Scoring Rubrics and the Material Conditions of Our Relations with Students

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New Voice

This article explores the use of scoring rubrics in the context of deteriorating material conditions of writing instruction.

Recent scholarship on the effects of scoring rubrics on student writing and pedagogy is reflected in the following statement from Bob Broad's *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*:

> Theories of learning, composition, and writing assessment have evolved to the point at which the method and technology of the rubric now appear dramatically at odds with our ethical, pedagogical, and political commitments. In short, traditional rubrics and scoring guides prevent us from telling the truth about what we believe, what we teach, and what we value in composition courses and programs. (2)

Although Broad's focus in his book is primarily on rubrics used in large-scale assessments, this statement is instructive with regard to rubrics used in individual classrooms, as well. It raises questions about the relationship between theory and practice that teachers enact when we continue to use rubrics and scoring guides in our teaching and assessment of student writing and about the ethical and political concerns motivating our pedagogical decisions. Broad's criticism, also voiced in Maja Wilson's recent work, is clearly motivated by a deep-seated concern for paying attention to the "educational impact" of what we do and how we do it (Broad 9). With rubrics, Broad writes: "Instead of a process of inquiry and a document that would highlight for our students the complexity, ambiguity, and context-sensitivity of rhetorical evaluation, we have presented our students with a process and document born long ago of a very different need: to make assessment quick, simple, and agreeable" (4). Although rubrics were important in the disciplinary past of composition—offering writing teachers legitimacy, affordability, and accountability (9)—Broad claims, "The age of rubrics has passed" (4). In classroom-based, direct assessment of writing on my campus, however, I have seen a proliferation of rubrics. "Telling the truth" about ethics and values surrounding rubrics requires that we consider with care the contexts in which we teach—the conditions of our labor that construct and, in many ways, determine our work with students.

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In this article, I hope to offer a consideration of rubrics that enables a revision of rubric designs, in order to facilitate teacher response to student writing, and that offers suggestions for uses of rubrics that account for the material conditions of our work and at the same time helps us deliver on the intellectual promise of our work. Integrating what we have come to know about writing assessment and the teaching of writing into the design and use of rubrics, I argue, writing teachers can mitigate the devastating effects of the deteriorating material conditions of our teaching. My argument rests on the belief that the conditions of our work compel the use of rubrics, and, in turn, the use of rubrics impacts our relationships with students. My attempts to understand these effects have lead me to the work of sociologist Bruno Latour. His contribution toward understanding how technologies embody values and change human behavior has directly shaped my thinking about rubrics. By viewing rubrics as a technology, I have come to believe that, by changing their design and use, we can develop rubrics that offer productive opportunities for enriching student-teacher relationships and improving writing instruction.

Material Conditions Engender Teaching Practices

Two years ago, I started using scoring rubrics in all of my writing-intensive courses. For most teachers, this confession won't sound too disturbing, but, for a long time, I never considered using rubrics; doing so betrayed my training in Composition and Rhetoric. When I served as the coordinator for Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) on our campus, I actively redirected my colleagues' attention away from scoring guides and rubrics. When they expressed concerns about how to handle the paper load, I suggested that responding to student writing begins not with the stack of papers on the kitchen table, but with the assignment sequence, assignment description, and classroom activities. I conducted workshops on assignment design, peer response, and commenting strategies, and I even instituted a "partnership program" that offered in-class writing assistants for teachers who participated in the faculty development workshops and consultations that I offered. Many faculty members significantly altered their teaching practices after the workshops, but, when it came to rubrics and scoring guides, we continued to talk about two separate issues: grading writing and teaching writing. Outside the first year writing classroom—where writing is both the subject and a way to learn—most faculty in other disciplines used writing assignments as a way to gauge student learning; they didn't see themselves as writing teachers but simply wanted to grade the writing and move on. Rubrics offered a clean and easy way to do that grading. Some of them even returned students papers without written comments, with only a filled in rubric. After a few years of working in this large state university system, I came to understand clearly why so many faculty focused so intently on the clean, easy fix.

