STUDYING ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

A RESOURCE FOR TEACHERS IN SCHOOLS

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Queensland
The assistance of teachers from Mackay State High School and Rockhampton State High School is gratefully acknowledged.

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Foreword

Since the introduction of the Radford system of school-based assessment in Queensland in 1975 and the development of the present system following the ROSBA review in 1981, there has been a need for research into the quality and effectiveness of this system. The Board has met these needs with research that is characterised by the active participation of the teaching community. This modest study in response to interest from teachers in Queensland is no exception. It is a resource for teachers developed with the input of teachers who considered questions about assessment practices relevant to their own school contexts. The contribution of these and other Queensland teachers to the Board’s research effort continues to be valued and appreciated by staff of the Board.

The extent to which teachers in Queensland are interested in studying assessment practices is, I believe, one measure of the professionalism brought to the assessment work they perform. I commend the study to you as a document that offers teachers a useful tool for discussion of assessment practices relevant to the Queensland system of school-based assessment.

John Pitman
Director
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Aims

Some Queensland schools have shown interest in the development of a guideline for stimulating discussion about assessment practices in schools. In response to this interest, a checklist of questions about assessment practices useful for in-service purposes was developed. This report offers a discussion of the outcome of one in-service session with a group of teachers where the checklist was ‘road-tested’ for its relevance to school-based assessment contexts.

The report also offers some information that may be useful in designing a statewide study of assessment practices. It is not a report of assessment practices at any particular school or schools. It is a document that was designed to offer schools a useful resource to promote discussion about assessment practices. Teachers who participated in the study were offering their opinions and expertise in developing such a resource. Their input should be interpreted accordingly.
Methods, strategies and scope of study

Summary
The project is a small field study, confined to discussion and analysis of applications of Short Response Item (SRI) Immersion notes for Units 2 and 7 of the SRI paper for the Queensland Core Skills (QCS) Test. It relates specifically to marking schemes used in the 1994 SRI marking operation. These parts of the SRI Immersion notes were chosen because they relate to two very different kinds of assessment items, and offer a useful point of departure for the development of materials relevant to a range of different school marking contexts.

As part of the study, the Evaluation, Research and Development (ER&D) Division developed a checklist of assessment practices and presented it to 15 teachers at a small workshop. The workshop was facilitated by the school’s deputy principal with an officer of the ER&D Division in attendance in a support and observation capacity.

At the workshop, teachers completed the checklist by indicating the extent to which each question on the checklist was relevant to their own marking contexts.

Phase one: Preparation of the checklist of questions relevant to marking processes
In this phase of the study, a checklist was developed by analysing the 1994 SRI marking schemes for Units 2 and 7. This first draft of the checklist is included in appendix 1.

However, the elaborate marking schemes used in the QCS Test marking operation were developed for a very specific context. Appendix 2 contains materials developed for teacher use at the workshop and represents the answer developed by the ER&D Division in response to the question, ‘How can the questions suggested by the SRI Immersion notes [in appendix 1] be further developed into a set of questions that teachers may find relevant?’.

Appendix 2 shows how the SRI Immersion notes may be applicable to teacher marking situations, particularly practices of reflection upon marking processes. The questionnaire was designed so that teachers could tick one of four boxes in response to each question, in this way indicating the relevance and practicability of that question to their own contexts.

Phase two: Teacher feedback
The workshop with teachers was held on the 23 November 1994. The 15 participating teachers were asked to bring assessment items with them that they judged to resemble Units 2 and 7 of the SRI paper for the QCS Test; for example, assessment items that included one or more of the following core curriculum elements (CCEs) assessed by these units:
• calculating
• applying a progression of steps
• comparing and contrasting
• using correct spelling and punctuation
• deducing
• judging
• using vocabulary appropriate to a context.
The workshop was conducted as a single four-hour in-service session with two parts:

- **Part one — Identifying performance domains (including CCEs)**
  
  *Purpose:* To identify knowledge and skills, including CCEs, measured by given assessment items with a view to also understanding the design of assessment instruments.

  *Activity:* Teachers were asked to use the first part of the checklist to examine one of their own classroom assessment items and develop lists of knowledge, skills and CCEs measured by this assessment item.

