

Chapter 17

What Is Next for Rubrics? A Reflection on Where We Are and Where to Go From Here

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ABSTRACT

Rubrics have become ubiquitous in compulsory education and common in higher education. As with any educational innovation, it is time to reflect on the current state of rubrics and how to move ahead. This chapter identifies common conceptions of the rubric that are problematic and proposes redefining the word rubric in terms of learning goals to better align with classroom assessment uses. Feasible suggestions for ensuring the quality of rubrics and avoiding unintended negative consequences for students are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

My first article about rubrics was published in *Educational Leadership* in 1996—nearly three decades ago. Since then, rubrics have become ubiquitous in compulsory education and common in higher education. As with any educational innovation, it is time to stand back and reflect on the current state of rubrics and how we might move ahead. In this chapter I focus on our conception of the rubric as problematic but salvageable and propose that we reframe the term to better align with classroom assessment uses.

BACKGROUND

It is tempting to begin with a brief history of rubrics in education, but Dawson (2017) has provided a detailed review that I will not attempt to improve upon except to add that the Rubric was part of the Catholic church's fourteenth-century Service Book, which described in excruciating detail the rules regarding religious ceremonies, vestments, the placement of furniture, and the like (Lewis, 1877). That is not what we are talking about here, obviously. The definition of the term *rubric* that I will defend in this

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-6086-3.ch017

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chapter is as follows: A rubric is a document that articulates the learning goals for a task and describes varying levels of mastery of those goals.

This is an unusual definition because of the reference to *learning goals* rather than *expectations* (e.g., Stevens & Levi, 2013) or *criteria* (e.g., Brookhart & Chen, 2015). It represents my attempt to reframe the definition of *rubric* to more explicitly represent its usefulness as a tool for teaching and learning. Rubrics have their roots in measurement, and much of the early research on them emphasized their summative aspects (Panadero & Jönsson, 2013). But the purposes of rubrics go far beyond measurement. The purposes of a rubric are to support teachers in designing instruction that addresses the goals, communicating the goals to students, guiding feedback from a variety of sources on students' progress toward the goals, and judging final products in terms of the degree to which the goals were met. Happily, in the hands of educators the rubric has come to serve the purposes of learning, but the measurement-oriented definition stuck. That is, we define rubrics in terms of grading and scoring, but we use them as instructional tools. We think of rubrics as useful tools for feedback, but we write rubrics as guidelines for evaluation. It is this disconnect between form and function, or features and purpose, that is the main concern of this chapter.

This disconnect is not surprising, given that at least some popular guidance on rubric design neglects learning goals (e.g., Panadero & Jönsson, 2020). In fact, the very definition of the term *rubric* often emphasizes measurement and grading, often to the exclusion of learning goals, objectives, or targets. I made that mistake myself back in 1996 when I defined a rubric as “a scoring tool that lists the criteria for a piece of work, or ‘what counts’... [and] articulates gradations of quality for each criterion, from excellent to poor” (p. 14). I went on to add that “they are powerful tools for both teaching and assessment” and can “help students become more thoughtful judges of the quality of their own and others' work when they are used to guide self- and peer assessment” (p. 14), but those teaching and learning-oriented purposes were secondary to the scoring tool definition.

RUBRICS FOR MEASUREMENT VERSUS LEARNING

This measurement-based definition followed by learning-oriented uses is common. Mabry (1999) might call it a problem of “the shackles of psychometric habit” (p. 678). Take, for example, this definition from an excellent article by McTighe and Frontier (2022) about using rubrics to guide feedback: “Rubrics are typically used by teachers to judge the degree of students' understanding, proficiency levels of skills, the quality of their products or performances, and their growth from one level to the next. But beyond being evaluation tools, rubrics can be an excellent way to give feedback for improving teaching and learning” (p. 17). Judgment and measurement first, teaching and learning second. For another example, take Dawson's (2017) definition. After pointing out that the term has a variety of meanings, he writes, “a rubric is a tool used in the process of assessing student work that usually includes Popham's (1997) three essential features: evaluative criteria, quality definitions for those criteria at particular levels and a scoring strategy” (p. 349). This is an evaluative definition but like me (1996), McTighe and Frontier (2022), and many others (e.g., Arter & McTighe, 2001; Smit et al., 2017), he goes on to list their instructional uses as well: “Rubrics are more than just a tool used to support assessors in making summative judgements. Teachers also use rubrics as a way to provide feedback information.... Students can use rubrics in a range of ways, including self and peer assessment, and in interrogating the requirements of a task” (p. 355).

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