

# SELF-ASSESSMENT IN YEAR 4 BOYS: USING STUDENT-DESIGNED RUBRICS FOR DEEPER LEARNING

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## **Abstract**

Through action research, I investigated the effectiveness of a student-created rubric and how it could enhance agency, participation, student interaction, and experience with the readings covered in Social Studies. I was curious to learn how the rubric could empower students to take ownership over their learning and provide them with a tool to advocate for themselves and monitor their own learning. The Year 4 boys participating read primary and secondary sources and were asked to corroborate, synthesize, and compare sources and their accounts of history. Following readings and discussions, the boys reflected on their rubrics, their comprehension, retell, and identification perspectives. Furthermore, the boys gauged their learning and understanding to make action plans for how to approach the following lesson. To end the unit, they demonstrated their understanding of examining multiple perspectives and how their co-created rubric assisted them in taking ownership over their learning by teaching our upper school community.

## **Introduction**

### **Background**

After my first year of teaching the Year 4 curriculum, my co-teacher and I sat down to rewrite it with the goal that it be representative of all perspectives and voices and include a variety of primary and secondary sources. In the creation of this new Social Studies curriculum, we utilized sources from a variety of books and online resources. Our Social Studies curriculum spans the historical period from the First People of the Americas through to the American Revolution. Therefore, in nature, the history covered requires students to make connections, comparisons, and to think critically and analytically about the role of the system of the empire. Given the sophisticated nature of the content and readings, it was important to me to see how students engaged with them and, ultimately, if they were understanding the material. Simultaneously, our Year 4 is a bridge year to Upper School and an important goal for students is to learn self-advocacy skills and ownership over their learning. Therefore, the research question that I hoped to

answer was: *How do student-created rubrics encourage deeper understanding of multiple perspectives in Year 4 boys?*

### **Action Research Methodology**

Action research was the appropriate methodology for studying the effectiveness of the curriculum through student voice as it allowed me to triangulate both quantitative and qualitative data of students' voice, choice, and agency over their learning. Additionally, action research is reflective and cyclical, which gave me the opportunity to both reflect and adjust the curriculum as needed during the unit as well as for next year. This project put boys at the center of their own learning as they worked collaboratively to create and take ownership of it. This proved to be effective, as the boys communicated what they needed to be successful learners and acted upon the advice they provided for themselves.

### **Literature Review**

As our world becomes increasingly diverse and globally connected, our Social Studies curriculum has become a crucial part of developing socially conscious boys. Previously, it was a curriculum that was often overlooked in the elementary classroom or embedded in Language Arts, (Goldsmith & Reinhard, 2016). Social Studies has since become a critical class for teaching students to think globally and critically about our world. With these changes, there is a movement towards including the once-silenced voices into the curriculum in order to educate our boys of the racial, economic, and cultural inequalities people have faced in the past. According to Epstein (2009), by highlighting those voices who were previously silenced in our history, we are able to instill the reality of inequality in our nation's history and disrupt the knowledge of the past and create solutions to today's problems. This work is invaluable to the development of both individual and collectivist agents of change.

In addition to the development of socially conscious boys, Social Studies provides boys the opportunity to think critically, debate, analyze, synthesize, corroborate sources, and utilize their voice (Goldsmith & Reinhard, 2016). These transferable skills have real world application, which in turn gives boys the feeling that their voice matters as they choose how to read and interpret or present an argument. This choice builds boys' metacognition and divergent and convergent thinking (Rothstein & Santana, 2011). Rothstein and Santana found that when boys create their own learning progressions and develop their own questions, "they have gained a better understanding of content and greater learning. They have gained confidence, become self-starters, are more engaged, and take ownership of their own learning. They have developed lifelong thinking skills to use in their education and beyond" (p.136). These transferable skills give boys the ability to become leaders in their learning and their greater communities.

At the center of this action research project was the development of student voice, choice, and agency. Boys co-created a rubric to evaluate their growing understanding of multiple perspectives over the course

of the first unit in the Social Studies curriculum. As opposed to a teacher-created and facilitated rubric, the student-created rubric was intended to give boys a sense of ownership over their learning, for “when students own the assessment process, they are able to: Figure out what they already know (prior knowledge); what they don’t know (areas of improvement); what they want to master (their goals); and what they will do to improve (action plan)” (Spencer & Juliani, 2017, p. 131). Spencer and Juliani’s research indicated that boys “think categorically and ... see a sense of progression in their work. And when boys are assessing their own work with a rubric, they have a greater sense of ownership in the process. They aren’t relying on the teacher as the sole source of feedback” (p. 137). Furthermore, Feldman (2019) notes:

Rather than passive recipients of grades who must depend on the unassailable and opaque, but determinate judgments of their teachers, rubrics share information and power.....Rubrics equip students to self-asses and even to peer-assess work, empowering them not only to know exactly what grade they will get, but exactly the recipe for success. (p. 189)

This project aligns with the developmental stage of Year 4 boys. According to Wood (2007), 9 to 10-year-old boys are concerned with global issues, seeking answers to big questions, take pride in their schoolwork which in turn motivates them to work diligently in the classroom. By giving students the opportunity to co-create their own rubric to gauge their personal understanding, the boys in my project were aligning their drive to seek answers to big questions with their ethic of hard work and pride through the process of self-reflection by evaluating and identifying the work they need to do in order to reach their achievement goals.

According to Reichert and Hawley (2009), the collaborative creation of a student rubric gives boys the opportunity to have choice in how they choose to measure their understanding. Their collaborative work increases problem-solving, which in turn drives “intended learning outcomes” (p. 83). The shift from teacher evaluation to self-evaluation has been found to give boys a sense of empowerment, as well as a “sense of control, responsibility, ownership, motivated, enthusiastic, satisfaction, excited, appreciative, and sense of purpose” (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000, p. 639). It has also been found that, “the creation of products [is] especially effective with boys” (Reichert & Hawley, 2009, p. 12). Allowing the boys in my project to create and produce their own rubric, therefore, would hopefully allow them to track their own growth, create a natural progression of learning, relearning, and unlearning (Spencer & Juliani, 2017, p. 19) as they developed an understanding of the importance of reading history through the lens of multiple perspectives.

This project was intended to encourage boys to gain ownership over their learning and to feel empowered as they self-reflected and reported on their understanding of the importance of reading for multiple

perspectives in history. Flowerday and Schraw (2000) reported that by giving students the opportunity to become “invested in the course will positively affect self-efficacy and motivation” (p. 640). The literature also states that when boys feel motivated to learn and are in control of their learning, they “become problem solvers, more creative, have a growth mindset, become explorers, they are self-directed, they learn to think outside the box” (Spencer & Juliani, 2017, p. 8).

This action research gave me the opportunity to evaluate my own practice to better the learning environment for their boys. The literature is clear in stating that boys need to feel ownership over their learning in order to gain understanding and become divergent, metacognitive and even convergent thinkers - all invaluable tools to evaluate the world around them as they hone their skills to become agents of change.

Through the collection of data from focus interviews, student rubrics, and surveys, it was hoped that I would have a better understanding of how effective the curriculum is, how boys learn best, the level of participation, and the types of thinking in Year 4 boys. The utilization of triangulation ensured that the data were in support of one another (Mertler, 2017).

### **Research Context**

Town School for Boys is located in San Francisco, California and serves K-8th Grade students. Founded in 1939, our mission is “learning is prized, love of school is essential, and boyhood is celebrated. ” Student Enrollment is approximately 400, with 36% of our students coming from self-identified families of color, 18% of our families receiving tuition assistance, and families coming from 38 different zip codes. As a school we value curiosity, respect, belonging, integrity, and joy. These values are upheld in our curriculum through collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and building empathetic boys who possess integrity. The participants in this study were twenty-two 9 to 10-year-old boys in my Year 4 homeroom classroom who represented the diversity in our school.

The research was completed in the Fall 2019 semester. The Social Studies topic we studied was the importance of studying multiple perspectives in history as students worked to answer our essential question: When does change contribute to and when does change threaten the control of our lives and our place over time?

### **The Action**

The action implemented in my research project was to have students create a rubric that assisted them to evaluate their learning (see Appendix). The boys began the unit by investigating already created rubrics and evaluating their layout, language, and scale. The boys were then tasked with co-creating their own rubric. Students worked together to determine layout, scale, which emojis to use to represent each level of understanding, skills to grade themselves on, and the language that reflected what it meant to demonstrate understanding based on “feel like,” “sound like,” and “look like.” During our unit on the First People of the Americas through to the arrival of European explorers, students read primary and secondary sources from the perspective of the first Americans as well as the explorers, with the intention of corroborating sources to increase their awareness of perspectives and how they inform the story told. Following every lesson in our unit, the boys graded themselves on their understanding of the material covered that day in class and how that day’s lesson contributed to our driving question.