- **Part two — Assessment practices**
  
  *Purpose:* To reflect upon marking processes and provide feedback about the practicality of the second part of the checklist.

  *Activity:* 1. Individual activity: Teachers were asked to read and respond to part two of the checklist by indicating the relevance of these questions to *their own marking contexts*.

  2. Group activity: Workshop participants were then asked to work in groups of about four to respond to part two of the checklist by indicating the relevance of these questions to their school marking contexts *in the opinion of the group*.

The structure of the checklist in appendix 2 is summarised below:

- Part one is a set of three questions about identifying the knowledge and skills, including CCEs, measured by a particular assessment item.

- Part two is a set of 32 questions about specific assessment practices that can be broadly grouped as: scrutinising the assessment item, the tools of assessment, the marking task/marking processes, and self-evaluation of marking practices. Teachers were asked to indicate the relevance of each question by ticking one of four boxes (this question is . . . not asked and not practicable/not asked but is practicable/is asked but is not practicable/is asked and is practicable). The value of this kind of structured response is that it allowed teachers participating in the trial workshop to make quick, balanced judgments about the extent to which an identifiable practice of assessment is meaningful to their own quite specific marking contexts.
The data

As noted above, the ‘data’ obtained in this study are by way of teacher advice and opinions about the usefulness of the checklist for teachers in schools. Accordingly, the data obtained at the workshop allow further discussion and speculation about specific features of the checklist in this report.

Responses for the group activity only were collected after the meeting. There were three groups of teachers at the meeting. Interestingly, although groups were asked to reach a consensus, in many cases this did not occur.

Figures 1 to 4 summarise responses to part two of the questionnaire, which addressed specific assessment practices; that is, one score indicates that one or more persons in one group ticked that response to that question. A score of two on the vertical axis indicates that one or more persons in two groups ticked that response to that question and so on.

Figure 1

'Not asked and not practicable' response

Scores for groups

Questions

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32
Figure 2

'Not asked but is practicable' response

Figure 3

'Is asked but is not practicable' response
This study does not offer any data about teaching practices at any school. It does offer some data about how a very small group of teachers responded to questions about the relevance of a questionnaire about assessment practices based on SRI Immersion notes. The value of the data is as a point of departure for discussion about the possible relevance of SRI Immersion notes and other aspects of Board procedures for marking operations. The data might also be helpful in considering the kind of research design that could be used in a study of assessment practices.

Figure 4 suggests that for every question on the checklist, there was at least one teacher in at least two groups who indicated the question is asked in teacher assessment contexts and is also practicable. This could suggest that the checklist had a reasonably high level of acceptability and perceived relevance for teachers at the meeting.

At the other extreme, figure 1 shows that at least one teacher in one group indicated that questions 8, 9, 10 and 12 were ‘not asked and not practicable’. One hypothesis might be that these questions are not so much irrelevant but rather questions that have a subject-specific relevance. For example, question 8 requires teachers to consider whether the assessment item is ‘a completely closed assessment item involving only one possible response and only one way of expressing it’. An English teacher might argue that this question is irrelevant because of the necessarily open nature of assessment items. Similarly for question 10, a mathematics teacher might argue that ‘an open assessment item involving different kinds of responses and different ways of expressing responses’ is not relevant. These speculations suggest that issues of subject specificity in assessment should be of particular interest in a larger study of assessment practices.

Figure 2 shows another pattern of responding — questions on the checklist that evoked the response ‘not asked but is practicable’ with the implication that the question should be asked. This figure suggests that at least some teachers participating in the study felt that particular questions about their knowledge of the assessment item, the tools of assessment, and the marking task are the kinds of questions that they should be asking. However, there is a marked
absence of this kind of response to questions relating to self-evaluation of marking practices —
the exceptions are question 21 ‘Do my marking decisions involve a clear interpretation of the
terms used in the criteria for each student result?’ and question 22 ‘Have I scrutinised my
reading of the criteria for each student result to identify and resolve any possible ambiguities in
my interpretation and use of this criteria?’ In short, when we consider assessment practices that
these teachers felt they could be following to a greater extent than might be the case, questions
about the interpretation of criteria are of particular interest, rather than other questions to do
with self-evaluation of marking practices.

