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Community-based assessment pedagogy

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Abstract

This article attempts to structure student assessment practices in the classroom. Informed by fourth generation evaluation, it discusses a pedagogy based on a recursive framework of writing, assessment, and reflection activities that move students toward productive praxis. Implemented over three semesters at a land grant university in the U.S., this pedagogy moves away from teacher-centered assessment and evaluation of student writing, and pushes students to do these things for themselves. It promotes a classroom in which students take control of all writing assignments, their instructions, assessment criteria, and the practices and reflective activities that go along with their writing. It encourages a community of writers that are implicated in each others' writing and assessment practices, and gets them to critically engage with these practices. The article offers theoretical justifications and qualitative data from three semesters and suggests conclusions based on them.

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Like a sliver under the skin, my grading and assessment of student writing has always bothered me. Often I'd leave a student conference or the grading of a paper feeling unsatisfied with my strategies, knowing that the student will not hear the good in my comments, only see the disappointing grade. And that grade will overdetermine not only how that student understands her writing in my class, but our relationship and her ability to grow as a writer. The pedagogical advice I got in grad school to "just get them to write and write a lot" doesn't work most of the time. The problem lies, as I have come to see it, in the fact that my past students weren't a part of the assessment process at all. They didn't contribute to the creation of

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the assessment rubrics used, the assessment processes, or the figuring of grades. These were things I did because I apparently knew best. But there *was a time* when I didn't know best, yet I was allowed to do these things as a first-year graduate teaching assistant. In a few years, I began to learn what "good writing" could mean in various contexts, how to see this in writing, and talk about it to others. In short, I learned what good writing was by assessing writing myself and talking to others about it. In soft terms, this is what community-based assessment is all about.

In a 2002 *College English* article, Brian Huot urges us to "create a new, shared discourse for understanding assessment as a positive force for the teaching of writing" (2002b, p. 165). In the same year in *(Re)Articulating writing assessment for teaching and learning*, he says that not only do we need to "talk about assessment in new ways" and "recognize how ubiquitous it is within the process of reading and writing" (2002a, p. 4) but that

(w)e need to articulate a much more conscious, theoretical and practical link between the way we think about assessment and the way we think about teaching, research and theorizing of writing, recognizing that assessment is a vital component in the act of writing, in teaching writing, and in the ways we define our students, courses and programs. (p. 11)

Effective writing pedagogy should seriously consider real student involvement, suggests Huot, in the processes of response, assessment, evaluation, revision, and grading.¹ In fact, he says that we must "teach students how to assess" themselves, otherwise "we fail to provide them with the authority inherent in assessment, continuing the disjuncture between the competing roles of student and writer" (2002b, p. 169).

In this article, I attempt to respond to Huot's call by offering a pedagogy, a community-based assessment pedagogy, that integrates assessment with the teaching of writing so that students not only learn to assess themselves, taking active learning stances in the classroom, but they begin to articulate how assessment and writing work in their own practices — theorize — that is, they begin to be more self-conscious, reflective writers. First, I discuss briefly how institutional pressure from grades and traditional teacher evaluations on student writing negatively affect the classroom practices I want to encourage, and so I don't do them. Second, I describe the three key components to my course: a class-constructed assessment rubric, the assessment practices that revolve around it, and frequent reflection activities that ask students to think explicitly about assessment. Third, I argue that when students assess and reflect on rubrics and their assessment practices in public spaces, it helps them become more critical, self-conscious, and hopefully better writers.

¹ While Huot consciously uses "assessment" and "evaluation" interchangeably in both his article and book quote, I'm working from Stephen Tchudi's terms in his introduction to *Alternatives to Grading Student Writing* (1997, p. xiii).

Community-based assessment pedagogy asks students to take control of all the writing and assessment practices of the class, including, as Ed White (1994), Brian Huot (2002b), and others have already suggested, the creation of assessment criteria, rubrics, and writing assignments. Condon and Butler (1997) support this kind of pedagogy in their textbook, *Writing the Information Superhighway*. In their chapter on “Assessing Writing,” they state to their student readers: “If you leave this course dependent on the teacher to tell you what your writing needs, then this course has failed in its mission” (Condon & Butler, 1997, p. 91). My mission is similar, but I add that in order to do this my students must leave my course with the beginnings of a theorizing (or at least an understanding) of their own writing and assessment practices. They can’t get this if I assess their writing for them. In fact, Ed White urges us to get students to develop criteria, share that criteria, involve students in the creation process, and use that criteria to assess and evaluate their practices (White, 1994, pp. 18–19). Brian Huot emphasizes that we shouldn’t divide “assessment and teaching into separate entities” (2002b, p. 163) because it “misrepresents the process of writing,” excluding the “reflection and recursion” inherent in the process (p. 168). Writing and assessment should be two faces of the same process taught in classes. Both rightly see student involvement and ownership of rubrics, assessment practices, and reflection on those practices as vital to student growth and sound pedagogy. Huot (2002b), however, points out that the processes of assessment and evaluation can’t be extricated from those of writing in general; they are a part of the entire process. I agree, and elaborate: effective and productive assessment, like writing to communicate, is done in community by community members. Rubrics and their assessment practices should, therefore, be sites for reflection as well, so that the rubrics can spur richer ways to evolve as writer, assessors, and theorizers of language.

1. Institutional pressure of grades

I won’t rehearse here all the arguments against grading but will highlight a few issues related to the functioning of my pedagogy and classroom. As you’ll quickly see, traditional teacher-centered evaluation and assessment, even grading, play very little part in my classroom.² I do not assess, evaluate, or grade my students writing, yet they still receive course grades, as well as assessments on

² Many have shown that traditional teacher-centered grading is dubious at best, inhibiting and harmful to students on average. Liesel K. O’Hagan explains that while grading emerged in the US around 1850, “studies as early as 1912 questioned the validity of grading, suggesting that in writing instruction. . .grades were far too subjective (Ellsworth and Willson 1988)” (1997, p. 4). More recent scholarship, O’Hagan says, is overwhelmingly against it. Summarizing much of Howard Kirschenbaum’s 1973 research, O’Hagan identifies the main problems in grading practices: they are scientifically invalid (p. 6), provide “false motivation” (p. 8), give a “false sense of worth” (p. 10), provide “superficial learning” (p. 10), produce a “barrier between students and teachers” (p. 11), and lead to “uncreative teaching” (p. 11).

everything they write. It's not a contract system, nor a default grade system. At the end of the semester, each student and I discuss and come to some agreements about their portfolio grade in private conferences that they manage. Fig. 1, adapted from Stephen Tchudi's own similar figure (1997, p. xiii), illustrates a point that many have made already: There are institutional pressures to evaluate and grade student writing acting on us, in our comments, and in our relationships with our students. It is "our job" to do these things. Chairs, deans, students, tax payers, and colleagues expect us to grade. This is how students learn how to write and know when they are wrong, goes the logic. It's the way we've always done writing, the way the institution can monitor how well we're teaching, or how tough our "standards" are, they say. And it's the way other instructors (past, present, and future) will continue to teach writing to students in other classes. So why does my pedagogy not allow me to assess, evaluate, or grade my students' writing? Because it's not fair since I'm already asking them to assess each other and revise based on those assessments. If reading is a hermeneutical act in which an assessor brings dispositions and values to a text, then using student assessments for revision purposes is risky, mostly for the students, and they know it.

At another level, for me to evaluate or grade my students' writing would reduce their writing and assessment practices to mere busywork, meaningless activities with little educative value and no real communicative function. Their own rubrics and assessments — what they come to understand about writing and then apply to others' work — would mean even less in this kind of environment. The weight of the teacher's feedback always trumps a student's, even an entire class of students. Our class would fall into a familiar paradigm: teacher assigns writing, students write, teacher evaluates writing. The teacher still ranks everyone, still gives the grades.³ Sarah, a recent student of mine (and quite typical), reflects on the communicative function of her writing in our class, saying that because her ideas for our rubric and about her peer's writing count in our class, she can "write to get [her] message out [to the class] . . . where as in other English classes, [she] would be entirely trying to please the teacher." Robert E. Probst's early discussion encapsulates what others like Ed White, Brian Huot, and William Condon have said in other places since, but focuses our attention on the student–teacher relationship and its power dynamics:

Ultimately, students must become their own evaluators. In essence, we are asking teachers to help wean students from a simple view of the world. We want students to see teachers not as right authority figures to be deferred to, nor as wrong authority figures to be rejected, but as individuals, representing a culture and a discipline, with whom to talk. (Anson, 1989, p.77)

³ I have deeper, more significant, problems with grading, bell curves, and ranking that go beyond the scope of this article. Alfie Kohn's (1993) *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes* is particularly insightful and convincing. Kohn uses a social psychological direction, showing how Skinnerian behavioral "pop psychology" is pervasive in our culture, flawed in its reasoning, and damaging to intrinsic motivation in education, on the job, and in child rearing in long-term results.