Since 2001, in the state of California, we have experienced repeated years of multimillion-dollar budget cuts. During those years, on our campus for example, the WAC program was phased out, despite a marked increase in faculty requests for

assistance. The provost and the General Education Advisory Committee advised faculty to reduce, "if they desire," the writing required in all General Education courses—from a meager 2,500 words to a paltry 1,500 (McNall, "Teaching and Assessing"). Course enrollment caps for the required first-year writing course, "Academic Writing," have increased from 22 to 27 students, and caps for upper-division "writing proficiency" courses in each major remain at 35. Recently, in an arbitration decision related to the collective bargaining agreement, so-called "part-time" or adjunct faculty can request to teach a fifth course if budget and enrollment support such teaching assignments (Angelo, "Work Dispute"). Because the English Department offers nearly 50 sections of the course each semester, the availability of extra sections for more pay is likely. In that case, budget—and not pedagogy—might compel a faculty member to request a fifth course, despite the substantial increase in workload (from 108 to 135 students).

These same budget cuts have also impacted California Community Colleges. Now, in addition to stories of cobbling together multiple sections of first-year writing at multiple campuses in an attempt to make ends meet, colleagues teaching in two-year colleges from one end of the state to the other talk about course enrollment caps for first-year writing increasing to 30, and even 35. Current conditions already force "part-time" faculty to teach numerous sections of larger classes. Further reductions in state support will likely lead to fewer full-time positions, which will lead to an increase in faculty teaching more sections of larger classes at multiple campuses.

To be sure, throughout the California State University and the community college systems in California, the budget-driven environment of higher education impoverishes the teaching environment. As I write this, Governor Schwarzenegger has proposed a "major deficit-cutting budget" that seems to call for an increase in student fees at the same time that it could lead to further increases in enrollment caps, reduced class offerings, and possible lay-offs of part-time faculty (Gordon and Perdomo). Despite promises we have heard on our campus that it can't get any worse, it looks like it has only just started to get bad. As recent experience shows, those of us who continue to have teaching jobs can expect a range of changes in our working conditions—not the least of which include larger class sizes and increasing teaching responsibilities, in addition to steady or increasing service and publishing expectations. Such changes have immediate, direct impact on the material conditions of our relations with students.

More than twenty-five years ago, Nancy Sommers presented the workload problem of responding to student writing in terms of hours: "Most teachers estimate that it takes them at least 20 to 40 minutes to comment on an individual student paper, and those 20 to 40 minutes times 20 students per class, times 8 papers, more or less, during the course of a semester add up to an enormous amount of time" (148). In the past, when teachers had the privilege of teaching two or three sections of twenty students, that "enormous amount of time" was embodied in the relationships that faculty have with students. With more recent increases in enrollment caps and teaching assignments, surviving one semester to teach another

requires effort, planning, and stamina—sometimes at the cost of those meaningful relationships. In such impoverished contexts, our professional survival and the survival of the students in our classrooms depend upon our ability to develop a pedagogy that enables us to do what we are paid to do: teach writing effectively.

The most obvious ways to "make" or "save" time are either to reduce the amount of writing students do or to cut down on the amount of time given to each student's writing. Rubrics are aimed at the latter, but, in their worst form, they further impoverish our teaching environments by limiting our ability to respond meaningfully to student writing and reducing a complicated intellectual activity to a sterile numerical score or a vapid trait description. When we are under such increasing pressures from outside and inside the classroom, we need to be innovative about what we do in our classrooms and how we spend our time. If we design a rubric that aims to make responding to student writing more convenient, standardized, and efficient, we might be successful, but at the expense of the very relationships and experiences that facilitate learning.

