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## From Homework to Home Learning

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# From homework to home learning

Stop assigning homework,  
and watch the learning grow.



It's an autumn afternoon in Phoenix. The temperature is dipping below 90, and the neighborhood is packed with kids throwing footballs and riding bikes (though thankfully not in the same space). My kids stare longingly out the window, filling out their packets. The work is almost over, and the learning is about to begin. They can't tell me what they're learning. It's all about covering rather than discovering. Both of the boys are a page away from freedom.

"Done!" Joel yells, stuffing the packet into his folder.

"Me, too," Micah says. However, as I collect the folders, I remember the turkey project that he has yet to finish. I hold onto it for the next hour before approaching him with the project paper.

"Micah, are you ready to do your turkey assignment?"

He shakes his head. He's too busy reading his first chapter book to be bothered by a homework assignment. I consider stopping him when he sets down the book, but he's already immersed in a world of monsters and dragons that he's

sketching out on paper.

Thirty minutes later, he's running in the backyard, kicking around a soccer ball with his older brother. They signal me to come outside, and suddenly I'm lost in a game of "Monkey in the Middle."

We walk back, and I point to the turkey. "You need to decorate this by tomorrow."

"Do I have to?" he whines.

"Look, it's art. You love art."

He shakes his head. "It's not art. It's a craft."

"Same thing."

"It's a craft."

"What's the difference?" I ask.

"Freedom. When it's art, you get to make it from your mind."

Grudgingly, he gathers materials and pastes them on the photocopied turkey. I hold my tongue when he decides to use leaves and grass and pinecone needles as his texture. He doesn't fall in love with the assignment, but he slowly finds himself enjoying parts of it. The end result is something sparse and dull, but it's his.

A few days later, he comes home upset. "My turkey looks ugly. The other kids have ones that look really pretty. Even the kids who aren't good at art have ones that are pretty."

I know what he's talking about. I've seen the Facebook posts of

the various turkey projects that the other parents finished. He loves art. He loves creative work. However, he is now convinced that his work isn't worth hanging up on a wall.

## My journey

I used to assign projects as homework. I asked students to do poster boards for presentations. However, after a few projects, I noticed the ones that parents had finished. I also had several conversations that started with, "Mr. Spencer, can I have extra time? My mom doesn't get paid until Friday, so we can't buy supplies."

## Instead of allowing students to bring their world into school, homework requires them to bring school into their world.

Initially, I assumed that the issue was bad homework. Therefore, I stopped assigning creative projects as homework and started assigning skill-based practice work at home. Students worked on writing drafts, practicing reading skills, and analyzing social studies articles. I didn't know about "flipping" a classroom, but I suppose I was pushing for a flipped model at the time.

Unfortunately, students who were behind in mastering standards seldom finished the work. Meanwhile, those who didn't need help ended up practicing the skills that they'd already mastered. Students who were struggling with work often practiced the skills in

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isolation. Often, they spent an entire evening practicing a skill incorrectly.

Eventually, I shifted toward “meaningful” homework. I started assigning parent interviews or homework that allowed them to use music and television from pop culture. I started finding things that connected to skate parks or video games. The completion rate was higher, but students still resented the new homework.

**I find it insulting to assume that my kids aren’t learning when they’re at home. They have books to read, art supplies, math manipulatives, and trees to climb.**

Suddenly, it made sense. I wanted students to engage in meaningful, authentic work outside of school. But instead I was forcing students to do homework that encroached on their free time. Instead of allowing students to bring their world into school, I required them to bring school into their world.

### **The problem with homework**

Children are naturally motivated to learn. I don’t need a rubric or a set of objectives on the refrigerator for my daughter to learn the rhyme scheme and letter sounds in a Dr. Seuss book. I don’t need a report card or a set of stickers to get my son to tell stories with sidewalk chalk.

When we’re at home, this is our chance to learn together in an unstructured environment. I realize that some students might need extra time to master standards. However, if they can’t do that over the course of a school day, then maybe we have too many standards for children to master. Besides, I find it insulting to assume that my kids aren’t learning when they’re at home. They have books to read, art supplies, math manipulatives, and trees to climb.

It’s true that some parents don’t provide a print-rich, learning-focused home environment. However, those are often the same parents who struggle to provide meaningful, timely feedback while students complete their homework. If a child really needs additional intervention, perhaps tutoring is the answer.

However, homework often is compulsory. Want to kill the love of reading? Hand a child a reading log and force him or her to monitor it each night. Make it a chore to finish. Homework is precisely that: work at home. The goal often is increased achievement without any consideration regarding whether we want achievement or learning. As a teacher and as a father, I want kids learning.

### **What about work ethic?**

It seems reasonable, too, that a student would do homework in order to learn good work habits. However, homework does little to cultivate strong work habits. This might sound counterintuitive considering that homework often *feels* like hard work. However, homework doesn’t help children develop a work ethic because the work is not self-directed.

Want to watch a child work hard and take ownership of learning? Watch him or her build a bridge

for fun. Let a child read a book for fun without the bribery of a gold medallion and see just how hard a kid will work when there is a meaningful goal. Hard work is a product of motivation. It is an internal drive.

I get it. Students still need to do hard work when it is an undesirable task. However, that’s why we have chores. I don’t mind rewarding my child for cleaning the bathroom or sweeping the back patio. What I don’t want, however, is a child internalizing the idea that reading a novel or solving a problem is a chore rather than an exciting, natural part of learning.

### **My approach**

I send home a letter each year emphasizing the idea that learning can and will happen naturally at home or elsewhere in a child’s world. Visit a skate park, and watch the learning that happens. Spend some time watching kids develop new games in the neighborhood. Instead of weekly homework, I send home a monthly newsletter highlighting what we’re learning and how students can extend those concepts away from school.

Some parents still want traditional homework. This is why I allow parents to opt-in to homework if they really feel that it is necessary. I will set up a meaningful assignment for them if they ask for it. Parents can supervise as students practice skills with the help of an answer key, which is no longer an issue because I’m not worried about credit and cheating.

I treat homework as an extra-curricular activity. Students in my class voluntarily do homework when we create documentaries. They take pictures, film interviews, complete community surveys, work on neighborhood ethnographic studies, and volunteer with local charities. The key here is that this homework is not graded and is treated as an extra-curricular activity. It is a voluntary extension that they choose on their own terms.

