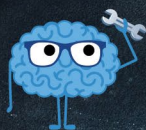
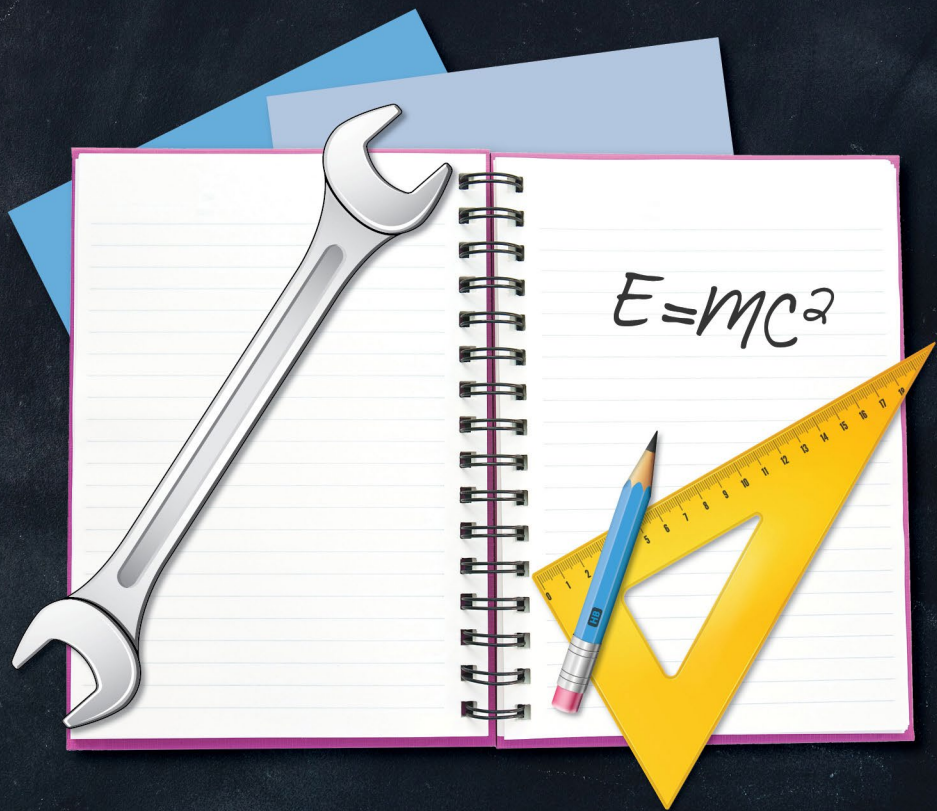


HACKING HOMEWORK

10 Strategies That Inspire Learning
Outside the Classroom



HACK[™]
Learning
SERIES

Starr Sackstein
Connie Hamilton





HACK 1

BREAK UP WITH DAILY HOMEWORK

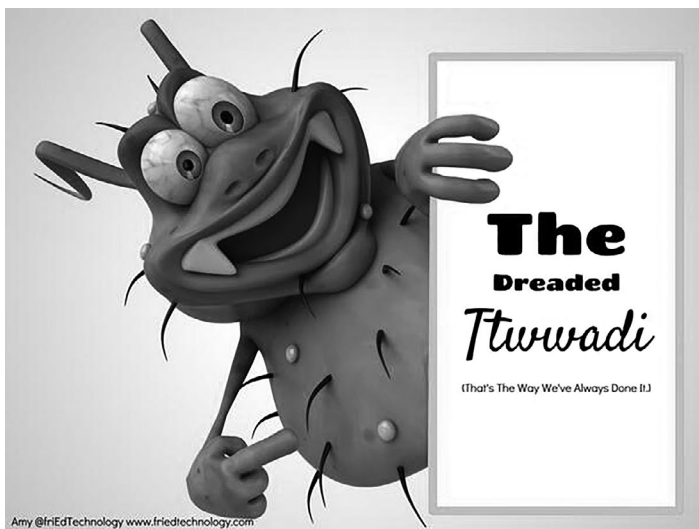
Work around the policies

*“You have to learn the rules of the game and then
you have to play better than anyone else.”*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

THE PROBLEM: SCHOOLS HAVE WRITTEN POLICIES THAT HANDCUFF TEACHERS FROM HACKING HOMEWORK

HOMEWORK IS OFTEN conceived of as paper-pencil tasks that are completed at home on a nightly basis; breaking from that tradition and perception can be a challenge. Some school districts actually require teachers to assign daily homework, based on the “that’s the way we’ve always done it” rationale. When districts establish these types of policies, they take away teachers’ autonomy to determine the most effective means of creating learning experiences both within and outside the classroom walls.



We send mixed messages to families when we promote family time, extracurricular activities, and student jobs, then infringe upon that time with nightly required homework. Keeping up with busy family calendars can be a juggling act, and sometimes reading for 20 minutes every night doesn't make the priority list. Not only can the nightly approach to homework be counterproductive, making students tired and hostile toward learning, it creates tension between parents and their children, leading some parents to resent the teacher or the administrators or both.

Curriculum materials often come with predetermined homework. Many teachers see it as mandatory, not optional. Also, creative assessments are often ignored when a textbook predetermines work assigned for home. Other issues with nightly homework include:

- Undermining teachers' ability to make choices for their students.
- De-emphasizing the value in clubs, sports, and other activities in which students engage after school hours.

- Expecting children to continue their “work” after long school days, which doesn’t support what we know about child development.
- Predetermined homework makes assignments boring and irrelevant to students, lowering the level of effort they put in.
- Students view learning at home as an obligation, rather than an authentic opportunity to expand upon or spark more learning in the classroom.

THE HACK: BREAK UP WITH DAILY HOMEWORK

Schools across the nation are embracing the idea of eliminating at-home learning altogether, or at the very least, making it optional. If you’re teaching in a system where change is slow and/or you’re not given the autonomy to make decisions about homework policies, create a workaround. This way, you can honor some of the *Hacking Homework* philosophies without jeopardizing your career through an act of insubordination. In advocating for a shift in how your school approaches daily homework, begin to collect evidence on the successes you’ve had with tweaking your own practices.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TOMORROW

- **Stop giving homework every day.** Give yourself permission to deviate from the expectation of nightly schoolwork. Just because the math materials have a consumable workbook that parallels the unit, day by day, doesn’t mean you have to use it. Students attend school for 30-35 hours a week. This schedule means

heavy cognitive work for children. Some educators have voiced the perspective that school is the student's "job." We believe 30-35 hours a week is enough for a child and adding even an hour a night approaches what's considered overtime for adults.

- **Distinguish between “required homework” and recommendations to support learning.** Since there's a difference between establishing good learning habits and tasks that link to daily lessons, begin to explicitly make that distinction. For instance, share the benefits of reading at home with students and parents, but promote it as a way to read for pleasure, enhance vocabulary, build fluency, but not to fulfill a nightly homework requirement. Put yourself in the role of a pupil, then connect that to how you learn as an adult.

When was the last time you read a book and thought, “I think I'll document the number of pages I read and the minutes it took me to read them. While I'm at it, I think I'll write a summary of the main idea of the text”? It doesn't make sense to require your students to break up the joy of reading with compliance tasks. If students are assigned 30 minutes of reading a night, some kids will set a clock, and no matter where they are in the text, shut the book when the 30 minutes are up. Lovers of reading choose to pick up their current book every chance they get and not because they are required to do it nightly. Other students will sit behind an open book and fake reading for 20 minutes and then slap a reading response into their log, during the last 10 minutes. So, the goal of encouraging students to read isn't fulfilled with an individual reading

log. (Establishing a class reading log is outlined in Hack 1 of *Hacking Literacy* by Gerard Dawson.)

- **Define homework differently.** If you're stuck in a system that requires teachers to give nightly homework, then find a loophole. Hack the homework system by "requiring" students to: Go for a walk, share what they learned in class with a parent, play a board game, volunteer, or even call a family member from out of town, just to catch up.

A BLUEPRINT FOR FULL IMPLEMENTATION

Step 1: Discuss homework policies with staff.

Having a shared understanding of the role of learning at home is essential to developing an overarching school message and culture. Some schools use school improvement teams, while other schools have communications committees in which representatives from the school community come together to discuss important school policies. Starting the conversation and coming to agreement on homework's purpose opens the door to hacking. Questions for discussion include:

- What are the most recent research findings on the impact of homework?
- What data do we have regarding the impact of homework on learning (not grades... learning)?
- What message are we sending about family time when we require homework?
- If we must give assignments outside of class, what's a reasonable amount of time students should spend on it?

- How do students/families perceive homework?
- Is homework, as currently used, effective?
- Are there ways we can encourage learning opportunities without making them required “homework”?

Step 2: Provide evidence for the change.

When a district begins to abandon some traditional uses of homework, it’s a shift that will require parents and students to adjust their preconceptions and expectations. While a number of them will likely support policies that discourage nightly homework, it’s possible you’ll run into others who are resistant to change. Being explicit about your intentions and rationale helps parents and students understand the reasons for deviating from the status quo. Examine Figure 1.2 for some examples.

Change in Homework Practice	Reason for Change	Additional Thoughts
Elimination of reading logs	We want students to read for pleasure, not for compliance. Students are encouraged to read at home a book of their choice and interest.	Consider having a family book club where everyone reads the same book and talks about it. Skype or FaceTime with Grandma, inviting her to read along with you.
Not everyone will have the same homework	Each student has unique learning needs. In order for academic practice to be helpful in learning, it should be not too easy and not too hard for students.	Although students might have different homework, the learning intentions for our classroom are consistent for everyone. This means even though students might be interacting with the content differently they’re all still interacting with the same content.
Sometimes there won’t be any homework	We recognize the value of family time and extra curriculars. We encourage students to be involved in activities outside of school and don’t want homework to interfere with their ability take advantage of other opportunities	If your family has an off season or a student isn’t involved in extracurriculars, take an opportunity to teach your child something you’re interested in. Guitar, golf, or pick up a board game and power down once a week to help your child learn strategy and sportsmanship.

Figure 1.2

Step 3: Plan events that expand student experiences.

Learning isn’t confined to the schoolhouse. Breaking up with the notion that students don’t have to sit at the kitchen table completing assignments in order to learn does not mean that learning slows down. Instead, learning expands beyond the classroom, to a 24-7 timeline. Not every family, however, has the resources to enroll their children in piano lessons or sign them up for the soccer team. Consider ways

that you can capitalize on less traditional learning environments to provide experiences to students and their families that support their social and emotional growth:

- Invite families to picnic on the playground
- Plan activity nights with music and an open gym (make it a family dance for younger students)
- Have tech nights so students teach adults how to use technology
- Coordinate a Battle of the Books
- Start a robotics or Lego team
- Plan a beautification club so students and/or families can make your school more aesthetically pleasing
- Partner with community centers so as to provide information on opportunities outside organizations offer
- Host Twitter chats to discuss various topics related to the interests of your community
- Connect students with e-pals to build writing and socialization skills

OVERCOMING PUSHBACK

There is a required number of homework grades each week. Data on student proficiency should take the form of substantive assessment, not graded homework. It's no secret for readers who follow us that we are proponents of standards-based learning and teachers throwing out grades. As this book is about hacking homework specifically, we'll simply point out that because we're unsure about the level of support a fourth-grader gets from parents, friends, or our pal Mr.

Google, any grade we give her for completed work might not accurately reflect what she has learned. So gather your assessment data from the classroom, not from homework.

If homework isn't assigned, kids won't do it. We are looking at the whole child. While state standards are certainly important for students' academic success, we're suggesting they only address one aspect of long-term success. Much of the time students spend outside of school on things other than academics have value too. If the "other things" aren't advantageous to kids' social and emotional growth, then go back to Step 2 and implement one of those ideas, or create your own. Kids are allowed to have lives outside of academic learning and they should. Let's support families the way they support us.

Parents expect homework. Don't underestimate parents' ability to support change once we have shared the rationale for reform with them. We can shift parents' perspectives by explaining the purpose and expectations of the new policy, arming them with clear strategies to support learning both when assignments are and are not provided. It could be helpful to communicate this information to parents multiple times, whether in writing, at an open school night, or during parent teacher conferences. Stay transparent and don't be afraid to field questions as they come.

Homework allows me to check student understanding. Sometimes we get the misperception that students are learning because they're compliant. They meet the minimum requirements for the grade or to avoid negative consequences, but not always for the purpose of learning. We see evidence of this when completed work is returned to school accurately, but students are unable to perform on summative assessments or even apply last night's focus to today's learning objective. This happens when students copy work, get highly scaffolded

support from parents or peers, or simply rewrite what's in the text or their notes without really comprehending what's written. Inaccurate data results in unnoticed gaps in learning because students are able to hide their struggles behind shallow efforts on the work they are assigned to complete at home. Formative assessments in the classroom, where teachers can see and question students' application of the content, is a more accurate assessment of student learning than traditional homework that has little context and inappropriate support.

Students have to read every night to build fluency. The argument here isn't whether or not students should read at home. There have been countless studies that support reading at home. The bigger question is whether reading should be required as homework. We argue that students are more likely to develop a lasting love for reading if they read by choice and it's part of the family culture. Forcing students to read for a specified number of minutes—then document that they did so—undermines the goal of getting them to interact with literature in a way that is enjoyable. We're forcing a compliance task on an activity we claim is fun.

THE HACK IN ACTION

Bethany Hill is the lead learner at Central Elementary in Cabot, Arkansas, where she serves kids in pre-K through fourth grade. In this Hack, Bethany shares her experiences with getting rid of nightly homework at her school.

