About Show My Homework

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Report summary

Qualitative research and case study
evaluation on Show My Homework

About Show My Homework

This study focuses on the online homework package, Show my Homework (SMHW) designed by Assistant Headteacher, Naimish Gohil, who has experience of the traditional methods of setting and collecting homework in school.

As an assistant head at two schools, Naimish had a strong background in ICT; he was searching the market for a simple and effective solution for his school and homework. Aware that the solutions needed to suit the school and more importantly the teachers, he was astonished at the complexity of the solutions that existed. The service was often hidden in a complex Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) that teachers and pupils found difficult to use.

Show My Homework is a centralised resource where all the information on homework can be found. The product is designed to consolidate homework across a school. The task, assignment details, resources, timing and deadlines are clearly displayed to pupils, parents and other teachers.

This makes stakeholders fully accountable for homework. Key features are:

• The product is intuitive and simple to use requiring minimal training;
• All the stakeholders have a view of what is required and when;
• No information is lost in the scramble at the end of the class to take down the homework in their note books;
• There are no excuses for not knowing when the assignment was due;
• Teachers can supply digital assets to facilitate the tasks;
• The school now has a view of homework across all age groups and can report on its usage;
• Teachers have the ability to re-use homework and peruse other examples from all the users of SMHW.

This research and development study

This research and development project was designed in association with the MirandaNet Fellowship, founded in 1992. This professional organisation with nearly 1,000 educators in 80 countries has an international reputation for researching the value of technologies in improving teaching and learning and changing practice. Fellows outlined the problems of conventional methods in a debate about homework: too much time is spent not in setting up the homework itself, but in rectifying miscommunication, retrieving lost papers, following up with pupils and parents when it is not completed and, of course, the marking. Homework can also be stressful for pupils, parents and teachers, either when the task is not clear or when homework tasks have been left at school or lost on the way home. The premise of this study was also that better homework strategies can be developed online as a means of involving parents and carers in their children's learning.

Research methods

In the first stage the MirandaNet team analysed the results of more than twenty case studies undertaken by the team since they began developing SMHW. The research team used this exercise to decide what research questions should be asked in the second stage of the research.

The researchers were looking for:

* evidence of improved behaviour and more independent learning and better home/school relations
* differences in teaching approaches
* signs of SMHW embedded into the practice and policy of the stakeholders
* other practices that could be adopted
* suggestions for improving SMHW
* CPD activities that might help schools to integrate SMHW in their practice

The researchers were also expecting to find hints and tips about installation and practice to share with other teachers.

A questionnaire was sent to the senior manager in charge of the homework project in one school as well as three teachers, three parents and five students. In-depth interviews were then held with each group. Finally these stakeholders came together in a focus group to share their perspectives on how far SMHW had contributed to a change in the attitudes to homework and the relevant practices.

The school

For this in-depth study in the second stage of the research, the SMHW team and the MirandaNet researchers selected Riddlesdown Collegiate in South East England as they had been active users over an academic year. Therefore, it would be possible to identify changes in practice and attitudes. Some important points can be observed in the ways in which the senior managers at Riddlesdown Collegiate secondary school ensured smooth adoption procedures for SMHW. In addition the stage was set for the embedding of SMHW into existing school systems.

Before the adoption of SMHW each pupil at Riddlesdown Collegiate had a large paper homework planner designed specifically for the school. The school had recently abandoned a Virtual Learning Environment that teachers and pupils had found too complex and unwieldy to navigate so the senior manager, Fiona Langan, did not want to replace this with a digital tool that was equally cumbersome.

Fiona had seen SMHW at a conference and decided that this package had potential to improve the school's homework system. She kept the paper homework diary because it provided a good back-up: in addition some pupils might be more reluctant to change their practice than others. However she reduced the page size of the diary by a half. This provided a reduction in the cost of printing that could be offset against the subscription cost for SMHW. In addition, she met the challenge of the 5% of pupils who do not have an Internet connection in their homes: provision was made to do homework in an existing network room that would be open at all times and outside school hours.

When SMHW was installed Fiona had undertaken some of the staff training herself. The SMHW team have also been supplying trainers on technical and operational issues. New thinking was being focused on what kind of training should follow.

Discussion

In the first stage of the research encouraging comments from stakeholders emerged in the overall MirandaNet analysis of the data from twenty case studies.

In the twenty case studies, five themes emerged from the observations of the SMHW users where evidence of satisfaction was clear. **Operationally** the schools reported that SMHW was sufficiently simple and intuitive to engage all the stakeholders without much training. Saving in time and money through clear communication channels and shared digital resources were reported as a result of the **resource management strategies**. Evidence of **clarity and consistency** was exemplified in the reduction in confusion at home about homework setting and an improvement in homework submission rates. The schools valued the **enrichment of their management and monitoring approaches** and were able to use the statistics to report on performance internally as well as to bodies such as OFSTED. In the most significant theme, **new ways of learning**, evidence emerged that indicated that the adoption of SMHW had made all the stakeholders feel more accountable for their role in making homework successful: teachers, parents and pupils. In addition parents were becoming more engaged in their children's education, an important factor in raising pupil achievement.

The findings from the **second stage of the research** must be judged in the context of a successful school where the senior management team had given time and thought to the installation of SMHW over more than a year. An analysis of the second interview data presented five themes that emerged from the interviews with the key stakeholders: one senior manager, three teachers, seven pupils and three parents.

