: Yeah, but being low and being mentally retarded are different.

Through this play, I believe that it becomes obvious how a student's real world connection to an assignment motivates him or her to complete the assignment with better quality. Students easily bridge the gap between a fictional story and a nonfiction magazine article when they care about what they have read.

The classroom debate continued throughout the class period. At the end, the students were still torn as to whether John Paul Penry should be executed or

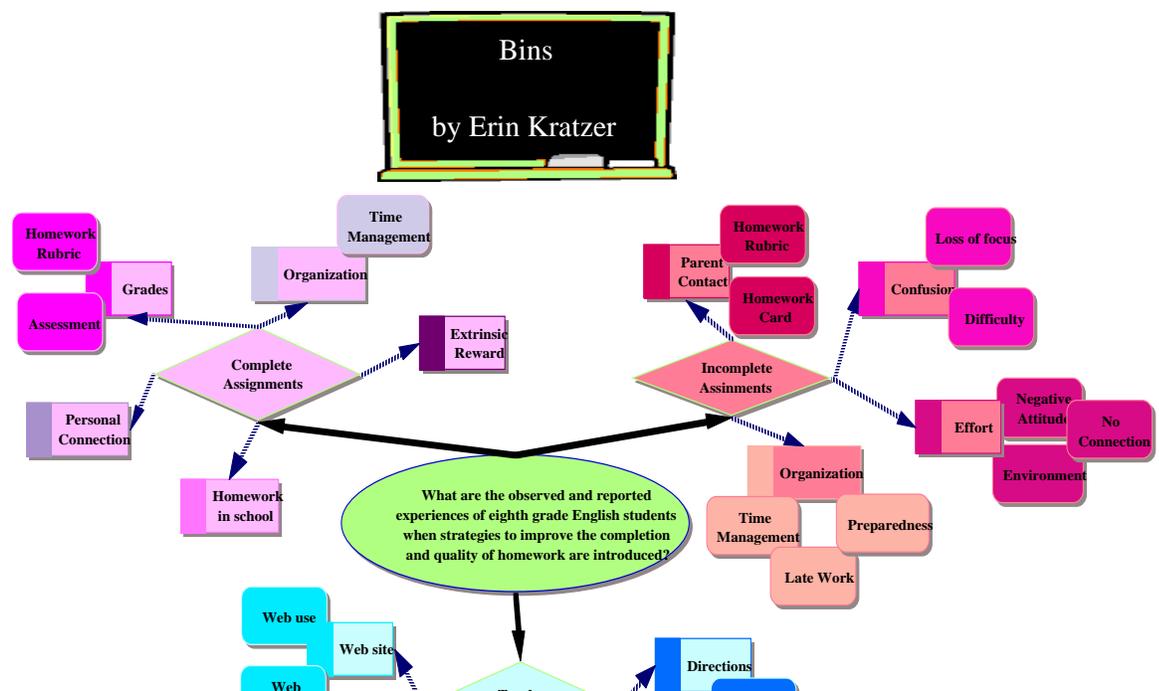
not. However, every student in the class contributed at least once, and I never had to interrupt the flow of the debate. After this lesson, I was easily able to transition into the next unit on persuasive writing. Many students chose to write about John Paul Penry, since they were able to select their own topics. This showed their motivation due to their high level of motivation. With this type of assignment, students succeeded.

DATA ANALYSIS

Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) call analysis “taking things apart” (p. 191). Throughout my teacher action research process, I have looked carefully at my data, searching for patterns to guide me to my findings. Some of the qualitative forms of analysis include coding the field log, binning the codes, writing analytic memos based on my classroom observations, composing analytic memos to examine my data from a variety of theoretical frameworks, creating theme statements, and generating narrative forms. Additionally, in a more quantitative form, I have produced bar graphs (see Tables 1 and 2). It is important to note that analysis of my data was an ongoing process. It was not done in one day but over many months. Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) point out, “The interweaving of data collection and analysis is highly transactional, each activity shedding new light on and enriching another” (p. 165).

Coding was my initial step in analyzing my data. Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) define coding as providing labels “that identify a meaning unit” (p. 162). Throughout my data collection, and after data collection was completed, I coded my participant observations, reflective memos, surveys, student work, and interviews. Initially, and days after writing my observations, I went back to read what I had written and wrote codes in the right margin. As this continued, I made a chart of my codes, and the pages where they could be found. From that point, I referred to the code chart to begin to examine patterns that were emerging.

After coding was completed, I created “bins” for my codes. Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) identify bins as “the first broad categories” (p. 162). These categories helped me to find common themes in the patterns that emerged from my data. Using Inspiration, a computer software program, I created a cluster chart so I could visualize these bins and the codes within them. I started with multiple bins, but after seeing them in the chart, I was able to narrow my focus to those which shed the most light on my research question (see Figure 10).



From these bins, I was able to create theme statements. Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) define themes as “a statement of meaning that runs through all or most of the pertinent data” (p. 206). After perusing my bins, and reviewing the codes within them, I created theme statements clearly supported by my research data. From these themes emerged metathemes. Metathemes “are major constructs that highlight overarching issues in a study” (Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul, 1997, p. 206). The metathemes I formed comprise the major findings of my study.

The composition of analytic memos also helped me to make meaning of my research data. Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) describe analytic memos as a tool utilized to “write a memo to yourself about what you see emerging as patterns of behavior, words, key ideas, events” (p. 187). I wrote analytic memos both about specific patterns in my classroom as well as theorists and how they

relate to my study. One specific type of analytic memo that I have utilized is a figurative language analysis. When writing about metaphors as a way to analyze language, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) write, “Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action” (p. 3). By analyzing the language that I used within the classroom and in my participant observations, my frustration with classroom routine and organization became evident. Additionally, I examined my data in light of theoretical constructs I encountered when reading various educators including Lev Vygotsky (1978), John Dewey (1938), Lisa Delpit (2002), and Paulo Friere (1970).

I also wrote the vignettes, pastiches, poems, anecdotes, and dramas presented earlier in this document to help me analyze the data that I collected and to tell my story and my students’ story of homework completion. Vignettes frequently depict one scene that is often a critical incident. Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) write, “Vignettes and portraits are representations of life on paper” (p. 242). A pastiche is a compilation of data that is put together to shed light upon a theme. Often pastiches will highlight juxtaposition, which was my intention with my students’ voices. I wrote the poem by drawing on parents’ words as well as my own, and it is used as a reflective analysis of parent contact. Another narrative form that I employed is called a layered story. According to Ely, Anzul, Friedman, and Gardner (1991), “One sort of layered story arises from different players about the same events” (p. 79). During the play, I set the scene for the

classroom and introduced the characters, my students, as the dialogue occurred in the classroom setting. I used the play to illustrate a particularly well-designed lesson and homework assignment.

