Homework vs. Home-learning: A Lifelong Learning Perspective and Student Perceptions

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Abstract

There appears to be no consensus among educators and students alike about the value of homework. Although some argue that it is essential for reinforcing learning, others say that it is irrelevant in most cases and detrimental to one's desire for overall learning. Geared towards the latter, this paper advocates a shift away from *homework* to *home-learning* based on the principles of lifelong learning. I will argue that this approach prepares students better for engaging in meaningful learning experiences not only during their college studies but also across their lifespan. In this paper, I also present the results of a small-scale study into 90 first-year English Department students' perceptions of homework vs. home-learning in the context of Abu Dhabi, the UAE. Analysis of data collected through a self-developed survey revealed that student attitudes were negative towards the former and positive towards the latter. Results also showed that student needs were not usually reflected in homework tasks. Yet students' weaknesses and strengths were taken into consideration at times. The students were also found to have a significant deficit in their skills for engagement in home-learning tasks as informed by the four lifelong learning skills on which the study focused. I discuss the results and make recommendations to foster students' awareness and use of home-learning skills so that their chances of engagement in effective and meaningful learning experiences throughout life are enhanced.

Keywords: homework, home-learning, lifelong learning, motivation, university students

1.0 Introduction

No discussion about the importance of engagement in learning activities outside the classroom can ignore the debate on "the necessity" of homework for supporting learning. On the one hand, there is the argument that homework increases academic performance by having "students review, practice, and drill material … learned at school", "provid[ing] students with the opportunity to amplify, elaborate, and enrich previously learned information", and "prepar[ing], in advance, material to be learned in the following classes" (Hong & Milgram, 2000, p. 5). On the other hand, some argue that the default arrangement should be "no homework" since most homework cannot

be justified (Kohn, 2016). Similarly, others go so far as to argue that homework reinforces "a corporate-style, competitive … culture that overvalues work to the detriment of personal and familial well-being" (Karlovec & Bueel cited in Marzano & Pickering, 2007, p. 74), with a toll on children's health and precious family time taken away (Bennett & Kalish, 2006).

All these distinct attitudes towards effectiveness of homework do have their own merits; however, it seems that in recent times the concept of homework has become a little tarnished, thus losing its original sense of purpose. It also seems that the above-mentioned conflicting arguments stem from the perception of the very concept of *homework* – a term that could indeed be ascribed a negative connotation. Just as a working adult would not be particularly happy to bring home "work" unless obliged to, neither, too, would a student like to be burdened with additional "work" from school upon arriving home. This interpretation of "work" reinstates challenges with which students' lives are beset, often stripping them of the desire to immerse in life-wide learning opportunities. To circumvent potential current and future consequences of this, an unconventional approach ought to be taken towards learning with a shift from "home*work*" to "home-*learning*." This shift in perception from "work" to "learning" implies a greater recognition that not all learning takes place in the physical boundaries of the classroom, and that our learning experiences in different contexts are not only complementary to each other but they also trigger related and/or completely new learning experiences. In this regard, home-learning adopts a holistic approach to learning. It underscores the role of immersion in meaningful learning experiences that are not restricted to the content covered at school. This resonates with the notion of lifelong learning which "potentially encompasses all forms of learning" (Singh, 2015, p. 18) in any given context. In this paper, influenced by earlier research into lifelong learning (e.g. Coşkun & Demirel, 2012; Deveci, 2018a; Deveci, 2018b), I will describe four overarching, symbiotic lifelong learning skills, and maintain that a shift in our attitude from home*work* to home-*learning* serves to develop students' lifelong learning aptitude and skills. I will also argue that this approach supports the learning of everyone involved in the process including peers and parents. Home-*learning,* therefore, is a comprehensive approach complementing formal education through its emphasis on meaningful and serendipitous learning with a view towards the constructivist approach. This will be followed by a section that presents the results of a study I conducted into students' homework experiences in an English course at an Abu Dhabi-based university. For this purpose, answers will be sought to the following questions:

1- How many hours a day do students engage in homework tasks? Do their responses differ according to gender?

2- What are student perceptions on whether their experiences of doing homework prepare them for learning after graduation? Do their responses differ according to gender?

2- To what extent do they think their instructors consider individual student characteristics when assigning homework tasks? Do their responses differ according to gender?

3- What are student thoughts about homework vs. home-learning? Do their responses differ according to gender?

4- How skilled are students in coping with homework tasks? Do their responses differ according to gender?

2.0 Lifelong learning skills and home-learning

In this section, I will explain four lifelong learning skills that have a direct link with the attitude adopted in this paper towards home-learning. These four skills should not be viewed as distinct from each other. Rather, there is a symbiotic relationship between them.

2.1. Motivation

Carefully planned home-learning opportunities provided by teachers and supported by parents reinforce a variety of lifelong learning skills. One of the most important of these is "motivation." It is essential that home-learning tasks create intrinsic motivation for learning. That is, students should see genuine value in doing the tasks. For this to happen, a one-type-fits-all approach must be avoided. Tasks ought to be differentiated according to individual student needs as well as interests. The former is only possible if teachers keep a vigilant eye on the difficulties students may be facing. The learning tasks set for the home should be carefully designed to take students through steps necessary to tackle these difficulties. It is, however, also important that home-learning tasks not focus solely on student challenges, but also areas in which students are strong. This will support the belief in students that "homework" is not to remedy weaknesses only, but it also reinforces their strengths. In setting home-learning tasks that would allow this to happen, students' interest areas should also be considered. Identifying each student's likes and dislikes early in the term and correlate tasks to these will create greater motivation for learning.

To ensure that students have intrinsic motivation for engagement in learning at home, teachers should also be mindful of students' learning styles. Just as they need to consider learning styles in planning and executing their lessons, they also need to design home-learning tasks compatible with different learning styles. This is not to suggest that every single task has to address all different learning styles. This is practically impossible. However, varying task types every now and then would help address students with different learning styles. This would also serve to familiarize students with different ways of learning. Their awareness of the similarities and differences between the ways in which their peers learn will help develop a greater understanding among students, which is critical when students are asked to perform learning tasks with others both in and outside of the classroom. To this end, students could be provided with a choice of tasks designed to serve the same learning outcome. They may as well opt for tasks not completely compatible with their learning styles. Considering the malleability of learning styles (Brown, 2003; Deveci, 2013), they may be expected to pursue these if they see any value in them. Collectively, these will make home-learning more meaningful and therefore create more motivation for learning.

