This is the question that I have grown to both fear and appreciate. In a school that mandates homework every night, students spend a lot of time doing homework assignments and we teachers spend a lot of time dreaming them up. Many students at our school, like schools everywhere in the U.S., consider homework to be a drag. Most of those students, I hope, would also admit that homework helps them to learn in the long run.

Objective
I have taught for four years in two different schools. In each school, the main challenge has been meeting students' needs or "meeting students where they are." At the moment, I am teaching at Bell Multicultural High School where students' needs are even more diverse than they were in my other school. When my principal approached me about joining the Language Minority Teacher Induction Project team, I joined with the hope of better meeting at least one of the challenges I face at this school more effectively.

I decided to focus on homework for my action research. It will discuss the difficulties I faced working with the team and the recommendations I have for improving the team's efforts next year;

My project….  
Having assigned too many assignments that are disconnected from one another, homework that culminates in a project seems to be my most effective and most highly "attended" assignments. To further narrow my focus, I decided to examine how I could create a long-term oral history project for my 10th grade World History class which would engage students and which would inspire the students to do the project in a quality manner. I found that the most effective way to gather quality work from my students in this project was to devote as much class time as possible to the project and to break down every single component of the project so they could complete the project a little at a time.

The name of the project is Project P.R.I.D.E. (Parents' Roots Inspire a Dedication to Education), a title which came from Suzanne Muchin-Stern. I first heard of the project in a hot, second floor office on the campus of Georgia College in Milledgeville, Georgia. Muchin-Stern, a Teach for America alumna, presented it to a corps member development meeting while I was completing my Teach for America commitment in rural Georgia. I took to the project immediately because I saw it as a way to finally get my rural students personally involved in
their studies and a way for me to understand the community where I was teaching. That spring, my senior Sociology class completed Project P.R.I.D.E. with the help of their grandparents.

Implementation

Five years later, as I set out to attempt the project once again, I decided to stick to Muchin-Stern's basic lesson outline. First, the students have to understand and get excited about oral history. After the initial snickers while we defined what oral means, I showed the class a clip from the film, Titanic. Since the movie is told by Rose, one of the few living survivors of the ill-fated ship, the film serves as the perfect example of oral history. After the clip, I emphasized the story-telling nature of oral history. I then introduced the project to them: they would each be interviewing an older adult, preferably a grandparent, about his/her life and then writing that life story down in the "first person." The challenge, as I told my students, would be to ask the type of questions which would allow their interviewees to tell good stories like the one in Titanic (although I hoped their relatives' stories would be without any drowned loved ones).

As students decided upon which relative they would interview, I had them complete "bio poem" about their favorite relative, living or dead, living with or away from them. The poem followed the following format:

First Name
Title
Four adjectives describing him/her
Who loves (3 things or people)
Who wants (3 things)
Who believes (2 things)
Who uses (3 things)
Who says (one meaningful quotation)
Last Name

The class practiced this homework activity by writing these poems about themselves in class and then sharing them. I found this activity to be a good beginning-of-the-semester activity as well as a good way to get the students motivated. This homework poem turned out to be one of the few homework assignments that almost the whole class completed on time all semester.

What happened at first…

While every student was able to identify a favorite relative, not all of them could think of an older relative whom it would be possible to interview. At first, I was too strict on the specifications for the relative they could interview. In Sparta, Georgia, it was easy enough to tell the students to interview their grandparents, many of whom lived in the community. At a school that serves mostly immigrant students, the grandparent option isn't there. Many students at Bell have grandparents back home in Central America, Asia, or Africa and cannot interview them without incurring some outrageous phone bills.
I then tried Door #2: pick anyone you'd like to interview who is 50 years or older. The idea was to pick a person removed by two generations from them. For one reason or another, this specification didn't help students either. Some even claimed not to be close to any adults older than fifty. I found myself assigning students to interview random faculty members. As I looked through my notes one night, I realized I was getting away from the purpose of the assignment: student ownership of a project about their families. The next day I announced to class that they could interview their parents, no matter how old they were. I hesitated at first to allow parent interviews because I suspected that students already knew their parents' stories and thus wouldn't learn anything new. In the interest of keeping the focus on the family, I relented. For those students who could not interview a parent for one reason or another, we found people in or outside of the school for them to interview. One young man was still not satisfied with the parent "amendment." At the time, he was living in a juvenile home after a District court had issued a restraining order forbidding him from setting foot near his house. To make matters worse, I learned that his mother had died two years ago. Even after we agreed upon three or four different adults, this student never sat down with any of them for the interview, he never completed the project, and at this time he is not in school.

Learning how to ask questions

For the remainder of the class, however, the time had come to learn how to ask good questions. Before I explained what a "good" question is, I played a game with the students: I pretended to be Superman and it was the job of the whole class to interview me. I went around the room and had each student ask me a question. Depending on the type of question asked, I would mark down a point for them or for me. While some students had a hard time catching on, most eventually realized that good questions which cause interviewees to answer in at least a complete sentence were not "Yes" or "No" questions, unless they were followed by a "Why," "Why not," or "Explain."