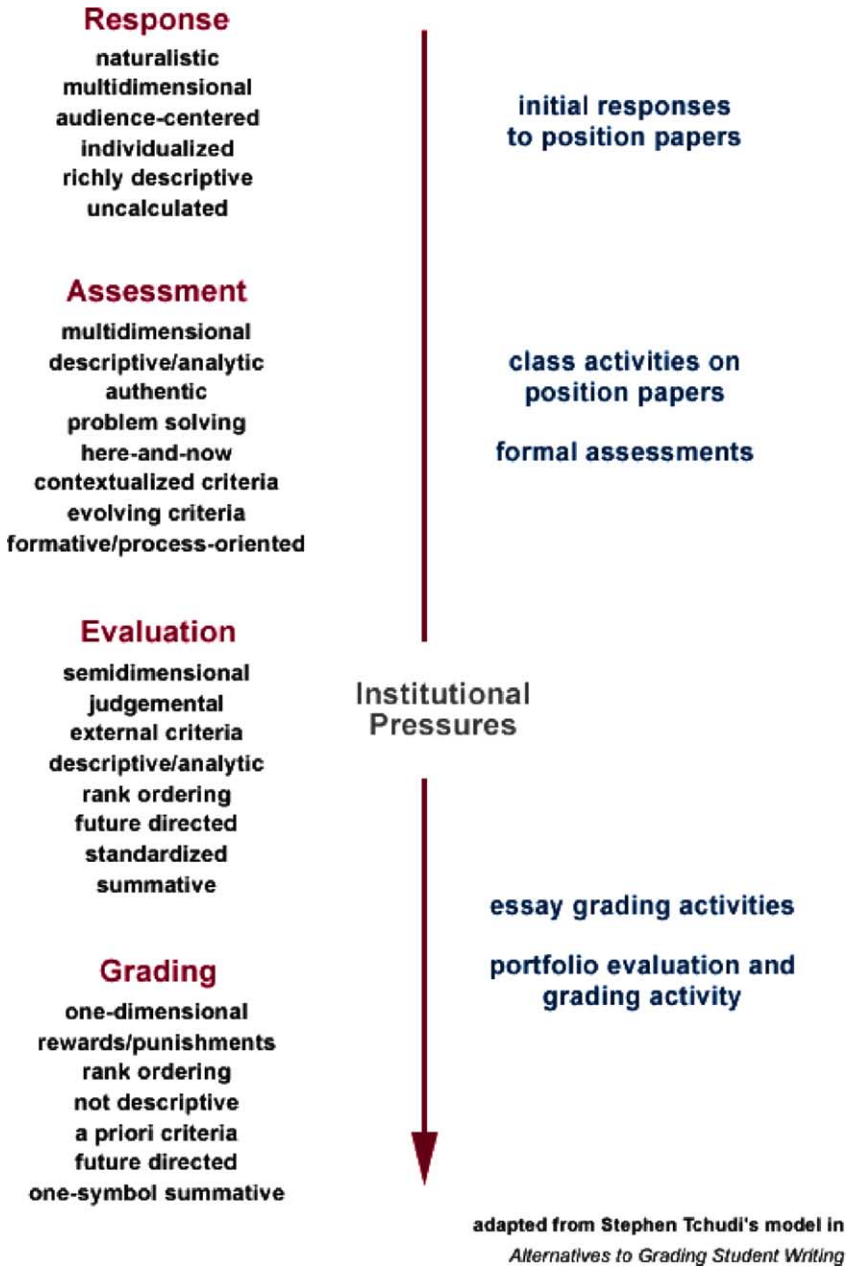


Fig. 1. Tchudi's (1997) distinctions between response, assessment, evaluation, and grading, and my course activities' placements on this continuum.

In the end analysis, should I assess and give grades, they'll figure out what's really going on: They're writing and I'm evaluating. It's the same old thing. The bottom line is: They have little need to form active learning stances and few opportunities to develop into self-conscious, reflective writers. And more importantly, they haven't been pushed to become agents in their own education: How will my writing course help them in their future writing? Have they addressed how their self-assessments might diverge from their teacher's or their peers'? Have they explored how they might find reliability in a network of varying and vying voices making evaluative claims about their texts? In short, have they struggled with an understanding of assessment as it pertains to their writing? These are the core questions my pedagogy attempts to urge students to explore through a framework of repeated assignments, and class-constructed rubrics.

2. The course's basic framework

All three iterations of my community-based assessment pedagogy (over three semesters) have been for a course called *Writing and Rhetorical Conventions* (a 300-level English course) at Washington State University. Most of my students were in their early 20s, non-English majors, and in their third year. While the majority of my students are men, women typically make up about 40–45% of each class. Because of the institution's general ethnographic makeup, I've only had five African-American students (two men, three women), five Asian-American Pacific Islander students (four women, one man), and one international Asian student (a man).

To understand the rubric and assessment practices, it's important to see the context in which it functions, that is, my course framework of re-occurring assignments. During a 15-week semester, each student will write and post on our Internet discussion board (e.g., WebBoard or WebCT⁴) two paragraphs (150 words each), two position papers (one to two pages each or about 350–400 words), and two essays (six to eight pages each or about 2,100 words) (see Fig. 2).

Each piece is assessed, then revised, and saved for possible inclusion in the course portfolio. Each also may be used to begin the next piece, so position paper one might help develop essay one (the next paper). To give us time to look at everyone's position paper in class, students sign up for specific due dates to post their work. Before each designated class session, everyone prints, reads, and writes assessments for the two or three position papers due that day. Fig. 2 shows this cycle of activities, which we go through twice in a semester, and it leaves us about one week in the middle and two weeks at the end for conferences and finishing up. On our second time through the cycle, however, we skip the paragraph activities

⁴ I've also used listservs and listprocs, but I find that discussion boards are nicer for everyone since (by their nature) they archive all work produced in the class, and I can organize them in a variety of ways (e.g., by week, by assignment, by group, by draft of assignments, etc.).



Fig. 2. My framework of recursive writing and assessment activities.

and need considerably less time revising the rubric for the new position paper. Most of our time is spent on the position papers and their assessments.

At the end of each week’s activities, over the weekend, I assign a reflection prompt (posted on our Internet discussion board) that typically asks students to reflect on their activities that week. I read them (without commenting or “replying” on the board), and bring a few to class for the writers to read, and the class to discuss or simply appreciate. This is primarily the place I attempt to get them thinking about assessment, their writing, the rubric and its process of creation, and their practices. It’s also a place where they can voice resistance, ask questions, or suggest things to the class.

Before we can write the position papers, however, we spend about a week and a half discussing at length what we want out of them, what we each want to write about, and what we expect to read and assess. We also create their first assessment rubric. It has to be something that everyone can buy into, use as writers and assessors, then easily revise as we move from position paper to essay, to new position paper. I set it up as something that is constantly revisable by them. Anyone can initiate a revision or question about our rubric at any time. To test and revise the rubric, we write two separate paragraphs, each receiving three peer-assessments that use our in-process rubric. The paragraphs are written quickly, both finished over a two-week period. Everyone’s paragraphs, because they are

short and relatively easy to produce, are due on the same day. We talk very little about them in class as writing, but they are assessed formally, just as the position papers will be in the near future. We then use what we've learned from the paragraph assessments to revise our rubric. This rubric then becomes the starting point for our first position paper's rubric, which can be ready for use in one or two class sessions.

The cornerstone assignment in this repeated sequence is the position paper since the paragraphs just get us warmed up and used to the process and sequence of tasks. Over about a month's time, each student will write a position paper, receive responses and assessments from the entire class (both on paper and through class discussions), post a revision of the position paper based on those discussions and input, get a more formal peer-assessment of the revision by a few colleagues, write an essay (often based on the position paper), and finally receive a formal peer-evaluation of the essay. Once we've done the essay evaluation, we start over again with position paper two. This repeated framework (done twice in a semester) allows the student to continually revisit, re-see, and revise her writing practices — not just drafts — in four ways: (1) as a co-developer of the standards by which all writing will be judged, (2) as a writer who reads a wide variety of assessments of her writing, (3) as an assessor of colleagues' writing, and (4) as a colleague who compares her assessment and writing efforts to others'. So the recursive part is in the various angles students must approach writing and assessing over time. Additionally, as I'll discuss later in more detail, our weekly reflection activities reinforce this recursion by giving a space for questions and theorizing. This framework starts with, and continually returns to, our class rubric, which forms the primary focal point of our initial discussions on writing and our ongoing assessment activities and reflections throughout the semester.

3. The rubric and its process

During the second week, we create our first paragraph assessment rubric (it takes the entire week). To get us started, I typically ask each student to find a "paragraph of good writing" that best fits the kind of writing she understands our paragraph assignment is asking for, and one she'd want to read if written by her colleagues. From this paragraph, each student prepares some observations she'll use in class discussions with her peers. I ask them to think about how the paragraphs they've chosen support their claims, what kind of evidence each uses, how the writer provides insight or analyzes details, and what elements make each paragraph meaningful.⁵ Additionally, I ask them to consider and identify the

⁵ In "*Demystifying grading: Creating student-owned evaluation instruments*," Kathleen and James Strickland offer other ways to involve students in the evaluation practices of the classroom; of note here is their brief discussion of inductive rubrics, ones generated by inducing traits from what students consider "good writing" (Allison, Bryant & Hourigan, 1997 p. 147), which I've used in an altered form here.

discipline and intended audiences for the paragraphs they choose. How do those discourse communities' assumptions match up with our purposes in the class? Since my class is geared around argumentation, rhetoric, and writing conventions, the questions, I know, we will continually explore, so I want them to consider them in this first rubric.

