
Homework Help: Problem-Solving through Communication

Duncan Smith, Lynda Fowler, and Alan Teasley

When it happens, it isn't pleasant. The voice on the other end of the line cracks with emotion.

"Are you the social studies supervisor? We have a little problem down here at the reference desk of the public library. Mrs. Whippet at Sole-noid Junior High told her students to bring in a list of the cabinet members tomorrow, and if they didn't know them, they could call the public library to find out. Do you know how much time it takes to read that list over the phone for 122 students?"

"Hello, reference desk? My son's term paper is due tomorrow, and he needs one more magazine reference on the dark comedies of Shakespeare. Could you go over to the Reader's Guide and just give me one over the phone? As it is, we'll never get this thing typed by the morning."

"But, Susie, I know the school library has plenty of books on spiders. Maybe somebody just checked out all of them. No, I won't change the topic of the class research project. Just go down to the public library. I bet they have lots of books on spiders. And Susie, don't call me at home."

"Mr. Bloodless, I did go to the public library last night, and they said they don't have any scholarly journal articles on Thoreau. Do I still have to have three of those?"

The homework problems outlined above are really communications problems. Teachers have traditionally viewed a homework assignment as a contract between the teacher and the student. In actuality, however, several other individuals may be involved in the completion of a homework assignment, particularly when the homework requires the student to engage in library research. Research assignments can involve not only the teacher and the student but also the school media coordinator, other faculty members, the student's parents, public librarians, and other members of

the community (for example, local travel agents are often inundated with requests for pamphlets as a result of geography assignments).

This proliferation of players is only part of the problem. Each one of the individuals mentioned above deals with homework in very different ways and may have different goals in seeing the assignment through to completion. The teacher makes a homework assignment to reinforce skills or to give students practice in locating, comprehending, and internalizing information. The student may view homework from one of several perspectives—as a learning experience, as a task to be completed as soon as possible with as little effort as possible, or as a means of exacting revenge on adults by ignoring the task altogether. For school media coordinators, who often love to do reference work themselves, research assignments can be their most rewarding challenge or, if they have no advance notice of the assignment or the teacher's objectives, their worst nightmare. Parents want to help students get the best grades possible, but they may view research homework as "busy work" assigned by a lazy teacher, one more indication of the sorry state of public education. Community resource people, such as a public librarian or a travel agent, want to help students but look on in dismay as their limited materials are depleted. What may begin as a sincere effort on the part of the teacher to teach a research skill soon becomes a complicated tangle.

As long as the individuals involved in the homework tangle see only their own perspectives, the problem will recur. It helps to view homework as a system. The homework system is not only a contract between a teacher and a student, but a contract among all of the individuals affected by the assignment. These can include a variety of individuals from several different organizations, some of which may not be affiliated with a community's formal educational system. Unless each of the participants in a specific homework assignment sees the entire system, each one will continue to have unreasonable expectations of the other individuals involved. A teacher does not understand why the student cannot obtain a

Duncan Smith is Coordinator of the North Carolina Library Staff Development Program for the School of Library and Information Sciences, North Carolina Central University, Durham. Lynda Fowler is Director of Media Services and Alan Teasley is Coordinator of English and Social Studies, Grades 7-12 for the Durham County Schools.

copy of a required reading, the school media coordinator does not understand why the student waited until the last minute, the student does not understand why the public library does not have the books needed to complete the assignment, and the parent does not understand why the public librarian does not know what is going on in the school system.

The result of this lack of communication among the agents in the homework system is that all parties miss opportunities to learn valuable lessons about how to find answers to questions. Instead of learning how to locate, evaluate, and assimilate information, the student learns that the system, specifically the classroom and the library parts of the system, does not work. The only thing inappropriate and ill-planned homework assignments teach students about media centers or public libraries is that these institutions do not have the help students need.

A Process for Addressing the Problem

In order to address this problem, the Durham County Schools and the North Carolina Library Staff Development Program conducted a workshop entitled "Homework Help" on Monday, May 4, 1987, at North Carolina Central University's School of Library and Information Sciences. The purpose of this workshop was to provide teachers, school media coordinators, and other area librarians with an opportunity to discuss homework and to brainstorm solutions to the problems associated with library assignments. Twenty-six individuals participated in this program, including teachers and school media coordinators from Durham County secondary schools, members of the Durham County Schools' central office staff, librarians from the Durham County Public Library, and a librarian from North Carolina Central University.

The morning portion of the workshop was devoted to brief presentations by a representative of each of the following groups: teachers, school media coordinators, and public librarians. Since a number of the participants were also parents, they were able to represent that perspective as well. Each presentation focused on that group's understanding of homework, problems or issues relating to homework, suggestions for coping with homework-related problems, and requests for information from each of the other groups in the homework system. The result of this section of the workshop was that all three groups achieved a greater understanding of how their actions affected members of the other groups. Teachers, for example, assuming that their students were

using the school media center to complete research assignments, were frequently surprised to find that their students used the public library instead. Teachers were even more amazed to discover that students frequently sent an "emissary" (usually a parent) to the library to do the assignment for the student. Public librarians learned that the major goal of many homework assignments was the search process itself, not just the information, and that by providing answers directly to the student, librarians were unwittingly circumventing the teacher's objective. School media people learned that students were having to go to the public library to complete assignments that could be done more successfully at the school, because school media centers were not open at times that were convenient to students.

