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MAKING EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM ASSIGNMENTS

George M. Usova

THE CITADEL

Today, probably more than in any other time, teachers are giving their students less and less homework. This is happening not because teachers believe less in giving assignments, but rather because teachers are finding that many students are not completing them.

Nearly every teacher can recall “the way it used to be.” Teachers recall their own roles as students — times when not completing an assignment was inexcusable, often punishable by reprimand or additional work. Many teachers can also remember the students “a few years ago”; these students finished their homework. There was little trouble then.

Of course, teachers can reminisce the past and talk of the ways it used to be; however, students have gradually changed over the years to the present. They are often more critical, rebellious, and less fearful of the teacher’s wrath. New approaches are needed in making assignments. The teachers can no longer assume that simply by giving an assignment will guarantee its completion. The statement, “read the next ten pages for tomorrow,” as the bell rings to end class, will no longer insure success. It is really because the teacher has used this technique and because it has repeatedly met with failure that the teacher has thrown his hands up in despair and has discontinued giving assignments.

If teachers truly value giving assignments and realize the necessity in giving them, then they must alter their past techniques. By taking a few minutes of preparation and exercising more care in giving assignments, the teacher can greatly increase the probability of their being completed by the majority of the students.

The first step involves the teacher previewing the assignment. He must look for any difficult vocabulary words that may hinder a student’s comprehension or create stumbling blocks in reading. These words should then be placed on the chalkboard or in the students notebook and discussed briefly in terms of pronunciation and meaning.

The second step involves motivation. While this may not be possible with every assignment, it is important to show students, by questioning and discussing, how what they will read will benefit them, how it can be related in some way to their lives now, or how it is relevant. If this step is included, students will read with more enthusiasm and interest; they may even want to read the assignment more for personal involvement rather than for feelings of obligation in completing it.

The third step involves reviewing previously learned material. Either through questioning or discussions, the teacher needs to review briefly and “tie together” what is already known to what will be learned. This gives the

student a sense of structure — that there is a continuity, an interrelated whole and direction to what is being studied and learned. This creates in the students' minds that there is a unified wholeness to the subject rather than unrelated "bits and pieces."

The final step is direct guidance. In unison with the entire class, the teacher needs to "walk students through" the actual assignment. Leafing through the pages, the teacher highlights more important sections of the assignment while informing students to skim or even omit other sections. This shows students *how* to read. Certainly every word and sentence is not equally important; some areas need intensive slow reading while others may be read rapidly, skimmed, or even omitted.

While these four phases of giving an assignment may seem lengthy, they actually are not. Usually, the amount of time needed in class is 3-5 minutes. If the teacher feels that assignments are worthwhile, then their time is well worth being spent. Students are helped, guided, and directed in their reading; they are able to read with a clear purpose rather than in a haphazard fashion. The overall value: more assignments will be completed and more meaningful learning will take place.