Rubrics as Designed Technology

According to Broad, rubrics were born of a need to expedite the response to and evaluation of writing, as well as an overwhelming desire to standardize and validate teacher response to writing (5–9). Rubric technologies have thus been developed for large-scale assessment, as well as individual classroom use, to offer uniform, objective response and evaluation, making the process more convenient for teachers and more understandable for students. No matter what the emphasis of any particular rubric may be, it is designed to focus a student's or teacher's attention. In return, the rubric is meant to make the response to and evaluation of writing *simpler.* An approach that has been instrumental to my thinking about rubrics comes from Bruno Latour, a sociologist who thinks deeply about the role of technology in our lives. From his perspective, one way to consider the impact of rubrics is to understand them as "lieutenants, [which] hold the places and the roles delegated to them" (Latour 309). Such "delegation" entails what Latour describes as a process of "transformation" (309). The rubric, for example, transforms a complex time- and labor-intensive activity of response and evaluation into a designation of point value or a circling of a number with corresponding criteria and, possibly, a brief summative comment. The effort and responsibility that we delegate to the rubric is significant in that what was once the role of teachers in direct response to each specific student essay is now shifted to the planning and design of a rubric before students turn in their written work and the application of previously articulated criteria to an individual work. The hope is that rubrics allow teachers to evaluate student writing quickly and correctly.

Those teachers who advocate their use reveal even more of the work that we delegate to rubrics. They argue that rubrics communicate expectations, give guidance for improvement, and "motivate students toward top performance because they clearly define the elements of an excellent product" (Young 226). Ru-

brics also "make assessing student work quick and efficient" and provide validation of grades (Andrade 13). "At their very best," writes Andrade, "rubrics are also teaching tools that support student learning and the development of sophisticated thinking skills" (13). For many teachers, rubrics are an evaluative and instructional tool that communicates to students, guides and motivates them, and, at the same time, makes assessment fast for teachers and clear for students.

According to Latour, however, when we delegate responsibility to technologies, such delegation also involves "prescription"—"the behavior imposed back onto the human by the nonhuman" (301). That is, for any technology that we might hope to understand, be it a scoring rubric, written comment, assignment description sheet, writing utensil, coffee maker, or iPod, it is important to discuss the behaviors that the technology imposes on users in return. Arguments against rubrics shed light on some of the behaviors imposed onto teachers and students. Detractors claim that rubrics "standardize writing" and also "standardize the teaching of writing, which jeopardizes the learning and understanding of writing" (Mabry 634). Rubrics alter how we approach a piece of writing by focusing our attention on only those characteristics of the writing that is addressed by the rubric, and, in the process, they compel us to see a dynamic rhetorical act in decidedly limited ways. "In declaring performance standards," Mabry also argues, "rubrics both compel and constrain student performance. It is unfortunate that the rubrics in current use demand compliance to dismembered definitions of writing" (678). Here Mabry's concern is not so much that rubrics compel and constrain student performance—indeed the same could be said for any pedagogical activity that we engage in—but rather that the observed practice of using rubrics demands compliance to problematic models of writing. Similarly, other detractors argue that, because rubrics are "relentlessly reductive," they standardize how teachers think about student work, limit a teacher's range of judgment, and "violate the complexities of the writing process" (Wilson xxiv). When a rubric that focuses entirely on the attributes of the final product is used, the message is clear to students that the most valued component of the learning environment is that final product, and, as a result, the process by which the written text was produced becomes less valued.

Yet it is in the process—and in the student-teacher relationship that such processes engender—that some of the most important learning happens. In *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment*, high school teacher Maja Wilson focuses on this student-teacher relationship as she presents her efforts to come to terms with the teaching practice that she feels "violates [her] deepest convictions about the complexities of the writing process" (xxiii). She sets her stage with a story of a student's essay that, in accordance with two common rubrics—the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) and the 6 +1 Trait® rubric—would have ranked very low, despite Wilson's own energized and appreciative reading of the essay. As Wilson explains, "The MEAP and 6 +1 Trait® rubrics failed to recognize my values as a reader and Krystal's strengths as a writer" (9). As she follows a historical genesis of rubrics with a description of current research and theories of assessment, Wilson comes to the conclusion that teachers should not use rubrics. Instead,

