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Breaking the Fourth Wall: Co-Constructing Evaluative Practices in the Graduate Methods Classroom

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Cover Page Footnote

1 These are all actual examples of artful media through which ABR students have worked.

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Introduction

Arts-based research (ABR) is a methodological practice that uses the arts as a means of inquiry (Guyotte & Coogler, in press). One aspect of ABR is that it subverts the logocentric, or *word*-centered, traditions of the academy, turning to the arts to explore, interrogate, and express our complex world (Eisner, 2008; Sousanis, 2015). Therefore, ABR is disruptive, nudging students into spaces that challenge their preconceptions about what does, and what *can*, count as research. As a former art teacher and current qualitative methodologist, Kelly teaches a graduate-level ABR course every other year. Carlson, an artist and graduate student, was enrolled in Kelly's ABR course in spring semester 2020; as an aspiring qualitative methodologist, she served as a mentored teacher (or co-teacher) for the course in spring 2022.

This article centers on our experiences co-teaching a semester-long qualitative ABR course by exploring a pedagogical practice implemented by Kelly—the co-construction of an evaluation rubric between teacher and student. We focus on this practice, in particular, because we believe it is uniquely situated for graduate student teaching, though it can be used across student levels. Teaching graduate students encompasses the teaching and learning of disciplinary content; however, it is also a space where students learn pedagogical strategies that may inspire their own future practices. Accordingly, alongside the final assignment in the course, students conceptualize and implement an ABR inquiry. Because these projects vary widely in their use of artful media, methods and processes, theoretical frameworks, and mode of presentation, Kelly invites each student to co-construct an evaluation rubric that will be used to assess their individual ABR inquiry assignment. Providing a starting point of criteria that must be included, though can be modified, she spends several weeks of the semester providing support for students to construct the rest of the rubric – engaging them with readings and dialogue about what “quality” means for ABR and provoking them to think about what they want their audience to notice and take away from their work. Kelly and each student then work together to tweak and polish their rubrics until both feel it effectively encapsulates their goals for the project. Once ready, Kelly uses the final version to assess their completed projects on the last night of class. This collaborative rubric is a central part of the inquiry's conceptualization and implementation, as Carlson – who experienced this activity as a student and student-teacher – can attest.

In what follows, we explain the learning objectives of the rubric-making process, clarifying the process. Together, we discuss what we learned from our experiences, especially how making the rubric “breaks the fourth wall” by disrupting what teachers and students typically do. To think about this, we draw on bell hooks's (1994) feminist liberatory pedagogy. While hooks's feminist approach is intersectional, intertwined with issues of race, class, sexual identities, and other diversities, here we focus on the feminist, relational aspects that this rubric embodies. We highlight the following possibilities in this practice: (a) problematizing the givenness of teacher/student roles and agencies in grading; (b) scaffolding the careful construction of rubrics/assignments as an experience essential for learning content and learning pedagogy; (c) and, in general, supporting students as scholars and teachers. Ultimately, students participate in pedagogically subversive and disruptive practices that prepare them for the teaching and doing of ABR, and of qualitative research.

As discussed in this introduction, this article focuses on articulating collaborative rubric-making within the ABR context. It is also important to note that this assignment can be, and has been, used in other courses. Kelly, for instance, has utilized collaborative rubric-making in other qualitative research classes; however, we believe this practice is well suited for any course or discipline with open-ended or student-directed assignments. Accordingly, we invite our readers to reimagine this assignment within their own disciplinary and pedagogical contexts.

Learning Objectives

The overarching purpose of ABR is to support students as critical readers, reflective doers, and astute evaluators of arts-based research. Thus, the rubric assignment is specifically designed to support the final ABR inquiry, a culminating assignment for the course. The learning objectives of the activity is as follows: Students will co-construct a rubric that: (a) is tailored to each student's mode of inquiry, theoretical framework, and purposes; and (b) applies the language of ABR-design criteria to their specific project. This practice makes expectations clear while increasing the collaboration and transparency of the grading process, disrupting the typical logics of summative evaluation.

