

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

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Title: *An Inquiry into Assessment: The Relationship between Self-Grading and Student Performance*
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School/Grade: Byram Hills High School/Grade 12

SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context:

Perspectives in Literature offers students a comprehensive study of literature, history, art, film, and philosophy. Students who enroll in the double-period course submit quarterly portfolios in which they demonstrate their understanding of the works studied in class. These portfolios must contain proof of the following: knowledge of content, research, personal reaction, creativity. In addition, students are required to submit a quarterly self-reflection in which they comment on their participation in the course and the overall presentation of the material in their portfolios. There are no graded assignments outside of the portfolio project.

Throughout the year, students in *Perspectives in Literature* investigate the following:

- A definition of the word *Beauty*
- A definition of *Art*
- An examination of the relationship between the artist and his/her audience in the appreciation of a work of art
- To what extent must an artist have a clearly defined artistic purpose when creating a work of art?
- To what extent must a person be aware of the artist's purpose in order to appreciate the work of art?

Successful portfolios address these terms and essential questions through a combination of analytical, creative, and metacognitive writing. Rather than addressing works in isolation, students are encouraged to find connections between curricular works and to relate these works to those studied independently. A principal goal of *Perspectives in Literature* situates the student at the head of the classroom and makes each member of the class responsible for teaching her peers. During the final week of each quarter, students read each other's portfolios and offer critical commentary.

This year, I chose to study the relationship between self-grading and student performance in *Perspectives in Literature*. As part of each student's quarterly self-reflection, I asked students to provide a justification for their quarterly grade. My participation in *Investigators of Practice* provided me the opportunity to study this process.

Action Plan:

The following question guided my research this year: *How do self-assessment and self-grading practices affect student attitudes toward learning?* Having taught *Perspectives in Literature* for the past three years, I always felt there was something inauthentic about the grading process. After all, I challenged my students to take ownership of nearly every aspect of their portfolios. They

determined the topics to study, the works to include, the arrangement of works. Some students enjoyed submitting visual art, music, and other multimedia presentations. All of the portfolios were intensely personal snapshots of student learning. But, how were they to be assessed? Truthfully, I resisted providing students with models of prior portfolios or rubrics for student performance because I feared that students would be more inclined to copy the model or that they would simply treat the rubric as mere checklist. I wanted students to complete the portfolio for the pure love of learning—this is the very reason students are encouraged to follow drastically different paths—but every time I slapped a grade on a quarterly portfolio I found myself having conversations about the grade itself rather than the learning. I was disheartened.

Several years ago, in preparation for the introduction of an Independent Reading Initiative at Byram Hills High School, I read Kelly Gallagher's *Readicide: How Schools are Killing Reading and What You Can Do about It?* Gallagher's work is a clarion call that challenges educators to resist the inauthentic. On the teaching of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Gallagher writes, "The value comes when [teachers] use this great book as a springboard to examine issues in today's world" (Gallagher, 2009). A great deal of *Readicide* focuses on the value of student choice and the power that comes from allowing students to discover what Gallagher calls the sweet spot of instruction, a place where student motivation guides the learning process. As I embarked on my journey with *Investigators of Practice*, I found myself rereading Gallagher's work to remind myself of what truly mattered.

I also found myself looking back at one of Gallagher's earlier works, *Teaching Adolescent Writers*. Interestingly enough, the book advocates the use of writing models and views student writing through the principal lens that everyone improves (Gallagher, 2006). One of the things I found incredibly interesting about Gallagher's approach was that he invited students to be participants in the development of a grading rubric. For his purposes, this allows him to differentiate writing instruction, but I found myself wondering if the same strategy could pay dividends in *Perspectives in Literature*. Moreover, I found myself wondering how students would articulate just what qualities define a successful portfolio.

Given the attention paid to APPR and teacher assessment this year, I naturally gravitated toward Charlotte Danielson's *The Framework for Teaching* (2011 Revision) as a model rubric. Though teachers were to eventually get a score—not what Danielson had in mind, I suspect—what I liked about her rubric was that it challenged teachers to think about their work through the lens of continuous improvement. This is precisely what I hoped for my students. I shared Danielson's process with my students at the opening of the year and I asked them to think about each of the four categories (unsatisfactory, basic, proficient, distinguished) as they applied to the expectations for their portfolios. For the first two weeks of class, I challenged students to design the course grading rubric that they would eventually use to assess their own work.