Engagement in learning can also be supported through carefully designed tasks. Learning becomes meaningful and therefore engaging only if it relates to the real tasks learners perform in their own lives. In their writing on foreign language learning, Platt and Brooks (2002) propose the notion of

"task engagement," which occurs "when learners display through either private or social speech their own structuring of the task, say, to establish goals as they feel necessary to move from mere compliance with the task itself to actual engagement with it" (p. 373). In an attempt to successfully perform the task, learners engage in language as well. However, their primary focus is not on linguistic forms, but on the successful completion of the task, which undeniably requires them to use linguistic and paralinguistic forms at both conscious and subconscious levels. By engaging in learning tasks, learners, in fact, take control of tasks assigned by the teacher. The feeling of ownership creates greater motivation for tackling challenging tasks through the use of learners' "emergent yet still imperfect linguistic system and other mediational tools" (p. 393). Although Platt and Brooks (2002) report on how certain classroom activities allow for task engagement, learning tasks set for the home should too consider task engagement for greater engagement in meaningful learning.

The motivation for engagement in learning outside of the classroom is also enhanced by ensuring that tasks demonstrate authenticity. To this end, tasks, Barbour (2012) argues, should engage learners in experiences connected to the real world as they know it. Tasks compatible with real-world experiences contribute to learners' holistic development. They help learners "build, connect, and apply concepts and skills in ways that make the most sense to them" (p. 23). Among the variety of ways in which authenticity can be achieved is allowing learners to organize information and consider alternative, encouraging them to do the work that real people do, and asking them to address a problem related to the real world beyond the physical boundaries of the school (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993 cited in Alleman et al., 2014).

2.2 Self-regulation

In comparison to the traditional view that the purpose of education is to produce knowledgeable people and provide them with "the concepts, values, and skills required to function reasonably well in the world," the modern view is that the purpose of education is "to produce autonomous *lifelong* learner" (Knowles, 1988, p. 4). Towards this end, Knowles (1988) posits, teachers can facilitate learning only if they follow learners' flow of natural learning process rather than impose their teacher-made sequence on them. Only in this way can we refrain from interfering with learning. All in all, to Knowles (1988), "the purpose of learning [ought to be] *learning*" (p. 5). Autonomy in learning requires that learners should be able to "make decisions for themselves about what they should be learning and how they should be learning it: teachers cannot, and do not wish to, guide every aspect of the learning process" (Boud, 1988, p. 17). This necessitates learners' acquisition and use of self-regulation skills, which is complementary to the above-mentioned role of motivation. For home-learning tasks to support students' lifelong learning, they ought to provide opportunities for self-regulated learning, which can be defined as

> a form of acquiring knowledge and skills in which the learners are independent and self-motivated. Learners independently choose their own goals and learning strategies that will lead to achieving those goals. It is through evaluation the

> effectiveness of one's learning strategies – comparing one's current state with the target state – that learning can be modified and optimized (Goetz, Nett, & Hall, 2013, p. 126).

A deeply ingrained notion in its definition is "independence," which underscores the role of lifelong learning. In relation to home-learning, this suggests that students ought to be able to correlate their learning goals and home-learning tasks. It is important to acknowledge the strong possibility that young and inexperienced students may not be able to set their own learning goals, at least *not* at the beginning of the year. This may be particularly true, if they come from an authoritarian, teacher/parent-dependent learning background. Yet, with adequate mentoring and guidance, they may be helped to gain the confidence and skills in determining learning goals. The same is true for home-learning tasks. This is not to suggest that students should always create their own tasks. They should be able to choose from the tasks that they consider to be the most appropriate in achieving their goals. It is also true that with sufficient training and feedback they can learn to create their own home-learning tasks. This requires an open-mind from their teachers. Likewise, students need to have their awareness raised regarding a variety of learning strategies at their disposal to carry out home-learning tasks successfully.

The ability to set learning goals and strive for them is a significant indicator of self-regulation. However, learners should also be able to adjust their plans devised to help achieve their goals. Too strict adherence to pre-made plans may, in fact, be harmful when flexibility with plans and goals may be essential. On the other hand, the inability to stick to self-made plans (especially when faced with challenges) may be equally detrimental, if not more. In order to avoid this, learners may require some teacher advice and redirection to help them keep to their plans. Sharing this sentiment, Candas (2011) uses the term "loose piloting," which points to the role of teacher support in "trigger[ing] reflective thinking in learners and enable[ing] them to make more personal choices" (p. 201). She underscores the importance of teacher support in enabling learners to make informed decisions regarding any inflection in their learning path and modes as they progress.

Self-regulated home-learning also requires self-discipline. From the perspective of schools, home*work* is argued to have "symbolic importance in emphasizing the school's concern for academic progress, and its expectation that pupils have the ability and self-discipline needed to work without direct supervision" (Etzioni, 1984, p. 30). From the standpoint of home-*learning*, however, the emphasis put on learning endeavors at home is not because of "the school's concern for academic progress", but rather "the student's holistic development," academic progress being only an aspect of it. It is true, though, that students ought to be able to engage in learning at home of their own accord without direct supervision. However, supervision does not necessarily mean the presence of authority when they are engaged in learning tasks. Students may also feel supervised when they know their work will be evaluated or assessed by their teacher at a later stage. Such external supervision and evaluation are harmful to self-regulation necessary for lifelong learning. Students need self-discipline to enhance their repertoires of knowledge and skills *without* supervision, but *with* support and guidance from significant others so that they can

successfully deploy self-regulation skills in initiating new learning activities necessary for solving problems throughout their lives. Towards this end, it may be a good idea for teachers, Jha (2016) argues, to refrain from grading tasks assigned for home. Only in this way will students be more encouraged to try their best on their own. Jha also notes that encouraging students to be more disciplined at a younger age develops their self-confidence, and this will help them in their future studies in higher education which puts a heavy emphasis on progress through self-development.

