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# Involving Students in Assignment Evaluation

JOYCE A. RADEMACHER

**Assignment completion procedures that are based on sound instructional principles are important and necessary in order to enhance learning for diverse learners. The first part of this article explains the connection between planning, presenting, and evaluating assignments for students who demonstrate ineffective assignment completion strategies. The second part offers specific guidelines for how to teach students to check their own finished assignments according to a set of quality work criteria.**

Few topics in education are more controversial than grading, reporting, and communicating students' learning. According to Guskey (1996), there are three premises on which to base our conversation surrounding evaluation of student learning. First, the primary goal of grading and reporting is communication. The purpose of that communication should be to relate high-quality information to students, parents, and other interested persons in a form they can understand and use effectively. Second, reporting is an integral part of the learning process only when it identifies where additional work is needed to improve future performance. Merely giving a low letter grade on an assignment without feedback is of no benefit to students, especially if they encounter a similar task in the future. Third, the need for more detailed communication about student learning is critical as the goals of schooling become more complex. In particular, teachers are increasingly concerned over how and with what standards to measure the academic performance of students from varying achievement levels, cultures, and backgrounds. They are just as concerned about students with learning disabilities, who are required by law to be involved and show progress in

the general education curriculum (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] Amendments of 1997).

As educators turn their attention to better ways of evaluating student performance, they are beginning to consider alternative forms for communicating student learning. Watts (1996) divided alternative forms of assessment for communicating student learning into four categories. Category 1 is visible evidence of student growth and achievement. This can be accomplished through methods such as portfolios, exhibitions, displays of work, presentations, and videos. Category 2 is a ranking or rating of student achievement against clearly stated predetermined standards. Methods that support this category include work sampling, rubrics, and report card checklists. Category 3 involves evidence of learning through self-assessment or peer-evaluation, whereas Category 4 includes opportunities for two-way communication through conferences. One or more of these methods are viable options for teachers to consider in their quest for a better way to evaluate learning outcomes. In particular, the use of rubrics, self-assessment techniques, and two-way communication conferences can be effective for teachers who wish to work in partnership with their students for improved learning.

The first part of this article gives a general explanation of how student involvement in each phase of planning, presenting, and evaluating assignments is equally important if students are to master the knowledge and skills associated with a particular assignment they are expected to complete. The second part of the article describes specific methods and procedures for including students in the evaluation of finished assignments. Specifically, the "PACE 1, 2 . . ." process—a set of procedures that teachers and students can use to evaluate finished work—is presented. The article concludes with guidelines for

conducting feedback discussions with students regarding assignment completion outcomes.

## PLANNING, PRESENTING, AND EVALUATING

Rademacher, Deshler, Schumaker, and Lenz (1998) devised and field-tested a teaching routine for assignment completion that consists of three distinct phases—planning, presenting, and evaluating. They found that planning assignments to meet the needs and interests of individual students is possible and necessary in order to enhance learning and motivation for all members of the class. They also discovered that what teachers say and do as they present assignments can make a significant difference in their students' ability to complete their work satisfactorily. Just as importantly, they learned that evaluation of student work must focus on preparing and giving feedback to students in such a way that students will be motivated to do more assignments in the future at higher levels of quality. Teachers who wish to increase both students' assignment completion rate and the quality of their work will benefit by examining their methods of planning, presenting, and evaluating assignments to see if they contain sound planning and teaching principles known to be effective with diverse learners.

### Planning

When planning assignments, teachers should focus on designing meaningful and interesting assignments that vary from the traditional worksheet format. Assignments are meaningful only when they are aligned with critical content to be learned and mastered. If not, assignments become merely "busy work." Motivation to complete assigned work may also increase when teachers offer reasonable choices to students regarding how to complete their assignments (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Glasser, 1991). In order to provide acceptable options to students, teachers might rely on information they gather from student interest surveys (Vance, 1995), learning-style preferences (McCarthy, 1996), multiple intelligence theory (Lazear, 1991), and motivation theory (Brophy, 1987); or, teachers might ask the students themselves what *they* believe are the characteristics of a good assignment. For example, Rademacher, Schumaker, and Deshler (1996) reported that, in addition to variety and choice, students prefer assignments that (a) offer the appropriate level of challenge, (b) allow students to be creative, (c) promote interaction among learners, and (d) provide complete directions. Directions are considered to be complete when they include action steps to be taken to do the work, needed supplies and resources, the due date, and the grading criteria on which the work will be judged. Students also enjoy working in small teams with the teacher in order to plan interesting assignments for the entire class (Rademacher, Cowart, Sparks, & Chism, 1997).