Bethany's Story

As a teacher, I always struggled with the idea of homework and often questioned its purpose. I assigned it every day because other teachers did, or because it was an expectation in the school. I remember thinking about how schools within the district had varied homework

expectations, and how sometimes even classrooms within the school were quite different in what they expected from kids (and families). When I became the lead learner at Central Elementary, one of my goals was to establish consistency in homework policy, so that our kids and families could understand what we value the most.

The disparities in our expectations create confusion for students and families. Educators often have different ideas about what homework looks like and how kids should be held accountable for completing it, with the result that the tasks themselves become less meaningful. As we struggled to define the role of learning at home, this question surfaced: What can we do to help families understand the importance of engagement with their children? When we began to tackle this inquiry, our homework hack came to life.

AUTHOR COMMENT

Offering this kind of homework is one way to appease parents who are resistant to moving away from the traditional nightly approach.



At Central we chose to address the homework policy beast by setting an expectation for teachers, kids, and families to commit to family engagement. This includes reading, playing math games (many suggested by our school), family game nights, and free play outside.

Investment is the most important thing parents can give their children. For a kid, spending time enjoying his or her family's company is more beneficial to the home environment than being stuck at the kitchen table completing required assignments. We also shifted the focus of our school family night events from "training" or "talking at" families to different kinds of activities in which families can engage their children. Our goal in doing so was to provide a model for families, in the hope that these activities would be transferred to the home.

A small percentage of families questioned our intentions in not

assigning homework, but individual conversations, our family night events, and feedback from their children eased their minds. Taking away the stress of having to study, read a certain amount, fill out a reading log, sign papers, or complete a math sheet has enabled us to focus on what really matters! We want our families to read to, with, and beside their kids. We want them to play games so they are supporting their child's social skills (winning, losing, taking turns). We want them to engage in unstructured play with their children at home, in order to foster creativity. We want families to go places together to help kids build their background knowledge about the world around them. How can we justify stifling these valuable activities in favor of mundane assignments? Family time is simply too precious.

Expanding the definition of nightly homework allows us to celebrate the learning that occurs in a diversity of formats. Shaking up our homework policy is one of the best decisions I have ever made for kids. True family engagement becomes possible when we weed out school policies that are unnecessary and that little research supports. Prioritizing the home and helping families support their children is our moral obligation. We can hinder family interactions with mandates and rules, or we can enhance them with guidance on what is truly important.

AUTHOR COMMENT



In a survey or exit ticket, collect responses from parents about how they see learning happening at home. A week or so after a family night event, send a communication to families thanking them for attending and sharing the list of activities compiled from the survey/exit ticket with everyone — even those who were unable to attend.



We often assume that kids don't like working at home, in general. When we asked students in our own schools and communities, there were a few anti-homework responses, but most students responded in a nuanced manner, recognizing the value of extending learning at home but suggesting a reduction in the quantity assigned by their teachers.

Here's what some students say about daily homework:

I feel while it's good at some days having homework every day isn't beneficial because it makes it feel like it's just an assignment made to keep the student busy. When the student feels this way then they start to care less of the homework and would leave it for the last minute. If the assignment was due the next week or students were given homework three times a week I think that would be better.

—BRENDON MUNIZ, HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

If there is homework every night, I get a bit annoyed, especially if it is from the same class. I have band so homework is hard to fit into my schedule sometimes.

—FAITH GUERNSEY, HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

I would dilute the gargantuan amount of it. I wouldn't eliminate it, but it's not fun when one has to miss events in their schedule or has to stay up an extra 3 hours just to complete it. We go to school almost 7 hours a day, nine

months a year, with class periods lasting over an hour. It is a good reference to see if the student is learning, but too much can be pernicious to the student's brain and life.

—JACKSON STEENWYK, MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT

I don't have one in particular but I can think of the days where I would be incredibly busy and doing homework would be the last thing I would want to do. I felt no motivation to put a lot of work into homework the days where I was balancing piano, sports, and theatre (all stuff outside of school). I felt like homework was taking up the time where I could be doing something fun.

—RACHEL BARNETT, MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT

It usually takes me longer to do my homework than other kids. Sometimes, I have to choose between homework and spending time with my family. I hate it when my dad invites me to go for a run to get ready for my cross country meet and I can't practice because I'm still doing homework. It's like I have to choose between two things that are both good for me, but homework always wins. It's not fair.

—ALLIE HAMILTON, MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT

Homework would be OK if we didn't have so much of it.

—STELLA, ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENT

If I had homework, I would need a later bedtime so I would have all that time to do it.

—HUNTER, ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENT



HACK 2

TEACH ORGANIZATION AND RESPONSIBILITY IN CLASS

Ramp up accountability, and
time management skills

*“Try not to become a man of success, but
rather try to become a man of value.”*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

THE PROBLEM: TEACHERS USE HOMEWORK TO TEACH RESPONSIBILITY

TEACHERS OFTEN CLAIM they use homework to teach responsibility, while rarely providing strategies to help students in this area. Of course we want students to be able to manage their time, meet deadlines, do quality work, and take ownership of their learning, but simply doling out assignments doesn’t achieve these goals. Giving homework in the hope that it will magically build responsibility is

unreasonable. This approach also clouds the purpose of learning experiences, making many stakeholders wonder if at-home learning is intended to assess responsibility or student learning.

Teaching is a challenging profession. Of course it would be nice to have classes filled with young minds capable of managing their time and diligently completing their work, but we respond to their lack of accountability skills by blaming their struggles on them with declarations like, “Guess you should have done your homework; maybe this will teach you to be responsible.” That’s like saying to a diabetic who goes into a coma because he doesn’t know how to manage his condition, “You should have taken your insulin shot; maybe this will teach you to be responsible.” If we have a student who needs to monitor her blood sugar, we teach her what to do. The same philosophy applies to students who are disorganized or lack responsibility. Let’s look beyond the symptoms and tackle the root of the problem by keeping the following in mind:

- Just because students are told to do homework, this doesn’t mean they have the organizational skills to complete the task.
- If students display a lack of responsibility, teachers often address this problem with *more* homework assignments, academic support, and punitive reactions, instead of direct instruction on accountability and time management.
- Employers want workers who are responsible, but the curriculum rarely includes lessons that specifically teach students how to develop these skills.

THE HACK: TEACH ORGANIZATION AND RESPONSIBILITY IN CLASS

We can agree that students of all ages lose papers, waste time, and have their priorities out of whack. Kids are often branded as irresponsible simply because they lack organizational and accountability skills. In order to effectively tackle poor habits, we should provide direct instruction and models of best behavior, teaching students how to keep track of deadlines and class materials; how to manage time efficiently; and how to be accountable for their work. Arming students with these strategies allows teachers to shift their focus from simply assessing whether students are responsible and organized to actually building responsibility and organizational skills.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TOMORROW

There isn't a one-size-fits-all solution to getting kids organized and developing their sense of responsibility. Each student might need a little something different to help him/her move toward becoming an independent learner. Teachers are working harder than ever before; much of this time is spent tracking down missing assignments, and planning consequences and rewards for completing all of their assignments. We're not often surprised to see the same names of students who lack the organization and responsibility skills over and over again. Our efforts to encourage accountability don't often change behavior.

In these cases when our best efforts don't produce results, it's more likely that those students just don't know how to keep track of assignments or manage time because nobody has ever

taught them those life skills. We don't have to turn our curriculum upside down, but let's look for opportunities to introduce and strengthen organizational and accountability skills, expanding beyond the traditional approach of assigning homework.

- **Maximize planners to manage time.** For elementary students, planners are often used as a diary of the day's events. Students copy a sentence or two off the board as a way to communicate from school to home what happened today or a reminder for what to bring tomorrow. Instead of using a planner to exclusively document each day's events, model how a detailed calendar helps them to plan. When you send home a monthly calendar, ask students to enter the events into their planners, getting help from parents if needed. Encourage them to add family activities as well; this will create a complete picture of what a student needs to plan around for his/her time. In class, regularly prompt students to look forward in their planners to consider what they have coming up in their schedules. Perhaps a favorite aunt has a birthday next week—the student might choose to use this event as the theme for a poem about the aunt as a gift. Teaching students to plan ahead will reduce procrastination and highlight the benefits of thinking about how to manage time instead of watching it fly by unproductively.
- **Make calendars age-appropriate.** For older students, teachers often provide copies of the syllabus with important dates up front, giving students the

opportunity to plan out long-term learning goals. Take this to the next level by introducing students to reminder messages within Google Calendar. As they enter due dates, students can determine how much notice they need in advance. Some students might send themselves a “get started” reminder message while others would benefit from “project is due in 3 days.” This personalized approach to teaching them how to manage time honors individual students’ work habits in a way they won’t feel nagged but still have beneficial reminders.

- **Target effective learning characteristics.** With your students, brainstorm qualities that support learning. As students identify traits, document their responses. Their lists might include qualities like: smart, enjoys reading, keeps track of stuff, follows directions. Take this list and divide qualities into categories: knowledge, responsibility, attitude, etc.

Then, depending on the age of your students, create common definitions of these category labels. Good and bad examples of what different traits look like will further clarify definitions. This list could be displayed in the classroom as a reference throughout the school year. Some teachers even have their classes sign the list, as evidence that students will strive to personify these traits. If you have multiple classes, each group of students should create their own unique list of words.

- **Demonstrate responsibility through classroom jobs.** Having a job chart in the classroom not only helps you

carry out your duties, but also provides students with a sense of purpose and daily responsibility that is visible in the classroom. The tasks should be of such a nature that students are held accountable for doing them, and that failure to do so would be conspicuous. For example, if a student is responsible for gathering attendance data at the beginning of class, it's an important task that would certainly be noticed if missed. If a student has a prearranged absence, another layer of accountability would be for him or her to solicit a replacement. This type of setup in the classroom makes the many layers of responsibility visible to all students. When someone is absent, the rest of the class sees the impact of how important it is for the role to be filled and the affect it has on everyone if it's not. See Figure 2.1 for more examples of classroom jobs that provide students the opportunity to show responsibility.

- **Illustrate accountability with think-alouds** that naturally arise in the classroom.

This might sound like:

I'm not going to be in class tomorrow. What responsibilities do I have that will not be taken care of if I'm not here? My class job this week is communicator, so I need to talk to the student substitute to have her fill in for me tomorrow. I'm also going to need to find out what I missed. I will alert the secretary to let him know I'll be touching base with him when I return to class the following day. Actually, if I text him after school tomorrow, maybe I can get the information

tomorrow, finish it tomorrow night and then I will be ready to learn and not behind when I get back the next day.

- **Acknowledge responsible acts.** Give recognition to students who implement the classroom norms you have established. Contact the parents of those students and provide explicit examples of how their children displayed responsible behavior in the classroom. Take an extra minute to ask the parents what they do to instill a sense of responsibility at home. If the parents put forward some good ideas, feel free to apply them in the classroom. If the parents express a need for support in this area, take the opportunity to partner with them by offering them examples of how responsibility and time management could be developed at home.



Figure 2.1

A BLUEPRINT FOR FULL IMPLEMENTATION

Step 1: Collaborate with fellow teachers on norms for learning.

In collaborative teams, share the lists of norms you and your students created, as described in the “What You Can Do Tomorrow” section. Look for common themes and identify key skills that you want students to hone. Together, create an agreed-upon list of traits through which mini lessons on responsibility and other desirable skills can be developed. Teachers should provide opportunities for students to practice these traits during the school day and at home. This approach gives a purpose to work done at home and develops students’ ability to meet learning standards. Telling a student to do homework and punishing him/her when that doesn’t happen fails to foster responsibility. Without instruction on how to balance time between track practice, dinner, and youth group, it’s not likely youngsters will just figure it out.

Step 2: Generate examples of learning traits.

In order for students to arrive at a shared understanding of the desired traits, it is important to provide evidence of what responsibility looks like and how responsibility impacts their learning and the classroom culture. Asking students to give non-examples or antonyms can get silly, but is also useful. Students are more likely to remember your common definitions when you present both types of illustrations. You can use a Frayer Model (see Figure 2.2) to further clarify vocabulary words that might be unfamiliar to students. Use questions like these to visualize learning traits:

- What does organized look like vs. disorganized?
- What are the effects of being disorganized?

- How can we move toward being organized consistently?

This step of guiding students to identify the transferable skill deepens their understanding of the words defined in the “What You Can Do Tomorrow” section.

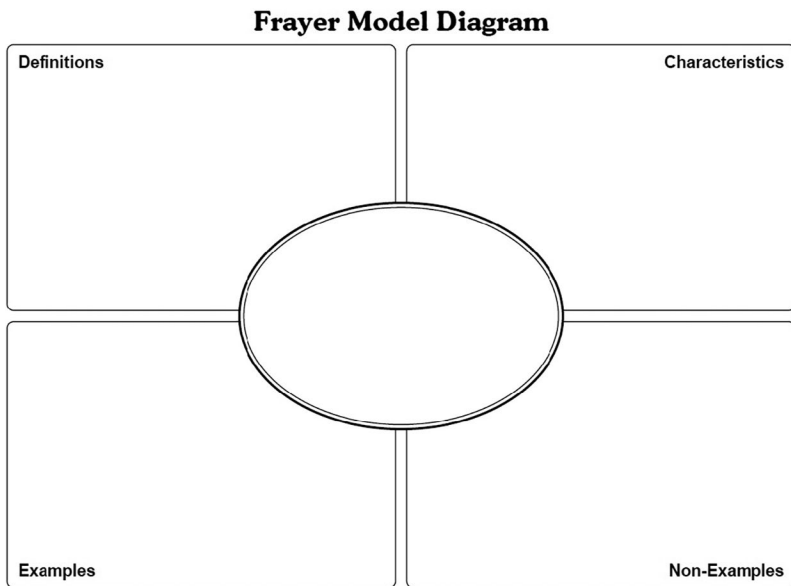


Figure 2.2

Step 3: Embed lessons that teach responsibility skills.