At this point, the project started to take off in many directions as students worked at different paces. We discussed the major phases of a person's life, which we identified as childhood, school, the teenage years, young adulthood, and now. I told the class to go home and write 10 questions that they would ask someone they didn't know about their childhood. The next night they were to go home and think of ten questions about the teen years. I joked with the class that they ought to be careful about any "PG-13" questions they had in mind since the intricacies of losing their virginity might be, "more than the interviewees would want to divulge." Sure enough, when the students turned in their rough drafts, one of my struggling second language students gave an in-depth description of his ESL teacher's "first time."

Setting a deadline

It was at this stage in the game when I made my next mistake. Tired of assigning students the seemingly simple task of creating ten questions each night about the different life phases I cut to the chase: I gave the class one week to produce a rough draft. After the moans and groans about the 750-word
requirement, the students were off on the road to "becoming young Oprahs, Charlies, and Barbaras."

The problem was, many of them were not fully prepared for the interview. That next week, I received rough drafts from 10 out of the 29 students, and many of the rough drafts were missing a phase or two of the person's life. I was frustrated; I had gone from everyone being in the same place with the poems to a third of the class being considerably ahead of their classmates. When I spoke with my mentor about failure of the rough draft deadline, he gently pointed out that I had asked the students to make too big of a leap. Up to that point, the class had been completing the project in very little steps. One moment I was asking them to think of ten questions at a time, the next I was demanding that they crank out a 750-word report. This leap turned out to be too much for some students, especially the students with the lowest English skills. His suggestion that I break up the completion of the rough draft into parts was a great one.

Tracking students’ progress

The next day I did two things. First, in the first rough draft debacle, I had lost track of how at least half of the class was progressing. I typed up a "progress sheet" (Appendix C) for students to fill out. Not only would the sheet notify me about the students' status with the project, it would give the students a clearer idea of where they were and what they had to do next. Second, I told students that we would be backing up a bit. Instead of trying to complete the whole interview at once, we would complete interview in parts. That night, everyone was to sit down with their interviewee and interview his/her subject about one of the life phases we established. For many students, then, their homework became completing the interview about childhood. For others, it became finishing the young adulthood portion of the interview or the questions on the interviewee’s life now. Each night, students were to complete a new part of the assignment until they had finished the interview. Finally, I told them to have a picture of them and their subject taken at any point during the process. In this way, the project continued for art an extra week or so, but I got better results.

Even with the extended deadline and more specific, attainable goals for each night, completed rough drafts continued to trickle in one at a time, as did the final drafts. Work schedules kept many parents out of the house until 10 or 11 o'clock at night, making it hard for students to complete the interview. Nevertheless, I established a final draft deadline of March 5th and our project neared completion. Since this was the first project of the year, I made sure that the rubric was very simple: students were graded according to the following criteria:

- Was the assignment turned in on time?
- Did the oral history include at least a paragraph about each of the five life phases?
- Was the report at least 500 words in length?
- Was the report typed?
- Did it include a picture of the interviewer and interviewee?
As students completed their projects, I outlined this rubric for them and reminded them of the possible grades for the project, from highest to lowest:
- **Super High Five**
- **Pat on the Back**
- **Lukewarm**
- **Save Our Ship!**
- **No Credit**

The final grades for this project are fairly well distributed, although there were not enough “super high fives” for my taste:
- 4 Super High Fives
- 10 Pats on the Back
- 4 Lukewarm
- 4 Save Our Ships
- 6 No Credits (unsubmitted reports)

**Final Reflection**

When all is said, done, and typed, I would say that the project was a success. The majority of students were invested in it, as evidenced in part, by the enthusiasm and/or impatience with which they asked me when I would return their projects. I have included some student feedback from students in the appendices.

One thing that added to the project's success was the removal of the grandparent or 'Person-over-fifty' requirement. Students seemed to settle into the project more once they knew that they could interview their parents.

Another successful element of the project was the requirement that it be typed and include a photograph of the interviewer and interviewee. I realize that my students in Georgia had written projects that lacked "official-ness." While some of the reports were very well written, they were not typed and there was little that aesthetically distinguished them as "major" projects. The requirement that all reports be typed with a mandatory cover photo added an element that said, "This is a serious project which we will make look as good as possible." I modeled a cover for them (Appendix B) in order to help them understand how their covers were to appear. As I expected, a few students outdid me with their own cover art.

The goal of this project was to have students participate in a long-term project which would engage them and motivate them to produce quality work. Not all of the students met the challenge, but with some minor adjustments in the project I can help even more students reach the goal next year. Based on some of the feedback students provided during their midterm exams, the majority did connect with the work and did produce work of which they can be proud.

The key to success is breaking down the project into the smallest parts possible so that no one segment of the project seems unattainable. The final result for students of a project like this, I hope, is reinforcement of pride in the students’ families, an understanding of their families’ relationship to World History, and a confidence in their own abilities to complete quality work, results which, while not unattainable, have a value that is immeasurable.
Appendices available upon request.