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Rubrics and Metacognition: Friends or Foes?

From Heidi Goodrich Andrade “Using Rubrics to Promote Thinking and Learning”

Instructional rubrics are easy to use and to explain.

Traditionally, we educators have kept our criteria and standards to ourselves...

Instructional rubrics make teachers' expectations very clear.

We often expect students to just what makes a good essay, a good drawing, or a good science project, so we don't articulate our standards for them...

Instructional rubrics provide students with more informative feedback about their strengths and areas in need of improvement than traditional forms of assessment do.

Imagine that your employer is about to evaluate you. You have a choice between receiving a letter grade or a rubric with statements circled that most closely describe your performance...

Instructional rubrics support learning.

A few years ago I investigated the effects of rubrics and self-assessment on learning and metacognition—the act of monitoring and regulating one's own thinking (Goodrich, 1996)...Students using the rubric learned more than students who did not. I concluded that self-assessment supported by a rubric was related to an increase in content learning.

Instructional rubrics support the development of skills.

Simply handing out and explaining a rubric seemed to help students write better, though improvements were not guaranteed. It appeared that more intensive work with the rubric might be helpful.

Instructional rubrics support the development of understanding.

I wanted to know whether students would internalize the criteria contained in the rubrics and thereby develop an understanding of good writing.... I concluded that instructional rubrics may help students understand the qualities of a good essay.

Instructional rubrics support good thinking.

The third criterion—considering the other side of an argument and explaining why your own position still holds up—is a sophisticated thinking skill. That kind of thinking is something adults and students tend not to do. Rather, we make an argument, defend it, and hope for the best. Good thinkers, in contrast, know that they also have to anticipate the other side of an argument and be prepared to explain why it doesn't undermine the claim they are making. When I included that criterion in the rubric for the persuasive essay, the students who used the rubric tended to consider the reasons against their claim. Students without the rubric did not consider the reasons against their claim. Thinking-centered rubrics seemed to help students think more deeply.

From Valerie G. Chapman and M. Duane Inman “A Conundrum: Rubrics or Creativity / Metacognitive Development”

A graduate student who has an eleven-year-old daughter in fifth grade recently described an incident that underscored concerns the writers and other professional teacher educators have felt for some time. Briefly, the eleven-year-old had a science assignment to complete as homework. Her parent, attempting to help, offered several suggestions for enhancing the project. The child's response to each suggestion was: “No, that's not on the rubric. Here's the rubric, Mother. This is all we're supposed to do.”...

Is the teacher merely requiring identical or nearly identical artifacts from the students to grade “fairly”? ...Matching their work to a teacher designed template (i.e., a scoring rubric) is different from analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating elements as students pull a product together for an assignment.

From Wade Carpenter “The Other Side of Rubrics”

Way too often, [Chapman and Inman] allege, we are rubricizing the creativity and initiative right out of our kids....My real concern is what they define as *bad* education—or conversely, what do they omit from their concepts of *good* education and, subsequently, good living? Will they view open-ended teaching as bad, and hence to be disregarded? Ambiguous assignments as unacceptable, and thence to be shirked? Ambivalent or nuanced positions as unworthy, and to be shunned? Opportunities as “uncertainties,” so safer to steer clear of? If so, they really will be handicapped in life, because one never learns from a challenge that has been avoided. (156, 158)

From Linda Mabry, “Writing to the Rubric: Lingering Effects of Traditional Standardized Testing on Direct Writing Assessment”

...[R]ubrics have the power to undermine assessment. Scoring rubrics are pivotal in operationalizing large-scale and standards-based performance assessments in writing. Rubrics promote reliability in performance assessments by standardizing scoring, but they also standardize writing. The standardization of a skill that is fundamentally self-expressive and individualistic obstructs its assessment. (673)

From Alfie Kohn, “The Trouble With Rubrics”

