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INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

How Students Can—and Should—Contribute to the Rubric Creation Process

I was in a kindergarten classroom a few weeks ago and was mesmerized by a rubric that was detailed on a large flipchart at the back of the room. It was titled "My Star Paper" and was a set of expectations for coloring. Yes, coloring. Using this rubric, students are assessed on a variety of factors such as number of colors used and whether or not there is white space left over once they are finished their work. On each of these factors, students can earn a smiley, neutral, or frowny face.

We could probably debate for quite some time the ramifications of using a rubric like this. But whether or not you agree with assessing a child's coloring skill, it is likely that you agree with the longstanding belief that using rubrics can help students be successful. Rubrics provide a clear outline of what is expected, along with a breakdown of points possible for each component of a given assignment. They are essential when designing summative assessments, which are meant to highlight the extent to which students understand overarching or fundamental course concepts. The question becomes, then, how should we create these rubrics, smiley faces aside?

Before we can answer this question, it's important to consider what else we know about student success. Providing students with the opportunity to choose—to decide for themselves what will be the most effective means for expressing their knowledge—makes them more involved in the process and much more persistent in the face of setbacks. Engagement is another widely researched component of student success. The more connected students feel to their classrooms or campus, the more likely it is that they will achieve their goals. Taking these two additional factors into consideration, I'd like to make a case for the argument that *students themselves* are the best resources for creating rubrics. We can get students engaged by having them make informed choices about how they will be assessed.

Over the past year and a half, I have worked with students in my Educational Psychology classes to beta test an assignment that I had been musing about for quite some time. It started as an extra credit opportunity around the time we were discussing the multitude of different approaches to teaching. The idea was for students to use one of the pedagogical techniques covered in our course to teach the class how to perform a task. Some of the earliest teaching demonstrations were the most fun—we learned how to make origami frogs, fold a kitchen towel into a swan, throw a spiral football, be a server at a steakhouse, speak Mandarin, and so much more. However, to make this activity an official points-bearing component of the course in future semesters, I needed to create a clear means for assessing students' demonstrations.

With best practices and models of similar coursework as a baseline, an initial group of educational psychology students and I set out to design the "Teaching Demonstration" assignment. (Incidentally, this activity coincided well with our unit on "Classroom Assessment" and was an excellent means for applying their growing knowledge of how to observe and sample student knowledge.) These students were very interested in helping me determine the length of the demonstration. They were mindful of providing enough time for students to teach without being rushed, but they were also cognizant of the need to encourage demonstrations that were rich with detail, thus requiring more time. They settled on a timeframe of no less than five minutes, but no more than seven minutes. These students were also integral in discussing how much the length of a teaching demonstration should be worth on the rubric. We talked about how time is related to more qualitative factors such as the logical sequencing of the demonstration and the means by which the students would "assess" their classmates' understanding.

Several of my classes involved in the testing process were interested in helping to shape how "presentation style" would be assessed. Given the performance anxiety that can accompany speaking in front of a group, students had a lot to say about the role that eye contact, body language, gestures, and clear pronunciation would play in how teaching demonstrations would be assessed. A significant by-product of the co-creation process was that this stress seemed to be significantly reduced. Through carefully structured discussions about the rubric for this assignment, students were able to understand the fundamental reasons why teachers need to develop a comfort level when speaking to their students.

Through these discussions it also became clear to me that practice really would make perfect. The feedback students gave seemed to indicate that one of the biggest stressors about speaking in public is that students aren't required to do it all that often, so when they do, it's anomalous and uncomfortable. A subsequent educational psychology class was the sounding board for creating the "Teacher Spotlight" assignment, which became a lower-stakes course requirement at

the start of the semester designed to give students a chance to exercise their oratory skills. Students choose a teacher who had a significant impact on their life and/or learning and are responsible for highlighting the characteristics and competencies that made that teacher so influential. Through some actual testing, we found that an appropriate time requirement for this assignment would be no less than two but no more than four minutes. This assignment, then, was designed with the help of current students to ensure that future students could feel more comfortable at the front of the classroom.

Knowing that past students were involved in creating the "Teaching Demonstration" and "Teacher Spotlight" assignments seems to have demystified these course requirements for current students. Those who take Educational Psychology now are apprised of the co-creation process via discussions with me and former students, which serve as a foundation for their understanding why such assignments are a necessary component of the course. For the future teachers taking the course, the answer is really quite relevant to their personal and career goals and, as a result, somewhat easier for them to appreciate.

Arguably more important is what these assignments mean for the students who are not going into teaching. It means the answer to that question needs to be even more carefully constructed. Most teachers are well aware that students often want to know, "When am I ever going to use this?" Armed with a rubric that is constructed with best practices for teaching and learning in mind along with input and feedback from students just like them, I can be confident in explaining how these assignments contribute to their personal and professional futures. Each component of these assignments—like eye contact, body language, and the logical sequencing of a presentation or explanation—are invaluable tools for student success in any course and in most relationships.

Engaging students in the rubric creation process has lead to several profound and even some unexpected outcomes. Just prior to this most recent semester, I had the chance to talk with several of my former Educational Psychology students, which prompted me to consider one final alteration to these assignments. We will now dedicate class time to practicing the teaching demonstrations. We will break into small groups and everyone will get to rehearse their teaching demonstration for a handful of other students. This aspect of the "Teaching Demonstration" is intended to give students the opportunity to refine their presentation well before they officially teach the class their skill, and to get specific feedback in the form of reviews from at least two of their peers.

The former students who came to visit mentioned how much they appreciated the feedback they were given after their demonstrations. They also commented about how they have used the suggestions to inform their work in subsequent education classes. Famous psychologist Jean Piaget believed in the importance of peers for providing a safe means for critique, as they can talk with each other and incite disequilibrium (a moment when the way a person understands the world can change), which is less possible between a teacher and student due to the "power differential." As such, I added a peer review component to the "Teaching Demonstration" so students can talk openly with each other about what could make their presentations match with the rubric requirements.

My students have served as an invaluable resource for curriculum design, and I would argue that this is not a unique phenomenon. All of our students can make valuable contributions to course assignments given the appropriate guidance. They are willing and capable of telling us what would be most beneficial for their futures as long as we lead carefully managed discussions about specific rubric items. Moreover, this is a mutually beneficial relationship. Students are able to actively engage with their courses, which increases their chances of success, and faculty are able to create course assignments with rubrics that are clear, pedagogically sound, and endorsed by their students.

It's hard to say if kindergarteners would support a rubric for coloring. They would likely wonder why they have to follow rules for an activity that they typically complete for fun and on their own terms. Maybe they could better understand and appreciate the educational reasons behind a coloring rubric if they were involved in its creation. Seems like a good question to ask.

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