Through these various forms, I was able to learn more about my students, the story of my classroom, and myself since “form shapes meaning” (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, & Gardner, 1991, p. 59).

FINDINGS

There are many variables that are integral to a teacher's homework design and students' homework completion. Based on my action research study, I have found that there are specific strategies a teacher can use to improve homework completion and quality in his or her classroom.

Teacher Presentation

The way the teacher presents each lesson and homework assignment affects the completion and quality of assignments. *When the teacher does not make the directions clear, students are less likely to complete the work. When verbal and written directions are given clearly, students are more likely to complete the work. Often, if the teacher gives students a routine for homework assignments, it helps them focus and understand the directions. For example, I discuss the evening's homework assignment in the beginning of class. Students know where I list the assignments and that I am giving them the important directions that they need. Many times, students will write down additional information at this time, as evidenced by the students' agenda books.*

If students understand the purpose of an assignment, they are more likely to complete the work, but if students do not understand why they are completing the work, they will be more likely not do it or put effort into it. Whether the purpose is to practice a concept learned in class, prepare for a test, apply writing conventions, understand vocabulary words in context, or read independently, it is

important for students to know why they are doing what I assigned. This is evident throughout my data. In the survey as well as the first marking period homework reflection sheet, students commented that while they enjoyed journals, they did not understand why they were important. When I started adding editing symbols and clear comments on the students' writing, journal completion increased.

Homework will be completed more often when the classroom environment is conducive to student input, time is taken for conferences, and students think they are included and important. Within the I-story vignette of a successful student, Tiona, Jason, and Katrina referred to the classroom environment. A classroom where students think they are welcome and their voices are heard, it is more conducive to student work. Additionally, the multiple times when I have negotiated with my students about an assignment or due date, their work has been of better quality. Even Arthur, a student who rarely did his work, was more prepared to work in class after I talked to him or gave him personal positive attention.

Strong classroom routines usually produce quality work, but if a routine is not clearly planned in my classroom, it seems to fail. In order to analyze this theme in my study, I examined my own use of metaphors and other figurative language in my field log. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) write, "Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of

extraordinary rather than ordinary flourish” (p. 3). By analyzing these metaphors as well as other types of figurative language within my classroom dialogue and reflections, I was able to explicate the role of routine and the benefits and pitfalls of my organizational structures.

Often I used figurative language in my field log entries to describe my own frustrations and annoyances. Much of the time, these had to do with a hindrance in my classroom routine or problems with organization, whether it was my own or the students’. Every day, I expected students to sit in their seats, write the assignments in their agenda books, and complete their warm-up within the first three minutes. Often something happened to interrupt this flow of activities.

I wrote a reflective memo in which I compiled a list of the ways I used figurative language. The first illustration I used, “like a laundry list of things to do,” compared the items to review in class to a laundry list. When there were many items to review, it took a long time to do so. Therefore, I did not get into the “fun parts” of my lesson quickly because I felt the need to complete the routine properly. In order to do this, students needed to make it obvious that they understood the assignments and had written them down. This may have taken awhile when there were a number of things to review. It took even longer when there were repeated questions because my students were not listening or a pencil needed immediate sharpening.

In the second example in my analysis, I used another term associated with cleaning. I compared distributing papers to housekeeping business. This is not something most people enjoy doing; however, it is a necessity in our lives. I returned every graded assignment to my students. I do not like to have students distribute papers because I don't think it is fair for them to see their peers' grades. Unfortunately, this consumes much needed time in the classroom. It is something that has to be done, and when it is done, you have something to show for it. In this case, students had their grades and the much needed feedback that so many of them desired. However, this takes away from teaching.

Next, I focused on students. In my field log, I wrote, "He was behind...again." This particular student always seemed to finish after the other students. Much of the time, he caused this by his lack of organization. He never seemed to find the materials for class, much less a writing utensil. In another example, I wrote about the students' lack of organization. It often seemed like students were "shuffling around" or "dragging their feet" any time I asked them to retrieve something from their bags. For this reason, I often encouraged students to keep a folder or binder for each of their classes. Within their folders, I asked them to keep a section for homework and notes. Additionally, I provided a classroom folder for all assignments with grades and comments. Yet, through this analysis, I gained insight into what my students were able to do on their own, and many of them needed someone to show them how to be organized.

During the day, my desk, where I rarely sit, was often covered with papers to grade, papers to return, notes that I took, parent phone calls I had to make, as well as random books and worksheets that I was using. Therefore, I could not find the top of my desk. This became frustrating for me, especially since I was the one who was promoting organization.

The final aspect of my figurative language analysis included a comment that I made in a participant observation log about one student's homework assignment. I wrote that the student's sheet "looked like a dog had taken a bite out of it." When he finally found it, it was torn, ripped and dirty. I asked him why it was not in his folder, and I looked in his bag; I could not even find a folder. It looked like a trash can of papers. I believe this lack of organization was affecting his classroom performance.

Consequently, it becomes apparent that while routines are an everyday necessity in my classroom, they can often add to my frustration if they are not carried out as planned. This is something I had not considered before. I have always focused on the helpfulness of routines. However, through analyzing the figurative language that I used, it has become apparent that I need to be willing to forego routines when the flow of the classroom is being hindered. Additionally, it has become obvious that some students need to learn how to organize their folders and backpacks. Simply asking them to do so is not enough. Furthermore, as the teacher, I need to model organizational strategies, so they are visible to my

students. Nevertheless, I believe they are essential in keeping my students and me organized. Coincidentally, that is the other discernible part of my figurative language analysis.

The parents and students who use the web site and Infotel find these tools to be helpful. This is seen throughout the I-story vignettes as well as the parent comments. Both of these remind students and parents about assignments and other assessments. With the website, there are also extra parts that can assist the students when they need help if the parent is unavailable or cannot help.

Incomplete Assignments

One major reason for incomplete assignments, as described by my students, is the lack of home support. *In the layered story, one student described a home without both parents and little guidance or help on schoolwork. Yet, students' work generally improves and parents report that they appreciate it when teachers contact them to keep them updated on a regular basis.*

When students are confused about an assignment, they are less likely to complete it. *The teacher can clarify the confusion with clear directions and teacher assistance. However, if students don't realize that they are confused until they get home, and they do not have help from a parent or guardian, work may not be completed. Having resources, like the web site, is one way to curb this problem.*

Students are less likely to put effort into homework if they find it too difficult or boring, or if they cannot make a connection. *As seen through students' comments and responses on the survey and first marking period homework reflection, as well as the I-stories, when students find an assignment too difficult or boring they may choose not to complete it. They may also avoid assignments where they cannot make a personal connection.*

Finally, lack of organization from the students or the teacher leads to incomplete assignments. *I have found that when I am teaching a fragmented lesson, or I am simply unorganized, students are less likely to complete their homework. This may be due to different reasons. One possibility is that students do not receive clear directions or purpose. If students are unorganized, however, it can lead to a much larger problem. Without an agenda book or place to write assignments, without folders and some sort of organization, middle school students may become lost. As explicated throughout my narrative, organization among many of my students is poor, resulting in forgotten assignments and even lost homework that had been completed.*

Complete Assignments

Multiple variables result in satisfactorily completed assignments. *When both the teacher and his or her students are organized, assignments will be completed with better quality. This is evident in Tiona and Katrina's I-stories, as*

well as the figurative language analysis. Organization gives both the teacher and students a sense of control about one's work.

