

# Homework—is this a project for plagiarism?

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**Abstract:** This paper will examine why some students feel they need to plagiarise or to cheat to accomplish homework tasks, or how they inexorably get involved in the plagiarism process. It will be shown that this is due parental influences, to the student's inability to appreciate the value of referencing and not understanding the value of academic integrity. The significance of homework and the reasons why it is necessary must be re-evaluated. The pressures placed on the modern family, the scholar of this century and the types of resources available are in constant flux, continually fuelling the plagiarism and cheating debate. Furthermore, the art of cut or copy and paste is an old one, and not confined to the Internet or computer based projects. This paper will show that if students are allowed to complete tasks in the classroom, they will be taught how to turn cut or copy and paste in to cut or copy, read, paraphrase, paste and cite. This paper in no way intends to undermine the value of homework, but rather emphasises that when projects that are supposed to teach research skills are given as homework, the risk of plagiarism is great. Sound research practices are imperative to instil academic integrity from an early age, thus overcoming plagiarism and cheating to a large extent. This paper primarily examines on the situation in the primary school, where the student experiences researching for projects for the first time.

**Keywords:** homework, project, plagiarism, parents, cut and paste

## Introduction

Every student is expected to do homework after the school day is over. Most teachers give students tasks, like projects, which they are expected to complete in their own time after the formal school day has ended. Some students are able to complete these tasks and some students cannot. The reasons vary from lack of understanding of the task, extra curricular activities, work commitments, family infrastructure through to even physiological issues like undetected poor vision. In the worst case, these homework tasks are partially or poorly done, or completed by mothers, brothers, sisters, friends, or even fellow students. This raises in particular, the issue of the project given as a homework task contributing to the plagiarism problem.

## Reasons for doing homework

There are many reasons for giving homework. One of the goals of homework setting is so that students can revise what they learned in class during the day. Other reasons require the student to complete work not finished in class or make up the lessons they missed due to absenteeism. They may be required to prepare for tests and exams, complete readings or make preparations for a lesson that is yet to be taught or they are expected to do project work,

Homework can create problems for children, parents and teachers alike. As homework is done outside of class time the teacher has little control over how it is accomplished. When homework is complete, it is expected that the teacher will examine this as soon as possible to check that it has been done correctly. In a primary or high school setting, there may be measures that deal with students who do not complete their homework in a timely fashion. These vary from institution to institution depending on many factors such as school policy, socio economic issues, neo-family structures and where homework is not regarded as a priority due to factors like travelling long distances to work and school, and the work commitments of parents and children. (Kralvoec & Buell, 2001, p. 40). Besides these modern day pressures, primary school children are more inclined to spend their time out of the classroom with friends or participating in extracurricular activities. Parents are involved in supervising their children's daily

activities, including homework, and Bempechat asks a question posed by Wildman as early as 1968: 'why engage in a practice that can promote conflict between parents and children and interfere with the development in other domains, such as athletics and the arts?'. Bempechat also inquires: 'Why burden overstretched working parents [with homework]?' (2004, p, 189). The homework project as such involves the gathering of data (pictures, readings, maps etc.) and problems can arise when primary school children anticipate that their parents will assist them in gathering this data. Parents, teachers and school children all have their own perceptions of how the project will be accomplished, and these can differ thus creating problems.

## **Parents and homework**

Despite these problems, most parents regard the homework project as a necessity. Often, they expect at least one project to be completed in any given year. This will vary according to the student's age and curriculum. Gill and Schlossman (2004) found that 'the best evidence suggests that most parents have consistently supported homework during the last 100 years [in the USA]' (Gill & Schlossman 2003 cited in Gill & Schlossman 2004). The parents also associate homework closely with good learning and believe that their children will achieve better results in their subjects. They also feel connected to the school system and that they have some idea of what their children are learning at school (Forster 2000). Whether parents had the capability of assisting their children with their homework project or not, Forster says that they still felt that homework was necessary. In spite of the keenness that parents display in wanting homework for their children, this task can be the source of conflict if the parents are unable to assist their children adequately. Parents assume that keeping in touch with the school, the child's curriculum, the content being learned is being achieved through supervising their homework.

