Student-generated rubrics: Bringing students into the assessment process

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Robbin Ferrell

"Perhaps the greatest potential value of classroom assessment is realized when we open the assessment process up and welcome students into that process as full partners" (Stiggins, 1997, p. 18). Involving students in the development of performance targets can be an effective instructional tool because students who are given the task of analyzing quality work and its critical components become better performers themselves (Stiggins, 1997).

Performance-based assessments, such as rubrics, are not new to the educational community. Over the past decade many states in the U.S. have mandated fundamental revisions of their assessment practices to include learning tasks that are open ended, aligned more closely to real-life learning situations and the nature of learning, and involve a variety of measures that inform students of their progress in reading performance goals (California Department of Education Elementary Grades Task Force, 1992; Wiggins, 1989). The nature of the assessments teachers use should create a relationship between assessment and instruction that is "more natural, ongoing, and constructive" (Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 1995, p. 482).

Highly competent teachers use assessment measures to inform their instruction and at times as a means of instruction. Rubrics are frequently the tools used to identify key elements of proficiency, particularly for assessing reading fluency or writing development. These rubrics assist both the teacher and the learner in determining the necessary elements for each level of performance. However, these levels of performance are usually developed by educators rather than by students. The purpose of this article is to highlight a performance assessment process where the teacher and the students work together to generate specific performance standards.

Teacher-researchers in the classroom

I (Mary Jo Skillings) met Robbin Ferrell when I worked as a university professor in partnership with a local school district’s mentor program. Robbin presented her use of student-generated rubrics to a group of beginning teachers. I asked if I could observe in her classroom and if we could work together to study how the process evolved with her second- and third-grade students. Over a period of 2 years, we observed, recorded, and questioned the process. Student interviews, classroom observations, and videotaped sessions were conducted as we looked at how Robbin’s students learned to assume more control in developing the criteria for their performance on a variety of reading and writing tasks.

Starting points

Robbin explained what prompted her to begin this process. “Our district began using rubrics for assessing students’ writing performance levels for inclusion in writing portfolios. It became apparent to me that when I displayed a set of criteria with examples for establishing performance levels, my students were supported and were more successful in meeting performance goals. They had a clearer picture of what the end results of an assignment should be. This was particularly effective with children in my class who were from other language backgrounds. Why not extend this process to other areas? I wanted my students to be more actively engaged, to better understand my expectations for assignments, and to have a better grasp of the concepts. I decided to gradually bring the students into the process of developing their own rubrics.” Robbin worked to help her class “solve the mystery of the meaning of success” (Stiggins, 1997, p. 38) in a series of small steps.

Setting the stage

At the beginning of the school year, Robbin started using teacher-developed rubrics with her students to get them accustomed to this form of assessment. The next step in the process was to bring the students into the actual development of a rubric by first asking questions that connected them to real-life situations that required establishing criteria. She asked her class to develop a rubric of five standards for a “Best Place to Eat,” an “Okay Place to Eat,” and a “Not So Good Place to Eat.” They established a rating of 3 for highest and 1 for lowest choice of a place to eat (see Table 1).
Robbin’s students agreed on the essential elements of what they thought would be important if they got to decide on a place to eat. Then they deliberated about the other two levels. Robbin pointed out to them that they needed to look at each point of the “Best Place to Eat” and consider how this point would change for the other two levels. After completing several of these, the process moved from the real-life situations into more structured development of a rubric that involved students’ performance on reading and writing tasks. Robbin’s students gradually became partners with the teacher in developing assessment tools.

Robbin explained it this way, “The first rubrics I used were extremely structured and were used both to teach and to assess if the students understood the concepts I wanted them to learn. It was important for me to make sure that my students had both the experiences and the information they needed to be successful with an assignment.” She provided an environment that included a wide assortment of literature, fiction and nonfiction books, magazines, maps, flyers, and menus. She used many examples of graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams, story maps, and word webs. All of these were accessible and prominently displayed in the classroom. Additionally, she aligned the development of her assessments with the California Academic Standards for the Language Arts: Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking Content Standards for Grades K–12 (Commission for the Establishment of Academic Content and Performance Standards, 1998). Robbin planned the exact requirements for the assignment. “I knew what I had taught them and I knew what I wanted them to show me that they had learned. It was a time-consuming process, particularly in the beginning stages, but it was important for establishing a foundation for them. I didn’t want them going in all directions.”

### Teacher-student collaboration in structured rubric development

The class had been studying the literary elements of character, plot, and setting. The focus of this lesson was on attempting to get students to understand the literary elements of character development using Cinderella. The underlying objective was to include the students in assessing their own learning about characterization. First Robbin read a traditional version of Cinderella. She explained the lesson with the specific tasks written on a chart that delineated what students were expected to know and to demonstrate for the assignment. Students were to choose a character and write four things the character did in the story. Students were to be able to explain what motivated the characters to act as they did in the story. They needed to include an illustration and an appropriate setting.