As evidenced by the first and second marking period graphs as well as my participant observations of my classroom, when homework is given a grade, it is often done more frequently and with better quality. If students know that their homework is going to be checked by the teacher, they are more likely to complete it. However, when I did not mention that homework would be checked or graded, students were more likely to leave an assignment incomplete, not do the assignment at all, or try to finish the assignment in the three minutes before class begins.

When students see a connection between homework and formal, traditional assessments, they are more likely to see the assignment as valuable.

Many students commented on this in the first marking period homework reflections. They felt that journals had no purpose since they were not being tested on the content of them. Yet, they found grammar worksheets to be helpful because they saw a direct connection to a test or quiz. I am not suggesting that grammar worksheets are the best assignment, however. Instead, I propose that teachers point out grammar and spelling errors within journals, without letting these affect the grades of the students. Additionally, instead of the traditional grammar worksheet, students should write and begin to apply the rules they are supposed to learn. The students in my college prep class enjoyed the opportunity

to do this, and it increased homework completion grades for grammar assignments.

When homework is begun in class, with my assistance, students are more likely to complete it. *When students were able to start an assignment in my presence, they often completed the assignment later. This is possible for many reasons. First, I am able to clarify any directions if they start the work in class. Furthermore, if the student does not understand the work, I can help him or her avoid confusion and homework distress. Also, students can ask their peers for guidance. Finally, if the student is enthusiastic enough to start the work in class, he or she may be able to see a personal connection or tie to the real world.*

When students are given autonomy they are more likely to complete homework assignments and produce better quality work. *Providing choices can be done through different approaches. The teacher may offer the students three varying ways to complete an assignment, or the teacher may, for example, assign a journal and tell the students to choose their own topic. Sometimes, after completing a lesson, the instructor can allow the class to decide what type of practice would be most helpful. This finding is most clearly seen with Arthur. When Arthur thought that he designed the assignment, he often completed it. If he felt ownership of the work, he often generated better assignments. Even when choice was limited, if students were given one, the completion rates rose.*

When students are able to form a personal connection and relate to homework, they are more likely to complete it with improved quality. *This is clearly seen through student work and in the I-story, where I wrote about Kayla. Whenever she could write about Halo or use her knowledge of fantasy adventure novels, she excelled. This worked for other students as well. By giving them more choices, I tried to give students the opportunity to make connections to every type of homework assignment.*

The following graphs illustrate the completion rates for varying assignments in the first and second marking periods (see Table 1 and 2). In the first and second marking period, I tracked the quality and completion of homework assignments. These were the assignments that I collected from my students and graded. There were different types of assignments including journals, grammar, vocabulary, and reading checks. Once I computed the average of each assignment across all of my college prep classes, I graphed them so completion rate could be seen clearly.

There were similarities and differences between the first and second marking period bar graphs. The first marking period bar graph showed eleven assignments with varying degrees of completion. Overall, students completed 78% of the assignments. In the second marking period, I collected and graded more assignments since I thought that this was one way to motivate my students, particularly the students who strive for good grades. The second marking period

bar graph depicted twenty assignments with different completion rates. The completion rate for the second marking period was 80% overall.