Over the course of three marking periods, I collected a variety of data related to my inquiry into assessment. The grading rubric (Appendix I) represents the students' initial attitudes toward learning. Throughout the quarter, I collected anecdotal evidence on student performance to determine how readily students used the rubric to guide their learning. At the end of each quarter, students submitted a written self-assessment wherein they were required to rate themselves according to the grading rubric. In their self-assessments, students included a justification for a quarterly grade and scheduled a conference with me to discuss their portfolios. Though I had originally planned to conduct brief surveys throughout the year, I found the richness of the discussions in these quarterly conferences to be a much more valuable tool. Of

course, the actual student portfolios exist as an authentic representation of student learning.

Results:

One of the most significant things I learned through my participation in *Investigators of Practice* is that students are capable of high quality self-assessment. In the design and application of the grading rubric, I found students wholly capable of providing an objective assessment of their work. In fact, their written self-assessments indicate that they were able to return to the rubric to target specific areas for improvement. In a discussion of her knowledge of content, one student wrote, “Although I think that I did a very good job of using specific textual evidence...for next quarter I should work on looking into the author’s life from a biographical point of view to further my understanding of [his] work.” Though it wasn’t specifically required in each student’s self-assessment, I found a number of students setting similar goals based on their performance according to the rubric. Another student wrote, “I think knowledge of content was my weakest link—my analysis and original thinking may have been proficient or even distinguished, but I left out a lot about the author’s personal lives or the content of movies, often focusing in on one part of my own analysis.” Some students were a bit more self-critical: “I feel I didn’t support my ideas well enough, though, because I’ll only use a few sentences from the article and may only interpret them literally.” Other students reported similar struggles with textual support: “I think that I showed an understanding of the ideas and themes from this quarter in my portfolio. However, I definitely could have gone further. One of my problems was lack of evidence and in-depth analysis of the text.” According to the grading rubric, a distinguished portfolio “integrates a wide variety of specific textual evidence that helps to develop innovative and original thought.” Though many of the students were able to include textual evidence that “moved beyond class discussions and critical readings,” they struggled to meet their own conception of distinguished work. As a result, all students self-assessed their knowledge of content as either basic or proficient, putting to rest any worries that students might have an inflated sense of their own performance.

In quarterly conferences, my discussions with students were rarely about the individual ratings or the grades that students assigned themselves. Though we typically discussed the students’ written self-assessments, the conversations were largely directed by the thinking represented in the students’ portfolios. During the conference, I provided students with a letter containing my thoughts and reactions to the portfolios and I invited students to discuss their overall performance. Consequently, most of these conferences were discussions of strengths and weaknesses with a decided emphasis on setting goals for next quarter. Particularly in the third quarter, the conversations turned so that students were able to offer advice on how to improve the course for next year’s students. I had several students suggest that the writing journal we used during the third quarter became an indispensable tool as it served to map their thinking, something that wasn’t readily available in the first two quarters. I also gained insight into moments in the classroom that students found to be the most valuable. For instance, after analyzing a variety of poetry in the first quarter, I gave students a copy of Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” and told them that I was going to sit on the sidelines for this one. What followed was an authentic discussion in which every student participated in a construction of the poem’s meaning. More often than not, students reflected on moments like these in our conferences, and though every student conference ended with me asking for the students to justify the grade they were giving themselves, the grade took a backseat to the learning.

Certainly, teaching seniors carries with it some enormous challenges. Most of the seniors in *Perspectives in Literature* apply to colleges and universities in the fall. As a result, they often have to juggle the demands of the application process with the demands of advanced coursework.

Several students indicated that although the rubric clearly outlined what they needed to do to be create a distinguished portfolio, they didn't have the time to be anything more than proficient. This typically surfaced in relation to the independent research students conducted. While the rubric asks students to reference "an array of primary sources to develop an understanding of how an author's life and time period influence his/her work," many students did not include references to any biographical works in their portfolio, instead relying on whatever information was discussed in class. As I stress in class, the research doesn't always have to be traditional in form. One student was prompted by our discussion of art and beauty to visit the Museum of Modern Art and view an Andy Warhol exhibit. Humorously, she tweeted a picture of herself exiting through the gift shop, a shout-out to a Banksy film we watched in class by the same name. The same student watched an additional film, "Ordinary People," in order to develop greater connections to her ideas about existentialism. For some, these habits grind to a halt when procrastination and senioritis get a hold of them. One student—a self-proclaimed procrastinator of the first degree—reported nervousness and anxiety during the first quarter as the amount of work seems to pile up and "the time was getting eaten away faster than the fuse of a bomb." For her, the third quarter represented a colossal triumph wherein she "used the rubric to improve her work." In fact, one of the improvements she noticed over time was her ability to use specific textual evidence, something that was lacking in her earlier work.

Below is a chart that reports the distribution percentage of student-reported quarterly grades. No student reported a grade lower than C+. Please note that the Byram Hills High School grading system does not include minuses.

