Negotiating the Political and Pedagogical Tensions of Writing Rubrics: Using Conceptualization

to Work toward Sociocultural Writing Instruction

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An increased emphasis on writing standards has led many U.S. states to incorporate on-demand writing assessments into their test-based accountability system. We argue this creates political and pedagogical tensions for teachers to navigate. We discuss how rubric conceptualization (1) is a process wherein a teacher iteratively (co-)constructs meaning from a rubric's design via classroom instruction; (2) is informed by implicit theories of learning; and (3) often requires a teacher to negotiate the competing pedagogical and political meanings of a rubric. While test-based accountability frameworks promote rubric use that equates learning with student achievement, rubric conceptualization is a process where teachers have some agency to resist behaviorist approaches to instruction.

In writing instruction, rubrics can be a contentious topic. Proponents of rubrics often talk about their utility in a variety of ways. For one, writing rubrics can provide explicit expectations to students, which can facilitate feedback and self-assessment (Andrade, 2006; Jonsson & Svingby, 2007; Saddler & Andrade, 2004). Researchers have also claimed that writing rubrics promotes more reliable scoring and provides a means to track students' writing development over time (Brookhart & Chen, 2015; Correnti, Matsumura, Hamilton, & Wang, 2013). Rubric critics, on the other hand, often lament an undue focus on efficiency, how rubrics negate the necessarily subjective nature of writing, and how they narrow the complex task of writing into performance standards that misrepresent underlying values and purposes of writing (Broad, 2003; Kohn, 2006; Wilson, 2007). Historically, these perspectives have meant that discussions often amount to taking a pro- versus anti-rubric stance rather than articulating under what conditions rubrics can be used appropriately (Turley & Gallagher, 2008).

We seek to reframe the discussion around writing rubrics by showing how rubrics can both illuminate and help educators negotiate various tensions that occur in the processes of writing instruction and assessment. In particular, we focus on state writing rubrics and their dueling identities as a high-stakes policy tool and a formative classroom assessment tool. As a high-stakes policy tool, rubrics are typically valued for their ability to measure writing skills in ways that are "valid," "reliable," and "objective." With the rise of test-based accountability systems in the past 30 years and the more recent adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), writing rubrics function more and more like policy tools for accountability rather than assessment tools that support learning (Welner, 2013). The use of rubrics as a policy tool for accountability is also part of a much longer tradition of embedding behaviorist learning theory (Shepard, 2000) and principles of scientific management (Au, 2011) into standardized testing, which began in the early twentieth century. Critiques of these test-based accountability systems abound, and for good reason. High-stakes assessments have been shown to lead to a wide variety of negative consequences, including curriculum narrowing (Au, 2007; Jennings & Bearak, 2014), teacher-centered instruction (Au, 2007), the neglect of democratic aims of education (Ben-Porath, 2013); the pushout of lower performing high school students (Tuck, 2012), and the exacerbation of racial inequality in education (Au, 2016; Horsford, 2017), just to name a few.

Promoting sociocultural theories of learning has been one response literacy researchers and teacher educators have made to address these inequalities and inadequacies. Sociocultural approaches to instruction and assessment focus on meaning making and view learning as a dynamic set of interactions among people, artifacts, and settings that occur across time (Lee, 2008). This *contextualized* view of literacy and writing seeks to create authentic rhetorical contexts (Newell, Beach, Smith, & VanDerHeide, 2011) and stands in opposition to the "objective" achievement-based view of learning embedded within behaviorism and standardized assessments.

Behaviorism and sociocultural theory's views and assumptions about learning and literacy create tensions in our public education system that teachers must (sub)consciously navigate. Given the pervasive reality of test-based accountability systems in U.S. public schools and the behaviorist assumptions that undergird them, teachers must actively negotiate these tensions and constraints to engage in socially and culturally responsive forms of instruction (Ladson-Billings, 2014). We focus on writing rubrics in this article to provide a concrete instantiation of the complex negotiation processes teachers engage in when making instructional decisions. We posit

that the process of rubric conceptualization can help teachers negotiate these tensions in rubric use and writing instruction more broadly. As a result, we view engagement with rubric conceptualization as a rich space for inquiry and praxis among teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and community members. While we believe only broad structural changes to the educational system will be able to lessen these tensions, we think change can, and should, occur. We position teachers, teacher educators, students, and community members as agents who can, despite tensions and constraints, exert agency to buffer, resist, and reappropriate structures in ways that value and develop students' social, cultural, political, and experiential knowledge.

What Is Rubric Conceptualization?

We identify three distinct but interrelated processes in rubric use: design, conceptualization, and implementation. In defining and distinguishing each concept, we seek to disambiguate these processes. While state rubrics often mandate the genre and desired writing skills within the rubric design, we argue that teachers can exercise some agency in how they conceptualize and implement those rubrics with their students.

Rubric design deals with concrete features of the rubric, such as its content and layout. Prior research has examined the benefits and drawbacks of different rubric designs. For example, in terms of rubric layout, research has compared the effectiveness of *holistic rubrics*, which use a list of criteria to give one overall score for a student's piece of writing, and *analytic rubrics*, which give multiple scores to represent the level of performance on several dimensions such as evidence use and organization (Smit & Birri, 2014). The general consensus is that while holistic rubrics are reliable and probably more efficient in that they take less time to use, analytic rubric designs present more precise and useful data for understanding student performance and growth, which may be especially useful for the purpose of formative assessment (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007; Reznitskaya, Kuo, Glina, & Anderson, 2009).

Rubric implementation is how teachers use the rubric to support teaching and learning within the classroom. This includes how rubrics are embedded in the curriculum, how rubrics are framed as part of the writing process, how and when students interact with the rubric, how teachers interact with students about rubric content to aid the learning of concepts within a particular genre such as argument writing, and how all of these interactions develop iteratively over time across the school year. While rubric implementation can be viewed as merely technical or a question

of fidelity (e.g., Andrade & Boulay, 2003; Andrade, Du, & Wang, 2008), we view implementation as a practice that is informed by practical experience, relationships, and knowledge of the community. This view of rubric implementation is relatively understudied since most research studies have been interventions that seek to understand the effect of rubric use on student outcomes. In this work, researchers have largely used experimental and quasi-experimental designs that aim for a standardized implementation (i.e., fidelity) to reduce confounding factors (see Jonnson & Svingby, 2007, and Brookhart & Chen, 2015, for meta-analyses of these types of studies). As a result, these designs do not lend themselves to studying how and why teachers implement rubrics in different ways.