During this week, we create usually two to three rubric iterations, each one getting closer to a class consensus. By "consensus," I do not mean that the class is in complete and full agreement, only that *hard agreements* have to be explicitly made eventually, despite some individuals' disagreements about a few particulars in the rubric. This is important because often I urge them to question their rubric criteria, which usually spurs lots of discussion and competing claims about writing, and highlights problems with any proposed "universal" criterion for writing. Some find this chaotic and unproductive, but the point is to have the discussion and begin to cultivate a culture of dialectical vying. I want our rubric process to open a space for de-constructing their rhetorical practices and conventions. I also want it to problematize their notions of some static, essential, "correct" assessment or grade that goes with each piece of writing. Is it really possible to have this, and what has allowed us to assume this claim about the value of any given text? I don't want us to blindly reproduce rhetorical conventions without interrogating why they are used, and how various folks in the class see their effectiveness and value. The practical side to this is that we can then make better decisions about *why* each element of the rubric should be there for our purposes. For instance, how does "offering support" (as a rubric criterion) serve our purposes for the assignment we've given ourselves, for learning in our class, for informing, exploring, or persuading (or whatever we set our mutual purpose to be)? What kind of support are we actually talking about and why that kind? We don't have to come to final conclusions. Instead I suggest that we raise important questions, discuss them, make some tentative decisions, then log the questions and come back to them continually during the semester. The important thing is that they do the constructing and revising, so that they have ownership of the language and contents of whatever rubric we end up with.

In a recent course we began the process in our second week of class. My students got into groups, shared their notes and paragraphs, discussed, and produced rubrics to offer the class for discussion. I gave them a simple structure to use when writing these rubrics, a statement followed by a list of verb phrases. I reiterated to them that we are not interested in a rubric that will identify an "A" paragraph or an "exemplary," or "outstanding" one — this isn't a set of grading criteria — instead our rubrics should help us identify proficient paragraphs, ones that do the job we ask of each other in the assignment handout. It's a list of proficiency markers only. If a paragraph does what these verb phrases identify, then the paragraph has done its job. While we would continually talk about making things work better in papers (i.e., excelling in each rubric dimension), all we cared about at this point was the sweet-spot of "proficiency." After about 20 minutes, we talked as a class about each rubric, pointed out nice features, then re-convened in groups, and revised our rubrics quickly. I collected them and posted on our Web site a class version based

on what seemed to be a consensus in the rubrics I collected. I tried hard to use the language produced from the class, not mine. Here's what they came up:

A proficient and adequate paragraph will . . .

- Contain a consistent claim
- Support claim with appropriate evidence (when needed)
- Elicit thought on the part of the audience
- Adapt to or consider its audience
- Use clear and concise language
- Use appropriate language and grammar
- Contain three or more sentences

Since none of the groups' renditions paid much attention to an order of importance, I ordered this list in bullet fashion and put the most repeated criteria at the top of the list.

For the following class session, I asked everyone to bring this first official version with revisions and suggestions marked on their copies, correcting me where I made a mistake or misinterpreted our discussion. And again, I structured their re-thinking, pointing them toward specific features of the rubric to re-consider, things we didn't get a chance to talk about: specific language choices, hierarchy of elements, elements that said the same thing or that can be combined easily, and conceptual groupings of the elements present (headings), etc. In our following class discussion, I tried not to make evaluative statements about their rubric, but instead asked them to explain and explore what each criterion means: why it was needed, what does it look like in a paragraph, and how would one locate it when reading paragraphs? I let them answer without much commentary on my part beyond occasionally summarizing points, or asking clarifying questions. I let them talk it out, and asked a student to "take notes" for us, which I used to revise their rubric after class.⁶ I had to accept whatever they came up with, and I told them this, but I also told them it was their job to provide adequate justification for criteria and be able to agree as a class on the rubric eventually. From this more detailed and nuanced class discussion, we formed a more finalized rubric, which I posted:

A proficient and adequate paragraph will . . .

- I. Clarity of thought
 - Contain a consistent claim
 - Support claim with appropriate evidence (when needed)
- II. Proper etiquette
 - Contain three or more sentences
 - Use appropriate language and grammar
 - Use clear and concise language

⁶ In retrospect, I think I should have asked more than one student to take notes in order to get a fuller account of our discussion.

III. Writing to the reader

- Be complex enough to elicit thinking beyond basic observations
- Challenge and/or engage its audience
- Adapt to and consider its audience

Here, most in the class liked the idea of grouping the criteria under headings, so as to have a better understanding of what they were asking of themselves and what they were going to look for when assessing. They also altered some language and added one element in the “Writing to the reader” section. Most felt that “complexity” was a good component to focus on when thinking about what would “elicit thinking beyond basic observations.” And this seemed to match well with the new criterion to “challenge and/or engage” the audience, and the final one in that section. The class felt the first two were talking mainly about content, whereas the third element in that section was dealing with style and rhetorical approach. Everyone, however, still unanimously thought that placing the rubric in hierarchical fashion was not a good idea. All elements were in effect of equal weight. Their thinking was quite logical. These elements simply need to be there. If they are all there, the paragraph is complete and proficient. Order of importance, or weight of any individual criterion, has no bearing on this kind of judgment.

While this rubric is somewhat simple, it’s important to realize that we generated it through a week or so of discussions, reflections, and group and individual activities. Each element had been discussed, thought about, and re-visited several times, so a criterion like “support claim with appropriate evidence (when needed)” meant very specific things to our class, things we’d change in a few weeks. Most importantly, I wanted this process to be recursive, critical, self-conscious, and reflective — things that would be a big part of our assessment practices and the structure of the course.

Once we had a rubric, they used it to write and post a paragraph (over the weekend). In the following class session, we talked about how to use the rubric for assessing, what assessing meant in our class (I discuss this below), and some ways we might go about assessing the paragraphs. By the end of the week, they had posted their assessments to their colleagues’ paragraphs (three paragraphs I randomly assigned to each student), and we looked at a few in class. From these discussions, we again revised our rubric in preparation for the second paragraph (done by the following week). After this discussion, their paragraph two rubric looked like this:

A proficient and adequate paragraph will . . .

I. Clarity of thought

- Contain a consistent thoughtful claim (e.g., one that is insightful)
- Support claim with appropriate and sufficient evidence
- Weigh in on the issue at hand (i.e., take a position within the debate)

II. Writing to the reader

- Be complex enough to elicit thinking beyond basic observations
- Challenge and/or engage its audience
- Adapt to and consider its audience

III. Proper etiquette

- Contain three or more sentences
- Use appropriate language and grammar
- Use clear and concise language

At this crucial stage, the rubric became more complex and explicit. After seeing and assessing three paragraphs and looking at some in class, they saw a need for the paragraphs to focus on a “thoughtful” or “insightful” claim, not just a claim that offered simple factual information or summary (the writer should “weigh in on the issue at hand”). They also found a need to dramatically revise their ideas about support. It was now *necessary* for a proficient paragraph that attempted a “thoughtful” claim, to contain “appropriate and sufficient evidence.” Of particular note in this final version was hierarchy. The most convincing argument made for this need after reading the first set of paragraphs was voiced by one male student. He explained convincingly to the class that the criterion of three sentences isn’t as important as something like adequate support or a focused and thoughtful claim. While most still wanted paragraphs with at least three sentences, they did agree that some rubric elements were more important than others when considering a writer’s purpose and a readers’ perception of meaning in a paragraph (what is she communicating to me?). And the rubric should reflect the class’s priorities accurately. Interestingly, it was the continued discussion of headings and groupings that allowed the student to argue his point. In effect, he said that “writing to the reader” was more important than “proper etiquette” in writing. The class, by and large, through just one round of assessments, began to see the difference between writing from a checklist of items to include in one’s assignment, to a more nuanced understanding of the relationships among writing priorities and the difficult judging that must be conceptualized when assessing to help writers write better. While it was just a start and there was lots of disagreement, I took the changes and issues raised around the rubric to be positive signs that our class was beginning to form active learning stances in which they were learning through assessment, understanding how rhetorical conventions work, are used, and are contested in texts.

Almost a month later through similar kinds of discussions, our position paper one rubric ended up this way:

A proficient and adequate position paper will . . .

