

SELF-ASSESSMENT AND WRITING QUALITY

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ABSTRACT

Students need to learn how to use self-assessments to improve their learning. They need to know where they are, where they are going, and how to get there. Self-assessments are a tool that allows students to understand their strengths and areas for growth in writing. The purpose of this research was to determine if student self-assessment with the use of a co-created rubric improves the writing quality and attitudes toward writing and rubric use with grade two students. Twenty students participated in this action research project, which took place in a grade two classroom within a large metropolitan school division located in southern Alberta. The design used in this research was a mixed-methods approach using both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Surveys, self-assessments using a co-created rubric, and teacher assessments using the co-created rubric were all used to determine the effects of self-assessment on writing quality. Self-assessments and teacher assessments were translated into a 4-point Likert scale to demonstrate improvement in writing quality. The results of the attitude survey, self-assessments, and interviews showed positive attitudes in several areas. The number of students who felt they were poor writers decreased by the end of the research. The majority of students increased how they view themselves as writers. Overall, there were more positive attitude changes than negative. In regards to improving writing quality, the data showed a positive correlation between the use of rubrics for self-assessment and improvement in both the quality of writing and in students' attitudes toward writing. The largest growth area was specific to the content of the writing.

Keywords: Learning, self-assessment, writing,

INTRODUCTION

Education is an ever-changing world. Roles and responsibilities of teachers and students are being redefined and reshaped on a continual basis. Historically, the process of assessment and feedback was entirely in the teachers' hands. However, assessment practices have changed, moving from assessing for diagnosis to assessing for accountability. Teachers are being held more accountable for feedback on student learning. This has changed the nature of the work done with students. Teachers are looking for ways to improve student motivation and learning. They are looking for ways to involve students in the learning and assessment processes. Teachers are looking for ways to develop independent, lifelong learners.

Student self-assessment is quickly becoming an expected element of reporting. Davies (2000), Kramer (2009), and Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis (2006) all agree that when students are involved in the assessment process, they recognize their strengths, gauge their progress, and take more ownership of their learning. When students are able to set personal goals, they identify where they are in relation to criteria and where they need to go. Davies (2000) adds that when students self-assess, they develop the skills necessary to be independent lifelong learners.

In today's society, writing is an essential skill. Yet, it is a subject with which most students struggle. They often do not view themselves as effective writers. They often do not

understand how to improve their writing skills. Students frequently have negative attitudes toward writing, which affects their growth and development as writers.

Students need to learn how to use self-assessments to improve their learning. Students must understand how to improve their writing quality. They need to know where they are, where they are going, and how to get there. Self-assessments are a tool that allows students to understand their strengths and areas for growth in writing. Personal goal setting, rubrics, and self-assessment all support this continuum of learning.

This topic is important because if educators are to develop independent, lifelong learners, then educators need to teach students the necessary skills. It was anticipated that this research project will enhance student learning. By involving students in assessing their writing and setting goals, we encourage them to become more actively involved in their learning and take more ownership for it. This increase in ownership may have a positive effect on student attitude and motivation toward writing. It was also anticipated that this project will have a positive impact on the teachers' understanding, development, and implementation of self-assessment.

RESEARCH RATIONALE

The rationale for this research topic was to explore the link between student self-assessment and improved student learning. When examining the Alberta Program of Studies, it became apparent that students need to become active participants in their learning. The Language Arts Program of Studies states, "Students need opportunities to reflect on, appraise and celebrate their achievements and growth" (Alberta Learning, 2000, p.87).

A large metropolitan school district in southern Alberta is in the process of implementing a new report card within the next 2 years. Its intent is to incorporate the use of personalized learning and connect it to three of the End Statements (goals): citizenship, personal development, and character. The school district believes in empowering its students in the learning process. The district believes that students need to be active participants in the process, incorporating their voice through self-reflection and personal goal setting.