We pose *rubric conceptualization* as a mediating step within and between the processes of design and implementation. Conceptualization entails asking questions such as, *How can this rubric support teacher instruction? Student learning?* More technically, we define *rubric conceptualization* as the context-specific process where a stakeholder conceives of the possible function(s) that a rubric can serve in assessment, instruction, and learning. Table 1 shows how this process can take different forms among different stakeholders. For teachers, the process of rubric conceptualization includes determining if and how the rubric can support student learning around writing concepts, which instructional goals the rubric aligns with, and what types of instructional activities the rubric is (not) useful for. We view rubric conceptualization as a potentially iterative and reciprocal process where teachers and students can co-construct meaning through their interactions throughout the school year.

Other stakeholders also engage in rubric conceptualization, albeit in ways more indirectly related to classroom instruction and learning. For example, when an instructional designer or policymaker selects rubric content that aligns with state standards, they are not only prioritizing particular writing genres and concepts but also (implicitly) endorsing certain functions and purposes for rubrics. These functions may be focused on summative or accountability-based forms of assessment, which can limit the rubric's use as a formative assessment tool. The mandated use of rubrics can also lead to mandated curricula, which both result in reifying conceptualizations of writing and literacy that are aligned with test-based accountability systems (we discuss an example in "What Could Sociocultural Rubric Conceptualization Look Like?" later in this article).

While higher-level stakeholders may confound rubric design with conceptualization and/or implementation, these three processes are important to distinguish because the meaning and use of a rubric is neither static nor

Table 1. Stakeholders' Roles in Rubric Creation and Use

Process	Process Description	Potential Stakeholders	Description of Stakeholders' Roles
Design	*What is included and emphasized in the rubric content and layout?*	Policymakers Test makers Administrators	In states that have high-stakes writing assessments, the design of writing rubrics for ELA often shifts to state policymakers and testing corporations.
		Administrators[2] Teachers	Some ELA teachers may be able to adapt these rubrics (e.g., make them more "student friend-ly"). States without accountability testing would be more likely to have teachers who choose or design their own writing rubrics.
Conceptualization	*How can and how should this rubric support teaching and learning?*	Designers (Policymakers; Test makers)	Whoever designs the writing rubric is also (implicitly) engaging in rubric conceptualization: they have an intended goal and/or function of the rubric in mind.
		Implementers: Teachers	When teachers plan to implement the rubric, they are conceptualizing what learning goals they think can be achieved and what instructional tasks they are useful for. These rubric functions may or may not align with those of the rubric designers.
		Students	Students conceptualize what a writing rubric is useful for based on their identity, their prior experiences as a writer, and how teachers frame and implement rubrics during classroom instruction.
Implementation	*How is the rubric used to support teaching and learning?*	Mandated curricula (state or district poli-cymakers)	Mandated curricula and lessons that dictate the content of lessons (texts, writing prompts, and other instructional activities) can constrain possible classroom implementations.
		Teachers	However, teachers have (some) agency in determining what specific instructional strategies, pedagogical moves, and instructional tools to use during instruction.

predetermined by its design. Instead, a rubric design is the raw material from which teachers construct their own context-specific meanings. This is not to say that the raw materials (i.e., rubric designs) do not matter but that *only* considering the rubric design is insufficient for understanding the iterative processes of rubric use.[1]

In addition, we view rubric conceptualization as not only a cognitive act but, like implementation, also informed by experience, relationships, and knowledge of the local context. We see conceptualization as a process akin to translation; teachers and administrators must take a rubric created in a separate context and figure out what meaning it can have for (1) their own writing instruction and, (2) their students' learning. We have chosen

to focus this article on rubric conceptualization because this mediating process is typically overlooked and because we think it has potential to help educators navigate tensions between sociocultural forms of instruction and the pedagogical and political realities imposed by today's accountability assessments and the systems built around them.

Interpretive Flexibility and Three Different Functions of Rubric Use

With rubric design, conceptualization, and implementation disambiguated, we now shift to the possibilities and consequences of rubric conceptualization. We posit that the more teachers are oriented toward sociocultural instruction, the more they will experience tensions in the conceptualization and implementation of state writing rubrics. To support this claim, we first explain how rubrics are boundary objects and, as a result, how rubric conceptualization is a form of interpretive flexibility. Next, we outline how this interpretive flexibility leads to three possible rubric functions. We discuss how these functions can be compatible with and/or in contention with behaviorist and sociocultural learning theories. How these tensions are (not) perceived and navigated is consequential to teacher practice and student learning, which we further discuss in the next section. Ultimately, we view rubric conceptualization as capable of helping to *negotiate*, but not fully *resolve,* these ideological tensions because sociocultural forms of instruction are generally not aligned with the values and logics of test-based accountability systems.

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Rubrics as Boundary Objects

A key aspect of state rubrics is that they are both policy tools and pedagogical tools. State rubrics are *policy tools* in the sense that they are part of large-scale externally mandated state writing tests that are used to reward or sanction students, teachers, and/or schools based on their performance (Au, 2009; Hamilton, 2003). At the same time, rubrics can also be *pedagogical tools* when they are used to help teachers and students develop understandings and skills related to writing. These dual identities and the fact that different stakeholders within and between different levels of the educational bureaucracy can conceptualize state rubrics in different ways (as seen in Table 1) means that state rubrics have interpretive flexibility. More technically, we propose that because state writing rubrics traverse all levels of the

educational bureaucracy, they are boundary objects that can have different meanings in different contexts and work processes.