Importantly, these various objectives and intents are interconnected. For instance, by making 'core' expectations for grading explicit *and* inviting students to suggest and revise additional expectations in relation to their specific inquiries, the rubric-in-development model resists the typical grading logic. While summative grading is typically unidirectional and entirely teacher-articulated and controlled, the collaboratively designed rubric elongates and opens up the submission-response pattern of grading. In this case, evaluation happens over time and is negotiated between teacher and student through conversation, as the teacher and student work together to envision an appropriate way to make sense of the inquiry project. As a result, the rubric-in-development makes teacher expectations more transparent, and it revises the grading process itself, taking that which is unidirectional (and in the case of a 'final inquiry project,' summative) and making it dialogic, formative, and multi-directional. This carves out spaces for student learning and knowledge-application even within summative evaluation, encouraging a feminist practice of engaging student negotiation in determining 'what counts.'

To be sure, the rubric helps students accomplish multiple goals. As students practically shape how they are evaluated (the alteration of categories, the negotiation of point values, and so on), they are shaping not just the rubric but the final project. Therefore, the process of designing the rubric affects the form of the rubric and the final project in at least two ways: first, through the actual revisions to the rubric, and second, how the revision process reshapes the learning process. By asking students to think about how they want their final product to be evaluated in relation to modality, purpose, existing ABR criteria, and so on, students are explicitly prompted to create with the end in mind. Certainly, this does not remove power dynamics in evaluation. It does, however, challenge the teacher's exclusive mastery/control of evaluation and situates the student in a position of authority regarding their own work. Importantly, this positioning works to intensify learning, not stall it, because revising the rubric requires that students *use* course knowledge (e.g., ABR evaluation criteria) in rubric creation as well as think carefully about their project's goals. They are putting to work what they have been learning and engaging in relative to reflexive scholarship.

Explanation

In theater, Denis Diderot is often cited as the originator of the concept of the fourth wall (Fourth Wall, n.d.) in which an imagined wall across the front of a stage separates the actor and the audience. Such a wall allows the actor to focus on their craft while ignoring the audience's presence. Breaking the fourth wall, then, refers to an action in which an actor addresses or otherwise acknowledges the audience, disrupting the perceived separation. We envision the fourth wall as a pedagogical concept that typically separates teacher and student through conventionally distinct practices such as the development and implementation of course assessments. Typically, instructors develop course assessments on their own, establishing their own criteria for what should be included within an assignment. Students, then, refer to rubrics as they compose their assignments ensuring they 'meet' or 'exceed' the articulated criteria, with little opportunity to provide feedback on how their work is evaluated. Breaking the fourth *pedagogical* wall occurs when instructors engage students in unconventional practices, for instance, inviting them to elevate their voices with regard to how they are assessed, to talk back, and to decenter who the authority actually is (hooks, 1994).

In the ABR course, students are tasked with conceptualizing and implementing an arts-based inquiry based on a research topic of interest. Since students come to ABR from a variety of disciplines, with myriad research interests, Kelly realized it would be severely limiting, and even disadvantageous, to use one singular rubric when there are endless possibilities for how the inquiry is carried out. In addition, students are allowed to use any artful medium/modality through which to inquire, as long as it makes sense with their work (e.g., form relates to content). This means that students can inquire using poetry, opera, musical composition, sculpture, painting, jewelry, and installation art, just to name a few, as well as any combination therein. Therefore, Kelly uses this opportunity to co-construct a rubric *with* the students to address the open-endedness of this assignment. This process creates a space for the students to consider and articulate what criteria pertains to their specific inquiry, according to their topic, and their medium (or media) of choice.

Another layer of this co-construction, beyond its practical benefits, is the opportunity for students to reflect on what it means to do 'quality' ABR. Therefore, Kelly engages the students in readings and consistent dialogue about evaluation, quality, and rigor as the students develop their rubrics. She encourages the students to think about the rubric as a way for them to communicate what she should be looking for in the work, and, in turn, they attune themselves to those aspects of their work *as* they work. This process-oriented focus is beneficial for the students because they can attend to the criteria of their rubrics throughout their processes, and even modify the rubric as they move forward and understand the best way to articulate the criteria. Breaking the fourth wall, then, also provides students the opportunity to engage deeply in what it means to produce 'quality' ABR while attending to the process and nuances of their particular artful research inquiries.