she writes, "our assessments should be based on the same assumptions as our pedagogy" (52). However, I am suggesting an approach that asks us to consider the rubrics that we use in the classroom and to ask ourselves what responsibilities we are delegating to those tools and what behaviors they are inscribing on both us, as teachers, and on students in return. Maybe the rubrics that we use should be thrown out, as Wilson suggests, and we should stop delegating so much teaching responsibility to assessment tools. But I think that we can also redesign rubrics and how we use them so that we distribute teaching and assessment responsibilities throughout the course assignments and activities. The best way that I have found to do this has been to go back to what research and experience has shown us about responding to student writing.

The Role of Teacher Commentary in Writing Pedagogy

As early as 1982, Nancy Sommers speculated that our need to respond to student writers stems from our own experience as writers: "As writers we need and want thoughtful commentary to show us when we have communicated our ideas and when not [. . .] We want to know if our writing has communicated our intended meaning and, if not, what questions or discrepancies our reader sees that we, as writers, are blind to" (148). Sommers emphasizes the degree to which the relationship between readers and writers gives meaning to the writing. If we want students to engage with the writing that we assign, students must feel as though they are being listened to before demonstrating their knowledge and abilities to us. Sommers points to other pedagogically important aspects of teacher commentary: "to dramatize the presence of a reader, to help our students to become that questioning reader themselves [in order to] help them to evaluate what they have written and develop control over their writing" (148) and "[to] create the motive for revising" (149). Brian Huot similarly argues that, by making assessment a more predominant part of writing pedagogy, teachers of writing help students learn to evaluate how well their writing matches "the linguistic and rhetorical targets they have set for themselves" (170). If our response to the writing that students give us is reduced to a numerical score or a letter grade, we miss what is likely to be the primary (if not only) individuated, purposeful teaching moment in our relationship with students. Still, understanding the importance of teacher commentary doesn't help us learn, as Sommers set out to do, "what constitutes thoughtful commentary [and] what effect, if any, our comments have on helping our students become more effective writers" (148).

Sommers's research, conducted with Lil Brannon and Cyril Knoblach, identified two productive issues for research on teacher commentary: the teacher's appropriation of the student's text (149) and the failure of the teacher's comments to be anchored in the particulars of the students' texts (152). In effect, Sommers's findings point to the written comment itself—what teachers comment on, how they comment, and what commentary works best—and to what roles the teacher and students might play in the assessment of writing in the classroom. Compositionists

have rightly taken up the research suggested by Sommers, Brannon, and Knoblach. Straub, for example, illustrated what he identified as "directive" and "facilitative" commentary ("Concept of Control") and offered a detailed demonstration of commentary as a "conversation" ("Teacher Response"). Conceiving commentary as conversation, Straub argues, has "become commonplace in the scholarship on teacher response" ("Teacher Response" 374). In his essay, he identifies strategies for accomplishing this kind of teacher-student relationship: create in written comments an informal, spoken voice (377), establish a "common ground" with students by making "frequent use of text-specific language" (379), and "focus on what the writer has to say and engage him in a discussion of ideas and purposes" (379). Straub also finds that effective conversational responses "cast [critical comments] in the larger context of help or guidance," "provide direction for student revision," and "elaborate on the key statement of their response" (382). If we design rubrics to participate in and facilitate a larger conversation with students about their writing, the relationships that we develop with students can help us address the limitations of rubrics and, at the same time, make us more efficient in our response to student writing.