### Presenting

When presenting assignments to students, the teacher must make sure that assignment explanations contain all the necessary information for students to do an adequate job. Lenz and Bulgren (1991) recommended that teachers induce learning and task completion for students who possess poor strategies for completing assigned tasks by routinely presenting assignments as individual lessons. During this phase of the assignment completion cycle, teachers must do everything possible to present clear instructions to students, allow them opportunities to ask and receive answers to questions, give them time to try out working on the assignment, and provide them with feedback about their initial attempts on the assignment. Students who have difficulty completing assignments need time to receive help so that they can successfully get started on the assignment before they leave the classroom to complete it independently.

Teaching students how they are to listen to and record needed assignment information in a notebook is also recommended during this phase. Assignment notebooks used in schools typically require students to record such information as the assignment for a particular class, page numbers, due dates, or other brief instructions, but this may not be sufficient to ensure that all students will be able to work independently without some difficulty.

Hughes, Ruhl, Rademacher, Schumaker, and Deshler (1995) designed the Quality Quest Planner, which can help students improve their grades on assignments. The first section of each assignment window in the notebook prompts students to record abbreviated course information and critical dates, such as when the assignment was given, when it is due, and when it was handed in to the teacher. The second section of the window prompts students to jot down four pieces of information: abbreviated directions, options for completing the assignment, grading criteria, and any needed supplies or resources. The third section cues students to create an assignment plan in which they divide the assignment into parts and estimate the number of 30-minute study sessions they will need to complete the work. Students can then block off or schedule those study sessions on a daily or weekly calendar located at the front of the notebook. The fourth part of the assignment window requires students to set goals for themselves related to the assignment. Additionally, there is a place for circling a grade goal and a quality goal, as well as a place for recording the actual grade received.

### Evaluating

Students should be actively involved in the evaluating process. An important aspect of encouraging quality work is to make students part of the decision-making process (Glasser, 1991). Involving students in planning and self-

evaluating their finished work empowers them and gives them control over their own learning. One way to involve students is to set a rubric to be completed by both the teacher and the students for particular assignments (see next section). In addition, once the teacher and students evaluate a finished assignment, the teacher should provide effective verbal feedback so that students understand how they performed on the assignment and how they might improve in the future. Thus, the assignment completion cycle is not finished until assignment evaluation procedures are carried out in a meaningful way with students.

## ASSIGNMENT EVALUATION PROCEDURES

### The PACE 1, 2 . . . Process

A *rubric* is a scoring guide used to evaluate the quality of student responses on assigned work. For example, a rubric can be used to check whether or not certain criteria were met on assignments such as written compositions, oral presentations, or science projects. Appropriately designed rubrics can contribute greatly to the development of quality work. When the teacher and students develop rubrics together, expectations for the task can be mutually explored and agreed upon.

Because rubrics clarify expectations, they yield better feedback and students can subsequently improve the quality of their work. Using rubrics with students who are low achieving is beneficial because these students then begin to see concrete ways to achieve higher standards. Thus, they are more likely to have the motivation to push themselves harder. Once students understand and internalize the rubric method, they can help to develop and use it in assessing their own work, as well as the work of their peers (O'Neil, 1994). Teaching students how to evaluate the quality of their work is an important aspect of ensuring that the assignments they do will earn them a better grade. Learning self-evaluation processes is also a necessary skill for success on the job and other life situations.

The PACE 1, 2 . . . self-checking process was designed as a flexible rubric-like system to help both teachers and students evaluate finished assignments against a set of precise standards (Rademacher et al., 1998). The self-checking routine is also beneficial for helping teachers organize verbal feedback to be given on finished work. Group verbal feedback can be provided to all students within the class. Individual feedback can be given to specific students as necessary.

"PACE" refers to four standard requirements to be applied to all assignments in order to be judged as quality work. Thus, classes that use PACE generally agree that all assignments handed in to the teacher should be: **P**rompt (on time); **A**rranged neatly (no stray marks, even

margins, well organized, and pleasing to the reader's eyes); **C**omplete (all directions followed, all questions answered); and **E**dit-ed (mechanics, correct, ideas clear, content accurate). The "1, 2 . . ." following PACE refers to any number of *additional* requirements associated with a particular assignment. For example, the teacher may specify that the student needs to include a picture with a poem, create a computer graphic to support an idea, include an outline with the report, and so on.

