



Advocacy for Gifted and Talented in New York

Empowering Gifted Students through Negotiable Contracting

By Dr. Andi Stix

What would happen if gifted students were invited to help decide how their work should be evaluated? Would they exploit the opportunity, designing standards ridiculously low to guarantee a glut of effortless good grades?

Surprisingly, the answer is no. Experience at Robert Wagner Middle School in Manhattan where the majority of students are “SP” or gifted shows that students given a role in the assessment process can and do rise to the occasion. Given appropriate direction by teachers, youngsters evaluate their strengths and weaknesses accurately and pinpoint where to focus efforts to get the most out of what they’re learning. As a result, students view assessment not as an arbitrary form of reward or humiliation (a common perception of middle school students), but as a positive tool for personal growth.

This monograph examines negotiable contracting, a new approach to involving students in the assessment process currently implemented in some schools in New York City area. Negotiable contracting is adaptable to both arts and science curricula and is flexible enough to accommodate multi-modal forms of learning. Like any assessment, it ensures that the teacher remains squarely in charge of the classroom and, ultimately, responsible for appropriate grading.

Empowering Students

Negotiable contracting (Stix, 1996) gives students shared ownership in their own learning (Wiggins, 1993). Although the teacher is ultimately responsible for grading, s/he functions not as an all-powerful judge of students’ work but as a facilitator of discussion on the assessment process (Seele, 1994). Before the teacher presents his/her own expectations of the work, s/he asks students what would constitute quality work in their opinion. Across the negotiating table, teacher and class arrive at a mutually acceptable consensus. The result is that students feel like valued participants in the assessment process, motivated to strive toward those criteria-based standards.

The contract process can be used independently of a formal evaluation and can serve a variety of purposes. Some lessons do not call for formal assessment. However, the teacher still wants to set short term goals by establishing criteria for high quality work. Negotiable contracting is ideal for such a lesson. For example, if students are to work together in groups, negotiable contracting is helpful in setting up expectations such as cooperative roles, research materials and formats for chart and graphs.

Creating the Rubric

The rubric, an important element of using negotiable contracting for formal assessment (Pate, Homestead and McGinnis, 1993), is a carefully designed ratings chart drawn up jointly by teacher and students. The leftmost column lists the criteria that the teacher and students decide are either most

important ideas to be mastered in the lesson; the top row lists the rankings assessing how well students understand each criterion. The rubric also indicates how much importance should be given to each criterion, based on its importance to the overall lesson. Within each ranking, there also may be numerical gradations, depending on whether a student performs on the higher or lower level of that category. Unlike a traditionally assigned, generalized number or letter grade, the rubric serves as an in-depth 'report card' for a lesson, unit or project.

Let's take an example Mrs. Polin, a social studies teacher at Robert Wagner Middle School. She assigned her students the task of creating a mural for a geography lesson. Before they began any work on the murals, she arranged the class in cooperative learning groups and asked them to consider, "If you were I, what qualities would you look for in grading each mural? Come up with six criteria." After allowing time for discussion, Mrs. Polin asked each group to rank the qualities they had selected in order of importance, from most important to least important.

Next, each group presented its top two criteria to the class. Mrs. Polin listed those criteria on the board and the class chose which were truly most relevant to the lesson. With the teacher's guidance, they agreed on three qualities; 1) detail and depth; 2) a clear focal point; and 3) high-quality design. They then were asked, "What should be considered poor, fair, good, and excellent for each criterion?" One student suggested that a poor mural would have most of the facts wrong; the others readily agreed. "What if only some of the facts are wrong?" Mrs. Polin asked. "That would be a fair grade," said one boy. "I think having some of the facts wrong should still be a poor grade," argued another student.

Finally, after more discussion, a consensus was reached among the class that getting only some of the facts wrong would earn a fair grade. After yet more discussion, they also decided that getting all the facts right should earn a gooey grade while getting an exceptional amount of accurate, interesting information from unusual sources would earn a rating of excellent.

As a result of their negotiations, before they'd even picked up a pencil or pen, Mrs. Polin's students were perfectly clear about what was expected in their murals. Moreover, they had the satisfaction of having had a voice in setting the objectives for the project and establishing a ratings system that they considered to be fair.

Criteria: Accurate Detail and Depth

Clear Focal Point High

Quality Design

The next step in creating a rubric is negotiating ratings to reflect how well each criterion is met. Across the top of the rubric chart are listed the various rankings, in lieu of grades or numbers. Again, those rankings may be decided during negotiations between teacher and class. There is a separate rating for each criterion in the rubric, since students naturally will be stronger in some aspects of their work than in others.

Choosing neutral words for each rating avoids the implication of good/bad inherent in a generalized A-F or numerical grade. In addition, the natural temptation of instructors-as well as students – to award a middle ranking is avoided by the use of an even number of rankings. For example, in a 1-5 ranking system, 3 tends to be used as a "neutral " grade.

Attempted Acceptable Admirable Awesome

Or

Novice Apprentice Veteran Master

The State of Kentucky, which uses a rubric system of assessment, utilizes four non-pejorative ratings in its rubrics. In ascending order of competence, they are Novice, Apprentice, Proficient and Distinguished. There is no “overall” rating for the child; the terms are used separately to evaluate students’ performance for each of the criteria in the rubric. For a social studies report, for example, the ratings might be defined as follows:

- “Novice” is a student who has absorbed little of the lesson; it signals insufficient preparation, weak conclusions or organization, and incorrect information.
- “Apprentice” implies a beginning conceptual understanding; there is a main idea but it is presented only in broad outline with little detail and some erroneous or unclear information.
- “Proficient” signals a clear conceptual understanding of the lesson; the report was well organized, logical, and focused with few errors.
- “Distinguished” means outstanding work; work rich in depth and precise detail with a consistent, powerful presentation and little to no errors.

