BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

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SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context:
We currently teach multiple courses and levels in the visual arts department at Byram Hills High School. The classes that were used for this study range from beginning to advanced levels and the students who participated were also of mixed grades (9-12). The focus of our study was based upon the following rational: students in the visual arts produce work of various quality and we believe that they often times lack the ability to articulate and internalize what is technically and conceptually strong artwork. We wanted our students to have a better understanding of how to improve their artwork through various feedback methods. In this study we concentrated specifically on improving our pre-existing student self-assessment rubrics and implementing writing sections to allow students to improve their reflective thought processes.

Action Plan:
Our research question was: *what are the characteristics of successful feedback methods that help to motivate and enable students to authentically grow and improve as visual artists?* We chose this because we felt that students were not always utilizing the existing self-assessment rubrics to be reflective and improve their work. Students also were not consistently reading and internalizing teacher comments. Our action research was based on re-evaluating existing rubrics to include more written self-assessment and student reflective thinking using specific vocabulary relevant to the visual arts.

We researched both public and private school websites that had information based upon feedback methods and assessment techniques in the arts, as well as read passages from books on the topic.

On the following page is a synopsis of the key points from the sources that we collected. We have pulled the most important pieces of the research as it pertains to our study:

Results:
In collecting our data we learned that we needed to change the format of our existing rubrics to include more opportunity for reflective writing and self-assessment. At the start of the study we made the assumption that our students were able to follow directions, internalize and interpret the categories of our rubrics, and apply it to their own work, thus gaining valuable feedback. Entry level art students did not use the vocabulary given to them in the domains of the rubrics when writing their self-reflections.

Our basic level art course rubric originally had 4 domains and 4 levels for students to use when evaluating their own artwork. These 4 domains and levels are used on ALL art rubrics at all levels within the HS art department. The domains are:

1. Elements and Principles of Design/Composition
2. Craftsmanship: Tools and Techniques
3. Creativity and Conceptual Understanding
4. Performance and Productivity.

The 4 levels are:
Exemplary, Proficient, Developing and Emerging with *Exemplary* being the highest level of achievement.

Within each level and domain, we use specific language and vocabulary that the students need to internalize in order to evaluate and receive feedback about their work.

The 2 reflective questions were originally at the bottom of the rubric. The questions were: "Discuss the strengths of your work", and "What did you find to be the most challenging in regards to this assignment?" In general, the student writing response was disappointing and they did not exhibit the ability to self-evaluate.

Examples of the student responses from the question are:
> "I am a continuous hard worker, I work productively, and for the most part I understand and demonstrate my comprehension of the artwork".
> "I think that I could have made this so much better than I did. I could have been much more creative in a design".

We learned that we needed to restructure the rubric so that students would respond to each domain in a specific way which would allow them to be more thorough and reflective.

We decided to restructure our rubrics so that students would have to go into more detail using the vocabulary in each domain. We changed the layout of the rubric to include increased writing space below each domain and included the following statement that the student had to respond to: "Justify your choice of category with specific examples from your work".

Here is an example one student's response under the domain, Elements and Principles of Design and Composition in an advanced class:
> "I chose Exemplary because I think all of my photos utilize some principles. The bottom is value while the top left is balance because of the difference between positive and negative space. I think that together they create a strong composition".

Although this student used vocabulary, the description is generic and there was no evidence by the student of *reflective thinking*.

We learned from collecting data from this modified rubric that in the more advanced classes students were able to repeat the vocabulary but they did not write anything specific about their work; one student's assessment could be exchanged for another without the reader being able to identify the work. We realized that we had wrongly made the assumption that students would go into more detail without our having to model our expectations. So we then created a model response for each domain and changed the statement to emphasize student thinking:
> "Justify your choice of category using the language above to describe your decision making. Refer to specific visual element in your artwork".

Below is an example of teacher modeling from the same domain, Elements and Principles of Design and Composition with a level of Exemplary:

I believe that my composition can be considered "distinguished" because in each of my images, I am cropping in a way that successfully fills the space with the subject. For example: in the long, vertical image on the left, the skateboard, arm, board and leg create a long line that emphasizes the vertical format of the space. Also the bottom right rectangular space uses line and repetition through the use of the rope, legs and feet, and then again the rope. The bars and rope of the ladder creates a rectangular shape that emphasizes the space on the board. Finally, the top image is strong because of the use of shape, form, line and texture; the rope has an interesting texture and creates line, the space between the ropes becomes repeated shape and pattern. The hands and fingers that peak through the rope create form and emphasis because the viewer's eye is drawn to the light that falls there.

After modeling expectations to the students here is the writing piece from the original student quoted from above in the same domain on a subsequent assignment:

"I used asymmetrical balance by placing the two girls in very different positions and framing it in a way that they are different distanced from the middle. I also utilized contrast in the picture without losing the greys in-between. The girl climbing the fence serves as the focal point to create a strong composition. In my next image I also used asymmetrical balance to make the composition stronger. I also used texture from the wall to make an interesting but not overbearing background. The value of the two girls could have been improved to include more detail".

We learned that it was necessary for us to model our expectations for students within each domain so that they could identify specific art elements that they used to achieve desired effects in their work.

Implications:
We were surprised to learn that when our students were given the tools and vocabulary to reflect and write about their artwork, they regurgitated the terms without any thought to their own work. They did not use the self-assessment rubric for their own growth; they were rushing through it and completing it simply because they were asked to by the teacher. We realized that our students benefited from the use of these rubrics and we were not providing them with a worthwhile feedback method that they could use to grow and improve as artists. We learned the importance of modeling even at the most advanced level of study. Providing the students with very clear expectations enabled them to create quality feedback and self-reflection. This study has left us with the following questions; are student generated rubrics more valuable in student learning as compared to a teacher-generated rubric? Would students be more invested in filling out self-assessments if they understood that the quality of their writing would affect their grade? Do we need to improve or modify our other current methods of evaluation and reflection?