The Use of Portfolio Assessments and Student Goal-Setting in Analyzing Student Growth and

Achievement in 11th and 12th Grade Social Studies

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Introduction

Over the past four years as a classroom teacher, there has been a common theme amongst

students and colleagues in the social studies department concerning unit and end of course

assessments. Multiple choice tests, universal writing and project rubrics, and state-made

common exams do not accurately measure the learning and comprehension for individual

students in semester and year-long social studies courses. Students in my classroom have

expressed interest in using a year-long portfolio to prove achievement and growth based on the

North Carolina Essential Standards rather than a common multiple-choice assessments. There

are more accurate and appropriate ways to assess students for learning, growth, and application

of concepts and skills than universal exams using multiple choice questions and rubrics. I plan

to implement a study where students work through eight units of American History II and create

a cumulative digital portfolio utilizing the Google Site platform in order to measure skills and

standards-based growth and achievement in the course. I will judge the portfolio with a specific

rubric, half of which will be based on the universal standards and skills from the NC Essential

Standards. The other half of the rubric will be based on individualized goals per each student

after a meeting between the student and teacher researcher at the beginning of the course. These

goals will focus on reading, writing, and discussion skills. Using forms of alternative

assessments including portfolio assessments and student-teacher goal setting to create

individualized rubrics will transform the social studies classroom by effectively measuring

student growth, comprehension, and achievement.

The issue at hand concerns differentiating assessment for individual students in order to

accurately show personal growth based on state standards. I am interested in studying how

goal-setting and portfolio assessments can increase student engagement and achievement in the

social studies classroom. I would like to measure effects on student understanding, writing

ability, and content mastery when students are given agency to create their own achievable steps

and goals throughout each unit. Throughout this study, students will build digital portfolios

using Google Sites to collect their work and show individual growth. I think that using student

and teacher goal-setting rather than universal rubrics and creating individual, cumulative

portfolios will ensure authentic assessments. The main research question then is *how is*

achievement level, growth, and engagement in a high school social studies classroom affected by

the implementation of portfolio assessments and student goal-setting?

Authentic or performance assessments are ways for students to demonstrate knowledge

and skills, including demonstrating the processes that they take to problem-solve. Scoring for

these types of assessments are often based on subjective judgement, and students must

demonstrate understanding and mastery of real-life skills rather than answer questions that are

created only for the classroom setting. Using a portfolio as part of this assessment shows

evidence of students' mastery of skills, application of knowledge, and aptitudes. A portfolio also

allows for students, teachers, and parents to reflect upon, critique, and evaluate work and

effectiveness of lessons. Students also are allowed a real world opportunity to select artifacts to

upload to the portfolio, and this gives them agency to learn and prove their learning within the

course. Any type of alternative or authentic performance-based assessment must require

students to use higher-order thinking skills, integrate real-world tasks and problems, work both

independently and collaboratively, prove growth of understanding through formative

assessments, and use technology when appropriate (Bland & Gareis, 2018).

The idea of AfL, or Assessment for Learning, is an example of alternative assessment and student goal-setting, as well as rubric-based grading. While more research must be done in this field, there is a strong suggestion that AfL has a positive effect on student engagement, learning, and motivation both in and out of the classroom which promotes self-regulated learning. In AfL, the teacher must establish clear learning goals and performance criteria, interpret evidence of learning, take immediate action based on evidence, and encourage students' active involvement in the assessment process. The way to collect evidence using AfL is gauging interaction between teacher and students, and the goal is to guide students in learning the skills that will help them succeed in the future. AfL is goal oriented, and the teacher works to assist students in understanding and setting their own learning goals and performance criteria. Students learn to monitor their own learning and are responsible for self motivation in the lesson. Heritage (2018) claims that AfL is a major factor in developing students' academic self-regulated learning, and therefore is a necessary assessment format in promoting student learning post-graduation (p. 62). While more research must be done in this field, there is a strong suggestion that AfL has a positive effect on student engagement, learning, and motivation both in and out of the classroom.

The study of social studies must be uniquely assessed using a variety of rubrics to measure quality of student learning rather than relying on the quantity of correct multiple-choice test items to prove student learning. Appropriate rubrics must be used to assess learning and growth, and students need agency to reflect on self growth within the assessment rubric. In Lockledge, 1997, students had the opportunity to select statements that defined their work and understanding, and students wrote rationales for each statements prior to submission to the teacher for grading. Not only did evaluation of performance based assessments using rubrics

give elaborate feedback, but students became responsible and aware of their own learning. They

produced higher-quality work, integrated writing and speaking with social understanding, and

demonstrated abilities to use information from multiple sources. Portfolios differed by grade

level, and students choose specific artifacts to use in the portfolio. This gives them agency in

their own learning and evaluation, and the portfolio is a personal representation of student

learning and growth throughout the social studies course. It demonstrates depth and breadth of a

student's competence rather than everything completed in the semester or year. The portfolio

assessment goes beyond piecing artifacts together because it requires students to write a rationale

for including each piece in the portfolio. Their rationale must have substance that relates to the

social studies standards and shows samples of student growth in the course. Students have to

know what the evidence proves in order to complete the assignment, and they must convey an

overall message that conveys their understanding, abilities, interests, and skills. Students should

be paired or put in groups of three or four in order to critique each others' selections, and this

promotes peer assessment and collaboration. The self-reliance built in this type of assessment in

crucial in post-secondary jobs and education (Lockledge, 1997).