Figure 3 gives a visual impression of yet another pattern of responding to the checklist —
questions that teachers felt are asked but probably should not be because, for various reasons,
they are impracticable. This figure suggests that more of the questions in the checklist under the
category of self-evaluation of marking practices evoked this response. There are many reasons
teachers may have responded in this way to these particular questions. We could speculate that:

• question 23 ‘For any student responses that may attract marginal decisions between grades,
have I scrutinised the criteria to see if it offers useful indications about how to resolve these
instances?’ may be something some teachers feel they do, although, at the same time,
perhaps they feel that the in-practice scrutinising of criteria does not always offer a way of
resolving questions about marginal grades, or that it is not feasible to perform this scrutiny
for every assessment item.

• question 25 ‘Do my marking practices allow me to consider, where appropriate, the full
range of different but equally correct answers students may arrive at?’ may be something
some teachers feel they attempt to do, but at the same time, consider impracticable in every
assessment context. The consideration of the full range of different but equally correct
answers is a very labour-intensive task, and decisions about what represents different but
equally correct answers are difficult and demanding decisions.
Conclusions

The study indicates support for the idea that some aspects of Board procedures for marking operations offer a useful point of departure for developing teacher resources. That is, SRI Immersion notes do offer a basis for developing in-service materials for staff, and for developing a research instrument for collecting teacher perceptions of the relevance and prevalence of particular marking practices. Teachers responded positively to the task of completing the checklist, and their responses indicated they did not generally feel the questions were framed in an obscure manner or a manner that was far removed from their own immediate concerns and marking contexts. The checklist appeared to prompt a great deal of highly relevant discussion about assessment practices, indicating its usefulness to schools.

However, the study also indicated that the SRI Immersion notes do not have an obvious and immediate utility for schools. As appendices 1 and 2 suggest, several stages of analysis of the SRI notes are required to produce materials that are useful in school assessment contexts, given the quite specific priorities and protocols of Board marking operations. Interestingly, the principles induced by scrutiny of the SRI Immersion notes for Units 2 and 7 are very similar ones — the observation that the checklist would not change radically with the inclusion of analysis of the 1994 SRI Immersion notes for other units is probably correct.

The value of a research study of assessment practices in Queensland schools is indicated by the following points:

• There has not been a comprehensive Queensland study of assessment practices of this kind, which has as its backdrop the issues of comparability sketched in the Viviani Report. There is a need for such a study using a non-intrusive research design that can be quickly and easily completed by a large number of teachers.

• As a resource for such a study, the Board currently has materials from its marking operations — for example, the 1994 SRI Immersion notes — offering a point of departure for developing very specific and relevant questions about teacher assessment practices that are both rigorous and valid. However, the checklist used in this study would need to be further developed, trialled and refined before it could be used as a research instrument.

• Teachers’ responses in this study indicated that the act of completing the checklist was a useful form of professional development and self-evaluation of their own assessment practices, i.e. a research project that promoted teacher participation in discussion of marking practices would represent a useful strategy in highlighting assessment issues in Queensland.

Accordingly, a research project developing the work begun here should make a useful contribution to assessment practices in Queensland.
Appendices

Appendix 1: Application of SRI Immersion notes to the task of developing a marking scheme — a checklist of questions

Preliminary questions

- Do I have a thorough knowledge of the stimulus material that I can use to approach the task of setting up a marking scheme that will specify a range of possible student responses?
- Have I identified the relevant CCEs or the performance domain to be assessed?
- Have I thought through the requirements of the item, that is, how this item tests the CCEs or performance domain?
- Have I established if there are one or more parts of the assessment item testing different CCEs and requiring different student responses and separate assessment decisions?

Identifying the relevant parts of the marking scheme to be developed

- Have I identified the relevant parts of a marking scheme that need to be developed
  - a list of the relevant CCEs to be assessed (performance domain)?
  - a list of the desirable features of a student response (that is, how achievement in CCEs is demonstrated in responses to this assessment item)?
  - an exemplar (that is, an example of an ‘A’ student response that is both accurate and complete)?
  - a set of notes qualifying or clarifying the marking scheme?
    and
  - a marking grid for each part of an assessment item (requiring different student responses and separate assessment decisions) that provides descriptors of appropriate student responses for each possible grade?

