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Student-Generated Evaluation Criteria

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Description: Some instructors are very successful having students work collaboratively to develop evaluation criteria for papers--an alternative to instructors giving students rubrics or criteria. Beth Godbee offers a persuasive argument about how much students learn from developing evaluation criteria and offers detailed advice about how to do this.

Student-Generated Evaluation Criteria

In my teaching, I'm deeply committed—philosophically and pedagogically—to listening to and learning from students. Part of this commitment is asking students to take the lead in developing evaluation criteria for their papers. After all, to learn to write well requires internalizing criteria for evaluating writing, and the best way for students to improve as writers is not to wait for my comments on their papers, but instead to wrestle with developing criteria themselves and collaborating with peers and with me to refine them.

I've admittedly had the luxury of teaching a small writing class, a class focused on undergraduate student life, so unpacking grading criteria fits within the course content and learning goals. Nonetheless, as I've taught writing courses at both the introductory and intermediate undergraduate levels here at UW-Madison, I've had great success collaborating with students to develop evaluation criteria—a list of characteristics of strong, persuasive writing. I believe this approach is an especially effective way to make feedback on student writing meaningful.

Rationale: Why Ask Students to Develop Evaluation Criteria

Traditional, pre-set evaluation criteria work well for helping students understand course expectations, for helping instructors clarify our own values, and for increasing transparency in the grading process. Pre-set criteria do not, however, ask students to identify explicitly—and *in writing*—their own expectations for the course, their values for what a given assignment should do, their sense of what “counts” as learning. Asking students to develop evaluation criteria invites an active involvement in the life and community of a course, which aligns with broader campus engagement and can heighten a student's sense of belonging on campus. In addition, this form of experiential learning can:

- Increase student participation during class sessions and with course assignments, as students become active in their own assessment

- Help students develop language to articulate their understandings of writing, as they name, identify, question, and possibly argue against writing conventions in a given course or discipline
- Give students practice in talk about writing that is needed for effective peer review, writing conferences, and writing workshops
- Teach leadership and team-building skills, as students work through a process of disagreement and negotiation to generate criteria that will be shared by all class members
- Disrupt the usual student-teacher contested relationship by asking students to make decisions about the course
- Ensure students have a stake in their writing assignments—*after all, how much more “high stakes” do you get than in grading?*

Process: How Students Develop Criteria

In past semesters, I have worked with students to develop grading guidelines through a process of sharing what individual students consider “good writing,” then working in small groups to determine what they value in writing, and finally coming together as a whole class to translate values into criteria.

INDIVIDUAL DISCOVERY & DRAFTING è SMALL-GROUP COLLABORATIONS è WHOLE-CLASS REVIEW

Although the evaluation criteria change little from semester to semester, I believe the process itself leads to many of the benefits described above.

While the process may take a single class or two, for me, this process has stretched over several class sessions and been divided into 15-30 minute segments, beginning around week 4. The following is a sketch of my process:

Individual Discovery and Drafting

1. Individual students choose samples of good writing and bring them to class.
2. Individual students freewrite for 5-10 minutes on what makes their sample “good.”

Small-Group Collaborations

1. Students then work in small groups to share their samples and the qualities of “good writing” they identified in freewriting. In these small groups, students discuss points of disagreement and find common ground across their responses.
2. In the next small-group session, students translate their more general discussion of “good writing” to the specific course context, considering how their own writing is similar to and different from the pieces they selected as “good writing.” At this point, students draft evaluation criteria, listing what they believe to be characteristics of “good writing” for the pieces they are producing in our course. These conversations bring in considerations of genre, audience, and rhetorical situation.
3. Before moving into whole-class discussion, I type and compile the draft evaluation criteria students have developed in their small groups. Students meet again in their groups to discuss the criteria others have developed and to identify (dis)agreements among the drafts.

Whole-Class Review

4. From these small-group settings, we move into a whole-class discussion and review of the small-group draft criteria. A student is elected to serve as “scribe,” recording our conversation and compiling a new and revised list of evaluation criteria. Although this conversation could continue for several class sessions, whatever agreements we have reached at the end of this session, we add to a new and revised version of the criteria. We also record questions for follow-up conversation.
5. In our next (and usually final) whole-class discussion, we review the revised criteria and open the floor for other revisions and debates. Students have copies of the revised criteria to review. As we make changes, we record them on the board.
6. I type a final draft of the evaluation criteria and present it to the class for a last vote of approval. After the approval, I upload the final version to our course website and distribute copies.

Throughout this process, my role is one of facilitator, listener, and tough questioner. Students often work through this process more quickly than I would, so I find myself working to slow us down, to ask questions that challenge easy assumptions. I remember clearly, for example, students agreeing that grammatical correctness should be part of their evaluation criteria, and I asked questions like: “What makes a paper grammatically correct?” “How many errors are ‘acceptable’ in a draft?” “Do you want *me*, as the evaluator, to count your errors?” The last question, in particular, provoked a long discussion of audience, the grading process, and the material conditions facing teachers who serve not only as *readers*, but also as *graders*. Students know throughout this process that I hold “veto power” over the criteria, but exposing this

power—and then questioning and discussing it—also adds to the sense of agency I hope students take away from the courses I teach.

SAMPLE FEEDBACK FORM

Student-Generated Evaluation Criteria for Midterm Portfolios

Portfolio Grading Guidelines

- The portfolio is not simply a container of work, but tells a story about you as a writer and learner in English 201. The cover letter and choice of artifacts illustrate self-reflection.
- The portfolio (cover letter and contents) shows progress and growth over the semester.
- Content draws the reader's interest and is engaging; ideas are expressed with the English 201 audience in mind, so readers will find the content familiar and thought-provoking.
- Papers are well-developed and provide description, details, evidence, examples, and thorough arguments (i.e., substance). Organization helps the papers "flow" so readers do not get lost.
- Papers match their purpose and genre; the writer's goals are clearly communicated and met.
- Papers work together as a "whole"—the parts add up to a single, polished product.
- Sentences are carefully crafted and show attention to style (word choice, sentence structure, and tone) as well as mechanics (grammar, formatting, and documentation).

Writer's Name: _____

Comments . . .

Grade Breakdown

Midterm portfolio grade (40%)	_____	Absences at midterm	_____
Midterm participation grade (10%)	_____	Tardies at midterm	_____
English 201 midterm grade	_____		

Variations: How This Could Work in Your Course

Asking students to participate in their evaluation doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing approach. For instance, what I've been able to do in the writing courses I teach won't work in every context, but there are many ways to engage students in a conversation about evaluation criteria. This process gets them thinking, talking, and writing about what makes "good writing" in your assignment, your course, your discipline—and gets them involved in the means of "grading."

In a large lecture course, this process might invite students to “vote” for choices using clicker technology. In courses in which the majority of class time is used to cover vast amounts of new material, students might write outside of class (or in the first few minutes of a class) justifications for their grades in which they critique or revise evaluation criteria. Opportunities for student involvement exist in all levels and class sizes and just require some imaginative planning with feedback from students. There are many ways to get our students actively involved in their own assessment, but I’ve found this process to be an especially effective one, one that strengthens my relationships with students and deepens their learning in the course.