CHASING OBJECTIVITY: HOW GRADING RUBRICS CAN PROVIDE CONSISTENCY AND CONTEXT

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Recently, my English 101 students have read and responded to essays from their course reader; two very popular essays with my students were Page Smith's "Human Time and the College Student" and Paul Goodman's "A Proposal to Abolish Grading." These decades-old essays advocate the abolition of grading systems which serve only to punish or categorize students. I'm pleased to see some students writing favorable responses to these essays, because their reaction validates my own search for more honest and developmental ways of evaluating their writing.

Teachers are compelled by administrators and students to assign grades to student work, asking simple and powerful symbols to do an overwhelming number of tasks: letter grades are at once designed to evaluate performance, potential, comparative skill level, and preparation to advance. Grades are used to characterize people: students often label themselves as "A" students or "C" students. Grades are used for social and economic evaluation as well: they determine scholarships, insurance discounts, credit transfers, and parental rewards.

Along with the external pressure exerted by academic, social, and familial institutions, grades exert an internal pressure on teachers who question the communicative ability of one letter. The "B-" on a student's essay cannot really explain to her that she was not able to clearly express her intended point or that she expressed her point but failed to make some very important connections. Liesel O'Hagan's 1997 essay "It's Broken — Fix It!" confirms that "piles upon piles of

research suggest that grading definitely does not help students and, in many cases, may even hurt them" (12). Grade-focused students don't gain knowledge through the sterile grading procedure.

We attempt to compensate for the letter grades' failure to communicate such messages by writing in the margins or end pages of student papers, but studies confirm our anecdotal experience that students tend to ignore all other markings, looking only for and at the letter grade. Marcy Bauman's research shows that "Even when teachers (or peers) offer extensive commentary in addition to grades, the presence of grades distorts the feedback, influencing the way the writer hears it" (169). Edward White's classic *Teaching and Assessing Writing* also comments on the futility of such attempts to involve students in our responses to their papers.

> Instructors spend endless hours meticulously marking papers in the belief that grading papers is the same as teaching writing, with irrepressible and unwarranted faith that conventional teacher comments on present papers will affect the writing of future papers. (7)

Writing teachers struggle with the internal pressure to make the response process instructive and against the external pressure to produce easily quantifiable evaluations for students and parents involved in traditional conceptions of academic success and administrators needing to make generalized statements about students, individually and as a population. And, in this struggle, marginal and end comments seem to turn into secondary justifications of the assigned letter rather than a system of communicating with the student. Bauman remarks that grades tend to teach students not to care about "modifying or expanding their work" (171). The grade signals the end of the transaction, even for students who wish to revise for a higher grade. Students seem to want and expect this closure, and all of their own work, their self-evaluations and prewriting and revision, pleases them only if it culminates in that magic letter at the bottom of the last page.

On my disheartened days, I contemplate giving in to the students and abandoning any attempts to offer more than a letter grade. I think, however, that real learning would cease on that day and that students would try in vain to change the little letters that appear on their papers (and student complaints would probably not cease; in spite of indifference to written comments, students seem to want to know that their writing is worthy of comment). What I'd rather do is relieve the external pressure and give in to the internal pressure by eliminating the letters and keeping the comments. I've done this to some extent by incorporating a portfolio system into my writing classes, offering extensive responses and suggestions for revision on a series of progressively more polished drafts.

Although I'd like to think that portfolio grading solves the problem of grades by delaying them, research on responding to student writing shows us that abandoning letter grades and concentrating on a "response dialogue" with our students still places teachers in the intimidating role of evaluators. The work by James Baumlin and Tita French Baumlin on the rhetorical styles of teacher responses illustrates this by noting that teachers often use a forensic, or accusatory, rhetoric in responding to student writing (176). Baumlin and Baumlin acknowledge that even when a teacher manages to blend the three rhetorical styles (forensic, epidiectic, and deliberative) in her response, she still does not achieve a truly negotiative rhetoric until she suspends her authority and responds to the student as a fellow writer. I've often wished that I could respond to student writing genuinely, with a "Wow" or a "Duh," abandoning the authoritative voice for one more personal.

