

Using a Standard Rubric to Promote High Standards, Fairness, Student Motivation, and Assessment for Learning

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Abstract

This article describes the implementation of a standard scoring rubric to assess the quality of student assignments and projects across eight undergraduate and graduate level university courses, as well as the results of an exploratory action research study of the effectiveness of the rubric. The rubric included a 5-point scale ranging from 0 to 4 points, with a score of “3” serving as the fulcrum, representing the instructional goal, and a score of “4” representing work that goes beyond level 3 performance. Results indicate that the rubric supported this goal by promoting clear expectations, good feedback and progress monitoring, and student motivation.

As a university professor, I have often struggled with grading student work. I want to promote high standards and motivate students to do their best. I want to be fair. I want students to learn from the assessment process. Fortunately, the use of scoring rubrics has been helpful in supporting my assessment goals.

A scoring rubric is a tool, often in the form of an outline, table, or checklist, used to evaluate the quality of student work. In addition to criteria that describe the expectations for work, a scoring rubric includes a scale of possible points for varying levels of performance in relation to the criteria (Goodrich, 1996; Popham, 1997; Wiggins, 1998). These criteria specify the “what;” the performance levels specify the “how well” (Mabry, 1999b). The rubric scoring procedure can be holistic or analytic. Holistic procedures rely on all of the criteria for one overall quality score, while analytic procedures require separate scores for separate components of the work, which may or may not be aggregated into one overall score (Mabry, 1999b; Popham, 1997).

Scoring rubrics have become increasingly popular among educators from preK-12 to higher education. Researchers have noted that scoring rubrics help define “quality” (Goodrich, 1996), provide expectations up-front (Moskal, 2003), provide feedback about strengths and weaknesses in student work (Andrade, 2000), monitor student performance (Goodrich, 1996), and support assessment for learning (Tierney & Simon, 2004), including student self-assessment (Andrade, 2000).

Assessment for learning is characterized as assessment that enables students to understand their own learning and goals through effective feedback (Elwood & Klenowski, 2002); thus, assessment is part of instruction. Andrade (2000) has referred to scoring rubrics that “blur the distinction between instruction and assessment” as “instructional rubrics” (p.13). Tierney and Simon (2004) have also noted the potential for scoring rubrics as an instructional tool, and according to Popham (1997), “Rubrics represent not only scoring tools but also, more important, instructional illuminators. Appropriately designed rubrics can make an enormous contribution to instructional quality” (p. 75).

The Problem

I have used scoring rubrics in the classes I have taught since I began teaching at the university level. Although there is much support for using scoring rubrics (see Andrade, 2000; Goodrich, 1996;

Marzano & Haystead, 2008; Moskal, 2003; Popham, 1997; Stiggins, 2001; Tierney & Simon, 2004; Wiggins, 1998) and my experience using them in my classes has been positive, I wanted to improve my assessment process. The scoring rubrics I used were holistic and generally included criteria describing the expectations for a given assignment and a scale to categorize student work along a continuum of “absolutely meeting expectations” at the high end, to “not meeting them at all” at the low end.

I became concerned that some students were treating the scoring rubrics as recipes—they made sure to meet the minimum criteria required to get the highest grade possible. This was promoting the high standards as identified in the rubrics, which was good; however, these students were not exercising the creativity, innovation, and interest in learning that I also wanted to promote. At the same time, there were always some students who did exercise creativity, innovation, and interest. They went above and beyond what was expected, but the scoring rubrics did not account for this. These students received the same score as students who met the basic expectations as defined by the rubric for an “A” grade.

Mabry has written about this issue with scoring rubrics in general (1999a) and with scoring rubrics used to assess writing in particular (1999b). She has noted that scoring rubrics can focus too much on performance criteria as opposed to the overall effect of a student’s work (1999b) and can limit student performance to the criteria listed in the rubric (1999a). According to Mabry (1999a):

One problem is that criteria imply that all students’ performances should conform to the criteria. But should they? What about students who are capable of doing more than the criteria require, and who might do less than their best by trying to conform to the criteria by which they will be assessed? . . . Teaching to the rubric is a dismaying variation on the theme of teaching to the test. The negative consequences of standardization or convergence of student thinking and products, dampening of creativity and self-expression, have not been thoroughly considered (p. 58).

The Solution

I had the opportunity to attend a workshop conducted by Robert Marzano at the 2006 annual National Evaluation Institute sponsored by the Consortium for Research on Educational Accountability and Teacher Evaluation. In the workshop, Marzano described a rubric format, available in the book

Making Standards Useful in the Classroom (Marzano & Haystead, 2008). The rubric format included a 5-point scale of 0 to 4 points with half-point scores possible (e.g., 3.5, 2.5). The score of “3” was the fulcrum on the scale, indicating the instructional goal. The score of “4” represented “in-depth inferences and applications that go beyond what was taught” (Marzano & Haystead, p. 29).

