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Series editors' introduction

Standards, assessment, accountability and grading – these are the issues that dominated discussions of education in the 1990s. Today, they are at the centre of every modern education reform effort. As educators turn to the task of implementing these reforms, they face a complex array of questions and concerns that little in their background or previous experience has prepared them to address. This series is designed to help in that challenging task.

In selecting the authors, we went to individuals recognised as true experts in the field. The ideas of these scholar-practitioners have already helped shape current discussions of standards, assessment, accountability and grading. But equally important, their work reflects a deep understanding of the complexities involved in implementation. As they developed this series, we asked them to extend their thinking, to push the edge and to present new perspectives on what should be done and how to do it. That is precisely what they did. The books they crafted provide not only cutting-edge perspectives but also practical guidelines for successful implementation.

We have several goals for this series. First, that it be used by teachers, school leaders, policy makers, government officials and all those concerned with these crucial aspects of education reform. Second, that it helps broaden understanding of the complex issues involved in standards, assessment, accountability and grading. Third, that it leads to more thoughtful policies and programs. Fourth and most important, that it helps accomplish the basic goal for which all reform initiatives are intended – namely to enable all students to learn excellently and to gain the many positive benefits of that success.

–Thomas R. Guskey

–Robert J. Marzano

Series editors

Preface

Have you ever been nervous about grading certain types of student work – like creative writing, a research report or an oral presentation? Have you ever been anxious because your new Department guidelines said that students ‘will think critically’ or will be ‘lifelong learners’ and you are not quite sure how to ensure that they become so or even if you’ll know when it occurs? Have you ever given up on peer-review groups because it seems to be a waste of time – students make very superficial comments to each other and you’re not sure what to do about it? Have you ever pulled your hair out at 11.00 at night because it’s obvious in the essays you’re marking that your students just don’t get it?



If so, then this book is for you. It is intended as a practical guide to the development and use of scoring rubrics in the classroom to achieve three goals:

1. Clarifying the targets of instruction, especially those that are complex and hard to define such as problem solving, writing and group process skills
2. Providing valid and reliable assessment of student learning on these same complex and hard-to-assess student outcomes
3. Improving student motivation and achievement by helping students understand the nature of quality for performances and products

Consider the four vignettes in Box P.1 with these benefits in mind. Which scenarios will most likely lead to (a) reduced teacher anxiety about consistent and effective scoring of performance and (b) increased student confidence and achievement? Why?

CHAPTER 1

Mapping the terrain

Guiding question: *What are performance criteria and rubrics and how can they support instruction and improve student achievement?*



Recently, I (Judith Arter) visited a school that was using a rubric for good quality writing to teach and assess writing (in this case, the Six-trait model, which is included in the Resources section). The teachers, students and parents loved the process because they could clearly see what it took to succeed. It also enabled teachers to focus instruction and reliably track student progress over time. Students amazed everyone by their ability to accurately self-assess and self-correct. Writing achievement was steadily improving.

During the course of conversation about their successful project I asked the principal, ‘Isn’t this a great example of standards-based instruction?’ I wasn’t grilling the principal, I was just excited about how their activities exemplified the best intentions of standards-based learning.

The principal’s reply brought me up short. She said, ‘What do you mean? We’re just using the Six-trait model to teach and assess writing.’

It became very apparent that, although this staff was successfully using a rubric to focus teaching and help students improve their writing performance, they may not have completely understood how their practice fits into the bigger picture of assessment and standards-based education. As a result, they may not have been able to fully justify nor explain to others what they were doing. Similarly, they may not have been fully able to generalise the use of rubrics to other content areas.

So, we’re going to begin by providing the ‘bigger picture’ of the use of assessment, performance criteria and scoring rubrics in standards-based education. We’ll consider four bits of contextual information: how rubrics and performance assessment fit into classroom assessment in general, what rubrics are, what we are and aren’t going to cover in this book and standards-based

Each of the following traits – the important dimensions of a quality writing product – is scored separately on a 1–5 scale. Score points 5, 3 and 1 include descriptors. A score of 3 represents a balance of strengths and weaknesses; 2 demonstrates some characteristics of a 1 and some characteristics of a 3; 4 demonstrates some characteristics of a 5 and some characteristics of a 3.

Ideas: the heart of the message, the content of the piece, the main theme, together with the details that enrich and develop that theme

Organisation: the internal structure of the writing, the thread of central meaning, the logical and sometimes intriguing pattern of the ideas

Voice: the feeling and/or conviction of the individual writing coming out through the words

Word choice: rich, colourful and/or precise language that moves and enlightens the reader

Sentence fluency: the rhythm and flow of the language, the sound of word patterns, the way in which the writing plays to the ear – not just to the eye

Conventions: the mechanical correctness of the piece – spelling, grammar and usage, paragraphing, use of capitals and punctuation

Figure 2.2 Analytical trait rubric: Six-trait writing

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Note: Only the trait definitions are included here. See the Resources section for the entire rubric.



How many slices (traits)?

Any good rubric, holistic or analytical trait will cover all the essential features of a performance – there are certain features of writing or mathematics problem solving or oral presentations that everyone agrees are important.

The only question is whether to leave the whole ball of wax as a ball (holistic scoring) or to group similar features together and slice the ball up into traits. The Six-trait model, for example slices the ball of quality writing features into six slices (traits). These six slices seem to cover everything pretty well – all the features in the ball seem to fit nicely into one slice or another. But, we've seen everything from

BOX 2.1 Scavenger hunt

Additional examples of holistic and analytical trait rubrics are presented in the Resources section. See if you can find examples of each.