The idea of being more honestly personal brings up my greatest fears about responding: I know that what may have been a "Wow" at the beginning of the day could become a "Duh" at the end of the day, after I've taught four classes and driven home in a snowstorm. Being human, I'm necessarily influenced by all the elements of my life, not just the quality of my students' writing. In "An Analysis of Response: Dream, Prayer, and Chart," Tilly Warnock urges us to remember that we always communicate with our students in a context. We respond not only to a student, but to a situation. We may remember,

while reading an essay, the attention the student did or didn't give to classwork; we probably respond to the essay with references to the class discussion and reading. I've written, "Remember how we said in class that . . ." on a student essay, hoping that the student paid attention and understood. Warnock reminds us that "students understand our responses only if they are part of the conversation at hand" (63). If no discussion of the nature and purpose of evaluation and assessment ever develops, the students have no information about the context of the grading situation. Traditional grading — what Stephen Tchudi calls "a single grade/symbol on the final product" (xii) — forces the student to rely on guesswork and past experience with grades; when students say that part of being successful is "figuring out what the teacher wants," they are expressing that need to contextualize a particular classroom situation. We can address this need by developing evaluative methods and tools which acknowledge that we and our students are involved in an ever-changing context of community and interaction.

Establishing standards for evaluation which both account for context and attempt to force consistency from us is a noble goal. A recent article in *Teaching English in the Two-year College* recommends the development of a system of self-assessment and response as a way to foster student involvement in the response process and to offer a context for the assessment situation. Peggy O'Neill contends that

> teachers need to broaden their conception of the response sequence to include at least four texts: 1) the student's reflective writing and self-assessment, 2) the student's essay/draft, 3) the teacher's response to the self-assessment and the essay, 4) a student rejoinder to the teacher's comments. (62)

O'Neill's suggestions provide a powerful encouragement for the student to understand the context of the communication process, but her suggestions do not address my practical need for consistency in my responding. Like many of my colleagues, I am faced, when I sit down to read and respond to student papers, with a stack of 75; I

want to take every precaution that the first essay and the 75th essay have been held to the same standard.

A viable solution to this problem of consistency is the use of reading and grading rubrics, also called scoring guides, reading guides, and grading guides. By using these rubrics, I direct myself to maintain a certain level of consistency in the evaluation of student writing, and I hope to acknowledge and stabilize the communication situation. Although I am not convinced that rubrics convey the most valid and valuable messages about specific pieces of writing, in my search to meet the imperative Chris Anson presents in *Writing and Response* ("real, substantive response is in one form or another fundamental to language development" (4)), I need also to balance the time demands of responding to student writing. Carefully constructed, assignment-specific reading rubrics can "streamline" the response sequence without sacrificing individual, contextual interaction and student input into the process.

Rubrics can be defined broadly as schema by which responses are given, whether in the form of letter grades for completed essays or initial evaluations of drafts which will be revised for placement in a portfolio. These schema can evolve as standards of evaluation for all course papers, guides for checking the grammatical and mechanical content of a paper, rubrics for individual papers, rubrics for evaluating the contents of portfolios, rubrics used by students to evaluate their own and their peers' writings, rubrics used solely by teachers, holistic scoring rubrics used to normalize placement essays, and any number of standardized guidelines for any evaluative situation. Tchudi's anthology *Alternatives to Grading Student Writing* offers several interesting examples of rubrics and a brief workshop on developing rubrics and scoring guides for various purposes.

Gail M. Young's essay in Tchudi's collection, "Using a Multi-Dimensional Scoring Guide: A Win-Win Situation," defines three significant advantages of rubrics:

> 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. (226)

To these three recommendations, I add that rubrics can provide a means for consistency in grading, creating an avenue for a certain level of objectivity in evaluation.

In an era of increasing assessment initiatives in liberal arts, a move toward a demonstration of objectivity seems inevitable. These assessment initiatives force teachers in disciplines whose outcomes resist quantification to establish assessment practices which imitate quantification. While we see the difficulty of reducing the assessment process to a simple numerical formula, composition teachers should and can make an effort to show their colleagues what specific qualities of good writing we are assessing for and teaching. Perhaps then, we aren't really seeking a demonstration of objectivity but a designation of fairly consistent standards.