Most parents take charge of homework project, especially with younger children or those who are reluctant to do homework. If the children can cope with the task and work independently, the indication is that the child is in control of the expectation. However, if there is a situation where they do not understand what to do, cannot remember exactly what is expected of them to complete the task, or simply do not want to do it, the parents become involved. Pomerantz, Wang and Ng (2005, p. 414) researched the effect that mothers had on homework, and found that they become involved mostly 'because children are having difficulty', and the key problem was that children were uncertain as to how to do their schoolwork. Many parents are not teachers, and a high level of frustration was recorded by Pomerantz, Wang and Ng (2005), because of the lack of understanding between the parent and the classroom (or teacher) and this fostered 'irritation and annoyance ... [when they felt that their] children [were] not working constructively'. Parents may feel that they are obligated to supervise homework as part of their parental duties and responsibility to the school.

On the other hand, when the homework project and the parents' struggle to assist their children replace the teaching a child needs in the classroom, then the plagiarism issue can become serious. Parents often resort to doing most of the homework project for the child. This could be plagiarism and cheating if this work is represented as being authored by the child. Balli (1997) set up a group of families who were given a set instructions about how to manage 20 mathematics homework assignments. The parents were invited to supervise these homework tasks, and a survey was conducted at the end of the study. Mostly, the students enjoyed the assistance they received from their parents, but one comment that Balli found disturbing was that some parents were giving their children the answer to questions rather than assisting them to solve the problem (1997, p. 13). How much assistance can a parent give,

before it is verging on unintentional plagiarism and accidental cheating? The child may unwittingly take information and include it in a homework assignment without acknowledgement, not realising that this is wrong as children may not understand the complexity of plagiarism. Many children enjoy the cut and paste activity of paper based projects without knowing that they have to take into account the original source of the material. Also, if the child's homework is being done by another individual, like a parent, and the child presents this as their own work, then plagiarism is present. It is important that the young student is shown that these practices are unacceptable and this could be avoided if parents could be educated on homework protocol and the issues of plagiarism and cheating. This would enhance their strategies in assisting their children to research effectively, acknowledge their sources appropriately and recognise valid resources.

### **Credibility of resources**

Helping students to understand reliability of information is essential for teaching the risks of plagiarism. This is particularly evident as the use of information from the Internet is becoming increasingly prevalent. Children need Internet guidance from teachers to help them understand the validity of sites as '[they] are becoming involved in the business of the Internet at a very young age'. Importantly, 'who is responsible for updating students on the legal ramifications of incorrect use of information' is a valid question that should not go unnoticed (Anonymous, 2001, p. 3). This anonymous source from *School Libraries in Canada* goes on to say that this is primarily the role of the teacher. In learning institutions, authentic information that is up to date and free of speculation, suspicion and rumour is readily available. As children become more familiar with the use of all the resources at their fingertips, they soon outwit their parents in the use of these resources (Anonymous, 2001, p. 3). Parents would be forgiven for thinking, for example, that a site from a university has reliable and has up to date information! Robert Harris, who says 'Reliable information is power' (1997, p. 2 of 10) has a simple checking system that will demonstrate to any untrained researcher, how web sites can be checked for credibility. His CARS (Credibility, Accuracy, Reasonableness, Support) system encourages researchers to check their sources. Unreliable information is often fraught with opinion and emotive writing, and Internet sites that are unprofessionally constructed are often not well resourced. The authors of these resources may have plagiarised their information and thus their material lacks intellectual honesty. Realising this, will hopefully instil in the students the desire to be more discerning while they investigate their assignment topics.