It is useful to include numeral gradations within each category. For example, a student may receive an Apprentice rating of three or four, depending on whether s/he performs on a higher or lower end of that category.

Let’s examine how Mrs. Polin’s class created the rubric for their geography mural;

Criteria

Novice

Apprentice

Veteran

Master

Accurate Detail and Depth

Incorrect or little facts, hardly any detail (1-3 pts.)

Some facts are accurate, some detail (4-6 pts.)

Substantial amount of facts, good amount of detail (7-9 pts.)

Exceptional amount of facts, vivid descriptions (10-12 pts.)

Clear Focus

Vague and unclear (1-2 pts.)

Some focus, but not organized enough (3-4 pts.)

Well organized and clearly presented (5-6 pts.)

Highly organized and easy to follow (7-8 pts.)

Design

Little to no layout and design (1-3pts.)

Simple design, but layout could be more organized (4-6 pts.)

Attractive and invites the viewer (7-9 pts.)

Exceptional design and outstanding visual appeal (10-12 pts.)

In addition to the rubric itself, there is an area included for comments. In this space, Mrs. Polin can be even more specific about strengths and weaknesses and, accentuating the positive, suggest ways for each student to stretch his/her skills and understanding. As a result, the rubric gives the student an overall picture of his/her skill level.

At Robert Wagner Middle School, some teachers have enlarged a blank rubric and laminated it. For each project, they use a dry erase marker and fill in the quadrants with the students. They do likewise with the assessment sheet. Students each receive a blank sheet to fill out with the teacher. Here, students have their own record of what is expected of them. At the end of the project, they may be asked to assess themselves and/or their peers and hand in the assessment sheet for the teacher to grade.

Peer Assessment

Another strategy that may be implemented is the peer assessment form. Students enjoy assessing one another's work. Not only do they become critical assessors of other people's work, but also they elevate their own expectations of themselves for future projects. In the example below, students not only score each criterion, but also have the opportunity to write a comment, commendation or a suggestion to the student directly:

Directions: Please complete a form for each student below. Once you are finished, please cut off the section and place it on top of that student's project with a paper clip.

Name of Student:

Accuracy of Information

(5,10,15,20)

Completion of Work

(3,6,9,12)

Presentation

(artwork, organization, neatness)

(up to 12 pts. each)

Depth and Breadth of Details

(8, 16,24, 32)

Overall Grade

Student Critiquing This Paper:

Comments for Student:

Creative Problem Solving

Rubrics can be especially effective in assessing student's work in mathematics (Moon, 1993). While traditional quizzing and grading may best suit rote skills(memorizing the times tables), most mathematics involves creative problem solving with several routes to a solution--some more succinct, effective or creative than others. For a fractions lesson involving word problems, for example, the "report card" for student's problem solving might include these assessment criteria; is the solution easy to follow? Does it demonstrate clear conceptual understanding? Would the answer work in real life? Do the diagrams, sentences and numbers coordinate?

Similarly, rubrics can be used in any discipline-based or interdisciplinary lesson. The rubric an include opportunities for students to use journal work, projects, research studies, experiments, skits or other vehicles to demonstrate their competence.

Good Poetry

How would Mrs. Bartko's 8th grade Language Arts class use a rubric studying a unit on poetry? After discussing how poetry differs from prose and looking at various types of poetry, the students receive the assignment of writing a poem of their own. Mrs. Bartko then asks: "How can a poem- a subjective assignment with no 'correct' answer – be fairly assessed?"

The students launch into a discussion of what constitutes "good" poetry. Working in groups, they come up with a rubric, composed of four main criteria that Mrs. Bartko and the students agree are the most appropriate and fair qualities. They decide a poem should: portray emotion and/or imagery; captivate the reader; use language clearly; and use punctuation purposefully. They then read various examples of how those skills are applied at the various ratings levels. Finally, before filling in the rubrics with her students as a whole group, she asks the youngsters – sitting in cooperative work groups--to evaluate the assignment and fill in the rubric on their own:

Criteria

Novice

Apprentice

Veteran

Master

Ability to captivate the reader

Unfocused; author seems unsure of direction (1-2 pts.)

Some focus, but lacks continuity (3-4 pts.)

Well-focused and interests reader throughout (5-6 pts.)

Captivates and involves reader deeply (7-8 pts.)

Sensory Images

Difficult to visualize image or emotion (1-3 pts.)

Some use of image, idea, emotion (4-6 pts.)

Clear use of sensory images to portray ideas or emotions (7-9 pts.)

Vivid, detailed images and intensely felt emotion (10-12 pts.)

Use of language

Imprecise or inappropriate choice of words (1-2 pts.)

Expresses thoughts marginally (3-4 pts.)

Appropriate choice of language (5-6 pts.)

Uses rich and imaginative language (7-8 pts.)

Punctuation

Arbitrary punctuation (1-2 pts.)

Some meaningful punctuation (3-4 pts.)

Punctuation meaningful throughout (5-6 pts.)

Punctuation enhances conveyance of thoughts and images (7-8 pts.)

Recognizing Achievements

Rubrics thus offer an important way for educators to motivate students through assessment. Giving youngsters a voice in their grading provides them with a clear understanding of what is expected of them and the assurance that their accomplishments will be recognized.

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