To use PACE 1, 2 . . ., students are instructed to write the standard letters (PACE) and a series of numbers (1, 2, or more) in a designated place on the assignment. Next to each number, students jot down a word or two to indicate the *additional* requirements specified by the teacher as part of the grading criteria. Under each standard letter and number, students draw two short lines. After students finish the assignment, they place a check mark or a zero on the top line to show whether they believe they did or did not meet the requirements for the assignment. The second line is for the teacher to judge with a check mark or zero whether or not the requirements for the assignment have been met. To better understand how to use PACE 1, 2 . . ., consider this example:

*Ms. Sparks, an eighth-grade history teacher, gave an assignment for her students to create a journal from the perspective of someone who might have lived in Ancient Greece. She told the students that they had to turn the assignment in by March 18, and that it would be worth 100 points. She stated that the purpose of the assignment was for the students to analyze why such a highly developed civilization fell apart and how responsible citizens could prevent the same thing from happening to our own civilization. When giving specific directions for the assignment, Ms. Sparks engaged the students in naming and jotting down a few of the action steps they would need to follow in order to do the assignment. Specifically, they were to choose some aspect of Greek culture that interested them, focus on that interest, and then create a journal that described what that aspect would have been like for someone who lived in ancient Greece. They were to describe at least one good and one bad thing about that chosen cultural aspect. Further, she told the students that they had a choice of doing the assignment alone or with a partner, that the journal could be written or audiotaped, and that they could choose whether the person they were talking about lived in Athens or Sparta. She reminded the students to check their work according to the standard PACE requirements and with the additional requirements to make sure that the journal had at least seven consecutively dated entries, that each entry included at least three statements, and that each entry focused on one good and one bad thing about the interest they had chosen. In addition to jotting down this information in abbreviated form, the students listed the needed resources*

How to Use PACE 1, 2,.. on Completed Assignments				
<b>P</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>1</b> (7 entries & date)
$\frac{\checkmark}{\checkmark}$	$\frac{\checkmark}{\checkmark}$	$\frac{\checkmark}{\checkmark}$	$\frac{\checkmark}{\emptyset}$	$\frac{\checkmark}{\checkmark}$
				<b>2</b> (3 statements per entry)
				$\frac{\checkmark}{\checkmark}$
				<b>3</b> (1 good & one bad thing)
				$\frac{\checkmark}{\emptyset}$

**Note:** The student marks the first line below each letter and number.  
The teacher marks the second line.

**Figure 1.** *The PACE 1, 2 . . . evaluation guidelines.*

that Ms. Sparks suggested they use, such as class notes, textbooks, library books, magazine articles, movies, and their imaginations. Figure 1 shows how Sarah, a student in the class, and Ms. Sparks each used PACE 1, 2 . . . to mark Sarah's finished assignment according to the criteria.

### Teaching PACE 1, 2 . . . to Students

How teachers state their expectation for students to use PACE 1, 2 . . . on completed assignments is extremely important. Merely telling students about the procedure will not suffice if student buy-in and ownership of the process are desired. Mercer and Mercer (1998) suggested three steps for teaching students about self-evaluation. First discuss the importance of evaluating one's own work and the benefits of doing so, such as determining whether or not satisfactory performance has been achieved. Second, demonstrate and model how to conduct a self-evaluation. During this step, the teacher demonstrates how to use a particular progress form designed to judge performance, and then has the students model the behavior to make sure they understand. Third, have the students practice and provide feedback. During this step, the student practices to proficiency with comments from the teacher on how well he or she is doing. These instructional procedures have been incorporated into specific steps on how to teach PACE 1, 2 . . . to students:

1. Give an advance organizer. Tell students that they will be learning how to ensure the quality of work on their assignments. Elicit student responses on what they believe to be the definition of "quality work."

2. Engage students in a further discussion on the meaning of "quality work" by displaying examples of two assignments. The first assignment should be representative of "nonquality" work—late, messy, incomplete, and unclear in meaning due to spelling and grammatical errors, incomplete ideas, and so on. The second assignment should be representative of "quality work"—on time, arranged neatly, complete, and edited for clarity. The second assignment should also contain the PACE 1, 2 . . . markings at the bottom of the page to indicate that the student who completed that particular assignment had used the checking process.
3. Introduce and explain the meaning of PACE as a way to remember the standard requirements for all assignments. Point out that all finished assignments should be **p**rompt, **a**rranged neatly, **c**omplete, and **e**edited for clarity. Show students how to write PACE and two short lines on their finished work. Tell them that the mnemonic PACE will help remind them to go back and forth through their work to make sure they have met the standard criteria.
4. Introduce and explain the meaning of the numbers "1, 2 . . ." as ways to note additional requirements expected for specific assignments. Elicit responses from students as to what some teachers may specify as additional requirements for particular assignments (e.g., including a picture with a poem, an outline with the final draft, a diagram to match an explanation, etc.).
5. Conduct a model for students for how they are to mark their assignments with PACE 1, 2 . . . while thinking out loud. Then summarize each step and

- state expectations for students to use PACE 1, 2 . . . on designated assignments in the future.
6. Give an actual assignment in which the grading criteria are clearly specified and ask students to demonstrate how they will mark their papers with PACE 1, 2 . . .
  7. Grade the finished assignments according to the PACE 1, 2 . . . criteria.
  8. Discuss with students their use of the routine after the assignment has been marked and returned. Give specific positive and corrective feedback on how students were able to use the routine. Also, give feedback on the quality of work you noted on the finished products as a result of using PACE 1, 2 . . .