2.3 Perseverance

Defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary (n. d.) as "continued effort to do or achieve something despite difficulties, failure, or opposition," the skill of perseverance is of particular importance for lifelong learning. Life is beset with challenges often impacting people's desire for continuous learning. One such challenge stems from the rapidly changing and protean nature of technology and its effects on the amount and diversity of knowledge available to us. Unless equipped with perseverance skills, we will be impoverished in our attempt to meet the exigencies and opportunities of our lives as self-fulling individuals.

Home-learning tasks can be an asset to instilling perseverance skills in students, thus preparing them for lifelong learning. For this, tasks need to be carefully designed to stimulate critical thinking through reflection on how best to solve questions, respond to prompts, and exhibit a deeper understanding of content matter in relation to its everyday applications. Light (2017) maintains that challenging and stimulating tasks assigned for home increase students' appetite for learning. She warns, however, that students' initial reaction to challenging tasks may be rejection, but their recognition that hard work is acknowledged and celebrated by their teachers likely results in their desire to engage in more learning activities outside class. There is, in fact, empirical evidence showing that students tend to derive enjoyment from accomplishing challenging tasks (Wasserstein in Blackburn, 2013). Also, the realization that strength grows out of struggle will motivate them to persevere in the face of challenges when they have to bring their knowledge and skills up to date in the future. Collectively, these clearly indicate that motivation and perseverance are inextricably linked to self-directedness which is a must for learning to continue throughout an individual's lifespan.

2.4 Interpersonal communication

Lifelong learning puts the individual learner at the center of learning so much so that it has become almost an unwritten rule for a lifelong learner to make the decision, make the effort and benefit from the learning process (Longworth & Davies, 2013). However, this seemingly learner-centered approach cannot, and should not, overlook "communication dynamics playing a significant role in the manifestation of learning needs and how these needs are addressed through interaction with others" (Deveci, 2018a, p. 79). Otherwise, learners who lose sight of interpersonal aspects of the learning process will be alienated from other learners. This likely results in "the reproduction of the alienated relationships within the wider social formation" (Edwards, 2001, p. 43).

The educational psychologist Vygotsky (1978) posits that our interaction with others and mental processes are inextricably linked to each other. According to him, children's interaction with other people, particularly adults and more experienced peers, help them develop quicker and acquire a more advanced understanding (Jarvis, 2005). Placing a significant emphasis on the role of language in children's cognitive development, he stated that children's language abilities develop as a result of social interaction with others. At the egocentric speech stage, the child uses language to regulate others' actions. However, the child also learns to be regulated by others (Jarvis, 2005).

Vygotsky's theory, together with other similar ones, gave way to the development of the social constructivist theory, according to which we construct our knowledge through our daily interactions with people in the course of our social lives (Burr, 2015). Applied to educational settings, this points to the role of a well-developed class community with adequate social and emotional support in "enabling learners to take risks and develop ownership of their learning" (Beck & Kosnik, 2006, p. 12).

This pivotal and determinative role interpersonal communication described above plays in lifelong learning ought to be considered in planning home-learning tasks. Mirroring the fact that much learning in the workplace takes place through informal learning among colleagues (Head, 2016), home-learning tasks need to engage students in a dialogue with others on learning related matters. This, however, should not encourage formal peer or parent-tutoring. Often-times busy parents recruit tutors to help their children with their "home-work" after school. This denies the purpose of home-learning by transferring formal education to the home context. For students to acquire interpersonal skills essential for lifelong learning, it is best for teachers to devise home-learning experiences involving students in a variety of "intentional or tacit learning in which [they] engage either individually or collectively without direct reliance on a [tutor]" (Livingstone, 2006, p. 204). These experiences need to provide students with the opportunity to immerse themselves in contexts where the target knowledge and skills are put in practice for a particular purpose, serving their individual needs (Hoofman, 2005). In doing so, students' needs and desires for communication with others should always be kept in mind. To this end, home-learning tasks should provide students with adequate guidance and support to engage themselves in social contexts where they know and trust each other's skills and knowledge, which is an essential element of informal, and therefore, lifelong learning (Hoofman, 2005).

The European Commission (2005) also highlights interpersonal communication competence among the eight key lifelong learning competences they have identified. This, according to the commission, requires individuals to "share what they have learnt … and to seek advice, information, and support when appropriate" (p. 15). Home-learning tasks, therefore, should be designed in a way they teach and encourage the use of interpersonal communication skills for learning purposes. This enhances the self-regulation, perseverance and collaborative skills discussed above. To this end, students can be assigned tasks that need to be completed with their peers. They should also be encouraged to give feedback on each other's work. This helps advance their lifelong learning skills at the meta-cognitive level in that they become more able to evaluate,

monitor and improve their own work when they analyze their peers' work (Ambrose et. al., 2010). This enables them to draw on their personal life-experiences and skills as a valuable learning source for both themselves and their peers. Not only does this enhance the social cohesion among students, but it also promotes positive interdependence between students. Undoubtedly, this will translate into higher motivation for learning in and outside of the classroom.

A variety of outside classroom/home learning tasks can be assigned to support the above-mentioned skills. To illustrate, a home-learning task in the form of collaborative writing can teach students cooperation and negotiation skills (Dale in Speck, 2002), which are now key to success in the workplace. When students do their writing tasks together, they also receive access to immediate and instant feedback (Porto in Grief, 2007). Students' engagement in collaborative writing has also been found to increase their skills in using technology for learning purposes when they were required to use online platforms such as Google Docs and Dropbox (Deveci, 2018c). The use of these platforms outside the class can also facilitate the student-teacher interaction, bridging formal and informal learning experiences. In a recent study, we, for instance, found that similar platforms – in addition to email correspondence – were used as useful didactic resources enabling students to reach immediate teacher feedback and increase the speed at which they could make corrections to their written work (Deveci et al., 2018).

