

Designing Rubrics to Foster Students' Diverse Language Backgrounds

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ABSTRACT: Scholars such as Diane Kelly-Riley and Patricia Bizzell have argued that the student writing feature most likely to place a student into a basic writing course is the presence of dialect other than standard academic English. This essay examines how assessment practices can foster students' diverse languages rather than inhibit them. I conducted a semester-long participant observation of two sections of first-year writing at Midwestern University, also considered basic writing preparatory courses, in order to examine how instructors assess varieties of English. One of these sections exclusively enrolled nonnative speakers of English; the other section enrolled both native and nonnative speakers. A key finding is that students modeled the vocabulary they used to discuss their writing and the writing of their peers to match the assessment language used by the program. Composition scholarship recognizes that language difference and variation is intrinsic to all language, thus, programs should take care to consider issues of language diversity when designing rubrics or other assessment tools to avoid unfairly penalizing students. I discuss one possible model for increased attention to language diversity in assessment.

KEYWORDS: assessment; basic writing; language diversity; rubrics

The privileging of academic English has the potential to create unfair assessment practices for nonnative speakers and speakers of “nonstandard” language varieties. Scholars such as Diane Kelly-Riley and Patricia Bizzell have argued that the student writing feature most likely to place a student into a basic writing course is the presence of a language variety other than standard academic English. Other studies, such as those by Ed White and also Arnetha Ball’s research in African American Vernacular, have shown that assessors may grade students who write in a so-called nonstandard language variety more harshly than their peers. Rubrics may emphasize this myth of a standard correctness. For these reasons, I argue that collaborative assessment practices at the classroom level—rubrics, in particular—may help to avoid unfairly penalizing those students whose home dialects most diverge

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from standard academic English. By involving students in the assessment process, writing faculty can develop assessment tools that assist students in understanding instructor feedback and the rhetorical nature of writing, as well as enabling student agency and ownership of language. Many current rubrics, such as the one used by the research site in this study, insufficiently account for the diversity inherent in language. Other, more collaborative assessment methods that focus on the process of writing rather than only its product, can help foster language diversity in the writing classroom. In this article, I discuss some possible take-aways for designing more equitable classroom-based assessment tools.

In her collection on racism and writing centers, Laura Greenfield argues that notions of standard English are racialized, and points out that even scholars who advocate for language diversity make the mistake of discussing standard English as a variety of English separate from those considered “diverse.” She writes that, “The only standard languages—languages with finite boundaries and comprehensively accountable features—are dead languages” (39), and explains that we too often refer to language diversity as dialects exclusive to people of color. In fact, she argues, standard English is an abstraction and difficult to define as a language variety because it tends to borrow from other varieties. Using it as a euphemism for “white English” leads to the assumption that white students who are not proficient writers are merely sloppy proofreaders, while students of color who make similar errors are considered deficient writers.

Similarly, Asao B. Inoue explains in his book *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies* the need for deliberate strategies to counter the racialized norms of so-called standard English in the composition classroom. He discusses his use of grading contracts in his first-year composition courses where the letter grade values labor over any single writing product. Students, regardless of writing ability, must regularly attend class and complete all assignments to earn a high grade. By acknowledging the labor of writing as the act of learning—rather than a single essay privileging a white language variety—Inoue argues that we can lessen assimilation to a dominant discourse. For example, in Inoue’s courses, a higher grade reflects that the student missed fewer classes and turned in more revisions. In this way, grading contracts as an assessment tool help to ensure that students who are less proficient in academic English are not at an unfair advantage, and as Inoue notes, higher grades are more available to all students (191). Since assessment of writing is typically where students of color are unfairly penalized

in a composition course (Ball; Kelly-Riley; Smitherman), more attention is needed to the tools and strategies we use.

Acknowledging the context and purpose of writing in all stages of the writing process may help make the assessment of writing more transparent and valuable for students. This is a position advocated by the Conference on College Composition and Communication in its landmark position statement “Students’ Rights to Their Own Language,” a document that asserts dialects are not errors of language, but sophisticated language patterns that are subject to discrimination in the classroom and beyond. Boldly stating that advocating a standard dialect equates to “immoral advice for humans,” the statement calls for faculty to honor the languages of students from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds. (For the purposes of this essay, academic English is used to refer to the “typical” language variety taught in a first-year composition classroom.) Since language variation is inherent to the nature of discourse, assessment practices should focus less on a single definition of “correctness” and instead explore the process-based nature of writing; and toward this end, assessment tools, such as rubrics, should continue to move toward a focus on process and, as Inoue stated, labor rather than product. My findings, described later in this essay, support Inoue’s conclusions that in addition to lessening the idea of one single correctness, framing assessment as process-based may help students understand the rhetorical nature of writing and assessment.

Methodology and Methods

Previous research in the teaching of basic writing indicates that the students enrolled in basic writing courses are more likely to use a variety of language dialects (Bizzell; Kelly-Riley). In order to understand students’ attitudes toward the assessment process in relation to language variety usage, I observed two basic writing courses at my institution, Midwestern University (MU). One of the courses I studied was designed for native speaking students and the other was designated for nonnative speakers of English. Both groups of students are likely to exhibit so-called nonstandard dialects of English.