If you find yourself saying, “I shouldn’t have to teach my students to ____; they should know how to do it by now,” that’s a good indicator that you do have to teach or re-teach expected behaviors. Using the list of responsibility traits created in Step 1 and the definitions you and your students clarified in Step 2, now construct lessons addressing each of the traits, including organizational skills and responsibility. Even after the lessons are over, continuously refer back to the traits to highlight how these habits are vital to both school and life.

Step 4: Implement chances for responsibility skills demonstrations.

When we assess responsibility by checking whether homework has been completed or not, we're missing the true definition of the word "responsibility." Is the student who copied off his friend, cut and pasted from a blog, or had his/her parent do most of the work just as responsible as the student who approaches the teacher during class to explain extenuating circumstances that prevent timely completion of an assignment? We don't know a teacher out there who wouldn't embrace a student's initiative in explaining that she has a soccer game tonight and won't be home until late. Almost all of us would work with the student to reach an agreeable plan to work through this type of time constraint. This is a teachable moment, not only for the individual student with the conflict, but the entire class.

We suggest using a fishbowl protocol in which students and teachers model these types of "responsibility" conversations for the class. In a fishbowl, a discussion or dialogue is held in the center of the classroom while participants circle around and listen to/watch the conversation. Role-play of the soccer game scenario not only highlights the benefits of being proactive, but also facilitates the transformation of students into hackers themselves, ready to devise solutions to their problems instead of excuses. It might sound something like this:

Sophie: I know our science reflection is due tomorrow, but I have a soccer game tonight so can I just turn it in Monday?

Teacher: Thanks for coming to me ahead of time to let me know you're having a problem with the timeline. Let's look at some creative ways you might be able honor the deadline and win that game tonight. What options have you considered?

Sophie: Options? I didn't think of any.

Teacher: Well, how much time do you need to finish the assignment?

Sophie: About 15 or 20 minutes.

Teacher: Think about your schedule tonight and see if there are 15-20 minutes between the end of school and bedtime when you can get it done.

Sophie: I could do it on the way to the soccer game.

Teacher: That's an option. Any other times?

Sophie: Maybe after I get home, but if we win we will stop for ice cream.

Teacher: Let's plan on a win and assume you'll be getting ice cream. Any other times?

Sophie: Maybe I could ask my grandma to pick me up from school a little later today, and I could quickly do the homework before I go home.

Teacher: That seems like a good option. Any others?

(Continue this exchange to help Sophie identify every possible option)

Teacher: So you've identified time on the bus, immediately after school, right before bed, or early tomorrow morning before school. Of those choices, which one will work best for you?

Sophie: I think I'll call my grandma and get it done after school. That way I can focus on my game.

Teacher: Sounds like a plan. Nice work solving this problem and making sure you keep your responsibility of meeting the due date.

After the fishbowl, students observing the exchange between Sophie and the teacher discuss the benefits of this conversation. Perhaps more important, students can evaluate what would have happened if Sophie had not communicated

her dilemma to the teacher and had arrived at school the next day without having completed her homework.

The fishbowl protocol is beneficial for both older and younger students. Many elementary teachers use this strategy to engender citizenship on the playground or kindness in the classroom. Consider the systems you already have in place and integrate opportunities for students to model their organizational skills, accountability, and responsibility.

Step 5: Transfer strategies to support students at home.

What parent doesn't want his/her child to grow up to be a successful adult with good character? Working with parents on these types of skills will not only strengthen your relationship with them, but will also lay the groundwork to create connections between student behavior at home and student behavior at school.



**When rewards and
punishments don't
impact certain
students, we
often ramp up the
consequences, but the
results don't change.**

When you communicate with parents, be explicit about how you plan to teach students to be responsible. Let them know how your students have defined traits in Step 2 and suggest ways that parents can support implementation of these traits at home. In this chapter's Hack in Action, we share an educator's process for teaching students how to organize papers. This same system can be used to help students

clean out their closets. Look for opportunities to reinforce desired traits at home. If you really want tasks done at home to teach kids how to get organized, then perhaps an effective way to achieve this

goal is to encourage young students to help mom and dad organize the toy box, or older students to organize the refrigerator so food doesn't spoil.

Step 6: Revisit the classroom norms for learning all year.

The habits referenced in this Hack must be revisited and rehearsed often; we can't simply check them off the list and believe our students will magically become organized and responsible independent learners. Development of these traits must be an ongoing process, and teachers should always be looking for ways to reinforce the skills. Keep a time-slot in your classroom for revisiting the list of traits and adding strategies that you, students, and parents have found to be successful. You don't need to reinvent the wheel. Opportunities for organization and accountability are everywhere: We just need to be more intentional in taking advantage of them.

OVERCOMING PUSHBACK

Incorporating behavioral skills into academic instruction is a significant adjustment for some teachers. In a desperate effort to encourage students to complete homework, teachers often use external incentives, such as grades, stickers, and praise; or they go with punitive actions, like lunch detention, a negative note home, and a grade drop. When these rewards and punishments don't impact certain students, we often ramp up the consequences, but the results don't change. Instead, if the root cause of students not continuing their learning at home is behavioral, we should provide direct instruction on responsibility and organization. Intentionally pinpointing these positive behaviors will effect real change in the students' approach toward their education.

It's my job to teach, it's the student's job to learn. Teaching is just talking if learning doesn't occur. It can definitely be challenging to help young, developing minds see the long-term value in education. However, there's a reason education is compulsory. Students are not given the unilateral power to determine whether they want to learn. If they appear unwilling, uninterested, or unmotivated, it is our job as teachers to find ways to inspire them and give them the skills to complete their tasks. Students who are apathetic toward school are unlikely to wake up one day and suddenly see the value of extending their learning outside the classroom. If lack of organization and responsibility are barriers, let's break it down by teaching these skills directly, not by hoping students will pick them up through homework.

I don't have time to teach employability skills. You don't have time *not* to. If you could add up all the time you spent giving students another copy of missing work, lecturing them for incomplete assignments, and grading work that might have been copied from a peer, you'd have time to write a book addressing employability skills. Just like we take the time to teach procedures at the beginning of the year, to ensure a smooth flow for classroom learning, the time spent teaching students what it means to be responsible and how to implement organizational strategies is invaluable.

My secondary students will see a job chart as babyish. Relate it to having a real job. At the beginning of the year, post a "help wanted" bulletin board with job descriptions and applications. Offer how these roles can be included in letters of recommendations for college applications as evidence of accountability. Stress how colleges want students who are dependable and are willing to take on responsibility for their learning and support the learning of others. You could even host mock interviews and "hire" for the posted positions.

THE HACK IN ACTION

Tamra Dollar has taught at both the elementary and secondary levels and most recently, as a middle school literacy coach and creative writing teacher. She believes all students can learn, just not on the same day, in the same way, and at the same pace. She shares Confessions of a Literacy Coach on her blog, Dollar Literacy. In this Hack in Action, Tamra describes how she turned excuses into learning opportunities to help students grow more responsible.

Tamra's Story

Over the years, I've heard more excuses for missing work than I care to admit. Long gone are the shallow excuses like "The dog ate my homework." As you can imagine, preadolescents are savvy and seem to know the perfect excuse to use and exactly the right moment to deliver it.

Without question the coup de grace of all excuses is the one that shifts responsibility from the student to the teacher. The excuse goes something like this: The student looks the teacher squarely in the eyes and solemnly swears that he/she has already turned in the homework. It is the teacher's fault for losing it.

In a stroke of genius, the problem is transferred from the student to the teacher. If you're like me, some days it is not worth going to extremes to convince the student that the homework is, indeed, missing.

Three weeks later, the homework surfaces during a mandatory locker clean up. It is now stuck to another piece of paper with a sticky substance that smells like cherry.

In order to tackle this kind of scenario, a colleague of mine started a lunch club to help students get organized. The club would order pizza and kids would have a grand old time playing trashcan basketball with old papers, only to find out a week later that a slam

dunk had been a critical worksheet. Students had placed papers that were clean back into their notebooks, removing all those that looked untidy, but had no other check/balance system for determining whether something was worth keeping. The club disbanded after a year.

AUTHOR COMMENT

Tamra's co-worker

successfully discerned that the issue with homework wasn't ability and perhaps not even motivation. The students just weren't able to keep track of all the papers and deadlines.

They didn't have a system for staying on top of it all. Tamra's school was on the right track in allocating time for students to get organized. If students do not have instructions and a workable process, however, they are not likely to figure it out on their own.



As part of my reading intervention class, I decided to dedicate the first Monday of every month to teaching organization. (If I had a new student I would schedule a time to meet with him/her one-on-one). I would have my students bring in their backpacks and every scrap of paper they could find in their lockers, even if the scraps looked like trash.

At a table or on the floor, I would have the students write on three sticky notes: Keep; Trash; or a "?". The first pile was for papers that should be kept and organized, including incomplete assignments, study notes, schedules, etc. The second pile was for papers that should be trashed or tossed out; students would often find doodle sheets, drafts of papers that

had already been rewritten, and even multiple copies of the same paper. The third pile was for papers that the student did not know whether to keep or toss. Students were taught how to assess the purpose of the paper so as to determine if it should go in the keep or trash pile.

I would literally pick up each piece of paper and ask, "Is this to

keep, trash, or you're not sure?" When students caught on to the system, I sat back and cheered them on. Next, the student would sort the "keep" pile by subject, then place papers in the appropriate subject folder. I added an extra layer of support by keeping piles two and three in the back of a filing cabinet until the end of the semester. Many times important papers "look" like trash! It was inevitable that a student would run into my room in a near frenzy because he/she threw away a paper that was due.

Students thereby learned through experience how being organized can save the day. They began to create their own systems for the "?" pile, just in case they might need papers from it next week. Students who are learning how to organize often do not have the skills to prioritize what is or isn't important. My reading intervention classes gave them a baseline framework within which to do so.

Teachers use this type of best practice in regard to academic content, like how to multiply fractions or write an expository essay. Explicitly teaching students how to organize is a way to teach responsibility.



If students don't keep track of their assignments and commitments, then they can't manage their time, leading others to view them as irresponsible. As educators, we recognize that just like the

AUTHOR COMMENT

As students are applying their newly learned skills, giving them a safety net is an additional strategy that teachers can temporarily use.



Pythagorean theorem must be taught before it is mastered, organization is a precursor to the ability to hold oneself accountable and act responsibly. This Hack is one example of how to provide direct instruction on skills that will enable students to be successful in life, not just school.

We recommend that teachers develop lessons and/or classroom routines that develop these vital life skills, creating regular opportunities for practice. Daily homework assignments, as discussed throughout this Hack, are not the answer. However, when teachers assign the type of out-of-class work discussed throughout the book, organization and responsibility will play major roles in students' success. So, they will develop valuable life skills and apply them to learning outside of school. That's a win-win.



HACK 3

CULTIVATE RAPPORT

Establish positive relationships
to motivate learning

*“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken
joy in creative expression and knowledge.”*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

THE PROBLEM: DAMAGED RAPPORT INCREASES POWER STRUGGLES

THERE ARE NUMEROUS reasons that students don’t do work at home. As discussed earlier, sometimes it’s because their schedules are just too busy. When students feel like their teachers don’t like them, their drive to perform well declines, creating an additional obstacle for teachers to overcome. Students attach the negative thoughts they have about their teacher to the learning process. “I don’t know why my teacher is making me do this...”

When students dislike teachers, this only exacerbates any animosity students may already have toward class work they have to complete at home; these feelings then spill over into learning in general. When learning is viewed as “work,” and students are expected to do it to avoid negative consequences, the message about learning becomes twisted. Power struggles over homework ensue, sending the message that schools prioritize completion of the task over embracing the opportunity to learn and celebrating the growth that comes along with learning. These foundational beliefs drive this Hack:

- Teachers who connect with students are more likely to get quality work from them. Authentic conversations about progress and growth occur when there is a trusting relationship.
- The culture of the classroom sets the stage for student attitudes toward learning both in and out of the classroom. If the teacher uses scare tactics, such as “You’ll get a lunch detention if you don’t do it,” students grow averse to learning experiences and are less likely to follow through with activities at home.
- Conversations that concentrate on learning and the progression of learning keep the focus on mastery, rather than completion. Power struggles blur the purpose of learning at home, distracting from the ultimate objective of mastery.

THE HACK: CULTIVATE RAPPORT

If we are invested in moving every child where he or she needs to be to achieve mastery, relationships are the most effective way to obtain this goal. So why should homework be any different? It’s easy enough to

say that students just won't do it, but if we invest our time in knowing who our kids are and what they need, we can easily reduce the power struggles that hinder effective learning extensions at home. As we re-imagine what learning outside the classroom is, we must include them in the conversation. Otherwise, we will spend our time fighting with them to turn in work that they've often copied just to get it done.

Building trust and rapport with students gives us a window into who they are as individuals, deepens our understanding of their preferred learning styles, increases their motivation, and prevents the power struggles that damage the culture of our classrooms. This Hack, as well as others in the *Hack Learning Series*, addresses what we can do to develop relationships with even the most challenging kids.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TOMORROW

- **Greet students with a smile.** You've heard the phrase "Actions speak louder than words." When you make welcoming students a priority, you not only send a message to the entire class that they are important to you, but you are able to read students' faces and postures to see if there's anything off about them today. A quick check-in to let them know you care goes a long way. Even this subtle strategy to build trust will benefit your students when it comes time to engage in learning outside the school day.
- **Notice the small things and say something.** Students love it when people notice things about them, even the kids who go to great lengths to blend in. Are those new shoes? Did you get a haircut? How was the

birthday cake last night? These interactions convey to students that you're interested in them as individuals and not just focused on the lesson.