It is also important that home-learning tasks be designed in a way that they encourage parental involvement. This has a variety of advantages. First, parents will be in a better position to know about their children's learning journey at school. The dialogue created between the school and the parents will allow each party to identify students' strengths and areas in which they need further improvement, and how they –individually as well as through partnership– support the students' personal, social as well as academic development. Previous research (Van Voorhis in Hindman, Grant & Stronge, 2013) has indeed shown that home tasks that required student and parent interaction resulted in not only in more accurate work but also higher rates of completion with a positive effect on student grades. In fact, it was also found that the increased dialogue between the school and parents about school improved the design of homework assignments. Second, engagement in learning together with their children will allow parents to update themselves as well. Given the protean nature of technology and its impacts on the skills and knowledge required for one to remain contemporary, parents, too, should engage in learning. The skills and knowledge they acquired during their school years likely differ significantly from those required of their children now. Supported by their children's home-learning tasks, parents may as well be encouraged to have a constant commitment to learning again and anew.

3.0 Homework at University

The argument that "[c]hange has become so much a part of the fabric of our lives that learning must be as continuous as change itself and inevitably lifelong in character" (McClusky, 1971, p. 1) points to the fact knowledge and skills acquired while at university likely need updating soon after graduation. We live in a time when our prospects for the future depend, to a greater or lesser extent, on our skills in relearning and applying our new learning across our lifespan. Unless

equipped with the requisite aptitude for and skills in lifelong learning, we are unlikely to prosper in our professional and personal lives. University education plays a critical role in providing students with opportunities for learning and applying lifelong learning skills. So much so that without adequate support from university administrations and the professors, students may cling to conventional approaches to learning and remain apprehensive about 'homework' resulting in a lack of educational adroitness. This reduces their chances of having a fulfilling life. Along with its effects on the individual students, it also has an impact on the larger society. To circumvent this, university education – just like school education – ought to be geared towards instilling lifelong learning skills in students.

Self-directed learning is the common core of lifelong learning skills proven to be the key ingredient in students' success both at and beyond college. It would be wrong to consider self-directed learning as students assuming the responsibility to learn the content matter *per se*. It also includes, but is not limited to, their conscious decisions about how to learn the content matter, assessing their learning and to critically reflect on the learning process. This approach to learning does not downplay the role of the instructor. Assuming a facilitator's role, the instructor works with students; in diagnosing educational needs, deciding on objectives as informed by these needs, designing learning experiences supported by appropriate techniques and materials, and evaluating learning outcomes (Knowles, 1973).

Homework, as a learning experience, is still considered by many to be necessary so that students develop self-directed learning skills (Daniela & Vasecko, 2018). Yet the term 'homework' is rarely used in university settings. 'Assignment' is an alternative term. It is also not uncommon to see both words used together: homework assignments. Homework tasks (or assignments) ought to mirror the principles of self-directed learning. To this end, they ought to avoid reinforcing rote-learning. For it to be "a learning activity in which students [are] responsible for directing their own learning" Hine and Pine (2000, p. 90) identify four types of activities: a) practicing the application of principles in new situations, b) undertaking research or preparation activities for future lessons, c) completing exercises to test their understanding of work undertaken in class, and using homework tasks for the 'distance learning' of new concepts. Coates and Morrison (2015) observe that high school teachers' and college professors' attitudes towards checking homework likely differ in that the former usually check students' completed homework while the latter may not do so assuming that students can perform the same tasks on tests. However, the instructor's engagement in student homework through feedback has been shown to improve students' reflection skills and enhance their confidence in working independently (Meyer, Haywood, Sachdev & Faraday, 2008). Guidance and support may be useful for first-year students in particular who have not adequately adapted to college life yet.

Equally important to note is that a significant number of individuals, adults in particular, are choosing to do distance education. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), in the U.S.A. alone, there were 5,954,121 students enrolled in a distance education course at the college level in fall 2015. Prompted by the need for making more profits, an increasing number of

universities are now offering students the full-time distance education option. So much so that there are several Open Universities around the Globe that are exclusively distance education institutions. Undeniably, individuals opting for such programs gain access to a variety of opportunities for engagement in lifelong learning. However, learners with a lack of requisite skills for autonomous learning will definitely face challenges. The support provided by distance education institutions per se will not suffice for these learners. They need to make concentrated efforts to take care of their own learning. They, too, should be able to create opportunities for engagement in learning endeavors with other learners in similar situations.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Participants and the context

A total of 90 students from Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi participated in this study. Of this number, 48 (53%) were male and 42 (47%) were female. The students' ages varied from 18 to 23 with an average of 20.

The students were registered in ENGL112 offered by the English Department. ENGL112 is an English course based on the principles of Project-based learning. It is designed to furnish students with academic literacy skills in addition to soft-skills they require as future engineers. To this end, students work in teams conducting a term-long research project on a topic relevant to their studies and lives as university students. The heavy emphasis on team assignments together with academic literacy skills is essential for effective communication requiring students to engage in extensive work outside work. Instructors teaching the course often suggest that students wishing to achieve excellent grades need to engage in at least four hours of extra study outside class hours. In addition to quantity, the quality of such work is highlighted.

3.2 Data-collection and analysis

I collected the data using a survey I developed myself. The survey was comprised of three sections. The first section included questions related to demographics (e.g. gender & age) and the average number of hours students spent doing homework a day. The second section asked for student opinions on whether their experiences of doing homework were preparing them for learning after college. This section also aimed to identify what students thought about home*work* vs. home-*learning*. For this purpose, they were asked to write the first three words/phrases that came to their minds related to each. The second section also asked students to indicate the extent to which they agreed with a number of statements about the attention their instructors paid to individual student characteristics in assigning homework tasks. The third section included the Home-learning Aptitude Scale (HAS) comprised of four sub-sections based on the four lifelong learning skills discussed in the literature review. These were namely i.e. motivation, self-regulation, perseverance, and interpersonal communication. The first three of these were inspired by Çoşkun and Demirel's (2012) research aiming to identify lifelong learning skills while the last one was informed by my own previous research (Deveci, 2018a).