In discussing standards and objectivity, we have to remember that we grade for two audiences: our students, who need constructive information about how their writing works and doesn't work and what changes might improve its quality, and our administrators, who want numbers they can "crunch" to show that the English department is "doing its job" and maintaining accountability. I am not as concerned with the administrative audience: I continue to question the imperative toward quantifiable outcomes for evaluation of whole programs and schools. However, I see the value in establishing a written set of standards for individual paper assignments which offer our first audience for grading (the students) more and clearer information about how they are being evaluated. We are teaching them to become critical thinkers who can integrate emotion into logic, so we need to show them that judgments are never either entirely subjective or entirely objective. There is value, then, in their seeing that reactions to their writing are not based on individual notions of good writing that change with each audience but on some well-discussed and established standards for

college-level writing that exist outside of individual classes. I talk to my students about audiences, contexts, and purposes for writing; I talk to them about code-switching in communication; I also, then, talk to them about objective standards for good writing. If teachers' responses to them can demonstrate that subjectivity plays against certain "objective" standards and that these standards shape even assignment-specific rubrics, we will be showing them how to negotiate complex communication situations.

I use the word "objectivity," then, to represent not a mechanical, numerical standard but a generally-established, agreed-upon standard for evaluation. In a denotative sense, this is not objectivity so much as a kind of academic literacy. In this sense, the rubric then hints at objectivity in evaluation by providing descriptions of good writing contextualized within a particular assignment.

A rubric designed specifically for student papers should describe the particular assignment's requirements or expectations and provide some mechanism for indicating the students' success at meeting those expectations. The rubric allows the reader (teacher, peer, or writer) to see what objectives to read for in the essay, providing a consistent template at once specific enough to provide standards and general enough to account for individuality and creativity in student writing. On rubrics which are assignment-specific (see Appendix 1), I use a plus-to-minus "continuum" for indicating the student's success at meeting each expectation, leaving white space under each line for personalized and specific comments about that element of the essay and space at the bottom of the sheet for more general comments about the essay and specific suggestions for revision that aren't covered in the rest of the rubric. I arrange the rubric so that the most global expectations of the assignment are addressed first, such as issues of clarity, focus, organization, and development, placing stylistic and mechanical concerns at the bottom. The student sees my "agenda" as a teacher and my commitment to the writing process in this organization; areas for true revision are addressed first, and surface problems for editing and proofreading are secondary.

In order to be effective teaching tools, not simply impersonal "copouts" from real responding, these rubrics must be designed and

revised according to each group of writers and each type of assignment. Students can and should participate in the design of the rubric, indicating what features they would expect to see in, for example, a narrative essay. This input engages them in conversation about what constitutes good writing and how standards are established.

The first rubric I ever used (see Appendix 2), given to me as a new graduate teaching assistant, had some interesting features; but I found that, other than the first section on content/subject, the rubric is a generic template that can be applied to almost any essay: "there is a controlling purpose," "there are enough details," etc. A rubric like this threatens to decontextualize the assignment and the essays.

However, pointing out the continuing and consistent requirements of good writing may be useful for some groups of students. With developmental writers working at the paragraph level, I have sometimes employed a more generic template of good writing (see Appendix 3) to reinforce qualities of good writing elaborated in their textbooks and in our class discussion. This rubric is a continual reinforcement for these developing writers that writing must be focused, developed with details, organized effectively, and prepared to meet the demands of an audience. A low score in one area can indicate for the writer where to concentrate revision of both the present writing and future assignments. This rubric also puts into perspective for these students my continual statement that correctness is only one important element of good writing. They learn very quickly that accurate spelling and appropriate comma usage cannot make up for a lack of details or sentences which stray from the focus of the paragraph. This generic type of rubric is probably useful only in a course where the writing is on such a small scale. Essay-based courses demand more context-specific rubrics.

In my continual search for both the most effective and most efficient means of responding to student writing, I balance my concern responding to developing writers in ways that will prompt them to write more, think more about how they write, and take control of improving their own writing with my own practical need to read and respond to a tall stack of essays each week in the midst of

other course preparations and reading. So, while I employ various methods, including rubrics, I find myself always doubting. I ask myself how rubrics account for papers which may be excellent but do not fit the assignment; must I adhere strictly to the requirements of the assignment as indicated on the rubric? I fear this kind of dogmatism limits the creativity of some students or makes some students feel powerless over what they write. A good grading or reading rubric must allow for these "creative" responses to the assignment.

Another doubt about rubrics returns me to the Baumlins' research into the rhetorical styles of teacher response. In theory, a rubric seems to be a forensic response to the student paper, serving mainly to point out the failings or inadequacies of the paper. In practice, however, using a reading rubric doesn't prevent encouraging or positive comments. Often, I feel freer to limit my end comments to positive things, allowing the rubric to bear all of the "bad news." This division of duties relates to my voice as the teacher; the rubric points out negatives in a more distant voice because it is printed and not as immediate as my handwriting. Especially when the students participate in creating the rubric, its reflection of weaknesses in essays is removed one step from the more personal and friendly voice in the margins. This separation of voices may seem like a game I'm playing with my students, pretending that I'm not in control when I really am; but I think it's no more of a game than those we play with audience and "real-world" writing and deadlines. Besides, "game" need not imply trickery. In this case, the game is how I put the responsibility for writing in the hands of the student.