- **Play “get to know you” games.** Learn about your students through icebreaker activities. Instead of just playing the name game at the beginning of the year or semester, play two truths and a lie, where students write two little-known facts about themselves and one that is untrue. You and the other students try to figure out which one is the tale. You can play this game over and over again, mixing it up by creating new categories for truths and tales, such as food, free time, and hair. These little-known facts about students will come in handy when you're providing examples of transferable skills and explaining how the knowledge students acquire in class applies outside the school walls.
- **Use growth mindset language.** Stop praising students for their intelligence. Compliments like “You're a genius” suggest that students either have the ability or don't. These comments do not promote hard work or a desire to become intentionally thoughtful about learning. As students see themselves as capable learners, they will be more confident in their pursuit to take the lead of their own growth. Refer to Figure 3.1 for ways to reframe your feedback.

Instead of:	Try saying:
You're a brainiac.	Your hard work really shows in... (be specific)
You have a knack for writing.	I can see you've been working on your voice. What a great improvement in your writing.
I'm so proud of your good grades.	You must be so proud of yourself, all that effort really paid off.
That was easy for you because you're so smart.	Looks like that wasn't a good match for your skills today, I'll make sure you're challenged tomorrow.
Try harder next time.	What can you learn from this so you can continue to improve?

Figure 3.1

A BLUEPRINT FOR FULL IMPLEMENTATION

Step 1: Make your data visible.

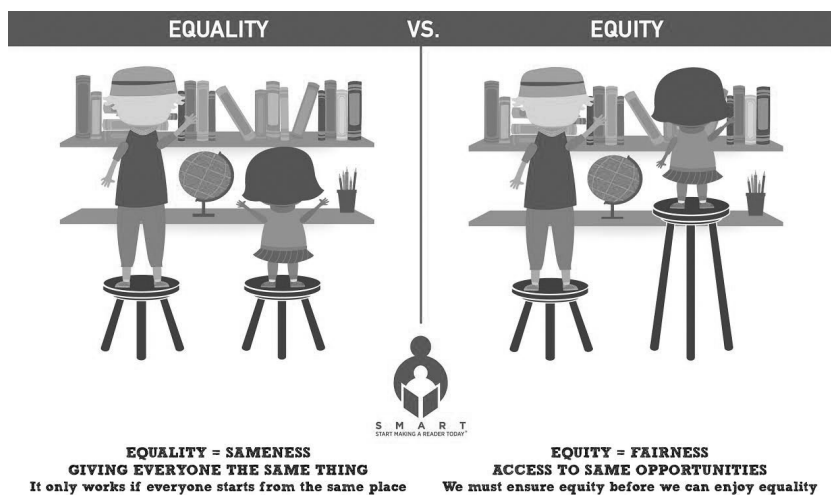
During the "get to know you" games discussed in "What You Can Do Tomorrow," keep track of details students share. Once you've collected information about students, share it. If 75% of your students are really into science fiction, you're providing justification for the reason you've elected to have them read a text on time travel. Then, displaying data you've collected showcases how much you care about each child while promoting an atmosphere of trust and rapport. Knowing their passions will arm you with the opportunity to make suggestions for texts, current events, articles, and/or trivia for students to explore outside the classroom.

This approach is beneficial beyond content interests. Be aware of skills and talents students have. If you know students are uploading tutorial videos to YouTube for fun, prompt them to use that skill to film how to find and calculate angles found around the house or invite them to create a video of famous quotes from Abraham

Lincoln and synthesize what it says about him. When this positive culture exists in your classroom, power struggles are naturally reduced and students are willing, actually motivated, to jump into the learning and extend it when they get home.

Step 2: Establish a plan of action with at-risk students.

When students have difficulty in class, they're likely to have struggles out of class as well, so you'll want to get to them quickly. Set up a time to meet with learners to initiate a conversation about what the barriers are to learning. When you are able to identify why students are not complying with learning tasks, you know how to address the problem. Never assume that you know why students aren't completing activities.



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Figure 3.2

If students don't understand the lessons, they might need intervention. But if they have to babysit other siblings because they have a single parent who works a second shift, intervention is not the

best solution. Sometimes, teachers think that they have to provide the same level of support to every student. If one student gets extra attention, it may be viewed as unfair, and that support is revoked. When you look at learning as a progression toward mastery, however, you must make sure students get what they need when they need it. Student needs are too diverse to support a cookie cutter approach. Figure 3.2 provides a visual of equality vs. equity. Remember that not every learner needs the same supports to gain access to learning. Fair doesn't mean equal.

Students will appreciate the individualized scaffolds and you'll see greater success across more kids. If it doesn't happen naturally, softly shift the conversation about how students can set themselves up for success when learning at home. If it helps for them to read in a quiet spot in the classroom, how can they provide that same type of atmosphere at home? Maybe she waits until her younger sister goes to bed, or he wears headphones when reading is involved at home. It's the defining of the problems that make for the best solutions, so take your time to clarify the obstacles to learning together with the student, then identify solutions that will work in all learning environments.

Step 3: Converse with all students about their progress regularly.

Sometimes any additional moments in the school day are spent establishing a plan as outlined in Step 2. There is a missed opportunity if we don't find some time to guarantee that all students have reflection time on their academic progress. Build a schedule that allows you to spend a little extra time with as many students as you can over the course of a day. Snag a moment with the early arriver who is always there before class begins. When students are working independently, tack a minute or two onto the end of a one-on-one conversation, expanding the dialogue beyond the current class activity

to the student's overall thoughts on learning. Consider this exchange between a teacher and student and notice how the teacher hones in on one strategy that can spread in other areas:

Teacher: I noticed when you were working in class today that you were singing or talking to yourself, and even doing a little dance? Tell me about that.

Student: I was having trouble remembering all the Great Lakes. I know we learned H.O.M.E.S. to give us the first letter of each lake and I can remember that, but I still couldn't remember the actual lake names...especially Lake Superior.

Teacher: How did you help yourself remember Lake Superior?

Student: I wrote down the list of lakes, and my dad helped me make up a way to sing each lake. Then we added some motions to go along with it. Superior is like Superman, so I do this (student puts one fist in the air as if she's going to fly). I don't know why it works, but it does. I can remember all the lakes now and that helps me as we learn about Michigan history.

Teacher: That's called a mnemonic. It's a very useful strategy to help remember things. Remember in math we used "Hey diddle diddle, the median's the middle, you add then divide for the mean. The mode is the one you see the most. The range is the difference between"? That's another example of a mnemonic. Have you used any others?

Student: OHH! Yes! Order of operations, Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally.

Teacher: That's right. But in social studies you created your own mnemonic. How did that help you?

Student: I added a way to sing it to myself, it was much easier to remember. Maybe I can use that for writing to help me

remember to transition my paragraphs. I'm going to think of one tonight.

Teacher: What a fantastic strategy. Would you be willing to share your mnemonics with the rest of the class tomorrow, especially the new one you write tonight about transitions?

Student: Really you want me to teach the class? Yea. It's going to be so good everyone will want to use it.

Even if students don't appear to be experiencing problems, establishing a rapport with them could be key to effective support if something changes in the future. In these student conferences, ask them for their thoughts on the pacing and rigor of the class, as well as their perceptions of their learning progress. Sometimes students are capable of creating their own hacks to obstacles, and because they've gotten used to doing so, appear to have it all together and fall off your radar. During these metacognitive exchanges, students are reflecting on their learning strategies that they take and use wherever they go, not just in school. These are the nuggets that foster lifelong learners and provide students with the confidence to persevere through challenging concepts when they want to extend learning at home.

You never know what these few minutes with a student will uncover. Knowing a student wakes up at 4 a.m. every day to catch the bus from the babysitter's house might be helpful information to have if he begins to fall asleep in class, or doesn't always have his materials with him. This enlightenment that might be revealed during a chat with a child is likely to influence your perspective on what and how much work is sent home. These realizations of what your students' lives are like at home confirm the need to reconsider traditional homework.

Broaden the discussion to show you care about the student: Inquire about how a student's clan castle is coming along, or how many stuffed animals the collection is up to. In this type of natural

dialogue, the topic might be shifted to books students are reading at home or passion projects they have initiated. If a student is rebuilding a motorbike, explicitly ask him how he can use what he learned in the garage in today's science lesson. As mentioned, these quick conversations can happen spontaneously: before the bell, while you're waiting for students to line up in the hall between classes, or wherever you find a moment to connect. It's not necessary to carve out half of your instructional time to shoot the breeze with kids. Purposeful links between learning at home and school is an effective way to guide these chats.

Step 4: Be an active listener.

When students display their trust in you by disclosing information that doesn't reflect favorably on your lesson, resist the urge to be defensive. Just pause, listen, paraphrase, and take note. Ask them to identify ways you can help, or if they have any input into what would increase interest. When the conversation focuses more specifically on doing assignments at home, pose questions to encourage students to share the challenges they face. You might discover that a student doesn't have a computer and has to complete assignments on his phone. Another student might disclose that her single mom just started taking classes and while she's studying, your student is responsible for getting her younger siblings fed and off to bed on time. During these valuable moments, you're able to get a glimpse of the true barriers to learning.

Conversely, when a student tells you she spends most of her evening FaceTiming with her friends, it would be natural to pass judgment about how she is prioritizing her time. Instead, take advantage of the rapport you're developing and find out what they're discussing. Are they fans of a favorite TV show? Do they collect anything with butterflies on it and share their collections? Have they

learned to do origami by watching videos together? What you learn might come in handy when making connections to future in-class lessons and ways these students can naturally extend their learning at home. Imagine suggesting they determine if symmetry is used in butterfly wings or if it's relevant in folding paper. Interacting with students at this level might be one of the best ways to send them running home to apply their new learning.

Step 5: Rinse and repeat.

Throughout the school year, repeat Steps 1-5 in order to continue building trust and mutual respect with each of your students. These relationships will result in students taking your advice and will supply you with the information necessary to develop a plan of action in support of their individual needs. The goal is to create independent learners so as you revisit these steps, students will build the skills necessary for them to take charge of their learning and extend it outside of school. Giving them the strategies to build on their strengths and compensate for their areas of weaknesses is the greatest gift we can offer for their ongoing success in life.

OVERCOMING PUSHBACK

Establishing a foundation of trust and rapport is invaluable. Think of co-workers you've had that you respected versus others who created power struggles. Which collaboration style provided an atmosphere for you to flourish? Students will eagerly partner with teachers who show an interest in them as learners and as individuals. When a teacher's main focus is on compliance, and learning is secondary, the priorities are out of order. Students might do what they're told, but no more. If we want them to take more initiative in their growth, we should leverage on our positive relationships and build a climate for open conversation about how learning occurs in school, but also

continues after the 3 o'clock bell. When you come up against push-back, consider the following responses:

They might not like their bosses, but they will have to do the work. True, but you're not their boss; you're their teacher and the role of a teacher isn't the same as that of a supervisor. Additionally, think about past bosses you've had. Were you more or less likely to go above and beyond for a boss who appreciated you and cared about you as a person, or someone who was ready with a write-up for you to sign before even asking why you were late?

I'm their teacher, not their buddy. Also true, but if you build rapport with students, it will not only benefit them, it will make your day-to-day job less stressful. Reducing power struggles with individual students creates relationships that value and promote learning everywhere, including at home.

Some students are really hard to like. True again, but they're kids. We can't label them as unlikeable at age 10 just because they're pushing back on completing traditional homework or don't seem to like you.

THE HACK IN ACTION

It's natural, when a school sees achievement gaps, to first look at curriculum and instruction for potential change. It's not uncommon for staff to assume that more time on studies will increase student achievement. Since there are only so many hours in the school day, some schools increase the amount of homework they issue to students, thinking it will help. In this Hack in Action, Connie discusses how the school improvement team included students in the problem-solving process and learned how teachers' rapport with students impacted students' attitudes about learning and homework.

Connie's Story

Connie's school district was informed by the State of Michigan that one of their schools, Saranac Junior-Senior High, was a Focus School. Focus Schools are identified as having the largest achievement gaps between their highest and lowest achieving students. In order to be removed from the list of Focus Schools, a school would have to—within three years—improve the achievement levels of the bottom 30% of their students (B30s) and close the achievement gap.

Staff identified students' lack of motivation in regard to homework as a key problem, dedicating meeting after meeting to brainstorming ways to induce B30s to complete their assignments. We simply couldn't figure out why they didn't care about learning and couldn't see the connection between doing their homework and success. One teacher suggested we meet with B30s and ask them directly. So we did. A group of teachers and hand-selected students met for a roundtable discussion with coffee and donuts. Over the course of two hours, we asked the B30s all the questions we had been pondering for years.

- How do you feel about school?
- What causes you to pass some classes and not others?
- How could the school improve to help you be successful?
- And the biggie: Why do you do your homework more often in certain classes?

In response to this last question, we expected to hear things like “if I have time... some classes are too hard... I don't like reading...” and so on. However, we were slapped in the face with a consistent message from the entire group of low-achieving students. They

overwhelmingly agreed that they were willing to do homework and put forth effort in classes if they felt that the teacher cared about their learning and underscored how they would use this content later in life.

One young man, representative of our unsuccessful learners, told a story about how his English teacher, Mrs. Cindy Sanford, cared more about him and his learning than he did. He acknowledged the time and effort she put into feedback, and said, “I didn’t think it was right that she spent more time on my homework than I did.” Mrs. Sanford was not at the roundtable to hear his comments. She is a highly respected veteran teacher known for her caring demeanor. It was no surprise that the students recognized Mrs. Sanford’s compassion, but we couldn’t ignore the negative feedback also provided by the ladies and gentlemen sitting with us: Students viewed as the “tough guys” of the school.