## GUIDELINES FOR ASSIGNMENT DISCUSSIONS

The process of learning about assignment completion is as important as learning about the content. Thus, discussions regarding the quality of assignments and the outcomes associated with assignment completion should be a regular part of classroom activities (Lenz & Bulgren, 1991). Without effective feedback, students will be unable to improve their performance in a way that satisfies the requirements for a particular assignment. Clearly, all learners need feedback from appropriate sources to guide their future independent study and learning efforts (Serna, Schumaker, & Sheldon, 1992).

It is important that assignment feedback be closely aligned to established grading practices, such as PACE 1, 2 . . . . The goal of feedback should be to provide students with information about their performance so that it leads to improved grades and increased independence. To be effective, feedback statements should be both positive and corrective. In other words, teachers should include praise and information about what was done right on a particular task, as well as point out specific errors (Lenz, Ellis, & Scanlon, 1996).

In addition to timely feedback on assignments that is positive and corrective, it is important to include a goal-setting component. Goal setting places more responsibility on students to do what they need to do in order to improve their work based on the feedback they have received. When teachers require students to set goals, they can observe whether or not students understand the desired behavior that is necessary to improve their work. Thus, feedback procedures can yield learning opportunities for students and teaching opportunities for teachers (Kline, Schumaker, & Deshler, 1991).

To better understand how to conduct discussions about assignment completion outcomes based on PACE 1, 2 . . . , consider the following example, which shows how Ms. Sparks used PACE 1, 2 . . . to guide her feedback comments:

*Before returning the diary assignments, Ms. Sparks rated each finished assignment with PACE 1, 2 . . . . She analyzed student error patterns and correct responses and made note of them to discuss with the class. On the day she returned the students' work, she briefly reviewed the grading requirements and her notes regarding the standard PACE requirements. Specifically, she told the students how pleased she was that all students had met the due date (prompt), that most had earned points for organization (arranged neatly), that almost everyone had followed all the directions (complete), but that the class as a whole would have benefited by checking their spelling more carefully on the final product (edited for clarity).*

*Ms. Sparks then stated that for the most part, the students had included at least three statements in each of their entries (additional requirements). She pointed out that quite a few students lost points related to how each journal was supposed to focus on one good and one bad aspect of their chosen topic (additional requirement). For example, some of the journals showed only what was good about the aspect of life they had chosen to write about. When that happened, she told the students, she had made note of it on their papers.*

*Ms. Sparks concluded by telling students that if they wanted to improve their grades, they could rewrite the entries on which they had lost points and turn the corrected work in to her by Friday. After asking the students if they had any questions, she spent the next few minutes circulating among the students to privately go over what they needed to do and to help them set goals. Before she dismissed the class, she told the students that she would be available to give them feedback on one of their corrected entries if they wanted her to do so before turning in their final copies on Friday.*

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The first part of this article explained the important connection between planning, presenting, and evaluating assignments as part of an overall assignment completion cycle to be carried out in partnership with students. When planning assignments, teachers should align them with critical content to be learned and mastered and offer reasonable choices to students regarding how to complete them. When presenting assignments to students, teachers should give clear directions, check for student understanding, and give students a reasonable amount of time to get started on the assignment during class. When evaluating assignments, teachers should set classroom standards for quality work with their students, use a consistent self-checking process on finished work, and conduct feedback discussions regarding assignment completion outcomes.

The second part of this article gave specific guidelines on how to use PACE 1, 2 . . . , a self-checking process to

help students improve the quality of their work on classroom assignments. PACE 1, 2 . . . allows teachers and students to discuss finished assignments against a set of consistent grading standards. It is also the foundation for establishing feedback comments to be given to the whole class or to individual students.

Teachers who practice these guidelines operate from the belief that assignment completion by their students is just as much *process* as it is *product*. They view assignment completion as a life skill to be developed and nurtured in classrooms where meaningful and interesting work is carried out in partnership with others. These teachers realize that some students are inactive learners and fail to use effective and efficient strategies for assignment completion. Therefore, they teach their students how to learn from their assignments and how to complete them successfully. When students fail to produce quality work based on the preestablished standards for a particular assignment, these teachers offer students an opportunity to improve their grade by helping them see their mistakes and find out how they might correct them. Motivation to learn thrives in these teachers' classrooms, where all students are expected to learn and succeed through well-established assignment completion habits.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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