Integrating Assessment and Instruction: Using Student-Generated Grading Criteria to Evaluate Multimodal Digital Projects

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Abstract

   In this article, I explore how we can link assessment to instruction and the multimodal composing process by inviting students to generate the grading criteria for new media assignments, and I show how this approach influenced students' composing and understanding of multimodal texts. I first detail the scaffolding processes I took to help the class learn to construct the evaluative criteria for a digital video project, describing the course curriculum, instructional approaches, and assignments. Then drawing from extended interviews with three learners, I present their perceptions on how the collaborative construction of grading standards affected their learning and comprehension of new media rhetoric. I close with pedagogical recommendations for instructors who teach multimodal digital writing and who seek to integrate the collaborative construction of grading criteria into their classroom.
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> "*...To have effective and productive assessment, assessment that teaches, all stakeholders involved in the assessment must be a part of the entire process. Students can't simply be recipient of assessment. They must be central to the practices in the classroom.*"
>
> Asao Inoue

> "*Much as teachers need to expand their view of learning goals to include more significant learning, they also need to expand their view of feedback and assessment to include more educative assessment.*"
>
> L. Dee Fink

1. Introduction

   When teaching first-year composition, I aim to help students develop multiliteracies (Anderson, 2008; Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007; Selber, 2004; New London Group, 1996) by exposing them to and teaching them about different modes of writing—alphabetic, visual, and aural. For one of their final assignments in the course, students produce multimodal projects using video editing software to demonstrate their understanding of the rhetorical functions of sounds, images, and alphabetic texts. While digital video is not an unfamiliar media to learners who watch countless YouTube clips in any given month,[1] they may not be cognizant of the rhetorical operations and effects at work. Brian Huot (2002a)

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   [1] In 2010 alone YouTube reported a 137% increase in the number of video uploads on its Web site (Yarow & Angelova, 2010).

observed that learners often have difficulties articulating the rhetorical functions of a text, moving "prematurely and uncritically to an evaluative decision" (p. 177). Teaching how to analyze and compose a multimodal video, hence, helps them become rhetorically aware and critical of a pervasive medium and enables them to see and use technology as a rhetorical tool to enrich their communication. Grading multimodal videos, however, presented a concern in my teaching. What criteria, I wondered, should I use to evaluate[2] students' works, given the complexity of multimodal integration? Through their survey research on multimodal writing sponsored by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), Daniel Anderson et al. (2006) discovered that writing instructors often feel they have "little help in conceptualizing multimodal assignments" and assessing students' projects (p. 79).[3] Similarly, Elizabeth Murray, Hailey Sheets, and Nicole Williams (2010) found that "a significant number of composition instructors. . .feel uncomfortable assigning multimodal projects in their classrooms due to concerns with assessment" (para. 1).

The assessment of multimodal "texts" is not only a concern of the instructor, however. It is a crucial skill students need to acquire to succeed as writers. Learning to evaluate the effectiveness of a text is an important part of being able to write and read well. According to Huot (2002a), students must be able to evaluate their own texts in order to revise effectively, making assessment a crucial part of composing; it is not discrete from the writing process. Recognizing its significance, Diane Penrod (2005) has identified assessment as one of the proficiencies that instructors must help students master: "Students will [need to] come to know the criteria others use to judge the quality of an electronic text, how an electronic text should be judged within various contexts, and how to secure evidence to measure a text's value according to different audiences' contexts and criteria" (p. 62). Given the importance of assessment to instruction and students' growth as writers and the dilemma that teachers face when grading new media[4] texts, the evaluation of multimodal projects is an issue that warrants additional research and theorization.

Drawing upon communal assessment practices (Inoue, 2005; Spidell & Thelin, 2006; Leahy, 2002; Shor, 1996), feminist principles (Shiffman, 1997; Royster, 1996), and instructive evaluation (Borton & Huot, 2007; Penrod, 2005; Fink, 2003; Huot, 2002a, 2002b; Soles, 2001), this article presents an "educative," (Fink, 2003) communal-based approach for teaching and evaluating multimodal video projects: Invite students to draft their own grading criteria. In a scaffolding process that lasted five weeks, students in my course analyzed sample media clips, individually developing and refining evaluation criteria covering a range of rhetorical concepts. Then, in discussion with the class, I consolidated these criteria into one comprehensive document that I used to grade the assignments and that students utilized to help them compose and revise their videos.

In what follows, I detail the scaffolding process I took to help students construct their evaluative criteria, and I examine how the use of student-generated grading criteria impacted students' learning and understanding of multimodal video composing and digital rhetoric. I begin by describing the course curriculum, pedagogical process, and assignments in depth. Then drawing from extended interviews with three students who were formerly enrolled in my first-year composition class,[5] none of whom had composed a video before my course, I present their perceptions about the affordances of creating and using student-generated grading criteria. By asking them in detail to reflect on their video composing process and by analyzing their projects and interview reflections, I show the benefits and challenges of such pedagogy. I close with recommendations for instructors who teach multimodal digital composing and who seek to integrate the collaborative construction of grading criteria into their classroom.

2. Current approaches for evaluating multimodal composition

Since the "multimodal turn" in writing studies in the 1990's, compositionists have proposed disparate methods for assessing multimodal work. I will briefly detail current assessment practices to later demonstrate how mine builds upon and differs from them.

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[2] Similar to Huot (2002a) and Inoue (2005), I use the terms evaluation and assessment interchangeably.

[3] Video composing is a frequent assignment in the writing classroom; 73% of the respondents reported having taught and assigned it.

[4] In this article, I use the terms multimodality and new media interchangeably. My definition of new media is informed by Cynthia Selfe's (2004): "Texts created primarily in digital environments, composed in multiple media (e.g., film, video, audio, among others), and designed for presentation and exchange in digital venues."

[5] The participants I recruited for this study were former students who were not currently enrolled in any courses I taught. With IRB permission, I contacted them via e-mail, and three agreed to an interview. I conducted the interviews face-to-face with a computer handy so we could talk and look at the student's project together. Pseudonyms are used in this article.