Rubrics: a self-evaluation tool that supports children's learning

Gill Fleming
St. Nicholas' Chantry CEVC Primary School
Clevedon, North Somerset

Rubrics: a self-evaluation tool that supports children's learning

Aims of the project

To introduce children to rubrics as a means of evaluating their learning and identifying the next steps for improvement.

A *rubric* is an explicit summary of the criteria for assessing a particular piece of student work, plus levels of potential achievement for each criterion.

Dimensions of the study

The project took place in one classroom, at St Nicholas' Chantry CEVC Primary school, over a period of two terms and involved a group of average and above average Year 4 pupils and a mixed ability group of year 3/4 pupils.

Summary of the main findings

• Carefully scaffolded challenges resulted in greater learning

• Putting responsibility squarely with the children least likely to participate gave them an immediate role and helped to increase their participation

• Pupils began to use the rubrics and other tools which helped them make better progress with their learning

Background and context

The project started as a result of introducing critical skills *Challenges* throughout KS2 in my school, which is a large primary school with 200 children in KS2. These *Challenges* were part of a broader piece of curriculum development aimed at developing pupils' thinking skills throughout the school. To enable them to support this work staff across the school attended a Critical Skills Programme.

Challenges involve pupils working collaboratively in groups, where they take on various roles, and during which they use a variety of group work tools and techniques to complete a specific task. They can be in a variety of subject areas. Working groups can be any size but 3 or 5 seems to work best. Each member

of the group is given a role e.g. timekeeper, materials manager, facilitator or quality checker. Although the children in my class enjoyed the *Challenges* it was clear that, for some children it was an opportunity to 'opt out' or disrupt. I wanted the children to be more focused on the skills needed to complete the *Challenges* and to be able to evaluate their own learning, recognising the stage they had reached and what they needed to aim for next. The children have used success criteria and quality criteria before and it seemed a good time to introduce them to the idea of rubrics as a self assessment tool and as a group assessment tool. Below is just one example of a rubric which assesses the end product of a *Challenge* and the way in which participants worked together. The required elements of the poster were set out in the *Challenge* sheet. A rubric could be simpler or more complicated depending on the task and the pupils.

Making a poster: Consumer report Best Cloth

Category	Gold Star +	Gold
Required elements	The poster includes all the required elements as well as additional information.	All required elements are included in the poster.
Use of class time	Excellent use of time. Project completed well within time scale. All on task.	Used time well during each class period. Usually focused on getting project completed and little distraction to others.
Attractiveness	The poster is exceptionally attractive in terms of design, layout and neatness.	The poster is neat and well laid out but may need more thought put into the design.

Teaching processes and strategies

Identifying what pupils did and didn't do well in problem-solving

After observing the children carry out a number of *Challenges* earlier on in the year I felt the whole process had to be broken down into smaller, more manageable tasks. The main issue was that the end product for the pupils was more important to them than the process. For example, the children were given a Maths *Challenge* in which they were asked to design a set of party bags in which there was a selection of gifts. The task was to ensure each bag was different, cost individual bags and find a total cost. The children were so caught up in designing a bag that the contents were very much an after thought! I therefore wanted to improve my organisation and delivery of the *Challenges*. In particular I wanted to look at the de-briefs at the end of the *Challenges* when we evaluated what had happened. Part of the critical skills approach to learning is getting pupils to self evaluate their own skills and to help them become aware of how they are learning. One subject area where I particularly wanted to develop this was in science because, as a school, we did not have a very established approached to evaluating this aspect of the curriculum.

We have been using success criteria across the school for quite some time and my class has become pretty good at being able to come up with these themselves. Gradually we have come up with success criteria not only for the task outcomes but the learning as well, which is more complex. Eventually I wanted the children to develop their own evaluation rubrics which would express their own target levels and success criteria for the task outcomes and the learning. I wanted them to know how the skills would look in terms of behaviour for learning.

Devising and developing the rubrics

The final part of the Critical Skills Programme staff undertook related to using rubrics. In the rubrics the different success criteria were set out in a grid, using bronze, silver and gold to indicate different levels of performance (see above). The criterion for each level of performance was listed in the grid. Each rubric is specific to the task in question. I used the internet to identify possible rubrics.

Silver	Bronze
Most required elements are there.	Several required elements are missing.
Used some of the time well during each period. Usually focused on the project but occasionally distracted others.	Poor use of time. Easily distracted. Distracted others. Project unfinished.
The poster is acceptably attractive although it may be a bit messy and have a poor layout.	The poster is distractingly messy or very poorly designed. It is not attractive.

On average I aimed to give pupils one *Challenge* a term in a specific subject area so that over the period of the research it would be possible to trial rubrics across several different subject areas. We set pupils by ability for Maths, Science and English so in these areas I worked with a different group of pupils than my own class. My idea was to develop the rubrics myself initially and then gradually let the children develop their own.

