

# Chapter 13

## Using Rubrics as Feedforward Tools for Subject Contextualized Dialogue

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter outlines an approach to using rubrics in a feedforward process using dialogue between teachers and students that takes place before students hand in their assignments. As such, it aims to complement existing research demonstrating the value of rubrics for feedback and for understanding subject content and assignments. After reviewing some key work on the use of rubrics, the chapter outlines theory around three areas; the importance of context to rubric terminology; the nature of dialogue; the specificity of language to individual assignments to a degree that resists any universal or future transfer to other assignments. The chapter then provides three examples of potential questions to focus dialogue using rubrics to help students understand what is expected of them in their assignments. The approach is then discussed, specifically in terms of the conditions that can facilitate it, and suggestions made for how others could use it.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

We work in Higher Education. We are lecturers based in departments. Our roles are to support students (and lecturers) with student work and assignments. One of us is based in a School of Computing. The other is based in The Business School. We teach in modules and alongside subject lecturers. Our remit and goal is to help students understand what is required of them in their academic work here. We are not part of a centralized unit, we do not consider what we do as delivering ‘Study Skills’ ‘Academic Skills’ or such like, and feel in fact no such things exist (see Richards & Pilcher, 2020a) a view we fully

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acknowledge is not without its detractors nor an uncontroversial one (see Richards & Pilcher, 2021). What we ourselves do is to support students in their subjects, and in the context of the subject, through using the assignments and materials the students are required to know for their subject degrees. Integral to our doing this are rubrics created by lecturers – these provide us with a focus to support students before they hand in their work, and through a process of dialogue in the context of the subject.

Many studies demonstrate the effectiveness of rubrics as tools for feedback (Frey et al, 2018; Pastore & Andrade, 2019; Andrade & Brookhart, 2020), and consider how rubrics work more effectively when given transparently or with teacher dialogue (Wollenschläger et al 2016). Some show individualised feedback to be more effective than generic feedback (Wollenschläger et al 2016) and underline the importance in training students how to interpret feedback (Sadler, 1998). Rubrics are invariably used with the aspiration of helping students approach future tasks through applying what they have learned to these future tasks (Sandrade et al, 2009; Wohlschlaeger et al; 2016).

Nevertheless, some are sceptical such aspirations are achievable (e.g. Sandrade et al., 2009), and others note the unequal power position in the relationship between teachers (understood here to mean teachers, tutors, lecturers etc) and students (Sadler, 1998), noting that teachers have numerous advantages over students in their knowledge of the task, criteria and standards (Sadler, 1998). Indeed, it is stressed that teachers should help students with understanding terminology, and considered essential that teachers “be literate” in the discourses of assessment before they can “help students to recognise (read), realise (speak) and move between the multiple discourses of schooling” (Willis et al, 2013, p. 243). Teachers need to be able to “recontextualise” knowledge to help students understand its function (Bernstein, 1996, p.47)

Such research uses rubrics to help students through a perspective that in essence harnesses them in feed *back*. Undoubtedly, students are provided with rubrics in advance in the form of marking and assessment criteria in guides and handbooks, and told these rubrics will assist them in their work and understanding of what is required. Also undoubtedly, teachers and lecturers will tell students that, for example, an ‘excellent level of work will involve or require the aspects that are described in the rubric itself, for example to show ‘excellent use of references’ or ‘excellent illustration of design.’ Here the rubric is ostensibly ‘fed forward’ although only later will students see their ‘feedback.’ In other words, students are only told how their own assessments align with rubrics *after* their assessment in order to help them to understand their performance (e.g. Sadler, 1998; Sandrade et al., 2009; Wollenschläger et al 2016; Andrade & Brookhart, 2020). Even where rubrics are explicitly stated as being used in a process of feed-forward (De Boer et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2021) the way they are used for feed-*forward* is through a use of them in feed-*back* for *students* to then take these forward. Here, however they are used, the goal is to use rubrics to help students understand learning from a specific individual assessment after it has been done, to then take that understanding forward to future, different, assessments, even if this is named as being feed-forward.

We argue there are a number assumptions involved with this approach; firstly, it is assumed in both cases that lecturer understandings of words and meanings will be shared by students; secondly it is assumed students will know how to interpret the words and meanings in the rubric in a subject context; thirdly, there is an assumption that if students understand the word ‘excellent’ in one context it applies universally to all others. The latter is both the case where it is assumed feedback from one rubric will help with future assignments, but particularly the case where it is assumed certain terminology and its meaning applies universally. In this chapter we challenge these three assumptions both theoretically and practically and outline an approach where we use rubrics in a feed *forward* process as a focal point for subject contextualised dialogue between teacher and students *before* a specific individual assessment

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