I. Clarity of thought, support, and details

- Focus on a single claim that is arguable, consistent, thoughtful, and takes a unique position on the issue (i.e., different from others’ stances, positions, and/or analyses)

- Sufficiently support claims with strong, specific, verifiable, and appropriate evidence
- Provide only details that are necessary, relevant, and appropriate
- II. Invoking audience, intellectual engagement, and significance
 - Offer significance of the writer’s position to the audience (should answer: “so what?”)
 - Be complex enough to elicit thinking beyond basic observations
 - Challenge inquisitively and engage intellectually its audience
- III. Organization, transitions, and style
 - Employ a logical structure or order that is appropriate for the discussion at hand
 - Provide (when needed) transitions between ideas and paragraphs
 - Have a strong control over appropriate language, punctuation, and grammar decisions
 - Use proper MLA formatting conventions, particularly with quotations and other outside information used

This rubric was produced from one full week of assessing and discussing the first eight position papers. While some elements were added, some of the language became more specific and reflected our class discussions. Maybe the most striking feature is the change in headings, or rather the class’s developing sense of the three main conceptual areas they thought were most important in a position paper written to the class. While initially most disliked the idea of long, verbose rubrics that seemed hard to use, most now found it important to be as explicit and careful in wording as possible, which often meant a rubric that was meatier. Because the class was deeply engaged in the rubric at all levels, they knew it well, had nuanced notions of what each criterion meant, and so did not see this more complicated and longer rubric as verbose or hard to use (as I know my own rubrics had seemed to my past students). Finally, one important note brought up by several students during discussions of these first few position papers was the “so what” factor. The titles of some of the position papers could illustrate why this became an issue: “Modern Justice,” “Foundations of Citizenship,” “Women in Afghanistan,” and “Children of the State.” Students simply had a tough time seeing the significance — caring — in these positions posed to the class for discussion. While most were considered to have revolved around “thoughtful” and “arguable” claims, these positions still seemed distant to most in the class. This sentiment quickly became the most important rubric element in the “Invoking Audience, Intellectual Engagement, and Significance” section, and in fact, pushed us to change some of our assignment instructions in the second position paper.

This is the rubric and its basic process of creation and revision, which is structured into the writing and assessment practices of the course, and added by weekly reflection activities. The rubric is central because it forms both our discussions of writing as a set of conventions, and it’s used to assess the writing of the class. It also provides an opportunity to see how writing conventions may change as our

class's writing purposes and needs change — this is often done explicitly in our reflections. We can talk in concrete ways, not in fuzzy ways, and ways that are connected to commonly known examples produced by the students themselves. So they aren't just "responding" to their colleagues, but developing assessment criteria and formulating an understanding of what writing means in the abstract, while also evolving practical assessment criteria. And as is probably clear already, the rubric means little, and cannot do all these things, unless *they* use it to assess.

Because of this, I try simply to provide the structures for my students to create a rubric, re-think it, write from it, use it to assess each other, and, of course, reflect continually upon all these practices. I distribute guidelines, provide due dates, post weekly reflection prompts, and pose additional questions in class that facilitate assessment discussions on student writing. In short, I try to coach them toward sound assessment practices and active learning stances by making them do the hard work of assessment. I encourage them to voice disagreement, show agreement, and elaborate and qualify ideas. I act as a facilitator, questioner, and listener when we talk about each other's writing. I try to keep us focused on our rubric in our assessment discussions, yet not be a guard to ivory towers. When asked about what "I think" of a piece of writing or about our rubric, I try to re-direct the question to the class in an honest way, sometimes re-phrasing it, explaining that I can't answer that question for them. Our class writing isn't about what I want — it's about what the class can agree on *they* want and can justify in some way so that agreements can be made. In this sense, our rubric is a set of *hard agreements* that we must make through dialogue and looking at specific writing, and our assessment practices are our attempts to judge one another's writing from these agreements, learning along the way (as all teachers/assessors do), even if individually we disagree with a point here or there. In this atmosphere, their writing isn't about me, it's about *them* — something many aren't used to. They can't be passive, can't simply accept criteria or assignments, nor can they write the way they've usually written in the past. My students must debate and decide on all the important decisions regarding their writing in the course from start to finish. The class is about *them learning* not me teaching.

Feminist pedagogy agrees with this kind of classroom, in which difference and the centrality of the male professorial voice is re-framed. Carolyn G. Heilbrun, in "The Politics of the Mind: Women, Tradition, and the University," asks if we can "conceive [of] difference without opposition" and thus "challenge the ancient male-female binarism as an intellectual imperative" within the academy (Gabriel & Smithson, 1990, p. 31). Essentially, Heilbrun attempts to show how Trilling's famous notion of the "life of the mind" has come to characterize academic endeavors in general. And I include the classroom in these endeavors. This notion embodies "wholly male-centered culture and university," binarism (Gabriel & Smithson, 1990, p. 28). Furthermore, she asks: "what is lost to this 'life of the mind' — to mind itself, to colleges and universities, to that proud contemplation of texts and culture to which Lionel Trilling devoted his life — when women are excluded from taking their full part?" (p. 29). If we re-phrased Heilbrun's question

to fit the writing classroom, the answer, to me, seems obvious. What is lost when we exclude most of the stakeholders in the classroom from fully participating in their own assessment and the grading processes — in their own praxis? Can a full, rich democratic community of fellow-writers, fully engaged in all aspects of their writing as active learners, critically reflective, bound together in mutual endeavors, be fostered without their own participation in the assessment and grading of their writing?

4. Community-based assessment practices

Community-based assessment pedagogy resists in theory and denies in practice the traditional way evaluation, assessment, and grading happen in the classroom. In the conventional paradigm, the teacher is *the* evaluator or assessor in the classroom who comes down from the mountain to bless the unclean ones, the students who are incapable of assessing themselves, or at least when it really counts. If assessment is a part of writing processes, and if we want our students to be able to assess their performances adequately, then it seems we typically give them little opportunity to practice, and thus constrain their ability to learn to write better. Fourth generation evaluation theory offers a way out of this harmful paradigm. According to Guba and Lincoln, fourth generation evaluation is based on a “hermeneutic dialectic,” which accounts for more (if not all) of the stakeholders involved or affected by the evaluation process (1989, pp. 40–41). This hermeneutic dialectic circle allows each stakeholder to offer input into an evaluation, in a kind of round-robin style, thus creating a circular process of recursive negotiation and consensus making (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, pp. 151–152). Informing heavily this dialectical process is a constructivist methodology (as opposed to a “scientific mode” or positivist model) (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, pp. 44–45). So stakeholders always have a say in effective and productive evaluation criteria, what those criteria mean, and their associated processes of evaluation. This agrees with how rhetorical conventions exist and function in real life. Good writing isn’t static or apart from contexts, purposes, audiences, assessments, and writing practices, as well as their modes of production and distribution. If “facts” require a “value framework” in order for them to be valid or understood, as Guba and Lincoln state (1989, p. 44), then why not offer a classroom context that explicitly acknowledges this, addresses it, and constructs stake in assessment as well as writing? Having stake in these processes means students can critically engage their writing as meaningful practices situated within community for particular purposes. Most importantly, what fourth generation evaluation theory demonstrates to us is that to have effective and productive assessment, assessment that teaches, all stakeholders involved in assessments must be a part of the entire process. Students can’t simply be recipients of assessments. They must be central to the practices in the classroom.

Students must assess each other — this is fundamental to my pedagogy. But “assessing” isn’t simply “responding” to writing. These activities are different in

my classroom, as Tchudi's diagram shows (see Fig. 1). The assessment practices in my course do not work as well when students are allowed to respond to writing in unstructured ways. While open-ended responses may encourage revision, ask explorative questions about a text, and assume writing is a process of learning and meaning making, as Tchudi explains (1997, p. xiv), its purposes are less explicit and can be too random and generative to help writers focus on revision and adequately formulate practices that will help them in future writing endeavors. Response also doesn't allow us to reflect well on our rubric since it doesn't assume it as a set of priorities from which to read. "Assessment," on the other hand, says Tchudi, is a process in which the reader/writer primarily reads and revises for ideas and refinement that are guided by criteria or values (often explicit). It's a process that looks to discover how the writing can be the fullest, which areas need growth, and which areas need trimming — what's good in the writing and what's not. It addresses context and evolving criteria, makes judgments about what's on the page, stops exploring every avenue of interest, and pursues only those that make sense, seem most profitable and appropriate (Tchudi, 1997, p. xiv). This is what I want my students to do. Their assessments use our rubric as a reading grid, pointing to potential and revision along its dimensions. We try to put on our rubric as a pair of glasses, so to speak, when reading to assess. Assessing, then, is a way of reading and responding that's filtered to catch only our class's expressed priorities.

For my students, responding tends to be easiest since it doesn't assume a rubric, and most have done it more than anything else when "critiquing" writing in school, so I push most for assessing, knowing that they may slide into responding (i.e., move away from our rubric, or not link comments to it, when discussing a colleague's work). In all their assessments, I ask them to ignore "errors," and certainly not mark them or call attention to them. We assume they'll be revised out later on since assessment happens in the middle stages (or even the front end) of their drafts' evolutions. Instead, I ask them to focus on *potential* in the writing in the areas our rubric identifies. The student judges the paper according to the rubric, makes a brief, specific comment for each criterion (a sentence or two) that shows the writer where the potential seems to be, and includes a short general assessment of the paragraph that points to the place the writer should revise first, or some overarching questions from which the writer might begin. It's about a page long. That's an assessment, and it's, in effect, what they'll do for each major writing assignment in the class.

