

15 Using a Multidimensional Scoring Guide: A Win-Win Situation

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Thirty years and five states ago, when I began my career as an English teacher, a well-meaning veteran of the classroom warned, "The paper load will do you in!"

Many times during my years of teaching, I was reminded of her words as I struggled to keep my head above a pile of essays. Of course, I've experimented with a variety of shortcuts and acts of desperation, including holistic grading and the "check, check-plus, check-minus" method. I've tried to justify nearly anything short of dumping the pile into the trash by reminding myself of the words of another mentor in the profession who stated without a hint of guilt, "If you have time to evaluate everything your students write, your students aren't writing enough!"

But that wasn't good enough for me. I had to know for certain that whatever choices I made for teaching and learning in my classroom, my students would in fact benefit. I had to observe an improvement in their language skills and, hopefully, a growth in their appreciation of literature and language.

More recently, my experiments with classroom assessment have involved the use of a scoring guide (a "rubric," or grading system, that uses a set of described criteria). In my district and at the state level in Oregon, a scoring guide for writing is used each spring to assess the

writing of all eleventh graders in six dimensions: content, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. In my classroom, I've created rubrics for specific assignments, sometimes in collaboration with my students, with both predictable and surprising results.

I've discovered that rubrics have three significant advantages. First, they motivate students toward top performance because they clearly define the elements of an excellent product. They also increase students' efforts toward improvement because they provide the language to distinguish between levels of accomplishment. A third advantage is that a rubric provides an explanation and justification of the grade to students, as well as to parents and administrators.

The experience which opened my eyes to the advantages of using a scoring guide was a poetry project for tenth graders. It was the culminating activity after a conventional poetry unit. I focused on oral presentations in which students (1) demonstrated their knowledge of writers' use of poetic devices; (2) showcased their ability to interpret and critique a literary piece; and (3) practiced their communication and presentation skills. These three purposes of the assignment became the dimensions of the scoring guide and were described specifically at four levels of achievement, from excellent to inadequate, corresponding to the values 4, 3, 2, and 1 (see Table 1). The grade for the project was a combination of a student's self-assessment, peer assessments, and my assessment. An average of all assessments (mine weighted equally) produced the score or grade. My students were fascinated that they and their classmates had a share in the scoring responsibility, which seemed to elevate their interest and involvement in the entire project.

Because I needed to know if and how the activity was beneficial for my students, I was eager to hear from them at the end of the experience. I asked for written responses to two questions: (1) Did the scoring guide help you with this assignment? How? (2) Did it help you assess the presentations? How?

Advantage 1: Motivation toward Top Performance

In their written responses, students told me that they clearly understood from the scoring guide what constituted an excellent product. From the guide they knew the elements of top quality:

The guide helped me get organized and told me how to accomplish it.

Table 1. Scoring Guide for Poetry Project

	Excellent: 4	Good: 3	Satisfactory: 2	Inadequate: 1
Literary Knowledge and Application	Explains poetic devices in concise, sophisticated language that demonstrates full understanding.	Explains poetic devices in own words, appropriate for the audience, that demonstrate understanding.	States definitions of poetic devices that demonstrate partial understanding.	Names poetic devices used in the poem and attempts an explanation of them.
	Exhausts examples from the poem and explains eloquently their use as poetic devices	Recognizes numerous examples and explains fully their use as poetic devices.	Recognizes a few examples and tells how they are used as poetic devices.	Gives examples that fail to illustrate the poetic devices or overlooks examples from the poem.
Interpretation and Critical Thinking	States with conviction, clear idea of poem's intent.	Explains, in clear language, ideas of poem's intent.	Gives an idea of poem's intent which is vague in concept and expression.	Lacks an idea of the poem's intent.
	Uses specific passages and information to fully and convincingly support ideas of poem's intent.	Uses numerous passages and information to support ideas of poem's intent.	Uses one or two passages to support somewhat the idea of poem's intent.	Does not make connections between passages from the poem and the poem's intent.
Presentation and Communication	Incorporates a creative visual or auditory component which is appropriate to the poem and carries the presentation to a level of unexpected significance.	Incorporates a creative visual or auditory component which enhances the poem and the presentation.	Includes a visual or auditory component which is somewhat related to the poem.	Presents the poem without a visual or auditory component.
	Uses voice quality as well as eye contact and body to captivate audience.	Uses voice quality and variation, as well as eyes and body, to hold the attention of audience.	Frequently varies voice, uses satisfactory voice quality, and makes occasional eye contact with audience.	Reads presentation in a monotone of voice and body expressions.

It gave me a basis for preparing. I could check to make sure my presentation had all of the necessary requirements.

I liked having the guide when preparing my presentation because it showed me everything, exactly, that I needed to cover. It also let me know if I covered certain parts adequately.

It was obvious from their comments that students were motivated by the scoring guide's clearly stated expectations and then challenged to perform with top effort. Because they recognized the distinctions between a 4 and a 3 or a 2, they had guidance toward achieving excellence in their preparation:

I really liked a guide in front of me while preparing my presentation. I automatically tried for a straight A and knew what was expected.