One of our female students mentioned that although she was great in one subject, she couldn’t stand the teacher who taught it, bringing to mind the adage: “Students need to know how much you care before they care how much you know.” It was the perspective of these students that the teacher no longer loved the job and couldn’t wait for retirement in June. We severely underestimated the impact relationships, positive and negative, played on students’ feelings toward learning both in and out of school, so we became more intentional about building rapport with students. This systematically helped us better connect with kids and improved achievement at our school.

Instead of placing “carrots and sticks” in front of students to bribe or scorn them for doing or not doing their homework, we took the time to identify root causes of their attitudes around it. According to students, connecting with them to help them see the value in education, writing, and even proper grammar—and then figuring

out what works best for each individual student—makes a difference. After the conversation with the B30s, the school improvement team at our school shared the students' perspectives with the entire staff, launching conversations about how to improve rapport with students.

It's not always an expensive speaker or a new curriculum that helps students see the value in learning, including learning at home. After two years, Saranac Junior-Senior High closed its achievement gap and saw its name removed from the Focus List. While a variety of initiatives contributed to this progress, the two hours the staff spent listening to students' perspectives was crucial.



Building better relationships with students allows teachers to really get to the heart of student motivation. The more invested we are in students, the more compelled they are to take initiative in our shared spaces; continuing learning outside the classroom is just one part of this philosophy. We have to stop wasting time fighting with kids who won't do homework and spend more time getting to know them and trying to figure out why this is the case.

Forcing compliance through punitive measures and extrinsic rewards will not make struggling kids smarter or more capable. In such instances, we must examine what we're asking kids to do and then determine if these tasks will successfully cultivate a love of learning in each child. It's okay to be flexible and meet kids where they are. Choose battles wisely and then everyone wins.



HACK 4

CUSTOMIZE TO MEET STUDENT NEEDS

Be flexible with assignments and timelines

*"It's not that I'm so smart, it's just that
I stay with problems longer."*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

THE PROBLEM: HOMEWORK ISN'T ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL

HAVE YOU EVER sat in a professional development (PD) session and wondered why you were there, because nothing new was being presented, or the speaker's message didn't relate to improving your teaching? The one-size-fits-all approach to learning isn't productive for teachers and it's less effective for kids. If we know that students are all at different spots in terms of learning progression, why do we dish out the same assignment to every student? The following notes were considered when developing this Hack:

- We spend the entire day catering to the individual needs of students, using flexible grouping and individual conferencing, then wrap it all up by telling every student to do the same task, regardless of how much or little they understand.
- Assigning tasks that are too easy for students reinforces the belief that it is pointless busy work and creates resentment on the part of students and even parents.
- Because students learn at different paces, some students might attempt to complete assignments at home with an underdeveloped understanding of the material. Ensuing mistakes become embedded in students' minds, making re-teaching the content difficult.

THE HACK: CUSTOMIZE TO MEET STUDENT NEEDS

Students make significant progress when teachers scaffold lessons in order to push learners slightly beyond their levels of comprehension. If the gap in understanding is too wide, students are frustrated and are quick to give up. If the gap is too narrow, students get bored and learning ceases. On top of academics, student interest and individual backgrounds also come into play with the relevance of learning. Understanding the broader purpose and the transferable life skill helps students see how their work connects to short-term learning goals and long-term outcomes.

When assignments exist in the sweet spot of learning, efficacy and engagement spike. Think of crafting activities done outside of school, like a video game designer. If kids experience enough success but are challenged, they will stick with the game, even begging for one more chance to get it right. However, if they rapidly make it to the highest

level and win the game, the fun is over and they're not interested in playing again. Once is enough.

On the flip side, if a game is too hard and kids get stuck on a level for too long, they'll cheat or quit. See any connections to homework here? We're not saying out-of-class assignments have to be a video game. What we are suggesting is that customizing activities to meet the needs of your learners is key to facilitating student growth and engagement.



With this kind of transparency, students make the necessary connections and are more inclined to prepare outside of school for upcoming in-class lessons and activities.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TOMORROW

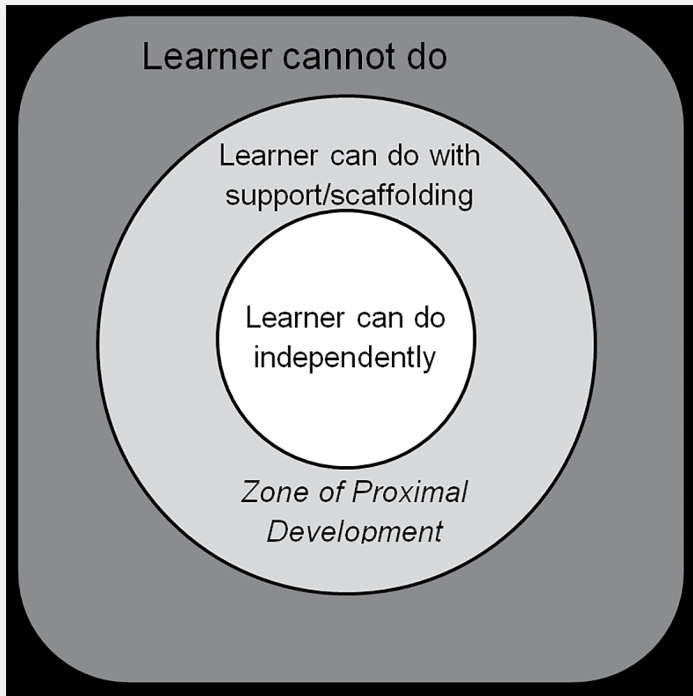
- **Delay sending work home that students cannot do independently.** Much of the frustration around traditional homework stems from students not remembering what they did in class that day and therefore feeling like they can't complete the assignment. Delaying out-of-class assignments that require application of a new skill—until there is a high level of certainty that students have sufficient foundation to execute the task—makes students' time more productive.
- **Prompt exit tickets that identify ways they can extend learning.** When closing a lesson, give students a sticky note and tell them to put their name on the back or the sticky side of the note. On the front, ask students

to name two ways they could extend their thinking on today's learning. This will not only give you information about if they grasped the learning target for today, but also get them thinking about how to go deeper. Next, sort, or allow students to sort them into categories such as research, transfer to home, create an example, etc. These extension opportunities for students to implement at home came straight from students, and offer choices for them to deepen their learning by choosing their own ideas or using someone else's.

- **Construct out-of-school activities at the independent level:** According to Lev Vygotsky, The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the point in students' learning progression at which they have enough background knowledge to be able to learn, but still require support and guidance. This is where the magic happens. When we assign work for students to do at home in their ZPD and provide no assistance, we can expect frustration, leading to struggles with parents and tears of anger at the study table.

Many curriculum materials follow a sequence that introduces a new concept and provides application opportunities immediately after the lesson. It's not uncommon for teachers to start these tasks in class, then ask students to finish them at home. The problem is that teachers often don't check to see if the content is in the ZPD. Teachers need to clarify the material and draw connections to the next lesson in the sequence if they want students to be confident. This moves assignments out of

the ZPD, where scaffolds and supports are needed, and at an independent level to foster success at home.



A BLUEPRINT FOR FULL IMPLEMENTATION

Step 1: Review your unit plans.

As you're planning your lessons and aligning them to your scope and sequence, pick out some of the main focuses of each day and summarize them in a few words. Consider what can be done in class and if there are any pieces that make sense for students to tackle at home. Looking at these focuses as a progression will help you determine how best to customize work for students.

Step 2: Present timelines of upcoming learning experiences.

This timeline doesn't have to be detailed. A good way to communicate your plan for the class is through a link to a Google Calendar on your class webpage.

Sample lesson sequence:

Monday: KWL on volcanoes

Tuesday: Read article on volcanoes, update KWL, add another source

Wednesday: Gallery walk sharing other sources, update KWL

Thursday: Check for understanding, watch video, update KWL

Friday: Show what you know assessment

Step 3: Identify short- and long-term assignments.

In the sample lesson sequence in Step 2, you might be planning for students to bring in their own sources of information about volcanoes on Wednesday. It would make sense at the introduction of the lesson, or even the Friday before, to invite students to begin looking for videos, blogs, webpages, books, articles, etc., on volcanoes and be ready to share on Wednesday. If you flag this piece of the unit in advance, you can launch your lesson in the KWL on Monday and include anything the students learned through collecting the sources you'll use on Wednesday.

This is a low-pressure, but useful assignment to give to students. It will only take a few minutes, gets them thinking about volcanoes in advance, and doesn't require prior knowledge or application at home that will create power struggles between students and their parents. If the students come in on Monday and don't have their sources yet, you'll be able to highlight the advantages gained by the students who completed that task over the weekend, and can also

revisit the week’s agenda, reminding students that without outside research, Wednesday’s activity will not be as productive as it could be. With this kind of transparency, students make the necessary connections and are more inclined to prepare outside of school for upcoming in-class lessons and activities.

Step 4: Communicate learning intentions.

Some districts use learning targets, others call them learning objectives or learning goals. Regardless of what you call the intent of your lesson, there must be a clearly defined purpose. When teachers are clear—not only about the task and how to complete it, but about why the task helps them learn, what they are expected to learn from it and how they will know they have learned it—students focus more on the learning intention and less on completing the task. This approach affirms that the point of working at home is to learn, not just to complete an assignment. This approach reinforces the notion that each person can take different paths at different speeds to achieve the same learning objectives.

Ineffective example	Effective example
Homework: Watch a YouTube video and write a paragraph on your opinion about the video.	Learning intention: Link opinion and reasons using words, phrases, and clauses Criteria for success: Write a paragraph that includes words that link opinions and reasons. Homework: Using a YouTube video as your subject, provide evidence that you can link opinion and reason.
Sample response: This video on silly cats was funny. I laughed when the cat got pulled into the bathtub. I was surprised to see there were cats that weren't afraid of water. I think you should watch this video too.	Sample response: I've always thought pets were funny, <u>specifically</u> cats. Some people think that cats are afraid of water but <u>actually</u> some cats enjoy baths. There are many YouTube videos that <u>provide examples</u> of how funny cats can be. I think you should watch them too.

Figure 4.2

Step 5: Personalize learning.

Conducting a learning style preference survey is a valuable tool when assigning customized work. Intentionally selecting approaches that match a student's preferred method of learning doesn't dumb down the learning, but personalizes it for students. If the objective is clear and students understand the criteria for success, the means through which they might fulfill these criteria varies. Ask yourself:

- Could the student have used a piece of text to write an opinion using words that link opinions and reason?
- How about a teacher prompt asking the student about his/her favorite flavor of ice cream?
- Does that task need to be paper-pencil?
- Could the student record his/her paragraph in an audio message and send it to the teacher?

Maintaining a focus on learning but being flexible about the "how" will make students far more likely to follow through on the plans they have developed.

Step 6: Adjust based on student progress throughout the unit.

If students have extended time to complete tasks, checking in with them periodically prevents them from procrastinating and becoming overwhelmed by the amount of work that has piled on over time. Adjusting as needed doesn't always mean giving students more time. If a project or assignment is completed in less time than provided, this is a perfect opportunity to talk to students about making conscious decisions regarding how they will use that additional time. Is it best to get a jumpstart on another project? Are they interested in

learning more? Could the additional time allow them to pursue a different passion? These opportunities allow students to think proactively and creatively about how best to plan out their schedules. Invite students to contribute to the conversation about customizing their learning and the pace in which they learn.

Step 7: Offer regular feedback about progress.

When you've provided clarity on what students need to know and how they will be able to show they know it, your discussions with them should remain focused on the criteria for success and the means through which students are working toward the learning objectives. In Figure 4.2, the learning intention and criteria for success center on linking opinions and reasons. The student should have focused on providing that evidence, and in the second example, the student did. You might be tempted to send these students back to the drawing board to work on expanding their vocabulary. However, if the expectations were clear from the beginning, students wouldn't feel that the time they spent was wasted.

This can be further clarified by making sure the student understands success criteria upfront, and encouraging a dialogue through questions along the way. Regularly checking in with students throughout the formative process and providing specific feedback that aligns with moving their learning toward the success criteria.

OVERCOMING PUSHBACK

Fighting against what has always been done will be a challenge. Rethinking what we ask students to complete outside the school day may cause a little stir. Here are some issues you may face when customizing it:

I write my lessons day by day based on what my students need.

This blueprint isn't asking for step-by-step lesson details; it's a rough outline of where you anticipate you will be going. If you are a teacher who creates lessons the night before, then take the opportunity at the end of the day or class period to reflect out loud on how you're using observations from the day to mold the specifics of subsequent lessons. You don't have to completely change your planning style, just give students a glimpse of how they can plan ahead and make sure that the learning occurring in and out of the classroom takes the personalized processes into consideration. Each day we should be assessing for learning, taking what has happened and adjusting accordingly the same way we expect the students to.

I have too many students to personalize learning for all of them.

Whenever possible, involve students in identifying ways they can best achieve learning objectives. Staying focused on the learning intention creates freedom as to how to accomplish learning targets. Offer a few explicit options and invite students to add to the list. There will be more detail on this strategy in Hack 8.

What if students don't do homework at all? If your purpose for giving activities at home is similar to that of Cathy Cooper's in the Hack in Action, then it's not an issue if students don't complete their work at home. Her intention as an elementary school teacher is to create a connection between home and school, so the tasks are optional. If you're assigning out-of-class work as a requirement and students don't complete it, determine the reason and address the cause, not the effect.