Another "game" which forces the student to take more control of the evaluation process is the actual scoring mechanism on some of my rubrics. Some of my past students have complained that the marks on the continuum line seem vague. Students aren't always sure what a mark in the middle of the line means, as opposed to one which might be placed an eighth of an inch in either direction. I secretly like this ambiguity and have not worked to resolve it because it allows me to offer a general impression of how well the student met a particular requirement, forcing the student to make more specific judgements

about her use of details, etc. This ambiguity also allows me to keep the context of the writing situation in mind; the marks become holistic impressions rather than quantities. The end comment is again useful in assuaging this feeling of ambiguity by offering concrete suggestions for revision or questions about the success of certain elements of the essay.

One of my general discomforts with any kind of evaluative tool, and certainly a potential problem with rubrics, is a tendency to examine the parts of an essay rather than the whole. Erika Lindemann's popular introductory pedagogical text, *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, contends that atomistic evaluation relies on small features of writing while holistic evaluation sees each piece as a mix of rhetorical functions and methods. One rubric that I developed to account for this concern (see Appendix 4) offers the criteria for the essay as a means of acquainting the students with some of the necessary elements of the individual assignments; this guide was given to students before their essay was due, allowing them to see early on in the process how well they were developing their essays in accordance with the elements to be included. In this way, the rubric becomes not an evaluative tool but a developmental tool. Lindemann recommends that written comments on a student paper must "point out what the student did well, why certain problems undermine effective communication, and how to improve the paper. Comments that teach help students develop effective prewriting, writing, and rewriting strategies" (220). Allowing the students actually to participate in the development of the criteria further underlines their investment in their writing, making the rubric even more of a teaching tool. Using the rubric to encourage revision rather than determine letter grades is another means of answering Lindemann's and Anson's call to help students develop.

Rather than dissuading me from using rubrics, these doubts help confirm for me the theoretical underpinnings of rubrics, revealing the most basic reason to keep working on and with them: in spite of their flaws and complications, they force me to read papers more consistently, to hold each student essay to the same standard. They continually remind me of what is and isn't important in reading and

responding to a student text. They allow me to avoid premature censure on stylistic and mechanical problems, keeping me from allowing spelling errors to overwhelm my understanding of a student's organizational method, while forcing that student to understand that writing is really the blending of several activities, such as spelling correctly, offering clear examples, and acknowledging counter arguments. While I appreciate and am always aware of Lindemann's discussion of atomistic versus holistic evaluation, I also know that we learn how something works by looking closely at its component parts. By looking at those parts and creating a rubric which defines them, I look more objectively at the construction of a student text and model for my students how they can evaluate and think critically about their own evaluation of writing.

Of course, some theorists, such as Edward White, suggest that teachers "must abandon the illusory goal of objectivity in our teaching of writing" as it is "both fraudulent and dangerous" (White 75). White contends that we must see response to writing as transactional, as a communication between meaning-making individuals, and, therefore, incapable of escaping subjective elements. Knowing this inherently, as I read, I write in the margins of a student's essay, in a voice that invites the kind of student response and involvement which O'Neill recommends as a means of engaging students in the communicative process. The rubric frees me to write comments less in the voice of "authoritative evaluator" and more in the voice of "fellow writer/interested reader." I allow the rubric to act as a "scapegoat" for all of the negatives associated with the evaluation process.

I don't apply each student's essay to a mechanical test of value that isn't influenced by factors other than those listed on the rubric. To evaluate students in such a way would belie my commitment to teaching students that writing occurs in context. The rubric offers, instead, a consistent set of descriptions of successful writing, contextualized for a specific assignment, that can form the basis for my evaluation of any individual paper. Because I don't want to reconceive the assignment with each paper I read, the rubric allows

for consistency. I don't want to limit the individual appeal of each paper either; the rubric should also leave room for that. The end comment reintroduces context, while the standards set forth by the rubric establish the consistent standards within which those contexts play. Composition teachers must continually assess their assessment tools, reestablishing standards and reevaluating contexts for the writing. The lesson that we teach our students about revision should not be lost on us.