HAS uses a 5-point Likert-type scale with responses to items ranging from 5, "completely agree," to 1, "completely disagree." Some statements are negatively worded, requiring reverse scoring. The highest, the lowest, and the average scores that can be obtained for the whole scale as well as the subscales can be seen in Table 1. The Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient of the scale was calculated to be .7324.

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Table 1. HAS score range

	N	Min	Max	$\bar{\text{X}}$
Motivation	3	3	15	7.5
Self-regulation	3	3	15	7.5
Perseverance	3	3	15	7.5
Interpersonal communication	3	3	15	7.5
Scale as a whole	12	12	60	30

I analyzed the data using SPSS (Version 25). I used descriptive statistics to describe the quantitative data such as frequencies, means, minimum and maximum scores. Student's t-test was used in comparing the data sets to reveal statistically significant differences. A p value of less than .05 was considered as a difference at a statistically significant level. On the other hand, I analyzed the qualitative data considering the emerging themes in student responses. I identified these myself first. Later, I consulted an independent researcher for inter-coder reliability. We achieved an overall 87% agreement. We discussed the divergences until we reached agreements.

4.0 Results

The students were asked to indicate the average number of hours they spend doing homework for ENGL112. Their responses are shown in Figure 1 below.
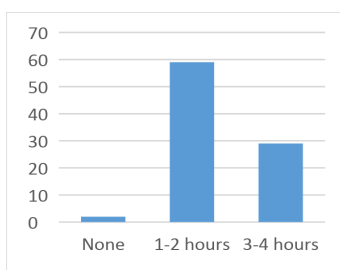

Fig. 1 Number of hours spent doing homework

Figure 1 shows that 59 of the students (66%) stated they spent 1-2 hours a day for their ENGL112 homework while 29 students (32%) stated that they spent 3-4 hours. On the other hand, two students said they never did homework for ENGL112.

The students were also asked if they thought their experiences of doing homework were preparing them for learning after graduation. Their responses are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Homework preparing students for learning after graduation

Whole Population (n=90)				Males (n=42)				Females (n=48)				t	p
Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No			
f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
55	61	35	39	24	57	18	43	31	65	17	35	.7163	.2378

$p < .05$

Table 2 shows that only 61% of the student responses were affirmative. Mentioned by 33% of these students, time-management was the most frequent reason for the affirmative response. The students indicated that doing homework set by different instructors helped them learn to juggle tasks. This, they believed, would be a good skill when they start working. Enhanced time-management skills were believed to help reduce stress. Related to this was learning to be responsible and self-reliant. One student said, "Facing the hardness of the homeworks will help me to stay strong when I face hard duties in the future." Other positive responses included preparation for work life (10%). Some students referred to the academic knowledge they acquired through homework being useful for work-life after university. One student remarked, "Homework prepares me to the exams. This will [make] me well-prepared for exams necessary for finding a job after university." Only three students made the remark that homework teaches them how to learn.

On the other hand, a significant number of students (39%) thought their experiences of doing homework did not prepare them for learning after graduating from university. When asked to give a reason for their responses, 14 of these students (40%) stated there was no direct link between homework at university and life after university. Sample student responses include "What you are studying [when doing homework] is not connected to your work," "I just want a job," and "Student life and life after university will be so different from each other." Another reason for students' negative response was the lack of care taken when doing homework, which was mentioned by five students (14%). One student said, "I am doing homework just because it is something I need to do to have full grades, not to learn." Other students remarked, "Homeworks are useless because we just copy from each other," and "… it is something I need to do to have full grades, *not* to learn." Among other reasons cited was inability to transfer the knowledge (e.g. "I will forget most of the things I learn from my homework."), irrelevance of homework to college education (e.g "Homework should be for school students only to teach them how to manage their time and to always be up to date of what they are studying at school," and weariness (e.g. "Sick of homework now. Do not want to do homework after graduation."

The analysis of student responses considering the gender variable showed that fewer number of the male students gave a positive response than the female students (57% vs. 65%). However, Student's t-test conducted revealed no difference at a statistically significant level (t=.7163, p=.2378>.05).

This research also aimed to find the extent to which the students' individual attributes were considered by their instructors when setting homework tasks. Table 3 describes the findings related to this.

Table 3. Homework addressing individual students

	Whole Population (n=90)			Males (n=42)			Females (n=48)			t	p
	Min	Max	$\overline{x}$	Min	Max	$\overline{x}$	Min	Max	$\overline{x}$		
My ENGL112 instructor considers my likes and dislikes when designing homework tasks.	1	5	2.1	1	5	2.3	1	5	2	-1.1081	.1354
My ENGL112 instructor gives me the opportunity to choose the kind of homework I like to do.	1	5	2.1	1	5	2	1	5	2.2	-0.4323	.3332
My ENGL112 instructor assigns homework to us according to our individual needs rather than one type of homework for everyone.	1	5	2.4	1	5	2.4	1	4	2.4	.0362	.4855
My ENGL112 instructor varies homework according to different students' learning styles.	1	4	2.4	1	4	2.3	1	4	2.4	-0.575	.2833
My homework from ENGL112 focuses on areas in which I need to improve myself.	1	5	3	1	5	2.9	1	5	3.2	1.1528	.126
My homework from ENGL112 focuses on my strengths.	1	5	3.5	1	5	3.5	1	5	3.4	.1003	.4601
Overall average			*2.6*			*2.6*			*2.6*	*.1775*	*.4375*

p < .05

Table 3 shows that the students disagreed that their instructors considered their likes and dislikes ($\overline{x}$=2.1), and they were not given the opportunity to choose the kind of homework they liked to do ($\overline{x}$=2.1). Their responses for these two items did not change according to gender (t=-1.1081, p=.1354>.05 & t=-0.4323, p=>.3332>.05 respectively). Neither did they think that their instructors varied homework tasks according to individual student needs ($\overline{x}$=2.4) or learning styles ($\overline{x}$=2.4).