Ryan's first formal assessment of Brad's paragraph two is fairly typical in length and approach (See Fig. 3). Like about half of the class, Ryan uses the larger conceptual headings of the rubric to organize his assessment by paragraphs (i.e., clarity of thought, writing to the reader and proper etiquette). While he talks explicitly about three of the rubric criteria, he could be more explicit about some of the criteria the class felt were particularly important, like "be complex enough to elicit thinking beyond basic observations" and "weigh in on the issue at hand." But his assessment is doing a few things right. It supports its claims about the

Subject: Re: Brad Mullen

Message no. 392 [Reply of: no. 349]

Author: Ryan Barnes (barn3200)

Date: Wednesday, February 4, 2004 11:00am

You have a consistent claim (Aristotle's definition of citizen conflicts with America's position).

Your engaged the audience well, but your claim is a little straightforward. I see potential for elaboration on the importance of Aristotle's definition and it's importance for our society.

Etiquette was good. To help your paragraph sound a little better, you might want to change the first of the sentence that starts with "which" because the previous sentence started with the same word.

Fig. 3. Ryan's second formal assessment for a peer's paragraph two.

text's main claim and pushes Brad to see potential in engaging the audience. While it could still be more specific, discuss all of the rubric criteria, and offer a general overall assessment of the paragraph, Ryan does center his assessment on the rubric's priorities, thus Brad has a place to begin revising in order to meet our rubric's demands and can now compare Ryan's suggestions to his other peers' assessments, which should discuss the same rubric dimensions. In fact, Brad's other two assessments, focus most of their attention on the same area of the rubric that Ryan did. Ian, who comments on each rubric element, offers this assessment for the second element in the "Writing the reader" section: "I feel your paragraph was some what engaging but I feel you didn't really challenge the reader. You might want to try to incorporate the reader into your writing. You may do this by asking the reader a question or telling the reader something to engage him in your writing." Again the language is suggestive and formative, not summative. Ian essentially agrees with Ryan. While Ryan suggests engaging the class with content (i.e., "the importance of Aristotle's definition and its importance for our society"), Ian offers a strategy of questioning that pulls readers in. Tyler, the third assessor for Brad's paragraph, also saw this same area as the key place of potential. His assessment combines Ryan's and Ian's. He says, "I felt that you were able to engage the audience but didn't really challenge [us]. If you decide to write more on this paragraph you could try further explaining the last part about the double standard. What can we do about this double standard? That would be a good way to challenge the reader. . . ." All saw the same rubric element, under the heading of "writing to the reader," as the issue for Brad's revision, Ryan and Ian assessed in terms of "engagement," while Tyler assessed it in terms of "challenge." All three assessments offer convenient ways to synthesize vying voices on the text, but the presence of three provides Brad with the opportunity to make some critical decisions as a writer, not blindly takes one assessment as a true assessment, or rejects one because the assessor "didn't like his topic."

Writers must become more responsible for their revisions in this scenario. They are pushed to read critically for patterns across assessments and areas that seem to cause readers to read in different and similar ways. There tends to be more of the rubric assessed, but more importantly, if the writer is reading her assessments

carefully, revisions suggest themselves, decisions about revision begin to be more concrete. So while each assessment by itself might be considered somewhat inadequate, the three together offer a fuller and richer assessment for Brad to consider. Of course, this is only the second opportunity to assess. So when we discuss assessments like these three as a class — which we do — we do so in order to find new strategies for articulating assessments and ways writers can read their often contradictory assessments in profitable ways. We also discuss the missing rubric dimensions not discussed.

This means that in all class discussions around our rubrics and assessments, I push them to grow as assessors. We look for assessments that help writers do the job we've given them, and then try to explain why they work well. In this way, their assessments and our discussions about them are formative in both form and function. In these discussions, I ask my students to explain to each other what seems most helpful, and why. They summarize, elaborate, and revise practice in the classroom with their peers, that is, theorize. I want them to think of assessment in specific ways, not in the ways they may be used to when “critiquing” colleagues' writing — but I do not tell them how to do things “right,” instead we derive this from what's posted. But assessments do have purposes and they affect the assessments themselves. Thus we reflect on what assessment and revision are, what they mean for us in this class, what the purposes are for these activities, and most importantly, how to frame judgments for their colleagues in profitable ways. For the class's benefit, I also ask them to reflect on assessment as a way to find potential in working drafts, to question assumptions in the text, and to theorize what they are doing. From these discussions and reflection activities, we revise the rubric, and maybe our individual practices.

And assessments always generally improve. Again, Ryan's improvement is typical. In his formal assessment of Brett's position paper one (about one month later), Ryan assesses along more of our rubric's dimensions, and is more detailed (see Fig. 4). Partly this is to do with assessing a slightly longer piece, but much of it is due to the activities that surround assessment and more practice. Ryan's assessments are more specific and suggest more for Brett. He engages in a dialogue with Brett as a fellow writer in the class. He offers friendly suggestions, states his ideas and reactions, remains fairly detailed, and keeps most of these comments pointed at Brett's text. His final overall assessment, which he didn't have in his earlier assessment, reinforces the primary concern he has already identified in the first area of the rubric (i.e., “connect your points about Bush and Pericles' use of patriotism as being deceptive”), which is where Brett's revision should begin. This closer attention to our rubric dimensions, discussion-based assessment strategy, and inclusion of an overall assessment are all areas Ryan's first assessments could improve on — and he did. Ryan and I had no conferences, nor did I speak to him specifically about his assessments. He was able to do this, like most other students, all by himself. This probably couldn't have happened so easily if we weren't continually discussing and reflecting on assessment as a class, looking at weekly reflections together, talking about individual assessments, and writing

Subject: Re: Public Address**Message no. 547** [Reply of: no. 524]**Author:** Ryan Barnes (barn3200)**Date:** Thursday, February 26, 2004 12:33am

1) Clarity of Thought, Support, and Details.

-I see potential for using further support for your point in your paper. I point I saw was that Bush and Pericles used the same method to deceive their audience. You support this point with their use of patriotism to persuade the audience. However, the term deception in this sense occurs when someone persuades someone to believe something that's not true or wrong. You don't provide evidence to show how it is deceptive but I do think that you could easily provide examples to show how their method of persuasion misleads the audience to believe something that may not be entirely correct.

-All your details seem necessary for your paper.

2) Invoking Audience, Intellectual Engagement, and Significance.

-I think your paper is highly invoking because it concerns a topic that is currently a very important topic. If, indeed, Bush is misleading us, then action should be taken. Personally, I think Bush does use rhetoric that draws the audience away from the reality of the situation. For example, he made it sound like Iraq the biggest threat for the US when in reality other countries such as North Korea are much greater threats.

3) Organization, Transitions, and Style.

-Order and organization were good. I think you could include reasons for why using patriotism can be deceptive in the 2nd and 3rd paragraph.

Anything else in the rubric that I didn't mention was good.

Your paper is very interesting and it is organized well. As I mentioned earlier, I think you need to connect your points about Bush and Pericles use of patriotism as being deceptive. Even if the use of patriotism is manipulative, it cannot be considered deceptive unless it leads the people to believe something that is not true.

Fig. 4. Ryan's formal assessment for a peer's position paper one.

daily informal assessments of first drafts of every position paper. The repetition in my pedagogy seems to provide this kind of development.

The key to making assessment work pedagogically is periodic reflection on the assessment activities. I do it once a week, done over each weekend. I give them general, open-ended prompts to point them to the areas I want them to reflect on. For a prompt during week 11 that asked the class to consider how their assessment practices had gone so far (I asked them to compare an early reflection on what "assessing" meant and their own assessments of the first position paper), Brad says,⁷

I think that I [am] actually looking deeper into the papers of my classmates. Before I would just look at a paper and say "wow, this is really good" and leave it at that. But now it seems as though I [am] going underneath the story and figuring out why I was so compelled by this story and what made it good. I guess I [am] starting to realize what the key components of a good story are.

Not only is Brad theorizing about assessment (i.e., he looks "underneath the story" and asks "why"), seeing the good and growth in his assessment practices, but he's allowing others to profit from his experience. These reflections are all

⁷ For clarity, I've made slight typographical changes to all the student quotations that are presented in the text of my discussion.

public, posted on our Internet discussion board. I highlight a few in class (six or so at the start of each week), asking the writers to read portions of them to the class. We then talk about them, or sometimes, we just let them stand.

Oftentimes, these reflections can help students identify problems they are having. Catarina, in the same week's reflection, says,

In assessing others, I'll be honest, I tend to rush through and conclude with minimal suggestions. I recognize this through reading my last assessment and know that making real suggestions is the only way to benefit the writer. I know the feeling of frustration when someone says "good job," or "good start." So, instead of making comments like that I hope to really pin-point the problems areas by being specific and making comments like, "Paragraph 2, Line 3 is awkward or unclear," and then giving a suggestion on how to fix the problem.

