Th'Ink Well

Center for Teaching Excellence

An occasional Newsletter from the Center for Teaching Excellence

Learning from the Best College Teachers: Successful Teaching Strategies and How They Relate to Assessment

Have you ever asked yourself what, if anything, your students learn in your class? This was the question raised by Ken Bain (Vice Provost for Instruction and Director of the Research Academy for University Learning at Montclair State University) at his talk *Learning from the Best College Teachers: Successful Teaching Strategies and How They Relate to Assessment* on November 14th, 2008.

Research studies suggest that students rarely remember much of what instructors address in class. The problem is not with students, Bain suggests, but rather with the assumptions that guide our teaching. The 'best' teachers – those that captivate students and foster life-long learning experiences – believe that students can learn and that teaching matters.

After conducting a fifteen-year study of what the best teachers do, Bain concludes that these teachers not only know their subject matter, but also value "deep learning." Deep learning occurs when students meaningfully integrate acquired knowledge, when new knowledge can be used, applied or transferred to new situations and problems. Surface learning by contrast is temporary and partial, it fades away rather quickly as it lacks coherent schemas or deep cognitive connections.

The best teachers encourage students to *construct knowledge* (not to absorb it) by
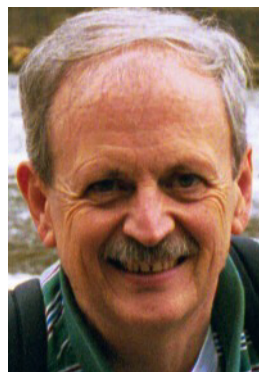
using strategies that promote deep learning. According to Bain, students learn best when:

- They try to answer questions or solve problems they find interesting and important
- They can fail and try again before anyone makes judgment of their work
- They can collaborate with other learners struggling with similar problems
- They feel in control of their learning and not manipulated
- They believe that they can learn and that others believe that can learn

The implications of Bain's work for classroom and institutional assessment are clear. We must look at the conditions that foster deep learning and align our learning outcomes with those principles. We must base our assessments on where the students are at the end of a process; deep learning is formative and must be assessed through improvements. Finally, we must

help students *understand* the criteria by which their work will be assessed. Defining rubrics and offering exemplary work is not sufficient; students must construct this knowledge through conscious analysis by assessing (in consultation with teachers) high and poor-quality models themselves.

We encourage you to read Ken Bain's award-winning book *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Harvard University Press, 2004), one of the top selling books on higher education.

Rubrics for Assessment and Grading

What is a rubric?

"A rubric is a **scoring tool** that **lists the criteria** for a piece of work … it also **articulates gradations of quality for each criterion**, from excellent to poor." From "Understanding Rubrics" by Heidi Goodrich Andrade (http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/thinking/docs/rubricar.htm)

Rubrics and Authentic Assessment

Assessment rubrics are seen as part of the "Authentic Assessment" movement in education which has largely come about in response to the overwhelming prevalence of multiple choice exams, "Scantron" tests, and simple letter grades in education. Most educators feel that while multiple choice test might have a small place in education for assessing content knowledge, it is impossible to really assess the most important things a student has learned (e.g. learning to revise according to feedback, knowing how to synthesize a lot of information into a large project) through such simplified tools. The Authentic Assessment aims to assess the important, complex learning that is going on in the classroom—the big projects, the research skills, groupwork skills, assembling portfolios of work that has been completed over the course of semester or a school year.

Advantages to using rubrics:
1. They help define "quality" - or a letter grade.
2. They establish a shared vocabulary for the class to use in critique.
3. Students can also use them to judge their own and their peers' work. Using the same rubric that the teacher is using helps them to internalize the concepts.
4. They reduce the amount of time teachers spend evaluating student work.
5. They can be adjusted to suit particular classes.

Developing your own rubric:
1. List the criteria you are judging the work on.
2. Look at examples of a range of work done in response to the assignment.
3. Describe the levels of quality—the best, the worst, and the levels in between—for each criterion.
    » Avoid vague language
    » Avoid unnecessarily negative language
4. Test your rubric on some other pieces.
5. Revise as necessary.
6. Hold a *norming session* with other instructors if possible. In a norming session, teachers all use the same rubric and score the same pieces without looking at each others' scores. After three pieces have been scored, the teachers look at all of the scores together and discuss discrepancies, clarifying as they go. This process is

repeated until the scores are the same most of the time—depending on the purpose of your norming session.)

Holistic Rubrics
Holistic rubrics do not separate out the criteria for discrete feedback. Instead, holistic rubrics describe the general features of a piece at each level. They are often used in placement exams.

Example of a holistic rubric for an oral Presentation

3	Speaker was engaging and stayed on topic for entire speech. Examples were interesting and pertinent. Body language was appropriate. Speaker had very smooth, strong transitions, introduction and conclusion. Volume and clarity of speech was good.
2	Speaker was generally on topic, though some transitions and examples may have been weak. Introduction and conclusion were present on topic, though not strong. Speaker may seem uncomfortable at times. Speaker may have been unclear or difficult to hear at times.
1	Topic was not immediately clear from speech. Point of most examples was not clear, or no examples were used. Speaking was very difficult to hear and understand at times. Transitions were choppy; introduction and conclusion were weak, or not present.

Rubrics Available Online
There are MANY rubrics available online. When doing a search, be sure to type in "scoring rubrics" or "assessment rubrics". The following websites might be good places to start:
»
http://www.goshen.edu/art/ed/rubric3.html
»
http://www.makeworksheets.com/tools/rubric.pdf
»
http://intranet.cps.k12.il.us/Assessments/Ideas_and_Rubrics/ideas_and_rubrics.html
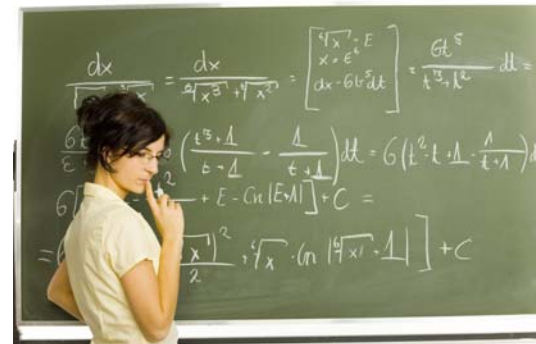»
http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php
»

http://intranet.cps.k12.il.us/Assessments/Ideas_and_Rubrics/Create_Rubric/create_rubric.html
»
http://www.phschool.com/professional_development/assessment/rub_electronic_portfolio.html
»
http://school.discovery.com/schrockguide/assess.html

Teaching Tips Corner

Classroom Assessment Techniques
Adapted from Angelo & Cross (1993)
A Handbook for Faculty

If you want to assess students' accumulation of knowledge into already established structures, try using one of the following:
➢ **Focused listing**: Ask students to produce a list of related terms (words or phrases) important to understanding the topic.
➢ **Empty outlines**: Provide students with an empty or partially completed outline and give them a limited amount of time to fill in the blank spaces. Students can work alone or in groups, depending on what is being assessed.
➢ **Memory matrix**: Build alone or with prior student input, a matrix of key ideas, in which each cell represents particular relationships across two dimensions. Provide the matrix & ask students to relate ideas from different parts of the matrix.