But all bets are off if *students* are given the rubrics and asked to navigate by them...[Proponents of rubrics want] us to employ these guides so that students know ahead of time exactly how their projects will be evaluated....But...studies have shown that too much attention to the quality of one's performance is associated with more superficial thinking, less interest in whatever one is doing, less perseverance in the face of failure, and a tendency to attribute the outcome to innate ability and other factors thought to be beyond one's control. (13, 14)

From Maja Wilson, “Why I Won’t Be Using Rubrics to Respond to Students’ Writing”

But even the rubrics I create for specific assignments and revise on a regular basis aren’t responsive enough. Student writing never fails to surprise me, and nothing I write before reading a paper is able to capture my responses to it or help the student to revise. (62)

Comments on a rubric don’t help good writers become better, since even the most carefully chosen complimentary comments don’t create conversation about the author’s intent and the words’ effect. The rubric couldn’t ask Miranda specific questions about what she was trying to do, or tell her that a certain phrase she wrote resonated perfectly with my experience of separating from my parents, or point out an interesting connection or thought that might be worth pursuing. Miranda would never have needed to revise if we had relied on the rubric, since she would have fulfilled the “requirements” for voice, word choice, conventions, organization, and all the other categories on which rubrics rely. Paying attention to the communicative and expressive purpose of writing rather than the rubric helped Miranda articulate her hopes for her writing and helped me to help her meet those goals. (65)

Once we discard rubrics and decide that disagreement in writing assessment can be useful—an idea that violates every tenet of standardization—we can teach students to disagree productively. (66)

It is startling that focusing on our response to the writing and thinking about how we can help the writer improve is, in fact, going against the grain. But writing itself has always presented a problem for positivist testing specialists; it has always been too messy and subjective to satisfy their need for factory-style assessment. Rubrics are writing assessment’s current sacred cow because they provide the appearance of objectivity and standardization that allows direct writing assessment a place in standardized testing programs. By accepting the standardized responses inherent in rubrics, we undermine the power of the experiences of reading and writing. In the end, assessment must be a conversation—just as writing exists for the purpose of conversation. I’m not willing to let rubrics script that conversation for me. (66)

From Vicki Spandel, “In Defense of Rubrics”

Rubrics are not all alike. Some are vaguely written, shrouded in jargon, more accusatory than helpful. Some emphasize a formulaic approach to writing or focus on trivia at the expense of substance, and to the extent that they influence instruction, this can have devastating ramifications... (19)

Because it demands reflecting on and describing performance with some precision, creating a rubric teaches us to think. For this reason, whenever possible, we should include students in the process, encouraging them to examine writing from a reader’s point of view. Writing is, after all, the making of reading. Sketchy, formulaic rubrics are created by critics whose primary concern is the rapid scoring of someone *else’s* work; instructionally useful rubrics are created by readers who think reflectively about how to make their own and others’ writing better. (19)

The real problem with current writing assessment lies not with rubrics but with what we value. Ultimately, we do not fail to reward risk taking because a rubric tells us we should. We fail to reward risk taking because we do not value it enough—yet. It isn’t rubrics pushing us around but our own lack of courage, our unwillingness to let go of tired formulas and embrace the complexity of truly fine writing. Too often, in on-demand writing, we do not honor design or thinking or voice as much as we should because these things can almost never be assessed in a rapid, assessment-at-a-glance fashion. Uncovering such qualities demands astute, perceptive reading—and time. (21)

Easier should not be part of the bargain. What we demand of our students as writers we must demand of ourselves as readers. A rubric is ultimately a two-way commitment, a reader-writer contract that says, “If you write with thought and with heart, I will understand, and I will hear you. I will follow you where you lead and reflect on the connections you make...” Let’s not abandon rubrics. Let’s make them better by ensuring that they honor what good readers think important in writing. Let’s also create an assessment approach that allows space for thinking: opportunity for reflection, personal selection of a topic, time for true revision and editing. We have seen what students cannot do, given time restraints and topics to which they have no attachment. Do we not want to see what the *can* do under the best of circumstances? (21-22)

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