More recently, Fife and O'Neill revisit the work of Sommers, Brannon, and Knoblach to demonstrate the importance of connecting comments to classroom context and inviting student metacommentary on their drafts (302–303). Their attention to these two components of writing instruction compels us to reexamine our assumptions about the role of rubrics in our classes, as well as how they privilege our perspective. Regardless of the form it takes, when response to student work is isolated from the instruction and activities that surround the written product and when the teacher's is the only voice heard in the exchange, we limit the opportunities for student learning. As Fife and O'Neill argue, "We should make sure that written comments and other activities that structure writing complement rather than subvert the other's efforts" (303). Such a complementary approach makes it clear that when a rubric is *simply* applied to a piece of writing so as to locate it within some pre-articulated evaluative matrix, it will surely fail to offer meaningful commentary about the student's writing, much less any instruction to the student about how to improve the writing.[1] The better that we are able to cast our commentary as a conversation about a specific piece of writing—a conversation that begins in classroom activities long before students turn in their papers and that invites students to evaluate their own and each other's writing—the better our writing instruction will be.

Re-Visioning the Use of Rubrics

In my own courses, I have attempted to design rubrics that remain in constant dialogue with course content, express my expectations for the writing that I ask students to complete, and invite students to talk back about what they have done in the writing. I have also endeavored to design rubrics that enable me to evaluate the writing clearly and productively. Because I typically teach multiple writing inten-

sive courses each semester, I was concerned with the number of papers that I would need to respond to, but my primary concern for using a rubric was students' repeated request for clarity in what I was "looking for." For that reason, the principal responsibility for my rubrics is to communicate to students what I expect their writing to do and what my criteria for evaluation are.

English 335, "Rhetoric and Writing," is a course that I teach regularly. In a recent version of the course, I used Sonja Foss's *Rhetorical Criticism* to introduce students to rhetorical theory and to teach different methods of rhetorical criticism; students wrote three essays, using the procedures and formats outlined by Foss, in order to critique three cultural artifacts. Because Foss details the work required by each form of criticism, I designed a scoring rubric that referenced her text and modeled the organization of the moves that an author typically makes in a critical essay (see Appendix 1).

Rather than identify specific features of the written work, such as paragraph placement, creativity, or style, I decided to emphasize the genre components of the particular form of criticism. By focusing on components—e.g., Introduction, Artifact, Report of Analysis Findings, and Conclusion—rather than on features, I hoped to teach students about the specific *work* that different parts of the essay should accomplish. For each component, I offered generalized descriptions based on the discussion of each feature of the criticism that was presented in the course readings. My evaluative scale—"Needs Work," "Effective," and "Highly Effective"—was meant to offer a range of judgment as I read the students' work. Then, for each main element, I left room for comments that could explain my evaluation and offer revision suggestions. This approach, much like the "E, M, and L" scale described by Helton and Sommers, "reinforces the importance of revision in writing" (159).

In the rubric, my instruction offers students a description of what they need to include and what they need to do in their writing. My rubric specifies a genre for analysis rather than describing general features of "good writing." When I comment on the students' success at fulfilling the genre characteristics, they learn whether or not I think that they accomplished the work of the genre, but they don't necessarily learn how to improve their writing. That is, rather than ranking the student's essay on some idealized scale, my rubric suggests that good writing means effectively using appropriate elements of a genre. So, although my rubric offers students a recipe for what an effective introduction includes or does, for example, it stops at that description. My assessment identifies how well I think that they have accomplished that work, but, because I do not want to delegate too much instructional responsibility to my rubric, I use space on the page to offer comments intended to help students consider other ways to accomplish their writing tasks. By only briefly naming the characteristics—"overview of the essay," "description of the artifact," "nature of the ideology," and "description of the rhetorical strategies"—my rubric functions as a placeholder for writing and research strategies that my classroom-based instruction needs to provide for students. For example, because students are evaluated on their ability to describe the artifact, I need

to spend time in class on how to describe the complicated, increasingly multimedia artifacts that students analyze in their essays.