	A+	A	B+	B	C+
Quarter 1	0%	0%	33%	44%	22%
Quarter 2	0%	11%	44%	22%	22%
Quarter 3	0%	11%	33%	55%	0%
Final Grade	0%	22%	22%	55%	0%

(Table 1: Student-Reported Grade Distribution)

Overall, I thought that students were able to justify grades that accurately reflected their work in *Perspectives in Literature*. There was no preponderance of A's and a number of students reported particular quarters as C+ work. And while assigning a letter grade to themselves was still difficult for some students, they too reported a value in using the rubric to assess their work this year. In the final conferences, two themes repeatedly surfaced: 1) the need for students to schedule writing conferences far in advance of the due date for the portfolio, and 2) the importance of looking back at the grading rubric throughout the quarter.

Implications:

When I asked my students for feedback about the self-assessment process, I was pleasantly surprised to hear that they found the creation of the rubric to be one of the most valuable experiences they had. This was the first class where they were given the opportunity to grade themselves and they definitely took pride in the strength of the rubric. I recall one student's comment upon seeing the completed rubric in early September: "Wow! It's going to be nearly impossible to be distinguished." Interestingly, that same student made tremendous progress throughout the year, suggesting in her final conference that she welcomed the struggle that came with creating her portfolios. Cognizant of the fact that there are few parameters for what needs to be included in each portfolio, she went as far as to suggest that it was that intellectual uncertainty that she truly enjoyed, and one of the principal reasons that she signed up to take *Perspectives in Literature* in the first place. While anecdotal evidence like this thrills me, I still

wanted to know more about how students related the experience of grading themselves to the learning itself.

One of the potential problems with the rubric is that there is no clear way to equate one's performance with a particular grade. The students decided not to include a grading scale, thereby making the process of assigning a letter grade a holistic one. Several students noted how individual papers included within their portfolios were distinguished, perhaps, though they didn't feel the same about the portfolio as a whole. Ultimately, students would have to weigh the various categories of the rubric (e.g. knowledge of content, research, etc.) and represent each rating numerically in order to arrive at the increments for any grading scale. Again, I find myself worrying that this will drive students to use the rubric as a means of achieving a particular grade rather than as a platform for a discussion of learning. The students tended to agree with this commentary since they said the absence of a grading scale kept them from thinking about the letter grade associated with any particular rating.

During the last day of class, I asked the students for suggestions related to the course. The students vehemently agreed that next year's class should create a rubric from scratch. There were mixed opinions about whether I should let the students see this year's rubric at all. Some advocated using it as a comparative tool whereas others suggested that the rubric needs to change to represent the values of next year's students. Concerning the difficulty some students had with including textual evidence, one suggestion was to provide a disclaimer on the rubric (i.e. No portfolio with unsubstantiated claims will receive higher than a C). An interesting approach! Though there were no "assignments," per se, the students did find value in the times where I scheduled research presentations as it led them to new discoveries. There was some caution about using the writing journal too much, with most students noting that they found themselves using their journal as a place for self-reflection and not just as a means to an end in the overall production of their portfolios. Even though the students enjoyed having the freedom to select independent reading books, they liked having suggested titles that guided them to particular areas of interest. Lastly, the students valued the time they spent reading each other's work. Some claimed that this was when they were able to see the thinking of less outspoken classmates and others suggested that it was great to see that they were not the only one who struggled with how to structure a portfolio.

Though the aforementioned commentary veers away from my original research question, I have no doubt that my students were more conscious of their own learning this year. Even those who may not have produced their best work reported that they enjoyed the metacognitive element of the course. The grading rubric, self-reflections, and teacher conferences all serve to reinforce the value of engaging students in regular and thorough self-assessment. In one of my final conferences, I had a wonderful discussion with a particularly reticent student about the challenges that await her next year. She admitted that she had no reservations about her ability to interpret works of literature or her skill as a creative storyteller; however, she noted that the rubric pointed out an obvious weakness in her reluctance to share her ideas with classmates. Our conversation closed with a reminder that I always hope that students see themselves as equal participants in the learning process. It is in the sharing of ideas and new perspectives that we grow and challenge our own thinking.

Here are some lingering questions:

- Will the inclusion of a scale to help students assign a letter grade shift the emphasis of the self-assessment away from continuous improvement?
- What strategies will help students track their own progress using the grading rubric?

- How can writing journals lead to an improvement in student portfolios?
- How do we continue to motivate seniors during the second semester?

Works Cited

Danielson, Charlotte. (2011). "The Framework for Teaching." *New York State Education Department*. Retrieved June 4, 2013, from http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/teachers-leaders/practicerubrics/Docs/Teachscape_Rubric.pdf.

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