Creating a two-tiered portfolio rubric
Burch, C Beth
English Journal; Jan 1997; 86, 1; Wilson Education Abstracts
pg. 55

Creating a Two-Tiered Portfolio Rubric

C. Beth Burch

Creating an assessment rubric is the most vexing—and yet possibly the most important—aspect of teaching with writing portfolios. Rubrics clarify expectations, provide parameters, and offer guidance both to students preparing portfolios and to teachers evaluating them. Rubrics specify what portfolios may include and make explicit the criteria for evaluation. Rubrics can be a source of immense comfort, particularly to students puzzled about how to proceed with a portfolio project or to those anxious about how their work will be assessed. And rubrics can reassure teachers as well by making it easier to assess portfolios with rigor, fairness, and compassion.

On the other hand, rubrics can also have a chilling effect on students' creativity: once contents and criteria are specified, other possibilities for items to be included or ways of thinking about the contents of the portfolio may be excluded. Students may no longer care about exploring avenues for creating an unusual or different portfolio once portfolio expectations are codified in a rubric. The challenge in crafting a rubric is to create one that doesn't stifle creativity and that is flexible enough to accommodate students' differing styles and processes of writing and of portfolio-making.

CREATING A RUBRIC

These caveats and benefits considered, however, most students preparing a portfolio will profit from a rubric, and so will most teachers. Thinking about a rubric entails asking questions like these: What sort of rubric will fit students (and the course work we have done) best? How can I ensure that students put enough material in the portfolio—sufficient quantity? What criteria should be considered so that the quality of the portfolio can be assessed? How can I make sure that students reflect on their processes of writing? How can I reward meaningful peer participation? How can I build in enough flexibility to reward different kinds of writers for ingenuity and creativity? How can I get students to engage the rubric and thus the portfolio? In short, how do I get students to buy into the rubric?

To address these questions, teachers can work *with* their students to construct a two-tiered portfolio rubric. A two-tiered portfolio rubric credits students for submitting finished work (first tier—quantity of work submitted) and also provides criteria for evaluating the quality of that work (second tier). Working together to construct the rubric helps students accommodate their strengths as learners and creates a more democratic classroom by engaging them in the process for assessing their work. A jointly constructed, two-tiered rubric is very much in keeping with the portfolio pedagogical goals of *process; student and peer involvement;* and *attention to individual abilities and styles.*

The author details how to create a rubric for portfolios which includes quantity and quality.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The following are some suggestions for creating and using a two-tiered portfolio rubric with your students.

Know What You Want in Portfolios Before You Begin to Discuss and Plan the Rubric with Students

Designing the rubric jointly is most profitable when both parties know what they want beforehand. If you haven't considered your goals and your interests before you engage students, your pedagogical aims may get lost when students get excited about constructing the rubric. Make a list of what *contents* you'd like to see in portfolios and what *qualities* you'd like the contents to exhibit before you start constructing the rubric—and ask your students to do the same.

Allow Sufficient Class Time and Reflection for Designing the Rubric with Students

You're going to need a 30-minute (minimum) stretch of time just to get students started thinking about the rubric. Appoint a class secretary to take notes on the process and to record the class' decisions. You'll need

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

to find out what students think should be included and how many of those pieces they think should be there. You'll want to know the criteria on which they want to be assessed—and what they believe the relative value of *contents* versus *qualities* should be (that is, if you are assigning a letter or number grade to the portfolio). Be prepared to revisit rubric negotiations several times; you may find it takes students considerable time and effort to negotiate and define criteria, even in class under your leadership. Of course, you'll be an active participant in the process, weeding out redundant criteria and insuring that rigor and integrity are built into the rubric.

Choose the Contents of the Portfolio First—and Determine How Much of the "Grade" Should Derive from the Contents

Here's what one writing class, which was to write seven essays of various genres and drawing on a combination of the modes of expression over the course of a semester, decided after long deliberation to put in the *Contents* section of the rubric:

Writing

_____ 1. [Name of piece]

_____ 2. [Name of piece]

_____ 3. [Name of piece]

_____ 4. [Name of piece]

Metawriting/Reflection

_____ 1. Table of contents

_____ 2. [Name of piece]

_____ 3. [Name of piece]

Peer Writing

_____ 1. [Name of piece]

_____ 2. [Name of piece]

Writer's Choices

_____ 1. [Name of piece]

_____ 2. [Name of piece]

Thus every writer in the class using this rubric should include samples of several kinds of writing: finished essays—four of seven essays written for the course; metawriting—a table of contents and two examples of reflection, pieces about the processes of preparing the essays and the portfolio itself; peer writing—two examples of writing by peers, typically done in peer review sessions in class; and finally, writer's choices—pieces of any kind which the writer may add.