In addition to re-presenting the more obvious linkages between in-class activities and the assigned writing, rubrics can also offer further opportunities for integration and development of the dynamism of the writing process. For example, as Helton and Sommers explain in their description of the "E-M-L descriptors," using a scale that allows teachers and students to evaluate a draft based on whether or not it is an early, middle, or late, portfolio-ready draft "transforms a number of classroom activities, including student essay workshops, peer review groups, collaborative evaluation sessions, and revision workshops" (159). The design that I used similarly encourages me to use the rubric in a number of ways. After I have assigned the "Ideological Criticism" essay, for example, a student volunteer provides a rough draft for a whole-class, peer-response workshop. Before we read the draft together as a class, I introduce the rubric. As we read the draft as a class, we use the rubric to comment on the essay's effectiveness and to discuss suggestions for improvement. This workshop offers a rare opportunity for students to consider the various strategies that writers might use to achieve highly effective writing and enables collaborative authorship, in which students offer suggestions for revising the rubric based on their experience of working on the essay. After using the rubric to focus our conversation about the draft, I ask the students to comment on the rubric itself. This discussion might help clarify what I am looking for in the essay, but, more important, it offers students an opportunity to explore as a class whether my instruction and their efforts match the rubric. Any perceived mismatch leads to changes in the rubric. During the subsequent in-class workshop, I distribute copies of a revised rubric so that students can use it in a peer-response activity, as a way to help their peers revise their drafts. I use the rubric to facilitate repeated workshops so that students learn how to assess their own and each other's work and so that students might be better prepared to revise their writing.

Congruent with Helton and Sommers's findings, the results of a survey that I conducted with students (at the end of my course) raised productive questions about the role of my rubric in their writing instruction. Every one of the twenty students who responded said that the rubric communicated my expectations and guided their work. Eight of the students said that the rubric motivated their best work, which encourages me to believe in the efficacy of such a rubric. On the other hand, nine students said that it standardized their writing. In the context of a writing class for English majors, this comment seemed to be a clear criticism. Compared to writing that moves, delights, or instructs, "standardized" writing is surely banal, tiresome, and vacuous. Although the students' "standardization" critique may be misplaced or unwarranted, it certainly draws attention to the dynamic expectations that students bring to their understanding and reception of teacher's grading/evaluation practices and raises interesting questions for later study. The survey design did not encourage a more complicated response, so I am left to speculate on how the rubric motivated students or why students felt constrained by what I believed to be a rubric that allowed them relatively wide room to move. For my

purposes, the fact that half of the respondents found the rubric was productive leads me to conclude that the rubric was useful.

Not surprisingly, when asked what practices were the most effective for teaching them how to write in the class, fifteen students pointed to the rubric, and seventeen students thought that my written comments on their papers were the most effective. One student's comments seemed to sum up many of the other's sentiments: "I found that because my teacher wrote a lot of comments under the rubric score I knew what he wanted and how to fix my papers. [The rubric] works good with lots of written feedback with it. Just circling a number doesn't say much." Such a comment suggests that students have been in other classes where rubrics alone were used to respond to students' writing and that comments written on a particular essay continue to be an important way to communicate to students about their writing. Including occasions for written response on the rubric—literally, white space where teachers can write context-specific comments—has proven to be an important design element; the "empty" space, if left empty, is so conspicuous to students that it compels me to write even a brief response.

While using the rubric to help me deal with the high paper load, as well as to help me teach students how to improve their writing, I resisted making a lot of comments on the students' work. For the most part, because it was integrated into my class design, the rubric helped me decide what to focus on in my comments. But, occasionally, it did feel limiting. For example, I never found a convenient place on this particular rubric to respond to them with comments about what I thought of their analysis or the selection of their artifact. One student commented on a related limitation: "Rubrics usually leave out anything having to do with the style of the writing, which can, in my opinion, make or break a paper. That's frustrating. It makes writing seem more like a science." One way that I have responded to these experiences has been to encourage further conversation. In the preface to a recent rubric, I wrote: "This rubric and my comments are not meant to take the place of a discussion between us. Please make an appointment to talk with me about my evaluation and your plans to revise." Such statements offer students an opportunity to rethink their own use of the rubric and enable me to remain focused on what my instruction has addressed overtly. This practice also seems to have encouraged more students to discuss their revisions with me during my office hours. Another way that I have responded to concerns about "standardization," has been to plan more whole-class writing workshops at different stages for each essay. This practice increases the number of essays that students discuss and offers a wider range to the quality of essays discussed. Rather than only talking about rough drafts that always "need work," now students are able to offer suggestions for how to help move essays from "effective" to "very effective." In this way, although a rubric can be a tool to help me significantly demystify writing for the course, the complicated revision work that produces "highly effective" writing plays a more overt, public role in the classroom. I am interested in socializing students to particular writing conventions, but I do not want them to experience writing, yet again, as a set of inflexible rules and rigid plans. One of the changes in student behavior that I

