Chapter 10
Rubrics as Tools for Effective Assessment of Student Learning and Program Quality

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the potential of rubrics as tools for effective assessment and introduce the concepts of rubric assessment, construction, testing, and implementation, with critical stakeholder involvement and leadership support. Rubrics should be designed to align to outcomes and assess the level of achievement for each major component of an assignment. They can be constructed in a variety of ways with various kinds of points allocations. From design to implementation, a range of stakeholders including subject, curriculum, and assessment experts should be involved to ensure the rubric descriptions use measurable verbs and objective language. Rubrics design is an iterative process with an aim to continuously improve their effectiveness. Done well, rubrics can serve as support to student learning, consistent and transparent evaluation of students work, and course, program, and institutional learning quality assessment.

INTRODUCTION

"When teachers' classroom assessments become an integral part of the instructional process and a central ingredient in their efforts to help students learn, the benefits of assessment for both students and teachers will be boundless" (Guskey, 2016, p.3).

In the past 20 years or more, higher education has been working to change the faculty paradigm of *sage on the stage* to a more learner-centered facilitator and coach model of *guide on the side*, and this aligns with the shift from traditional testing of learning to assessment for learning (Gijbels & Dochy,

2006; Russell & Markle, 2017). Traditionally, faculty employing a teaching-centered paradigm have viewed their responsibility as presenting lectures and assigning readings, with the purpose of assessment being to assign student grades. Today, it is more common for faculty to follow a learning-centered paradigm with the faculty guiding students to actively be involved in self-directed learning (Barkley & Major, 2016; Suskie, 2018). Higher education institutions adopting online instruction during the 2020-2021 COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated this paradigm evolution. Much of what faculty could communicate explicitly and even nonverbally in a brick-and-mortar classroom setting, including rich in-class dialogue, is now missing or rarely possible in the online environment. Changes in how course content is being delivered drive leaders in higher education to adopt more curriculum and assessment tools that enable learner-centered and even learner-driven strategies. They also set the stage for making learning outcomes and learning assessments more explicit and transparent.

The focus on performance-based assessment in a learner-centered paradigm aims to assess higher-order thinking processes and competencies versus lower-level, factual cognitive skills (Gallardo, 2020). Performance assessment requires students to do real-life tasks that they will be expected to demonstrate in the workplace. The assessments often provide students with realistic learning situations to solve messy, complicated real-world problems with no one answer. Suskie (2018) highlights that because performance assessments merge learning and assessment, they are increasingly becoming more popular. A performance-based assessment allows students to demonstrate their acquired skills and knowledge in real-world applications. It enables students to view the key objectives on the rubric and communicate the assignment's expectations (Gray et al., 2017). Unlike performance-based assessments, traditional assessments such as multiple-choice tests, essay tests, or oral examinations have been around for a long time, but the intent of these assessments is to collect assessment information. Traditional assessments do not allow students to learn from their mistakes. Performance-based assessments are designed to allow students to demonstrate what they have learned (Suskie, 2018). Rubrics are one of the tools that can support this new paradigm and online learning environment.

Consistent deployment of rubrics within a program or across an institution can represent a significant shift for all stakeholders and requires leadership from the top down to support the effort. As shown in this chapter, extensive stakeholder involvement is the best way to ensure that rubrics are developed and implemented in a beneficial way that supports their potential for continuous improvement. Importantly, rubrics are a means of building quality into the program rather than simply and often subjectively measuring the level of quality that exists after the fact. Further, when developed and used appropriately, rubrics have the power to transform the institution into a learning organization that continuously improves its educational product from a systemic vantage point where collaboration is valued and promoted. Leaders can utilize rubric results to establish the accountability of the institution to its stakeholders.

A rubric is an assessment tool that identifies specific expectations aligned to descriptive criteria of a task in a grid format and measures performance on the task against the expectations. As a subtle way to convey instructional goals and objectives to students and other stakeholders in students' learning, rubrics provide the expectations for students' performance on specified tasks. It then becomes a powerful tool to evaluate and give students feedback (Jonsson, 2014; Lasater, 2007; Reddy & Andrade, 2010). A rubric allows for reliability, validity, and transparency in grading student work (Chowdhury, 2019; Schmidt, 2020). Explicit descriptions of intended and connected actions related to the criteria and the standards and performance levels expected from the related learning outcomes are essential features of a rubric (Jonsson, 2014). Using rubric assessments can enable faculty to directly assess student achievement on learning outcomes that inform the student, faculty, course, and program level.

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