

Meaningful Homework: A Study of Government that Utilizes the Broader Community

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If we as educators recall hating homework as students, why then would we continue to subject our students to similar experiences? We believe that, by finding ways to leverage learning opportunities outside of school, the curriculum could become more dynamic and personal.¹

Our intent in writing this article is to reveal how you can maintain the integrity of the in-school curriculum while at the same time making school more meaningful and engaging. We will describe meaningful homework followed by an overview of a unit on government. We'll then provide a couple of examples drawn from units of study in which homework has been transformed into worthwhile community learning.

Linking the Community with the Curriculum

One way to involve upper elementary students in their community is to link in-school curricular experiences with exploratory homework assignments. Although the value of homework has been the source of occasional debate among educators, it is an important and often overlooked component of the learning cycle. Meaningful homework activities enrich the school curriculum by challenging students to think more deeply about important and related questions and use the community as a laboratory for answering them. When teachers carefully and purposefully consider the role of homework in furthering curriculum goals, they can use it as a tool to support integrative learning that challenges students to investigate community issues and to inspire an understanding of active citizenship. This type of homework serves several functions:

- Extending education to the home and community by engaging adults in interesting and responsible ways
- Personalizing the curriculum, helping a student identify with the material
- Keeping the curriculum up-to-date, making it relevant to the here and now²

Homework activities can push students not only to locate and reproduce information, but also to interpret, analyze, and manipulate that information in response to questions or problems that cannot be resolved by referring to a workbook.

To create meaningful homework, teachers should consider how a student will engage with and complete the assignment. The process is as powerful as the product. Traditional assignments such as answering factual questions or completing a crossword puzzle often require students to use only low-level, routine skills. Before meaningful homework can be assigned, students need to acquire the skills of inquiry. Meaningful homework assignments apply those skills; they stimulate the strengths and capacities that exist within the individual students, and tap resources that exist in local communities.³

A Study about Government

Teaching government and civics provides ample opportunities for students to understand the ways an individual is connected to governmental and societal structures locally and globally.⁴ The community is a natural venue for seeing government in action.⁵ Given the divisiveness and polarization that have characterized the nation's political climate in recent years, emphasizing three key goals in teaching about civics and government is essential. During such a unit of study, students can

1. Develop an appreciation of why governments are needed and the kinds of resources and services they provide for people.
2. Observe (and possibly experience) the importance of serving a common goal, accomplishing as much as possible for as many as possible.
3. Observe (and possibly participate in) civic discourse in action, which involves advocacy and compromise (not vilification of the opposition).

The overarching theme of this unit was centered on discovering how to develop active citizens and how students' common experiences, motivations, and traits lead them to take action, affect change, and participate in the democratic process. Debates, reading, Socratic class seminars, field trips, role play, and writing were integrated throughout the unit for developing an understanding of key concepts such as: democracy, citizens' rights and responsibilities, representative government, separation of powers, and the ability to distinguish between the roles of local, state, and federal governments.

BanyanTree/commons.wikimedia.org



Iraq out-of-country voting at the Washington, DC site (actually New Carrollton, Maryland) on Sunday January 31, 2005.

Exploring and grappling with the topics and issues led to personal meaning and growth. At various stages throughout the unit, students were empowered to assert their positions on issues, as they realized the importance of taking a stance based on their own learning. Students strengthened their social studies thinking by engaging in projects that required collaborative effort, examining circumstances, testing hypotheses, and drawing conclusions from data that had been collected as part of homework assignments.

Homework Example 1: Government in My Life

The initial teaching about government focused on helping students understand and appreciate why governments are needed, what they do for people, and what it means to be an active and informed citizen in the governmental process.⁶ Parents and the community served as useful resources. Early in the unit, students experienced a lesson on the functions of government regulations in order to become more aware of the written laws and rules, and unwritten mores and traditions, that are part of their social environment. The main idea was that rules and laws are designed to help people get along, keep things fair, protect individuals and public property, and keep people safe.

Using an interactive discussion format to talk about the influences of rules, laws, and government, a photo essay about a

fourth grade student was presented addressing the question, "How does government affect my life from the time I get up until I go to bed?" This was an eye-opener in making the value of government visible to students.

