Rubrics as an Assessment Tool in Distance Education

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INTRODUCTION

Effective communication of the grading process to students is a concern that many online instructors face. The purpose of this entry is to show how the use of a rubric as an assessment tool clarifies for distance education instructors and their students the expectations, criteria, and performance levels of assignments, plus – more importantly – how the rubric details the description of the earned grade.

Many student activities can be assessed similarly in a distance learning situation to the building-based environment. There are traditional assignments, such as multiple choice tests and homework, which measure students' ability to absorb content information. Alternate assessments—such as paintings, stories, projects, essays, portfolios, journals, web page designs, simulations, group activities, PowerPoint® presentations, self-evaluations, etc.—ask the student to demonstrate their knowledge about the learning process or the quality and effectiveness of some product that they have authored.

Herman, Aschbacher, and Winters (1992) describe the process of creating alternative assessments to include linking assessment and instruction, selecting assessment tasks, setting criteria, ensuring reliable scoring, completing student self-assessment activities, and identifying decision making moments. Often, when adopting the ideas of alternative assessments, instructors focus only on creating new and innovative activity directions without matching them to reliable scoring. Montgomery (2002) identifies that traditional grading for these alternative assessments often is through proofreader marks or teacher comments in the margins of the document that can be open to interpretation. Without specific criteria identified that match the learning objective for the activity, the grading becomes subjective and non-effective for student improvement (Andrade 2000: Herman, Aschbacher & Winters, 1992; Montgomery 2002; & Sanders, 2001).

WHAT IS A RUBRIC?

The Latin *rubrica terra* (or red earth) is the origin of the word "rubric." The evolution of the word over time moved from marking sections of medieval manuscripts with red notations to the identification of various sections of rules. The term rubric today is a set of rules for grading a classroom activity that includes defining the outcomes to be evaluated at a basic through mastery level (Marzano, Pickering, & McTighe, 1993; Popham, 1997; Taggart, Phifer, Nixon, & Wood, 1998).

A rubric lists the criteria of the activity that matches the instructional performance objectives of the lesson or course. The rubric can be categorical — a simple checklist — to see if various parts of the assignment are present. It can offer details on scoring which identifies each specific criteria of the activity plus degrees of performance, usually using words that describe the levels as poor, good, better, and best. Or the rubric can be holistic where there is a summative list of characteristics sorted by performance that can be used to show overall what is exemplary, standard, or poor work. One type of rubric that can be utilized effectively to assist the communication between asynchronous teachers and students who are at a distance is called either the detailed or descriptive rubric.

Descriptive Rubric

Once the instructional and performance objectives have been identified for a lesson or course, the following step is to design the alternative assessment including both the directions of the activity plus the rubric with scoring criteria and performance levels. Both criteria and performance levels are "described" in a grid format so that students visually can see that they can move from one level to the next higher level to obtain a higher grade (see Figure 1).

Points are assigned for each column of performance with the low column often showing no points, the basic

Figure 1. Sample descriptive rubric format

	Performance Low	Performance Basic	Performance Standard	Performance Commendable
Criteria 1	Poor	Good	Better	Best
Criteria 2	Poor	Good	Better	Best
Criteria 3	Poor	Good	Better	Best

column shows some points, the standard "passing" points, and the commendable shows exceptional points identifying 100% mastery of the criteria. Students use the rubric while creating their product to "see" what the teacher means by "ok" versus "exceptional" work. Some students are willing to "slide by" with a minimum effort, and, using the rubric, they now have the details of what they must do minimally to pass this activity. Other students are over achievers and they will do everything that they can to hit the "mastery level" performance for all criteria activities. By "seeing" what the teacher wants before the activity is created, distance learners can budget their time for the "level" that they are targeting for their performance and their grade.

Using the Descriptive Rubric

After the product is completed, the student uses the rubric for self-evaluation purposes. This gives the opportunity to check the product once again against the criteria to be sure that all items have been included, and, if not, gives the student an opportunity to edit or "fix" the item that is missing or incomplete. This activity also gives the student a chance to "reflect" on the process of learning that evolved through completing this activity.

Once submitted, the instructor can grade students' products by choosing the level of performance for each criterion. By adjudicating students' work against the predefined rubric, each grade is assigned. By analyzing all rubrics for that class and activity, the instructor can identify if there are trends within a certain number of student products where certain criteria have not been met, where directions may not have been clear, or where the rubric performance level descriptions were ambiguous. This can lead to remedial or new instruc-

tion on the missed criteria and/or a "lesson learned" to change the directions or wording on the directions or rubric for next term.

Grading with the Descriptive Rubric

A graded rubric, whether through student self-reflection or instructor final adjudication, shows that most students do not stay strictly within one column or another for performance but they float through different mastery levels that are particular to each criterion (see Figure 2).

In this illustration, both the student and the instructor know that Criteria 2 and 4 have been met at a mastery level, criteria 1 and 5 have been met generally, and criteria 3 needs some remediation.   On this particular rubric, the points have been assigned by "skipping" over the "unlisted" points 2 and 4. In some situations, the instructor might identify a person who is somewhere "in between" two columns and be able to assign "unlisted" points to show the student that they are moving away from one level, toward the next one, but that they have not yet fully arrived (see Figure 3).

Here the student can see that movement is achieved for criteria 3 and 5 but that full performance for the next level has not yet been demonstrated.

Criteria within an activity are not always equal in status for the assignment. In that case, the rubric can display the criteria and its weight to the whole assignment. To calculate the overall student performance on a weighted criteria rubric, each criteria's earned points are multiplied times its weight. The results for each weighted criteria are added together to gain an overall mastery score (see Figure 4).

Rubrics can be separate documents attached to the assignment or, depending on the activity, they can be

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