Table 1

Marking Period 1

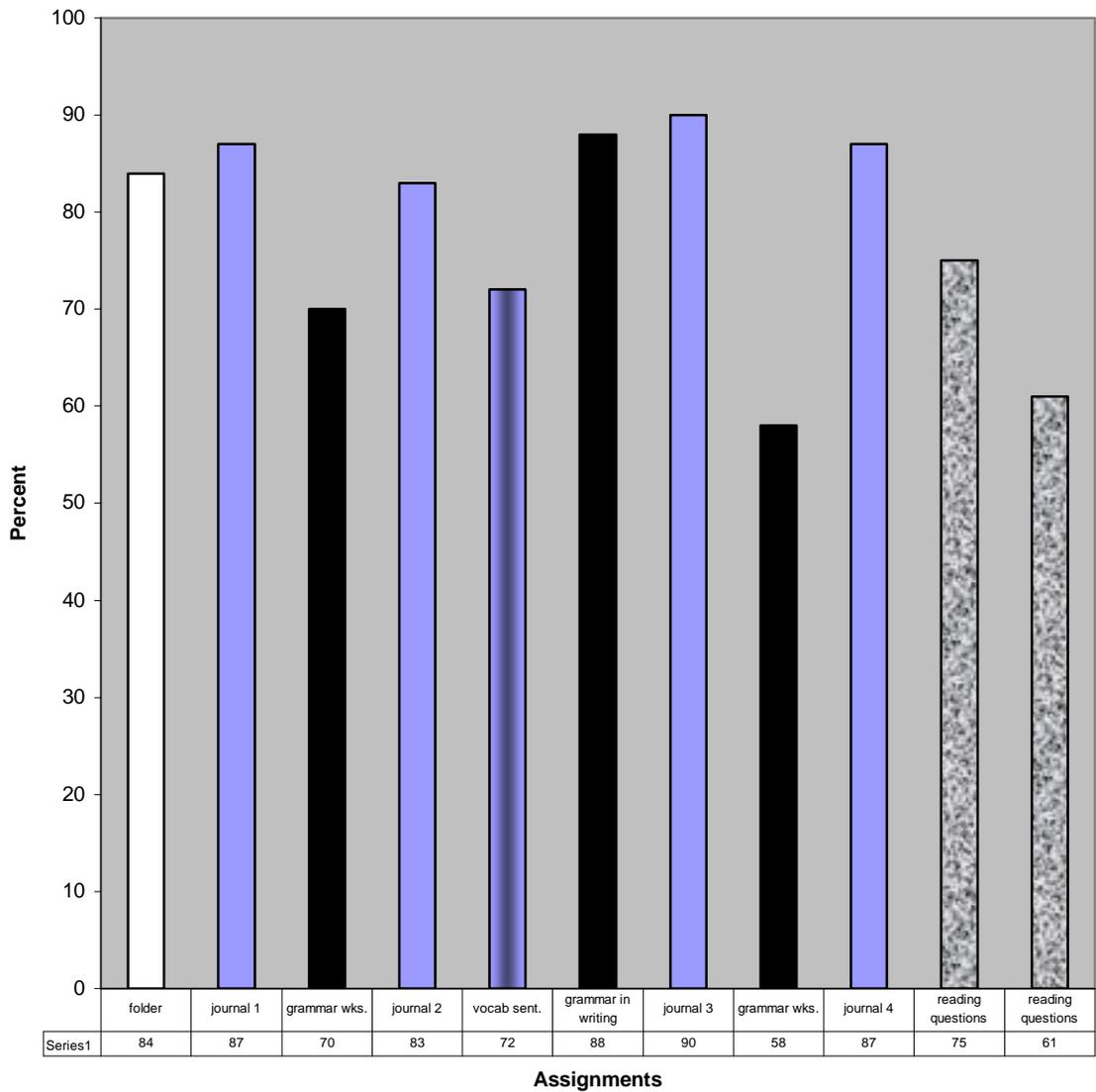
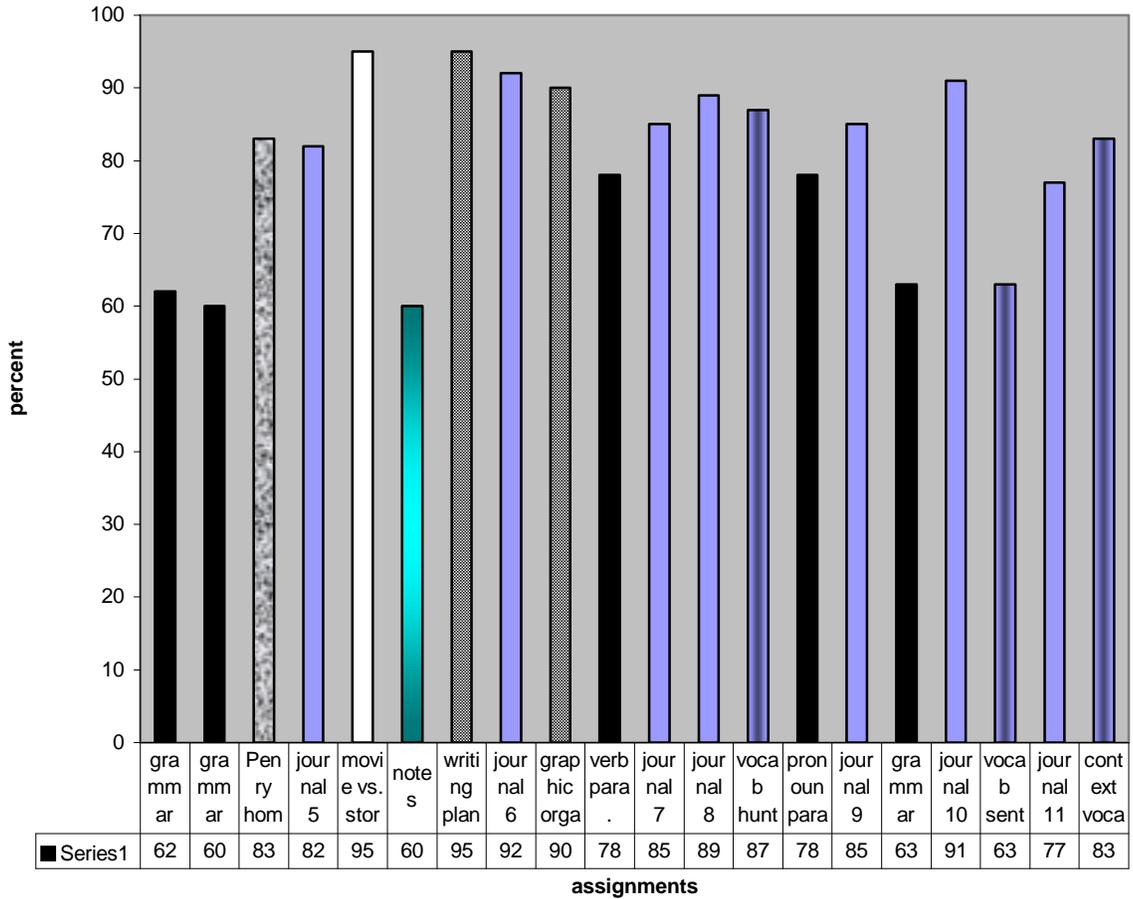


Table 2

Marking Period 2



Students completed journals most frequently with 87% completion in the first marking period and 86% in the second. This supports what students reported about journals in their homework reflections at the end of the first marking period. Generally, students enjoyed the opportunity to express their feelings and learn about themselves, especially when they were not being assessed on grammar and

spelling. I suspect that another reason the rate of completion for journals was so high was the routine. Every other week, on a Monday, I assigned a new journal entry. I collected the journals on Friday and returned them the following Monday with teacher comments. Based on the students' comments and the rate of completion, I do not plan to change the journal assignments.

On the other hand, I will adapt grammar assignments based on the data I collected. Although students described worksheets as the most helpful, they did report that they were "boring" and had "no connection to things" they cared about. In the first marking period, I assigned students three graded grammar assignments. Two of the three assignments were worksheets that I created. The completion rates for these assignments were 70% and 58%. However, when I asked students to write their own sentences following a particular sentence pattern, 88% of the students completed the assignment with high quality. This showed me that students were more willing to complete grammar homework when it related to them in some way. Skill and drill worksheets, although helpful for some, were not completed as frequently as grammar assignments where students were given the opportunity to write.

This pattern continued into the second marking period, when I assigned two grammar worksheets in the beginning of the quarter. The sentences within the worksheets were related to the curriculum because they were extended from the short story that we were reading and discussing at the time. However, the students

averaged a 61% completion rate. Yet, when I asked students to write one paragraph using irregular verbs and another one using pronouns as compound subjects and objects, the completion rate rose to 78%.

I changed vocabulary assignments as well. In the first marking period, I asked students to define fifteen unrelated words in a vocabulary unit. As another part of this unit, I asked students to copy sentences from the vocabulary book and fill in the correct vocabulary words. Additionally, I directed students to underline the context clues in each sentence to show why they choose a particular word; 72% of students completed this assignment.

To increase student participation in vocabulary assignments for the second marking period, I changed my approach to vocabulary homework, asking the students to define and then within a week, find one word from the unit in a newspaper, magazine, or book. By the end of the week, they presented the word that they found to the class. Grades on the vocabulary quiz were higher as 87% of the students completed and learned from this assignment.