In detail, the teachers were enthusiastic about the **new teaching techniques** that were available to them because of SMHW and they were not concerned that the homework tasks they set were now in the public realm. From their point of view there was much to learn in seeing what homework was being set not just in the school but also by all SMHW users. Both pupils and teachers found the storage of lesson plans, resources, hints and tips and revisions notes enhanced the learning opportunity and afforded the parents a better grasp of the task in hand. Teachers valued being able to track statistics for reports like OFSTED and were keen to have more analytical tools at their fingertips.

The younger pupils were articulate about the contribution that SMHW was making to their ability to **learn independently**. They were highly committed to the use of SMHW and were keen that teachers and parents should engage as widely as possible. More independent learning was evidenced by pupils' requests for more resources attached to the homework task, a self help forum for parents as well and the notion of building a school knowledge base where resources endorsed by the teachers could be stored over time. They also felt that operating this system well would be evidence of competence in job interviews and translate into their professional life as well. However, the sixth form who were not yet using the system fully were yet to judge the impact on their learning. Teachers pointed to evidence of improved independent learning mainly based on the fact that homework was handed in more regularly. Two teachers thought the homework was of a higher quality although this observation would need further investigation to be ratified.

The stakeholders were unanimous **about improved relationships** in the homework context. All the stakeholders reported that there had been improvement in the behavioural issues around homework. Pupils demonstrated more accountability by expressing a wish to find out what their homework was even if they could not be present when it was handed out. Pupils felt more accountable about homework as most of the grounds for excuses had been removed. Key reasons for the dissipation of the 'excuses' culture was the reliability of provision of online tasks and resources for children who had not been in class when the homework was given out or had left the diary at school or lost it. Children who were in hospital were also glad of the opportunity to keep up with their schoolwork. In particular, the pupils appreciated the clarity and the parents appreciated being involved. They all agreed that bringing informed parents into the mix was a key factor in changing behaviour.

In the collaborative consultation all the stakeholders agreed that SMHW was **embedded in the system**. The signs were that all the stakeholders in the study now saw SMHW as an integral aspect of homework **practice** at the school and wished to keep the system and build on it. In addition, parents and pupils were keen that the teachers who were not yet using the system effectively should be encouraged to do so especially in the Sixth Form where use was not embedded. Only one suggestion was made to improve the current version but the stakeholders presented a variety of suggestions about what might be added by the company to enhance the users' experience. This engagement with innovation was also a sign that the stakeholders had ownership of SMHW and were able to make their own decisions about future trajectories.

One exception was found to the effective embedding in the school culture. The seven pupils were from 11 years to Sixth Form: the younger pupils were using SMHW far more than the Sixth Form who were slower to adopt as they were used to the paper system. All the stakeholders urged both the Sixth Form pupils and teachers were urged to start using the system more comprehensively because of the benefits.

The joint message sent to teachers about the suggested new procedures was an important indication that **policy** was being changed to accommodate what had been learnt. This message suggested how teachers could improve the process by more detailed entry of tasks and the attachment of lesson plans and resources as appropriate. In particular this was appreciated by those who could not attend school because of illness. The stakeholders were responsive to the need to change **practice and policy** as use become more sophisticated and more users became involved.

When discussions were held about **professional development** the consensus was that the initial skills training had been sufficient because the software design was simple and intuitive. However, teachers then talked about the need for a second stage of professional development that was not about the basics of use but better matched to some of the challenges that emerged as the stakeholders become more sophisticated users.

They favoured professional development in school about the guidelines for setting effective homework, issues of the provenance of online materials, digital citizenship issues, collecting data with value for teaching and learning and sharing their knowledge and skills with each other and with other members of the SMHW community.

It was clear as well that the teachers were learning about the power of digital technologies. It was suggested that there might be potential in professional development programmes to develop a knowledge bank as well as creating procedures to monitor the quality of homework, work on differentiation and further explore links with the data in SIMS about learning. Some of the teachers were already able to monitor others and lead an action research professional development programme. In the action research approach the stakeholder decide the agenda, agree the questions, develop evidence collaboratively and share the results with other professionals.

Conclusion

This study focused on the online homework package, Show my Homework (SMHW) designed by an assistant headeacher to provide a solution to the inconsistency and inefficiency that occur when homework systems are not well organised in school. The fact that SMHW was designed to be as simple as possible was important because all the stakeholders, pupils, teachers and parents were able to become proficient quickly.

Amongst the benefits is that pupils and parents can see what homework they have to hand in and when. Most pupils enjoy seeing the clear plan of what homework is due when and recognise that this is helping them organise their time. Teachers say the work is handed in more regularly and the 'excuses' culture has largely dissipated.

Within a year the service has been embedded into the school culture and everyone interviewed wanted to extend the use of the online package. The detail in the report provides information about the issues that other schools should consider when they reach a higher level of maturity in the use of digital technologies. This research steeped in practice also indicates how a product can be further aligned with the needs of the stakeholder.

What emerges from the in-depth study of one school is that the provision of a well-designed product like SMHW can raise the confidence of the stakeholders in the value of online working across the school community. This is a catalyst to broader learning and a more positive conversation about school assignments in general.

But there is a bigger picture too that reflects the ways in which schools are coordinating their practice with the wider world. SMHW counts here as one of the innovations that underpins a revolution in teaching and learning by bringing learning at home and school together. The package encourages the teaching method of 'flipped learning', a version of independent learning where pupils find out about a topic for homework and bring their knowledge into the classroom for debate with their peers and their teacher.

Flipped learning is an example of how technology is contributing to changes in the school's learning culture to meet the needs of a world where technology is ubiquitous. So SMHW is not just valuable in the school context but as one of the tools that encourages exploration of innovation in education.

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