To begin, I queried basic writing instructors via email seeking faculty participants and received two affirmative responses. I then met with both of these instructors to further discuss my plans to observe their courses for one academic semester and survey their students periodically during the observation to learn more about writing assessment and language diversity. Based on my review of literature, the course outcomes, and the structure

of the writing program (including an already in-place universal rubric and portfolio exit system), I arrived at the following research questions:

- In what ways can instructors use collaborative assessment practices to foster our students' diverse languages?
- How do our rubrics consider the diverse language backgrounds of students enrolled in basic writing courses?
- What does sentence-level "correctness" in college level composition mean to students and instructors?

In "Beyond the Personal: Theorizing a Politics of Location in Composition Research," Gesa E. Kirsch and Joy S. Ritchie state, "researchers need to acknowledge the way race (and for most composition scholars this means examining their whiteness), social class, and other circumstances have structured their own thinking and how that, in turn, has shaped their own questions and interpretations" (10). Feminist methodology inspired my own approach to data collection; I wanted to involve participants in the process and value their contributions to my research in this study. To this end, I created a research web site and corresponding blog where all participants could review in-progress data and leave comments or feedback. While I encouraged students to approach me directly since I regularly attended their class sessions, I knew that an anonymous method of contact might encourage participation. By inviting my participants to review and respond to data throughout the semester via this research website and blog, I hoped to create a sense of equity between researcher and participant and also expose any personal bias.

In addition to observing and taking notes on both courses for one semester, I also conducted pre- and post-semester instructor interviews, surveyed all students twice throughout the course, and routinely performed textual analysis by collecting any classroom artifacts such as syllabi, assignment sheets, and the program's first-year writing rubric. I used an on-going, grounded theory approach to coding to provide findings to my research questions. I began to work with my data immediately, coding major discussions of class sessions according to general topics (such as thesis statements, library research, etc.) and examining the frequency of each topic. This allowed me to determine what and how often general writing topics were covered in each session and how many class sessions discussed the assessment process.

I'll discuss my methods of data collection in greater detail:

Collecting Artifacts. Throughout the semester, I gathered various textual data from the course. I collected a copy of any sheet or handout given to students such as topic proposal worksheets, essay and short writing assignments, peer review guides, or other overviews of writing activities in order to see how these influenced student perceptions regarding the rubric or assessment. Artifacts typically fell into one of three categories: assignment requirements (to unpack the assignment), pre- or post-writing activities, or student modeling.

Observing Classrooms/ Building Rapport. During the study, I regularly attended class sessions to learn more about both the native and nonnative speaking sections. I observed two sections, one taught by a lecturer named "Kay" and another section taught by a graduate student named "May." (I discuss these participants later in this essay.) I kept a journal of my classroom observation notes and regularly posted these notes to my research blog, viewable by students and course instructors. Not only did these class sessions provide valuable data that revealed more about each instructor's individual approaches to writing pedagogy, the sessions helped me build a rapport with students and invite them to participate more directly in my research. For example, one post to my research blog asked students to assist me in creating the participant and university pseudonyms, which students then voted on and selected. Here is an excerpt:

What's in a Name?

Any research project involving "human subjects" must be approved by that university's Internal Review Board (IRB). One of the requirements for my project is that I keep your personal identities a secret – I can't use your real names. Due to this, I won't be naming the university you attend, either. This means that I'll need to create a pseudonym and I'd love your help with this. What would you call the university if you could name it something else? If you have an idea, send me an email [embedded hotlink to address] and then let's vote to decide. The name we choose will go in my final research project.

I took detailed notes on classroom sessions and coded the notes into categories to learn more about the frequency and patterns of major activities in both sections. For example, Kay's section—whose students were exclu-

sively nonnative speakers—included more attention to grammar and syntax, while May's section focused more on brainstorming and prewriting activities. The categories for coding classroom sessions closely aligned to the categories of the writing program's rubric, such as development, organization, and grammar. I included an additional category for any discussion of assessment.

Surveying Students. In her book on teacher research, Ruth E. Ray writes that “students are not merely subjects whom the teacher-researcher instructs and assesses; they are co-researchers, sources of knowledge whose insights help provide new directions for the study” (175). In this sense, student responses helped to shape the course of my study and as a comparison for my personal observations. Anonymous online student surveys were another means of gathering student input. I chose to create online surveys for ease of student access and so that I could more easily view patterns within responses. These surveys were given at midterms and at finals during the Fall 2012 academic semester. I asked about students' demographics and also general thoughts on the assessment process, for example, “How did the rubric help you revise your writing?” I hoped to learn more about students' writing values and whether or not those aligned with what was being assessed in their writing. In other words, students could reflect on the tension between home language and academic writing. Surveys allowed me to gain valuable information without having students sacrifice their privacy as they were able to view results of the surveys and provide any feedback or clarifications. However, to fully protect students' anonymity, some survey results were not posted until after the course had ended.

Conducting Interviews. I interviewed instructors in a face-to-face setting near midterms and at the end the term and periodically followed up with emails to see if there were any questions or comments that the instructors wanted to add to my data collection. Thus, while there were only two “formal” interviews, we met often informally during office hours to discuss the course and my in-progress research. The formal interviews ranged from ten minutes to thirty minutes and were conducted in each instructor's office. I began the study wanting to learn about what each instructor valued in the writing classroom, and as the semester progressed, I became more interested in how the values of the writing program (again, the university used a mandatory, standard rubric for each essay) affected each instructor's pedagogy. As I previously stated, participants had the opportunity to review all survey data, transcripts, and my written summaries of findings.