Toward the end of the second marking period, I asked students to complete a worksheet for vocabulary. This assignment was unlike the other vocabulary units because all the words related to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream speech." On one side of the worksheet was the word and definition, and on the other side was the quote from the speech that used the vocabulary word. Using the context clues, and a dictionary if necessary, I asked

students to match the definition to the sentence from the speech. The completion rate for this assignment was 83%.

In comparing the two marking periods, it seems that the design of the assignment truly lends itself to completion rates. When I created assignments that the students could relate to, or at least see direct connections to themselves, students were more likely to do the homework. Furthermore, when I gave students assignments that related to their lives, they were more likely to participate in class, have more success on the quizzes and tests, and extend their grammar and vocabulary knowledge past the particular homework assignment and into their writing.

THE NEXT ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE

Through my research this year, I have learned that my students and I must take joint responsibility for missed homework assignments. The design of the homework that I assign my students will often affect how they complete it. Through observation, reflection, and analysis, I strongly believe that I have a sense of what these students need from me as their teacher. However, every child is different.

I plan on continuing my adaptation of homework assignments throughout this school year and for years to come. By keeping an open mind, I am prepared to work with students and teachers to develop better homework assignments. Through this study, I have realized that I will not understand what each student needs until I listen attentively.

I have learned about strategies to improve homework in general. In the broad sense, it is important to establish a classroom routine, but not to be so structured that changes and adaptations cannot be made. Additionally, it is integral for me to model organization, so my students see the benefits and not just hear about them. Students also need to understand the purpose of a homework assignment. Next, immediate feedback on all assignments helps students to see the importance I place on homework. Finally, parent contact is another aspect that can be helpful in raising the completion rate of homework.

More specifically, each type of assignment that I gave needed to be adapted for this year's students to be most successful. I plan on continuing to grade journals for completion; however, I will include feedback on content, grammar, and spelling, so the students see them as being more useful. With each vocabulary assignment that I give, I plan on giving students choice. While this may develop over time, I would like to find more types of assignments and short projects that they can choose from in order to learn the vocabulary words. When it comes to grammar, I would like to find more ways to teach grammar through writing, as this seemed to be the best way for my students to gain knowledge of and understand the importance of learning grammatical conventions. This brings me to my continued action research.

Since the students showed motivation when they wrote, I hope to find ways of using writing within my grammar lessons and vocabulary lessons. In order to begin this next cycle, I plan on reading Janet Allen's (1999) *Words, Words, Words: Teaching Vocabulary in Grades 4-12*, as this book describes new methods and strategies for teaching vocabulary to students. Another text that will be helpful is *Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing* by Constance Weaver. While I believe it is important for my students to learn the conventions of standard written English, the purpose of comprehending these rules is so they can write better. While students found worksheets most helpful, they did not enjoy doing them, and they were not motivated to complete them with good quality. By

teaching grammar in the context of writing, I hope to make the purpose for each assignment more apparent and motivate students to learn.

I began this action research cycle unsure of what I would find but prepared to adapt and change as I learned about new strategies to improve homework and my students' learning. Through this reflective, qualitative study, I have noticed what worked and did not work to improve homework completion and quality in my classroom. I have also discovered that there is much more to learn concerning this topic. Additionally, during my study of this topic, I have realized that observing, analyzing, and reflecting with and about my students are my best resources when I want to improve something in my classroom. In the future, I plan on continuing the action research cycle through careful observation and research of the topics that arise.

REFERENCES

- Allen, J. (1999). *Words, words, words: Teaching vocabulary in grades 4-12*. York, ME: Stenhouse Publications.
- Arhar, J. M., Holly, M. L., & Kasten, W. C. (2001). *Action research for teachers: Traveling the yellow brick road*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative research in education: An introduction to theory & methods* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bryan, T., Burnstein, K., & Bryan, J. (2001). Students with learning disabilities: homework problems & promising practices. *Educational Psychologist*, 36 (3), 167-181.
- Bryan, T., and Sullivan-Burnstein, K. (1998). Teacher-selected strategies for improving homework completion. *Remedial & Special Education*, 19 (5), 263-276.
- Callahan, K., Rademacher, J., & Hildreth, B. (1998). The effect of parent participation in strategies to improve the homework performance of students who are at risk. *Remedial and Special Education*, 19 (3), 131-142.
- Canter, L. (1987). *Homework without tears for teachers*. Santa Monica, CA: Lee Canter and Associates.

- Claggert, F. (1996). *A measure of success*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook Publishers.
- Cooper, H. (2001). Homework for all-in moderation. *Educational Leadership*, 58 (7), 34-39.
- Cooper, H., Lindsay, J., Greathouse, S., & Nye, B. (1998). Relationships among attitudes about homework, amount of homework assigned and completed, and student achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90 (1), 70-93.
- Delpit, L. (2002). *The skin that we speak*. New York: The New York Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Eagland, D., & Flatley, J. (1985). Homework and why. *Phi Delta Kappan Educational Foundation*. 19-32.
- Ely, M., Anzul, M., Friedman, T., Garner, D., & Steinmetz, A. (1991). *Doing qualitative research: Circles within circles*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Ely, M., Vinz, K., Anzul, M., & Downing, M. (1997). *On writing qualitative research: Living by words*. London: Falmer Press.
- Epstein, J., Polloway, E., Foley, R., & Patton, J. (1993). Homework: A comparison of teachers' & parents' perceptions of the problems experienced by students identified as having behavioral disorders, learning disabilities, or no disabilities. *Remedial & Special Education*, 14(5), 40-50.

- Epstein, J., & Voorhis, F. (2001). More than minutes: Teachers' roles in designing homework. *Educational Psychologist, 36* (3), 181-194.
- Feldman, S. (2004). The great homework debate. *Teacher to Teacher, 6*.
- Freire, P. (1970). Pedagogy of the oppressed. (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum.
- Gajria, M., & Salend, S. (1995). Homework practices of students with and without learning disabilities: A comparison. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 28* (5), 285-297.
- Green, S., & Gredler, M. (2002). A Review & Analysis of Constructivism for School-Based Practice. *School Psychology Review, 31* (1), 53-77.
- Killoran, I. (2003). Why is your homework not done? How theories of development affect your approach in the classroom. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 30* (4), 1-7.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- MacLean, M., & Mohr, M. (1999). *Teacher-Researchers at work*. Berkeley: National Writing Project.
- Polloway, E. & Epstein, M. (1994). Homework practices of general education teachers. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 27* (8), 500-510.

