Daily Practice: Is it “Homework”? 
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In many homes homework is a major issue. A typical scenario is the grade seven child, increasingly resistant to homework as the amount increases with each grade, being cajoled by a concerned and insistent parent that the homework must be completed, while the child insists s/he does not understand what is to be done. The parent attempts to help and also can’t understand the expectations, gets frustrated, and feels increasingly incompetent with each grade level. For the parent this stress-producing ritual may be complicated by other children needing homework help, the need to get the child to hockey or gymnastics, the psychological pressure of virtuous parenting expectations from the community, the desire for healthy and relaxed family relations, the pressure from the teacher and the school system, and the fear of jeopardizing the child’s future chances in university or career.

Then when the math problems have been done, the science project has been reviewed, and the chapter in the novel has been read and analyzed, the homework is done! Now the child finally can practice the clarinet. But, that is not “homework.” That is music – so it is a delight, a soul-building engagement, a diversion from the drudgery of academic homework. Right?

Do music teachers think of the assigned practice as “homework”? Is it discussed with other teachers in the child’s rotary schedule as part of the target amount controlled by school policy? Do music teachers see their courses and their contribution to the child’s schooling expectations as “core” to the extent that their course expectations are part of the total homework load?

In the current Teachers’ Perspectives on Homework Survey (Bartel & Cameron), we are seeing evidence that music teachers do not see their “homework” in the same vein as “real homework.”

I do not tend to assign much homework as a habit. Perhaps because the students at my school receive overwhelming amounts of homework in other subject areas and I do not want to add to their stress. Also, the emphasis is on regular practice sessions on their instrument or voice as opposed to written homework. The practice sessions should become a part of their regular routine (i.e. 15 mins three times a week in grade 7/8, up to 20 -30 mins in grade 9/10).
Music practice seem to be thought of as life-style, regular routine, simply “a given” for music students – with the implication that it is really not homework and is on top of regular school work.

"Homework" by a music teacher's definition is practicing your instrument and learning your music

Daily instrumental practice on his/her instrument is crucial to developing and learning how to play an instrument. Without home practice, they could never excel with simply one class per week. Learning how to play an instrument requires regular effort outside of the classroom.

A recent survey of students in the Toronto District School Board (Yau & O’Reilly, 2007) found that high school students report doing about 12 hours of homework a week. Do music students do this plus an extra 4 or 5 hours a week? Any student serious about studying music in university practices an additional 1 – 3 hours a day. So a music student seeking admission in a major music school is probably spending about 18 hours a week practicing plus about 12 hours a week at academic homework – 30 hours outside of school, family, church, job, friends, and relaxation.

One of the paradigmatic “givens” of traditional music education is the essentialness of “practice.” This was cryptically clear in the comment of one the music teachers completing our homework survey:

I am a Band Teacher...the homework I assign consists of practice.

“Practice” always assumes practice for something – and that seems to be pervasively the performance selected and directed by the teacher. The teacher “teaches” the ensemble which means in most cases the teacher selects the music, rehearses the music, and assigns practice to perfect the music directed and interpreted by the teacher.

I teach music which is a skill based coursed. Students need to do home practice to learn the physical skills. They do practice sheets. The students are require to do ten minutes a day, with flexibility, in that they need seventy minutes per week and it does not matter how they divide it up. These sheets are checked weekly.

Is there not a different way to motivate the development of musical ability? Is there not a possible “project-based” approach that might have the development of music reading and music playing ability as a spinoff? Why could homework not be the preparation of a solo piece to be performed for the class? Why not a duet or small ensemble to be performed? Or of their own composition? Does large ensemble performance have to be dominant?

In our survey of parental attitudes we found that completion of class work and drill and practice were the types of homework with least positive attitude. When students had a choice, could take ownership and responsibility, and pursue relevant goals, their
motivation increased. Can we do this in music? Does a project-based curriculum like Nova Scotia is now exploring accomplish this?

When we asked teachers to give us examples of the “ideal” homework assignment, music teachers primarily reiterated “regular practice.” A non-music teachers suggested this:

I am currently engaging my students in creating a wikispace on chocolate. The students choose their own topic from a list that I generated and are collaborating with students from other classes in creating their space. They post comments on each other's work in a discussion forum, create links to relevant media and websites, write and edit articles and so on. I have students who are not otherwise engaged in learning activities working on this at home, emailing me for feedback and seeking guidance with this project. I am more than thrilled with their engagement.

What might a musical equivalent be to this type of “homework”? Might it involve creativity? Might it involve critical thinking? Might it involve recording and making a cd? Might it involve a contribution to a class website of mp3 reviews? In our “creative” subject of music, can we do something other than assign “drill and kill” practice?

In the face of research that homework in the lower grades has little if any positive effect, that homework beyond 90 minutes a day for grades 7 – 9 and beyond 120 minutes for grades 10 – 12 has little positive effect, and that families frequently find homework very stressful, some parents and many teachers argue that homework is meant to “teach discipline and responsibility.” Does homework teach discipline and responsibility? Or do only the disciplined and responsible make it to the end so it looks like it does? Does assigned practice with parental monitoring sheets require discipline and teach responsibility? Or does it merely require and teach dutiful compliance and obedience?

One of the conditions of learning (Bartel & Cameron, 2004) that fosters motivation and engagement is “responsibility.” But, this is not compliance or obedience. It is having opportunity for choice and the obligation to accept the attendant effects of that choice. It is closely related to ownership. In music this might involve selection of repertoire, or selection of topic or genre, or the need to make interpretive decisions. It stems from “response” – the teacher gives opportunity for authentic response to viable choices. Greater responsibility comes from opportunities to select among more varied and influential choices. Do we develop that ability through rote repetition in skill and drill practice?

There are many more issues that stem from the “homework” (any task assigned by the teacher but not done under the direct supervision of that teacher) dimensions of schooling. These include levels of parental support and parental competence, questions of assessment and feedback, differentiation or “one-size-fits-all,” and the balance between achievement-oriented expectations of continuous learning and work, vs. a balanced and holistic life of fulfilling engagement.
I invite you to share your perspectives on homework by completing the online survey.

References


NOTE:

To read a full copy of the Bartel and Cameron, Homework Realities Study Technical Report, go to [www.leebartel.com](http://www.leebartel.com) and search site for “homework technical report” and you can download the 65 page report.