This sounds like a grading nightmare. The work you gather from different students should provide information about their progress toward a learning objective; the manner in which students complete

the assignment is less important. If you're worried about a different grade for a student who creates an infographic vs. a student who sings a jingle, you might be focusing on the wrong thing. Instead, you should be asking the questions, "Were the students able to show what they know, and how close are they to meeting the learning targets?" Remember, assessments are assigned to standards and learning goals, not individual assignments. If students have shown some evidence of success when working independently at home on a concept or skill, you're ready to assess their ability to transfer that more formally in a summative way.

THE HACK IN ACTION

Cathy Cooper is a teacher at Saranac Elementary School, the PK-6 building in the district where Connie is curriculum director. Mrs. Cooper has taught many elementary grades, and in this Hack in Action, describes a system she uses to customize homework.

Cathy's Story

As a teacher of various grade levels within an elementary school, I have learned to remain flexible in all areas of my role. Homework is no exception. I have adapted homework to meet my needs and the needs of students and parents, as well as to ensure a "developmental fit" based on the ages of my students.

Because we are aware that homework in the elementary grades has a negligible impact on learning, I tend

AUTHOR COMMENT

As Mrs. Cooper reiterates the lack of research supporting homework at the elementary level, keep in mind that while there is some support for assigning homework at the secondary level, the benefits of it do not increase the longer students spend on it. Fifteen minutes of homework has the same effect on learning as three hours.



to look at it much differently from the teachers I had when I was a student. My primary purpose in providing activities for students to complete at home is to create a connection between school and home: honoring family time but providing parents with a view of what students are learning in class. Because out-of-class activities are not tied to a specific day's lesson and aren't designed so that the learning of material occurs at home, I intentionally select activities that reinforce skills and allow students to show off their knowledge to parents, but in a brief show-and-tell approach rather than drill and kill.

Our standards identify spelling as one area in which students need to show proficiency. Each student in my class has his/her own spelling list based on words they are using in their writing. I recommend spelling as a place to start because it allows parents to establish routines, it's an easy skill to apply, and can be practiced in many ways. I offer suggestions such as using sidewalk chalk to write words on the driveway, smearing shaving cream in the bathtub, and singing the spelling words to the tune of a favorite song in the car. These types of at-home activities allow families to engage in their typical activities and throw in a little learning on the side, which does help customize the learning to each family.

An unintended benefit of highlighting alternatives to "write the word 10 times" is that parents are able to break from their preconceived notions of what homework and learning traditionally look like, which helps them engage in this more personalized and meaningful approach.

In order to allow families to create their own routines around school connections and study time at home, it was critical that I choose a consistent day of the week to send home their customized tasks, asking that they be returned no later than the same day the following week. I use Friday because in my school we send home

Friday communication folders. Parents and students know to look for the homework on Friday. I then request to receive it on any day from Monday through Friday of the following week. I do not offer reminders or “nag”; I simply expect that the packet will be returned before a new one goes home again the following Friday, allowing students to determine the best timeline for that week together.

Some students hand in partially completed work, which I accept. Occasionally a student will not hand in anything one week, but the following week I may find two assignments in the folder. Students know that I do not “grade” the homework, but look at each assignment and respond to what has been completed. When I review their work, I am checking for some understanding of the material, and offering feedback. I often make comments about how I can tell their efforts at home are having an impact on their learning, encouraging them to choose to support their own learning because they see the direct effect. Any data I gather is used for small group and individualized instruction.

The activities designed for home are based on a child’s interest level and academic need. For example, if I were to include a personal interview activity about sightseeing in Michigan and I have a nonverbal student or a student who recently moved from out of state and has little to no connection to the area, I would craft different assignments that are more meaningful and relevant for these students.

As educators we all have students working at a variety of levels and I might have four to six different math activities or games going home with individual students on the same Friday. I want my

AUTHOR COMMENT

Giving students a full week to bring their work back to school honors family time and provides an opportunity for students to apply time management skills.



students to spend time connecting school to home at appropriate levels for themselves. If, during a formative assessment, I notice a student needing a “little extra,” I make a note to include that “little extra” for the child the next Friday. But that certainly doesn’t mean I expect all of my students to complete the extra activity. In order to effectively customize homework, I must know my students well. I enjoy the process of creating something somewhat unique for each of them.



Most students will consider traditional homework a waste of time when it isn’t relevant, is redundant, or is beyond what students can do independently and appropriate scaffolding isn’t available. Tell us you’ve never heard of a student copying a friend’s assignment: not really learning the material, but still completing the assignment. Then there are tasks we think will take 10 minutes but wind up invading valuable family and extracurricular time because they are too difficult for students. Those 10 minutes turn into an hour.

While no teacher would ever deem these examples ideal, we can’t discount how common they are. Teachers can prevent these negative outcomes by more intentionally considering the learning preferences/levels of each student and customizing homework to address his or her respective learning needs.



HACK 5

ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO PLAY

Support innovation and creativity

“Play is the highest form of research.”

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

THE PROBLEM: BORING HOMEWORK TAKES AWAY FROM PLAYTIME

TOO OFTEN TRADITIONAL homework is laborious and boring. Some teachers don’t worry much about engagement or the manner in which students complete the work; they focus only on what students must learn in order to prepare for the upcoming exam. Because of the expectations imposed by content-heavy learning, teachers employ a top-down approach, paying little attention to student needs. Students are forced to complete worksheets and meaningless assignments that discourage curiosity and creativity,

preventing students from taking ownership of their learning processes and robbing them of unstructured playtime.

Here are the main concerns with the absence of play due to uninspired nightly tasks:

- Teachers often have a lot of content to cover and not enough time in class, so they feel the need to transfer material left over from the school day into after hours. The homework is focused on student absorption and memorization, not student interest.
- Boring homework doesn't encourage or support students' critical thinking, which is really what school is all about.
- Play, though extremely valuable for a student's learning progression, isn't considered "real work" that can substitute for content that needs to be covered. Instead, play is thought of as something that should be done on a kid's own time, once schoolwork is completed.

THE HACK: ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO PLAY

With all the stresses that students currently face, it is essential that we, as educators and parents, encourage our children to make time for play. Play can encompass a range of activities; not just games or outdoor sports, but all structured and unstructured activities that students choose to do on their own time, such as reading, music, or painting.

There are many benefits to children engaging in play that help facilitate reflection on the day's events. With games like hide and seek or board games like Sorry!, for example, students are negotiating

with each other and learning the same critical thinking skills necessary for school lessons. The more we offer students opportunities to do the things they love outside of school, while connecting those activities to what was learned, the more they will approach learning from a fresh and engaged perspective during the school day.

It is vital that all teachers spend time encouraging students to find their passions and then incorporate these passions into classes. Such connections are what make school more tangible and meaningful, helping students learn classroom material in the long term, not just for the day of the exam. For more innovative ideas on bringing play into learning, check out Angela Stockman's *Make Writing Hack 3: Teach Them to Tinker: Play through the process*, moving away from worksheets that don't really engage students in any kind of meaningful way.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TOMORROW

- **Throw out worksheets.** This is so easy to do. Start by integrating technology. In lieu of the worksheet with 20 problems, send students on a quest for problems of their own. Have them search the Internet or engage peers on a social network. If you're uncomfortable with technology, invite students to create the practice that you might send on a worksheet. The conversation alone will engage students and improve learning, and this is how kids play.
- **Re-evaluate the amount of homework assigned.** Assess what you're expecting kids to do at home and how long it will likely take them. Ask yourself if all the

assignments are necessary and then try to lessen the load wherever you can. Students will then have more time to play after school.

- **Designate time specifically for play.** Instead of asking students to do worksheets, build playtime into at-home learning time, connecting play to students' education. Students learn so much from both unstructured and structured play. Ask them to play a board game that involves math—like Monopoly or Yahtzee—with family members. Students will benefit from the math practice, as well as the skills associated with this kind of play: patience, following directions, analyzing, sharing, etc. You can also bring board games into the classroom and use them to explicitly teach certain skills. For older students, consider a game like chess or Risk that gets them thinking strategically.
- **Connect playtime to learning.** Sometimes what we think is obvious isn't. So take time in tomorrow's class to connect all of the amazing skills that come out of play to the learning happening in the classroom. For example, ask students to tinker with writing, an art project, or a science lab for one period and then ask them to reflect on what skills were being used. Start a chalk talk in which students write on chart paper about what learning occurred as a result of their tinkering. In sharing their observations, students will realize the ways in which we are constantly learning in various environments. Remind them that this kind of learning begins

outside of the classroom, often in ways they wouldn't normally consider, like while playing games.

- **Survey students about after-school activities and play.** Find out what students are doing on their own time so that you are able to make specific connections to their interests and activities in future classes/units. Surveys can be issued using Google Forms, SurveyMonkey, or the well-worn pen-and-paper method.

A BLUEPRINT FOR FULL IMPLEMENTATION

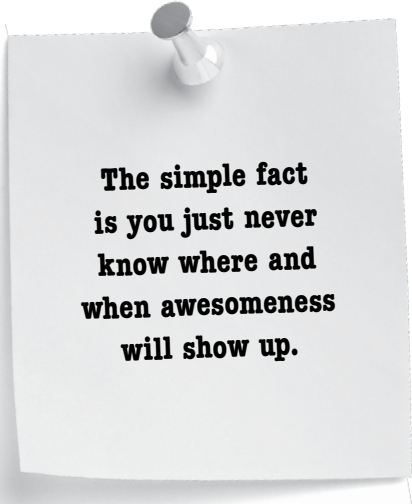
Step 1: Pinpoint learning situations and communicate skills.

Before students can connect their play to learning standards, you must take the time to teach them how to discern and communicate about learning situations. In class, spend time working on communication skills like writing notes and making good eye contact, then connect speaking and listening standards to real-world skills. One way to reinforce this connection is by asking students to create and perform skits that emulate home situations. This would work well in preparing for student-led conferences using the work done in class.

As a scaffold for the process, help students write a script, if necessary, to figure out how to talk about what they have learned in a structured and meaningful way. This step can be implemented not just with older students but with students of all ages. Imagine kindergarteners telling their parents about why a square is always a rectangle but a rectangle isn't always a square. What a fantastic way to inspire learning outside the classroom.

Step 2: Share class work with parents.

Many schools already have communication systems that teachers use to share work that is going on in their classes. Find the system that works best for your age group of students and make sure to invite parents. Most applications also have the capacity for mobile notifications, if parents think this would be helpful. It's easy enough to set up shared spaces through platforms such as Google Classroom, FreshGrade, Edmodo, ClassDojo, Remind, Appletree, IO Education, etc.



**The simple fact
is you just never
know where and
when awesomeness
will show up.**

In order for parents to best facilitate connections between play and learning, they must be aware of what is happening in class. In addition to posting sample assignments or exemplary student work on shared spaces such as websites and social media pages, teachers can live-stream lessons via Periscope (be sure to have signed waivers), giving parents a window into the actual classroom. This way, you take the sharing

of class work one step further than just sending home a folder with worksheets. School will be a living, breathing experience that parents can partake in by either watching videos or live footage.

The more parents are engaged throughout the day, the better they can advance student learning at home, linking playtime to the classroom. Of course, this is yet another way to get families on your team, as we will highlight in Chapter 9.

Step 3: Connect learning standards with play.

As an extension of what you already started per the “Connecting playtime to learning” section explained in *What You Can Do Tomorrow*,

it's time to connect the standards to the play. This will take time because there are many standards that can be taught through different forms of play. Spending class time drawing connections with students will establish a direct link between something fun and learning, helping them see where they overlap.

Speaking and listening standards, for example, easily align with play activities: "Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate" can be applied to every play situation. When we play with different friends and/or people of different ages, the way we speak to them hinges on what we know about them.

Being able to read an audience and appropriately communicate our feelings, thoughts, and ideas is part of what the Common Core aims to teach students of all ages. There are also specific math and content-area standards that align with games requiring strategy and/or money manipulation. Teachers shouldn't underestimate these connections. Check out Hack 6: Prioritize in Mike Fisher's *Hacking the Common Core* to learn about making the standards work for you. This is a helpful resource, even if you don't use the Common Core.

Step 4: Develop a list of out-of-school activities based on play.

In class, prompt students to brainstorm a list of potential home activities or games that relate to learning and their interests, and then describe how the activities will help develop their skills. A carousel brainstorm protocol would work well to accomplish this:

- On chart paper, identify environments students often frequent outside school, such as their neighborhoods, their homes, playgrounds, the local coffee shop, auntie's house, etc.

- Assign students to work in small groups at first, to ensure that all voices are heard, and have them list as many activities as they can think of that could take place in these environments.
- Next, have students list how the activities contribute to their learning.
- After small groups have documented their ideas for potential at-home activities, do a full class share of the proposals.

For a more kinesthetic version of this brainstorming process, have students write home activity ideas on small pieces of paper, write class activities or skills on other pieces of paper, then create piles connecting the two. In drawing these links, use colors to differentiate skills, constructing a colorful wall space in the classroom that will serve as a point of reference. For example, red might be associated with listening skills/standards, blue with speaking, green with organization, etc. Continue adding to the wall space throughout the year.

Step 5: Connect learning, social, emotional, and physical growth (Step 4 of this blueprint) and “play.”

Students must be responsible for the out-of-class work they have chosen from the menu they created. With younger students and English learners, try using sentence stems like: “At home, I _____ which helped me learn to _____.” This framework will give students a way to articulate what they did and how it connects to the learning happening in school. For older students, the link between play and education will likely come up in classroom discussions and small-group learning. Hold students accountable by asking them to make these connections explicit in their written reflections, when

submitting work as a part of their process writing. This will be a more authentic learning experience than traditional nightly homework.

OVERCOMING PUSHBACK

Play is an essential part of childhood, but there will always be people who favor traditional homework for its strict nature. Parents and other educators may push back against the idea of students having more playtime with any of the following:

Play can happen at any time and shouldn't factor into homework.