Research Site: Basic Writing Instruction at Midwestern University

Midwestern University is located in a rural Ohio town with a population of approximately 30,000. Founded in 1910 as a teachers' college, the campus is relatively large at 1,400 acres. The school offers bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees. During the 2011 – 2012 school year, 13,814 undergraduate students were enrolled along with 1,269 graduate students. Nearly 12,000 of the undergraduate students were in-state residents (“FTE Enrollment by Campus”). MU's writing program is a well-established unit, and at the time of this study, operated as a department separate from the university's English department. Its major driving force in assessment is the program's rubric and portfolio system that requires students to pass two of five essays in order to pass the course; students produce two drafts of each essay. Students are introduced to the rubric and portfolio system when they purchase their required course packet containing five blank rubrics (one for each essay), five topic proposal sheets, and a welcome letter from the WPA. Students must also pass the end-of-the-semester portfolio review to pass the course. Portfolios are reviewed by faculty other than the course instructor, so it is possible for a student with two passing essays to fail the course.

All students are required to take FYW, but may instead receive an exemption through a placement test or by transferring credit from a similar course at another institution. In most cases, students entering the university as first-years take the entrance exam to determine placement into one of three courses: 1100, the basic writing course, 1110, the intermediate course that most students are placed into, or 1120, the final course in the sequence and the only course that is credit-bearing. The online placement exam consists of an essay prompt where students have 24-hours to draft, revise, and submit. These placement exams are evaluated by graduate assistants with a final review by a full-time composition instructor. In this way, the assessment practices undergo intensive norming with the program's universal rubric as the primary assessment tool.

The exception to this placement requirement is for non-US citizens, who must take the writing exam in-person, the week before the semester begins; this would apply to most students in Kay's section. Students whose first language is not English must take a special section of 1100, denoted as 1100W, that enrolls only nonnative speakers—this section is one of the two 1100 courses observed in this study, taught by Kay. Although this course

typically enrolls only international students, other students whose first language is not English are permitted to enroll in the course.

Students designated as underprepared writers are placed into 1100, the course that I studied. This course is similar to the other writing courses at MU in that they also have a course cap of 15, students draft and revise five essays before submitting a final portfolio of work, and students receive a grade of "Pass" or "No Pass." The course outcomes, however, are broad. These include selecting and narrowing topics that engage and have meaning for both writer and audience, incorporating references to source material as a means of adding voice through writing to a larger conversation, producing, revisiting, and revising multiple drafts of a project, using citation effectively, developing confidence speaking about writing, writing to a variety of audiences, writing with a variety of purposes and genres, and writing across modalities ("First Year Writing"). There are more goals for 1100 than either of the upper-level courses, with a greater focus on understanding the writing process itself. Thus, although this is a preparatory course, students must demonstrate a mastery over more material.

While there is no set definition for what constitutes a basic writing course, Mina Shaughnessy defined it as "the teaching of writing to severely unprepared freshmen"; in his 1987 essay "Basic Writing, Basic Skills, Basic Research," Joseph Trimmer notes that most basic writing courses offered no college credit and perhaps overly focus on grammatical skills (5). Based on these categorizations of what defines basic writing, MU's 1100 is a basic writing course. Still, the term is somewhat arbitrary since student standards are based on the local context of an institution. So, while MU does not specifically designate this course as basic writing based on its purpose, it serves what writing instructors and the institution refer to as a basic writing function. As Trimmer's quote suggests, and besides the course's broad rhetorical goals, there is greater attention to sentence-level writing instruction in 1100, with many instructors using a sentence-combining workbook as a required text. This dichotomy made 1100W a fit site for research on rubrics' impact on students' perceptions of their writing development.

Student Participants in 1100W and FYW1100. According to material collected by the university admissions office of the research site, most students enroll in first-year writing directly out of high school. The campus has a predominantly middle-class, white student population, with twenty percent of the student population identifying as ethnic or cultural minorities. Although all states are represented in the student body, most at the university are from surrounding working-class towns. In her 1999 article for *Journal of Basic Writ-*

ing, “Just Writing, Basically,” Linda Adler-Kassner discovered much about basic writers by surveying 16 randomly chosen basic writing students at the University of Michigan-Detroit, inquiring why they felt they were enrolled in basic writing courses. Adler-Kassner found that, similar to students at MU, most of the basic writing students were from working-class backgrounds and lived near the university. Her student participants responded that they struggled with grammar, but also that their ideas did not translate well to the page (76 – 79). Thus, development, while important to all writers, is an especially important concern for basic writing students such as those who had enrolled in May’s course. Like the majority of students in MU’s writing program, the students in May’s course were recent high school graduates enrolled in degree-seeking programs, and from groups historically more likely to write in nonstandard dialects (Bizzell). May’s students mostly identified English as their home language, with one student identifying as a Nigerian second-language writer but not specifying his home language.



Figure 1. Student Desks, May’s Course.

Students in Kay’s section, as noted, were mostly international students and spoke home languages of Japanese, Farsi, Arabic, Chinese, and Hindi. Students who enrolled in the university through the international program were required to take this specific section and could not enroll in the native-speakers course, although some self-identified non-native English speakers enrolled as well. Obviously, these students differed from May’s students in that many of them had previously lived abroad prior to attending MU. Nearly all lived on campus, unlike the largely commuting population of May’s course. Data from this study, confirmed by research on similar popula-

tions, revealed that Kay's students were likely more interested in rule-based grammar instruction than their native-speaking peers.