Developing the marking grid

Preliminary questions

- Have I given preliminary consideration to the fact that, depending on the CCEs to be evaluated, some marking schemes (such as those for language responses) may be more ‘open’ and require more scope for marker interpretation while others may not?
- Have I established about where the marking scheme will be on a continuum from completely closed to somewhat closed to open, that is,
  a completely closed marking scheme that will specify only one possible response and only one way of expressing it?
  or
  a somewhat closed marking scheme that will specify one response and different ways of expressing it?
  or
  an open marking scheme that does not specify responses or ways of expressing responses?
Writing descriptors for student results

- Have I identified, where appropriate, the range of different student responses that would be awarded the same result?
- Have I identified, where appropriate, the different forms of expression student responses might take for each grade?
- Have I identified, where appropriate, the different ways in which students give partial answers and various combinations of these in the appropriate descriptors on the marking grid?
- Have I identified the kinds and range of errors in student responses that are likely to occur (for example, omission, addition and/or ambiguity) in order to clearly establish what an ‘A’ response with no errors is as well as the grades of responses with various errors?
- Have I identified what is immaterial to the award of a grade?
- Have I provided sufficient detail so students will not be inappropriately penalised?
- Have I provided sufficient detail so students will be appropriately penalised?

Refining and evaluating the marking scheme

- Does the marking grid with grades and descriptors correspond to real differences in performance that are readily discernible in student work?
- Does the marking scheme allow me to make sound on-balance judgments about point-at-able features of different student responses?
- Have I developed a clear interpretation of the terms used in the descriptor for each student result?
- Have I scrutinised the marking grid to identify and resolve any possible ambiguities in interpreting and using it?
- Have I identified any student responses that may attract marginal decisions between grades and scrutinised the marking grid to see if it offers useful indications about how to resolve these instances?
- Have I established what student responses not covered by the marking scheme are likely?
- Have I considered, where appropriate, that there are different but equally correct ways in which students may arrive at an answer?
- Does the marking grid include reference to an ‘N’ response or a blank or intelligible response that does not satisfy any of the descriptors?
- Have I provided notes qualifying or clarifying the descriptors in the marking scheme in order to provide further information, if necessary, about the variation in the way in which students communicate information?
- Have I ‘road-tested’ the marking scheme by consulting with other teachers to determine if the marking scheme is reliable, that is, different teachers marking the same student work will award the same result?

Using the marking scheme

- Have I identified and set aside any issues such as
  - personal expectations of individual students
  - preconceived notions of the distribution of grades
  - issues that are not relevant to the validity of the assessment item (for example, untidy printing or printing in the wrong place)

in order that I may focus upon applying the marking scheme?
Appendix 2: Agenda and materials for an assessment workshop

Assessment practices: some questions about the marking process and CCEs

9.00 Introduction and overview by workshop facilitators

Workshop structure

Part 1: Identifying performance domains (including CCEs)

*Purpose:* To identify knowledge and skills, including CCEs, measured by given assessment items with a view to also understanding the design of assessment instruments

*Activity:* Teachers will be asked to use the checklist in part one in an exercise which requires them to examine one of their own classroom assessment items and develop lists of knowledge and skills as well as CCEs measured by this assessment item.

Part 2: Assessment practices

*Purpose:* To reflect upon marking processes and provide feedback about the practicality of the checklist in part two

*Activity:* 1. Individual activity: teachers will be asked to read and respond to part two of the checklist, by indicating the relevance of these questions to *their own marking contexts.*

2. Group activity: workshop participants will then be asked to work in groups of about four to respond to part two of the checklist by indicating the relevance of these questions to their school marking contexts in *the opinion of the group.*

Debriefing by facilitators

12.00 Close
A checklist of some questions about assessment practices

The nature and status of this checklist

The following checklist of questions is not all-inclusive and does not represent a comprehensive, or in all cases relevant, ‘guide’ to ‘good’ assessment practices.

Assessment situations vary greatly across different subjects and accordingly not all of the questions below are relevant to every assessment situation or every subject. The checklist of questions that follows does represent a list of some provisional questions that have some basis in the 1994 SRI Immersion notes for Units 2 and 7 only. Accordingly, this list might be useful to teachers as one possible source of some questions about assessment practices. The task of developing good assessment practices will necessarily involve considering many other kinds of information and questions.