Although play can occur at any time, it doesn't happen enough, or with sufficient purpose. Because school has gotten much more serious even for younger students, play is essential to helping connect learning to life in a meaningful and enjoyable way. These connections are what will make lifelong learners out of our kids. As people get older, they begin to call play activities hobbies; these hobbies serve a key role in adults' personal lives and help them balance career and home.

School is more important than social time. Yes, school is important, but it isn't more important than social time. Consider the whole child when you're putting together educational plans. Social-emotional skills are a huge part of what teachers seek to develop in students. There often isn't enough school time to spend on the social-emotional, so these skills must be fostered at home with the help of family, friends, and educators.

What about kids with multiple parent homes? It's true that students of divorced or separated households face challenges, such as when families don't communicate with each other. We can include all households in the student's learning process by getting contact information from both parents for the purposes of Steps 2 and 5. There is no reason for the non-custodial parent to be less involved. As a divorced parent,

Starr shares custody of her son and has worked with Logan's teachers to ensure that multiple copies of important materials are sent home or mailed to both houses. Teachers also communicate regularly with both Starr and her ex-husband about Logan's progress. Such communication is vital to drawing connections between play and learning, as parents may not understand this philosophy at first. In order to truly advance learning through play, play must be a part of learning in both households; then there will be the necessary continuity to make learning stick.

There isn't sufficient time in class to finish everything. There are many things that you must get done during a school day, so re-evaluate the pace, scope, and amount of content you expect students to take in on a regular basis. The fact of the matter is that although you may be able to cram more into the day, that doesn't mean students are absorbing it all. Wouldn't it make more sense to slow down, focus, allow students to digest the learning in a meaningful way, and *then* move on when appropriate for all children involved? It may be tempting to argue that tests require a certain amount of knowledge, but let's teach for kids, not tests. Remember, stuffing all of the content into the day neither produces better test results nor fosters a lifelong love of learning. Instead, when we allow students to mix up learning with activities associated with play, we let new learning sink in and help kids actually enjoy the learning process.

THE HACK IN ACTION

The simple fact is you just never know where and when awesomeness will show up. Every teacher knows what we're talking about. Still, in traditional school situations, teachers tend to over-plan, leaving little room for students to explore and discover on their own. However, the

more we put kids in situations in which they make their own decisions and generate their own ideas, the richer the classroom culture becomes.

Peter Cameron is a teacher with 20 years of experience at the junior level. He is an Apple Distinguished Educator, SMART Exemplary Educator, Google Educator, and an experienced leader in integrating all types of technology into the classroom. This highly experienced educator favors 90 minutes of daily homework. Yes, you read right, and we approve. Check out Peter's unique homework, which he has repurposed and rebranded as HomeSHARE.

As a student I despised the word homework. Images of sitting at the kitchen table for hours on end, beating my head against a textbook as I tried to complete an endless number of meaningless math questions or memorize 20 words for my spelling dictation, are forever imprinted in my memory. However, with my parents' support and patience, I persevered to complete the work. When I became a teacher 20 years ago, I did what every other good teacher had done before me: I assigned homework. I would task students with finishing an often-large quantity of math questions; completing a reading response journal and grammar sheet; and studying for our weekly spelling dictation and a number of other unit tests.

My views on homework have changed over the course of my career. I've arrived at the conclusion that traditional homework has done little to improve my students' academic performances or their ability to think and learn. In fact, I believe homework has had somewhat of the opposite effect. When it piles up, stress increases and students come to school tired, overwhelmed and burned out. I have also found that students who have little support from their parents or guardians (whether in regard to assistance with their assignments and/or

encouragement to finish it) tend to turn in incomplete work, increasing the gap in learning for this group of kids.

Homework in my classroom has now evolved into home'share'. A couple times a week, my students are tasked with sharing a piece of writing with a parent, solving or explaining the solution to a "real math" problem, or creating a problem of their own that can be solved through play. I encourage parents to write comments on their child's work and initial it after their child has shared it with them. The result? Students are consistently completing home'work' in my classroom. Parents say they feel more involved in their child's learning and that the stress level within households has decreased.

Week of: _____ Home"work" Name: _____		
Do one or more of the following for a minimum of 90 minutes everyday!		
Monday Play outside_____ Exercise_____ Create something_____ Meditate_____ Talk with parents_____ Read a book_____ Volunteer_____	Tuesday Play outside_____ Exercise_____ Create something_____ Meditate_____ Talk with parents_____ Read a book_____ Volunteer_____	Wednesday Play outside_____ Exercise_____ Create something_____ Meditate_____ Talk with parents_____ Read a book_____ Volunteer_____
Thursday Play outside_____ Exercise_____ Create something_____ Meditate_____ Talk with parents_____ Read a book_____ Volunteer_____	Friday Play outside_____ Exercise_____ Create something_____ Meditate_____ Talk with parents_____ Read a book_____ Volunteer_____	Saturday Play outside_____ Exercise_____ Create something_____ Meditate_____ Talk with parents_____ Read a book_____ Volunteer_____
Sunday Play outside_____ Exercise_____ Create something_____ Meditate_____ Talk with parents_____ Read a book_____ Volunteer_____	Reflection	

I have also started to experiment with a new type of daily home'work' that encourages students to live more active, balanced lifestyles. For the last two weeks of the 2015/16 school year, I gave this assignment to my students: "Homework: Do one or more of the following EVERY DAY

for a minimum of 90 minutes: play outside, exercise, create something, meditate, talk with parents, read a book, volunteer.” I sent a note home to inform my students’ parents and provided a tracking sheet.

The Monday after this new home‘work’ was introduced, my students arrived in class excited about how easy their assignment had been to complete and eager to discuss the things they had created, the books they had started to read or continued to read, and the types of exercises they had done. We had a conversation about “volunteering” and what that may look like (offering to help a neighbor, parent, or sibling were all deemed good examples of volunteering). A student inquired about how he might meditate at home (we use the ‘Calm Classroom Initiative’ at school) and his peers offered a number of suggestions. We also discussed the importance of balance and challenging ourselves to try things that we haven’t done before.

My students continued to complete their homework with much enthusiasm during the last two weeks of the school year. After the first week, 92% of my students handed in their completed tracking sheets. The ‘reflection’ component was somewhat lacking, but after giving my feedback and sharing student exemplars, my kids proved to be very thoughtful. At the start of each morning, we had a class discussion about what students did for home‘work’ the evening before, their successes and next steps. My students were excited to share, and in so doing, motivated one

AUTHOR COMMENT

Like Peter, many students
despise traditional homework.

This is the problem we are
trying to address. Admittedly,
getting rid of homework
altogether may be impossible,
but as suggested here, a
home‘share’ allows us to
create fun out of the ‘work’
assigned after the school
day ends. Home‘shares’ also
connect families to the learning
happening throughout the school
day even if the child isn’t with
them all the time.



another to continue their quests for more balanced lifestyles. There was no stress, and a general feeling of accomplishment: the camaraderie that comes with working toward a common goal.

During week two of the trial, most of my students took ownership of their home‘work’ and continued to complete it and now tracked it on their own! Although time was limited, my students still came in each day wanting to share what they had accomplished the evening before. At the conclusion of the trial in week two, 80%

AUTHOR COMMENT



We simply love the idea of “home‘share’” described by Peter. Considering “work” a part of the sharing process, reshapes how we perceive the time families are asked to spend with our learners after school, and also bridges the gap between play and learning.

of my students brought back their home‘work’ tracking sheets without prompting or reminders! They *wanted* to hand them in to me.

At the end of the two weeks, I elicited parent feedback and collected and reviewed all student tracking sheets. My takeaways from the home‘work’ trial? I’ll definitely continue this with my new grade 5/6 class in September. Importantly, I’ll also continue with my home‘share’ initiative, as I have had nothing but success with this type of

after-school activity. One thing is for certain: In my classroom, “traditional homework” has become a thing of the past.

June 13, 2016

Dear Parents/Guardians,

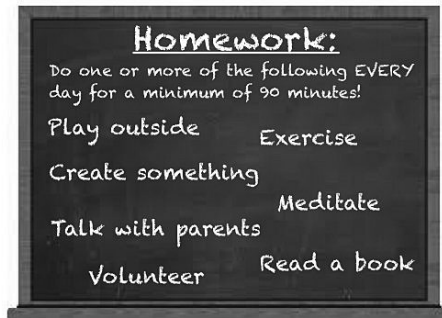
In addition to our tradition Home'share', for the last two weeks of school, I am hoping your child will complete homework' for a minimum of 90 minutes a day, INCLUDING weekends! Please refer to the Homework Board below to see the different options that I have suggested for your child! I am also providing a checklist for your child to track his/her Homework' completion. Upon completing the sheet, your child is encouraged to reflect on his/her Homework'. They may wish to write about trends that they noticed, successes, challenges, new things they learned and goals they have for the following week.

I have written a blog post about my idea and am hoping you will provide me with your initial reaction, feedback and suggestions as I truly value input from you, the parents and guardians of my students. I will send out a "Remind" notification this evening with a short questionnaire, should you wish to fill it in. In two weeks, I'll send out another questionnaire for additional input and suggestions.

As always,

Thank you!

Peter



Homework doesn't have to be onerous; it can be enjoyable and *should* be. It can provide a fantastic opportunity for students to really allow their learning to sink in and to celebrate time at home with their families, doing activities that make sense for everyone. It's antiquated to think that the work we send home should fit in a backpack and make up for learning that didn't get done during class hours. Given the myriad pressures faced by today's students, it's our job to make sure they get the time they need to have fun and reflect on the day's learning, not to insert additional tasks into their already busy lives.

WANT 5 **MORE HACKS** AND
75 MORE PAGES OF STRATEGIES
AND RESOURCES?

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KINDLE APP AT

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OTHER BOOKS IN THE HACK LEARNING SERIES



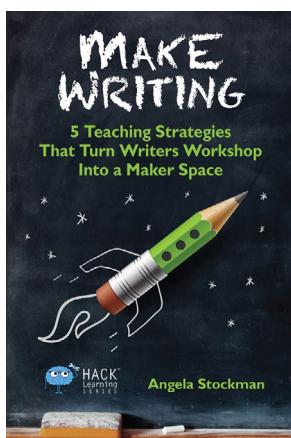
HACKING EDUCATION **10 Quick Fixes For Every School**

By Mark Barnes (@markbarnes19) & Jennifer Gonzalez (@cultofpedagogy)

In the bestselling *Hacking Education*, Mark Barnes and Jennifer Gonzalez employ decades of teaching experience and hundreds of discussions with education thought leaders to show you how to find and hone the quick fixes that every school and classroom need. Using a Hacker’s mentality, they provide **one Aha moment after another** with 10 Quick Fixes For Every School—solutions to everyday problems and teaching methods that any teacher or administrator can implement immediately.

“Barnes and Gonzalez don’t just solve problems; they turn teachers into hackers – a transformation that is right on time.”

— DON WETTRICK, AUTHOR OF *PURE GENIUS*



MAKE WRITING

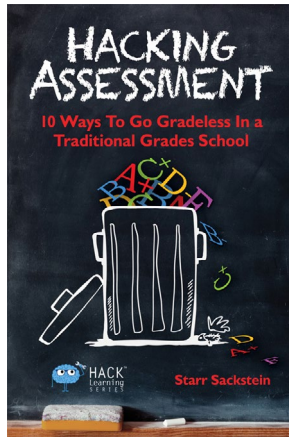
5 Teaching Strategies That Turn Writer's Workshop Into a Maker Space

By Angela Stockman (@angelastockman)

Everyone's favorite education blogger and writing coach, Angela Stockman, turns teaching strategies and practices upside down in the bestselling *Make Writing*. She spills you out of your chair, shreds your lined paper, and launches you and your writer's workshop into the maker space! Stockman provides five right-now writing strategies that reinvent instruction and **inspire both young and adult writers** to express ideas with tools that have rarely, if ever, been considered. *Make Writing* is a fast-paced journey inside Stockman's Western New York Young Writer's Studio, alongside the students there who learn how to write and how to make, employing Stockman's unique teaching methods.

"Offering suggestions for using new materials in old ways, thoughtful questions, and specific tips for tinkering and finding new audiences, this refreshing book is inspiring and practical in equal measure."

— AMY LUDWIG VANDERWATER, AUTHOR AND TEACHER



HACKING ASSESSMENT

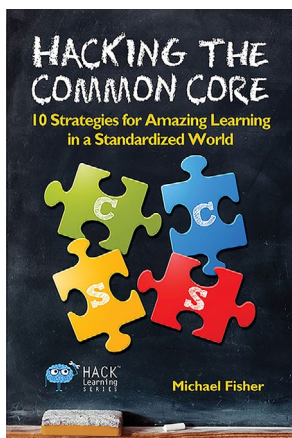
10 Ways to Go Gradeless in a Traditional Grades School

By Starr Sackstein (@mssackstein)

In the bestselling *Hacking Assessment*, award-winning teacher and world-renowned formative assessment expert Starr Sackstein unravels one of education’s oldest mysteries: how to assess learning without grades—even in a school that uses numbers, letters, GPAs, and report cards. While many educators can only muse about the possibility of a world without grades, teachers like Sackstein are **reimagining education**. In this unique, eagerly anticipated book, Sackstein shows you exactly how to create a remarkable no-grades classroom like hers, a vibrant place where students grow, share, thrive, and become independent learners who never ask, “What’s this worth?”

“The beauty of the book is that it is not an empty argument against grades – but rather filled with valuable alternatives that are practical and will help to refocus the classroom on what matters most.”