Here Catarina not only honestly identifies her area for growth in her assessment practice, but she links it to her responsibility to her colleagues in the class. Additionally, she thinks up a good strategy for better assessments in the future. Again, praxis is formed by reflecting about practice. So while she has not assessed satisfactorily in the past, maybe even cheated a few of her classmates, her public reflection (this was one we discussed that week in class) offers the class an opportunity to benefit from her mistake and reflective insights — a mistake arguably worth making in the context of the entire class. Reflections like this one, which are typical, give the class a chance to see that growth is more important than ignoring failings and better assessment can come out of reflecting on our past practices. Maybe most importantly, by looking at Catarina's reflection, the class was able to theorize about assessment practices and responsibility.

Often, however, my classes offer both me and my students opportunities to articulate larger assessment issues, ones that can reach far beyond our classroom, even if only in personal terms. In a reflection after our essay evaluation exercise,⁸ Elizabeth illustrates a fairly typical problem between the acts of evaluation/assessment and the grading that many teachers feel every term. Elizabeth, who continually found it hard to cope with the rubric and assessments by her peers, explains that her evaluation and grading process was hard despite knowing clearly the criteria we'd established. In fact, this was the problem. Illustrating an Elbovian compassionate reading of her peer's paper, she says, "[i]t's hard when you set criteria. . . then you

⁸ The essay evaluations are essentially longer, more formal assessments that tend toward summative judgments and focus on lesson potential. In these, I ask them to talk in more summative terms (not formative) in their final general comments or endnote, while sticking to the shorter assessment-style comments when discussing each rubric element. Additionally, I ask them to put a mock grade on the paper. This agrees somewhat with how Tchudi identifies "evaluation." He says that it focuses on audience concerns (maybe exclusively), judges through external criteria, is descriptive and summative, ranks writing products, and directs for the future. It demands judgments of effectiveness from standardized sets of values (1997, p. xiii). Peter Elbow contrasts grading with evaluation, calling it "ranking," or a "summing up [of] one's judgment . . . into a single, holistic number or score." He concludes that "[r]anking implies a single scale or continuum or dimension along which all performances are hung" (1999, p. 175).

get to a paper, Christina's, and her strengths weren't what I felt was important — then what, change my rubric to accommodate? . . . that's unethical . . . it's difficult to grade a great paper that just didn't fit our criteria." In effect, she moves through a process of understanding "the mystery of liking" another's writing, that is, "to be able to see potential goodness underneath badness" (Elbow, 1999, p. 192). And more importantly, she frames the "badness" of the paper not in such essentialized terms, nor even in terms of "badness," but as strengths that just don't "fit our criteria." Despite her unease, Elizabeth shows how "good" and "bad" writing are tough contextual judgments, mediated through a set of values (our rubric), made in community. She couldn't have understood so well this insight if I had told her it or explained it to her in an endnote on her own paper. Yet Elizabeth clearly sees this problem in Christina's paper. Moving from assessment to evaluation and grading helps most of my students find these kinds of insights and critical ways of reading, despite some healthy discomfort.

But community-based assessment pedagogy also offers ways to build a pragmatic sense of community that is active and purposeful.⁹ I'm not talking about a fuzzy, cum-by-ya community, but a tangible set of practices that make students rhetorically and ethically face each other, listen, and act on each other's words. And again, it starts from our rubric and assessment activities. They are the common places for us to know each other — to bind us in common practices and purposes. In the 10th week of a recent course, Kelly reflects on what she's come to learn after an essay evaluation and grading activity we've done. She explains that "[i]t is important to recognize that the only barometer of the effectiveness of your writing is through feedback from the reader and their interpretation of your text. It is often said that actions speak louder than words, but in writing it is the reader's interpretation that speaks louder than your words." And this social-constructivist realization could only be meaningful in a community of writers and assessors that Kelly comes to trust. She explains in her final reflection:

My biggest challenge this semester was my preconceived notion that I was walking into this class with a "green thumb" and that I already knew how to write effectively . . . This made me immediately defensive and unreceptive to the suggestions and criticism of my peers when they evaluated my work. What I had to come to realize was that I was writing for them, and that their engagement into my papers determined my effectiveness. So I had to swallow my pride and digest some criticism and I am not ashamed to admit that I am a better writer because of my peers!

Kelly's assessments of her work helped her to gain some new insights into writing and audience. It was uncomfortable for her. She had to swallow some pride, but

⁹ I'm thinking in terms of the shared origin of the words "community" and "communicate," which in Latin is *commun-is* (common). The OED parses the term: *com* (together) and *mūnis* (bound, under obligation). I'm implying that authority and empowerment in individual writers comes from a group's sense of being bound together in a mutual struggle with and within texts and contexts, meaning and the conventions that constrain and overdetermine meaning.

she's "a better writer" because she "came to realize" that her peers had "criticism" she should "digest." Sarah, another student in the same class, approaches the value of community assessments from a different but equally productive angle:

... when there is a group evaluation, it helps make the critique more valid, because it isn't just one person's feeling, but a group ... I like the group evaluations in the class. On my last position paper, having the class all agree on an idea to help expand my paper, made me think, and by giving me the idea, it also helped me understand what they were talking about.

While Kelly takes a pragmatic approach (she's writing to her colleagues in class, so she'd better take their assessments of her work seriously), Sarah uses an analytical approach (her colleagues assessments agree in certain ways, so those judgments on her writing must be more valid through their apparent reliability). Both approaches center on trust in a tangible community that has an immediate, practical function. The voices acting on writers and their texts are active in helping each other write better papers because they assess according to community-defined criteria and in a context in which everyone is both assessing and receiving assessments. They are *mutual* acts of assessments, a giving and getting. When I also consider where each student started and left the class, I see two writers who became empowered by their assessment practices and reflections, and allowed others to do the same around them. I also hear active voices in groups, in our conferences, and in their assessments and evaluations of their colleagues' work.

The sharing of writing and assessing also allows some to find help on the job, in their other courses, in their thinking about issues others write about, in their educational journeys, and with friendships and citizenship status. In a late-semester weekly reflection, Krystal offered the class this:

Throughout the semester, I have become less stressed out with the class and more excited to go to class and hear what people had to say or argue. I realize that I am not one who always speaks up in class or states my opinion, but I do have an opinion ... I enjoyed the fact that I could just sit back and take in what others had to say and not be graded on this participation, or lack there of.

I feel, though, that I have taken a lot from this class. I have realized that how and what you write about really can affect people, both positive and negative. Sometimes what someone would write would inspire me to do more in the world, or to love myself more for who I am rather than wishing I had a better body [two position papers from the class]. Those subjects impacted me very much. I also feel that I have become more of a developed writer, that I look harder at what I am writing as well as reading, and take in other's perspectives with more willingness. All in all, I feel that this was a good course for me, that it helped me develop not only as a writer and reader, but also as a person, a friend, and a student.

Krystal finds personal value and meaning in her colleagues' writing, in the class discussions (mostly without me), in the course structures that gave her opportuni-

ties to speak her mind, remain silent, engage in assessments. Notice I am absent in this picture of our class. She is central, and her peers are integral to her learning. Krystal highlights what most do at some point in our discussions, conferences, reflections, or course evaluations: that when the class is successful, it is so because the students not only become active learners in their writing and assessment processes, but they begin to see how better writing and thinking has more to do with their own assessment practices than mine.

What the student assessments and reflections in this section illustrate, I hope, is that allowing our students to assess themselves *for real* is pedagogically sound. If our purpose for assessing and evaluating student writing is to help students learn — if assessment is inherently a learning practice (which I think it is) — then the teacher shouldn't control all of the process. Assessing *for* our students only hamstrings their progress by making pronouncements on their writing, halting reflection and self-assessment — it keeps them from doing the very things we want them to be able to do: assess and understand language, write and understand writing, conceptualize hermeneutical acts. A rubric that continually evolves pushes students to rethink assumptions about rhetorical conventions. Assessment practices that are reflective and publicly discussed can make reflective, more self-conscious writers, as well as an active, pragmatic, responsive community. Fourth generation evaluation focuses our attention on assessing writing in a real and tangible community and by its members who find mutual respect for one another because of their common endeavors.

When asked on the last day of class what element of the course I should keep for future courses, the anonymously written responses each time are similar in nature and content, for example, “peer evaluation,” “position papers,” “community,” “open discussions,” “atmosphere of the class,” “process of the position papers/assessment/essay,” and “peer review and evaluations of papers.”¹⁰ One anonymous student identified, as most do, the “ability to evaluate my own writing.” Michael from a more recent semester ends the course with this reflection in which he mixes his revision, self-assessment, and colleague assessment processes together: “Even though it was difficult at times, I learned and practiced self analysis, and the feedback I got from others was invaluable to reshaping my writing on these individual papers. The evaluation of papers and the going back over the same work time and time again has helped me see my own writing in a different perspective.” That different perspective for Michael comes from the various angles assessment provides. It wasn't just him “going back over” his work, but also his peers. And the “going over” involved assessment, revision, periodic reflection, and discussion on all his activities with his peers and not a teacher. This is a fuller, richer position

¹⁰ In fact, in one class of 15 students, there was a deep sense of community: 12 responded to this question in this way, one did not respond, and one cracked an inside joke (which I took as another way of saying, “community” or “atmosphere”). This class also decided on their own to hold class on a day I was sick and could not attend. They also planned a party and often brought cookies, cupcakes, and other food to share with everyone.

from which he can learn to write and assess writing, and it tells me things are working in my class.