It is not expected that the answer to each of the questions in this checklist will be, or should be, ‘yes’ in every case. Yet if we think of the process of rigorously thinking about and critically evaluating assessment practices as useful, then the act of asking these and other questions (regardless of the answer) could be considered valuable in itself.

‘Good’ assessment practices are not synonymous with equity in assessment, although it is true that you cannot have one without the other. This checklist offers some provisional questions aimed at achieving ‘good’ assessment practices as they relate to the marking process. Part one of the checklist refers to the design of assessment instruments, because consideration of this is integral to both equity in assessment and good assessment practices.
Part one: Identifying performance domains (including CCEs)

Part one of the workshop is about identifying knowledge and skills, including CCEs, measured by assessment items with a view to also understanding the design of assessment instruments.

You are asked to use the checklist in part one in an exercise that requires you to examine one of your own classroom assessment items and develop lists of knowledge and skills as well as CCEs measured by this assessment item.

Have I identified what the assessment item measures in three steps by

1. listing the broad range of knowledges and skills this assessment item measures (that is, knowledge and skills that are relevant as well as knowledge and skills that may not be relevant)?

2. narrowing the list developed in step one by listing only those knowledges and skills that might be relevant whether they are subject specific or not?

3. narrowing the list developed in step two, by listing all the CCEs that can be matched with the knowledges and skills identified in step two?
Part 2: Assessment practice

The purpose of your participation in Part two of the workshop is to reflect upon marking processes and provide feedback about the relevance of the checklist in part two.

This part of the workshop will involve one task, which you will first complete as an individual and then as a group of about four.

1. Individual activity: you will be asked to read and respond to part two of the checklist by indicating the relevance of these questions to your own marking contexts.

2. Group activity: you will then be asked to work in groups of about four to respond to part two of the checklist by indicating the relevance of these questions to your school marking contexts in the opinion of the group.

The assessment item

1. Do I have a thorough knowledge of the stimulus material?

   - not asked and not practicable □ is asked but is not practicable □
   - not asked but is practicable □ is asked and is practicable □

2. Have I established if there are one or more parts of the assessment item measuring different performance domains and requiring different student responses and separate assessment decisions?

   - not asked and not practicable □ is asked but is not practicable □
   - not asked but is practicable □ is asked and is practicable □

3. Have I advised students beforehand what this assessment item measures?

   - not asked and not practicable □ is asked but is not practicable □
   - not asked but is practicable □ is asked and is practicable □

The tools of assessment

4. Have I developed:
   - a list of the relevant performance domains (including CCEs)?

   - not asked and not practicable □ is asked but is not practicable □
   - not asked but is practicable □ is asked and is practicable □

5. a description of the desirable features of a student response (showing how achievement in the performance domains is demonstrated in responses to this assessment item)?

   - not asked and not practicable □ is asked but is not practicable □
   - not asked but is practicable □ is asked and is practicable □

6. an exemplar (that is, an example of an ‘A’ student response that is both accurate and complete)?

   - not asked and not practicable □ is asked but is not practicable □
   - not asked but is practicable □ is asked and is practicable □
7. – for each part of an assessment item (requiring different student responses and separate assessment decisions) an understanding of the appropriate student responses for each possible grade?

not asked and not practicable  □  is asked but is not practicable  □
not asked but is practicable  □  is asked and is practicable  □

The marking task

Preliminary questions

8. Have I established about where the assessment item/s will be on a continuum from completely closed to somewhat closed to open, that is,
– a completely closed assessment item involving only one possible response and only one way of expressing it?

not asked and not practicable  □  is asked but is not practicable  □
not asked but is practicable  □  is asked and is practicable  □

or

9. – a somewhat closed assessment item involving one response and different ways of expressing it?

not asked and not practicable  □  is asked but is not practicable  □
not asked but is practicable  □  is asked and is practicable  □

or

10. – an open assessment item involving different kinds of responses and different ways of expressing responses?

not asked and not practicable  □  is asked but is not practicable  □
not asked but is practicable  □  is asked and is practicable  □

The marking process

11. Have I considered, where appropriate, the range of different student responses that could be awarded the same result?

not asked and not practicable  □  is asked but is not practicable  □
not asked but is practicable  □  is asked and is practicable  □

12. Have I considered, where appropriate, the different forms of expression student responses might take for each grade?

not asked and not practicable  □  is asked but is not practicable  □
not asked but is practicable  □  is asked and is practicable  □
13. Have I considered, where appropriate, the different ways in which students give partial answers and various combinations of these?