I tried introducing the rubrics in various ways; for example in one *Challenge* I used a rubric in which there were gaps in the levels. I gave the pupils examples of criteria at bronze and gold and the children had to fill in the criteria for the silver level. We used the rubrics at different points in a Challenge, particularly after their initial planning when we looked at their plans and see if they had covered the task criteria.

Pupils planned and monitored their own progress

I set up a blank timeline in the classroom on to which each group put 'Post-its' showing the stage they had reached in the *Challenge*. This helped me keep track of where they were and helped the children break down the task and reflect on what they were doing. When I introduced the next *Challenges* we used the timeline and I also selected one pupil to take on the role of the facilitator, to whom I gave a set of success criteria. The rest of the group did not look at this rubric until the end, during the de-brief.

I developed a particular way of doing the de-briefs which involved self, peers' and teachers' evaluations. At the end of a *Challenge* the group wrote down their own evaluation using the rubric, then they went round and evaluated each others' work. Finally I evaluated their work. Inevitably what emerged was a wide variation in their use of the rubric. Some of them were not using it at all, and simply stated that they liked something but weren't giving any reasons; others did made a fair attempt. The most interesting discussion arose when in one *Challenge* a group marked everyone else down and gave themselves a high mark. This started a discussion about fairness and the role of success criteria and how you should treat evaluations which are unfair.

In talking with the pupils and looking at how they used the success criteria I reflected on how easy or difficult they found applying the criteria. They were happy to judge something as gold, silver or bronze but found it more difficult to account for why they had made this judgement. I realised that to help them improve I had to engage them in much more conversation around these judgements. I started to do this by comparing my judgements and their own and discussing the evidence I had used and asking them to do the same. This appeared to help them but I was faced with a time issue as to how to have these conversations with 8 or 10 groups. This was particularly a problem when I was working on a *Challenge* in one of the areas where we set pupils. As they came from other classes I could not always bring the pupils together again to do a de-brief. I had to involve other staff so that I could occasionally bring groups back together again by 'borrowing' children who were not in my group at the time. It was important to do this as the de-briefs needed to take place as soon after the completion of the *Challenges* as possible.

The findings

Carefully scaffolded Challenges were linked to greater learning.

The *Challenges* were very open tasks and for many children they needed a great deal of scaffolding to become meaningful learning experiences. In order to effectively scaffold them I used a combination of tools such as the timeline, with questions which focused on how they would achieve their outcomes, and the use of evaluation frameworks, such as the rubrics, at different stages of the process. These rubrics also had to be structured as I found it important to make a distinction between criteria that focused on the product and those that focused on the learning.

Putting responsibility squarely with the children least likely to participate gave them an immediate role and in most instances increased their participation.

Not only did the task need to be scaffolded but the groups needed to be appropriately structured. Non-participation by some pupils was a problem but improved for most when they were given an immediate role, where they were given responsibility for an

aspect of how the group functions, e.g. it was their responsibility to ensure everyone contributed an opinion. They needed to be engaged from the beginning of the task in order to secure their continued participation. The factor that seemed to determine the success of this approach was the group dynamic rather than the individual pupil's ability to take on the role.

Pupils began to use tools which helped them make progress with their learning.

Assessing and evaluating learning is one of the most difficult parts of these challenges. Giving pupils who took on the role of group facilitator the rubric which looked at their learning helped ensure the group focused on their learning during the *Challenges*. The rubrics supported them by setting out the kinds of learning behaviours they should be looking out for and encouraging in others.

Research methods

I kept a research journal throughout the project in which I recorded my observations of pupils' work and I also collected examples of their work. I supplemented the journal with digital photographs of the children working at the tasks.

Conclusions

Whilst my experience of using *Challenges* during the professional development programme was helpful I still had work to do in order to adapt the strategy for classroom use. In particular I was faced with a number of issues related to task design. I needed to break down the task into smaller 'bites' and find a way of keeping an ongoing record of the progress each group was making. Using a time line on which children added their comments encouraged those who were 'off task'. The rubric proved to be a great tool for helping children to move from a satisfactory piece of work to a good piece of work and from good to very good.

Suggestions for further reading
Some sources of rubrics are:

http://www.tcet.unt.edu/START/instruct/general/rubrics.htm

http://www.rubrics4teachers.com

http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php

http://www.rubrics.com

Author's contact details

Gill Fleming

St Nicholas' Chantry C E V C Primary School,

Highdale Avenue,

Clevedon.

North Somerset.

BS21 7LT

01275 873132 phone / fax

e-mail: gflemingpetra@hotmail.co.uk

National Teacher Research Panel
engaging teacher expertise