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The second portion of the workshop focused on another major issue for libraries in the area of homework: the abuse of limited resources. Frequently an entire class is given a research assignment on the same topic, which can result in only a few students getting access to a library's resources. If one or two students manage to check out all of the circulating books on an assigned topic, they leave their classmates without resources. Another consequence of the single-topic assignment is that a library's reference materials and magazines are damaged when desperate students tear out pages containing information related to the assignment.

The afternoon portion of the workshop focused on the development of two sets of guidelines dealing with ways to make more effective use of the school media center and other community libraries in regard to homework. These guidelines were developed by group brainstorming, negotiation, and consensus. Workshop participants sought to make these guidelines practical, easy to understand, and positive in tone. The group named the resulting documents "Tips for Success (to the Teacher)"—which encourages teachers to plan their research assignments carefully—and "Tips for Success (to the Student)"—which contains helpful hints for both students and their

parents. Copies of these documents appear at the end of this article.

The workshop received positive evaluations from its participants. All participants stated that they had a fuller understanding of homework, that they appreciated the opportunity to hear all points of view on the homework issue, and that they would try to communicate more effectively with their colleagues on future homework assignments.

Disseminating the Documents

To implement the recommendations of the Homework Help workshop, the director of media services in the Durham County school system distributed copies of "Tips for Success (to the Student)" to each school principal. Secondary school principals were asked to include this one-page document in student handbooks for the 1987-88 school year. Elementary school principals were asked to include the document in information sent home to parents at the beginning of the school year. All principals were asked to distribute copies of "Tips for Success (to the Teacher)" to all teachers and to include these guidelines in all future editions of their teacher handbooks.

Copies of the two documents were also sent to all media coordinators and to all secondary English and social studies department chairs. These teachers were asked to share the information with members of their departments and to encourage teachers to make the guidelines part of their normal procedure for giving research assignments. Teachers were urged to use the student "Tips" as part of their student orientation each year.

Future Implementation

Although the development and dissemination of the two documents are steps toward alleviating homework problems, they do not ensure meaningful, problem-free research assignments for all students. Continuous attention and reinforcement of the guidelines are necessary to accomplish the goals of the original workshop. We recommend the following additional implementation strategies:

1. Develop an attractive brochure from the "Tips for Success" handouts. Have copies available in all school media centers and public libraries to serve as a guide to students completing research assignments. Produce a poster outlining the student tips and place the poster in every classroom, media center, and library throughout the county.

2. Offer workshops or informal sessions to teachers to assist them in designing appropriate

research assignments. As Michael Marland has written, "The most important part of a resource center is neither the resources nor the staff, but the assignment set by the teachers."¹ In these workshops, emphasize the need for working closely with media coordinators and public librarians well in advance of a major research assignment.

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3. Develop a model "action sheet" for teachers to complete and give to students when they make research assignments. A good action sheet will contain the objectives and purpose of the assignment, steps to follow in the research process, resources to consult (and to avoid), the format for the final report, the preferred system for documenting sources, the criteria by which the assignment will be evaluated, and a timeline for all stages of the project. Committees of teachers could develop different action sheets for short- and long-term research assignments, for various subject areas, and for different age levels.

Conclusion

This article has outlined the steps taken by one team of concerned professionals to address some of the problems of homework. Our experience has been that no single group working in isolation can solve these problems. The success of Durham County's Homework Help workshop, however, does indicate that providing an opportunity for all parties concerned to meet together and discuss homework issues can have beneficial results. Communication and cooperation foster a greater understanding of the real issues involved in homework assignments and result in a more positive experience for the most important participants in the homework system—the students.

References

1. Michael Marland, "Libraries, Learning, and the Whole School," *Emergency Librarian* (November/December 1987): 9-14.

Copies of articles from this publication are now available from the UMI Article Clearinghouse.

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Durham County Schools

Library Assignments: Tips for Success (To the Teacher)

In the past, some of our students have experienced frustration in using the public library and school media centers to complete research assignments. Aspects of this problem include limited media collections, unrealistic assignments, student confusion, and overworked library staffs, but the underlying source of the problem is a failure of communication among three groups: teachers, students (and their parents), and library personnel. So that you may more effectively teach your students research skills, a committee of teachers, school media coordinators, and public librarians has published these guidelines.

1. Design Appropriate Assignments.

A. Identify the *purpose* for each research assignment. Are you making the assignment in order to teach the *process* of research or in order for the student to collect a specific body of information? Do you want your students to learn to use a particular type of reference material or to explore several types in the pursuit of one topic?