A *boundary object* has "different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation" (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 393). The fact that state rubrics can take on different meanings in different contexts based on their use and interpretation (i.e., rubric conceptualization and implementation) means that state rubrics have *interpretive flexibility*. As a result, teachers can vary with how and to what extent they engage with state rubrics as a policy tool and/or a pedagogical tool. In particular, we posit that there are three key functions that state rubrics can serve depending on how they are conceptualized and implemented: *assessment for pedagogy, assessment for accountability,* and *assessment for measurement*. While teachers often implicitly engage these varying functions, how they are conceptualized and implemented has consequences for teaching and learning.

Three Rubric Functions and Their (In)compatibility

Using a writing rubric as an *assessment tool for pedagogy* entails that the rubric is helping to iteratively and reciprocally build understanding between and among teachers and students about key skills, processes, and reasons for writing in a particular genre. Assessment for pedagogy is in alignment with sociocultural theories of learning because it views writing as a social process that is embedded within a particular context; that the individual and their context interact in interdependent ways (Gresalfi, 2009). This means that a teacher does not think that the language and words within the rubric have an obvious or predetermined meaning. Instead, a major focus of writing instruction is the co-construction of meaning around writing concepts. Discussions are used to help students iteratively develop meaning around key writing concepts in the rubric (e.g., "evidence" and "claim") so that students develop understanding around both how and why they should use these concepts in their writing. Even further, these writing tasks and discussions would ideally be connected to authentic writing tasks that are directed toward issues and audiences that are relevant to the students' lives and communities (Kinloch, 2010). In this way, rubric use becomes less about evaluating student work and more about coming to understand the meaning and purpose of writing in different contexts.

The second function, *assessment for accountability,* entails that writing rubrics are conceptualized and implemented as a high-stakes summative assessment tool that evaluates the student, teacher, and/or school. Typically,

practitioners receive messages about assessment for accountability through the rubric's use as a policy tool. While high-stakes reading and math tests have traditionally been the focus of state accountability systems since No Child Left Behind was enacted in 2001, CCSS has increased the number of states with standardized writing assessments, especially text-based writing tasks. A 2016 study found that 46 of 50 states had an on-demand essay on their standardized exams, with 39 having some form of text-dependent essays (Behizadeh & Pang, 2016, p. 32). As states adopt and prioritize standardized tests in writing and develop a subsequent focus on aligning writing curricula and instruction to the assessments, the writing rubrics' political focus on performance and accountability can displace its formative, pedagogical focus on learning and meaning making. This is because test-based accountability systems typically synonymize student achievement scores with student learning (and teacher effectiveness) despite the low consequential valid- ity of the tests (Behizadeh, 2014; Welner, 2013). Equating "learning" with performance is compatible with behaviorist theories of learning because learning and knowing are viewed as the accumulation of stimulus-response associations, routinized practice and tightly sequenced learning objectives (Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, 1997). Relatedly, assessment for accountability also promotes content control, pedagogic control, and bureaucratic control (Au, 2009). Mabry (1999) describes how this looks in regards to rubrics:

> Rubrics are designed to function as scoring guidelines, but they also serve as arbiters of quality and agents of control. Moreover, the control is not limited to assessment episodes but influences curriculum choices, restricts pedagogical repertoires, and restrains student expression and understanding. (p. 674)

In the next section, we discuss one state scenario that exemplifies this shift toward assessment for accountability.

Last, *assessment for measurement* means that rubrics are viewed and/ or used as a means to measure student performance or the development of students' skills and understandings. Whether assessment for measurement is compatible with the other two functions depends on *how measurement is defined* and *operationalized* (as outlined in Figure 2). We suspect that many may immediately associate assessment for measurement as being aligned with the accountability function of rubrics, given the emphasis on cut scores, proficiency levels, and "data-driven instruction" in test-based ac- countability systems (Bennett, 2011; Shepard, 2013; Welner, 2013). These uses of measurement are indeed compatible with the accountability function of

rubrics because they utilize quantification to make a high-stakes summative evaluation of student writing.

However, assessment for measurement is not necessarily at odds with the pedagogical function of rubrics. A form of measurement that is compatible with assessment for pedagogy is one that does not use numbers as the end itself, but as a means to a larger goal: describing and helping improve students' understanding and skills over time. When used this way, measurement does not emphasize the number score on a rubric (e.g., a 2 in evidence use) but *what the score means* in terms of skills and concepts within a progression of learning (Shepard, 2013). While this may sound like a subtle distinction, it can significantly alter a classroom's *cultural assessment practices*, which are "the social norms and meanings associated with assessment processes in classrooms" (Shepard, Penuel, & Pellegrino, 2018, p. 28).

When measurement is framed as an end in itself, it likely promotes a "performance orientation" among students. This focus on performance creates an external form of motivation in line with behaviorism. While the performance orientation is, in general, the status quo in schools, we argue that different conceptualizations of rubrics and assessment cultural practices could support a "learning orientation" instead. Such practices frame measurement as a means to observe and develop understanding. This orientation supports both internal (sociocultural) motivational structures for improvement and promotes the idea that writing skills are developed iteratively over time.

Tensions within and between Rubric Conceptualizations and Functions

Different theories of learning and different assessment practices can lead to different conceptualizations of rubric functions, as shown in Figure 1. Practically, these different rubric functions would lead to different learning environments for students. For example, a context that is compatible with assessment for accountability (bottom left of Figure 1) is when teachers and students focus on the rubric scores (i.e., performance) and engage in minimal substantive meaning making around what those scores mean in terms of learning and writing. In such a case, students receive their scores, but are likely provided minimal feedback as to *why* they received that score. While students can determine whether they received a "good/high" or "bad/low" score, they are left to make their own inferences about what they learned and why they scored that way. This use of rubrics mirrors high-stakes accountability testing, where teachers and students typically receive individual and

aggregated rubric scores but no personalized feedback. This accountability function (implicitly) operationalizes a behaviorist learning theory because it assumes students can learn how to write from a rubric telling them what the standards and expectations are. In contrast, if rubric scores are viewed as a means to iteratively discuss how student skills and understandings are developing over time, then the rubric is serving an assessment for pedagogy function (top right in Figure 1).

