

Making Learning Visible: Student and Peer Evaluation

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I'll begin this response to Mark Giese's final journal entry by taking up his discussion of student assessment, focusing on the issue of subjectivity in grading. I'll also take Mark's lead and offer a few additional reflections on the process of peer review of teaching and return, by the end of this piece, to the concept of the scholarship of teaching because it crystallizes the focus on student—and instructor—learning.

The knowledge and skills that Mark and Nancy emphasized in their course created some assessment challenges. Traditional evaluation techniques, like multiple choice tests, didn't seem adequate to the task of measuring complex performances. Accordingly, Mark and Nancy used a variety of approaches to gauge student

learning. Mark writes about the subjectivity inherent in the grading process, but argues that "despite the perils," evaluation provides students with feedback that they can use to improve their learning.

This term, I am teaching a graduate-level course on qualitative research methods in education, so the tension between objectivity and subjectivity is on my mind quite a bit. Qualitative researchers typically argue that subjectivity is unavoidable in the research process because the choices we make in research are not neutral and value-free. Since complete objectivity is impossible, a reasonable course of action is for researchers to heighten their consciousness of their subjectivities and how they might affect their research. If you can't eliminate subjectivity, many

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qualitative researchers would argue, you must find a way to tame it so that it doesn't interfere with the ability to understand and report what is happening in the research setting (for a discussion, see Maxwell, 1996; Peshkin, 1991).

Instructors, I think, need to take a similar approach to dealing with subjectivity in student assessment because it is clear that many important learning outcomes can't be assessed using what we have come to think of as "objective" measures. For example, most of us seek to promote students' abilities to use their knowledge and skills to solve the messy problems they encounter in the world. We are fond of saying that real-world problems don't have a single "right" answer, so students must learn to grapple with incomplete information and conflicting evidence, weigh the advantages and disadvantages of a variety of solutions, evaluate alternatives, and come to justifiable conclusions. A good example of how objectivity and subjectivity meet in assessment comes from the field of engineering where students often compete to produce the "best" design solution to a given problem, such as how to build a more efficient *and* environmentally friendly car. Students must correctly apply mathematical and scientific knowledge and skills in addressing such a need, but in evaluating the final designs, faculty and other expert judges, often industry representatives, also consider other criteria to render a final decision. These might include cost-effectiveness, originality, creativity, energy efficiency, aesthetic appeal, aerodynamics, marketability, and so on. Subjective judgments are part of a holistic appraisal of success.

Rather than apologize for the intrusion of subjective factors in grading, instructors would be better served by acknowledging the important role of expert judgment in "authentic" assessments of student learning.¹ Engineers assume that experts know what expert performance looks like and can articulate its features. Similarly, in their respective fields of study, faculty members are expert judges who know what criteria should be used to evaluate a particular assignment. They also know what differentiates a poor performance from an excellent one. In my experience, many instructors are uncomfortable with authentic assessment of student learning because they have not thought carefully about the criteria and standards of performance that they will use to evaluate a given performance. As a result, neither student nor instructor is clear about what students are expected to do for a specific assignment and what will serve as evidence of an excellent performance.

In my own teaching, I have found assessment rubrics to be exceptionally useful tools for articulating and communicating expectations to students. A rubric requires an instructor to break a complex performance into discrete components that can be individually assessed against a standard. For each skill or knowledge component required in a given assignment, the instructor must articulate what counts as an unacceptable, fair, good, or excellent performance. In addition to assessing each component, instructors may also provide a holistic judgment. By establishing important criteria and defining the standards that must be met, instructors provide students with information regarding what they must do to excel on a given task, and also provide, through

the use of the rubric, clear and specific feedback about what was done well and what needs improvement. (See Huba and Freed [2000] for a useful primer on assessment and rubrics in college and university settings.)

This type of criterion-based grading approach alleviates student and instructor fears about the subjective nature of grading and banishes concerns about grading on a curve, that is, assessing students relative to one another rather than against a predetermined standard of performance. Criterion-based grading is particularly important in courses like Mark's that incorporate collaborative work and peer evaluation. If we expect students to work together, we must cultivate collaborative skills and attitudes through our teaching and assessment processes. If students are expected to provide critical and constructive criticism to their peers, they, too, must understand the criteria and standards for a good or excellent performance – and how their subjective responses to classmates' work align with stated criteria.

Finally, for those who are still worried about student reactions to "subjective" grading procedures, I note that my students rarely question their grades. I provide a rubric for each course assignment well before it is due and I use the rubric template to organize and communicate my feedback on each student's work. Students appreciate the specificity of the feedback and know what they need to do to improve. And they perceive the grading process to be fair. That's revealing: it is not subjectivity and judgment they fear, but bias.