While the nonnative speakers and basic writing students are similar groups in that they are less familiar with standard academic English, their needs are not identical. Paul Kei Matsuda argues that historically, universities have more often than not categorized second-language writers as basic writers regardless of their writing ability (67); for example, no second-language writers were placed directly into the for-credit section—1120—at MU in the academic year of this study. Echoing this call for more attention to language diversity, Susan Miller-Cochran writes that writing program administrators should remember that, even in cases where international or second-language students are separated into distinct classes, language differences are present and should be addressed in all writing classrooms (215).



Figure 2. Student Workstations, Kay's Course

Faculty Participants

Differences in the two teachers' backgrounds and orientations toward language teaching should be noted. Kay remarks in her faculty biography that she is a developmental writing specialist and that she regularly teaches FYW1100W, the basic writing course at MU intended for nonnative speakers, and has taught writing since 1990. During the classroom sessions that I

observed, Kay self-identified as a nonnative speaker of English who has lived in several countries and is of Asian heritage. Through my observations of her course, I learned that Kay values independent work and also individualized attention for each student. Most class lessons allowed five to fifteen minutes for students to work on their writing and Kay dedicated one full class period for each essay to independent in-class writing. The other faculty participant, May, was a graduate student in the English program at MU. May identifies as a white, native-speaker, and a “non-traditional” returning student. Prior to attending MU, May was a lawyer in a nearby city for many years. This was her first time teaching the basic writing section of this course and the third FYW course she has taught at MU.

Both courses used the mandatory universal program rubric in their assessments, a feature that greatly impacted how students understood and valued writing.

Findings

The data collected throughout the semester revealed that a student’s understanding of his or her writing errors may be very different from his or her instructor’s but that classroom artifacts, such as MU’s standard program rubric, may strongly shape the way that students think about writing. Rubrics can be opportunities for establishing values, but too often overly focus on sentence-level writing above large, complex issues. The effects of this heightened focus played out in my study’s findings as I describe below.

The rubric used at MU had five detailed categories with a majority focusing on grammar and structure: audience, organization, development, word choice, syntax, and usage/mechanics. Each section of the rubric was scored as “pass” or “no pass”, and students must pass all sections of the rubric in order to pass an essay. Each section was weighted equally. Thus, the entirety of assessment was focused on product rather than process or labor.

According to student survey results, the language of the rubric likely led to a troubling shift in student perception of “good” writing. At the beginning of the course, students felt critical thinking skills were more important to good writing than mechanics. Results showed that the language of the rubric heavily influenced the way that students talked about writing. This was true regardless of how they did or did not align to pedagogy implemented by the instructor. Early in the semester, many students listed “ideas” or “creativity” as most important to good writing; by the end of the semester, no students listed these as qualities of good writing and instead mimicked

rubric language, with the majority responding that some type of grammatical feature was an indicator of good writing—this is most likely due to the course rubric's heavy emphasis on grammar and syntax. Students learned to view good writing in terms of what was assessed and only what was assessed. One student responded that grammar makes one sound “educated,” stating, “It does in the way of making your paper sound as though your educated and know what you're talking about.” Additionally, student survey responses indicated that they wanted to know academic English and valued “correctness” in the classroom.

Yet, both students and instructors preferred individual feedback to the rubric. Even though both May and Kay indicated that they did not heavily refer to rubric language (only marking the rubric with the required pass or fail) in their written feedback to students, students overwhelmingly used the rubric language in their end of the semester survey responses. One student participant noted that the rubric may have had potential as an assessment tool but that he did not look at it after the “pass” or “fail” grade was checked: “The rubric would have definitely helped me improve my writing. It told me exactly what I needed to do. But I never bothered to look at it.” Although students were highly influenced by the language of the rubric, they did not view it as transferable to their drafting or revision process.

Due to an overvaluing on mechanics and sentence-level issues, the rubric at MU muted differences in language variation likely to function as assets. Because this assessment tool influenced student perceptions of correctness in composition, it became a central point of my study. The course rubric listed sentence-level issues as 3/5 of potential errors, despite instructors feeling that organization and development were more significant issues. The rubric also listed “ESL difficulties” as a potential error under syntax, although Kay, the instructor of the section for nonnative speakers, felt that her students were more likely to exhibit specific issues in “Mechanics.” Neither students nor faculty knew specifically what “ESL difficulties” referred to. This factoring of grammar into assessment did not mirror course pedagogy, which emphasized a process-based approach to writing where students drafted, peer-reviewed, and revised essays. Here is an excerpt from the rubric, where the numbers in parenthesis link to a writing and grammar handbook:

IV. Syntax: The sentences of this essay are generally free of errors and appropriately varied.

__ ESL difficulties (57-58)

- __ Unintentional sentence
- __ Run-on sentences (33)
- __ Comma splices (33)
- __ Lack of variety in length/style (40)
- __ Misplaced/dangling modifiers (36)
- __ Inflated/wordy structures (42)
- __ Lack of active verbs (41e)
- __ Mixed constructions (35b)
- __ Problems w/ coordination/subordination (40b, 42c.1, A7)
- __ Faulty parallelism (43)

- __ Other:

Figure 3. MU rubric, excerpt, “Syntax.”

Reflections on the importance of grammar and syntax varied between the two classes observed; student survey data showed that international students desired much more help with grammar than American students, particularly with verb issues, although both groups of student participants replied that grammar was at least somewhat important to them. Both faculty instructors taught grammar in the context of writing rather than stand-alone exercises, although the instructor of the native speakers’ section taught grammar in terms of style and rhetorical effect, while the nonnative speaking students learned more about comparing language structures, due to many students having home languages that did not align to American English verb usage.