Research shows that teachers can hold multiple beliefs about assessment simultaneously (Barnes, Fives, & Dacey, 2017; Harris & Brown, 2009; Remesal, 2011). Given that rubrics are part of assessment practices, we posit that teachers can also have multiple conceptualizations of rubrics. This means that teachers' rubric use (and other aspects of their writing instruction) may move around different areas of Figure 1. Tensions can occur when multiple functions and their underlying learning theories come into conflict. For instance, teachers could blend the assessment for pedagogy and assessment for accountability functions (i.e., the light gray circles in Figure 1), either by being oriented toward a sociocultural view of learning but with an explicit focus on performance or, conversely, have a focus on learning but a behaviorist learning theory. The closer to the upper right quartile that
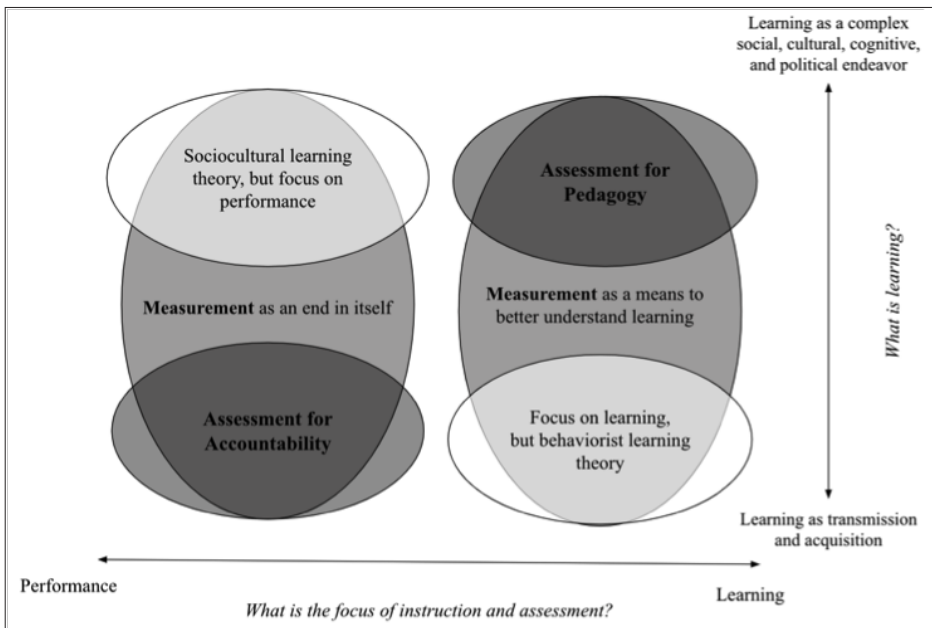

Figure 1. Relationship between Learning Theories and Rubric Functions

a teacher's operationalization of rubrics lie, the more aligned it is with sociocultural learning theory, while the lower left represents alignment with behaviorism. The sources of these tensions and multiple conceptualizations are likely complex, though one possible source is the macro-level influence of test based accountability systems, which are more likely to promote behaviorist-aligned pedagogies (Au, 2007; Jennings & Bearak, 2014). At the same time, we also view contextual factors at the classroom (micro) and school (meso) levels as creating particular opportunities and constraints that teachers must navigate.

The potential for tensions in a teacher's rubric use further increases once we consider the processes of rubric design and rubric implementation. This is because misalignments can exist within and between the three rubric processes (design, conceptualization, and implementation), as shown in Figure 2. For instance, a sociocultural conceptualization of the state rubric could lead teachers to feel their instruction is misaligned with the accountability function of the state test. Teachers' implementation of the rubric could respond to such tensions in different ways, as the different ovals in Figure 1 show. Teachers could defer from state accountability policies (bottom left), resist these pressures to adopt an assessment for pedagogy function (upper right), or enact a hybrid function. Within this negotiation process, we hypothesize that rubric conceptualization plays a significant mediating role, as shown by the thickness of the arrows in Figure 2. While we anticipate that negotiations in rubric conceptualization and functions are not always conscious, we believe that making conceptualization an explicit topic of teacher education and professional learning communities (PLCs) could support teachers in using rubrics in ways that are aligned with assessment for pedagogy and sociocultural learning theory more broadly.

The Social and Practical Consequences of Rubric Use

The routines of standardized, summative assessments are often so ingrained that we don't think about how this form of assessment is aligned with the assumptions of behaviorist and cognitivist theories of learning. These theories assume that students must be tested as individuals because social interaction is viewed as an impediment to accurate measurement. In addition, "good measurement" is viewed as requiring standardized texts and prompts. However, such standardization in direct writing assessments (DWAs) deny the importance of the local context (Behizadeh, 2014). In addition, DWAs allow researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to make limited generalizations about students' overall writing abilities because the target domain of
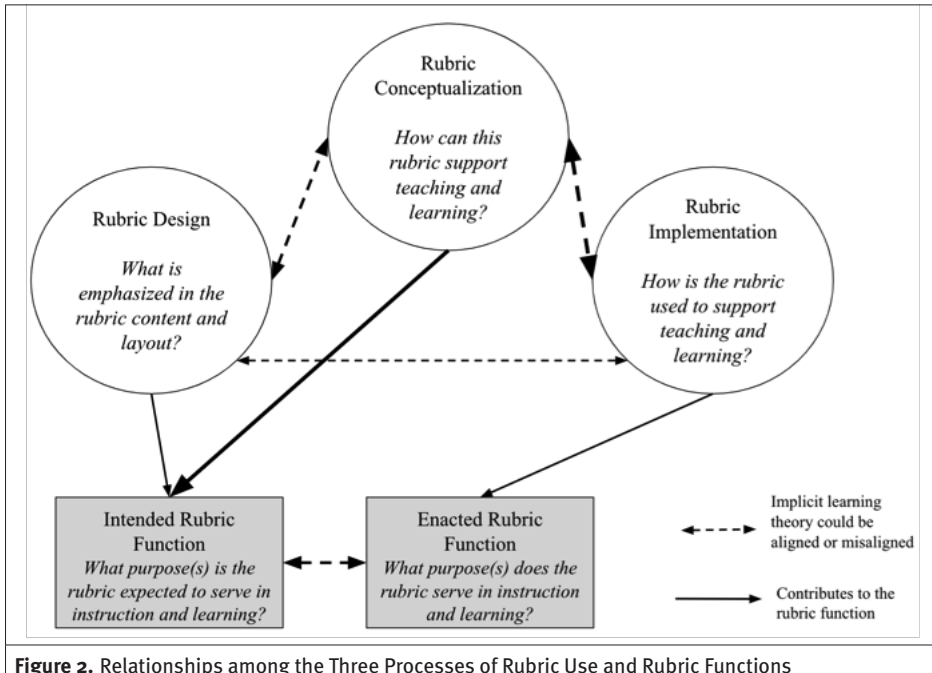
Figure 2. Relationships among the Three Processes of Rubric Use and Rubric Functions