### **Data Collection**

For my action research, I utilized a mixed-methods approach, which allowed me to analyze both quantitative and qualitative data. These data were triangulated in order to enhance the validity of my research (Mertler, 2017). My data collection methods included:

- Student surveys
- Semi-structured interviews
- Video recordings and photos
- Student artifacts
- Field notes

After completing my data collection, I coded the survey responses from students. At the beginning of the project, and at the end, students completed the same survey that used Likert Scale questions, which “[begin] with a statement then [ask] individuals to respond on an agree/disagree continuum” (Mertler, 2017, p.147) and one open ended question. I read the survey questions aloud, considering “the age or grade level of students” (Mertler, 2017, p. 146) Using their iPad numbers to protect the boys’ identity, I coded responses to track students’ understanding of multiple perspectives and their use of the rubric. I coded the language they used when in small and whole group discussions, in corroboration with their self-reflection using the rubric, to gauge their growing understanding of multiple perspectives. I also observed students' use of the rubric and observed their interaction with the rubric. Using field notes and videos/photos, I was able to capture the boys’ growing comfort with the rubric: information that I was then able to track for growth and understanding of navigating a rubric. I then triangulated this information with

responses from focus-groups semi-structured interviews. Given the age of my students, I chose this method to collect data as the structure lends itself to follow up questions and students adding on to one another's responses (Mertler, 2017).

Mertler (2017) states that semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to ask several base questions but also have the option of following up a given response with alternative, optional questions that may or may not be used by the researcher, depending on the situation" (p. 134). Using this information, I then coded for patterns in the responses from students. With student artifacts, I examined students' use of the rubrics and their self-analysis of their growing understanding of why it is important to study multiple perspectives in history. In addition, I coded students' reflections on their learning through their rubrics, class discussions, and interviews. I organized language into three categories, self-awareness of learning, and ownership over learning, which was self-directed by their student-made rubric. Next, I corroborated the student reflections with my own field notes that captured students engaging with the readings and their completion of the student-created rubric to have agency in their learning of the importance of considering multiple perspectives in history.

### **Data Analysis**

After completing the action in class, I organized the students' data into a spreadsheet and graphed their growth, based on their rubrics over the course of the unit. Firstly, I analyzed students' responses to the survey given at the beginning and end of the research project. Using the survey responses, I was able to identify the median of students' responses and compare the first survey to the second. This helped me identify outliers in my quantitative data, as well as find a more comprehensive mean, given that my data set contained two means or midpoints. (Mertler, 2017). Furthermore, I organized the data to identify the mode in order to track trends across the boys' responses to the survey.

Through student class discussions, survey responses, and interviews, I was able to color code students' language for phrasing that indicated that they were growing in self-awareness and taking ownership over their learning, and analyzed growth in the length of their responses to the question of whose perspective was taken in this reading, and what is the opposite. These data were then polyangulated with students' self-reflections via their rubrics, to code for trends. Finally, I found correlations between retell and comprehension, as well as between comprehension and identifying perspective. To conclude, I looked at cumulative and individual data sets in correlation with student engagement (via my field notes) to track boys' growth over the course of the 10-week unit

## **Discussion of Findings**

The goal of my project was to investigate how student-created rubrics encourage deeper understanding of multiple perspectives in Year Four boys. After reviewing the data, three themes emerged that indicated student-created rubrics developed self-awareness in learning, instilled ownership over learning, and empowered boys to challenge perspectives. Furthermore, alongside these themes, in-class discussions and projects demonstrated that a student-created rubric encouraged students to engage in deeper learning as the boys reflected on their progress and took necessary steps to master the importance of multiple perspectives in history.

### **Developing Self-Awareness**

At the start of the unit, the boys were able to communicate where they fell on the scale on the rubric; however, they were not able to name what they did while engaged in the lesson and how that was reflected in their scoring. The boys responded with, “It was low,” “I didn’t get it,” or “I wasn’t paying attention.” As the unit progressed and the boys continued to grade themselves, their self-awareness of their learning increased as well as their ability to describe what was impeding their learning. The boys reported that the rubric helped them reflect on their learning and the steps they needed to take in order to understand the material. One boy shared that, “filling out the rubric helped me realize that I wasn’t paying close attention to the reading so I didn’t understand it.” Given the sophisticated nature of the content in the primary sources, when asked by a teacher, “How did you grade yourself on your ability to comprehend and retell the reading and identify a perspective? If you graded yourself low, how will you approach the next reading and lesson?” a boy shared that he would “annotate more of the readings to answer the questions because I wasn’t always doing that before and that helps.”

Regarding primary sources, a boy reported that he grew in his self-awareness of the complexities of reading primary sources: “primary sources require you to study everything, you can’t miss something, I missed a lot the first time. I missed the important parts.” Finally, 17 out of 22 boys shared that the rubric helped them organize their thinking and “identify how they have grown and what else they need to do to get 5s.” This self-awareness taught boys to reflect on how they approached a lesson, how they engaged in a lesson and determined what they need to do the next time to be successful.

