Enhancing Reflective Practice Through Alternative Assessment

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Rural educators are asked to meet multiple and sometimes conflicting demands: to raise academic standards, teach basic skills, teach students to be good citizens, and prepare students for jobs. Alternative assessment strategies, grounded in reflective practice, have the possibility to enliven instruction and improve students' knowledge, reasoning, and communication skills. The following article suggests that alternative assessment is consistent with the development of the knowledge and dispositions associated with critical democratic citizenship. A rubric and alternative assessment example is provided for teachers to incorporate this strategy into their classroom instruction.

The subject of this article is, at first glance, both focused and practical: the use of rubrics to assess the work of middle level students. After all, as former social studies teachers in a rural school (Dwight High School, Dwight, Illinois; student population 454 to 315 from the early to late 1980s), we realize the potential benefits that the use of rubrics hold for teachers who are attempting to improve the quality of learning in their classrooms while facing the reality of quite limited resources to achieve this goal.

To be honest, however, we believe it is important to frame our enthusiasm for using rubrics in evaluating student work in both theoretical and practical terms. For the last several years, our interest has focused on the gulf separating social studies as a theoretical field of study and social studies teaching in elementary, middle, and high schools (Nelson & Drake, 1994). The examination of the use of "New Social Studies" materials by secondary teachers in the 1960s-1980s led us to conclude that these materials, developed primarily by university-based social scientists and educators, had a minimal impact on the classroom practices of teachers. On a more general level, our inquiries resulted in an appreciation of the difficulties inherent in transplanting theories conceived and elaborated in university settings to the over-demanding world of the teacher.

In light of our own work and of studies conducted by other researchers documenting the difficulty in initiating instructional changes in schools (Leming, 1989; Mehlinger, 1981), we are cautiously optimistic regarding the potential incorporation of rubric assessment as an evaluation tool by social studies teachers. The social studies reforms of the past 4 decades—the social science projects such as the High School Geography Project (HSGP) or Man: A Course of Study (MACOS), values clarification strategies, and the

teaching of public issues—focused on changing the strategies employed by teachers. In some cases, such as the High School Geography Project, lessons were scripted or "teacher-proofed" so all the classroom teacher had to do was follow the recipe and serve the purposes of the curriculum developer. In hindsight, it seems these curriculum developers were at the least naive and, perhaps more accurately, blind to the desire of teachers to serve as intellectual agents in creating instructional strategies for the classroom.

The use of alternative assessment strategies is not a panacea for the problems confronting middle level social studies teachers: many students and their parents will continue to place greater value on mathematics, science, and language arts or those subjects that are more closely identified with the vocational purposes of schooling. Still other students and parents will feel comfortable only with multiple choice tests; and some others will pronounce the work in social studies "boring" when compared to the side show available to them on late afternoon television. We believe, however, there are benefits to be derived for both students and their teachers as a result of alternative assessment strategies. In fact, we strongly suggest that alternative assessment should complement, if not supplant, traditional forms of assessing students in social studies. Reflective practice theory and alternative assessment strategies are consistent with traditional rural values of close working relationships among teachers, students, parents, and members of the community.

Rationale for Alternative Assessment in Social Studies

Many proponents of contemporary reform efforts in education ground their arguments in the belief that modern (or is it post-modern?) life in the 21st century will demand knowledge and skills radically different from those available from existing instructional practices. In both rural and

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urban settings, for example, we are periodically visited by an individual who conjures up the horrifying image of a future where our high school graduates lack the skills to obtain employment in a "high-tech" McDonald's restaurant. Our reasons for advocating alternative assessment in social studies focus on the consistency of this means for assessing students' knowledge and skills with the overarching theory of reflective inquiry that has served to guide the work of a number of social studies educators throughout the 20th century.

Reflective inquiry as defined by John Dewey (1933, p. 9) is "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief, or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends." Although it would be a misrepresentation of the varied positions of theorists to reduce reflective inquiry to a single model of instruction, a number of elements are repeated in the works of individuals associated with this theoretical perspective:

1. A primary outcome of engaging students in reflective inquiry is so that they use their ability to reason in order to carry out their responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society (Griffin, p. 20).

2. Students interests and experiences are motivating factors in the inquiry process (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1977; Dewey, 1933).

3. Reflective thought is initiated when an individual is confronted by a problem of conflicting data and/or conflicting values (Barth, 1980; Metcalf, 1963; Ross, 1985; Shermis & Parsons, 1983; Williams, 1974).