Robbin already had in mind what she felt were the important criteria for the development of the rubric. She used three performance levels “because I have found it is easier at this stage to differentiate among the levels.” The three-level rubric designing session began with the question “If you were to get the very best grade on the assignment, what would you have to do?” Students responded with the various requirements that were anchored within the assignment chart while Robbin recorded their exact words.

“You have to pick a character from Cinderella.”

“You need to have four things that your character did in the story.”

“There need to be two reasons we think the character did what he did.”

“There needs to be a picture that is right for the story.”

Robbin continued the discussion with a variety of probing questions and included the responses for the criteria for “best paper.” “I let the students make the decisions on these questions before I include it as part of the criteria,” she explained. The questions included these:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They have special kids’ meals with prizes</td>
<td>Some kids’ meals but no prizes</td>
<td>No special kids’ meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food comes fast</td>
<td>Food is a little slow</td>
<td>Food takes a long time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food is good</td>
<td>Food is okay</td>
<td>Food isn’t all that good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A special place to play</td>
<td>Space to play is small</td>
<td>No special place to play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noise is okay</td>
<td>Not too much noise</td>
<td>You have to be quiet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Does there need to be a heading?
Do the sentences need to be complete?
Does all of the information need to be correct?
“For a top paper, you have to remember everything and put it in,” explained one student. Students then began to add criteria on their own without the teacher’s leading questions, and they expressed knowledge of expectations for the assignment. Additional criteria for classroom assignments were added:

“You need to have your name and date in the upper right side.”

“It has to be neat.”

“For showing the ball, you should show the prince in a palace.”

Robbin again directed students’ attention to the assignment and agreed that they should write why their characters acted the way they did. Finally, the class had developed a standard for a paper to be considered a “best paper.” Then she assigned it a grade, or a level of 3. Robbin asked, “Who thinks they can get a number 3 paper?” Every hand went up. Robbin explained that she does not assign a level until criteria are set because students can identify with a good grade rather than a number 3.

After the standard was established for the best grade, the same process was followed for the next category, an “okay” or number 2 paper. Robbin again asked her students to think about what would cause a paper to be a number 2 or an “okay” paper. The students lowered the standards in some cases. They suggested the following:

- There might be only three things the character did in the story.
- The picture might not be colored or have enough details in it.

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Table 2
Structured character rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choose a character</td>
<td>Write four things the character did</td>
<td>Choose a character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write two reasons for character’s actions</td>
<td>Illustrate character in appropriate setting with at least three details</td>
<td>Write one reason for character’s actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Complete sentences</td>
<td>Proper heading</td>
<td>Illustrate character in appropriate setting with at least two details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neatly done</td>
<td></td>
<td>Most sentences are complete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Heading complete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not as neat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- It might have only one reason for the character doing what he did.
- The sentences could be complete but it might not be neat.

Finally, Robbin questioned, “What makes a paper that is not very good, a level 1 paper, a paper that might have to be done over?” The process was repeated with the standards adjusted to a lower level. Students’ comments were recorded as they thought about the assignment and the criteria for their work. In addition to meeting the assignment requirements for the lesson, Robbin addressed the additional criteria for headings and neatness, and these were added to the rubric. She also reminded students of where they could get help with the information if they needed it. She discussed looking in their books, looking on the class charts, or reviewing previous assignments. The structured language arts rubric in Table 2 was developed by Robbin and her students.

Robbin led the students through all of the criteria from the very best paper and adjusted it for each of the standards. The assignment was reviewed with the students, and the charts were placed within easy access for reference. As students worked, they frequently referred back to the rubrics for cross-checking their papers.

Expanding the possibilities

Robbin began to move students beyond the constraints of a prescribed set of criteria. She continued to use structured rubrics for instruction and assessing student understandings for many reading and writing tasks, but she also began to expand the rubrics for more open-ended activities. Thus she began to open up the rubrics to a higher level of student ownership. The students were able to choose what they would do and how they would do it. This step was taken later in the year and after many occasions to work with rubrics. She used rubrics as opportunities for her student to negotiate new connections they had made and to be able to use a variety of forms to represent new concepts they had learned. “I wanted them to have choices and to have a broader vision of what they could do to satisfy the requirements of the lesson. I have students who are able to achieve higher levels of performance when they are able to express themselves through more involved expressive modes, such as telling another student who then writes the version down.” Robbin used the familiar rubric form but invited students to “think about what other ways you could use to demonstrate, to show what you know.”

The expanded rubric started with a reading lesson from a traditional version of a familiar story, Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Robbin led the students through the creation of a story map which included the setting, characters, problem (plot), and solution. On the following day, she read aloud a different version of the story, Somebody and the Three Blairs (Marilyn Tolhurst, 1990). She asked the students to think about, “How can you show your understanding of this new story? How does this story compare with the traditional version?” She and the students generated ideas, which she listed on the board. Most of the ideas represented activities that students had done previously as learning exercises.

