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Giovanna Walters

Minnesota State University, Mankato, giovanna.walters@mnsu.edu

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On Assessment, Imagination, and Agency: Using Rubrics to Inform and Negotiate the Honors Experience

GIOVANNA WALTERS

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Joan Digby's passionate article about the role of rubrics in outcomes assessment is well-timed and pertinent to contemporary issues in honors education. In her piece, Digby argues that outcomes assessment and the rubrics that often accompany it stifle imagination, creativity, and outside-the-box thinking that all honors educators hope to foster in our students. "My goal," Digby writes, "is not to score or measure students against preconceived expectations but to encourage the unexpected, the breakthrough response that is utterly new, different, and thus exciting." Digby's illustrations reveal her assumptions about assessment and rubrics today but the question is whether her assumption—that assessment and rubrics necessarily stifle the imagination essential to honors education—stands up to scrutiny. One can debate the merits of rubrics, but to argue that they stifle imagination or creativity is problematic

As an educator, I have been drawn to rubrics at times and repelled at other times. After working with students at various levels for many years, I have come to learn the value of rubrics that are well-crafted. Poorly crafted rubrics are, as Digby says, nothing more than “little boxes far less colorful and ingenious than Rubik’s Cube,” but well-crafted rubrics can be instrumental in helping students learn and helping teachers assess their learning.

A well-crafted rubric is difficult to create, and it might be easier to dismiss the entire notion of rubrics than to devote the time and effort necessary to create an effective one. However, honors education is never about doing things the easier way. If we challenge our students to view notions of society and their disciplines from a different perspective than ones that are familiar to them, then we must challenge ourselves to do likewise. An effective rubric should not place students or their work into boxes but should be a working, fluid, and negotiable document that allows students to pursue success in a variety of ways; it should state what students need to accomplish without being prescriptive in how they get to that point.

Because a good rubric is fluid, it can provide students with the power and flexibility to determine their own definitions and applications of abstract concepts. Let’s take the example of a much-desired skill in honors programs: leadership. The leadership competency rubric for Minnesota State, Mankato Honors Program’s electronic portfolio states that students need to “use personal theories and values of leadership within campus or community organizations” by the time they graduate. The rubric does not tell them which organization(s) to participate in, which personal theories and values to use, how to use these chosen theories and values, or how to articulate their application of theory into practice within their electronic portfolio. Students can fill that box in a variety of ways. The rubric tells students what they need to do, but our students create it and give life to it. As a result, the rubric allows them to negotiate their best way to achieve the end result. The goal is achievable in a variety of ways, but throughout the negotiation process honors faculty and staff advise students and provide feedback when needed or asked so that students know what is required of them; it would be unfair to ask students to explore the concept of leadership and then just let them go out on their own, hoping they come back with something effective.

Because of the standards-driven pressures on the K–12 system, students are often not asked to engage in activities as open-ended as in college, especially in an honors program or college. In an honors section of First-Year Experience or Introduction to Honors course, the instant confusion when students are

asked to “reflect” is almost palpable. Most first-year students, through no fault of their own, have no idea what that means. Reflection is a nebulous concept that often results in students’ submitting written work closer to description than reflection. Rather than dismiss students’ attempt at reflection, we need to teach them the importance of good reflection. John Zubizarreta speaks to the usefulness of reflection when he says that it is “desirable in promoting better learning, but it is also challenging and painful, demanding a level of self-scrutiny, honesty, and disinterestedness that comes with great difficulty” (7). Students come to understand what reflection means by reading successful examples, submitting multiple drafts, and—brace yourself—consulting the rubric. An advanced reflection, according to our rubric, is written in interesting prose, has an established thesis and theme throughout the text, and provides clear, thoughtful examples of links between new learning and past and future experiences. Students’ ultimate goal in First-Year Experience or Introduction to Honors is to navigate this process of reflection and learn how best to achieve an advanced reflection.

Well-written rubrics are effective because they help educators give students assessments that are valid and reliable, assuring that the assessment measures what it is supposed to measure and that it produces consistent results regardless of who grades it. Rubrics help us achieve both of these objectives. They also create a level playing field for our students so that we don’t give students the benefit of the doubt or play favorites when we assess student work. Especially when assessing something as complex as writing, we need guidance and reminders about what we are looking for in a student’s paper. If we create our rubrics well, they can provide us with the same guidance and reminders that they provide our students, and they can make both us and them accountable.

Many of us subscribe to the concept that we can negotiate syllabi with our students in facilitating a democratic classroom (Shor, *Empowering Education* and *When Students Have Power*), and we can apply the same concept to a rubric. Especially in an honors class, where students tend to think outside the box and contribute innovative ideas, the act of negotiating assessment materials can be an exciting and educational experience for the instructor and the students. Students and faculty collaborate to create many of the rubrics used in our program and in our courses. This collaboration process might take many forms, depending on the context, but we consistently engage students in the process. We ask them if the rubrics make sense to them and if they are fair and reasonable; it is a democratic process where students are

partners in the construction of knowledge rather than an authoritative one where they are given little choice in what and how they learn. This process has resulted in well-written rubrics that students comprehend and respond to with a sense of ownership. My experience indicates that they constantly seek to improve, edit, and revise the rubrics by which they are assessed, commonly approaching an instructor to express confusion over the rubric; at that point, the instructor can and should allow for a conversation about the confusion, possibly resulting in a reconstruction of the rubric. Honors students are a particularly attractive group with which to work on learning outcomes and explore rubrics for several reasons: they have high standards and expectations for themselves and their peers; they value individualism and creativity; they view themselves as co-creators of the community of scholars which they work diligently to be a part of. As a result, honors students are not and should not be satisfied with having a rubric handed to them. They enjoy engaging in dialogue about the outcomes of the course and the means through which they will be evaluated.

Rubrics are tools that we use to assess ourselves as well as our students. Honors programs and colleges must regularly submit reports to deans and other university administrators, and rubrics help us establish our accountability to these administrators as well as to ourselves. As we build upon our successes and integrate new ideas into our strategic plans, rubrics help to identify and categorize our strengths and weaknesses. For instance, the honors program at Minnesota State, Mankato, analyzes results of students' electronic portfolio reviews annually in order to assess how well we are incorporating the portfolio into our program and how well students are understanding and integrating the portfolio as a reflection tool. Without rubrics as a benchmark for student and program success, it would be difficult to articulate our program's strengths and weaknesses. We could compile qualitative data through what would certainly be an arduous process, but we would have no quantitative equivalent. With a rubric, we can compile and refer to both types of data in reports to various stakeholders.

The debate over the ethics of measurable outcomes and rubrics is not one that we should ignore; however, quantifiable measures of student success are not going away. Educators are not suddenly going to convince the powers-that-be to eradicate them from assessment processes. Rather than completely discounting rubrics and categorizing them as infections that pollute the purifying spring of education, we should use them to establish a common language while continuing to advocate for our students' imagination and agency.

We should adapt them in a way that works for our students and for us while at the same time we do what we tell our honors students to do: think outside the box and get creative.

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The author may be contacted at
giovanna.walters@mnsu.edu.