As self-assessment becomes an integral component of all teaching and learning, it is important for educators to fully understand how these assessment practices support the personalization of learning and ultimately result in improved learning outcomes for all students.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The impact of this research was twofold. First, the impact on student learning was anticipated to include improved attitude toward writing; increased confidence as a learner; knowledge of own strengths and weaknesses; and knowledge on how to improve individuals' writing. Second, the impact on the teaching environment was anticipated to include creation of co-created rubrics to be used as a self-assessment tool; focused writing instruction; improved understanding of the link between self-assessment and specific student learning outcomes; and a direct link to the new report card.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Davies (2000) pointed out that assessment needs to be flexible, address individual needs, support student learning, and inform parents. One assessment tool that allows for these conditions is rubrics. Rubrics have become popular with teachers (Andrade, 2000; Andrade, Du, & Wang, 2008; Stiggins et al., 2006).

Andrade (2000) defined rubrics as a teaching tool that is used to support learning and encourages sophisticated thinking skills. As Andrade continued in her research on rubrics, another definition she gave was a scale of detailed criteria that outlines clear requirements of an assignment. Andrade (2001) added that rubrics that reveal common problems students experience would provide more descriptive feedback that can be used to improve learning. Ainsworth and Christinson (1998) defined a rubric as a brief outline that describes quality and content used to determine a grade as well as a student's understanding and his/her ability to communicate this understanding. According to Ross (2006), rubrics use language that students can understand, address expectations that are familiar to the students, and include performance criteria that are deemed important to the task. Stiggins et al. (2006) stated that the ultimate goal of a rubric is to define quality work, and not just to provide a scoring guide. They added that descriptive language, definitions, and examples of work quality are what make rubrics clear. Furthermore, Stiggins et al. (2006) stressed that rubrics help students gauge their progress, understand the targets, and comprehend how to close the gap by comparing their work to models of strong and weak performances.

Research has demonstrated that there are many benefits to involving students in the creation of rubrics (Andrade, 2000; Ross, Rolheiser, & Hogaboam-Gray, 1998). Ainsworth and Christinson (1998) articulated that because students are actively engaged in setting the criteria, they take greater pride in their work, are more motivated, and experience a greater sense of ownership for the entire learning and assessment process. Students are able to understand the criteria thoroughly and apply this to their learning. The rubric becomes a kind of map, guiding them to their final product. Davies (2000) and Andrade (2000) agreed with this conclusion by stating that when samples accompany criteria descriptions, students are enabled to gauge their progress in relation to the learning targets. The use of rubrics supports the development of understanding in students. Andrade (2000) stressed that rubrics provide students with more descriptive feedback about their strengths and areas for growth.

Stiggins et al. (2006) advocated strongly for involving students in developing the criteria for the rubric. Involving students helps them to develop a deeper understanding of what is expected.

Ainsworth and Christinson (1998) highlighted the benefits for parents of using rubrics, including an understanding of the requirements of an assignment and how they can support their child, an understanding of why their child received the grade they did, knowledge of the content being covered, and a better understanding of their child as a learner. The authors observed, involving students in developing criteria to evaluate their work benefits a much wider spectrum of the school community than merely students themselves. Teachers, parents, and administrators also gain valuable insights with regard to student learning, instructional methods, and curricular emphasis. (p. 69)

Historically, the process of assessment and feedback was solely in the teachers' hands (Vagle, 2009). The teacher was responsible for collecting, organizing, and presenting the evidence of student learning (Davies, 2000). The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat of Ontario (2007) stated that assessment practices have evolved, with teachers developing a bank of assessment strategies. The Secretariat reported that assessment strategies are now beginning to include student self-assessment. Vagle (2009) highlighted the fact that formative assessment requires students to be users of the data. Black and Wiliam (2001) concurred and added the statement that self-assessment is the essential component of formative assessment. The research in support of student self-assessment is overwhelming (Andrade, 2008; Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009; Rolheiser & Ross, 2001; Ross, 2006; Stiggins, 2002). Andrade (2008) stressed that when used effectively, student self-assessment is valuable in promoting learning.

Self-assessment is defined as the process of assessment where students reflect on their work, judge it based on goals or criteria, and then revise (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009). It is done on rough copies of work in order to allow for revisions and improvements. Rolheiser and Ross (2001) added that this type of assessment, which is based on evidence of learning in relation to the learning goals, is then used to improve and direct subsequent learning. Joyce, Spiller, and Twist (2009) concurred with the idea that student self-assessment is actively engaging and purposefully involving students in each stage of the assessment process.