4. Reflective thought requires student inquiry and exploration (Dewey, 1980; Metcalf, 1963).

5. Reflective thought is a continuous, "chainlike" process building on previous experience and resulting in a "conclusion" (Barth & Shermis, 1980; Dewey, 1933; Hullfish & Smith, 1968).

6. Reflective thought involves the art of invention (Hullfish & Smith, 1968; Metcalf, 1963; Williams, 1974).

Reflective practice theory provides a congenial framework for alternative assessment strategies while sharing the elements of reflective inquiry theory previously described. Reflective practice, as elaborated in recent publications

(Adler, 1994; Ross, 1994; Zeichner, 1987), focuses on the teacher as well as the learner as creator of curriculum and instruction. In contrast to the conception of the classroom teacher as a "conduit" through which flow the concepts and generalizations of social scientists or the facts deemed essential by learned individuals, educators elaborating reflective practice theory view the teacher as the creator of the "enacted curriculum." Zeichner (1987, p. 24) expresses a central belief of reflective practice when he states:

It is our belief that learning, for both pupils and teachers, is greater and deeper when teachers are encouraged to exercise their judgment about the content and process of their work and to give some direction to the shape of schools as educational environments.

From this premise reflective practice theory examines the key issue of the types of decisions made by teachers (Adler, 1994; Zeichner, 1987). On one level, the teacher is viewed as a "technician," an individual whose competence is measured by the ability to choose instructional strategies to achieve purposes described by individuals in authority. On a second level, the teacher as craftsperson would consider the reasons for curricular and instructional goals as well as the effectiveness of instructional strategies to achieve these goals. At a third level, teachers critically examine their curricular goals and instructional methods in relation to the creation of a "more just and humane society." This conception of reflective practice, while at odds with top-down education reform efforts, is consistent with the long-standing tradition that the citizenship goal of the social studies curriculum is not defined in terms of conformity to the existing social order, but by the critical use of reason by the student to determine to what degree the existing order merits conformity or reconstruction.

In addition to the theoretical foundation provided by reflective inquiry and reflective practice, alternative assessment strategies are consistent with the intellectual characteristics of adolescent students and the purposes and practices of middle level education. Allen's (1990) descriptions of the early adolescent include a number of characteristics that make rubric evaluation appropriate to the maturity level of these students. In addition, these characteristics suggest additional student cognitive and emotional growth resulting from teachers' feedback using rubric assessment. Among the characteristics listed by Allen are: the ability to institute new and higher cognitive processing; curiosity; enjoyment of intellectually stimulating experiences; interest in learning experiences that are linked with the student's goals; enjoyment in arguing their beliefs; interest in the "enigmas of life;" and interest in a variety of issues and casual relationships.

Much the same as their teachers, middle level students want to be creators of the curriculum and participants in their education. Numerous middle level reform efforts have been initiated in the last two decades in recognition of adolescent needs. As a representative of these middle school reform efforts, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (Hornbeck, 1989) describes a good middle school in the following terms:

1. A small community where close, stable relationships are developed between adults and students.

2. Teach an academic program that develops literacy in the subjects including the ability to think "critically," lead a healthy life, behave ethically, and assume responsibilities of citizenship in a pluralistic society.

3. "Ensure success of all students."

We believe that support for alternative assessment strategies in middle level education can be located in the reflective practice principles that have formed the foundation for social studies education since the 1920s, the principles of growth and development that define adolescence, and the characteristics of middle level education. Any educational reform, including alternative assessment strategies, must justify itself in more than the off hand observation, "Life in the future will be so much different that we must radically alter our educational goals and practices." This call is especially true in social studies. If citizenship entails the ability to transform, as well as to fit into society, then a blueprint for action must be enacted by teachers, students, and members of the community and not handed down by a remote architect.

There is widespread agreement among teachers and educators that superficial coverage of history and social science topics should be avoided. What content should be emphasized is an important question for every social studies teacher, and reflective practice theory urges teachers to weigh carefully their decisions. We believe that the method a teacher chooses to assess students provides the impetus for classroom instruction.

Traditional methods of assessment—multiple-choice questions, matching exercises, true-false questions, fill-in-the-blanks, and short identifications—fail to measure adequately what students know and are able to do in social studies. Traditional methods of assessment must be complemented, if not supplanted, by new methods of assessment if teachers want to improve the quality of what their students learn.