Responding to the question of what patterns of errors she saw in student writing, Kay stated:

There are so many circumstances that ask for a different verb usage and the students are still trying to figure out which type of verbs are appropriate for different situations. It’s not just as simple as “is this a past tense or is this a present tense?” ... I think verb usage is their biggest problem. Mostly, I would say with the Asian students. The two Middle Eastern

students are doing quite well. One is doing extremely well.

Kay also noted what she saw as cultural linguistic patterns in her students:

I shared with you information about [student's] use of transition about how he is very modest and sharing his own opinion. The phrase he constantly used was "in my honest opinion," "in my humble opinion," you know. I think it's because this is a cultural thing. They are just not used to giving rebuttal and speaking up on their own opinions. So that's kind of interesting.

A student participant agreed with Kay's assessment of student error patterns and felt that proficiency with standard syntax was necessary to be a competent writer: "grammar is probably the biggest problem for international students." Although structural issues were an important part of Kay's pedagogy, and thus assessment of student writing, these issues were not the largest factor in Kay's determining whether or not a student passed an essay, as the rubric might indicate. Although language differences were not mentioned on the rubric, Kay reviewed with students how specific languages differed from English in order to help students write with greater clarity; Paul Kei Matsuda writes that hiding these linguistic differences, rather than making them an explicit part of the classroom pedagogy as Kay had, ignores the needs of language diverse students and contributes to "linguistic containment" (87).

By the end of May's course, her native-speaking student population had developed a greater awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses as writers, according to survey results. The traits that students listed as writing strengths—such as development and organization—more closely aligned with May's own observations about student writing strengths and weaknesses. Similarly to Kay's experiences, May noted that the rubric had the potential to be overwhelming to students and that the degree of specificity did not align with the errors she noted in her students' writing. This reveals that students develop a sense of writer agency throughout the semester; students were more aware of their writing progress and confident in what they needed to do during the revision process. In this sense, both students and instructor found teacher feedback to be the most helpful part of assessment, although students still used the language of the course rubric to talk about writing, as indicated by the absence of terms such as "ideas" and "creativity" in the final student survey where students were asked about qualities necessary for a piece of writing to be successful. Rubrics are clearly influential to

student's values on writing and assessment, and heuristics for rubrics that consider issues of language diversity might consider the multiple audiences and purposes for writing. Again, while students mimicked the language of the rubric, their responses indicated that they did not find it as helpful as instructor feedback or conferences when drafting or revising. Assessment is thus personal, and the relationship that developed between student and instructor was more valuable to students collectively than the tool. About ten percent of students in both courses wanted more individual conferences with instructors to discuss their work or grades.

My findings support previous studies that prove the inconsistencies of trying to match rate of error to improvement in writing. In 2008, Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford revisited Lunsford and Connor's 1988 study of student error patterns. The pair found that students were writing more challenging, longer texts with the same rate of error, but that the types of error were changing—students were using more incorrect words and homophones (791 – 806) rather than sentence-level syntax errors. May's findings echo this study; she noted that the error pattern occurring most frequently in her students' writing was the "eggcorn" ("acorn") error—homophones. This trait fell underneath the rubric category of "Word Choice." Although May did not feel this issue was significant enough to keep a student from passing an essay, the rubric prompted her to acknowledge it.

When asked about patterns of errors, May replied:

Yes, I have noticed a whole series of words that they hear one way and are not writing correctly. In fact, I just had this with my son the other day. He came in and he said "what are you saying when you say 'innohvitsel'?" And I said you're saying—he said "No, no, I know what it means, but what are you literally writing?" Like, he didn't know it was in-and-of-itself. He didn't know it was four separate words because he's never seen it written; he's only heard it.

Native speakers such as May's students are more likely to use conversational English, and May did not feel that the rubric aligned with the errors she found in student writing:

I tend not to mark a lot of stuff in those sections via the rubric. . . There's so much of it that it gives the impression that that's the key stuff when really, I'm more concerned about development and thesis statements, stuff like that. So I don't know. I don't know if they are overwhelmed by the rubric, or if they even get the rubric.

The students agreed with their instructors about the rubric, feeling that it had potential but was unhelpful in its current iteration. In this sense, the rubric was more of a routine artifact than a useful tool for students.

A Rubric to Foster Language Diversity: The University of Southern Florida Model

Rubrics that treat academic English as one variety of English—one of many— demonstrate the rhetorical nature of language, audience, and text. Conversely, rubrics that highly focus on a single notion of correctness may discourage students from thinking of writing in terms of the rhetorical situation and language diversity. Assessments leave a lasting impact on student attitudes toward writing during the course but also on how students think about writing in their future experiences. Likely in this case, because both students and instructors had little to say about how or why the rubric was valuable to them, the rubric as an assessment tool was not used to its full potential. This particular rubric was dense with many repetitive categories and instructor participants had conflicting ideas about what categories most corresponded to the errors present in student writing. A more rhetorical and labor-valuing approach to assessment, as called for by Greenfield and Inoue, where rubrics and grading criteria are reflexive depending on the assignment, could make the assessment process more useful to students.