There were no differences between the male and female students' responses at statistically significant levels (t=.0362, p=.4855>.05 & t=-0.575, p=.2833>.05 respectively). However, they were neutral about homework focusing on areas in which they needed to improve themselves ($\bar{x}$=3) and on their strengths ($\bar{x}$=3.5). Again there were no statistically significant differences between the male and female students' responses for these items (t=1.1528, p=.126>.05 & t=.1003, p=.4601>.05 respectively). The average rating for this subsection was 2.6, pointing to the students' overall discontentment that their individual characteristics were considered by their instructors when setting homework assignments.

The third research question asked what the students' thoughts were relative to homework vs. home-learning. Neutral and positive opinions were merged for ease of data analysis. A summary of the results is given in Table 4.

Table 4. Student thoughts on homework vs. home-learning.

			Neutral & Positive	Negative	Total	Males vs. Females		Homework vs. Home-learning	
						t	p	t	p
Homework	Males	f	31	72	103				
		%	70	30	100	-1.5143			
	Females	f	22	83	105		.0657		
		%	80	20	100				
	Whole population	f	53	155	208				
		%	25	75	100			23.0993	.0000
Home-learning	Males	f	90	5	95				
		%	95	5	100	0.2218	.4123		
	Females	f	94	6	100				
		%	94	6	100				
	Whole population	f	184	11	195				
		%	94	6	100				

p < .05

According to Table 4, 75% of the student responses were negatively worded. The students often referred to 'amount of work' imposed on them due to homework. They often felt inundated by the sheer amount of homework leaving little or no time for personal pursuits. It also affected some students' sleep quality. 'Stress' was mentioned as an impact 54 times. Some stated they did homework for 'the sake of grades'. They wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible since it was 'boring' (f=13) and a 'burden' (f=1). This, in some cases, led students to 'copy homework from their peers' (f=5). On the other hand, positive words included 'thinking' (f=6), useful (f=3), 'learning' (f=3), 'effort' (f=1), 'focus' (f=1). Among the neutral words were 'study' (f=8), 'revise' (f=7), and 'solving questions' (f=2), 'improvement' (f=1). The male and female students' opinions were similar to each other with a lack of difference at a statistically significant level (t=-1.5143, p=.0657>.05).

Table 4 also shows that almost all of the student responses (94%) relative to home-learning were positively worded and/or neutral. There were only eleven negative statements (6%). An important number of student responses were related to it being 'time-convenient' (f=17). Related to this was 'the comfort' attached to home-learning (f=15). The students also referred to 'individual accountability' as being an important aspect of home-learning (f=11). As a result, the students often mentioned it was 'useful' (f=14) with some students indicating it is 'better than schools' (f=4). Among other words/phrases used to describe it were 'interesting and fun' (f=8), 'important' (f=9), 'increased knowledge and skills' (f=9). Comparatively infrequent as they were, other words with positive connotations were used. These included stress 'free', 'experiential', 'creative', 'critical thinking', 'challenging oneself', 'dedication', and 'freedom'. 'Use of technology', the Internet, in particular, was also referred to in relation to home-learning (f=16). 'Communication with friends and family members' was also mentioned ten times. On the other hand, some students used some negative words in their description of home-learning. They used words and phrases such as 'confusion', 'difficult', 'too much time' and 'boring'.

As in the case of homework, the male and female students' responses relative home-learning were similar to each other without a statistically significant difference between them (t=0.2218, p=.4123>.05). On the other hand, the statistical analysis conducted to compare the homework and home-learning data sets revealed a significant difference between the two to the benefit of the latter (t=23.0993, p=.0000<.05). This finding points to the students' thinking that home-learning confers a major advantage over homework.

The last research question aimed to identify the students' level of home-learning skills. For this purpose, the students were administered the Home-learning Aptitude Scale (HAS) comprised of four sub-scales. Student scores for the whole scale together with the subscales can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Home-learning skills

	Whole Population (n=90)			Males (n=42)			Females (n=48)			t	p
	Min	Max	$\overline{x}$	Min	Max	$\overline{x}$	Min	Max	$\overline{x}$		
Sub-scale 1: Motivation	3	14	9.8	3	14	9.6	4	14	9.9	-0.6562	.2566
Sub-scale 2: Self-regulation	4	15	9.2	5	15	9	1	15	9.4	-0.9064	.1835
Sub-scale 3: Perseverance	3	14	8.6	3	14	8.3	3	14	8.8	-0.9108	.1824
Sub-scale 4: Interpersonal communication	4	14	10.4	5	13	10.7	4	14	10.1	1.4018	.0822
Scale as a whole	23	55	38	24	52	37	23	55	38.4	-0.5458	.2932

p < .05

Table 5 shows that the student scores ranged between 23 and 55 with an average of 38, which is slightly higher than the average score of 30 calculated for the scale. This indicates that the student had a moderate level of aptitude for home-learning. Their scores did not differ at a statistically significant level according to gender (t=-0.5458, p=.2932>.05). When the subscales were considered, it was seen that the highest average score belonged to interpersonal communication ($\bar{x}$=10.4). This was followed by motivation ($\bar{x}$=9.8) and self-regulation ($\bar{x}$=9.2), both of which were above the average scores (7.5). The lowest score belonged to perseverance ($\bar{x}$==8.6). No statistically significant differences were found between the male and female data sets for any of the subscales (t=1.4018, p=.0822>.05; t=-0.6562, p=.2566.>.05; t=-0.9064, p=.1835>.05 & t=-0.9108, p=.1824>.05 respectively). This was despite the fact that the average scores of the latter tended to be higher than that of the former. Results for the four sub-scales are described in greater detail below.

The first sub-scale was related to motivation. A summary of their responses related to this can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6. Motivation skills

	Whole Population (n=90)			Males (n=42)			Females (n=48)			t	p
	Min	Max	$\bar{x}$	Min	Max	$\bar{x}$	Min	Max	$\bar{x}$		
I like doing homework.	1	5	2.8	1	5	2.7	1	5	2.9	.994	.1614
I see a genuine value in doing homework.	1	5	3.3	1	5	3.3	1	5	3.3	.1374	.4455
I do my best when doing my homework.	1	5	3.7	1	5	3.7	1	5	3.7	-0.3474	.3645

p < .05

The average score for interest in doing homework was 2.8, which indicates that the students did not like doing homework much. Conversely, though, the overall average score of 3.3 indicates that they were slightly more positive about the value of doing homework. They also stated that they did their best to do their homework ($\bar{x}$=3.7). Gender did not appear to be a determining factor in their beliefs (t=.994, p=.1614>.05; t=.1374, p=.4455>.05 & t=-0.7042, p=.2145>.05 respectively). The overall average score for the motivation subsection indicates that the students were moderately motivated to engage in homework tasks.

