



Teaching For Success®

Quick Answers

No. 807

Q: There Is Too Much to Do; How Can I Get it All Done?

A: How to Better Manage Homework Discussions

by Rebecca Schantz

I have attended and have taught many classes in which the homework discussion was held at the beginning of class. Many of us, as instructors, try to set a time limit on this period, which can sometimes cause friction between the students and instructor.

A common scenario

You're reviewing homework from a previous class assignment. A student wants you to do just one more homework example and then another student wants just one more problem covered. The result is that the planned 10-minute time limit for this activity turns into 20 minutes and now you're stressed and pressed for time to make progress on learning the new material for this class session.

Try this approach

I have discovered a way to cover more material at a slower pace: I save homework discussion for the **end** of class. I usually administer short quizzes or CATs (Classroom Assessment Techniques) at the beginning of class and these assessments usually provide a nice review.

I usually block 75-minute classes and have found that this schedule has allowed me to reserve the last 10-15 minutes of class for an optional homework discussion at which time students are free to leave, but are encouraged to stay ("attends homework discussion" is one of the items listed on their student participation grade rubric).

Not perfect, objections raised

I have only found a couple negatives with this form of classroom management. One is that students who are doing poorly and **choose** to not attend the discussion are shooting themselves in the foot.

These are usually the students who claim that they don't have time to stay and are usually the first to complain that they don't have time to visit me during my office hours. We have to remind ourselves that it is **their choice** and remind them that homework discussion is scheduled during the scheduled class time. The other negative I found is that while one item on my evaluation is improving, another item is not. Students find me very helpful, but they claim I am not holding class for the entire time. I am... they just choose to leave!

Solutions tried

One recommendation I have is to remind your students throughout the semester that even though a student chooses to leave instead of stay for the homework review session, you are there for anyone who chooses to stay and take advantage of this learning activity. We should also remind them of this right before handing out evaluations. My other recommendation is that we need to give students with homework questions priority over students who want to use that time to discuss their grade or personal concerns. I make this very clear in the syllabus.

Benefits of better management

Aside from being able to control how much time I spend on new material, there are other benefits. The feedback I receive does not complain of my “spending too much time answering students’ questions” and boring them with what they already know.

For example, students who get stuck on a particular concept are encouraged to stay at which time I will assist them. I have also found that holding homework discussion until the end of class encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning. It’s giving them the opportunity to make their own choice and discovering the consequences, good or bad, of their choices.