In her 2012 essay, “How Writing Rubrics Fail,” Valerie Balester discusses how rubrics can influence students with diverse language backgrounds as she examines the portrayal of standard academic English in writing rubrics. Balester found that rubrics tend to fall into three categories: acculturationism, those which count errors to determine correctness, such as electronic tests; accomodationism, or more “middle-ground” rubrics that are similar to acculturationism rubrics but make some limited attempt to accommodate second-language writers, and multiculturalism, which are rubrics that incorporate principles of the CCCC position statement on language diversity through the emphasis of “writerly agency” (72). These rubrics do this not only through showing the contextual nature of language and audience appropriateness, but through use of terminology that eschews correct or not correct attitudes toward assessment.

One rubric that Balester reviews describes mechanical errors as “beginning, developing, competent, or advanced” (72), which stresses the process-based nature of writing rather than the product alone. Balester also adds that these rubrics discuss grammar as effective or ineffective rather than correct

or incorrect. The author explains, “rubrics announce forcefully how we define ‘good’ writing” (Balester 64). Thus, it’s important to have assessment artifacts that value language diversity rather than a focus on only one “correct” dialect. When focus is on the latter, as my survey data showed, rubrics are more influential to how students think about assessment than even teacher feedback—MU students used this language to define what “good” writing was. Rubrics that portray writing as either correct or incorrect have the potential to focus on what not to do rather than what to do.

According to Balester’s criteria, MU’s rubric would fall under an accommodationism approach since it does acknowledge “ESL difficulties,” but lists this item only as a potential error in student writing without defining what the phrase means. As mentioned previously, there are six rubric categories with three focusing on sentence-level issue. The phrase “ESL difficulties” is listed as a syntax error, along with other errors such as comma splices, lack of variety, coordination/subordination issues. By contrast, there is no one error or series of errors attributed solely to nonnative speakers of English, as evidenced by the instructor interviews and student surveys.

Based on Balester’s description of a multicultural rubric as an assessment that establishes agency and acknowledges the various levels of writing proficiency, writing programs should consider adapting rubrics to more fully value the process-based nature of writing instruction and change from “pass,” “almost pass,” and “no pass” to categories such as “beginning,” “intermediate,” and “advanced”—with no one single category passing or failing an essay.

Scholarship supporting the use of writing rubrics is mixed, with supporters arguing that rubrics provide needed assessment norming and critics believing that rubrics oversimplify the complex act of writing assessment. Going beyond assessment of writing for individual students, a 2013 study published in the *Journal of Writing Assessment* by Joe Moxley supports the use of rubrics as a means of assessment norming. At the University of South Florida (USF), Moxley used a self-designed software program called *My Reviewers* to collect and categorize information on 100,000 student essays over a three-year period, scored with USF’s community rubric, a term reflective of its “crowdsourced” design, created with instructor, student, and staff feedback (3). Moxley found that the rubrics did provide assessment norming and were reliable tools for scoring student writing. Notably, unlike MU’s, USF’s rubric would likely fall under Balester’s category of multiculturalism as it did not directly tie a passing or failing grade to any one rubric category; they were used holistically in scoring.

Designing Rubrics to Foster Students' Diverse Language Backgrounds

In doing so, the USF rubric comports with more socially just renderings of individual assessment. The USF rubric's categories of "Focus," "Evidence," "Organization," "Style," and "Format" emphasize writing and thinking processes. There are two hierarchies within most of these categories: "basics" and "critical thinking," with the former focusing on satisfactory completion of required essay elements and the latter assessing higher order logic. For example, the "Focus" category lists meeting the assignment requirements as a basic-level skill, and crafting an "insightful/intriguing" thesis as a critical thinking component. The majority of this rubric assesses the ideas and development in a student's work. Instead of awarding full or no credit to any one section, the instructor scores a piece of writing at "Emerging," "Developing," or "Mastering" level (4) on a scale of 0-4.

Additionally, syntax is assessed as a stylistic choice rather than a grammatical one, appearing under the category of "Style." Although this rubric does list "correct grammar" as a feature of a "Mastering" level student essay, it also notes "rhetorically sound" syntax in this same category. Style is the only category in the rubric that examines sentence-level mechanics and showcases to students the purposefulness of linguistic variation. The effect is to lessen the idea of one correct, standard notion of writing that is presented in what Balester refers to as accomodationism rubrics.

Moxley's study shows that assessment tools that foster a sense of language diversity and rhetorically-situated notions of "correctness" still provide solid norming and can be useful feedback to students. He notes that the success of this rubric in comparison to others is that the community rubric reflects the "real-world" writing situations in which students might find themselves. Students with diverse language backgrounds may receive less feedback on rhetorical features of writing and are generally less likely to pass a writing course (Ball; Kelly-Riley), and rubrics such as those at the USF, have the potential to provide a sense of multiculturalism while still championing "good" writing. Unlike MU's rubric, which presents error as the presence or absence of an element of writing, USF's rubric indicates the growing progression of a draft.