While most of my end of semester student evaluations and comments on my pedagogy have been quite positive and encouraging, there are some mixed results. Some students still leave much the way they came in: overly concerned about grades, dogmatic about what makes good writing, confused about why I didn't assess them (a couple, even a bit upset), and feeling generally dissatisfied with the "quality" of their papers due to only peer feedback on them (no "expert" assessments). Usually, however, even the negative experiences, like the explicitly positive ones, tend to be mixed in sentiments. The tension is often around their final grade. Jennifer is typical:

I think I struggled with this [the absence of a teacher as an evaluator] a lot during the class and it was hard when I got my final grade because I know that I've learned a lot even without the documentation of it. A lot of the grade was my fault though, so I'm trying to be content with it; again it's just hard when you know you've learned a lot.

Jennifer sees a discrepancy between what she "got" as a grade in the class and what she knows she's learned. This may be part of the "false motivation" and "false sense of worth" described by O'Hagan (1997) and Kirschenbaum separately — grades are deceptive. But even in this final reflection, Jennifer takes responsibility (maybe for the first time, she was in her first year of college), shows a level of active learning, assesses her own progress, the pressure of grades, and their effects on her attitude toward the class. She acknowledges that "a lot of the grade was my fault" and hints that she continues to look for contentment in what she's learned (ongoing reflection), and not in the inadequate ways in which our institution forces us to measure her performance. And maybe mostly, she seems to be finding a way both to see what she's learned and understand the pain and confusion that grades present oftentimes. But getting the most out of a class is not always "fun," nor does it always leave us with "good feelings" about everything. And my sense is that Jennifer wants that grade to reflect her character, not her portfolio as a situated product whose evaluations were negotiated by her and me. The "documentation" she speaks of was the drafts necessary to show how each portfolio document moved in revision — they weren't there. And so she simply couldn't talk much in her reflection letter about rhetorical decisions, revision choices, or peer assessments she pondered. And because many of her included drafts were only slightly different from those she submitted for class discussion and assessments, it's hard to see what she learned exactly. No doubt she has, but, as she says, she hasn't documented it for us. This has been the most difficult aspect of this pedagogy for me to bear because I want Jennifer to see the real potential in her education, listen to her peers and judge for herself, become more critical about language and her own hermeneutical acts, feel good about her learning, and not focus on collecting certain letters for her transcript. However, she will have to come to these conclusions on her own, if she's willing to.

Many also complain about the intense focus on peer assessments and class-constructed rubrics. They say the teacher should be the center of knowledge about writing, and the creator of rubrics. This is logical, really. Teachers know more about writing — that’s why they’re “teaching” the class. While I do not disagree with this logic, it is the application to a classroom, the learning processes of students that I question. If I know how to teach writing best, why not trust me? More importantly, as has been shown over and over, writing isn’t something directly deliverable as a “skill.” It’s a complex practice. We don’t learn how to write successfully by someone else telling us how to do it. We learn by practicing, thinking about our practices, and re-formulating practice. For some, the rubric even seems too context specific, too constructed by our class, and thus won’t help many in future writing endeavors. Catarina voices this tension early in a recent semester. After explaining that she liked having the class create the rubric but she wondered: “How do we know this will help us beyond this class? Making personal rubrics may be fine for this semester, but when we go back to the traditional class environment, what will we have gained?” Yes, what will she have gained? A great question. And just asking it suggests a gain already, one concerning an active learning stance and an awareness of shifting and contested rhetorical conventions. But it is the process itself — the finding of answers — that matters most, not a list of universal writing guidelines for all occasions. My hope is that our rubric processes allow students to see these questions as important to ask, ask them of all their educational contexts, maybe force them to, and find useful ways to address them in each context. At another level, what Catarina and her classmates have gained is quite tangible. They’ve learned that writing conventions are contextual and communally developed; that they often evolve over time; that individuals’ hermeneutical acts (the judging from them) often lead to contradictory results; that judging writing is not a cut-and-dry act, done in a vacuum, but one mediated by many factors (e.g., the purpose of the assessment, the rhetorical context and exigencies, the community from which the writing takes place, the purpose of the writing, etc.).

These resistances and complaints that always occur in some form, highlight the simple fact that many problems within my class stem from the realities outside of it. Our class, as democratic as it is, doesn’t change the fact that my students’ writing outside of class may still seem like a game of chance, regardless of the motives of their teachers or the soundness of their grading practices. Their experiences with grades given to them by teachers with fuzzy grading criteria, or mysterious hermeneutical practices, have trained them to see the problems with teacher-centered assessment, but have not offered them any strategies to cope with these problems. Additionally, they know that they still need to leave my class with something, a grade, some skills as a writer, how to argue better than when they came to me, etc. Because my pedagogy seems so non-traditional, so radical, some can’t see what they’ve learned because it’s not packaged in the form they are used to.

But most do leave with a sense of improvement, and they voice it in many ways. In an end of semester reflection, Kim points out her development,

showing a stance of an active learner, and directs her comments to future students:

Instead of grades you will learn how to assess and evaluate your peers' writing which in the end will give you more satisfaction with your writing skills. You will also be expected to validate your own writing. Asao gives you direction, but it is up to you to answer your own questions. This has been the most effective way in my learning process.

While she doesn't offer much specificity, Kim does demonstrate a new confidence in her own abilities as a writer. Her portfolio and final conference with me attest to this. She was thorough and reflective. Her portfolio was thick, each draft containing layers of color-coded assessments by her peers and herself. She even annotated the assessments written on her drafts, describing the patterns she observed, and how she addressed each in the next draft. And Kim is not that atypical. A good one third of my students do similar kinds of heavy annotations and commentary on their written assessments and portfolio contents. These kinds of practices, reflections, and assessments, undirected or prompted by me, show an active engagement with the writing and assessment processes of the course that suggests my framework is doing its job.

But sometimes I wonder if drafts really get better, if writers learn to actually write better. While all of the drafts in Kim's portfolio were responsive to her colleagues' assessments, and showed her analyzing and synthesizing them in detail, several of her papers just didn't move very far from first to last draft. In her first position paper, she looked at a reality TV show's objectification of women and the common "selling of sex" trope in their advertisements. Her first draft simply gave a description of a magazine advertisement for the show and made this conclusion: "Why is this show called real T.V. when each person on the show is put in a surreal situation with seductive chords and heat lamps . . ." (her ellipsis). Kim's final draft's conclusion isn't much different, although it is more coherent: "Ads focus on sex and sexual appeal to portray women objectively in society, even if it has nothing to do with the products that are being sold." While more realized and clearer, her claim and argument haven't really changed in depth. She doesn't look at any details in any new or different light. She did listen to her peers, and her ideas became more concrete, less narrative-like, but she took little from our class discussions, which focused on the underlying issues around the images of women in the ad. *Why* does sex sell? *Why* is a show like "The Bachelor" popular? A man picking from a throng of eager women, doesn't this seem chauvinistic? Yet most of the women in that class were eager to admit they watched the show religiously, including Kim. Gender stereotypes and unquestioned "American" values that subordinate women abound in the ad, but Kim made no mention of them. I wondered: Has she learned to look deeper into a text like this? Has her peers in class really helped her find these kinds of things in her text? Would she have done better if I had assessed her writing? Is the depth of the *product* (the paper) more important than the writer's depth of understanding as a learner and assessor? Are these areas exclusive?

5. Assessment as “instructive” praxis

In a way I believe Huot is not thinking of explicitly (but not excluding), community-based assessment pedagogy does the work of what he calls “instructive evaluation.” In his chapter on assessing, grading, testing, and pedagogy, Huot’s description of instructive evaluation glosses well the assessment practices I’ve been describing:

Assessment as a way to teach and learn writing requires more than just feedback on writing in progress from a teacher or a peer group . . . [instructive evaluation] is tied to the act of learning a specific task while participating in a particular literacy event. Instructive evaluation involves the student in the process of evaluation, making her aware of what it is she is trying to create and how well her current draft matches the linguistic and rhetorical targets she has set for herself, targets that have come from her understanding of the context, audience, purpose and other rhetorical features of a specific piece of writing. Instructive evaluation requires that we involve the student in all phases of the assessment of her work . . .

