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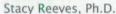

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Rubrics for the Classroom: Assessments for Students and Teachers

BY STACY REEVES AND BARBARA "POKEY" STANFORD

How do teachers assess all learners in the classroom as they produce written pieces while offering encouragement and motivation in the learning process? Rubrics can help measure student performance beyond the data that can be collected using a standardized testing system (Arter & McTighe, 2001). Rubrics measure teaching by helping the teacher to focus instruction on specific elements or characteristics. When focusing on assessment tools, understanding and developing the right type of rubric may help classroom teachers show growth and development in their students' writing. Assessment becomes a loop of learning for the students and the teacher. In addition, rubrics are defined and websites are listed which show excellent examples of these types of authentic assessments.

Introduction

How do teachers measure what students write? How do teachers assess all learners in the classroom as they produce written pieces while offering encouragement and motivation in the learning process? Can a teacher focus on learners' strengths, while at the same time addressing their weaknesses? Is there more to the measurement of students' written products and knowledge outcomes than standardized, high-stakes assessments? The answer: Yes, teachers can do all of these things by using rubrics!

Using rubrics to assess writing is not a new concept, but we argue they are being under-used in many language arts classrooms. Our hunch is that rubrics are being under-utilized because they are misunderstood; teachers believe they are time-consuming, lack reliability and validity, and are too confusing for students and parents (Kamil, 2003). But, when focusing on assessment tools for the writing process, understanding and developing the right type of rubric may very well help teachers show growth and development in their students' writing process, skills and products.

It is valuable to classroom instruction to

gather data and to assess beyond standardized tests. High-stakes tests are rigid and show only a snapshot assessment, that is, a narrowed view in a focused, momentary frame of time. Taking into consideration the language and writing differences that all groups of students display in the learning process (for example, differing intelligences, learning styles/learning modalities, and strengths), teachers must also consider assessing and gathering data for learners by differing means (Alvermann, 2003).

Numerous assessment options are available including anecdotal records, process lists, portfolios, checklists and t-charts; there is a plethora of options for measuring writing processes and products. Rubrics can help measure student performance beyond the data that can be collected using a standardized testing system *(Arter & McTighe, 2001)*.

What is a rubric and how is it created?
A rubric is any set of criteria that describe the varying degrees of excellence or levels of development in an activity, process, or product (Andrade, 2005; Goodrich, 1997). A good rubric for assessing writing can serve (at least) two purposes—evaluating students' knowledge and measuring teaching. To evaluate students' knowledge, the teacher can develop a writing rubric. How does a teacher create a rubric? Before beginning development of a rubric, the teacher should clearly visualize what is expected from the written project, product or process. The expectations, or the vision of what the written work should look like, may be described in terms of "look fors" (for example, the teacher will look for creative word choices based on the week's mini-lessons in writers' workshop or the expectations may be described in measureable standards (for example, "look for five paragraphs"). These descriptors become the criteria or characteristics that will be used on a Likert scale for measuring student growth in their writing. The Likert scale may be very basic and in three levels (e.g., under the heading "Creative Word Choices" the following scale is used "Not Found (0 points)," "Found Less Than Two Times (1 point)," and "Found More Than Two Times (2 points)").

After a list of criteria is developed, teachers should consider asking the students what they feel is most important to the success of the project (Nitko, 2001). Would they like to have more time to work on a project, which would necessitate including more components in the completed work, or would they rather have less time and just a few, but more focused, criteria on the rubric? By questioning students and listening to their responses, teachers can cooperatively develop a rubric for writing that is valid and jointly shared with student/teacher ownership (Wilhelm, 2008).

Using defined criteria, the teacher's next step lies in determining how a student can distinguish levels of performance or how the student's writing will be positioned within a range of scores. What looks like "Outstanding," "Adequate," and "Needs Work" according to the teacher and the students? Utilizing past examples of students' writing or teacher-made models can help clarify what is required (Ward & Murray-Ward, 1999). Often, operationalizing what is expected from an assignment helps both teachers and students determine the goals and better understand what is expected from both the process and the product. By determining what criteria or characteristics are present in the highest level of performance and clearly describing these characteristics, the indicator of performance is understood by teachers, students and parents (Andrade, 2000). Likewise, by describing the lowest level of scorable

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student work or bare minimum of performance, students and teachers are often able to distinguish real differences in performance based on specific writing needs, goals, and differentiated instruction.

The question then becomes how to develop rubric assessments, or in other words, how does a teacher make a rubric? The teacher may utilize the Internet which contains several excellent samples of rubrics and there are free rubric makers as well. Three excellent sites are http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php (Rubistar 4 Teachers); http://www.teach-ology.com/web_tools/rubrics/ (Teach-nology); http://712educators.about.com/od/rubrics/ (Writing and Grading Rubrics). All of these sites are free of charge and guide the user/teacher to through the process of developing a rubric for writing-based assignments.

A well-constructed rubric can be used as a measurement of teacher self- assessment because the teacher must be instructing the criteria or characteristics found in the rubric (Stefl-Mabry, 2004). The teacher is the one utilizing the rubric as a grading instrument so she or he is very familiar with its steps and criteria. In knowing that the evaluation is developed at the beginning of a writing activity has been established, the teacher also knows what should be taught, when it should be taught, and approximately how much time to devote to it. The spelling and punctuation criteria can be tailored to focus on a particular spelling or punctuation strategy, such as spelling sight words correctly in context. As the rubric shows progress, data can be linked to daily instruction. More specifically, the data generated by the use of rubrics can help the teacher make daily instructional decisions.

Recommendations
To best understand how to both write and to use rubrics, teachers should view examples of rubrics used to assess writing. Some good examples are found at the website http://www.rubrician.com/writing.htm. This site is dedicated to educators, teachers, parents, students and evaluators who are looking to design or locate good rubrics. Another great site to see rubrics is Kathy Schrock's Guide for Educators at http://school.discovery-education.com/schrockguide/assess.html. It is further recommended that teachers practice as-

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sessing a set of writing samples from students. As the teacher spends time practicing with the rubric, the assessment becomes easier and more automatic. After these initial efforts, the teacher should be ready to develop a simple rubric and to ask the students to give input into its development. At this point in the process, students should be ready to write their assignment, all the while focusing on the rubric. Last, the teacher should score these projects, products, or processes using the rubric. As the teacher becomes more practiced in developing rubrics, everyone's comfort level grows including that of the teacher, the students, and the parents (Simpson, Stahl, & Anderson, 2004).

Rubrics can become a familiar and accurate tool for the development of instruction and for scaffolding learning. Assessment in a continuous feedback loop is fostered as a process for teaching and learning, for both students and teachers. The learning process becomes more concrete with the narration and feedback inherent in the rubric. Focused, corrective feedback from the

teacher becomes more individualized and specific. As he/she grows in knowledge and experience with the use of rubrics, the students and parents should also see results in the form of improved student writing.

Conclusion

Rubrics can help measure student performances beyond the data that can be collected by standardized, high-stakes tests. Good rubrics are simple to design when the criteria or characteristics are in place, and rubrics measure teaching by helping the teacher to focus instruction on specific elements or characteristics. Furthermore, educators can tailor outcomes to specific objectives. By using rubrics in the classroom, confusion between student and teacher should decrease while learning should increase, contributing to a win-win situation for everyone.

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