- Prawat, R. S. & Floden, R. E. (1994). Philosophical Perspectives on Constructivist Views of Learning. *Educational Psychologist*, 29 (1), 37-48.
- Rademacher, J., Cowart, M., Sparks, J., & Chism, V. (1997). Planning high quality assignments with diverse learners. *Preventing School Failure*, 42 (1), 12-19.
- Rademacher, J. (2000). Involving students in assignment evaluation. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 35 (3), 151-157.
- Rosemond, J. (1990). *Ending the homework hassle*. New York: A University Press Syndicate Company.
- Salend, S., Duhaney, D., Anderson, D., & Gottschalk, C. (2004). Using the Internet to improve homework communication & completion. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 36 (3), 64-73.
- Tabor, M. (1996). Homework is keeping grade-schoolers busy. *The New York Times*, 6.
- Thompson, S. (2003). Creating a high performance school system. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84 (7), 489-495.
- Tovani, C. (2000). *I read it, but I don't get it*. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.

Trammel, D., and Schloss, P. (1994). Using self-recording, evaluation, and graphing to increase completion of homework. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 27* (2), 75-82.

U.S. Department of Education. (1987). What works: Research about teaching and learning. Pueblo, CO: Consumer Information Center.

Viadero, D. (1995). The dog ate it. *Education Week, 14* (32), 1-7.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Weaver, C. (Ed.). (1998). *Lessons to share on teaching grammar in context writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Homework Contract

August 30, 2004

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Homework is important because it is a valuable aid in helping students make the most of their experience in school. I give homework because it is essential for reinforcing what has been taught in class, preparing students for upcoming lessons, extending and generalizing concepts, teaching responsibility, and helping students develop positive study habits.

I will assign homework Monday through Thursday. Homework should take students no more than one hour to complete each night, not including studying for tests or long-term projects.

I expect students to give their best effort on all homework. I also expect homework to be completed neatly and on time. Finally, I expect students to do the work on their own and ask for help after they have given their best effort.

I will check all homework. I strongly believe in the role positive support plays in motivating children to develop successful study habits. I will give students praise and other incentives when they do their homework.

If students choose not to complete their homework, I will contact the parents to help set up a homework plan. If students choose not to complete their homework, they also choose to lose certain privileges. If students choose to make up their homework the next day, their homework will be accepted, but they will receive half credit.

I feel that parents are the key to making homework a positive experience for the children. Therefore, I ask that parents make it a top priority, provide necessary supplies and a quiet environment, set a daily homework time, and provide positive support. Please contact me if there are any problems or questions. The easiest way to contact me is through email at kratzere@eastonsd.org.

Please sign the portion below, so I know that you have received this letter.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Erin Kratzer

I attest that I am the student's legally authorized representative and that I read and understand this homework contract and received a copy.

Legal representative signature: _____

Child's Name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B: Grade Report

Language Arts 8 - Exp. 3(A-E)
Monday, December 06, 2004

Progress report for:
Current overall grade: 83 (83%)
Citizenship: H

Date	Ctgry	Assignment	Score	Poss.	%	Grade	
11/5/04	Eval	FFA vb quiz2	20	20	100	100	
11/5/04	1stMPBook	FFA vb quiz 3	10	20	50	50	
11/5/04	Eval	Journal 5-Just right	13	15	86.67	87	
11/11/04	Eval	Flowers test	88	110	80	80	
11/18/04	Eval	Penry paragraph	17	20	85	85	
11/19/04	Eval	Journal 6-FYI	14	15	93.33	93	
11/22/04	Eval	persuasive notes	10	10	100	100	
11/23/04	Eval	pros and cons	10	10	100	100	
11/24/04	Eval	graphic organizer	10	10	100	100	

This is the 2nd Marking Period Grade.

Appendix C: Homework Rubric

	<i>Prompt</i>	<i>Arranged Neatly</i>	<i>Completed</i>	<i>Edited</i>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> no stray marks well organized no stains, rips, or folds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all directions followed all questions answered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> spelling and mechanics are perfect no careless mistakes
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Same day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 stray mark organized, but parts are missing 1 stain, rip, or fold 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all directions followed 1 or 2 missed answers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1-2 spelling or mechanics mistakes no careless mistakes
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 day late 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2-4 stray marks semblance of order more than one stain, rip, fold 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all directions followed 3-5 missed answers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2-4 spelling or mechanics mistakes no careless mistakes
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 days late 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This assignment went through a war! ☹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> directions not followed over half the work is missing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> over 4 spelling or mechanics mistakes carelessness evident

Appendix E: Agenda Book

The image shows two pages from an agenda book. The top page is for August 2004, and the bottom page is for September 2004. Both pages are divided into columns for each day of the week, with handwritten notes detailing tasks and assignments.

August 2004:

- Sunday 29:** (Blank)
- Monday 30:**
 - E - Folder papers signed ✓
 - TE - Folder ✓
 - H - Paper signed
 - M - ~~papers~~ signed ✓
 - SS - Paper signed ✓
 - R - Book ✓
 - S - NONE ✓
- Tuesday 31:**
 - E - Folder laminated
 - Paper signed
 - Cover Book
 - TE - None ✓
 - H - NONE ✓
 - M - Book covered
 - SS - NONE ✓
 - S - Book covered papers
 - R - NONE ✓
- Wednesday 1:**
 - E - outtie 60

September 2004:

- Sunday 26:** (Blank)
- Monday 27:**
 - English-quiz tomorrow
 - parts of speech
 - parts of speech/dog
 - matching definition with part of speech
 - speech labeling
 - definition 3-
 - types of rates
 - 2 main types of rates proper/common
 - Spanish-none
 - science-study elements
 - social studies-pg 9 q. 1 abc 2 abc due Fri
 - health-diagram into math p 617
 - 1-30 Answers only
- Tuesday 28:**
 - English-no homework
 - Spanish-no homework
 - science-no homework
 - history-pg 9 questions 1(abc) and 2(abc) due Friday
 - health-Finished Project
 - math-get quiz signed!
 - DON'T FORGET!**
- Wednesday 29:**
 - English- no test Oct 22 write 10 sentences of the 15 vocabulary words
 - Spanish-none worksheet
 - science-19.201 top half of 21 in packet
 - history pg 9 questions 1(abc) 2(abc) due Friday
 - health-none
 - math-none

Appendix F: HSIRB Acceptance Letter**MORAVIAN COLLEGE**

September 21, 2004

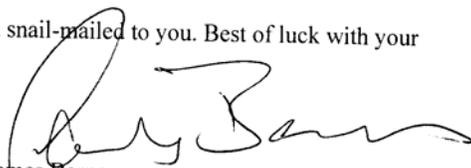
Erin C. Kratzer
1190 South Krocks Road
Wescosville, PA 18106
kratzere@eastonsd.org

Dear Erin Kratzer,

The Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board approved your proposal: Effective homework strategies in middle school English language arts. Given the materials submitted, your proposal received an expedited review. A copy of your proposal will remain with the HSIRB Chair.

Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this letter, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSIRB before implementation.

This letter will be e-mailed and snail-mailed to you. Best of luck with your research.



James Barnes
Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board
Moravian College
610-861-1672 (voice)
610-861-1657 (FAX)
barnesj@moravian.edu

Appendix G: Principal Consent Letter

August 23, 2004

Dear _____,

During the 2004-2005 school year, I will be taking courses toward a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. These courses help me stay in touch with the most effective ways of teaching in order to provide the best learning experience for the students.

Moravian's program requires that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. The focus of my research is the strategies that can be used in my eighth grade English classroom to improve homework completion and quality. In doing this, I hope to learn why students respond to some homework more positively than other assignments, to improve the quality of students' assignments, to increase student motivation pertaining to homework, and to increase parent and teacher communication. Completing homework successfully will help a student to succeed not only in his or her middle school years but also throughout his or her continued education. This study will take place August 30, 2004 to December 23, 2004.

As part of my study on homework, I will be observing the students' current homework practices by beginning assignments in class. Also, I will have students monitor their own practices of homework completion and quality through graphing of assignments and self-evaluating homework with the use of a rubric that details how many points are earned for different criteria. I will interview interested students about their thoughts and feelings both formally and informally during class time and during study halls.

Additionally, I plan to collect samples of students' work to analyze homework quality. Finally, the students will be asked to perform a survey both before and after the research. There are no anticipated risks in this study.

All children in my classroom will be involved with the homework improvement strategies as part of my regular English program. However, participation in this study is entirely voluntary and will not affect the child's grade in any way. Any child may withdraw from the study at any time. If a child is withdrawn, or a parent or guardian chooses not to have them be part of the study, I will not use any information pertaining to that child my study.

All the children's names will be kept confidential. The name of any student, parent, faculty member, cooperating teacher, or cooperating institution will not appear in any written report or publication of the study or its findings. Only my name and the names of my sponsoring professors will appear in this study. Minor details of the student's writing may be altered to ensure confidentiality. All research materials will be secured in a protected location.

My faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be contacted at Moravian College by phone at (610) 861-1482 or e-mail at jshosh@moravian.edu. The Principal, _____, has approved my study and can be reached by phone at (610) 250-2460.

If you have any questions or concerns about my in-class project, please feel free to contact me at school or e-mail me at kratzere@eastonsd.org. If not, please sign and return the bottom portion of this letter. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Erin C. Kratzer

I attest that I am the principal of the teacher conducting this research study, that I have read and understand this consent form, and received a copy. Erin Kratzer has my permission to conduct this study at _____.

Principal's signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix H: Parent Consent Letter

August 30, 2004

Dear Parents,

Currently, I am completing a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. These courses help me stay in touch with the most effective ways of teaching in order to provide the best learning experience for your child.

Moravian's program requires that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. The focus of my research is the strategies that can be used in my eighth grade English classroom to improve homework completion and quality. In doing this, I hope to learn why students respond to some homework more positively than other assignments, to improve the quality of students' assignments, to increase student motivation pertaining to homework, and to increase parent and teacher communication. Completing homework successfully will help a student to succeed not only in his or her middle school years but also throughout his or her continued education. This study will take place August 30, 2004 to December 23, 2004.

As part of my study on homework, I will be observing the students' current homework practices by beginning assignments in class. Also, I will have students monitor their own practices of homework completion and quality through graphing of assignments and self-evaluating homework with the use of a rubric that details how many points are earned for different criteria. I will interview interested students about their thoughts and feelings both formally and informally during class time and during study halls. Additionally, I plan to collect samples of students' work to analyze homework quality. Finally, the students will be asked to perform a survey both before and after the research. There are no anticipated risks in this study.

All children in my classroom will be involved with the homework improvement strategies as part of my regular English program. However, participation in this study is entirely voluntary and will not affect the child's grade in any way. Your child may withdraw from the study at any time. If your child is withdrawn, or you choose not to have them be part of the study, I will not use any information pertaining to your child my study.

All the children's names will be kept confidential. Neither your child's name nor the name of any student, parent, faculty member, cooperating teacher, or cooperating institution will appear in any written report or publication of the study or its findings. Only my name and the names of my sponsoring professors will appear in this study. Minor details of the student's writing may be altered to ensure confidentiality. All research materials will be secured in a protected location.

My faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be contacted at Moravian College by phone at (610) 861-1482 or e-mail at jshosh@moravian.edu. The Principal, _____, has approved my study and can be reached by phone at (610) 250-2460.

If you have any questions or concerns about my in-class project, please feel free to contact me at school or e-mail me at kratzere@eastonsd.org. If not, please sign and return the bottom portion of this letter. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Erin C. Kratzer

I attest that I am the student's legally authorized representative and that I read and understand this consent form, and received a copy.

Legal representative signature: _____

Child's Name: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX I: Introductory Survey

Homework Survey

Please rate each of the following on a 1-4 scale, where (1) is "never," (2) is "sometimes," (3) is "almost always" and (4) is "always." This is a confidential survey. I have no way of knowing your answers.

- 1 It takes me a long time to begin my homework.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 2 I get easily distracted when I am doing homework.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 3 I feel unsure about which homework assignment to do first.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 4 It takes me a very long time to do my homework, so I get tired and cannot finish my work.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 5 After I finish my homework, I do not check to see that I have completed all my assignments.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 6 I must be reminded to start my homework.

<input type="checkbox"/>

Never Sometimes Almost Always Always

7 I need someone to do my homework with me.

Never Sometimes Almost Always Always

8 I feel teachers are unfair and give too much homework.

Never Sometimes Almost Always Always

9 I feel homework is not important when you do not get graded on it.

Never Sometimes Almost Always Always

10 I go to school without completing my homework.

Never Sometimes Almost Always Always

11 I complain about homework.

Never Sometimes Almost Always Always

12 I forget what homework was assigned.

Never Sometimes Almost Always Always

13 I make excuses for not doing my homework.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

14 After working for 30 minutes on my homework, I lose interest and quit or take a long break.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

15 Being with friends is more important than my homework.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

16 I misunderstand the assignments and due dates.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

17 I forget to take home the materials I need to complete my homework.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

18 I forget to bring my homework to class.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

19 When I do not understand an assignment or find it too hard, I stop working on it.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

20 I start my homework with the subjects that I like and then find no time to complete other assignments.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

21 Please describe what makes homework a positive experience for you:

22 Please describe what makes homework a negative experience for you:

23 Please select your gender from the following selections:

24 Please select your age from the following options:

25 Please select your typical grade in English.

Thank you for your opinions.