Stiggins et al. (2006) stressed the importance of involving students in their learning and assessment processes. In fact, this is the basis for the students' work. The authors add that students need to be more responsible for their learning. By involving them in the assessment process, teachers encourage students to recognize their aptitudes and progress and to take ownership of their learning. Through reflection, students will develop a deeper understanding and remember it longer (Stiggins et al., 2006). Chappuis and Chappuis (2008) agreed with this finding, stating that when students self-assess they accept greater responsibility for their academic progress. This sentiment was echoed by Black and Wiliam (1998), who stated that when students are required to reflect on and articulate their learning, then achievement improves. Davies (2000) agreed that this process helps students better understand their learning and progress. According to Overlie (2009), self-assessment is "forms of feedback in which students are in charge of giving and responding to the feedback" (p. 188).

However, in order for students to self-assess as part of formative assessment, they need to know three things: "1- where they're going, 2- where they are now, and 3- how to close the gap" (Stiggins et al., 2006, p. 41). A student needs to have a clear understanding of the learning targets in order to analyze his or her own work and determine what needs improvement. Kramer (2009) concurred that students need to evaluate their work to determine their progress and areas for growth. From this analysis, they then set goals for future learning. Andrade and Valtcheva (2009) highlighted three steps necessary to involve students in effective self-assessment:

1. Articulate clear expectations for the task. These have been created by the teacher, the student, or both.
2. Students self-assess their work based on the expectations.
3. Students use this feedback to direct their further learning and set goals.

Other authors, including Black and Wiliam (1998), Davies (2000), Heritage (2007), Joyce et al. (2009), and Stiggins (2007) put forward a similar acknowledgement of these three steps for effective self-assessment.

The support for the use of student self-assessment is overwhelming. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat of Ontario (2007) argued that the power of this type of assessment is in its effect on student progress and students' ability and desire to achieve academic success. Dunning, Heath, and Suls (2004) (as cited in The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat of Ontario, 2007), reported, "Accurate self-assessment is...crucial for education to be a lifelong enterprise that continues far after the student has left the classroom" (p. 85). Davies (2000) mirrored this sentiment by articulating that when students self-assess, they develop the skills necessary to be independent, lifelong learners. She continued by stating that when students are actively engaged in assessments they are better prepared to have conversations regarding their learning. According to Kramer (2009), the culmination of the assessment process is the students' ability to discuss and articulate clearly regarding their learning. These discussions become more meaningful, specific, and targeted. Students begin to gain a greater sense of control over their learning and confidence in their abilities. Stiggins (2002) claimed that

student self-assessment allows students to become in charge of their learning and make decisions for continued success. He argued that this leads to the construction of lifelong learning.

Rolheiser and Ross (2001) agreed that student involvement in assessment can be powerful due to its effect on students' academic success, drive, and self-confidence in their learning abilities. The authors further developed this idea by stating that self-assessments give teachers information about student effort and persistence they would otherwise lack. Joyce et al. (2009) added that this intrinsic motivation is due to students' greater responsibility for their own learning. Andrade (2008) articulated that when students were active participants in the assessment process it helped them feel more prepared, improved quality of the product, and made the goals achieved more transparent. Ross (2006) stated that the findings support that self-assessments leads to improved academic performance and behavior. Skilling and Ferrell (2000) added that self-assessment supports the development of critical thinking skills.

Self-assessment is also beneficial to teachers. Rolheiser and Ross (2001) claimed that making the self-assessment criteria clear and specific to learning targets helps clarify what is important for student performance. This clarity leads to more focused teaching. Stiggins (2002) asserted that teachers benefit because their teaching becomes more directly tied to student needs, because students become more motivated to learn, and because time is saved as a result of more effective and efficient classroom assessment. Andrade (2008) concluded, "If students produce it, they can assess it: and if they can assess it, they can improve it" (p. 63).

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A mixed approach was used in this research in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the effects of self-assessment on the writing quality of grade two students. Triangulation occurred in order to obtain this information and increase the credibility, dependability, and reliability of data. This triangulation of data occurred monthly over the course of three months.