attribute to our use of the rubric is a shift in how students respond to writing and talking about revision. As Latour might say, the *imposition* of the rubric is found in the language that it offers for talking about writing. This change has been most pronounced in my first-year writing courses.

In my first-year writing courses, I use a similar rubric and often in the very same ways as previously described. First-year students are not always as eager as English majors to visit me during office hours to discuss their revisions, and they are not often as articulate as majors are when talking about writing. Using a rubric, however, offers students a structure to use when talking about writing. The major difference is in the content of the rubric (see Appendix B). For example, in two current sections of first-year writing, I assigned an "Inquiry Essay," which relies heavily on the selection, analysis, and integration of sources into an essay that answers a research question posed by the student. We have been reading Joseph Harris's book, *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*. The headings of my rubric follow the discussions that we have had in class about the use of sources to address the following: "a question is posed and evidence provided for the reader's investment in it," "a detailed answer is provided," "the essay is organized by reasons that support the answer, not by individual sources," "the author works with sources effectively in order to do something with each source, whether that is 'coming to terms,' 'forwarding,' or 'countering,'" "sources are integrated smoothly into the writer's own sentences with appropriate attribution," and "the essay is free of errors and has been thoroughly proofread." Students have not yet turned in their revisions, but the conversations that we have had as they prepare them—both in workshops and individual conferences—makes me think that the assignment effectively engages the students' interest and that the rubric helps them think about what they are *doing* in their essays and how they are using sources to answer their questions.

The Potential of Rubrics

Considering the changes in workload occurring across the curriculum, there is a growing demand for writing assessment strategies that help teachers do their jobs and keep their jobs. In my experience, the most obvious concerns that writing faculty have about their workload are what to do with the stacks of student papers on their desks. If, in the process of using a tool to evaluate or grade a piece of writing, we delegate the responsibility for writing instruction to rubrics, they might satisfy our need to move through those stacks of papers quickly, but they won't help us teach students to write more effectively. The only way to make rubrics meaningful for classroom instruction is to alter how we *use* this evaluative tool. In his work on assessment, Brian Huot advocates that our assessment practices become a more pronounced part of our instruction. In describing "instructive evaluation," Huot writes: "Instructive evaluation involves students in the process of evaluation, making them aware of what it is they are trying to create and how well their current drafts match the linguistic and rhetorical targets they have set for themselves, targets that have come from their understanding of the context, audience, purpose, and other rhetorical features of a specific piece of writing" (170).

Rather than attempting to minimize the role of our evaluation of student writing in our instruction, rubrics might offer more occasions in the classroom for *involving* students in the conversation about their writing, rather than simply offering the final word in that conversation. By examining each rubric as a technology operating in the classroom, we can pay attention to the responsibilities that we delegate to them and can be more deliberate about the behaviors that the rubrics impose on us in return.

Given my course assignments and increasing enrollment caps, I have found rubrics to be an effective tool for articulating—to myself and to students—how I am going to evaluate student work and for talking with students about some of what matters for writing in the course. Although my survey of students offers complicating perspectives on rubrics, I believe that those experiences offer opportunities to develop different kinds of rubrics and invent new ways to use them throughout the course activities. From my experience, rubrics have some potential benefits for classroom-based, direct assessment of student writing:

- Rubrics can clarify teacher expectations for teachers and students, when teachers design their rubrics in conjunction with their assignment learning objectives.
- Rubrics offer opportunities for collaborative discussion of writing assignments, when integrated into the design of the course.
- Rubrics can help focus multiple assessment and instructional strategies, when writing assessment is directly related to instruction.
- Rubrics present opportunities for meaningful assignment sequences, when coordinated with other course activities.