on-demand writing is quite narrow (Kane, Crooks, & Cohen, 1999) despite their political use as a measure of student learning, teacher quality, and/ or school success.[3]

Critiques of these test-based accountability systems abound, and for good reason. High-stakes assessments have been shown to lead to a wide variety of negative consequences, including curriculum narrowing (Au, 2007; Jennings & Bearak, 2014), teacher-centered instruction (Au, 2007), the neglect of democratic aims of education (Ben-Porath, 2013), the pushout of lower performing high school students (Tuck, 2012), and the exacerbation of racial inequality in education (Au, 2016; Horsford, 2017). This means that DWAs are in direct conflict with sociocultural approaches of current research where writing—as a component of literacy—requires the consideration of students' sociocultural backgrounds and the creation of authentic rhetorical contexts (Newell et al., 2011).

The problematic behaviorist assumptions and (unintended) conse-quences of DWAs have led other researchers to propose new systems of assess-ment that better align policy, assessments, and instruction to sociocultural theories of learning (Baird, Andrich, Hopfenbeck, & Stobart, 2017; Behizadeh, 2014; Shepard et al., 2018). For example, Behizadeh (2014) outlines a new

vision of large-scale portfolio assessments that promotes of authentic writing tasks written for multiple purposes in varied dialects and languages. Shepard and colleagues (2018) also propose a new assessment system, one where stakeholders within and between different levels of the educational system "hold compatible and synergistic visions of learning goals and the means to achieve them" (p. 22).

While we agree that our educational systems should be aligned with sociocultural learning theory, we differ in *how* such a goal may be feasibly achieved. Unlike the researchers just mentioned, we do not posit wide-ranging policy changes to address this misalignment. Instead, due to the historical persistence of behaviorist learning theories and scientific management practices from the early 1900s (Au, 2011; Shepard, 2000), we assume educational policies will continue to promote these forms of learning and management for the foreseeable future, even despite their well-documented history of justifying and reproducing discrimination (Au, 2016). As a result, we are interested in using rubric conceptualization to ameliorate the tensions that teachers experience when they seek to implement sociocultural pedagogies in a political climate that typically places too little value on these approaches. We believe such tensions are worth negotiating, despite the practical and theoretical difficulties, because sociocultural theories of learning present opportunities to provide culturally sustaining pedagogies to students (Paris, 2012). It also challenges the mainstream rhetoric and goals of "closing the achievement gap" that has served to narrow, standardize, and decontextualize curricula, especially for students of color (Anderson & Cohen, 2015; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016).

What Could Sociocultural Rubric Conceptualization Look Like?

In this section, we contrast two school contexts to show how different constraints can present different opportunities for educators to engage in sociocultural instruction around rubric conceptualization and implementation. While the tensions and misalignments among learning theories, curricula, classroom instruction, and assessments are often implicit (Baird et al., 2017; Shepard et al., 2018), we examine the processes of rubric conceptualization and rubric implementation to make them explicit. We argue that *how* teachers conceptualize and implement rubrics could serve as a lynchpin to help teachers align their writing instruction with sociocultural theories of learning.

The two school-based scenarios we discuss sit on opposing sides of a constraints spectrum. This spectrum, diagrammed in Figure 3 below, de-

scribes the level and intensity of the micro- and meso-level conditions that either support or hinder the use of sociocultural literacy practices. Both scenarios are derived from the authors' experiences. The first scenario is based on the state context we recently encountered in Louisiana while working with fifth- and sixth-grade ELA teachers on an automated essay scoring study. While it was not the intended focus of the study, we were struck by how aligned the state, districts, schools, and teachers were in their focus and conceptualization of text-based writing assignments. Text-based writing is an emphasized section of the state ELA exam and performance on that state test is used to reward or sanction schools and teachers (both politically and monetarily). In particular, emily was struck by how different this context for writing instruction was from her experiences teaching in Consortium High School (CHS),[4] a New York City public school. A composite of emily's four years of experience at CHS serves as the second contrasting scenario.[5] Both contexts serve students from predominantly low socioeconomic statuses, though they differ in geographic locales and racial demographics. CHS is in a large metropolitan city while the schools in Louisiana range in location from rural areas to large towns. The schools in Louisiana tended to be predominantly Black in more urban locales and majority white in more rural areas. CHS was more racially diverse with approximately 60 percent of students identifying as Hispanic, 20 percent as Black, 5 percent as Asian, 5 percent as white, and 5 percent as two or more races.[6] These two scenarios are intended to illustrate how opportunities for and constraints to creating sociocultural learning environments for students are complexly influenced by meso- and micro-level factors (in addition to macro-level factors). In this approach, we intend to "attend equally to the wider policy stage" where "teachers learn to teach and to the more fine-grained, context-bound, and complex processes of how they learn to teach their subject in particular school contexts" (Gatti, 2016, p. 33). As a result, these examples are not prescriptive or exhaustive, but demonstrate three practical principles of sociocultural rubric conceptualization:

> **Opportunities for and constraints to creating sociocultural learning environments for students are complexly influenced by meso- and micro-level factors.**

1. The specific tensions and constraints educators face in conceptualizing and implementing sociocultural writing instruction can vary based on meso- and micro-level contextual factors.