- Do a story map for the new story.
- Write a new ending for either story with an illustration.
- Do a Venn diagram comparing the two stories; include illustrations to show comparisons.
- Do a Venn diagram comparing a character from each story, include illustrations to show comparisons.

In addition to the list, Robbin told the students that they could add any other ideas that they might think of later. Next came the development of an open-ended rubric. Through the discussion and questioning process that Robbin had promoted and developed with her students, she and the class designed a rubric. At this point she wanted to be less in control of orchestrating the mode of the outcomes and to have her students move in the direction of making decisions about how to express their knowledge. Students linked the performance levels to the requirements on the board. They began to broaden the field when a student asked, “Could I tell my ending on the tape recorder and then write it down?” Robbin asked the class, “Would that satisfy the requirements?” The class decided that it would, provided that an illustration was included. Again the lesson was aligned to the California Standards in Language Arts. Table 3 is the expanded version of a teacher- and student-generated rubric.

Through the use of this more expanded form of rubric, Robbin found that both her lower achieving students and higher achieving students were able to be successful in showing their knowledge. By having the liberty to demonstrate their knowledge through their different learning styles, Robbin’s more capable students were able to take the assignment to an even higher level of performance.
Standards lead to thinking

“Learning is a consequence of thinking” (Perkins, 1992, p. 78). Through the use of rubrics, Robbin has invited her students to think more deeply about their learning. Robbin has expanded her use of rubrics to include teaching math processes, science, and social studies. The use of rubrics has become an integral part of the set of strategies she uses to assist children in concept attainment and also to assess their learning. Bringing students into the development of the criteria, like bringing them into the development of their personal portfolios, supports them in their abilities to build their own performance standards (Danielson, 1996).

When students complete an assignment or a physical product, teachers have specific criteria or standards for the designation as “best work.” Students also need such standards for making the distinction between a best product, an acceptable, or an unacceptable product. When students begin to see this distinction and examples of exemplary work, their own standards tend to increase (Danielson, 1996). Involving students in this process of self-evaluation empowers them in the development of critical thinking skills.

The classroom teacher may use rubrics as a tool for teaching concepts or for assessing what students know about a subject. This process takes time and preparation. It is begun by modeling the thinking that goes into the development of criteria. Then students are brought into the creation of a class rubric. Students also need assisted practice in looking at samples of work at each level to begin to make comparisons and to determine the elements that demonstrate a high-quality, acceptable, or less than acceptable product.

The strength of using rubrics as a learning situation or as an assessment strategy lies in its success in developing metacognitive skills: this ability to think about one’s thinking is critical in a world of continuous change. Through metacognition, students can develop those skills that are transferable to new learning situations (Abbott, 1997). Students in Robbin’s room have increased confidence in their ability to learn because they are in a classroom where they help develop the standards for work that demonstrates knowledge of the concepts.

Robbin uses the scored rubrics as “a starting point for additional instruction.” After assigning scores, she confers with students to have them “discover” why they earned the scores. “Sometimes I show a student who has received a lower score a number 3 paper, and we discuss the gaps and matches between their paper and the higher paper. Sometimes I give them the chance to do the assignment again, and other times we just try to apply the findings to the next assignment.”

This process can be modified to meet the needs of the students and their abilities, and is especially effective with second-language learners due to the repetition and the variety of ways concepts are presented. Robbin stressed the importance of the development of the sense of community, which is essential for creating a low-anxiety environment. The repeated practice of working through the setting of criteria and the modeling done by the classroom teacher all contribute to the effectiveness of the process for all learners.

Students’ responses to the use of rubrics are the most revealing. “You mean all I have to do to get the best grade is what we wrote?” Students in Robbin’s room are using rubrics to assess the quality of their work and reflect on any gaps in their knowledge or missing elements and to search for ways they can improve. Her students frequently raise their hands and ask if they should develop rubrics as a next step. They are actively engaged in finding solutions for working out the tangles of new learning.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very best level</th>
<th>Okay level</th>
<th>Not so good level</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shows clear understanding</td>
<td>Some understanding</td>
<td>Not so clear understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows creativity</td>
<td>A little creativity</td>
<td>Little or no creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrations colored with details</td>
<td>A few colors &amp; details</td>
<td>Little coloring &amp; details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct spelling</td>
<td>Some spelling errors</td>
<td>Many spelling errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Done on time</td>
<td>Done on time—1 day late</td>
<td>More than 1 day late</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neatly done</td>
<td>Not neatest work</td>
<td>Sloppy work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proper heading</td>
<td>Proper heading</td>
<td>May have proper heading</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References