### **Instilling Ownership Over Goal Setting**

The boys’ ability to self-monitor their learning and develop self-awareness allowed them to take ownership over their learning by setting realistic goals. Students looked back at their rubrics in order to reflect on their engagement and determine how they could “do better next time.” One boy commented that, “The rubric helped our learning because it was a way to grade ourselves instead of the teachers doing it. So, this helped us by giving us independence over our learning.”

In order for boys to learn the importance of considering multiple perspectives when studying history, they read a variety of texts that were both primary and secondary sources. The boys' first encounter with primary sources was difficult, as seen in their self-graded rubrics. They scored themselves low in all categories (retell, comprehension, and identifying perspective). However, the second time we read primary sources, comprehension increased in all categories because the boys were able to see how they did on the previous reading via their rubrics and reflections from the previous time. They then made action plans for the second time they were going to approach primary sources using skills they thought would enhance their understanding.

Using the language of the rubric, the boys articulated what materials and actions they needed to complete in order to "connect their ideas to other people's," "be confident in identifying whose perspective it is from," and "explain it in their own words." The boys were able to retell what they had read and identify the intended audience for the text based on the author and name the perspective that would tell the story differently. One boy in particular, who struggled the first time analyzing a primary source said, "the rubric helped me reflect on what I needed to improve on for my understanding of the content and then I could make a plan to get there." A second boy added, I made sure to "reread, highlight, underline, and get headphones so I could really pay attention to what it was saying." Another boy shared that, "seeing my scores on the rubrics go up and down helped me think about why they were at a level 2 or 3 and then I could see what a level 4 or 5 looked like and reach for that."

As a teacher, I observed the boys take ownership over their learning by annotating, asking friends for clarification, and rereading. I observed engagement increase as their bodies were upright, their heads over the reading, writing furiously, and adding to one another's comments in discussions about multiple perspectives and why it is important to consider. The boys were able to do this because of the ownership and intrinsic motivation they felt to do better the next time on a lesson because they were able to see explicitly how they were doing in history based on their rubric. One boy reported, "It was better to give myself feedback because I could be honest and with a teacher, I might want to impress them and pretend I know more than I do, but that hurts my learning." To conclude, the boys felt ownership over their learning and enjoyed the independence and responsibility they had over their growth.

#### **Year 4 Grade Boys Challenging Perspectives**

We read *Encounter* (Yolen, 1992), a book told from the Taínos perspective of the arrival of Christopher Columbus and his men. To counter this perspective, boys read letters and journal articles written by Christopher Columbus. When considering the audience, many boys began to question the validity of Christopher Columbus and his account of the events that occurred. Students questioned, "Why do we celebrate Christopher Columbus?" and "Why aren't more people studying the Taíno?" One boy shared



that he knew the whole story because “we learned about both Columbus and the Tainos first encounter from both sides which means that we know the whole story and no one’s voice was left out.”

This work became so ingrained in the boys’ lives that they no longer needed prompting from a teacher. They began to search for other perspectives “because otherwise, you lose half the story if you only hear from one perspective and then we don’t know the truth.” Boys demonstrated agency by asking these questions of one another and by trusting in their ability to question perspectives and to ensure that all sides of the story were appreciated. Additionally, the boys worked to ensure challenging perspectives extended beyond Social Studies as they challenged the perspectives in their book clubs. To conclude, the boys chose to share their work with upper school advisories and taught them why it is important to study multiple perspectives and how that has impacted their understanding of history. When asked, an upper school boy remarked that he was impressed by the work the Fourth Graders had taken on and “wishes he had learned the same lesson at an early age.” Fourth Graders discovered the importance of examining history from multiple perspectives and, as one student shared, they were in search of “the whole story and the truth” in history.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Practice**

Having Year 4 boys create a rubric to gauge their learning was an effective way for students to gain self-awareness and ownership over their learning and resulted in students understanding the material in class. The boys in my classroom developed critical skills as they moved through their schooling. They developed skills and language to reflect on their learning and created action plans to take ownership over their learning. These vital skills are essential for students as they move into upper school next year. An implication that I learned from this practice is that Year 4 boys are developmentally ready for this work and that incorporating student-created rubrics into my practice enhanced boys’ engagement with the concepts being covered as they worked to score high marks across the rubric and encouraged deeper learning. Deeper learning was achieved through boys reflecting on their learning and making plans to access the content. In doing so, students demonstrated a deep understanding of the content through rich discussions, questions they posed, challenging perspectives, by teaching upper school students about the importance of this work, and incorporating the language of the rubric and challenging perspectives into other subject areas. To continue, the next step I would like to take in my teaching practice is having boys create rubrics in other academic subjects to see similar self-awareness, ownership, and deeper learning developed.