To experience these benefits, however, takes planning, reflection, and listening. All too often, when teachers and researchers explore their response to student work, they focus intently on the written comment, isolated from the context of other course activities. If we see opportunities for response as being more varied than the written comment—for example, as including student conferences, whole-class workshops, and peer response—and work to surround such opportunities with instruction that prepares students to hear and use the responses that they receive, we will be more effective in teaching students about writing. In this way, too, rubrics can offer faculty opportunities to develop multiple ways to engage with students on writing, not just our efforts to communicate our expectations about writing to students. And if it does not lead to changes in the material conditions, such engagement with students will certainly enrich the relationships that we have with them.

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Note

1. In "Grading as a Teaching Strategy," Derek Soles makes a different argument, although, in principle, I think that our two approaches are similar. Among the variety of strategies that he describes, Soles identifies a small number of studies suggesting that rubrics can facilitate the teaching of writing. For example, he cites the findings of an unpublished dissertation in which "three instructional methods for teaching argumentative writing to first-year college students" were compared. The study found that, compared to another common practice in writing instruction, "the study of exemplary models of writing," rubrics or "scales," taught students both "what is effective and ineffective (declarative knowledge)" and also "how to make their own writing more effective (procedural knowledge)" (127). Although such research sounds provocative, current published research and discussion about rubrics in Rhetoric and Composition have not systematically taken up the question of how rubrics are used in college-level teaching. Although there is consensus surrounding the limitations of rubrics for writing instruction, there apparently hasn't been much research into the strengths and weaknesses of rubrics at the college level.

APPENDIX A

The procedures for writing a critical essay described by Sonja Foss will serve as the basis for your peer response and my evaluation of your essay. (See pages 15–16.)

Introduction/Background Material – A strong introduction presents a brief overview of the essay by presenting relevant background/contextual information on the artifact, by posing a specific research question, and by highlighting the scope and organization of the essay to follow.

Needs Work Effective Highly Effective

Artifact – A strong essay clearly describes the artifact and its relevant context.

Needs Work Effective Highly Effective

Report of Analysis Findings – A strong essay includes a description of the nature of the ideology manifest in the artifact, the interest groups it serves, and the rhetorical strategies that promote it over other ideologies.

Needs Work Effective Highly Effective

Conclusion/Claims – A strong essay offers claims about the artifact's ideology and explains the significance of the analysis. In short, a conclusion answers the question: "So What?"

Needs Work Effective Highly Effective

Format/Mechanics/Process – A strong essay is essentially clear of error and follows MLA formatting guidelines.

Proofread? Need a Handbook Proofreader!

Grade:____

APPENDIX B

This rubric and my comments are not meant to take the place of a discussion between us. Please make an appointment to talk with me about my evaluation and your plans to revise.

A question is posed and evidence is provided for the reader's investment in it.

Needs Work Effective Highly effective

Comments:

A detailed answer to the question is provided.

Needs Work Effective Highly effective

Comments:

The essay is organized by reasons that support the answer, not by individual sources.

Needs Work Effective Highly Effective

Comments:

Author works with sources effectively in order to do something with each source, whether that is, following Harris, "coming to terms," "forwarding," or "countering."

Needs Work Effective Highly Effective

Comments:

Writing shows appropriate work (i.e., summary, paraphrase, or quotation) with at least four sources and the selection of information from each source is productive and effective.

Needs Work Effective Highly Effective

Comments:

Sources are cited properly using MLA format and the sources are introduced smoothly in the writer's own sentences.

Needs Work Effective Highly Effective

Essay is free of errors and has been thoroughly proofread.

Needs Work Effective Highly Effective

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