1. The child wakes up in the morning in a house or apartment that has passed inspection by the government, indicating that it is safe to live in, (i.e., it is a solid structure, the roof does not leak, the electrical wiring is safe, etc.). Government agencies sometimes helps families get loans and provides funds for helping to rebuild some neighborhoods or to insulate their homes to make them more energy efficient.
2. The child gets out of bed wearing pajamas that are non-flammable. Special fire-resistant materials are required for the manufacture of bedclothes, and government inspectors test the cloth to make sure it follows regulations.
3. The child goes to the bathroom to brush his teeth. The water is supplied by the local community and tested by a government inspector to make sure it is safe to drink and use for tooth brushing. The toothpaste and toothbrush have government labels indicating that they are made from non-hazardous materials and are safe to use.
4. The child sits down to breakfast (fruit, cereal, and milk). The packaged products display a seal indicating that they have been inspected and are safe to consume.
5. The child gets dressed for school. In checking the labels of the clothing, the family will find that the items have been inspected for safety and are of a certain standard (imposed by the government) that is acceptable for purchase.
6. The child remembers that he needs lunch money for the week. The U.S. government mints the coins and prints the paper money that we use.
7. The child goes to the bus stop and waits for the school bus. A police car drives by. The government is responsible for making sure that the school bus is safe for passengers, that the driver has passed a special test and earned a license to drive a bus (not just a car), that the roads are safe, and that the rules and laws regarding driving are enforced. Police officers patrol the area to make sure that the rules and laws are followed and that children feel safe (stoplights and traffic signs help everyone drive safely and efficiently).
8. The child enters the classroom and once again encounters the influence of the government. The United States and the child's state have departments of education that make sure that teachers have the proper education and training, that suitable instructional materials are available, that there are a certain number of school days every year, and that students have access to certain

curriculum materials (e.g., approved textbook series).

9. The child is asked to take a note to the school secretary. Government regulations also influence her work life. The government makes sure that she and all other school employees have safe and healthful working conditions. The laws also ensure a minimum hourly wage, overtime pay, and freedom from employment discrimination. They provide unemployment insurance benefits to workers who lose their jobs and workers' compensation payments when workers are unable to work due to a job-related injury.

10. The child goes to lunch, again protected by food inspections. The Food and Drug Administration (in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) and the Food Safety Inspection Service (in the Department of Agriculture) are two agencies in the federal government with responsibilities for assuring food safety. State, county, and school district regulations also help assure that food is safe and that meals are nutritionally balanced.

11. When the child returns to the classroom for the afternoon session, he participates in a computer class. Possibly, the school received a grant from a government agency to help with the cost of purchasing computers.

12. Later in the day, the class receives a visit from a police officer as part of the social studies unit. This community helper is a representative of the part of our government that protects people and enforces the laws.

13. At 3:30 the bell rings. The government even influences this by having established time zones. The electric wiring has been inspected for quality and safety. The U.S. Department of Energy helps regulate the generation of energy and aspects of the energy market (such as supply).

14. The child rides the school bus home. (See # 7)

15. After school, the child watches television, which has government (Federal Communications Commission) regulations regarding what type of programming is shown during the hours immediately after school, which when children are most likely to be watching.

16. Later in the evening, the family goes to a restaurant for dinner. Again, government influences can be seen in safe food preparation and emergency exit signs in the restaurant.

After the class discussion about how the government helps us, students were asked to go home, explore their surroundings, and compile a list of additional ways in which government

Government in My Life

Handout A

As you make your way through the day, write down an activity in column 1 that is affected by the government agency or department listed in column 2. If you wonder what they do, then visit their websites!

1. Your Daily Activity	2. Government Agency or Department
	Food and Drug Administration www.fda.gov
	National Highway Traffic Safety Administration NHTSA www.nhtsa.gov
	Department of Education www.ed.gov
	Federal Communications Commission www.fcc.gov Hint: This commission helps regulate television, radio, and the internet.
	Consumer Product Safety Commission www.cpsc.gov

regulations have had an impact on their lives. Students were encouraged to get family and community members involved. Their specific assignment was to prepare a chart that showed all the ways government regulations have affected their lives and to bring it to class for an upcoming discussion. (HANDOUT A).