Alternative assessment strategies, accompanied by a rubric, have the potential to enhance the teaching and learning of social studies; that is, it is important for teachers to organize their instruction by considering first how they will assess their students and *second* how they will provide students with feedback designed to help them improve. Most alternative assessment activities, when used by perceptive teachers, help improve teaching and learning.

Alternative assessment activities disclose at least three dimensions of a student's social studies literacy. First, students who complete alternative assessment activities display their *knowledge* of facts, concepts, and ideas. Second, these students demonstrate their ability to *reason*; that is, they show their ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information. And third, students who complete alternative assessment activities display their ability to *communicate* their knowledge and reasoning to a broader audience.

Each dimension of a student's social studies literacy has discrete characteristics. *Knowledge* of social studies evidence is the prerequisite students need to demonstrate their abilities in the other two dimensions. Students who have developed social studies knowledge are able to demonstrate accuracy in identifying, defining, and describing important details, facts, and concepts. Learning in the social studies, however, must transcend the acquisition of discrete information; it is important for students to make the facts and concepts meaningful, thereby bringing about a deeper understanding of the social studies. *Reasoning* is an active process, an intellectual transaction that takes place as the student interacts with information. It involves translation, interpretation, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information and requires the student to find relationships among facts and generalizations, and values and opinions, as a means to formulate a solution to a problem, to make a judgment, or to reach a logical conclusion. Reasoning requires a student to reconfigure facts, concepts, and generalizations. Ultimately, it is a process that leads students to a more complete understanding of their own lives and to work to make changes in the circumstances that surround their lives. Effective *communication* of social studies knowledge and reasoning requires a student to organize his or her thoughts. For a student to present his or her knowledge and reasoning, he or she must possess a clearly defined thesis and present it in a well-organized manner.

Alternative assessment activities offer a wide range of ways for students to communicate their knowledge and reasoning: constructing museum exhibits, creating newspapers, drawing political cartoons, role playing, analyzing photographs, and writing essays. Imaginative teachers and students can think of additional activities suitable for assessment at the end of a class session, during a unit of study, or at the end of a semester.

Many teachers, however, do not take advantage of alternative assessment strategies to assess their students' knowledge, reasoning, and communication. Some teach-

ers do not realize the potential for alternative assessment activities because they conceptualize assessment as a one-shot, terminal experience. We suggest that alternative assessment activities be used at numerous times in the school year and that their characteristics are such that to an outside observer an alternative *assessment* activity would appear to be an *instructional* activity. In Appendix A, we offer a representative prompt (McBride, Drake, & Lewinski, 1996) of an alternative assessment activity that is suitable for middle level students.

Other teachers who do not use alternative assessment activities may be uncomfortable with complex generated assessment because they do not have a systematic means to assess student performances nor do they have a rationale for alternative assessment. Thus, we suggest in this essay a rubric for alternative assessment that provides a systematic way to offer students feedback and augment their learning. Moreover, use of alternative assessment activities and this rubric, we believe, will enhance reflective practice theory.

A Rubric for Alternative Assessment in Social Studies

Teachers have an intuitive sense of what constitutes an outstanding oral or written report, but they often lack an established criteria, or rubric, that provides systematic feedback about their students' abilities in each of the three dimensions. In addition, teachers face the problem of having to create a rubric for each assessment activity, and they may not possess a rationale for use of a rubric in their social studies teaching.

In Appendix B, we show an analytic rubric and a rationale that teachers can use to assess their students' knowledge, reasoning, and communication. This rubric, which came from a project in Illinois (McBride et al., 1996), is a generic rubric that helps the teacher diagnose student performances in each of the three interrelated dimensions and, when shared, informs the students of the standards they will need to achieve success in the three dimensions of social studies literacy.

Each dimension—knowledge, reasoning, and communication—has six levels. Each level is defined by several criteria that reflect a student's skills and abilities. Collectively, Levels 6, 5, 4 are constructed to differentiate among students whose knowledge, reasoning, and communication skills are *developed. Collectively,* Levels 3, 2, 1 represent knowledge, reasoning, and communication skills that are still *developing.* Level 6 represents work of a student who displays the most developed skills. Level 1 represents the work of a student with the lowest level of developing skills. As a deficit model, it is most compatible and helpful for assessment in social studies education. The *gap* between Level 3 and Level 4 is wider than the distance between any

of the other levels because it distinguishes between students who are *developed* and students who are *developing.*

Teachers realize that their students may perform at a more or less developed level in one dimension than in another. An analytic rubric allows teachers to take these differences into account when assessing their students. It also benefits the students, for it shows them their strengths and weaknesses in each of the three dimensions. Thus, this rubric serves as a *diagnostic* tool for *teachers* and serves as a *ladder for success* for *students* (Drake & McBride, 1997).