Determine the Criteria on which the Portfolio Will Be Evaluated

What do you value in the portfolios? What criteria do students think should be considered in the evaluation of their portfolios? Choosing these criteria takes time and considerable editorial tact. You'll help students eliminate redundancies in their criteria (*creativity* and *originality*, for instance, are so similar that distinguishing between them in a portfolio may be difficult). You'll ensure that there aren't too many criteria (when this happens, the focus gets blurred, and evaluators get bored with sifting through the remains of the portfolio). Finally, you'll facilitate a decision about the relative value of the *qualities* section vis-a-vis the *contents* section—if, of course, portfolios are being evaluated with a letter or number grade. In the sample rubric (see sidebar), the class determined to count the *contents* section 60% of the grade and the *qualities* section 40% of the grade.

One class selected the criteria of *voice, organization, reflection, development,* and *mechanics* for the *qualities* section of their portfolio rubric. After students chose these criteria, they then had the more difficult and time-hungry task of defining what they meant by each term and including that information on the rubric for evaluators to use. They eventually decided on the following:

_____ 1. Voice—distinctness of style, creative expression and arrangement, personality

_____ 2. Organization—logical, orderly arrangement, ease of movement within portfolio

_____ 3. Reflection—thoughtfulness, awareness of self and reader in metawriting

_____ 4. Development—fullness of contents, full explanations, adequate detail

_____ 5. Mechanics and Usage—spelling, punctuation, word choice, usage

In this particular class, the students agreed more readily to the criteria themselves than to their definitions: they knew what criteria they "wanted to be graded on," but they didn't always agree on their understandings of those criteria. They agreed, for instance, that an excellent portfolio would

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

have a distinctive *voice*, but they initially couldn't agree on how to define *voice*. Defining criteria was absolutely necessary, though, in light of a class plan to include outside evaluators in the assessment process (a mix of parents, teachers, and students from outside the class itself).

If You Are Grading the Portfolio, Allot Points for Each Item in the *Contents* Section and Each Criterion in the *Qualities* Section

Here you clearly have more than one option: create a rubric that lets the teacher allot all the points or one that lets the teacher allot some of the points (perhaps the *contents* points) while students allot the others, either as individuals or as a group. You can also create a rubric that allows students to allot *qualities* points to match their individual strengths. To determine how many points to allot, simply start from the number of percentage points you (and the class) determined that the *qualities* section should be worth. In the sample rubric cited before, the items in the *contents* section were eventually divided among the four major areas in *contents*, according to the values that the teacher wanted to allow and that seemed to represent what was being emphasized in the course: 40 points for the writing itself; 15 points for the metawriting; 5 points for peer writing; and 5 (maximum) points for Writer's Choices. This totals 65 possible points. Notice that a writer can earn full credit without turning in Writer's Choices additional work—but that the extra pieces do provide a small bonus.

In the flexible *qualities* section of the rubric listed above, number values are later inserted by the individual student—but maximum-minimum scales created by the group at the teacher's suggestion ensure that every writer attends to each criterion. With this feature, students can distribute possible points to earn more points in areas of strength. If a student realizes her portfolio is very *organized*, for instance, she can specify the maximum number of points (12) for *organization*, so as to profit maximally from her knowledge and reflection on her own writing process.

Leave Room on the Rubric for Comments

Make sure there is enough blank space for suggestions, comments, and questions from evaluators. If necessary, use the back of a sheet for comments and notes to the writer. It's better, though, not to use more than one sheet (front and back) for the entire rubric; the more pages, the more possibility for leaves to get separated and lost and for the integrity of the rubric to be dissipated.

Create a Heading that Makes for Easy Bookkeeping

What information do you need for recording a grade, matching portfolios to rubrics, gathering information for research? Make sure to build space for that information into the heading of the rubric.

Consider a Variety of Options for Using the Rubric

How many ways can you assess a portfolio? As many as you can imagine! You may, for instance, have multiple evaluators: the instructor, the portfolio-maker, peers, other teachers, parents. If you assign grades to the portfolio, you can average scores, or you can weight them so that the teacher's score counts most—or least. Another option is to use descriptors (*beginning competency, expert*, etc.) instead of number grades or to

TWO-TIERED RUBRIC

Name _____

Date of Submission _____

Class _____

Evaluator _____

Date of Assessment _____

Score _____

A. Contents of Portfolio (60% of portfolio grade)

Writing (40 points)

_____ 1. _____ [Name of piece]

_____ 2. _____ [Name of piece]

_____ 3. _____ [Name of piece]

_____ 4. _____ [Name of piece]

Metawriting/Reflection (15 points)

_____ 1. Table of contents

_____ 2. _____ [Name of piece]

_____ 3. _____ [Name of piece]

Peer Writing (5 points)

_____ 1. _____ [Name of piece]

_____ 2. _____ [Name of piece]

Writer's Choices (up to 5 extra points: not required)

_____ 1. _____ [Name of piece]

_____ 2. _____ [Name of piece]

B. Quality of Portfolio (40% of portfolio grade)

You must allot 3–12 points to each criterion, for a total of 40 points. Write your allotments in the bracketed spaces.