2. These context-specific tensions and constraints present different opportunities for buffering, resisting, and/or reappropriating state writing rubrics, assessments, and curricula.[7]

3. Sociocultural conceptualization and implementation must account for these constraints and opportunities in crafting more coherent socioculturally informed writing instruction.

These principles are "practical" in the sense that they speak to the complex sociocultural and political conditions that practitioners work within, but not in the sense that they are easy to implement or translate to a particular context.

Rubric Conceptualization in Context

We view scenario one, the Louisiana context, as generally emphasizing *assessment for accountability* while scenario two, Consortium High School, is explicitly working toward *assessment for pedagogy*. Neither context is tension-free, but the level and types of constraints teachers face are quite different, as shown in Figure 3. In Louisiana, teachers face pressures to teach to the end-of-year ELA exam since the mandated state curricula are aligned with the test and because student performance on the state test is used to evaluate both school and teacher "quality." These policies promote assessment for accountability, scientific management, and implicitly equate performance on DWAs as learning, all of which are in contention with sociocultural learning theories. This tension manifests in many teachers' frustration at their limited input in the curriculum and in the limited types of texts and writing that are
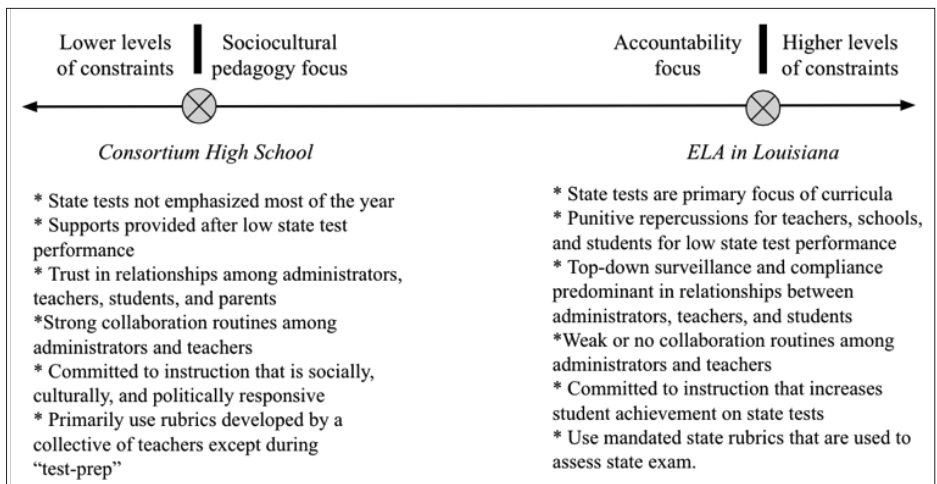

Figure 3. Spectrum of Some Micro- and Meso-level Constraints to Implementing Sociocultural Writing Instruction

taught due to the focus on the state test.[8] At CHS, the stakes of the state ELA exam are also high—it is a high school graduation requirement—but teachers and administrators in this school do not see teaching to the exam as their primary goal. Instead, for the majority of the year ELA teachers engage in reading and writing tasks that are related to current events and local issues that are important to students. Closer to the exam date, teachers explicitly engage in a "test-prep" curriculum that more closely aligns with behaviorist learning theory as well as the content and format of the state test.

To understand how rubrics could be leveraged in these contexts, we need to understand different ways conceptualization and implementation of rubrics can unfold. In Louisiana, teachers report high levels of curricular control. When we asked teachers in interviews the extent to which the state test influenced their decisions about writing instruction, common answers included, "Pretty much 100%," "That's the sole influencer," and "Oh, everything. We technically teach to the test. We like to pretend that we don't, but we do." In the interviews, most teachers perceived that they must follow the curriculum "to the letter," though there were exceptions. A few teachers talked about "sneaking in" other materials with their colleagues, "not being afraid to branch out into the real world," and just aligning their instruction with the state rubric because its focus on claim, evidence, and explanation is "basically good writing." Part of the mandated state curriculum includes using the state rubrics to assess student writing. In a survey we conducted in September 2018, all but one of the 44 teachers claimed that they usually use rubrics related to or adapted from the state exam and 93 percent (41) reported regularly using these rubrics to assess their students' writing. Eighty-six percent (38) of teachers agreed with the statement that they would use a rubric to assess student writing even if it wasn't required. In addition, 95 percent (42) agreed that rubrics help students focus on conceptual features of their writing. While the state writing rubrics are a mandated policy tool attached to state ELA tests, these numbers suggest teachers may also see rubrics as a useful assessment and/or pedagogical tool.

In terms of constraints, the state rubric is limiting in that it only focuses on two genres, literary analysis and research simulation.[9] In addition, most teachers reported that the texts and essay prompts in their curricula were mandated. From our review of classroom tasks the teachers submitted to us, it seems the assigned texts were on or above grade level, but we believe they lacked relevant and/or controversial topics that students would find socially, culturally, or politically engaging. Teachers reported mixed feelings around mandated tasks. They typically viewed the texts as sufficiently complex and rigorous, though they sometimes lamented that a few of the

texts were "boring" and "not engaging" for students.

Despite the numerous constraints in the Louisiana scenario, we still see some opportunities for sociocultural instruction. For one, the state rubric focuses on claim, evidence, and explanations, which are substantive aspects of student writing.[10] Given that (a) the rubric focuses on complex and substantive writing concepts, and (b) the specific ways in which teachers use the rubric is not easily observed or controlled by their supervisors, we believe this rubric could support (some) sociocultural rubric conceptualization and implementation. However, this would require teachers to reappropriate the meaning and function of the rubric. Instead of the rubric functioning primarily as a way to give students a grade and explain what will be expected of them on the state test (i.e., assessment for accountability), the rubric has *potential* to be reconceptualized and used as a pedagogical tool for developing students' writing skills and understandings.