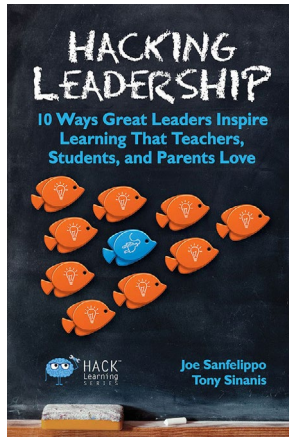
— ADAM BELLOW, WHITE HOUSE PRESIDENTIAL INNOVATION FELLOW



HACKING THE COMMON CORE **10 Strategies for Amazing Learning in a** **Standardized World**

By Michael Fisher (@fisher1000)

In *Hacking the Common Core*, longtime teacher and CCSS specialist Mike Fisher shows you how to bring fun back to learning, with 10 amazing hacks for teaching all Core subjects, while engaging students and making learning fun. Fisher's experience and insights help teachers and parents better understand close reading, balancing fiction and nonfiction, using projects with the Core, and much more. *Hacking the Common Core* provides **read-tonight-implement-tomorrow strategies** for teaching the standards in fun and engaging ways, improving teaching and learning for students, parents, and educators.



HACKING LEADERSHIP

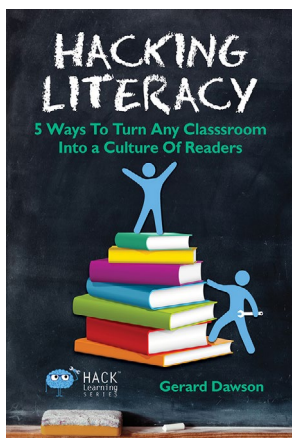
10 Ways Great Leaders Inspire Learning That Teachers, Students, and Parents Love

By Joe Sanfelippo (@joesanfelippoFC) and Tony Sinanis (@tonysinanis)

In the runaway bestseller *Hacking Leadership*, renowned school leaders Joe Sanfelippo and Tony Sinanis bring readers inside schools that few stakeholders have ever seen—places where students not only come first but have a unique voice in teaching and learning. Sanfelippo and Sinanis ignore the bureaucracy that stifles many leaders, focusing instead on building a culture of **engagement, transparency, and most important, fun**. *Hacking Leadership* has superintendents, principals, and teacher leaders around the world employing strategies they never before believed possible.

“The authors do a beautiful job of helping leaders focus inward, instead of outward. This is an essential read for leaders who are, or want to lead, learner-centered schools.”

— GEORGE COUROS, AUTHOR OF *THE INNOVATOR’S MINDSET*

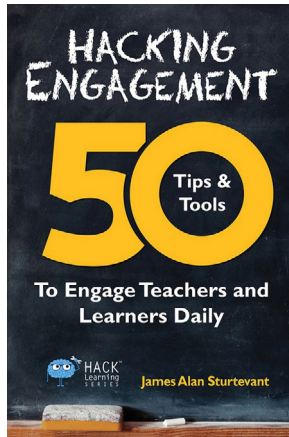


HACKING LITERACY

5 Ways To Turn Any Classroom Into a Culture Of Readers

By Gerard Dawson (@gerarddawson3)

In *Hacking Literacy*, classroom teacher, author, and reading consultant Gerard Dawson reveals 5 simple ways any educator or parent can turn even the most reluctant reader into a thriving, enthusiastic lover of books. Dawson cuts through outdated pedagogy and standardization, turning reading theory into practice, sharing **valuable reading strategies**, and providing what *Hack Learning Series* readers have come to expect: actionable, do-it-tomorrow strategies that can be built into long-term solutions.

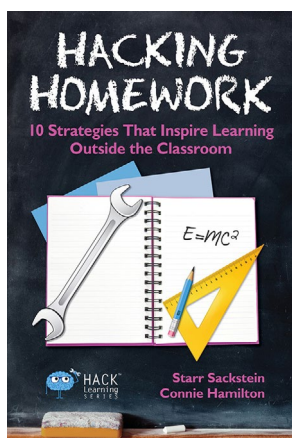


HACKING ENGAGEMENT

50 Tips & Tools to Engage Teachers and Learners Daily

By James Alan Sturtevant (@jamessturtevant)

Some students hate your class. Others are just bored. Many are too nice, or too afraid, to say anything about it. Don't let it bother you; it happens to the best of us. But now, it's **time to engage!** In *Hacking Engagement*, the seventh book in the *Hack Learning Series*, veteran high school teacher, author, and popular podcaster James Sturtevant provides 50—that's right five-oh—tips and tools that will engage even the most reluctant learners daily.



HACKING HOMEWORK

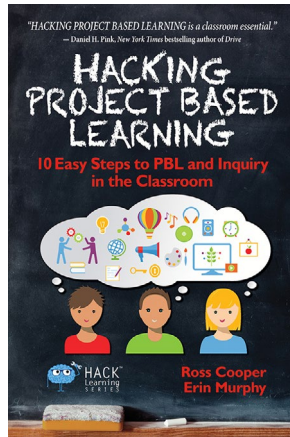
10 Strategies That Inspire Learning Outside the Classroom

By Starr Sackstein (@mssackstein) and Connie Hamilton (@conniehamilton)

Learning outside the classroom is being reimagined, and student engagement is better than ever. World-renowned author/educator Starr Sackstein has changed how teachers around the world look at traditional grades. Now she's teaming with veteran educator, curriculum director, and national presenter Connie Hamilton to bring you **10 powerful strategies** for teachers and parents that promise to inspire independent learning at home, without punishments or low grades.

“Starr Sackstein and Connie Hamilton have assembled a book full of great answers to the question, ‘How can we make homework engaging and meaningful?’”

— DOUG FISHER AND NANCY FREY, AUTHORS AND PRESENTERS



HACKING PROJECT BASED LEARNING

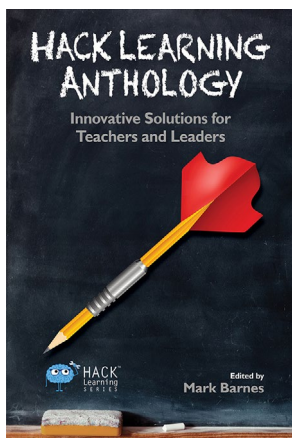
10 Easy Steps to PBL and Inquiry in the Classroom

By Ross Cooper (@rosscoops31) and Erin Murphy
(@murphymusings5)

As questions and mysteries around PBL and inquiry continue to swirl, experienced classroom teachers and school administrators Ross Cooper and Erin Murphy have written a book that will empower those intimidated by PBL to cry, “I can do this!” while at the same time providing added value for those who are already familiar with the process. *Hacking Project Based Learning* demystifies what PBL is all about with **10 hacks that construct a simple path** that educators and students can easily follow to achieve success.

“*Hacking Project Based Learning* is a classroom essential. Its ten simple ‘hacks’ will guide you through the process of setting up a learning environment in which students will thrive from start to finish.”

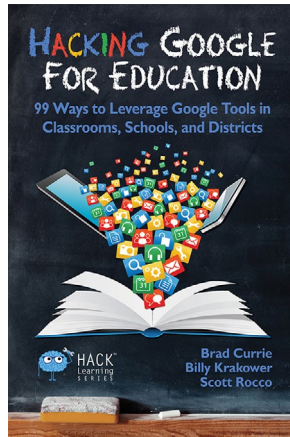
— DANIEL H. PINK, NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *DRIVE*



HACK LEARNING ANTHOLOGY **Innovative Solutions for Teachers and Leaders**

Edited by Mark Barnes (@markbarnes19)

Anthology brings you the most innovative education Hacks from the first nine books in the *Hack Learning Series*. Written by twelve award-winning classroom teachers, principals, superintendents, college instructors, and international presenters, *Anthology* is every educator's new problem-solving handbook. It is both a preview of nine other books and a **full-fledged, feature-length blueprint** for solving your biggest school and classroom problems.



HACKING GOOGLE FOR EDUCATION

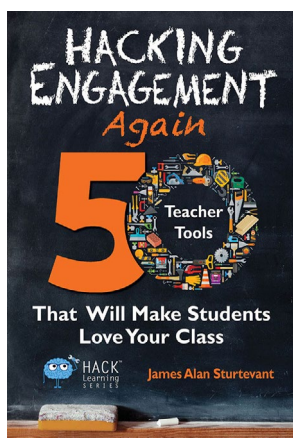
99 Ways to Leverage Google Tools in Classrooms, Schools, and Districts

By Brad Currie (@bradmcCurrie), Billy Krakower (@wkrakower), and Scott Rocco (@ScottRRocco)

If you could do more with Google than search, what would it be? Would you use Google Hangouts to connect students to cultures around the world? Would you finally achieve a paperless workflow with Classroom? Would you inform and engage stakeholders district-wide through Blogger? Now, you can say Yes to all of these, because Currie, Krakower, and Rocco remove the limits in *Hacking Google for Education*, giving you **99 Hacks in 33 chapters**, covering Google in a unique way that benefits all stakeholders.

“Connected educators have long sought a comprehensive resource for implementing blended learning with G Suite. *Hacking Google for Education* superbly delivers with a plethora of classroom-ready solutions and linked exemplars.”

— DR. ROBERT R. ZYWICKI, SUPERINTENDENT OF WEEHAWKEN
TOWNSHIP SCHOOL DISTRICT



HACKING ENGAGEMENT AGAIN

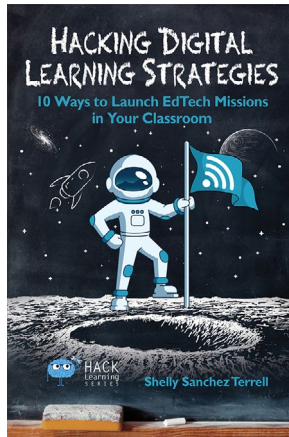
50 Teacher Tools That Will Make Students Love Your Class

By James Alan Sturtevant (@jamessturtevant)

50 Student Engagement Hacks just weren't enough. 33-year veteran classroom teacher, James Alan Sturtevant, wowed teachers with the original *Hacking Engagement*, which contained 50 Tips and Tools to Engage Teachers and Learners Daily. Those educators and students got better, but they craved more. So, longtime educator and wildly popular student engager Sturtevant is *Hacking Engagement Again!*

“This book is packed with ideas that can be implemented right away. Some creatively weave technology into instruction, others are just plain creative, and all of them are smart. Plus, the QR codes take the reader to so many more fantastic resources. With this book in hand, every teacher will find ways to freshen up their teaching and make it fun again!”

— JENNIFER GONZALEZ, BESTSELLING AUTHOR, SPEAKER, AND CEO AT
CULTOFPEDAGOGY.COM



HACKING DIGITAL LEARNING STRATEGIES

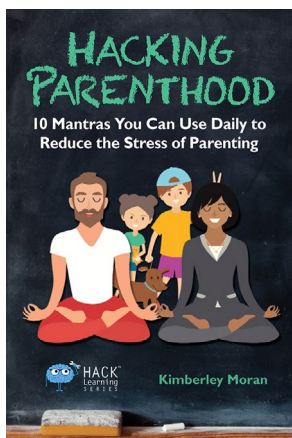
10 Ways to Launch EdTech Missions in Your Classroom

By Shelly Sanchez Terrell (@ShellTerrell)

In *Hacking Digital Learning Strategies*, international EdTech presenter and NAPW Woman of the Year Shelly Sanchez Terrell demonstrates the power of EdTech Missions—lessons and projects that inspire learners to use web tools and social media to innovate, research, collaborate, problem-solve, campaign, crowd fund, crowdsource, and publish. The 10 Missions in *Hacking DLS* are more than enough to transform how teachers integrate technology, but there's also much more here. Included in the book is a **38-page Mission Toolkit**, complete with reproducible mission cards, badges, polls, and other handouts that you can copy and distribute to students immediately.

“The secret to Shelly’s success as an education collaborator on a global scale is that she shares information most revered by all educators, information that is original, relevant, vetted, and proven, combining technology with proven education methodology in the classroom. This book provides relevance to a 21st century educator.”

— THOMAS WHITBY, AUTHOR, PODCASTER, BLOGGER, CONSULTANT,
CO-FOUNDER OF #EDCHAT



HACKING PARENTHOOD

10 Mantras You Can Use Daily to Reduce the Stress of Parenting

By Kimberley Moran (@kimberleygmoran)

You throw out consequences willy nilly. You're tired of solutions that are all or nothing. You're frustrated with the daily chaos. Enter mantras, invaluable parenting anchors wrapped in tidy packages. These will become your go-to tools to calm your mind, focus your parenting, and concentrate on what you want for your kids. Kimberley Moran is a parent and a teacher who works tirelessly to find best practices for simplifying parenting and maximizing parent-child communication. Using **10 Parent Mantras as cues to stop time and reset**, Moran shares concrete ways to parent with intention and purpose, without losing your cool.



HACK LEARNING RESOURCES

All Things Hack Learning:

hacklearning.org

The Entire *Hack Learning Series* on Amazon:

hacklearningbooks.com

The Hack Learning Podcast, hosted by Mark Barnes:

hacklearningpodcast.com

Hack Learning on Twitter

[@HackMyLearning](https://twitter.com/HackMyLearning)

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[#HackingPBL](https://twitter.com/HackingPBL)

[#MakeWriting](https://twitter.com/MakeWriting)

[#HackGoogleEdu](https://twitter.com/HackGoogleEdu)

[#EdTechMissions](https://twitter.com/EdTechMissions)

[#ParentMantras](https://twitter.com/ParentMantras)

[#MovieTeacher](https://twitter.com/MovieTeacher)

Hack Learning on Facebook:

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Hack Learning on Instagram:

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The Hack Learning Academy:

hacklearningacademy.com