The Use of Scoring Rubrics for Assessment and Teaching

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Program assessment is an ongoing, formative process in which faculty specify program learning objectives, verify that the curriculum aligns with these objectives, collect assessment data, and use findings to improve student learning (Allen, 2004). Assessment data frequently are based on analyzing student products or behaviors, such as exam responses, projects, portfolios, or recitals. Scoring rubrics are versatile tools for simplifying this review by clearly specifying assessment criteria. Rubrics also can be integrated into courses. Faculty can use them to communicate expectations, provide formative feedback, and grade students.

Rubrics are explicit schemes for classifying products or behaviors into categories that vary along a continuum. They can be used to classify virtually any product or behavior, such as essays, research reports, oral presentations, and group activities.

There are two major types of rubrics. A holistic rubric involves one global, holistic rating, and an analytic rubric is used to make separate, holistic ratings of specified characteristics of the product or behavior. For example, the CSU English Placement Test Scoring Guide provides guidelines for making one holistic judgment about the quality of student writing. Experienced readers can quickly and efficiently make this holistic judgment without getting bogged down providing feedback about detailed characteristics of the writing. The Rubrics for Assessing Information Competence in the California State University is an analytic rubric that can be used to assess five information-competence dimensions. Each dimension is separately rated, resulting in more detailed analysis than provided by holistic rubrics.

A wide variety of rubrics have been developed, and it is often easier to adapt an already-existing rubric than to create one from scratch. For links to online rubrics, go to http://www.calstate.edu/acadaff/sloa/. Many quality rubrics have been created for use in K-12 education, and they can be easily adapted for higher education. As you review available rubrics, don't look for one that you can copy and immediately use in your own work. Look for formats, language, and dimensions that might be useful components of a rubric that you tailor for your specific needs.

Rubrics have many strengths:

- Complex products or behaviors can be examined efficiently. Faculty have many demands on their time, and assessment activities should be structured to use that time effectively. Rubrics focus raters on the learning objectives being assessed, allowing them to tune out extraneous variables. For example, if faculty are analyzing a set of lab reports to assess students' ability to statistically analyze data, the rubric should help them ignore other
aspects of the reports, such as the quality of the literature review and written communication skills.

- Developing a rubric helps to clarify faculty expectations. We frequently use terms like "critical thinking" or "cultural sensitivity," but we often have different conceptions of what these terms mean, making it difficult to communicate our expectations to students and each other.
- Well-trained reviewers apply the same, agreed-upon standards to the products being reviewed. This generates data that are likely to be reliable and valid.
- Summaries of results reveal patterns of student strengths and areas of concern. These assessments allow us to identify learning objectives that require increased attention.
- Rubrics are criterion-referenced, rather than norm-referenced. Raters ask, "Did the student meet the criteria for level 5 of the rubric?" rather than "How well did this student do compared to other students?" This is important for program assessment because you want to learn how well students have met your standards.
- Faculty might feel overwhelmed when faced with assessment mandates, but they are not the only ones who can assess student work. Sometimes ratings can be done by students to assess their own work, or they can be done by others, e.g., peers, fieldwork supervisions, or visiting artists or scholars.

Rubrics can be used for grading and assessment. (See the complete article and sample rubric at: [http://cai.cc.ca.us/workshops/RubricsByMaryAllen.doc](http://cai.cc.ca.us/workshops/RubricsByMaryAllen.doc)) For example, points can be assigned and used for grading and the categories (below expectation, satisfactory, and exemplary) can be used for assessment. Faculty who share an assessment rubric might assign points in different ways, depending on the nature of their courses, and they might decide to add more rows for course-specific criteria or comments. In this way, assessment data can be collected while faculty are grading, faculty control how their own grades are assigned, and data are aggregated across relevant courses and faculty to assess the program. Walvoord and Anderson's provide many useful examples in Effective Grading (1998).

Notice how the above rubric allows faculty who may not be experts on oral presentation skills to give detailed formative feedback to students. This feedback describes present skills and indicates how students can improve. Effective rubrics help faculty reduce the time they spend grading and eliminate the need to repeatedly write the same comments to multiple students. Provided with the assignment, the rubric communicates faculty expectations to students, including the many first-generation students who may not understand the level of scholarship expected in college classrooms.

Steps that might be used to create a rubric and some additional suggestions for integrating rubrics into courses are provided at [http://www.calstate.edu/acadaff/sloa/links/using_rubrics.shtml](http://www.calstate.edu/acadaff/sloa/links/using_rubrics.shtml)

One of the most positive aspects about program assessment is that it provides a framework for faculty discussions about teaching and learning, and, in my experience, group reviews of student products using rubrics can be an effective precursor of these discussions. Like any effective process, planning is required. The leadership team identifies appropriate student products that reflect student mastery of the learning objectives being assessed, collects these products,
develops and pilot tests a rubric, and selects exemplar products differing in quality. The session generally begins with a review of the assessment effort, the products, and the rubric, then readers are "calibrated" by discussing and reaching consensus on ratings for the exemplar products. Generally two reviewers apply the rubric to each product so that inter-rater agreement can be examined. Discrepancies often are resolved by using a third reader or by having paired reviewers reach consensus on each product. Once data are collected and summarized, the group can discuss what results mean (Have our students mastered our learning objectives at a satisfactory level?), who should be told the results, and implications for changes in curriculum, pedagogy, or student support.