

Changing Assessment Practices

Every year, Ms. Perry engages her students in a project-based study of *Romeo and Juliet*. Last year (Scenario 1) she used traditional methods to assess student work. This year (Scenario 2), she revised the unit to include some new methods of assessment.

Read the two scenarios below and focus on the shift Ms. Perry made in assessment practices. Consider how these changes are likely to affect her students' overall learning and project performance.

Romeo and Juliet - Scenario 1

Ms. Perry, an upper secondary school English teacher guides her students through a unit on *Romeo and Juliet*. She focuses on state reading standards related to character analysis and literary devices, along with other oral and written communication standards.

Ms. Perry begins the four-week unit by explaining to her students that they will be learning about Shakespeare and his most famous play, *Romeo and Juliet*. She introduces the Essential Question for a student discussion, *Does literature help us better understand ourselves?* She explains that they will be completing a project at the end of the unit where they will apply the themes of the play to a current problem and develop solutions.

Students spend several weeks reading and acting out the scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*. Ms. Perry assigns students roles and they begin reading aloud and analyzing scenes. Students also read some parts of the play for homework. After each act, Ms. Perry gives her students a quiz to assess their learning.

They spend considerable time during class discussing the difficult scenes and the literary terms associated with the play. For instance, students identify and discuss the metaphors concerning Juliet in Romeo's soliloquy. Ms. Perry asks students questions such as:

- *How do the metaphors help to show the feelings and thoughts of the characters?*
- *How does the imagery affect the way we respond to the scene?*

Just before finishing the play during the fourth week, Ms. Perry asks the students to define fate and to take a stance as to whether or not they believe in it. The class discusses fate as understood in the time of Shakespeare. After finishing the play, they take a multiple choice and matching test on the play's action, characters, themes, and literary devices.

Ms. Perry assigns a final project to student teams in which they will apply the themes of the play to modern life to develop a solution to an age-old problem that will positively impact their community. They are required to present their findings and solutions to an audience and create appropriate products to supplement their message (multimedia presentation, brochure, newsletter, flyer, Web site, and so forth).

The class discusses example themes, such as parent-teenager communication, peer pressure, or violence in school, and they review an example student-created brochure on conflict resolution. Ms. Perry hands out the rubric that will be used to

evaluate the final project and discusses expectations, including problem-solving and group work. Students also receive a checklist to help them stay on-track through the stages of brainstorming, planning, and implementation of their project.

Romeo and Juliet – Scenario 2

Ms. Perry attends a class, conducts online research, and reads a few publications about assessment since last teaching the *Romeo and Juliet* unit. She decides to try some strategies she hadn't considered before and develops a plan for embedding other methods of assessment in the unit.

To provide more opportunity for students to consider Shakespeare's relevance, Ms. Perry sets up an e-pal project so her students can exchange ideas with peers comparing Shakespeare's time to their own. To structure the students' email communication, Ms. Perry plans student reading logs with specific questions that prompt analysis of characters and literary elements as the students read each act of the play. Students will write answers to the reading log questions and exchange them with their e-pal. They will periodically hand in a log of their email exchanges during the unit.

As before, students will read the play and explore the themes in *Romeo and Juliet* and discuss how they apply to modern life and relationships. To start the unit, Ms. Perry introduces the same Essential Question, *Does literature help us better understand ourselves?* A short discussion of what students already know about Shakespeare and *Romeo and Juliet* follows. Ms. Perry is surprised to find that students know very little about Shakespeare. She decides to introduce an Internet scavenger hunt, a structured search for basic facts about the life and times of Shakespeare. After the activity, students complete a handout on what they now know and would still like to know about Shakespeare and the era in which he lived.

As in past years, students spend the next several weeks reading, acting out *Romeo and Juliet*, and discussing difficult scenes and literary terms such as metaphor. This year however, Ms. Perry uses observation sheets to keep track of notes for individual students, looking for such things as: participation in discussion and analysis of ideas. She refers to these notes when conducting brief one-on-one conferences with her students. The conferences are meant to ensure student are on track as they develop a short essay on one theme, character trait, or literary device from the play that seems relevant to their own life. Students send these essays to their e-pals for peer feedback before handing them in.

Ms. Perry introduces the final project to the class, and they discuss example themes and review a student sample. They also examine the rubric that will be used to evaluate the final project. To help create ownership for the criteria for which their work will be rated, Ms. Perry asks students to use the rubric to score the sample student project. Together, they discuss the assessment rubric and make some changes to the language of the criteria. Students also receive a checklist to guide them through all stages of the project.

As they work on the project, students use the information they have recorded in their reading logs to provide "evidence" to support a case for their solutions to the modern life issue they choose for their project topic. Using these arguments, students create a presentation discussing their topic, its relationship to *Romeo and Juliet*, and their solutions.

Students take a final test on the play's plot development, literary devices, and characters. Afterwards, they complete a self-assessment to include in their English class portfolio, and respond in the form of a reflection, to the Essential Question, with a focus on what the question means in relationship to their own learning.

Changing to Student-Centered Assessment

Much like Ms. Perry in Scenario 2, changing to a student-centered classroom does not mean abandoning traditional classroom assessment practices; but integrating a variety of student-centered strategies throughout the entire instructional cycle. These strategies are often embedded and contribute to learning and instruction at the same time.

In student-centered classrooms:

- Tests and quizzes are still used but are not the only method of assessing student learning.
- A variety of assessments, each for different purposes, are implemented at multiple points within a unit of study. For example:
 - Teachers determine student understanding and activate prior knowledge before launching the project
 - Teachers and students give and receive feedback in the form of peer and teacher conferencing
 - Checklists and rubrics help students understand expectations and manage learning progress
 - Self assessments and reflections encourage metacognition and ownership of learning
 - Rubrics define quality for products and provide criteria for self, peer, and teacher assessment
 - On-going observations provide opportunities to adjust instruction