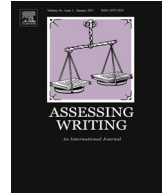




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Assessing Writing



Instructional rubrics: Effects of presentation options on writing quality



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ABSTRACT

Using rubrics for writing instruction has become a common practice for evaluating the expressive writing of secondary students. However, students do not always receive explicit instruction on rubric elements. When students are explicitly taught elements of writing rubrics, they have a clearer perspective of the expectations for their compositions. This study examined high school student writing under three conditions using instructional rubrics in which students were taught rubric elements, provided with a copy of the rubric, and simply scored using the rubric. Results indicated that when students have access to an instructional rubric either through explicit teaching or by receiving a copy, their writing quality improved.

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1. Introduction

Writing is one of the most complex, yet important skills that students are required to master ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2012](#)). The complexity of proficient writing results from it being a cognitive strain on both working and long-term memory. In contrast to reading where the reader is interpreting another's thoughts, writers are formulating, organizing, and expressing their own ideas ([Graham & Perin, 2007](#)). Indeed, the most recent national data indicate that writing is so difficult for students, only 24% of students in grades 8 and 12 write proficiently ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2012](#)). Additionally, student writing at the secondary level is used to demonstrate

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learning in content areas such as history, science, and economics (Graham & Herbert, 2010; Rezaei & Lovorn, 2010). So, as the demands on writers increase, the process of writing evaluation becomes more vital. Therefore, effective writing instruction and assessment are essential elements for student success as they pass through school and prepare for work or college.

Since writing effectively is so important, it is critical that teachers clearly communicate their expectations to students as they embark on expressive writing projects. One of the most effective ways to communicate specific expectations is through the use of rubrics for writing assessment (Andrade, Du, & Wang, 2008). Rubrics are not a simple list of expectations for the writing process. Objectively written rubrics must effectively communicate specific writing elements that students will address in their essays (Fang & Wang, 2011). Rubrics also allow teachers a means for evaluating writing through an interpretive process that is limited only by the language in the rubric itself.

1.1. Rubric debate – reliability and validity

The use of rubrics for evaluating writing has long been the topic of debate among scholars. One of the primary concerns has been the emphasis of reliability in writing assessment to the potential detriment of validity. The initial focus of writing assessment prior to the 1970s was on the development of test designs that maximized reliability in testing instruments (Slomp & Fuite, 2005). Large-scale test developers acknowledged the benefits of using essays to directly test the writing abilities of students. But, direct assessment of writing ability was an inefficient and expensive assessment method. The margin of error for raters evaluating student writing was often unacceptable (Yancey, 1999). In their seminal report on a study of interrater agreement, Diederich, French, and Carlton (1961) made their contribution to the trend toward the development of reliable writing assessments for use in direct writing assessment. Fifty-three raters evaluated 300 papers revealing an inconsistent interrater median correlation of 0.31. This report indicated a potential inherent flaw with direct evaluation of writing: reliability. Through the successive decades, the focus of much of the controversy on writing assessment has continued on whether the use of rubrics increases reliability at the expense of validity (e.g., Broad, Adler-Kassner, Alford, & Detweiler, 2009; Huot, 1990; Jonsson & Svingby, 2007; Slomp & Fuite, 2005; Wiggins, 1994).

The question of how to address potential tradeoffs between reliability and validity has also been a topic of contention. Wiggins (1994) indicated that rubrics should reflect scoring criteria that undergird students' ability to convey more authentic, consequential, and contextual writing. He also contended that, "Validity and educative power will always be sacrificed to reliability if testing is what one does apart from teaching" (p.1).

Complicating the discussion is how validity is defined. At its most absolute level, validity has been conceptualized through Yancey's (1999) summary statement, "Validity means that you are measuring what you intend to measure" (p. 487). The definition of validity has, nonetheless, expanded. The conceptualization of an extended definition of validity was proposed by Messick in 1990 was widely adopted by educational measurement scholars (Slomp & Fuite, 2005). Further, Messick (1996) followed with a more focused discussion of validity. He included a specific emphasis on construct validity and proposed a six-part comprehensive theory of construct validity: content, generalizability, external, structural, substantive, and consequential. The implications of a multifaceted definition of validity for writing assessment are powerful. "Though researchers might study certain strains of validity evidence, they must relate each strain of evidence first to the construct, and only then to the global construct of validity" (Slomp & Fuite, 2005, p. 194). Clearly, arguments supporting or negating rubrics must approach the topic of validity comprehensively.

Adding to the discourse against rubrics are scholars whose emphasis includes applying alternate forms of writing assessment at the post-secondary level. In a book both lauded and criticized, Broad (2003) elaborated on a hermeneutic-based (writing portfolios) rather than a psychometric-based (holistic rubrics) process for discerning and articulating the rhetorical values of college or university writing programs. He describes and elaborates a method whereby writing program objectives are discovered and addressed through a process of discussion and debate among instructors. The goal of his methodology is to drill down to identify the essential rhetorical values of individual school writing programs. So, rather than negating the value of rubrics for evaluating student writing, the Broad text

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