A qualitative approach included the use of surveys and interviews. Surveys were based on a Likert-type scale using smiley-face pictures targeted to grade two students. These smiley-faces were then translated into a 4-point scale to allow for quantitative results. Surveys were conducted at the beginning, middle, and end of the research process to determine students' perceptions regarding writing and rubric use. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format to allow for follow-up responses. Dependability and credibility was ensured through having others view the survey prior to administration, collecting surveys on multiple occasions, and debriefing after surveys to allow for further insights. Each interview was recorded to ensure accuracy of responses and unbiased results.

A quantitative approach included the use of survey data, self-assessment data, and rubric assessments performed by me that were translated into a 4-point Likert scale. Each instrument was conducted monthly for each student. Self-assessments and rubric assessments performed by me were compared pre, mid, and post to determine if writing quality had improved. Students worked with me in the creation of the rubric that was to be used in the self-assessments. Rubric development occurred over the span of 1 week.

Selection Process

The research study took place in a large metropolitan school division located in southern Alberta. The elementary school is a K-6 school with 320 students. The community itself is representative of a middle-class socio-economic area with a low unemployment rate (3.2%)

and a high post-secondary education rate (65%). It is a community where the visible minorities are few (5.7%). Sixty percent of the students are from out of area, encompassing 27 different surrounding communities in the south part of the city.

Data Collection and Analysis

The attitude survey was broken into two sections. The first seven questions dealt with students' attitudes toward writing. The survey was collated into three distinct tables for pre, mid, and post survey scores. The total for each statement was tallied for each reply. This total was then divided by the number of respondents to give a percentage for each statement regarding the first seven questions of the survey. When analyzing the data I assigned a "negative attitude" to answers from the *hardly ever* or *sometimes* categories and a "positive attitude" to answers from the *mostly* or *always* categories. This method was used to demonstrate an increase or decrease in attitude change. Question #8 dealt specifically with how the students viewed themselves as writers. Data were analyzed and compared pre, mid, and post research. Percentages were used to illustrate an increase or decrease in attitude.

The last two questions dealt specifically with rubrics. Figures were used to illustrate a change in attitude. The co-created rubric consisted of five sections: spelling, punctuation, capitalization, ideas, and organization. Each section was then divided into *always* (big happy face), *often* (happy face), *sometimes* (neutral face), and *hardly ever* (sad face). The students responded using this Likert-type scale of smiley-faces. Scores of 4 (Always), 3 (Often), 2 (Sometimes), and 1 (Hardly ever) were awarded for replies on each statement. A table was used to compare the pre and post scores for each category on the rubric. These results were then analyzed. I set up a chart to compare writing quality pre and post. I analyzed the data from first and last teacher assessments and tallied whether there was an improvement, no improvement, or a decrease in writing improvement.

The one-on-one interviews with open-ended questions were then analyzed, and common themes were observed. Responses to the interview questions were recorded. Specific quotes were recorded and used in support of the quantitative data.

FINDINGS

Research Question One

Did the use of a co-created rubric, as a self-assessment tool, affect student attitudes toward writing? When comparing pre and post surveys, the results illustrate that most students made a positive attitude change toward writing. In response to question #1, there was a 45% increase in positive answers. This was the highest growth area. This increase was connected to students' attitude toward writing at school. This area found a 15% increase in positive attitude, while writing at home scored only a 5% increase in attitude. Question #2 illustrated a 10% decrease in positive responses. All other questions showed at moderate improvement in student attitude.

The last question regarding attitudes on the attitude survey dealt specifically with how well students felt they wrote. At the beginning of the research, 35% of the students scored themselves as either average or poor writers. This percentage dropped to 25% by the end of the research.

The greatest growth was demonstrated at the midpoint of the research, with 89% of students rating themselves as either great or good writers. Even though this percentage dropped to 75% by the end, there was still an increase of 14% in how students view themselves as writers. Connected to how students felt they wrote was their ability to revise their own writing.

Knowing what a rubric is and reflecting on how it helps during the writing process was analyzed for a change in attitude. The last two questions on the attitude survey dealt specifically with rubric use. The first question asked if the students knew what a rubric was. 100% of students pre-research did not know what a rubric was. Post-research 19 out of 20, or 95% of students, knew what a rubric was.