### **Reflection**

This experience has truly been remarkable. I have enjoyed being a member of the IBSC community and engaging with colleagues from every stretch of the earth. From the moment I met my cohort, I felt supported and that I had a community of like-minded thinkers who are all eager to better their practice.

This year in particular, many schools faced challenges between wildfires and COVID-19, it was heartwarming to have a community to share ideas of how-to best comfort students, to uplift each other, and share resources. This is a community that I will continue to engage with through WhatsApp, online learning, and attending conferences even after completing my action research.

Being in my second year of teaching following on the heels of graduate school, I was looking for an opportunity to continue to learn and perfect my craft. Being given the opportunity to participate as an action researcher aligned with my pursuit of continued learning. Action research gave me the opportunity to reflect on my practice and new curriculum as well as provide new learning opportunities for my students. From this project, I have taken away the importance of stopping, reflecting, and refining my teaching during and after a unit of study. This is a practice that I will continue to model for myself each school year. Finally, the most important lesson that I learned from this experience is the importance of providing students with agency and voice in their learning. Through the creation of a rubric, I had the pleasure of watching students collaborate to create a final product that reflected their desires to learn and develop their voice in what understanding looked like, felt like, and sounded like. With their voices leading the way, students gained ownership over their learning and provided one another with a deep understanding of why it is important to study history from multiple perspectives. From this I take away the importance of providing students with ample opportunities to reflect on their learning and voice it to their communities.

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APPENDIX

STUDENT-CREATED RUBRIC

					
<p><b>Retell</b></p> <p>(Can I synthesize the reading?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I wasn't paying attention to my reading. Therefore, I don't have anything to share.</li> <li>I say "umm..." a lot in my retell.</li> <li>My head is down and I let someone else talk for me.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I can give some details or examples, but I am pausing often through my retell.</li> <li>I am going back into the text to support my retell in remembering what I read.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not the best retell, I include some details or evidence.</li> <li>I feel better to share out in a discussion.</li> <li>I am still thinking during the discussion.</li> <li>I need more details to emphasize my point.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I can connect my ideas to other people's and add on or disagree.</li> <li>I am an active member of the conversation when retelling.</li> <li>I can give specific details from the text, but can't quote it.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I can give a solid retell that includes specific details and evidence from the text.</li> <li>I can connect to other people's ideas with a detailed response and do so at the appropriate time.</li> <li>I am dying to raise my hand and share</li> <li>I can also connect my retell to other texts/articles I have read.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Identify Perspective(s)</b></p> <p>(Can I identify whose perspective this is from? Can I identify the opposite perspective?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I am thinking about it for a long time by saying "umm..."</li> <li>I can't identify the perspective or give a random name of someone unrelated to the text.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I have a better idea of whose perspective it is from, but am still guessing.</li> <li>I ask, "maybe it says in the text somewhere?"</li> <li>I went back in the text to check my answer.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I say something like, "I think it is from ___'s perspective... maybe?"</li> <li>I am hesitating and questioning myself.</li> <li>I feel that I am 75%-80% right.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I say something like, "It was from ___'s perspective"</li> <li>I am confident in identifying whose perspective it is from.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I can show someone that their perspective is different than what is stated in the text based on evidence from the text and prior knowledge.</li> <li>I provide evidence and details to back up the perspective I identify</li> <li>I can identify the opposite perspective.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Comprehension</b></p> <p>(Do I understand what happened in the reading?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I am asking myself, "what happened?"</li> <li>I need to ask a friend who understands it for help.</li> <li>I am making excuses for why I don't understand it.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I ask myself, "maybe it is saying this or maybe it is saying that?"</li> <li>I need help from a friend who understands it to get the full picture.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I can somewhat explain what happened, but I feel that I am less than 50% right.</li> <li>I am still sort of able to understand what the text is saying.</li> <li>I can partially explain the events.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I understand the reading and can explain it in many details and in my own words.</li> <li>I can provide lots of examples and don't need to reread to do so.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I totally get it! I didn't miss a single detail.</li> <li>I can include prior knowledge into my understanding.</li> <li>I can write about it in detail.</li> <li>I can teach someone.</li> <li>I can connect it to other readings and discussions.</li> <li>Finally, there is 100% accuracy in my understanding according to the text.</li> </ul>