The second sub-scale was related to self-regulation skills. Results for this section are summarized in Table 7 below.

Table 7. Self-regulation skills

	Whole Population (n=90)			Males (n=42)			Females (n=48)			t	p
	Min	Max	$\bar{x}$	Min	Max	$\bar{x}$	Min	Max	$\bar{x}$		
I create my own homework tasks.	1	5	2.8	1	5	2.7	1	5	2.9	.865	.1946
I arrange my time effectively regarding when I should do my homework.	1	5	3.1	1	5	3	1	5	3.3	-1.2678	.104
I do my homework without any supervision.	1	5	3.3	1	5	3.3	1	5	3.3	.3737	.3547

p < .05

Table 7 shows that the students' average score for creating their own homework task was 2.8, which indicates relatively less aptitude for this self-regulation skill. They were generally neutral in their responses regarding time-management ($\bar{x}$=3.1) and working without supervision ($\bar{x}$=3.3). These, too, indicate limited self-regulation skills. The male and female student responses did not differ from each other (t=.865, p=.1946>.05; t=-1.2678, p=.104>.05 & t=.3737, p=.3547>.05 respectively).

The third sub-scale was comprised of statements relative to perseverance skills. The student responses are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8. Perseverance skills

	Whole Population (n=90)			Males (n=42)			Females (n=48)			t	p
	Min	Max	$\bar{x}$	Min	Max	$\bar{x}$	Min	Max	$\bar{x}$		
I easily lose my motivation when my homework is difficult.	1	5	2.6	1	5	2.5	1	5	2.7	-0.7885	.225
If I do not understand a task in my homework, I give up doing it.	1	5	2.7	1	5	2.6	1	5	2.8	.9315	.177
Even if I have a lot of homework, I try to all of it.	1	5	3.3	1	5	3.2	1	5	3.3	.4354	.3321

p < .05

Table 8 indicates that the students received low scores for maintaining motivation ($\bar{x}$=2.6) and persevering ($\bar{x}$=2.7) in the face of challenges posed by homework tasks. Albeit comparatively higher, their score for completing all their homework, even if too much, was 3.3. There were no statistically significant differences between the male and female data sets. (t=-023.7885, p=.225 >.05; t=.9315, p=.177 >.05; t=.4354, p=.3321 >.05 respectively).

The fourth sub-scale was related to interpersonal communication skills. A summary of the results is given in Table 9.

Table 9. Interpersonal communication skills

	Whole Population (n=90)			Males (n=42)			Females (n=48)			t	p
	Min	Max	$\overline{x}$	Min	Max	$\overline{x}$	Min	Max	$\overline{x}$		
I do homework tasks with my peers in addition to those I do individually.	1	5	3	1	4	3.1	1	5	2.8	1.5055	.0678
My peers and I give feedback on each other's homework.	1	5	3.8	1	5	3.7	1	5	3.8	-0.4774	.3171
My peers can help me learn new knowledge and skills when we do homework together.	2	5	3.7	2	5	3.9	2	5	3.5	2.0925	.0196

p < .05

Table 9 shows that the lowest average score belonged to doing homework tasks with peers ($\overline{x}$=3), which indicates a neutral stance. Their scores for giving feedback on each other's homework and belief that doing so improves their own knowledge and skills were slightly higher ($\overline{x}$=3.8 & $\overline{x}$=3.7 respectively). When their responses were compared considering the gender variable, it was seen that there was a statistically significant difference in the last item only (t=2.0925, p=.0196<.05). This difference stems from the male students' higher score than that of the female students($\overline{x}$=3.9 vs. ($\overline{x}$=3.5).

5.0 Discussion and Implications

Results of the current study revealed that on average students spent 1-2 hours a day doing homework for ENGL112. This appears to be below the expected number of extra 'learning activities' students are instructed to engage in outside class hours. The course information sheet provided to students at the beginning of the course instructs that for each contact hour students are expected to spend a minimum of one hour of 'independent study' a day. ENGL112 being a four-credit course, then, means at least four hours of extra study for students. Only 32% of the students, the majority of whom were female, indicated that they spend 3-4 hours for ENGL homework. The discrepancy with student responses and the expectation of them likely stemmed from the students' perception of 'homework' and 'independent study'. As is indicated by the other data collected in this study, homework is not necessarily equated with independent study. It, indeed, is argued that '[h]omework has become an institutionalized aspect of schooling … The reasons given to defend assigning … homework almost exclusively refer to academic achievement as opposed to encouraging student autonomy…" (Spiri, 2009, p. 1). This points to the need for ENGL112 students' and instructors' agreement on the meaning of homework and independent study.

A significant number of students (39%) thought their homework experiences did not prepare them for learning after graduation. The main reason given for this was the disconnect between homework and what happens in real life after university, leading students to do homework for the

sake of grades. This finding indicates that a significant number of students lacked a clear understanding of the purpose of homework. It may also be the case that homework tasks they are assigned failed to support meaningful learning experiences. Other data from the survey also showed that the students thought homework was demanding and took too much time leaving them little to no time for other recreational activities. This seems to support the argument that homework might have a negative impact on personal and familial well-being (Karlovec & Bueel cited in Marzano & Pickering, 2007; Bennett & Kalish, 2006). Together, these are very likely to cause students to disdain homework. This sentiment might cause negative feelings in students regarding engagement in lifelong learning experiences. Therefore, it is essential that homework tasks be aligned with real-life experiences and individual student needs. Only in this way can a genuine interest in learning be created.

