



FLORIDA
MUSIC DIRECTOR
Volume 65
Number 8
May 2012

**MAKING
THE GRADE**
*Using Rubrics as
an Assessment
Tool in the
Music Class*

P. 10

**Critical
Listening
in Jazz
Rehearsals**

P. 14

SUMMER BREAK
& Professional Development

P. 8

Making the Grade

Using Rubrics as an Assessment Tool in the Music Class

A powerful and flexible assessment strategy for the performance class

by Stan Haskins

The issue of assessment and evaluation in the classroom has been at the fore of recent discussions about education across the nation. Since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001, statewide assessments in English language literacy and mathematical skills have become the driving force behind educational curriculum. Music teachers are being asked with increasing frequency to use systematic and justifiable evaluation tools that give students, parents and administrators an honest appraisal of their progress and achievement (Leonhard, 2005). In many cases, the use of rubrics may provide the perfect solution to this challenge (Holtzberg, 2005).

Ensemble directors who teach band, chorus and orchestra sometimes rely on questionable grading criteria: Some use students' attendance at rehearsals as the basis for assigning grades while others use informal assessments of students' effort and attitude. As today's schools become more and more assessment-driven, the time has come to improve upon these practices.

Why rubrics?

Rubrics are an easily created, easy to use assessment tool perfectly suited to the music performance class. They are flexible: Unique rubrics can be created and modified to evaluate students' progress and achievement regarding any specific teaching point or instructional objective. They can be adapted to work with various levels of students' ability (Whitcomb, 1999).

In addition to being functional and flexible, rubrics allow students to see exactly what they are expected to do to earn grades and improve their own performance. Perhaps most

Continued on page 12

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teaching point or instructional objective. They can be adapted to work with various levels of student ability (Whitcomb, 1999).

In addition to being functional and flexible, rubrics allow students to see exactly what they are expected to do to earn grades and improve their own performance . Perhaps most importantly, students can work cooperatively to create rubrics themselves. This allows students to take ownership of the skills and materials they are being asked to master, encouraging a far deeper understanding of the material (Eppink, 2002).

What is a rubric?

A rubric is usually written as a chart, describing the typical characteristics of the performance of a specific skill, ranked from high to low. It is possible to create rubrics capable of judging very fine distinctions between levels of performance; however, they are easiest to use, and most commonly created, to rate student performance on a three- or four-point scale. Rubrics give a clear description of what constitutes the difference between high, middle, and low levels of achievement in any area of learning the teacher wishes to assess.

The following example, created cooperatively with an undergraduate class of music education students, is one line of a five-line rubric intended to assess the use of the bow by beginning or intermediate level string players of any string instrument found in the standard string orchestra.

	1: Not Proficient	2: Developing Proficiency	3: Acquiring Proficiency	4: Highly Proficient
Bow Placement	Bow is usually in an inappropriate location (on the fingerboard or elsewhere)	Bow is occasionally in the correct location, often drifts onto the fingerboard or over the bridge	Bow is frequently in the correct location, may occasionally drift onto the fingerboard or over the bridge	Bow is consistently placed between the fingerboard and bridge
Angle of bow	Bow is never travelling straight across the string.	Bow is occasionally travelling in a straight line across the string: it may frequently curve	Bow is frequently travelling in a straight line perpendicular to the string: it may sometimes curve	Bow is consistently travelling in a straight line perpendicular to the string

As you can see, the rubric is designed to be easy to use: during student performance, the teacher can simply check off the achievement level demonstrated by the student in the area being assessed. If the student places the bow in the correct location, and draws the bow at the optimal angle relative to the string consistently, he or she will receive a rating of “highly proficient” in both of the categories assessed. This information can easily be converted to a grade, progress report, or whatever other type of assessment format the teacher may need. Additionally, this type of assessment allows the student to see exactly what is expected of them, and to know specifically what they need to do to improve their future performance (Wesolowski, 2012).

The important thing to remember when creating a performance rubric is that the specific criteria for achievement levels must be stated in advance. The teacher and students must know exactly which aspects of performance will be rated, and what constitutes the highest, lowest, and middle level of achievement for each. Every effort should be taken to use language that describes each level as comprehensively as possible (Scott, 2002). Alternately, pictures can be used to demonstrate elements of embouchure, bow hold, vowel production, or other technical aspects of performance.

To really find out what your students know, involve them in creating the wording of the rubric they will be judged on, or allow them to pose for pictures demonstrating

examples of good and bad performance habits. This is a great opportunity for you to informally check for student understanding, while allowing students additional reinforcement and practice of the techniques.

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