Appendix J: Closing Survey

Homework Survey

Please rate each of the following on a 1-4 scale, where (1) is "never," (2) is "sometimes," (3) is "almost always" and (4) is "always." This is a confidential survey. I have no way of knowing your answers.

- 1 It takes me a long time to begin my English homework.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 2 I get easily distracted when I am doing English homework.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 3 I feel Mrs. Kratzer is unfair and gives too much homework.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 4 If I know why homework assignments are given, I am more likely to complete them.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 5 I feel homework is not important when you do not get graded on it.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 6 When Mrs. Kratzer reminds me to write assignments in my agenda book at the beginning of the period, I am more likely to complete my work.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

7 I am more likely to do my homework when it is graded.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

8 I go to school without completing my homework.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9 I complain about homework.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

10 I forget what homework was assigned.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

11 I make excuses for not doing my homework.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

12 When I am given the chance to start my homework in class, I am more likely to finish it.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

13 I misunderstand the assignments and due dates.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

14 I ask when I am confused about an assignment.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

15 I forget to take home the materials I need to complete my homework.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

16 I forget to bring my homework to class.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

17 When Mrs. Kratzer gave out tickets for completed assignments, I was more likely to do my homework.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

18 When I do not understand an assignment or find it too hard, I stop working on it.

Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

19 On a scale of 1-10 rate your grammar homework.

least favorite	most favorite
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



20 On a scale of 1-10 rate your vocabulary assignments.

least favorite	most favorite
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

21 On a scale of 1-10 rate your journal assignments.

least favorite	most favorite
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

22 Please describe what makes homework in English class a positive experience for you:

23 Please describe what makes homework in English class a negative experience for you:

24 Please select your gender from the following selections:

25 Please select your age from the following options:

26 Please select your typical grade in English.

Thank you for your opinions.

Appendix K: Homework Reflection

Which type of homework is the most *helpful* for you? (You've learned the most from it.)

Rate them 1-6 (1 is the most helpful 6 is the least helpful)

Types of Homework	Comment:
<input type="checkbox"/> Journals	
<input type="checkbox"/> Book test	
<input type="checkbox"/> Practice worksheets	
<input type="checkbox"/> Reading assignments	
<input type="checkbox"/> Vocabulary	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (explain)	

**Which type of homework have you *enjoyed* the most?
Rate them 1-6 (1 is the most enjoyable 6 is the least enjoyable)**

Types of Homework	Comment:
<input type="checkbox"/> Journals	
<input type="checkbox"/> Book test	
<input type="checkbox"/> Practice worksheets	
<input type="checkbox"/> Reading assignments	
<input type="checkbox"/> Vocabulary	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (explain)	

What was the best homework assignment in the first marking period? Why?

Why don't you do your homework?
List at least 3 reasons.

What was the worst homework assignment in the first marking period? Why?
Why do you do your homework?
List at least 3 reasons.

Appendix L: Interview Protocol

1. How do you feel about homework in English class in the past?
2. Are you likely to complete homework assignments?
3. What would lead you to complete homework?
4. What would lead you to not complete homework?
5. What type of assignments are you likely to complete?
6. What type of assignments are you not likely to complete?
7. Have you ever had an assignment that you found interesting or fun?
 - a. What made it interesting or fun?
 - b. What could teachers do to make homework more interesting or fun?
8. Do you find that you usually understand the homework assigned to you?
 - a. What makes homework easy to understand?
 - b. What makes it difficult to understand?
9. What are some things that a teacher can do to help you complete homework?
10. What makes you try your best on homework assignments?

Appendix M: Class Expectations

Class Information

SURVIVAL IN MRS. KRATZER'S ENGLISH CLASS

Daily Classroom Materials:

1. **Texts:** Bring your *covered* texts *every day*. Grocery bags work best. **Do not** use self-adhesive book covers.
2. **Notebook / Folder:** Notebooks are *required* and must be in class *daily*.
 - ❖ Keep a dated notebook. You may use a spiral notebook and keep an additional folder, or you may keep a three-ring binder for all. Throughout the year, there may be surprise notebook checks.
 - ❖ Hand-outs, worksheets, and homework must include your name and date.
3. **Journal:** A journal is provided for you in the beginning of the year. You must replace it if you lose it. Journal topics will vary throughout the year. Remember, these are graded assignments, not diary entries.
4. **Writing Utensils:** You will need pens, pencils, and a highlighter in class daily.

Additional Information:

1. **Writing Assignments:** All formal writing assignments **must be typed or neatly written with blue or black ink. Always double space.**
2. **Homework:** Expect homework daily. Graded assignments submitted one day late are worth half credit. I will not accept any work more than one day late. See homework contract.
3. **Grading System:** You are responsible for keeping track of your own grades. My class follows a point system. For example, homework averages 10 points an assignment whereas unit tests average 100 points. Bring a calculator to class.
4. **Behavior:** I will enforce all rules and guidelines within the Student Handbook.

Student's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Parent's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix N: Homework Card

Name _____ Date _____ Period _____

Assignment Missed _____

Date Assigned _____ Date Due _____

I did not complete the assignment because...

It is important that I do this assignment because...

I plan on completing it and handing it in _____.

Student Signature _____ Parent Signature _____

Appendix O: Web page

Mrs. Kratzer's 8 Grade class



Mrs. KRATZER

Homework and Tests

On this page you will find the weekly assignments and assessments. Some assignments are graded, while others are simply checked for completeness. No matter what, it is important that the student does the work by himself or herself.

[CLICK TO EMAIL ME](#)

- [HOMEPAGE](#)
- [ANNOUNCEMENTS](#)
- [HOMEWORK](#)
- [BOOK LISTS](#)
- [IMPORTANT LINKS & RESOURCES](#)

Just for you from Scholas

[At-Home Activities](#)

[Ask the Experts](#)



Web

FFA packet up to April 18
All Subjects

Read and answer the questions in you packet for the progress reports.
Due on 10/25/04

Charlie's run-ons
All Subjects

Fix Charlie's run on sentences!
Help him with his writing.

Due on 10/27/04

FFA packet up to June 5

All Subjects

Read story and complete review questions.

Due on 10/28/04

Warm-up Quiz

All Subjects

This is an open notebook check to check to see if students have been completing the warm-ups on a daily basis. If warm-ups are organized and dated in the student's notebook this quiz will provide a great grade booster!

Due on 10/29/04

FFA vocab 2

All Subjects

Define, write the part of speech and write other forms of the following vocabulary words: psychology, refute, tangible, neurosurgeon, unconscious, opportunist, shrew

Due on 11/26/04

FFA up to May 18th

All Subjects

Read and complete review packet.

Due on 11/27/04