

On a Public Speaking Assessment for Middle School Social Studies

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Background

Over the past five years, the “five minute presentation” has been an important activity in my classes. The rubric for assessing student performance in these tasks has evolved, as has the training I provide students in public speaking. For some students, this task was an excellent alternative to essays in those cases where the writing act was an impediment to expressing themselves.

In the fully-differentiated model I now apply in my classes, this option has become popular with a segment of my students. 28% of my seventh and eighth grade students performed nearly 80% of all in class presentations given over a period from January through April 2010.

Recently, I implemented a modified curriculum element to my differentiated instruction model. Students choosing the “basic proficiency” model studied a lesser amount of material for quizzes (accepting that the maximum score they could earn was 67). This policy was directed at the student overwhelmed by the amount to learn and who would remember more if he only could concentrate on less. One concern in such a scheme is that less motivated but capable students might take it as a way out. Only a single such case has arisen despite policies implemented to discourage it. This student intended to do basic proficiency and then choose five minute presentations for his high order task selection on each topic. Since he scored well on five minute presentations generally (his average score on the last four was 86 yet his class average overall is only 71), he planned to easily earn the 67 on quizzes and then actually see his average increase by doing the five minute presentations. Though other policies would mitigate this inflation (such as the monthly exam), I felt I needed to take a closer look at the five minute presentation rubric.

Study

There have been 71 five minute presentations since January in grades seven and eight performed by 24 students (some students did more than others. It was a choice). All of these were assessed using the same standard rubric. With only two zero scores, the average score was 80.5. The average overall average of these 24 students is 74.8, revealing a difference of 5.7 points between the averages. The correlation coefficient was only 0.43, revealing almost no relationship between overall average and five minute presentation scores. Since the overall average in my classes has consistently correlated highly with the NYS Intermediate Social Studies Test, I reason that overall averages earned in my classes strongly represent an assessment of the NYS standards. Obviously, the five minute presentation rubric is too weak and is having an inflationary effect on the grades of students who do them.

Eighth Grade In Particular

The figures for grade eight, a class with nearly two years of experience doing this task on this rubric, show a particularly high degree of grade inflation in the five minute presentation scores. There are thirty-one students, of whom 14 or 45% carried out 45 five minute presentations since January. Nine of these did four or more presentations each. These students earned an average score on all 45 tasks of 83.4. The average overall grade of these students is 76.9, showing an inflation of 6.5 points. The correlation with overall grade was only 0.38 and the correlation with the midterm, a portion of an old State test, was only 0.22. It is easy to see that the rubric I use to measure these class presentations is not measuring the State standards to the degree I intend my “high order tasks” to do. Further, it is likely having an undesirable inflationary effect on the grades of the roughly one third of eighth graders who do these tasks most often.

Weaknesses in the Rubric

There are no Social Studies State standards for presenting, so the rubric is entirely of own design. However, it is clear that some top scores were better than others and that I can tighten up the task to recognize a higher standard. Having had the opportunity to assess hundreds of such tasks over the years has also been informative.

The following were weaknesses in the rubric that I am correcting in the new version:

| Old Version Weakness | New Version |
|---|---|
| <p>The old rubric did not evaluate the quality of the student’s research. As the class moved out of the shadow of the textbook and everything becomes research in some fashion, clearly there is an important place for evaluating research and presenting works cited.</p> <p>Though the old rubric recommended citing sources in some way, I did not enforce it or provide guidelines for doing so.</p> | <p>The new rubric will require, for a level 5 (score of 94 or 100), that the presenter submit a works cited page, typed, right before he presents.</p> <p>The sources must be cited in MLA format, there must be at least two, they are to be strongly credible sources and one must be a non-textbook.</p> |
| <p>The distinction we make in assessing essays between those which are mostly descriptive and those which contain greater elements of analysis was not assessed in the old rubric.</p> | <p>The level 4 and level 5 scores will require that the student present an analytical talk. Strongest presentations will demonstrate comparisons and contrasts, categories, and/or cause and effect relationships.</p> |
| <p>I did not maintain a consistent or high standard for the required visual aid or class activity.</p> | <p>The visual aid or class activity required will be held to a higher standard. Most students create PowerPoint presentations and these will be held to a higher standard of quality.</p> |
| <p>I did not hold students to a high public speaking standard.</p> | <p>Performance elements like volume, pace, enunciation, posture, audience rapport and the like will be more critically evaluated.</p> |

Concluding

The result of these changes will be roughly that presentations earning a 5 on the old rubric would only earn a 3 on the new form. I expect in follow up to see a higher correlation between the five minute presentation and the state standards. The demand for more analytical presentation is in line with demands for essays. The works cited requirement, along with the assessment of the quality of information sources, presents a deterrent to the unmotivated while pushing the quality higher. The new rubric will be implemented after a class presentation on the changes.



The 5-Minute Presentation

| | | |
|---|---|-----|
| 5 | <p>PUBLIC SPEAKING: Appropriate volume, posture, speed, and enunciation</p> <p>PRESENTATION: Well organized. Used time wisely and fully. Notes only used as reference, not read as script.</p> <p>HISTORICAL MATERIAL: Showed strong command of the material. Right amount for the time. Right selection of material.</p> <p>REQUIRED: Typed works cited page to teacher in MLA format right before presenting—2 strong sources, one non-textbook.</p> <p>REQUIRED: Strongly analytic presentation—cause-effect, compare-contrast, categorizing, etc.</p> <p>VISUAL AID OR CLASS LEARNING ACTIVITY: Highest quality visual aid or highly effective activity.</p> | 100 |
| | | 94 |
| 4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be minor weakness in public speaking. • Well organized. Used time wisely and fully. Notes only used as reference, not read as script. • Showed some command of the material. Right amount for the time. Right selection of material. BUT ... No works cited page. • May be more descriptive than analytical. • Average quality visual aid or activity. | 85 |
| | | 78 |
| 3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be weakness in public speaking • May be weakness on organization. May be too short. • Over-reliance on prepared notes or slides. • No works cited. Information is descriptive with no real analysis. May be errors in information or pronunciation of words. • Information was not completely well-chosen. There were some irrelevancies or there was an information “overload” for five minutes. Shows average command of the topic. • Weakness in visual aid or activity. | 71 |
| | | 65 |
| 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your public speaking may have made it difficult to learn from what you taught. Volume, posture, speed, and enunciation were all problematic. • The presentation was not organized in a way that enhanced learning of what you taught. You may not have used time wisely. You may have read a script to us. • The amount of material you tried to address was inappropriate, irrelevant, and/or in the wrong amount for five minutes. • The visual aid or activity does not meaningfully support the audience’s learning experience during this presentation. | 58 |

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Characteristics of High Quality PowerPoint Slideshows:

- **TEXT**—Very little on a slide and it’s all relevant and legible. Avoid background images that obscure text. No errors in spelling or grammar unless for specific effect. Attributes like font, color and size all help the viewer.
- **IMAGES**—Relevant to the topic, not just for decoration. Avoid pictures that have nothing to do with the slideshow. However, good slideshows have quality images to enhance learning for the visual learner. Blank slideshows of just words are not strong.
- **VIDEO and SOUND CLIPS**—Relevant to the topic and edited for time (may be edited while presenting by starting/stopping in right place)