Themes for Rethinking Classroom-Based Assessments

The results of the study at Midwestern University revealed key information about how students with diverse language backgrounds experience the assessment process and therefore provide guidelines for best practices in assessment. Findings suggest that assessment artifacts should be aligned

Criteria	Level	Emerging	Developing	Mastering
		0	1	2
			3	4
 Focus	Basics	Does not meet assignment requirements	Partially meets assignment requirements	Meets assignment requirements
	Critical Thinking	Absent or weak thesis; ideas are underdeveloped, vague or unrelated to thesis; poor analysis of ideas relevant to thesis	Predictable or unoriginal thesis; ideas are partially developed and related to thesis; inconsistent analysis of subject relevant to thesis	Insightful/intriguing thesis; ideas are convincing and compelling; cogent analysis of subject relevant to thesis
 Evidence	Critical Thinking	Sources and supporting details lack credibility; poor synthesis of primary and secondary sources/evidence relevant to thesis; poor synthesis of visuals/personal experience/anecdotes relevant to thesis; rarely distinguishes between writer's ideas and source's ideas	Fair selection of credible sources and supporting details; unclear relationship between thesis and primary and secondary sources/evidence; ineffective synthesis of sources/evidence relevant to thesis; occasionally effective synthesis of visuals/personal experience/anecdotes relevant to thesis; inconsistently distinguishes between writer's ideas and source's ideas	Credible and useful sources and supporting details; cogent synthesis of primary and secondary sources/evidence relevant to thesis; clever synthesis of visuals/personal experience/anecdotes relevant to thesis; distinguishes between writer's ideas and source's ideas
	Organization	Basics	Confusing opening; absent, inconsistent, or non-relevant topic sentences; few transitions and absent or unsatisfying conclusion	Uninteresting or somewhat trite introduction, inconsistent use of topic sentences, segues, transitions, and mediocre conclusion
 Organization	Critical Thinking	Illogical progression of supporting points; lacks cohesiveness	Supporting points follow somewhat logical progression; occasional wandering of ideas; some interruption of cohesiveness	Logical progression of supporting points; very cohesive
	 Style	Basics	Frequent grammar, punctuation errors; inconsistent point of view	Some grammar/punctuation errors occur in some places; somewhat consistent point of view
Critical Thinking		Significant problems with syntax, diction, word choice, and vocabulary	Occasional problems with syntax, diction, word choice, and vocabulary	Rhetorically-sound syntax, diction, word choice, and vocabulary; effective use of figurative language
 Format	Basics	Little compliance with accepted documentation style (i.e., MLA, APA) for paper formatting, in-text citations, annotated bibliographies, and works cited; minimal attention to document design	Inconsistent compliance with accepted documentation style (i.e., MLA, APA) for paper formatting, in-text citations, annotated bibliographies, and works cited; some attention to document design	Consistent compliance with accepted documentation style (i.e., MLA, APA) for paper formatting, in-text citations, annotated bibliographies, and works cited; strong attention to document design

Figure 4. University of Southern Florida's Community Rubric (Moxley 4).

with course pedagogy and explained during instructional time, and that tools should indicate the process-based nature of writing rather than an overt focus on “correctness.” Based on these indications and current scholarship in basic writing and language diversity, these proposed activities may help foster language diversity in the assessment process.

I present the following themes for rethinking classroom-based assessments:

Using Feedback to Complement Tools

Rubric language had a great impact on how students understood their writing as indicated by the language students used in their survey responses when discussing their strengths and weaknesses. This was most evident in May's class, as these students—unfamiliar with college-level writing or MU's assessment language until this course—drastically shifted the way they talked about writing by the end of the semester in order to mirror the language of the program rubric and to focus on the goals of development, organization, and grammar. Kay's students talked about writing in a way that echoed the categories of the rubric from the beginning, but these students had participated in other writing courses in the ESOL program at MU using the same rubric and similar learning outcomes. This indicates students may carry the language of the writing rubric into future writing courses. This also suggests that assessments implemented by WPAs affect student understanding of writing assessment as much as or even more so than other practices implemented at only the classroom-level.

While assessing the mechanics of writing can be valuable—and is often explicitly desired by students—writing instructors and programs should take care to also consider other less “assessable” features of writing, such as creativity and reflection. The National Writing Project's “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing,” identifies habits of mind necessary for success in college-level writing and those include “creativity,” “openness,” and “flexibility.” Students in this study ceased to value these features by the end of the semester because they were not listed on any classroom artifact, including the program's rubric. Assessment tools designed to acknowledge the rhetorical nature of writing, such as collaborative rubrics or grading contracts, can acknowledge and value these features better than tools that focus solely on an end product as the measure of success.

Designing assessments collaboratively with students reinforces the rhetorical nature of both writing and assessment: both are in flux based on audience and purpose. For example, at MU, instructors may have simplified the detailed sub-categories of the rubric to more clearly reflect students' writing concerns or perhaps in Kay's case, remove the “ESL difficulties” language to refer to the more specific usage errors she encountered in student writing. Given that students did not understand these rubric categories, student input and feedback on its design would have enlightened faculty and administration to this. Although it is based on a small sample, a 2005 study by Judy Fowler and Robert Ochsner suggests that universities with higher admissions

rate may overly focus on sentence-level correctness due to outside pressure rather than engagement with texts and ideas.

For this reason, classroom activities such as self-assessment and co-designing rubrics can bridge the acts of invention and revision by giving a sense of purpose to writing. Ideally, rubrics should align with learning outcomes and goals that are established for each assignment. To model Inoue's pedagogy model, for example, the labor of the drafting and revision should factor into assessment. Assessment strategies should consider more than just the finished product—having the potential to overemphasize standard correctness, as in the case of MU's rubric—and instead, or in tandem, assess the amount of drafting and revision.