The last question of the survey asked if a rubric was a helpful tool during the writing process. Figure 4 represents the findings.

As 100% of the participants did not know what a rubric was at the beginning of the research, they did not answer this question. Therefore, results are only for post-research. As is evident, 53% of students stated that a rubric is “always” a helpful tool, with 32% falling in the “mostly” category. These two categories yielded an 84% positive attitude toward rubric use. One student was not able to respond to this question, as he continued to not know what a rubric was.

Research Question Two

Did the use of a co-created rubric, as a self-assessment tool, improve writing quality? The improvement in writing quality in each category between the pre and post writing samples are extremely positive. All five categories from the rubric demonstrate growth. The largest growth area was ideas, with 70% of students showing improvement. Spelling was the next largest growth area, with a 30% increase. Punctuation and capitalization were the only two categories that illustrated a decrease with a small percentage of students.

One question on the post-research interview focused on how the students viewed changes in their writing. Ninety percent of students gave positive responses to this question. Sixteen out of 20 students, or 80%, stated that the most improvement was in regard to topics and ideas in their writing.

In conclusion, the number of students who felt they were poor writers decreased by the end of the research. More students liked to write at the end than did in the beginning, with a large increase in liking to write at school. Lastly, the majority of students increased how they view themselves as writers. Overall, there were more positive attitude changes than negative.

In regard to improving writing quality, the data showed a positive correlation between the use of a rubric for self-assessment and improvement in both the quality of writing and in students' attitudes toward writing. The largest growth area was specific to the content of the writing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To begin with, it is absolutely necessary for the teacher to spend an ample amount of time working on what constitutes good writing. In order for students to be able to improve their own writing, they need to have a solid understanding of how to do this. This work needs to involve the use of quality writing exemplars. Students need to be able to see the difference and then be able to translate that into their own words. It is recommended that classroom teachers take the first month of school to analyze, evaluate, and discuss the different writing samples. The more time teachers put into this process, the deeper an understanding the students will have. Setting the groundwork is perhaps the most important step in this process. Once this discussion of what constitutes good writing has occurred, then the development of the rubric can take place.

A second recommendation for the classroom is to use a colour-coding system with the students with their writing. For example, periods will be colour coded red, capitals in blue,

topic sentences in orange, details in purple. By colour coding the writing, students are able to see how their writing is related to the rubric and the quality writing exemplars from the beginning of the year. In turn, this makes it easier for them to do the rubric self-assessment, and to ensure a higher percentage of accuracy.

A third recommendation is for the writing and rubric final product to be sent home to the parents. This allows for follow-up discussion and another chance for the students to explain where they are with their writing, where they need to be, and how they are going to get there.

The last recommendation is for teachers to use the same rubric as the students and score the writing. Teachers need to conference with students, comparing their scores against the student scores. By comparing the two, the teacher has been afforded a one-on-one conference with the student that offers greater insight into the student's thinking. It is also an opportunity to build on the student's ability to assess his or her work more accurately.

Consistency between grade levels in writing programs is necessary if continued writing progress is to occur from year to year. It is recommended that all grade levels use quality writing exemplars to discuss what good writing looks like. It is also recommended that all grade levels involve students in the creation of rubrics that will be used for teacher and self-assessments. A final recommendation is that the schedule includes uninterrupted time blocks for writing to help students improve.

CONCLUSION

The impact of this research was twofold. First, the impact on student learning included improved attitude toward writing, increased confidence as a learner, knowledge of own strengths and weaknesses, and knowledge on how to improve their own writing. Second, the impact on the teaching environment included creation of co-created rubrics to be used as a self-assessment tool, focused writing instruction, and improved understanding of the link between self-assessment and specific student learning outcomes.

The data showed a positive correlation between the use of a rubric for self-assessment and improvement in the quality of writing. A positive correlation can also be seen between the use of a rubric and students' attitudes toward writing. As Andrade (2000) states, teachers have the ability to increase the potential of rubrics by including students in their design, as well as engaging students in self-assessment using these rubrics. She concludes by observing that using rubrics for instruction and assessment has a powerful effect on teaching and student learning.

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