Evaluation is a means for encouraging revision. I seek to respond to students in ways that will help them improve the next attempt. A "text," an evaluative moment, should be a learning opportunity. Students learn very little from A, B, C, D, or F; they learn much more when we communicate with them using many letters, strung together in words and sentences. I value the clarity and consistency of rubrics, and the objectivity at which they hint.

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Appendix 1

English 103
Reading Guide for Research-Supported Essay: - +

_____ Research essay offers a clear, argumentative thesis which makes a claim or proposition.

_____ Essay offers support for the thesis in the form of secondary sources, experience, and reasoning.

_____ Essay acknowledges and refutes arguments which contradict thesis.

_____ Essay has a clear and logical pattern of organization, with the individual sections growing logically out of the thesis.

_____ Essay offers logical transitions to move readers along from idea to idea and paragraph to paragraph.

_____ Essay offers an introduction which leads the reader into the topic, offering enough back-ground information for the reader to feel well-informed.

_____ Essay offers a conclusion which ties the writer's ideas together and offers the reader a sense of closure about the topic.

_____ Essay is written in an appropriately serious and academic tone which limits the use of personal experience and avoids use of first- and second-person pronouns, slang, conversational asides, or direct addresses of the audience.

_____ Essay documents all sources (at least three) using MLA format and a works cited page which leads readers easily to more information on the topic.

_____ Essay is relatively free of the grammatical and mechanical errors which distract readers.

Comments:

Appendix 2

GE-D 101-071
Fall 1994
Reading Guide for Essay One: The Good Teacher - +

Content/Subject:

_____ Paper deals with a good teacher from whom the student apparently learned something.

_____ Paper shows the qualities of a good teacher by illustrating a specific good teacher in action.

_____ Paper talks about/discusses the qualities of good teaching as they relate to the specific teacher.

Focus and Controlling Idea:

______ Paper has a clear focus and controlling idea which makes a statement about good teaching.

______ The controlling idea covers the entire scope of the paper.

______ The controlling idea matches the ideas presented in the paper.

Development:

______ There are enough details to support the main and subordinate ideas; details support not only the subject matter but also the point about the subject.

______ Details are specific and relevant.

______ Details are suitable to audience and purpose.

Organization and Coherence:

______ Each section is connected to the overall purpose or point of the paper.

______ Connections are made between sections so that the reader can follow the logic and the movement.

______ There is a clear progression to the paper.

______ Paper is paragraphed to help the reader follow the author's thinking and to facilitate reading.

Mechanics/Grammar:

______ Paper is relatively free of distracting grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors.

Comments:

Appendix 3

Grading Guide for Eng 098 Paragraphs

Each of the qualities of good writing is worth two points toward your grade.

______ Focus – The paragraph has a clear topic sentence which makes a clear point.

______ Development – Each sentence in the paragraph supports the topic sentence with specific details, descriptions, or facts.

______ Unity – Each sentence in the paragraph sticks to the main point.

______ Coherence – The paragraph is organized logically and flows smoothly.

______ Correctness – The paragraph has complete sentences that are relatively free of grammatical and mechanical errors.

Total Points Earned out of 10:

Appendix 4

Grading Criteria for Interview Essay:

An "A" paper will meet the following guidelines:

1. The essay will have a clear, concrete focus, meaning that one aspect or event of the subject's life will dominate the entire essay. There will be no information that does not relate to that focus.

2. The essay will present one or several stories, depictions of actual events, involving action, detail, and dialogue. These stories will either constitute or illustrate the focus (discussed in #1).

3. The stories and the essay will have a definable beginning, middle, and end, not merely be a series of observations or statements. There will be a clear pattern of organization, a logical building from one point to another.

4. The essay will be full of vivid descriptions and detail and will incorporate dialogue which allows the reader to hear the voice of the subject.

5. The essay will demonstrate an awareness of audience by offering accessible punctuation and grammar, sufficient introduction of the subject, and some statement of the purpose of the essay.

6. Any essay which does not meet these qualifications in a superior fashion will be given a grade other than A. Please reread your own essay and my comments on it; judge your essay according to the guidelines for an A. Then, if you see a need, rewrite the essay to align with the criteria. If you imagine yourself as not meeting these standards, you can

only improve your essay by working on including these qualities. If you feel that your essay meets these criteria or that you don't have the time or inclination to revise, you may resubmit the essay as it is.