It set my goals high on how to perform the presentation. I spent more time with it than most of my presentations.

I really like the idea of having the concrete expectations for an assignment and to know exactly what I needed to do to get the grade I wanted.

It assures you an A if you follow specifically.

Advantage 2: Guidance in the Plan for Improvement

The difference between a scoring guide and a more traditional grading system is most significant for the student. In many traditional systems, specific descriptors are given for the perfect product (an A), but a B, a C, and a D are simply percentages of the perfect product. On a scoring guide, each level of performance has its own distinct and specific descriptors. It is because of these distinctions that students know how to approach a plan to improve their work:

I skimmed the 4 point guide before I started and then checked it again to see what grade I would get. Then I polished it up to the point where I thought I would get all 4's.

Using these specific descriptors for self- and peer assessments gives students the tools they need for their own improvement plan:

I liked being able to grade my peers because it made me listen for things they do better than me. It gave me specific things to listen for and judge on.

It gave everyone a fair chance to make a quality presentation because everyone was given the same guide to follow. I also

liked grading other people and myself. It gives them and me a second opinion on our work.

And from a student who often gets low grades:

It told me what needed to be done to get a better grade.

In this model, descriptive language from the scoring guide gives students the words they need for “Explanation and Comments” on the scoring sheets for their classmates (see Figure 1). They use words and ideas taken directly from the scoring guide to describe what is “excellent,” “good,” or “satisfactory” in a particular dimension.

By using descriptive language for peer assessments, students practice skills which are transferred to self-assessment and self-improvement. Improvement is facilitated when a student has the language to recognize and express the distinctions between excellent, good, and satisfactory. A scoring guide models that language. For instance:

On Literary Knowledge and Application:

You did pretty well with poetic terms used in the poem. You explained about four or five the poet used. (Score 3)

You mentioned personification and alliteration, but I don't think that that was really an example of personification. (Score 1)

On Interpretation and Critical Thinking:

The passages you chose persuaded me that you understood the poet's intent. (Score 4)

You had only one quote to support your idea about the meaning, and it didn't fit very well. (Score 2)

On Presentation and Communication:

I was really surprised by how well you presented. You really did “captivate” the class. (Score 4)

I had to give you a 2 because you read your paper and looked up only a few times. It ruined your poster because you didn't even refer to it—even though it was pretty good. (Score 2)

Advantage 3: Validation of Grades

Because students had specific feedback from their classmates, as well as from their teacher, and a voice in their own assessment, there was not one complaint or even a question about a grade. Grades were validated by the scoring guide. Explanation and justification were defini-

Evaluation Sheet: Poetry Project Presentation		
Presenter:	Evaluator:	
<i>Dimension:</i>	<i>Score:</i>	<i>Explanation and Comments</i>
Literary Knowledge and Application		
Interpretation and Critical Thinking		
Presentation and Communication		

Figure 1. Scoring sheet.

tive because of the scoring guide, and therefore the grades were satisfactory to them. Grades based on the specific distinctions of a scoring guide are equally clear to parents and administrators.

Other Thoughts

The three dimensions and the specific descriptors I wrote for each of the four levels on this scoring guide are, of course, somewhat subjective, based on what I consider important for the assignment. I could have focused on logical organization, or well-developed support, or an attention-getting opening statement, or a creative element by asking students to write a line of poetry related to the poem which they were assigned to analyze. For each of those I would have written descriptors to explain each score level. Or a scoring guide could address only one dimension, in which case the grading process would be simplified. Each assignment has its own focus, and for each would come its own unique scoring guide.

There are options, as well, for the grading aspect of the project. If I had wanted to emphasize self-assessment, I could have weighted the student's own evaluation more heavily in computing the average of scoring sheets. Or I could have asked students to evaluate only

some of the presentations, had I wanted to encourage more elaborate written comments.

No grading system is a panacea. A variety of assessment and scoring methods is needed in a dynamic classroom. Using a multidimensional scoring guide for the presentation of a literary analysis to a group of teachers and learners is just one way of handling assessment.

The poetry project, in summary, indicates that students can be motivated by a scoring guide to reach for “excellent” as their goal. It demonstrates that they can learn to distinguish between excellent, good, and satisfactory and, more important, that they know how to improve their performance when they haven’t yet reached their goal. Using this model, assessment and teaching are integrated activities throughout the project, from the initial assignment to the culminating grade.

A final word, just in case anyone missed the bonus advantage to the teacher: There is no risk of being “done in” by the paper load with this grading model. When the bell rings, the activity is complete. There are no papers to take home!

Interlude

I have been working in a writers' workshop style, and I, too, am most frustrated in my reading of papers. I want to reward a student for wondrous ideas/writing/metaphors, etc., but then "what did I get?" comes up, and I feel great frustration. I tried to do more portfolio-type evaluating but found that students wanted everything read by me, so I ended up overwhelmed again. Hmmmm...I know that the cross which we must bear is that of grading all of those papers (so says my principal), but there has to be a way to keep each of us fresh to the next great writer.

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