Mark argues that the purpose of assessment is improvement. That implies, I believe, that student learning

should be evaluated early and often. Feedback is not useful when it comes at the end of the term and cannot be used to improve subsequent performances. Increasing the number of assessments we provide, of course, is time-consuming for the instructor. My best response to complaints about workload is that good pedagogy demands that we design courses so that they allow students (and instructors) to demonstrate and gauge learning throughout.

The ideas of demonstration and documentation of learning bring this "Peer Review" series full circle. Mark wrote in his closing paragraphs: "Like our students, I have learned a great deal from the class. The chance to reflect and to submit my work to peer review has been key. This has been an opportunity to consider, articulate, critique and then to reconsider how best to teach a body of knowledge and skills." The process of peer review, Mark writes, is a form of teaching in which feedback from a peer enables an instructor to improve his or her pedagogy.

Reflecting on what Mark and I have and have not achieved in this series prompts me to consider the process of peer review we modelled and venture my own assessment. First, because we tried to communicate a lot in a limited space, Mark and I have focused more on what was done and why than on what was learned in the doing. Mark's journals reveal how he translated his pedagogical beliefs into a course design, but I couldn't see always see how his ideas about teaching practice evolved. If we seek to encourage a scholarship of teaching, then we need to focus not only on what we achieve but on how we get there. Like our students, we must be able to docu-

ment progress in our learning. And, if we are to engage in the scholarship of teaching, we need to document our students' learning as well our own. How, if at all, did our use of certain in-class activities, out-of-class assignments, or grading practices influence students' development of desired knowledge, skills, and dispositions? Did our practices make a difference in the quality of instruction and learning? In my first response to Mark (winter 2005), I urged him and all of us to consider how we might systematically explore the relationship between our teaching practices and our students' learning outcomes and share what we have learned with others.

In our behind-the-scenes correspondence with *JMC Educator* Editor Jeremy Cohen, Mark commented that one shortcoming of our peer review process was its linearity. Wouldn't an interactive dialogue between teacher and peer reviewer, he wondered, be more useful? Absolutely, I would answer. This series stimulated reflection on teaching practices and learning, but Mark wanted something more. What would a better process look like?

At my university, junior faculty must document their teaching annually through student course evaluations and peer review. As required by my college, each year I invite a senior faculty colleague to observe one of my class sessions and to write a letter evaluating my teaching. That letter becomes part of my annual performance review and tenure dossier. One problem with this one-time observational event, for me, is that it creates serious performance anxiety. During that class session I am hyper-aware of my senior colleague's presence and somewhat distracted from my primary

objective—interacting with students about the topic at hand. However, the bigger problem is the episodic nature of this procedure. Would my self-consciousness abate if my senior colleague were a regular observer in my classes? What if the goal of his or her visit were not to render an immediate judgment but to work toward improving my instructional practices? In *Turning Professors into Teachers*, Joseph Katz and Mildred Henry outlined a peer review process characterized by sustained dialogue about teaching, grounded in observations of and inquiry about actual teaching practice. I think this is what Mark has in mind. As he noted in his journal, assessment isn't about assigning a final grade; it's about enabling individuals to learn from experience and improve.

The more interactive process Mark craved would be difficult to achieve in this format, but it would probably lead to better learning outcomes for the participants. Over time, I'll bet Mark and I would have become more comfortable talking about what went "wrong" in Mark's classroom as well as writing about what seemed to go well. I might have better understood the evolution of Mark's ideas if I were able to ask questions about his pedagogical decisions. Together, we would have made Mark's *learning* visible.

Visibility is a mixed blessing. Mark notes that one of the advantages of teaching filmmaking skills in a formal education setting is that "it provides a safe place for mistakes to be made." The peer review process should provide a similar haven from penalty. However, I want to remind us that it is only when our mistakes motivate systematic explorations of alternative teaching methods that we move from

reflection on teaching to engagement in the scholarship of teaching (see Shulman, 2004, and my discussion in this series, winter 2005). Exposing our missteps and confusions, and our search for answers, is important not only for individual instructors, but for higher education institutions. Teaching is a process of knowledge creation and dissemination of knowledge about teaching is necessary if we are to improve postsecondary education. This *Peer Review* series took an important first step toward a scholarship of teaching, but we still have work to do.

References

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Endnotes

1. Authentic assessment refers to tasks and projects that ask students to demonstrate what they know and can do in a "real-world" context.

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