- not asked and not practicable
- not asked but is practicable

14. Have I considered the kinds and range of errors in student responses that are likely to occur (for example, omission, addition and/or ambiguity) in order to clearly establish what an ‘A’ response with no errors is as well as the grades of responses with various errors?

- not asked and not practicable
- not asked but is practicable

15. Have I considered what is immaterial to the award of a grade?

- not asked and not practicable
- not asked but is practicable

16. Have I sufficiently considered the distinction between features that must be present for the award of a particular grade and features that, if present, will lead to the award of a lower grade?

- not asked and not practicable
- not asked but is practicable

17. Have I sufficiently considered the above so students will not be inappropriately penalised?

- not asked and not practicable
- not asked but is practicable

18. Have I sufficiently considered the above so students will be appropriately penalised?

- not asked and not practicable
- not asked but is practicable

Evaluating my marking practices

19. Do my decisions about the award of grades correspond to real differences in performance that are readily discernible in student work?

- not asked and not practicable
- not asked but is practicable

20. Do my marking decisions involve sound on-balance judgments about point-at-able features of student responses?

- not asked and not practicable
- not asked but is practicable
21. Do my marking decisions involve a clear interpretation of the terms used in the criteria for each student result?
   - not asked and not practicable □
   - is asked but is not practicable □
   - not asked but is practicable □
   - is asked and is practicable □

22. Have I scrutinised my reading of the criteria for each student result to identify and resolve any possible ambiguities in my interpretation and use of this criteria?
   - not asked and not practicable □
   - is asked but is not practicable □
   - not asked but is practicable □
   - is asked and is practicable □

23. For any student responses that may attract marginal decisions between grades have I scrutinised the criteria to see if it offers useful indications about how to resolve these instances?
   - not asked and not practicable □
   - is asked but is not practicable □
   - not asked but is practicable □
   - is asked and is practicable □

24. Are my readings of the criteria consistent across the work of different students?
   - not asked and not practicable □
   - is asked but is not practicable □
   - not asked but is practicable □
   - is asked and is practicable □

25. Do my marking practices allow me to consider, where appropriate, the full range of different but equally correct answers students may arrive at?
   - not asked and not practicable □
   - is asked but is not practicable □
   - not asked but is practicable □
   - is asked and is practicable □

26. Do my readings of the criteria allow me to appropriately recognise, where necessary, the variation in the way in which students communicate information?
   - not asked and not practicable □
   - is asked but is not practicable □
   - not asked but is practicable □
   - is asked and is practicable □

27. Is my understanding of the marking criteria I am using specific enough to clearly distinguish this particular assessment item or instrument from others?
   - not asked and not practicable □
   - is asked but is not practicable □
   - not asked but is practicable □
   - is asked and is practicable □

28. Do I discuss my marking practices with other teachers and consult with them where appropriate in order to gain information that may be useful to self-evaluation of my marking practices?
   - not asked and not practicable □
   - is asked but is not practicable □
   - not asked but is practicable □
   - is asked and is practicable □
29. Are my marking practices consistent with those used by other teachers so that it is likely that student work I mark will be awarded the same result by other teachers?

not asked and not practicable  □  is asked but is not practicable  □
not asked but is practicable  □  is asked and is practicable  □

30. Have I identified and set aside any issues such as
   – my personal expectations of individual students?

not asked and not practicable  □  is asked but is not practicable  □
not asked but is practicable  □  is asked and is practicable  □

31. – any preconceived notions of the distribution of grades?

not asked and not practicable  □  is asked but is not practicable  □
not asked but is practicable  □  is asked and is practicable  □

32. – issues that are not relevant to the validity of the assessment item (for example, untidy writing or writing in the wrong place)?

not asked and not practicable  □  is asked but is not practicable  □
not asked but is practicable  □  is asked and is practicable  □

in order that I may focus upon applying the assessment criteria to point-at-able features of student work?