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Collaborative Design: Building Task-Specific Rubrics in the Honors Classroom

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I read Joan Digby's essay with interest and found in it concerns I have heard expressed elsewhere. I agree with her that the role of college faculty is to help students "engage deeply in 'critical thinking.'" As someone who has spent twenty years teaching literature and writing, I nodded in agreement when she stated, "My field is literature—that is, thought and sensibility expressed in words. My field encourages the subjective, anecdotal, oddly shaped experiences that constitute creative writing." Where I veered away from agreement was her assumption that using rubrics is antithetical to encouraging critical thinking or to the creative expression of these subjective, anecdotal, oddly shaped experiences. I also disagree that using rubrics is merely a means to "measure students against preconceived expectations." In fact, I would argue that creating task-specific rubrics with students does exactly the opposite.

Not just the choice to use rubrics but the approach to creating them and the format they take express one's philosophy of teaching and learning.

As someone who values collaboration with my students, supports students' ownership of their own learning, and looks for opportunities to increase their critical thinking skills, I find many benefits to using task-specific rubrics that evolve from class discussion. This process is ideal for honors students because of their high level of engagement, motivation, and intellectual capability, and it is especially useful in the two-year college where students are often grappling with what it means to be a college student as well as what it means to be in honors.

In considering ways that rubrics can help support the goals listed above, I have appreciated John Bean's approach to rubrics in *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* because, as the title suggests, it contextualizes rubrics within critical thinking and active learning. Bean delineates a range of approaches to rubrics, each of which can be presented to students: generic or task-specific, analytic or holistic, points or grades or both, grid or no grid (269–276). Discussing these options with the class allows students to consider the pros and cons as well as what each approach suggests about learning.

Task-specific rubrics are particularly beneficial because they increase discussion about the different components of a specific assignment. Students create the rubric's criteria based on the assignment's components, describing how they understand the components and the relationship between these components and the students' own learning. The discussions lead to an increased understanding of the assignment's purpose and more critical thinking, and they afford students and instructors the opportunity to address confusion or misunderstandings. Additionally, the students blend their own words with academic language to describe the different criteria, thereby becoming more knowledgeable and confident about academic work while also taking ownership of their learning.

Next, the class considers the descriptors, which will demonstrate that the criteria just decided on have been met and the degree to which they have been met. This discussion involves a thoughtful consideration not just of what the criteria mean but how one recognizes them when they are achieved in practice. Students also determine how much detail needs to be provided in the rubric to clarify why the student met a specific level of achievement and what areas might still need more attention. This exercise allows students to articulate what traits reflect achievement of different levels, again using both their own words and those of the specific field.

Our Honors Capstone Seminar concludes in a symposium for which the students determine the specific format—e.g., panels, keynote speaker, PowerPoint presentations—based on the type of research they conducted and the best way to communicate their findings to their audience. Then we create the rubric. As a class, we reflect back over the term, considering the various readings, guest speakers, and research fairs we attended. Rather than my co-instructor and I presenting them with a set of criteria and descriptors for what constitutes successful participation in a symposium, we discuss this question as a group and arrive at collectively at the criteria and descriptors. At the end of one seminar, for instance, instead of the instructors dictating what evidence would demonstrate critical thinking, the students established that the evidence would include considering multiple points of view. Their 2014 symposium rubric included specific descriptors such as “refuted significant counterarguments with relevant research” and “multiple sources and perspectives were clearly connected to thesis.” Thus, students apply what they have learned over the term:

- they think critically about the goal of research and the sharing of research findings;
- they increase their confidence; and
- they increase their ability not just to complete work but to know the purpose and significance of that work.

The collaboratively created rubrics are, in this context, significantly different from their top-down counterparts. Again, this student-centered approach is especially important at a two-year college as students grow into their identity as honors students before transferring to four-year schools.

Generating task-specific rubrics with my students offers opportunities I consider central to my work as an educator: it becomes a means for learning at the beginning of an assignment and not just during assessment at the end; it encourages students to move beyond the idea that everyone evaluates achievement in the same way or that assessment is entirely relative based on the instructor; it affords clarity and transparency about assignments; it increases students’ ownership of their learning; and finally it creates more collaboration in the classroom. Rather than providing means to “measure students based on preconceived expectations” or limiting student creativity, rubrics in this process become a tool for enhancing learning and empowering students.

REFERENCE

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey, 2011. Print.

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