Instructive evaluation demands that students and teachers connect the ability to assess with the necessity to revise, creating a motivation for revision that is often so difficult for students to obtain. . . . A classroom pedagogy that encourages and highlights the evaluative decisions of writers, teachers, and peer review groups can help foster a new, shared role for assessment and the teaching of writing. (2002a, pp. 69–70)

In a community-based assessment pedagogy, student writers are integrally involved in the assessment processes of their work — in fact, assessment is integrally *their* activity, not the teacher’s. Revision and assessment are married to public reflection, which allow students a formal chance to consider what they are attempting to communicate to each other, how they are doing it, how well they are meeting their rhetorical targets, and offer these insights to the class as a whole. In my pedagogy, these targets, encapsulated in our rubric, are ones derived from class dialogues and dialectic activities that use fourth generation evaluation techniques, i.e., to instigate students to continually theorize around writing and assessing in order for them to write and assess more self-consciously. And so, this pedagogy does something that Huot doesn’t list: it pushes students to articulate and theorize their assessment practices, which then informs their own writing and revision. The “new, shared role for assessment and the teaching of writing” that this pedagogy encourages is the role that theorizing plays in writing and assessment — that is, it offers students a new role to play, one that we teachers already play and benefit from, that of theorizers of writing. Just as we do, our students should theorize their practices in order to ask better questions and find better practices. All of these characteristics are a function of the students’ stance as active learners, both as individual writers and (maybe most importantly) as a community of writers and decision makers bound together in mutual endeavors. Without this stance, it

would be difficult to act upon their rubrics, assessments, and ideas about writing and assessing.

Victor Villanueva Jr. voices what I'm encouraging through community-based assessment, using Paulo Freire's account of critical consciousness:

Critical consciousness is the recognition that society contains social, political, and economic conditions which are at odds with the individual will to freedom. When that recognition is given voice, and a decision is made to do something about the contradiction between the individual and society's workings against individual freedom, even if the action is no more than critical reflection, there is *praxis*. The way to arrive at critical consciousness . . . is through *generative themes*. Generative themes are critical assessments of *limit-situations*, the myths that maintain the status quo. (1993, p. 54)

Critical consciousness explains the tension that most of my students feel at one time or another when I stay away from their texts and they get conflicting assessments from colleagues. They need outlets to express this tension — to assess critically their assessments. In fact, according to Villanueva's summation of Freire's account, "critical assessments" are the key to critical consciousness in the individual. They help form praxis. The "critical" part in this process, as I see it, is self-reflection made public on inherently reflective practices (that is, assessments), a praxis that allows the individual to confront and question the contradictions in her experience of our classroom conditions, of her writing, of what others say about her writing, and display it for others' benefit — this is how my students "give voice" to their critical awareness and "do something" about what they think and feel. When done in community, praxis can be focused on broader goals, ones that compare practices — not to rank student performance but to enrich and complicate them, to produce a sense of mutual endeavoring and common struggling, to improve writing. When reflected upon and discussed publicly, writing and meaning making become less about what is good for the individual and more about what's good for the class. Yet these same reflective activities can also preserve individual resistance to discourse conventions set up by the class (our rubrics) by allowing spaces for dissonant voices and uncensored questions. In fact, this happens often in my classes, and I encourage it because it gives us a chance to talk about why we believe what we believe, about hegemony, the power of language and its conventions over us and our ways of knowing. It connects the self-as-writer to the self-as-stakeholder-in-community. It's an attention to the "us" yet not forgetting the "me."

To illustrate, Kim articulates how this process of critical awareness has worked for her in our classroom community on a personal level and in context of her educational history with grades and writing. She reflects at the end of our course:

When I began your class I was upset at the fact that we were not getting grades or validations for the work we produced during the semester . . . I did not understand how we could be graded without getting a formal letter grade at the top of our papers with teacher's comments. Now . . . it does not take a grade to validate one's

writing because grades are subjective . . . I have the skills to assess and evaluate . . . without revealing to me all the answers, you have stood back to let me figure them out on my own, and for the first time in my life, without people giving me the answers, I have figured things out on my own.

To place Kim's conclusions in context, in her final reflective piece within her course portfolio (the one discussed earlier), she emphasized her understanding of self-assessment and writing for an audience as practices spawned from our daily assessment and response activities. We also had a number of conferences and email exchanges on her work. In all these discussions, I asked her questions, and attempted to coach her carefully toward her own ideas but refused to offer suggestions for her writing. What did she feel was important to tell the class (what tells her that this topic is important?), and how did she think she should explore it? Her own self-assessments, and those from her colleagues in class, were key for her because they gave her thinking to reflect upon.

Through her own practice and reflections, Kim was able to find validation for her writing and assessment processes, theorize her role in her education a bit, and find good answers for her questions. Keeping my hands and words off of her texts was crucial to Kim's growth. David Bleich says that grading has "ideological functions," ones that work to perpetuate "conditions favorable to the few who govern society" (Allison et al., 1997, p. 22). This seems clear in Kim's case. In effect, past teacher comments have constructed a hegemonic discourse around her writing, which is part of the reason Kim has had a hard time finding value in her writing and self-assessments. Teachers have dominated her texts through their evaluations, which in the end silenced her (what Paul Bové, quoted by Bartholomae, calls "regimes of truth" (Bartholomae, 1996, p. 16). In fact, Bleich says that "[g]rading and testing [which are usually administered by teachers] have an *ideological* authority. *Testing and grading have such great inertia in society because they are the pedagogical means by which an unfairly structured society is perpetuated*" (his emphasis, Allison et al., 1997, p. 28). Almost ten years later in *Grading in the Pos-Process Classroom*, and attempting to deflect the ideological authority grades have on students, William Dolphin proposes to make "the subject of grades . . . the initial topic of inquiry [in the writing classroom], with the goal of arriving at a consensus within the class on a collaboratively written grading policy" (Allison et al., 1997, pp. 115–116). Tim Peeples and Bill Hart-Davidson argue for a classroom practice that allows students to debate over their own grades in writing (through "grade arguments" written to the teacher), something to be included in their course portfolios and engaged throughout the semester. It's practices like these, when added to Huot's call for "real student involvement" in assessment, and the understanding that grading is an activity that does not have to be done unthinkingly, uncritically, or by the teacher alone, that reiterate how necessary students' roles are in classroom assessment.

What I hope to have shown here is how community-based assessment pedagogy can build more meaningful and productive writing practices, ones that use

class-constructed rubrics, assessment, and public reflection to encourage active, self-conscious, critical writers who can begin to theorize their practices. Additionally, it offers one way to foster meaningful and tangible class communities that support the mutual efforts in which students are involved. Community-based assessment pedagogy, as described here, boils down to three classroom imperatives: (1) encourage active learning stances by allowing students to assess and evaluate their own and their colleagues' writing practices, and make these assessments meaningful and purposeful, (2) situate assessment practices within a community of knowledge makers who construct assessment rubrics and define and justify assessment practices, i.e., encourage the class to work for one another as mutual agents working with and for each other's benefit, writing for each other, and negotiating *hard agreements* together, and (3) give lots of opportunities to reflect on assessment that speaks to the larger class community, in order to theorize about writing, rhetorical conventions, assessment, and the judging of writing from specific criteria, i.e., what we say about what we are doing (or did) can help us do it better in the future. In my versions of this pedagogy, these imperatives rest on a framework of recursive, repeated writing and assessment activities.

Finally, these three imperatives offer what Bell Hooks contemplates in *Teaching to Transgress*: “an education as the practice of freedom” and not “education that merely strives to reinforce domination” (Hooks, 1994, p. 4). She says, “I think that a feeling of community creates a sense that there is shared commitment and a common good that binds us” (p. 40). Her language echoes how I've attempted to think about community and the stances students need to take in the classroom. It is a sense that we are all in this thing together, “bound” to one another in mutual endeavors, helping each other to learn, create, and understand. While total class agreement isn't necessary (or wanted) and while conflicting voices are encouraged and needed, the driving force to community-based assessment pedagogy is its ability to create rich, textured, and multi-voiced discussions that actually produce things for students: rubrics, assessment practices, revision along specific rhetorical dimensions, theory, and more reflective stances as writers. Invoking Freire, she explains that “education can be liberatory when everyone [in the classroom] claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor” (Hooks, 1994, p. 14). Hooks and I articulate a similar purpose: liberatory educational practices lead to learning and theorizing about the process and products of education so that students own knowledge, not to possess it, but to question it for more ethical future purposes.

There are still lots of questions unresolved and issues unaddressed, but I am encouraged by my results, so I continue. My classroom isn't a place where anything goes, but one where, I believe, anything is possible. It's a community that gains authority by exercising power at all levels, and takes control of the conventions used to write, assess, and evaluate, then practices these things on itself. This takes some of the best elements of post-process, assessment, critical pedagogy, and portfolio theory to date and provides a crucial link between the writing assessments students must bear in other arenas and those they do on their own in my class. To practice a community-based assessment pedagogy is, as I've shown here, to teach writing,

assessment, and reflection as intertwined public acts, that must be discussed and scrutinized by students over and over, and that are necessary to giving them the most chances at developing as writers and critically aware citizens. And if this pedagogy is done right, students might actually theorize for themselves about their own writing and reading practices, assess themselves critically and purposefully, and come out of the process fundamentally changing the questions they ask when they write and read, form praxis — and wanting to do all these things because they find them intrinsically worthwhile to do.

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