Students who have developed knowledge—Levels 6, 5, 4—are able to demonstrate their ability to identify, define, and describe key concepts, facts, and ideas; they show an awareness of the connection between key facts and ideas and supporting details; and they are accurate in their use of facts and details. The levels are differentiated by the degree to which students can demonstrate their knowledge, that is, their ability to be thorough, inclusive, and accurate. Similarly, students who are developing—Levels 3, 2, 1—are unable to demonstrate their ability to identify, define, and describe key concepts, facts, and ideas; they demonstrate a deficiency when connecting concepts and supporting details; and they are mostly inaccurate in their use of facts.

A student with developed reasoning abilities must be able to organize evidence and select and apply an appropriate method for analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. For a student to analyze and evaluate evidence, he or she must ask relevant questions and demonstrate the use of critical thinking skills. Students at a developed level will demonstrate their intellectual character, that is they will show self-discipline as thinkers as they draw informed conclusions. Differentiation among students' developed reasoning is a matter of degree as they identify, analyze, and organize evidence. Ultimately, students at Level 6 will construct a new synthesis. A student at Level 4 will identify and analyze the evidence from one perspective—that is still sufficient for them to evaluate successfully concepts and ideas and to combine their new knowledge with what they have already learned.

Students who are still developing their ability in reasoning show deficiencies in organizing information for proper analysis and may select an inappropriate method for analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing evidence. Students who are in the process of developing reasoning skills have difficulty thinking critically. Finally, a student who is still in the developing stage of reasoning is unable to reach a reasonable, informed conclusion.

A student can select a variety of methods to communicate his or her knowledge and reasoning skills. The teacher, sometimes in conjunction with the student, establishes the context, or audience, for a student's presentation: a letter to a newspaper, an out-of-class or in-class essay, an oral report to the class, or a museum exhibit on display. Each

communication method has its own conventions such as effective use of gestures, voice, eye contact, and use of visual aids in oral presentations; use of color, neatness, captions, and the selection of appropriate photographs, maps, and pictures in student-made exhibits; and a clear thesis statement, appropriate use of footnotes or endnotes, and bibliographic citations in research papers.

A student who has developed ability in communication presents knowledge and reasoning in an organized and clear way. Levels 6, 5, 4—the developed stage—are determined by the degree of clarity and organization, the quality of illustrations and supporting examples, and the power of the conclusion. Main ideas and reasoning processes are well-developed and are clearly articulated. In addition, developed students in communication meet all the standards for the type of activity the teacher assigns or the student selects.

Developing students in communication still lack the ability to present their knowledge and reasoning clearly; that is, students who are developing cannot provide a clear thesis or clearly written narrative. Developing students cannot communicate an informed conclusion and neglect the details of performance conventions. The distinctions between students performing at Levels 3, 2, 1 are a matter of degree in each criteria.

Summary

Rural education provides a unique opportunity to implement alternative assessment strategies. Teachers should share the rubric with their students because the three dimensions indicate the standards for success as students construct knowledge, engage in reasoning, and communicate what they know about the social studies. It is very important that teachers and students know in advance the criteria they are looking for in each dimension.

For teachers, the rubric serves as a diagnostic tool; for students, it establishes the parameters for attaining success. As teachers and students use this rubric, they will become collaborators in the construction of students' social studies literacy. Thus, it is important for teachers to practice using the rubric and to realize that they will need to coach their students about the best ways to demonstrate their abilities in each of the three dimensions.

While rural teachers may not always have the resources available to their suburban counterparts, they have two unique advantages as they work with students in smaller educational settings. First, they have a sense of community as they guide their students and involve adults in school activities. And second, a small class size provides an ideal environment for interaction between the teacher and students. Rural social studies educators are accustomed to coaching their individuals students in one-on-one situations. We believe this rubric will help teachers attain a long sought

after goal in social studies—reflective practice—and in the process provide their students with the foundation of knowledge, reasoning, and communication skills necessary to shape as well as to fit into society.