_____ 1. Voice—distinctness of style, creative expression and arrangement, personality [ ]

_____ 2. Organization—logical, orderly arrangement, ease of movement within portfolio [ ]

_____ 3. Reflection—thoughtfulness, awareness of self and reader in metawriting [ ]

_____ 4. Development—fullness of contents, full explanations, adequate detail [ ]

_____ 5. Mechanics and Usage—spelling, punctuation, word choice, usage [ ]

Contents points ( ) + Qualities points ( ) = Total score ( )

Comments about the Portfolio
(continue on back)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

implement scales or charts to illustrate the assessment.

Numbers and letters are probably the most common ways that evaluations are expressed, but that doesn't mean that numbers and letters are the only ways to translate assessment results. You may also consider letting students submit their original rubric designs for your approval (or the approval of a class committee designated for that purpose). Students frequently have excellent insights on how they'd like to be assessed, and designing a rubric certainly helps them understand the seriousness of the undertaking.

CONCLUSION

Finally, in the true spirit of portfolios, it helps to think of each rubric as a draft to be rethought and rewritten when the next portfolios are assigned. Like writing, assessment is a process that is, at its best, ongoing, individual, and thoughtful.

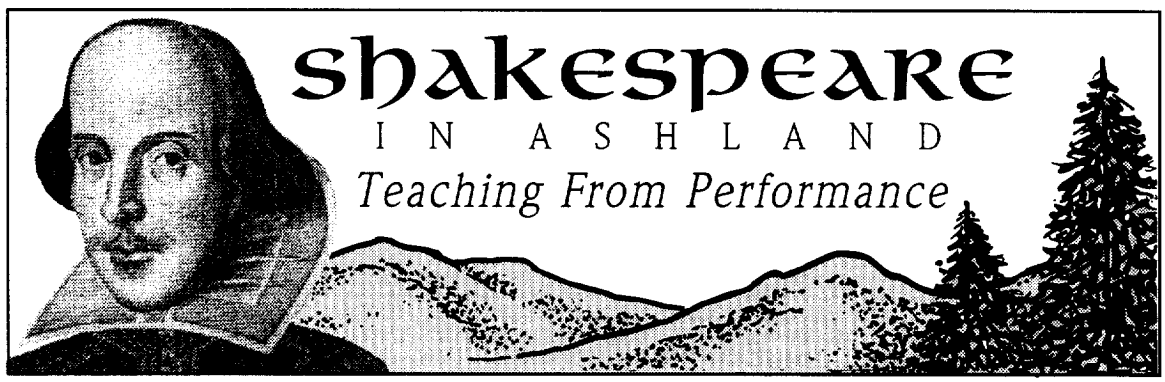
C. Beth Burch teaches English Education at Binghamton University, SUNY, New York.

EJ TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

The Value of Literature

"First, I hold that the value of a book lies not in its antiquity or in its revered academic value, but in its ability to capture and exercise the imagination of a reader. Any work of art, either literature or whatever, can be regarded as successful only in proportion to how strongly it affects its human beholders. If a book can attract, hold, and then excite the imagination of a reader, it has been the instrument of effecting a change upon the mind of the individual."

Don Adrian Davidson. 1972. "Sword and Sorcery Fiction: An Annotated Book List." *EJ* 61.1 (Jan.): 43.



At our NEH Summer Institute, 25 high school teachers from around the country will explore new approaches to Shakespeare, while seeing and studying plays performed by the Tony Award-winning Oregon Shakespeare Festival. The 1997 repertory includes *As You Like It, King Lear, Timon of Athens, and The Two Gentlemen of Verona.* Along with Festival actors and directors, a team of nationally known scholars will present a variety of effective critical approaches and teaching methods. Instructors will be Ralph Alan Cohen (James Madison University), Jean Howard (Columbia University), Philip McGuire (Michigan State University), Carol Thomas Neely (University of Illinois), Alan Armstrong (Southern Oregon State College), and Vincent Wixon (Crater High School). Students receive transportation, room and board, and a $1,000 stipend. Students may elect to receive nine quarter hours of graduate credit.

For more information, write:
Alan Armstrong, Center for Shakespeare Studies
Southern Oregon State College, Ashland, OR 97520
(541) 552-6905 • e-mail: hexter@wpo.sosc.osshe.edu

JUNE 29 THROUGH JULY 25, 1997
SOUTHERN OREGON STATE COLLEGE
ASHLAND, OREGON
Home of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival

Deadline for application: March 1, 1997. Supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Endowment programs do not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, handicap or age. For further information, write to the Equeal Opportunity Officer, National Endowment for the Humanities, 1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20506

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.