B. Does your school media center have *adequate materials* for all of your students to complete this assignment, or will your students need

to go to the public library? Often, the most successful research assignments are those which can be done during class time in the school media center. If the students will need to go to the public library, make sure they are likely to be able to find materials there.

C. What form will the student's *final product* take? Will the student produce a paper, an oral report, or some other product? Clearly describe the assignment to the students; show them an example if at all possible.

D. Type up the assignment on a handout. Include topic possibilities, description of the final product, parameters such as length and format, type of resources they should use, a time line of intermediate deadlines, and the final due date of the project. Give a copy to each student (for younger students, you may even want to have a parent sign the sheet to indicate the parent is aware of the assignment). Also send a copy to your school media coordinator. If there is any chance your students may be using the public library, send a copy to the reference librarian at any branch the students are likely to use.

2. *Plan Ahead and Provide Time.* Stagger major research assignments with your colleagues so that students will not have more than one at a time and so that the media center resources will not be depleted. Give the students adequate time to get to the public library. (Remember that not all students have ready transportation to the library.)

3. *Consult with your School Media Coordinator During All Stages of the Process.* As you are designing your assignment, the media coordinator can tell you whether the media collection can support the assignment. The coordinator can also suggest types of reference materials that will be useful to your students. Given enough lead time, the coordinator can pull together materials on a given topic so that your students will be able to work more efficiently during the media center time. School media coordinators can also assist you in teaching media skills.

4. *Provide Opportunities for the Students to Work in the School Media Center.* Problems arise when students are required to do all of the work on a research project outside of class. Some students can't get to the library; others get there after someone else has checked out all of the materials on a particular topic. Some students will send an "emissary" (usually a parent) to do the work for the student. Students may enlist more help from a

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librarian than you would like. Students have even been known to "resubmit" someone else's previously submitted work! Remember, there is no substitute for having the students do the work in front of you!

5. *Make Effective Use of the Public Library.* If your students need to use the public library, make sure they know the rules, procedures, and hours of the branches they will use. The libraries are quite willing to send this information to you. Consider including it in the written copy of the assignment. Take time to discuss with the librarians how you would prefer them to help your students. Make sure that both students and librarians know what is "appropriate help" and what is "doing it for them." Make sure the students under-

stand exactly what their responsibility is.

6. *Stress Student Accountability During the Process.* Include intermediate deadlines throughout the period of the assignment. You might want to count these "process" assignments as a part of the final grade.

7. *Evaluate the Project.* After all of the assignments are in and graded, reflect on the entire project. What problems did the students have? Were adequate materials available? What problems did the media support people have? What problems did you have? Did the students produce the products you wanted? What will you do differently next time? Record these reflections so that you can consult them when you plan this assignment again next year.

Durham County Schools

Library Assignments: Tips for Success (To the Student)

From time to time your teachers will give you an assignment that requires you to use your school media center or the public library. So that you will succeed in your quest, some teachers and librarians have written this guide.

1. *Understand the Assignment.* Know exactly what your teacher expects you to do. Be sure you understand what your finished product will be (it's usually a written or oral report). Know what *type* of reference materials you will need (books, encyclopedias, magazine articles, for example) and have some idea of the topic you wish to explore. If your teacher has given you a written copy of the assignment, **BRING THIS SHEET WITH YOU TO THE LIBRARY.**

2. *Plan Ahead.* Know your deadline and make plans to go to the library as far in advance as you can. Don't wait until the day before your report is due!

3. *Set a Goal for Each Visit.* Don't expect to be able to do the whole assignment in one visit. Your goal might be to find three books on your topic and check them out or to find five magazine articles and take notes on them. Another goal might be to find the answer to a certain number of questions you have developed. When you set a goal, you feel much better about the amount of work you've done. Setting a goal also saves you time because you don't wander around wondering what to do next.

4. *Come Prepared.* Library research can take a lot of time, so plan to come and stay for a while (at least an hour). Be sure to bring the materials you will need:
your library card

pencil or pen

plenty of paper or notecards

money for the copier ("Xerox")

a copy of the assignment

any textbooks that will help you

5. *Know and Respect Library Rules.* The procedures may differ from one library to another but almost all libraries ask you to work quietly, respect all library staff and equipment, take care of the materials you use and return them to the designated area. If you check out materials, take care of them and return them on time so that other patrons can use them.

6. *Ask for Help.* If you are unsure about a procedure or the location of certain materials, ask one of the librarians. Each is specially trained to find information in a wide variety of sources. If you don't know how to use a particular kind of reference material, ask at the reference desk. A reference librarian will tell you how to use it. (Remember, however, that public librarians often do not have time to teach everyone to use all kinds of reference materials. If you need more instruction than just quick directions, you may need to ask your teacher or your school media coordinator.)

If at any time you run into difficulty, be sure to let your teacher or school media coordinator know. Your media coordinator may be able to help you find materials. Your teacher may be able to adapt the assignment to the materials you can find and to suggest ways to solve the problems you're having with organizing or writing the report.