### **The classroom project**

In an attempt to teach children the importance of obtaining information and acknowledging the original source, investigative projects are part of many curricula. Besides gaining knowledge about a certain topic, the objective of assigning projects to students is to encourage curiosity, teach research skills and instil academic honesty. Also, the purpose of project work combines these research skills with writing. If this is done outside the school environment, the research skills can not be overseen and the acknowledgment of the original work can not be taught. Academic or intellectual honesty needs to be a focused aspect of the research project. Each item, be it a paragraph, picture, photo, map, that the student uses, should be cited. The emphasis on the aesthetic quality of the presentation of the project should not be a focal point; often this is where the parent becomes drawn into the situation and where most of the time is spent. The development of the details of the project and the recognition of the importance of using and referencing original sources should be taught.

As students compile their projects, they gather many and various types of resources. The problem that can arise here is one of cut and copy and paste. This is not a new technique and has been used along by schoolchildren creating projects when scissors and runny, *unsticky* glue were the only tools available. The use of project sheets specifically designed for this purpose are readily available from stationery stores do not foster learning, but rather this art of cut and paste. Everything is prepared and may be compared to a dehydrated meal—tear open the packet, add water, and you have a tasteless meal that is nutritionally dead and unfulfilling. Similarly, a project sheet requires a pair of scissors to cut out the nicest picture or the largest amount of text, is educationally unfulfilling because it hasn't been read, analysed or understood, and simply glued into place. Large cardboard posters would be completed with the pictures neatly pasted and screeds of written information taken verbatim from the original source. Fixed on the walls, these were testament to the effort put in, and apparent knowledge gained on the subject matter. Within the wink of an eye, the scissors and glue have been replaced by a few mouse clicks and the information is transferred from a website, email and discussion board to the student's assignment, which is usually being designed using publishing software. Whichever method is being used to cut and paste source material, the content knowledge being replicated without being understood.

The skills that project work is intended to teach are paraphrasing, summarising, referencing and citing original sources, thus developing intellectual and academic honesty. In 'A guide for teachers' published in the *School Libraries in Canada Journal* (Anonymous 2001), the researchers clearly state that 'students have to be prepared to be accountable users and producers of information' (p. 2). For projects to succeed, the student's own thinking and must be evident. 'Phrases meshed together from numerous sites [and project sheets] of dubious quality and content' is negligent and devalues the need for students to learn appropriate research techniques. The art of paraphrasing and summarising can be taught to children at an early age and is more productive than accepting well presented work. This is a step in the right direction to teach students how to avoid plagiarism and how to gain knowledge from their projects. Harris states that 'education is about awakening the mind, stimulating curiosity, and engaging interest in focused ways' (2001, p. 204). He asks two valid questions. 'Do you think student who plagiarise are more or less likely to be bored?' and 'if students do not develop the ability to find interest in various subjects now, what will they do in the careers when faced with "boring" tasks?' (p. 204). He is reasoning that students who are not skilled in finding out for themselves what the amazing answers are to all the interesting questions will become disinterested in the skill of learning. Information handed out on a silver platter, like homework being done and research projects being coached, will engender a disinterested student. Gathering information to complete a project, and presenting this well paraphrased and appropriately referenced will teach students not to plagiarise.

When projects are completed at school, there is control over how much independent work is being done. If the work is to be completed at home, there is no way in which the result can be accurately measured because there is no guarantee that the effort put into the work is solely or mostly the student's. If there is been assistance given, then it is going to take an extra task, like an oral presentation or the checking of the assignment's plan, to determine the level of knowledge gained. When the situation arises where the child has taken home work to complete in a set timeframe and this has to fit in with extra activities like music and sport, the time management issues are put to the test. Pomerantz, Wang and Ng (2005) found that even willing [parents] find overseeing homework of their willing children frustrating and irritating. This may result in too much guidance and the project may not actually belong to the student in its entirety. In this situation, the student is typifying the definition of plagiarism which states that the

work is falsely presented as being that of the student when in fact it is that of the parent. Rather than put the student at risk of plagiarising, projects should be completed under the supervision of a teacher.

