

Cultivating Respect for Homework

To weigh into the homework debate as Vice President for Academic Affairs at College Year in Athens (CYA), the importance of homework is undebatable and indisputable in higher education. A study-abroad program that offers junior level courses to students visiting for a semester or academic year from U.S. universities and colleges, CYA caters to the core of the mission of higher education, which is research and production of original thought. Achieving this requires advanced study habits enhanced by inquisitiveness and structured reading methods. And this is precisely why the “no homework” argument cannot be seen as anything more than a debate for debate’s sake—unless, of course, it stems from a reaction to the nature of homework assignments themselves, which can often be tedious and uninspiring.

So what is homework? What purpose does it serve? According to Cooper, Robinson and Patall (2006), homework improves performance and study habits and creates a more disciplined and independent person who is able to address and solve problems. The fact alone that we learn to designate a time-block, on a daily basis, during which we read carefully, record thoughts, combine and evaluate different readings and sources, and finally, produce something of our own adds to the quality of both our studies and our own private time.

But this cannot happen without consistent and continuous effort. Studying is a skill that needs to be taught and practiced. So instead of debating the merits of homework, we should be debating how to better teach students, beginning in their first years in elementary school, to concentrate and learn. This relates greatly to the type of assignments given to the students. From the perspective of someone who teaches and creates courses and academic questions for tertiary students, a combination of assignments that promote autonomy and group work is best, and this exact combination is actually at the core of our institution’s learning philosophy. Autonomy gives students responsibility for their

learning. A classroom environment where teachers set the standards for learning and achievement by controlling everything (type of assignments, assessment tools, etc.) without sharing with the students the purpose and importance of these activities creates an environment where the responsibility of learning is removed from the student and there is little or no accountability. Instead, an environment where emphasis is given to the importance and even personal relevance of the subjects studied and where goals, as-

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signments and assessments are chosen in a way that allows students to see the purpose in what they need to work on make learning a conscious and even enjoyable decision. If a task with clearly set goals and values begins in the classroom, then the purpose of studying at home becomes relevant to the students and enables their individual contribution to the classroom/community environment the following day. This, enhanced by group assignments—an activity that can teach even very young students to contribute their point of view, listen to other students’ viewpoints, and work together to solve common problems and create a common achievement—can offer students a sense of belonging and responsibility of shared goals. Homework that includes both solitary undertakings and group projects does more than teach students the course requirements or various sets of skills: It benefits the community as well.



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