One student's chart included the item "pound of package meat found in the refrigerator." Her comment was, "The government has created agencies to ensure that all food items that we consume are inspected to make sure they are safe. All food products sold in stores display seals or other markings indicating they have been inspected." Another student's response included, "no text messaging while driving." The student explained that this law had recently been adopted in Michigan, and since her mother communicated a lot that way, she would need to rethink how she will change her practice.⁷

During the following week, the students looked for examples in the media (television, newspapers, and magazines) of government involvement and added these examples to the charts. They engaged family or community members in conversations about the government's power and influence. At home and in class, students wrote individual essays on the role of government regulations. All of these homework assignments served as essential preparation for the unit's culminating classroom debate on the questions, "Does our government have too much power? Not enough? Why or why not? What is the evidence?"

In the government unit, they learned that public issues are problems that communities face, and then work to resolve through their governments. The students explored and applied criteria to identify issues as being truly public, and distinct from personal or family issues. They expanded their knowledge by exploring a variety of public issues at the community, state, national, and international level. As a conclusion to this segment of the unit, students completed an individual activity sheet designed to assess their knowledge and understanding of public issues. It asked students to identify the issue that they felt deserved the most attention for further debate and to explain why.

Homework Example 2: Extending Democracy via Voter Participation

Because this was an election year, voting became one of the sub-themes of the unit. A lesson that extended over several days aimed to use resources in the wider community to allow students to learn more about citizens' rights and responsibilities and engage students in actual participation meaningfully. Topics included the following: the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the 21st Amendment, what it means to vote, why do people not vote, increasing voter participation, and why and how voting makes a difference.

Several "big ideas" were developed: voting is a method by which people choose among several alternatives; a democracy is a form of government in which people take an active role in decision making; a ballot is a list of names and offices (and sometimes issues) on which voters indicate their choice. During the class sessions, students participated in a mock voting process using various issues on which students expressed multiple views. The

teacher referred to students' questions about current events, then selected five large topics (safety, environment, health, education, and the economy) and illustrated how each issue affected the students' community. For example, a group of students interested in the safety of their community explored the issue of cell phone use while driving. Another group, focused on the environment, examined the use of plastic bags and their impact on the local landfill.

Some of these important issues were at play in the upcoming election, so different political beliefs were respected and the classroom kept politically neutral. Students explored the various views of local, state, and national officials in the upcoming elections using media as well as reputable sources such as the League of Women Voters. Two local candidates and an election official visited the class. Students talked about the importance of voting age and individuals participating in the democratic process. They were asked to talk to their parents about the importance of being registered voters and voting.

After a very spirited class discussion, students decided they wanted to do and learn more by examining the details of voter registration and turnout in their town. They sought out unregistered adults in their community and attempted to convince them of the importance of being involved in the decision-making process of our democracy. This assignment was designed to personalize the content being learned in class.

The assignment lasted two weeks. Students' reported their findings every day, and the teacher integrated new information into ongoing lessons. Results from the assignment allowed valuable connections to be made with state standards, students' interests, and community issues. For example, a student found out that her parents were registered to vote in a state that they had recently moved from, but were not registered in their new state. This also created an opportunity for studying local and state issues and expanded students' understanding that ballot choices go further than just selecting a presidential candidate. Vital state and county leadership positions are filled, and important issues can be resolved, when people vote.

With a family member, fourth grade students examined the PBS-sponsored website, The Democracy Project: Inside the Voting Booth (pbskids.org/democracy/vote). While the site has not changed since 2008, the content is still worthwhile. This activity created a shared content experience for families. The website is kid friendly, with historical photographs that encourage families to generate voting-related questions together. Students and families then made a list of people with whom they could discuss politics. In addition to family members, this list included people in the community such as barbers, bus drivers, and grocery store cashiers.

Students then set out to see if those people were registered to vote. They were encouraged to begin by choosing people with whom they interacted routinely so that additional driving would not be required. Their mission was to talk about issues and ideas they had been studying by using campaign conversation starters that were modeled and practiced in class. They were prepared

Extending Democracy via Voter Participation

Consider using these questions to start a conversation with your parents and adult friends. Take notes about the conversation.