Primary school children can be taught in the classroom to value and acknowledge reliable information. Often the expectation that a parent may have of what they want their child to achieve in designing and creating a project is not the same as what has been set by the classroom teacher. The trained teacher is more informed on research techniques than the untrained person, like a parent\* or a sibling. As a primary school teacher at a boys' school, I never sent the project work home. 'Projects must show the student's own thinking and not just a compilation of "cut and paste" phrases conveniently borrowed and meshed together from numerous sites of dubious quality and content' (Anonymous, 2001, p. 3). The Year 5 boys each choose a topic and this was written into their diaries so that their parents could sign and in this way acknowledge that they were aware of what their son was going to be planning and creating in the next few afternoons after lunch. Ideally, this was a great activity for the latter part of the day, where the boys were allowed to work in the library for a while finding small chunks of information and then bringing this back to classroom where they worked in teams of two. Each boy had his own project, but the idea was to assist each other with paraphrasing, referencing, and other skills to the best of their ability. I would pair boys with similar ability so that the standard of their work was not competitive to the point of dominance. The situation seemed chaotic to some teachers on the staff, who did not like the idea of smudges and sticky sheets of cardboard. However, I felt that the boys were proud of what they had accomplished as they were simply expected to do their best. Some projects would have shoe prints, messy glue, crooked pictures that were badly cut out and short descriptive sentences instead of copious notes. Most importantly of all, there were acknowledgements for all the resources, and they were able to tell anyone what they had discovered and where they found it. When all the projects were complete, we had a *show and tell* session during the lunch break. Each boy stood at his poster and told the story he had developed to boys from Year 5 and Year 6. This audience was given a list of the available presentations' titles, and they would choose one that they wanted to know more about. The Year 5 boys saw their own efforts being displayed on the walls and it all became worthwhile when they had an audience. Also, their parents were invited to view these projects in the classroom before they were taken home, and many made the effort to come and listen. The reason for this was that their son was expected to present their project orally, demonstrating what they had learned. They were proud, I was pleased, and hopefully I had practised that 'all teachers are entrusted with the responsibility of educating students on the ethical use of information' (Anonymous, 2001, p. 1). Early in their lives, these primary school boys had learned the value of academic integrity.

If any student is exposed to practicing sound, self achievement on a regular basis and feels a sense of accomplishment when work that they have done is praised or rewarded with a satisfying grade, it will be perpetuated throughout their educational career. Intellectual honesty can be instilled at an early age in each student's research experience. This ensures that the value of research is respected and that the desire to have a high opinion of sound academic practice is encouraged and taught (Anonymous, 2001). The basis for finding out new things, of knowing what happened last century, of discovering how things work or analysing the outcome of a situation, is learning by investigating. Students are all expected to complete projects throughout their academic career, and Michael Willen (2004) writes about students at the college level, 'who are bright, [who are] well-intentioned [and who] know better' but who plagiarise. He states that from a pedagogical perspective, this precludes learning. If these students he writes

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\* Some parents are trained teachers, and these are not referred to here.

about had been able to learn sound research skills, their sense of achievement would encompass intellectual honesty and integrity.

## Conclusion

The issues of plagiarism that surround us today, are more apparent as the journal articles, newspapers and websites expose findings by many researchers. While students of all ages are expected to research and find new information, the correct practices need to be taught as soon as they take the first glance at a resource that may be useful. In this way, children will realise that they can find out as much as they like, as long as they acknowledge the hard work done previously to get that information into their school library or a website. The value system of learning needs to be reset. Much of the homework project should actually be schoolwork and a child may not be able to research facts at home that can not be possible at school? The bulk of the school based task should not be completed outside of the schoolroom where all the necessary resources are that the student needs. The teacher, who can assist the student and supervise the acknowledgement of resources, thus preventing coaching, plagiarism and cheating.

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