

## Liz Brown's Development Work: Supporting homework through peer assessment at Sir John Lawes School, Harpenden

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Liz Brown is Head of Modern Foreign Languages and a member of the Teacher Led Development Work group at Sir John Lawes School. She wanted to improve the effectiveness of 'homework' as a learning strategy for her students.

The problem with homework seemed to exemplify the difficulties she had in encouraging children to value learning for its own sake (Dweck, 1986). She felt instead that she had to cajole her children into learning through the promise of external rewards. Her reading suggested that there is a common problem with homework. One commentator claimed that only 2% of children enjoy homework and this resonated with Liz's own experience (Stern, 1997). Awareness of this problem with homework and its potential contribution had clearly been around for a long time: in the 1980s the Hargreaves Report said that the appropriate use of homework could add the value of at least one year of full-time education (Hargreaves, 1984).

Liz decided to lead a discussion with students in one of her Year 8 groups to help her to understand more about their views on the purposes and usefulness of homework. After reflecting on what her students said she decided to experiment with three different ideas to see if she could impact on their attitudes towards homework in general and on their own homework practices. She decided to:

- use different terminology to refer to homework
- introduce student-led homework
- introduce a Study-Buddy system

The effectiveness of these strategies varied.

Changing terminology is a well known strategy to encourage people to think differently about a practice. Liz began to refer to homework as 'independent study' to try to reframe this activity. On reflection however, Liz felt that she should have spent more time with the

students looking at the significance of this change of terminology. In order for the change in language to have more impact it needed to be accompanied by a more obvious change in activity. Liz felt that if she had done this it might have been more effective in changing students' homework habits or their perceptions of the value of homework as a learning strategy.

Introducing the concept of student-led homework was more effective. Liz provided students with a grid which gave details of her own ideas regarding the content of lessons and accompanying independent study for one module of work. Students were invited to annotate this grid with more inventive ideas for independent study and also for lesson content if they felt this to be appropriate. Although students did suggest some alternative activities, they appeared to feel constrained by the amount of detail which Liz had originally given them.

The peer-assessment strategy came later. Liz decided to action this through the setting up of a 'Study-Buddy' system. Her reading suggested that peer assessment can scaffold the development of students' responsibility for their own learning (Black *et al.*, 2003; Black and Wiliam, 1998; Weaver and Cotrell, 1986). Liz also saw it as compatible with her wish to encourage a trusting and collaborative environment for learning. She put her students into pairs and explained the Study-Buddy system to them. Students would help their Study-Buddy by assessing work and feeding back to them on how it might be improved. They would design activities to help their Study Buddy revise work covered in class. If students had not completed their independent study, they had to write their name in a book and give a reason for this. Study-Buddies would monitor the completion rate of their partner and set detentions and give rewards where appropriate, although this aspect of their responsibility was supervised by Liz.

Liz asked a colleague to interview the students to find out their reactions to the Study-Buddy system as it progressed. A final questionnaire was then used to give her more information on students' reactions. Liz was interested to see the degree to which her students' experiences accorded with those described in the literature.

She learnt that most students worked together productively and felt that the distribution of work between them was fair. All enjoyed working co-operatively to share opinions and ideas and to check for accuracy. Liz herself noted some rise in student attainment which

she attributed to the development of a greater degree of knowledge of errors made and appropriate remedial action. Students also appeared to be more conscientious about their independent study tasks, perhaps because of the impact of the failure to complete work on their Study-Buddy.

At the end of her project Liz reflected on the impact of the project on the school as a whole. She felt that this development work had allowed her to participate more actively in whole-school development activity. She shared the story of her project in several forums, both within her own school and beyond, and initiated a whole-school discussion on homework policy and practice.

## References

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