When engaging in text discussions and writing instruction, the concepts within the rubric can act as an anchor for students' making meaning within a particular writing genre and its associated skills. For instance, one key concept in argument writing is evidence use. Teachers and students could examine how the concept of what qualifies as "good evidence use" varies between different types and genres of texts. In this case and others, iterative student–teacher discussion across classes, texts, and units about what constitutes "good" and "effective" writing within and across genres could better support the development of students' understandings and skills in core writing concepts. In addition to aligning with sociocultural learning theories and promoting a dialogic learning environment, this iterative use of rubrics would also address a practical concern that 75 percent (33) of Louisiana teachers in our sample expressed on our survey: students struggle to interpret rubrics.

Consortium High School (CHS) is part of a collective of 38 public high schools that have a waiver from New York State to replace four out of the five state Regents exams required for graduation with teacher-created performance-based assessment tasks (PBATs).[11] A PBAT has two components: a domain-specific argument essay and an oral presentation of the essay in front of a panel of teachers. While teachers at each school design their own PBAT tasks, the rubrics used to assess PBATs are common and collaboratively developed by teachers across the collective.[12] At CHS, students typically create and defend their PBATs in 11th and 12th grade. To prepare, students at CHS engage in similar tasks throughout 9th and 10th grade. The common rubrics and adaptations of it are used throughout the school to assess student writing. The PBAT model of instruction and assessment is highly valued by

all CHS staff, not only because it replaces Regents exams but also because it is viewed as a more authentic and meaningful way for students to develop and share their learning. At CHS (and generally across the collective), teachers seek to develop curricula and PBATs that engage students in discussion and action around controversial topics that are relevant to students' lives.

However, students in 10th grade must still pass the ELA Regents as a graduation requirement. As a result, ELA teachers who prepare students at CHS for the ELA exam have to negotiate the tensions between the sociocultural model of the PBATs and behaviorist assumptions implicit in New York's test-based accountability system. To do so, ELA teachers explicitly engaged in a "double curriculum" to balance the competing demands and values of the PBAT curriculum and the state exam. For the majority of the year, the ELA teachers implemented a reading-writing workshop, where students spent extended periods of time reading and collaborating on writing with each other. Teachers worked together in a professional learning community (PLC) to develop curricula, assessments, and to reflect on student work. Their teacher-created units explored different genres of writing (e.g., poetry, memoir, dystopian fiction) and/or particular topics (e.g., human rights, gentrification) that were selected to be socially, culturally, and politically relevant to students. Classroom instruction aimed to promote the development of dialogic spaces, where students and teachers co-construct meaning around texts and related current events during class discussions. Writing workshops, which consisted of students working in small groups, focused on helping students develop their ideas and voice through writing. While these types of curricula and instruction align with sociocultural theory and the Consortium model of PBATs, they were in contention with the demands of the ELA Regents.

The tensions and constraints ELA teachers face intensified as the exam dates approached.[15] About a month prior to the Regents, ELA teachers at CHS explicitly and intentionally shifted instruction to "test-prep." Test-prep included direct instruction about the test format, the state rubrics, and test-taking strategies. Students then practiced these testing strategies on prior years' tests and teachers provided strategic feedback to focus students on improving specific skills that were known to be emphasized on the test. Similar to the first scenario, the state ELA exam included two writing genres: a nonfiction argument essay and a literary analysis essay. This was a stressful and dreaded time of year for both teachers and students, despite the fact that the large majority of students typically passed the exam. The combination of the PBAT model of instruction and the department-level PLCs at CHS also created unique tensions between the ELA teachers and

other teachers. Because the only Regents exam administered to students was in ELA, this small group of teachers were often de facto tasked with these test-prep responsibilities. It was usually only in their classes that test-prep occurred. In addition, the ELA teachers would run sessions and mock exams after school, which also required them to score student essays. Over time, these teachers became more vocal at meetings about how they viewed these responsibilities as an unshared burden.

While both CHS and Louisiana teachers dealt with the macro-level pressures of state accountability testing, the meso- and micro-level constraints were quite different. Unlike teachers in Louisiana who usually had mandated ELA curricula, teachers in CHS were encouraged to develop authentic and relevant units rather than an accountability-driven curriculum and assessments. This gave CHS teachers more opportunities to (re) conceptualize how writing rubrics could support their pedagogy and student learning. Instead of providing measures for test-based accountability, the design, conceptualization, and implementation processes of Consortium rubrics were grounded in teacher collaboration and inquiry. This aligned with a similarly collaborative approach in the classroom, where the rubrics supported co-construction of knowledge with students around writing and textual analysis. While both groups had access to writing rubrics that could anchor classroom discussions of texts and writing, the state rubrics were often conceptualized as accountability tools (i.e., primarily a summative assessment of student achievement). However, we believe these state rubrics have some potential to be reconceptualized and reappropriated as pedagogical tools. In both contexts, if teachers use rubrics to iteratively develop meaning around writing concepts and its authentic purposes, then rubrics can support the creation of sociocultural spaces. Still, the supportive and socioculturally aligned micro- and meso-features of CHS make it easier for teachers in that environment to both conceptualize and implement rubrics as pedagogical tools.

Conclusion: Rubric Conceptualization as Resistance

We want to be clear that our approach to rubric conceptualization assumes the current, less-than-ideal U.S. educational system where a range of historical inequalities, structural barriers, and ideological tensions exist. Given the long history of test-based accountability in the United States that is rooted in behaviorism (Shepard, 2000), we believe this system is unlikely to change in the short term. As a result, we assume that administrators, teachers, and teacher educators likely work within a system that presents significant

macro-level constraints and obstacles to sociocultural conceptualization, but where there are also (some) opportunities to exert agency at the classroom (micro) and school (meso) levels.

