

# ED412170 1997-06-00 Using Alternative Assessments To Improve the Teaching and Learning of History. ERIC Digest.

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A history teacher's curriculum planning, choice of classroom methodology, and means to assess student learning are inextricably linked. Forms of assessment that involve only recall of discrete information are likely to encourage teaching methods that emphasize low-level cognition. Further, traditional forms of assessing students' knowledge of history neither prompt students to reveal all they know about the subject nor challenge them to learn more. Thus, teachers and researchers have concluded that traditional assessments must be complemented by new methods that can reinvigorate and improve the teaching and learning of history in schools.

# ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENTS AND HISTORICAL LITERACY

Alternative assessment can be a diagnostic tool to improve both a teacher's instruction and a student's learning of history by revealing information about three dimensions of a student's historical literacy. First, students who complete alternative assessment activities demonstrate their knowledge of historical facts, themes, and ideas. Second, students who complete alternative assessment activities demonstrate their ability to reason; that is, to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize historical evidence. And third, students who complete alternative assessment activities demonstrate their ability to communicate their historical knowledge and reasoning to others.

Each dimension of a student's historical literacy has its own important characteristics that provide the structural frame teachers need to create an alternative assessment activity for their students. Knowledge of historical evidence is the prerequisite students need to demonstrate their ability in the other two dimensions. The Bradley Commission's "Vital Themes and Narratives" is a conceptual scheme that helps students organize their knowledge of the past. These themes serve as filters to help students differentiate between what is important and what is insignificant in the historical record. They provide direction for students to accurately identify, define, and describe important concepts, facts, and details. (The Bradley Commission on History in the Schools 1988, 10-11).

Historical facts and themes, approached through informed questions, are points of departure for demonstrating a student's ability to reason. Reasoning makes the facts and themes meaningful and thereby brings about a deeper understanding of the subject. Reasoning certainly involves critical thinking and requires students to discover relationships among facts and generalizations, and values and opinions, as a means to provide a solution to a problem, to make a judgment, or to reach a logical conclusion.

Historical reasoning ought to be the principal aim of historical study and alternative assessment. The National History Standards (1996, 14-24) distinguish historical reasoning or thinking and historical understanding. The latter defines what students should know; the former makes it possible for students to differentiate between past,

present, and future; raise questions; seek and evaluate evidence; compare and analyze historical illustrations, records, and stories; interpret the historical record; and construct historical narratives of their own. The Bradley Commission's "Habits of Mind" provides a useful conceptualization of historical reasoning, such as the ability of students to understand the significance of the past and the present to their own lives; to perceive events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time; and to recognize the importance of individuals who have made a difference (Bradley Commission on History in the Schools 1988, and Gagnon 1989, 25-26).

Effective communication of historical knowledge and historical reasoning requires a student to organize, interpret, and express his or her thoughts. In recounting events of the past, a student must develop a clearly defined thesis and create an interesting narrative that tells what happened in an informed way. A well-organized presentation supplies relevant examples to support its main ideas and offers conclusions and a synthesis based on an analysis of historical sources. Furthermore, evidence of a student's knowledge and reasoning must always be apparent in an effective presentation. Alternative assessment in history offers a wide variety of ways for students to communicate their knowledge and reasoning: analyzing a primary source; drawing political cartoons; creating newspapers; participating in historical simulations; and writing research papers.

As teachers create assessment activities they should ask the following questions:

- \* Does the activity match my teaching goals?
- \* Does the activity adequately reflect the "Vital Themes and Narratives" in its organization of the historical content and the "Habits of Mind" that I expect my students to use in thinking about the past?
- \* Does the activity enable my students to demonstrate their development in historical knowledge, reasoning, and communication?
- \* Does the activity motivate students to demonstrate their capabilities?

## A GENERIC RUBRIC FOR ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES

For decades, good history teachers have been using projects and activities requiring students to blend skills and knowledge across disciplines. Often, the problem has been assessing the activity. Critics have rightly cautioned that alternative assessment is susceptible to corruptibility, possible lack of sensitivity to cultural and linguistic diversity, and psychometric issues such as generalizability and reliability. We should be aware of these important problems, but a more immediate concern for classroom teachers is: Will the teacher need to create a new rubric for each assessment activity?

Recently, a generic "History Rubric for Alternative Assessment" has been developed to help teachers assess their students' knowledge, reasoning skills, and communication skills (Drake and McBride 1997). It is an analytic rubric which allows a history teacher to assess simultaneously student performance in each of the three interrelated dimensions: knowledge, reasoning skills, and communication skills.

Each dimension of the rubric is divided into six levels. Each level is defined by several criteria which reflect a student's abilities and skills. Collectively, levels 6, 5, and 4 are designed to differentiate among students whose knowledge, reasoning skills, and communication skills are developed. Collectively, 3, 2, and 1 represent knowledge, reasoning skills, and communication skills that are still developing. Level 6 represents work of a student who exhibits the most developed knowledge and skills; level 1 represents the work of a student with the lowest level of developing knowledge and skills.

## HOW ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT IMPROVES THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF

HISTORY A "History Rubric for Alternative Assessment" is especially appropriate and useful for assessment in history education, because the rubric benefits teachers and students alike. Teachers know that their students may perform at a more or less developed level in one dimension than in another. For example, when a student analyzes a primary source document he or she may demonstrate knowledge at a level 6, reasoning at a level 5, and communication at a level 3. An analytic rubric allows teachers to take these differences into account when assessing their students. An analytic rubric benefits students by showing them their strengths and weaknesses in each dimension. Thereby, they learn where they must place their time and effort to improve their historical knowledge, reasoning skills, and communication skills.

The effective use of a rubric requires planning and practice by teachers and students alike. Moreover, teachers must share the rubric with their students because it contains the criteria that students will have to meet as they construct historical knowledge, engage in historical reasoning, and communicate what they know and understand. Successful acquisition of knowledge and development of skills in reasoning and communication demands that both teachers and students know in advance the criteria they are seeking in each dimension, and that the students are coached about the best ways to demonstrate their abilities. For teachers, the rubric serves as a diagnostic tool; for students, it establishes the parameters for attaining success.

As students attempt initially to meet the criteria of an alternative assessment activity, they may achieve developed levels (level 6, 5, or 4) in one dimension (knowledge, reasoning skills, and communication skills), while achieving a developing level (3, 2, or 1) in the other dimensions. Reference to the rubric during consultation with their teacher

will help students to organize their historical knowledge and reasoning and to consider ways to communicate effectively what they know and think about the past.

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