Aligning rubric language to specific assignments and integrating it more fully into course pedagogy matters. One classroom idea for instructors may be to have students give mini-presentations on sections of the rubric, or have students use the rubric during peer review. Students can then offer suggestions as to what was useful on the rubric (or other assessment tool) having used it to assess a peer's work. At MU, student survey results indicated that they did not find the tool useful for drafting or revision assistance, but the data also revealed that students adopted the language to talk about writing strengths and weaknesses. This leads us to consider how important it is to discuss the rhetorical nature of the concept of "good writing" throughout these collaborations on assessment.

For instructors working in an environment with a standard rubric, other tools may help clarify or supplement the rubric language. For example, both May and Kay did supplement with informal assessments. May had students read their essays aloud in the drafting stages in order to "self-correct" their work and to develop writer agency. Kay also had students assess their own writing by having students write about what they changed from one essay draft to the next. These reflective approaches to assessment assist students in developing the writerly agency that the CCC's position statement, SRTOL, recommends in order to foster an environment of language diversity. This agency not only helps students become better at understanding what to revise, but it also enables students to decipher the complex rhetorical nature of writing, genre, and varieties of English.

Assessment as Values: Code-Meshing and Grading Contracts

In order to make rubrics—such as those at MU—more in line with both Moxley and Balester's definition of a multicultural assessment tool, programs need to reduce the focus on sentence-level error and respond to levels of student progress, from beginning to advanced competency in any given

area of writing. Rubrics might acknowledge the diverse writing situations in which students find themselves by changing assessment criteria based upon an assignment. As part of this, instructors should consider modeling the code-switching or code-meshing that occurs in writing.

In *Code-meshing as World English*, Vershawn Ashanti Young writes that code-meshing, rather than code-switching “allows minoritized people to become more effective communicators by doing what we all do best, what comes naturally: blending, merging, meshing dialects” (100). For example, courses may include additional discussion on audience and context to discuss how students vary their language varieties from one situation to the next. Students might read diverse language models, noting the purpose and dialectal patterns, and align them to sections of a course rubric. As A. Suresh Canagarajah writes in “A Rhetoric of Shuttling Between Languages,” linguistic difference is not inherently a limitation to language proficiency; students are also managing rhetorical situation and writing genres (159). Models could be a way to see how rhetorical situations affect varieties of English. Staci Perryman-Clark proposes in “Toward a Pedagogy of Linguistic Diversity,” that students discuss social issues in relation to writing, such as having students discuss and respond to CCC’s *Students Rights to Their Own Language*.

Finally, a shift toward grading contracts and other methods that focus on process rather than product may be useful to lessen racialized assessment practices. As Asao Inoue’s previously discussed research in *Antiracist Writing Assessment Strategies* posits, the labor of writing should be valued over any single product of writing. Through assessment tools that invoke rhetorical situation, modeling varieties of English, and a process rather than product-based approach to assessment, writing instructors can help foster language diversity in the classroom.

Conclusion

This study provides insight on how students with a variety of language backgrounds understood writing assessment within a particular context, especially in regards to notions of correctness and what academic writing should “look like” at the classroom level. This study suggests that overemphasis of structural, sentence-level error in assessment tools rather than valuing the rhetorical nature of writing can unfairly penalize varieties of English most divergent from the mythical standard academic English.

While MU did have a universal rubric and portfolio exit assessment governing classroom-based practices, I studied the attitudes, impacts, and expectations of individual basic writing classrooms that I had anticipated would enroll students with a wide variety of language backgrounds. Further studies might examine the effects of programmatic assessments through a student's entire postsecondary career or through an interdisciplinary lens. Finally, it may also be useful to study other institutions with a diverse range of assessments such as grading contracts or individualized rubrics to learn more about other writing assessment tools and their impact on fostering varieties of English. There is still much to be discovered about student and instructor practices in a variety of settings.

The students enrolled in MU's basic writing courses came to their first-year writing classes with a wide variety of writing experiences and language backgrounds. Their instructors also were equipped with diverse teaching experiences and preparation. And yet, the program represents a typical Midwestern university setting with its large student body, rural setting, and the majority of students residing on campus. Data for this study reveals that, despite what may seem like an institution with little need for attention to language diversity, its students are not only linguistically diverse—with both American students and international students listing a language other than English as their native tongue—but have much to say about diverse languages in the writing classroom. Students worked to shape their own views of good writing and correct writing along with the assessment language used by the writing program, most notably in its universal rubric. This shift in thinking, from writing as a creative act of invention to writing as an act that can be measured in terms of organization and mechanics, shows that the assessment values we uphold in our writing classrooms have a great impact on students' views of writing and writing activities, and if we wish to move from possible notions of "correct" vs. "incorrect" writing to writing that is more or less effective depending on a given context, our assessments will play a large role in this shift.

Data collected revealed that both students and instructor tend to think of error as referring to sentence-level issues; this sentence-level error is often the cause of a student's placement into a basic writing course (Bizzell). However, students feel a variety of issues keep them from succeeding in writing, with most of them noting issues of development and organization, a finding that repeats a conclusion made in Linda Adler-Kassner's survey of basic writers at the University of Michigan-Dearborn ("Just Writing, Basically"). Therefore, assessment efforts should work to show where students have

progressed in their writing, noting where improvement as needed as well as a writer's strengths. In order to attend to the diverse varieties of English with which our students communicate, assessments might move away from notions of "correct" vs. "incorrect" through the use of language that indicates progress as a linear path rather complete or incomplete, as noted by Valerie Balester in her discussion of course rubrics. Individualized assessments that require students to reflect on the rhetorical nature of the writing process can encourage students to develop agency and focus on their progress.

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