Many researchers have concluded that both authentic and portfolio-based assessment

work over a period of time in the social studies classroom correlates with academic success in

learners (Bland & Gareis, 2018). Positive effects of student goal-setting and reflection were also

observed in the schools where this teacher research and action took place, student achievement in

reading improved in both local and state assessments (Dotson, 2016; Lockledge, 1997). An

implication from these studies is that teacher educators must prepare pre-service teachers in

technical knowledge and skills needed to create and use valid and reliable rubrics to effectively

assess using portfolio assessments and monitoring goal-setting. However, there is a profound

lack of research on performance-based assessments, and this is an opportunity for me to add my

own teacher research to the ongoing discussion of creating authentic and useful assessments.

The goal of this study is to measure the accuracy and effectiveness of using portfolio

assessments and student goal-setting to gauge student engagement, growth, and achievement.

Methodology

There are multiple questions to consider regarding the topic of portfolio assessments and

student goal-setting. First, what happens when students are allowed to create individualized goals

for assessments within the social studies classroom? Second, how can digital portfolios be used

to differentiate student learning and to promote individual student growth in the classroom?

Finally, what if students could set their own goals throughout a learning unit and be graded based

on their individual abilities? The goal is to measure the effectiveness of using these measures to

engage student learners and provide a differentiated and positive learning experience for all

participants.

This teacher research study will focus on a public high school social studies classroom.

The students will be between the ages of sixteen and eighteen and will be enrolled in the

American History II course for juniors and seniors in North Carolina. Students will have daily

access to chromebooks and internet within the classroom as they develop digital portfolios for

the end of course assessment. The timeframe of this preliminary study will take place between

August of 2018 and January of 2019. This study will span the entirety of a semester-long

American History II social studies course.

There will be four methods of data collection. To collect qualitative data, I will first assign a questionnaire that asks introductory questions about past NC Final Exam scores in social studies courses, study practices, time spent on homework and reading each night, learning preferences, and interest in American History topics. These questions will give preliminary information about each students' abilities, interests, and potential goals for the semester. Throughout the semester-long study, I will conduct two group interviews, one at the end of the first quarter and the next at the end of the second quarter of the course to gauge student engagement, growth and achievement to date. Finally, I will take detailed field notes at the end of each week of the study. There should be eighteen field entries at the end of the study that analyzes short term growth of students and the class, as well as successes and issues that arise in the study. In order to collect quantitative data, the teacher researcher will track individual student grades on formal tests in the class, as well as the North Carolina Final Exam grades for each student. I will also track scores based on the portfolio assessment rubric at the end of each unit and at the end of the course.

When the qualitative data is collected, it will be read and memoed, described, and classified into categories that measure engagement, growth, and achievement based on the NC Essential Standards (Koshy, 2010; Rust & Clark, Teacher Leadership Network Institute). I will analyze this data and develop an argument and use the evidence to support or discredit initial claims. Quantitative data such as NC Final Exam scores and cumulative tests and rubrics will be analyzed by finding measures of central tendency such a mean, median and mode. I will also measure variability in a central question, such as standard deviation. Along with "critical" friends, I will track patterns in this data and compare it to what others have researched and

learned about the topic in order to use it to prove or disprove the action research questions.

Along with my colleagues, I will interpret the meanings of themes and patterns found in the data

and use it to write a report to tie together the study and validate the accuracy of information in

the research actions.

Discussion

The results of this study will impact my personal instructional methods in American

History II, as well as other courses. My hypothesis is that using digital portfolio assessments as

well as individualized student-goal setting methods to judge student work will positively impact

students' growth, achievement, and engagement in this social studies course. Based on the data

collected and analyzed in this study, as well as input from critical friends and colleagues, I will

implement portfolio final assessments for each social studies course that I teach. This may

provide differentiated goals, instruction, and scaffolding for each student and encourage

self-learning in post graduation endeavors for students. This will also allow the teacher to

advocate for or against individual student promotion regardless of outcomes on NC Final Exams

at the end of the course, with administrative support.

There are significant implications for changing school-wide and local practices

depending on the outcome of this study. If, in fact, the data and analysis results in proving

positive changes in achievement, engagement, and growth, using portfolio assessments and

student goal setting might be implemented in every subject within the high school setting. Each

field of study can tailor the rubric and guidelines of the portfolio to fit the needs and standards of

each course. The study, if effective in my own course, will be implemented throughout the

entire social studies department, analyzed for effectiveness, and shared with the rest of the

school. If the school deems these changes effective in promoting growth and achievement in the

majority of subjects, I plan to share the study and research ideas at district-wide professional

development sessions that are hosted each quarter in Alamance County.

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