Given these obstacles, we view engagement in sociocultural rubric conceptualization and implementation—whatever its form and depth—as not just a pedagogical decision but a form of *principled resistance*, which involves "overt or covert acts that reject instructional policies, programs, or other efforts to control teachers' work that undermine or contradict professional principles" (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006, p. 32). Principled resistance also seeks to build alliances among educators, students, parents, and communities (Anderson & Cohen, 2015). In the two scenarios discussed here, the states' test-based accountability systems are a policy tool that controls pedagogical and discursive aspects of the teachers' work. Au (2009) and other critical scholars have called this phenomenon "steerage at a distance":

> **We view engagement in sociocultural rubric conceptualization and implementation—whatever its form and depth—as not just a pedagogical decision but a form of *principled resistance*.**

[H]igh-stakes testing is having a tangible impact on the educational experiences of students. Thus it is important to recognize that high-stakes testing is in fact changing the educational environments of schools: Not only do teachers lose control of curricular decisions, but any power the students might have as contributors to their own educational process is also taken away. (p. 101)

While the macro-level pressures of the test-based accountability systems in our two scenarios did not entirely determine the classroom instruction in our two scenarios, they certainly influenced it.

We believe there are two key ways that teachers' use of sociocultural conceptualizations of rubrics specifically, and writing instruction generally, allow them to use their agency as professionals to resist the problematic assumptions and consequences of test-based accountability systems. The first is that sociocultural conceptualizations have the potential for teachers and students to position themselves as (co-)creators and inquirers of knowledge. Second, and relatedly, sociocultural conceptualizations have the potential to resist the systemic disempowerment of students and teachers.

In Louisiana, teachers were positioned as transmitters of knowledge by the state and districts because their role was confined to the delivery of mandated curricula. For teachers to use their professional judgment to adapt or change the mandated curriculum was a sanctionable offense. Similarly, in learning to write text-based arguments, students (like teachers) were restrict-

ed to engaging with the writing forms, topics, and texts deemed relevant to the test. As a result, students were effectively recapitulating the perspectives of the texts' authors, though under the pretext that they were formulating their "own" arguments. We believe that the tight alignment between the state, district, and school mandates, along with the punitive assessment for accountability function, greatly constrained teachers' agency and ability to conceptualize and implement more sociocultural forms of teaching and learning. This is not to say that teachers could not resist or that they had no responsibility to resist. However, teacher compliance and deprofessionalization are also likely symptoms of the systemic and institutional failings of test-based accountability systems. Sociocultural rubric conceptualization is one strategy that we believe could help teachers imagine and implement alternative pedagogies that resist the behaviorist content, pedagogy, and implied aims incentivized by mandated curricula and assessments.

In contrast, the meso- and micro-contexts at CHS created more opportunities to resist the transmission model of teaching and learning. ELA teachers took advantage of these opportunities by designing, conceptualizing, and implementing writing curricula that was responsive to student interests and the current and historical events affecting their lives. CHS's commitment to sociocultural models of instruction and the common rubrics for PBATs supported the ELA teachers in both imagining and implementing a classroom environment that situated students and themselves as co-creators. This environment thus supported student and teacher empowerment by situating both groups as inquirers and (co-)constructors of knowledge that is informed by and relevant to their lives. While these sociocultural conceptualizations/ resistance did not (and could not) fully resolve the ideological tensions that existed in the teachers' commitment to sociocultural instruction and the demands of the ELA Regents, it did provide ways for teachers to reposition themselves and their students as active epistemic agents.

Within this relative agency at CHS, teachers and students were able to work collectively and individually to construct understandings of the world through reading and writing, rather than merely transmit and comply with top-down educational policies and mandates. While the resistance of individuals cannot resolve the historical tensions between behaviorist and sociocultural learning theories, let alone the structural injustices that test-based accountability systems perpetuate, it can lay the groundwork for more coordinated activism. In this resistance, teachers, administrators, and community members can work together to construct learning environments that are dialogic and responsive to local needs and values.

Notes

1. This is also not to say that rubric design and state tests do not impose real, and sometimes insurmountable, constraints to writing instruction. We discuss a scenario with many design-based constraints in "What Could Sociocultural Rubric Conceptualization Look Like?" later in this article.

2. The role(s) of administrators can vary within the design of writing rubrics. They may work with policymakers or curriculum designers to create rubrics, and/or they may work with teachers at the school level to interpret and adapt rubrics for instruction.

3. These shortcomings of DWAs can be described as having low *consequential validity*, which is "an appraisal of the potential social consequences of the proposed use and of the actual consequences when used" (Messick, 1980, p. 1023). Behizadeh (2014) has argued that DWAs have limited consequential and construct validity due to their lack of communicative function, sociocultural relevance, and authentic purpose.

4. Consortium High School is a pseudonym.

5. emily was certified to teach special education at CHS. She co-taught with other teachers across content areas including history, literature, science (biology, physical science), and math (algebra). However, she never taught with the ELA teachers at CHS. As a result, the scenario she describes is based on her observations and conversations with ELA teachers and their students.

6. The descriptions of locales and racial demographics for both scenarios are based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

7. For more on the concepts of bridging and buffering, see Honig and Hatch (2004). We view buffering, or "strategically deciding to engage external demands in limited ways" (p. 23), as relevant to sociocultural rubric conceptualization since it is often incompatible with external demands of state based accountability systems.

8. However, it is worth noting that some teachers, who view the mandated curriculum's focus on state test-based skills as useful and aligned with their goals for their students, do not experience this tension. This further emphasizes our point that tensions are a result of being oriented toward sociocultural learning theories and pedagogical functions of rubrics and assessment.

9. Research simulation writing tasks are based on multiple nonfiction texts that ask students to synthesize and analyze information across texts.

10. Teachers repeatedly explained that grammar and mechanics are not emphasized on the state exam and that, as a result, the curriculum and the rubric do not emphasize them either.

11. Students must present a PBAT in math, science, and history to mirror the Regents exam requirements. The fourth PBAT can be in literature or a second PBAT in any of the other subjects.

12. There are annual meetings to help teachers and schools "norm" their PBATs in relation to the common rubrics. Teacher representatives from the Consortium schools bring their PBATs and corresponding student work. Tasks and student work are evaluated on how well they align with the Consortium rubrics. Similar teacher meetings also periodically review and revise each Consortium rubric.

13. Regents exams are administered twice a year, in January and June. At CHS, the main test-prep period was for the June administration.

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