Assessment

The co-constructed rubrics are introduced in class to students a few months before the final product is due. Kelly shares the rubric assignment and discusses the co-construction process, providing students with a template that they can use and modify according to their needs. On this template are three criteria that Kelly explains should be addressed in some way within their projects (i.e., signage, aesthetics and quality, and illumination and evocation). These

criteria are fleshed out within three columns labeled “Advanced-,” “Proficient-,” and “Limited” Performance with indicators for each. Students are encouraged to edit these sample criteria to make sure they are aligned and compatible with their specific inquiries, as well as to add to the rubric. For instance, Carlson added a category for “Engagement with Theory” and divided “Aesthetics and Quality” into two components, each of which was written in relation to a key mode of the inquiry. Collaboration with and feedback from peers is encouraged through dedicated class time.

Once students submit a first draft of their rubric to Kelly, she uses track changes to *initiate a dialogue* with the student about how they can strengthen their work moving forward. This practice of *dialogue* is stressed to the students because the co-construction process should be dialogic *with the students* due to its process-oriented and transgressive nature (hooks, 1994). Through this, she poses questions and comments to the students within the document for them to consider and/or respond to. They have as many opportunities as they need to dialogue with Kelly about their rubrics (e.g., multiple opportunities to resubmit) until they feel the rubric is a strong representation of the work they are striving to produce. The final rubric itself is not *assessed* but is used to *assess* the student’s final inquiry project presented during the final class meeting.

Debriefing

In this section, we dialogue with each other by way of debriefing, focusing on what the rubric made possible for Carlson as a graduate student and co-teacher, and for Kelly as instructor. This dialogue takes place four months after Carlson co-taught with Kelly.

Kelly: What did you think about the rubric assignment as a student?

Carlson: As a graduate student, I loved how the assignment gave me the opportunity to affect what I was graded on. I also found it really helpful in the process of doing and communicating the inquiry. It helped me articulate for myself, for you, and for my audience, what the project’s goals were, how I was using the particular modes, how theory mattered, and so on. So, making the rubric was a process of thinking through my inquiry—it was not just about the inquiry’s conclusion.

Kelly: What about as a graduate student and co-teacher?

Carlson: As a co-teacher, I kept an eye on the students and on you; paying attention to the rubric as a teacher made your experience especially salient. I was interested in what it required of you – not just in time and effort, though certainly that – but, also in how co-constructing the evaluation process meant you opening up the role of an evaluator to students. That’s not done a lot, but I think it embodies a relational, feminist pedagogy. I think “breaking the fourth wall” in this way is very productive in the classroom and in ways that reach far beyond the specific assignment. As a student, I could not have known how it would shape my thinking about pedagogy moving forward. It stayed with me. I thought about that assignment as a model. As a teacher, it prompted me to think about how evaluation could be more relational, and how it could ‘fit’ with the epistemologies, ontologies, and ethics we advocated in class. Breaking the fourth wall in that assignment became a visible, usable, legitimate practice I could think with and do. How does it affect *your* experience as a teacher to “break the fourth wall?”

Kelly: I will be honest and say there is some discomfort. Breaking the pedagogical fourth wall requires a need to trust in the process. Like students, instructors have been conditioned to think about the evaluation/assessment process in particular ways. Often, we think *we* must be in control, and we might question whether students are capable of engaging in this co-construction process. The truth is, they are more than capable. I've co-constructed rubrics in multiple qualitative courses with enrollments varying from 6 to 20. Each time, I learn a great deal from them through our dialogues. I even draw inspiration from the way they revise my *a priori* rubric components to tweak the template over time. To me, it is this mutual trust that illustrates feminist pedagogy within this assignment. Trust, reciprocity, and valuing student perspectives (hooks, 1994). How do you think the co-construction process reflected my/our commitment to feminist pedagogy?

Carlson: I really value how it makes grading more conversational and personal. Power dynamics are always involved in instruction and evaluation, and I appreciate how the rubric does not shy from this but instead purposefully unsettles it. Rubrics are never neutral or de-personed. The process of making the rubric emphasizes the subjectivity of rubrics in a way that demonstrates how this subjectivity can be more-than the teacher's. It is very feminist to me in that way, and very essential, especially for a research methods class. There are no static, universal criteria for quality. Making the rubric together as teacher and student is a pedagogically purposeful, responsible, way of teaching that supports student learning *and* development as scholars and teachers. In breaking the fourth wall, we prepare graduate students to do the same.

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