Results of the current study relative to homework assignments addressing individual student profiles were not very encouraging with an overall agreement rate of 2.6 out of 5. It was found that the assigned homework did not consider student likes and dislikes, and the students were rarely given an opportunity to choose the kind of homework which they liked to do. Neither were students' learning styles considered to a good degree. Despite this, the students were slightly more positive about homework tasks focusing on their weaknesses as well as strengths. Collectively, these results raise a certain amount of concern regarding possible *unintended* impacts of homework assigned to ENGL112 students. Instructors who pay limited attention to individual characteristics do so to their students' detriment. The consequent lack in motivation for homework likely reduces what is potentially a good preparation for learning throughout their lives.

I also asked the students to compare homework and home-learning by indicating the first three words/phrases they thought of relative to the concepts. Results clearly showed that the former was mainly attributed negative associations. The latter, on the other hand, was predominantly regarded positive. This shows that the students were still in favor of engagement in learning outside class hours. However, they made a clear distinction between the two terms with a heavy bias against homework. This finding resonates with the position held in this paper regarding the recommended shift from 'homework' to 'home-learning'. First and foremost, word choices affect our audience. Considering the fact that "As human beings, we are some emotional creatures that exist and react totally by feelings (Rogers, 2011, p. 4), it makes sense to avoid lexis with negative connotations - words that would create a negative feeling in students. We cannot be oblivious to the emotional effects words have on students. If, then, the very term 'homework' is generally perceived to have a negative connotation, it is common sense to refrain from its expansion. Second, a natural alignment between real-life situations/tasks (those that are specific to individual students) and learning assignments set for the home will help students recognize the value of engagement in learning outside of class. In order for students to avoid thinking that homework has only academic value, Bowman (2018) suggests communicating with students the multiple purposes of 'homework' tasks. To this end, students need to be shown both their short-term and long-term benefits such as goal setting and time management, which are significant lifelong learning skills.

It is also important to note the students' reference to technology in relation to home-learning. Today's youth are considered 'digital natives'. Palfrey and Gasser (2008) say that digital natives spend a considerable amount of time online. They often do not distinguish between online and offline contexts. They multitask and relate to each other in ways mediated by digital technologies which they frequently use to access, use, and create new knowledge. Clearly then designing home-learning tasks incorporating these technologies will encourage students to engage in learning with more motivation and confidence. Greater flexibility and freedom to initiate learning when and at where they prefer contributes to their engagement in independent learning and communication with others for information exchange and mutual support (Clarke, 2011). This may be a challenge to instructors who are 'digital immigrants'. However, their open attitude about this and willingness to learn from their students will be important in convincing their students that their role is to facilitate the process in which they can be co-learners, not the sole holder of knowledge and skills. This does not devalue the role of the teacher. Rather, it will increase students' confidence in making a difference in significant others' lives. This attitude will translate into mutual trust and growth.

I also aimed to identify the participants' home-learning skills based on the four domains of lifelong learning on which this paper is based. The students' overall level of aptitude was slightly above the average, indicating a promising level of preparedness for the skills necessary for engagement in home-learning as a way towards lifelong learning. The above-mentioned qualitative data on student thoughts about home-learning bespeak their willingness to use the requisite lifelong learning skills at home. Together these data show that, with quality support and guidance, students can acquire academic and social adroitness to increase their HAS scores. That the students' highest score belonged to the sub-scale of interpersonal communication is important to note. This resonates with the social constructivist theory of education stating knowledge and skills are acquired through interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1978). According to this theory, learning occurs when students share, discuss, critically review and interact with each other. Leveraging interpersonal communication skills, then, helps students engage in informal and therefore lifelong learning (Hoofman, 2005). Towards this end, the teacher should help students create suitable contexts encouraging them to carry out home-learning tasks in pairs or groups. Bearing in mind some students' tendency to copy answers from peers, the assigned tasks should address individual student needs.

Data from HAS also showed that the students received the lowest score for the perseverance sub-scale albeit slightly above the calculated average. This result indicates that the students require support to succeed in home-learning when faced with challenges. Perseverance is considered "a product of students' motivation to learn" (Slavin, 1989, p. 5), perseverance skills can be argued to carry much more weight than the other three sub-skills. This is because the absence of perseverance implies almost certain failure. Yet, in order to avoid students' not experiencing failure, home-learning tasks should not be simplified. Nor should the teacher's expectations be lowered. Doing so would limit students' opportunities to challenge themselves. This, in turn, would decrease their appetite for learning often derived from challenging and stimulating tasks (Light, 2017;

Wasserstein in Blackburn, 2013). Considering their comparatively stronger interpersonal communication skills, students ought to be helped to identify the ways in which they can interpersonally access the support they need. Perseverance also requires students to be mindful of the ways in which they give feedback to their peers (Deveci, 2018b). They ought to avoid disturbing relationships with others, which - otherwise - would prevent collaboration. Effective collaboration appears to be a common core of social skills indispensable for lifelong learning.

6.0 Conclusion

In this paper, I maintained that homework is often ascribed a negative connotation with impacts on students' engagement in effective and meaningful learning experiences in and outside of schools as well as upon graduation. I suggested that a different approach ought to be taken to *learning* activities students are asked to engage in outside class hours. This, I argued, requires a holistic approach to learning with an orientation towards *lifelong learning*. To help achieve this, four inextricably linked domains of lifelong learning skills were described. Following this, the results of a small-scale study investigating university students' homework experiences in a project-based course in their local context of Khalifa University (Abu Dhabi) were presented. Results reiterated the position held in this paper regarding students' apprehension about homework at the expense of their overall enthusiasm for learning. On the other, they reported more positive thoughts about the concept of home-learning, which could, in fact, embed 'homework tasks/assignments' so long as they are adjusted to the student needs, interests, and learning styles. The attitude towards learning during university years will come into play in learning experiences throughout their lives. It is, therefore, essential that students be provided every opportunity to acquire the requisite qualities and skills for this. The renowned scientist Albert Einstein once said, "I never teach my pupils, I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn," and a shift away from *homework* to *home-learning,* as is described in this paper, may be an important way in which we can also achieve this.

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