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Appendix A
Developing Countries

Developing countries experience a transition from a traditional to a modern society. Imagine you are visiting one of the developing countries of the world.

Reproduced below are the two sides of a postcard you might send to your family or friends at home. Identify the country you are visiting. On the front side of the card, draw a scene of what you might see while visiting that country. The scene should include elements of both a traditional and a modern society. On the back of the card, write a message describing the scene and presenting important facts and ideas about the country.

Part A

                                        Country _____

Part B   In a written or oral presentation explain why you included the object in the scene.

Appendix B
A Rubric For Social Studies Alternative Assessment

KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge of evidence from social sciences: facts/supporting details; themes/issues; and concepts/ideas

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6
- Key concepts/themes/issues/ideas are thoroughly identified, defined, and described
- Significant facts/supporting details are included and accurately described
- Has no factual inaccuracies

5
- Key concepts/themes/issues/ideas are considerably identified, defined, and described
- Facts/supporting details are included
- Has only minor factual inaccuracies

4
- Key concepts/themes/issues are partially identified, defined, and described
- Some facts/supporting details are included
- May have a major factual inaccuracy, but most information is correct

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3
- Some key concepts/themes/issues/ideas are identified, and described
- Few facts/supporting details are included
- Has some correct and some incorrect information

2
- Few key concepts/themes/issues/ideas are identified, defined, and described
- Facts/supporting details are not included
- Information is largely inaccurate or irrelevant

1
- Key concepts/themes/issues/ideas are not identified, defined, and described
- Facts/supporting details are not included
- Information is inaccurate or absent

REASONING

Analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of evidence

6
- Identifies and logically organizes all relevant evidence
- Uses appropriate and comprehensive critical thinking skills and Habits of Mind to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize evidence
- Reaches informed conclusions based on the evidence

5
- Identifies and logically organizes most of the relevant evidence
- Uses appropriate and critical thinking skills and Habits of Mind to analyze, evaluate,and synthesize evidence
- Reaches informed conclusions based on the evidence

4
- Identifies and organizes some of the relevant evidence
- Uses partial critical thinking skills and Habits of Mind to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize evidence
- Reaches informed conclusions based on the evidence

3
- Identifies some of the relevant evidence but omits other evidence
- Uses incomplete critical thinking skills and Habits of Mind to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize evidence
- Reaches incomplete conclusions based on the evidence

2
- Identifies little relevant evidence and omits most of the evidence
- Uses unclear or inappropriate critical thinking skills and Habits of Mind to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize evidence
- Reaches inaccurate conclusions based on the evidence

1
- Important evidence relevant to the problem is not identified
- Critical thinking skills and Habits of Mind are absent
- Conclusions are lacking or unclear

COMMUNICATION

Demonstrates knowledge and reasoning through oral, written, visual, dramatic, or mixed media presentation

6
- All ideas in the presentation are expressed in a way that provides evidence of the student's knowledge and reasoning processes
- The presentation is well focused with a well-defined thesis
- Presentation shows substantial evidence of organization
- Presentation shows attention to the details of specific performance conventions

5
- Most ideas in the presentation are expressed in a way that provides evidence of the student's knowledge and reasoning processes
- The presentation demonstrates a focus and thesis with minimal narrative gaps
- Presentation shows sufficient evidence of organization
- Presentation has minor mistakes in attention to the details of specific performance conventions

4
- Some ideas in the presentation are expressed in a way that provides evidence of the student's knowledge and reasoning processes
- The presentation demonstrates a focus and thesis with several narrative gaps
- Presentation demonstrates adequate evidence of organization
- Presentation has mistakes in attention to the details of specific performance conventions

3
- Few ideas in the presentation are expressed in a way that provides evidence of the student's knowledge and reasoning processes
- The presentation demonstrates an inadequate focus and thesis
- Presentation demonstrates inadequate evidence of organization
- Presentation has insufficient attention to the details of specific performance conventions

2
- Most ideas in the presentation are not clearly expressed
- The presentation demonstrates insufficient focus and a poorly defined thesis
- Presentation demonstrates insufficient evidence of organization
- Presentation has multiple mistakes in attention to the details of specific performance conventions

1
- Expression of all ideas in the presentation is unclear
- The presentation demonstrates little focus and lacks a thesis
- Presentation demonstrates little evidence of organization
- Presentation has no attention to the details of specific performance conventions