- Are you registered to vote?
- Are you planning to vote in the upcoming elections?
- In your opinion, what are the most important issues in the election?
- Why is voting important in a democracy?

Name of Person I Talked to	Registered to Vote? Yes or No	Topics We Talked About...	Now I Wonder...I Want to Learn More About...

to take various actions depending on whether or not the person was registered to vote. They were ready to explain why they felt it was important for eligible individual citizens to vote, explain the procedures for voter registration, elaborate on how to become an informed voter, etc.

It was as valuable for students to see how many people were already registered to vote as it was for them to observe how adults register to vote (by filling out a mail-in form, for example). Students were prepared to discuss the importance of participating in government and to make the argument that voting is essential in a democracy. They recorded notes about their conversations (**HANDOUT B**). They also recorded questions that arose from talking with each person and identified government/civic topics they were interested in learning more about.

The extent to which children may assist with voter registration varies from state to state. Before suggesting that your students “help to register new voters” to any degree, discuss plans with your state board of elections, which are all listed at vote411.org. (This website is run by the League of Women Voters. Click on the menu tab “Voting in Your State” and then click on your state as it appears on a map of the U.S. to find the office to call.) A similar directory can be found at www.canivote.org. (The “Can I Vote?” website is run by the National Association of Secretaries of State. Select your state from the drop-down menu to find contact information.)

Throughout this assignment, students were able to bring a variety of important questions and new insights about elections

to their classroom study. New queries about the voting process, history, and current issues were posted daily. Students noticed that the adults they spoke with expressed a diversity of opinions, perspectives, and concerns. The new questions raised by family and community members did not need to be answered immediately, but they were recorded and were referred to throughout the unit. This assignment generated a purpose for learning and a need to learn more.

For example, students were initially puzzled about how to respond to citizens who displayed a lack of interest in voting or people who had negative perceptions of government. They realized the importance of learning about the historical struggles of many groups of Americans to obtain the right to vote and cleverly used this information in their discussions with others outside of school. Finding out how many voters their class could convince to register also created enthusiasm among students because they did not know how the assignment would turn out. Students felt that they were doing something important and original. They demonstrated a stubborn willingness to continue to find more and more people to talk with, and having a registration deadline brought the assignment to a natural close. Instead of being concerned about a grade or a consequence for not completing the assignment, they became more interested in finding out how many voters they could convince to register. As students learned more about voting, they started to read the newspaper and classroom magazines with greater inquisitiveness and purpose. Classroom discussions

also improved as students became not only better informed, but more enthusiastic about current issues.

The results of the students' political conversations, as well as any additional questions from the students, were posted in the classroom for further examination. Students then used this information to guide their choice of an independent project that examined their chosen topic or issue in greater depth. The finished projects were presented in student-created digital story presentations and shared with families as a culminating event.

Worthwhile Community Learning

Upper elementary students are able to form genuine learning partnerships with adults as they develop the desire to feel included in adult intellectual activity. Homework is powerful when it speaks to students and parents in ways that reflect their lives and the content being learned. The family's role in school can be strengthened during the upper elementary years. During this time, parents ask how they can be most effectively involved with increasingly advanced content and how they can help their children to reason and solve problems with greater independence. When a homework activity becomes worth doing for its own sake, students feel their actions are significant, and they want to involve their parents or other adults in meaningful ways.

Having families and students engage in structural learning outside of school as an enhancement or replacement for traditional homework doesn't happen overnight for all

sorts of reasons. Once you, your students, and their families realize the power of personalization, the impact on motivation, and the possibilities to contemporize the curriculum, you are well on your way to seizing learning opportunities that matter. 🌐

Notes

1. Jere Brophy, *Motivating Students to Learn*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2004).
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4. Jere Brophy and Janet E. Alleman, "Introducing Children to Democratic Government," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 19, no. 1 (September/October 2006): 18.
5. Jere Brophy and Janet E. Alleman, *Powerful Social Studies for Elementary Students* (Belmont, CA: Thomson, 2001), 168.
6. Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy, *Social Studies Excursions, K-3, Book Three: Powerful Units on Childhood, Money, and Government* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003), 274–276.
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