For me, the appeal of the Marzano and Haystead rubric format was that it could accommodate, reward, and motivate more creative, innovative, and in-depth student performance beyond what was described as meeting an instructional goal. It also included a standard scale that could be used across many assignments and projects. Thus, I took the concept of a 5-point scale with a score of “3” as the fulcrum and developed a standard scale to use in the courses that I teach. To meet the needs at the university level, I modified the scale descriptors and added percentage grade translations for the rubric: 4 = 100%, 3 = 95%, 2 = 85%, 1 = 75%, 0 = 0% (see Figures 1-3). The unique aspect of the rubric, of course, is the score of “4” or “performance level 4,” which is intended to motivate students to work beyond the instructional goal. I have used this rubric format since the Spring 2008 semester in the following undergraduate and graduate courses:

- *Teacher, School and Society* (Spring 2008): This is an undergraduate educational foundations course for pre-service teachers. Most students are sophomores.
- *Technology for School Administrators* (Spring 2008, Fall 2009): This is a master’s level technology leadership course for Master of School Administration students. Most students are full-time teachers or assistant principals.
- *Research in Education* (Spring 2009): This is a master’s level research methods course for education students. Most students are full-time educators.

Figure 1. Standard Rubric for Study Guide Assignments for *Teacher, School and Society* Course

Grade	Criteria
4	Demonstrates in-depth understanding of Study Guide content that goes beyond “3” performance criteria.
3	Clearly demonstrates understanding of Study Guide content. ✓ Responses to questions are complete, accurate and appropriate. ✓ Communication is clear with minimal spelling and grammatical errors. ✓ Study Guide is completed and submitted in the specified format by the deadline.
2	For the most part, demonstrates understanding of Study Guide

	content.
1	For the most part, does not demonstrate understanding of Study Guide content.
0	Does not demonstrate understanding of Study Guide content at all OR does not complete and submit Study Guide within 48 hours of the deadline.

Figure 2: Standard Rubric for Online Discussion Postings for *Educational Program Design and Evaluation* Course

Grade	Criteria
4	Demonstrates in-depth understanding of and ability to apply Discussion content that goes beyond “3” performance criteria. <u>For Example:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Postings demonstrate in-depth grasp of content and sophisticated reasoning. ✓ Communication is exceptionally clear, well-focused, and relevant.
3	Clearly demonstrates understanding of and ability to apply Discussion content. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Postings evidence ability to meaningfully examine and apply Discussion content. ✓ Postings evidence understanding and higher level thinking skills, good “listening” skills, and includes at least 3 discussion posts with the first post made at least 48 hours prior to the deadline. ✓ Communication is clear with minimal spelling and grammatical errors.
2	For the most part, demonstrates understanding of and ability to apply Discussion content.
1	For the most part, does not demonstrate understanding of and ability to apply Discussion content.
0	Does not demonstrate understanding of and ability to apply Discussion content at all.

Figure 3: Standard Rubric for Review of the Literature Project for *Research I* Course

Grade	Criteria
4	Demonstrates in-depth understanding of and ability to apply Review of the Literature skills that goes beyond “3” performance criteria.
3	Clearly demonstrates understanding of and ability to apply Review of the Literature skills. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ All required sections of the Review of the Literature are complete, accurate, and appropriate. ✓ Procedures clearly describe the search process used to locate references and the analysis process used to analyze information. ✓ Results for each Review Objective adequately address that Objective. ✓ At least 1 analysis table is included; all analysis tables are used appropriately. ✓ References used evidence adequate search for secondary and primary sources. ✓ APA format is used correctly throughout—e.g., headings, tables, citations, references, appendixes. ✓ Communication is clear with minimal spelling and grammatical errors. ✓ Review of the Literature is completed and submitted to Blackboard in the specified format by the deadline.
2	For the most part, demonstrates understanding of and ability to apply Review of the Literature skills.
1	For the most part, does not demonstrate understanding of and ability to apply Review of the Literature skills.
0	Does not demonstrate understanding of and ability to apply Review of the Literature skills at all OR does not complete and submit assignment to Blackboard within 48 hours of the deadline.

- *Educational Program Design and Evaluation* (Spring 2009): This is a master’s level data-based decision making course for education students. Most students are full-time educators.
- *Research I* (Spring 2008, Spring 2009): This is a doctoral level research methods course. Most students are full-time principals, assistant principals, school district administrators, or teacher leaders.
- *Research II* (Fall 2008): This is a doctoral level research methods course. Most students are full-time principals, assistant principals, school district administrators, or teacher leaders.

In each class, rubrics were given to students in advance so that they knew what was expected for each assignment and project. I used the rubrics for grading and feedback to students. Each student received a copy of the rubric with a grade and comments related to criteria met or not met for each assignment and project. With the exception of large projects, I gave rubric feedback and grades to students within one

week following the deadline for the assignment or project so that they could use the feedback to make needed changes for future assignments and projects. For larger projects, they received rubric feedback and grades within two weeks following the deadline.

The Study

Based on informal, positive feedback from students about the rubric as well as my experience using it, I conducted an exploratory action research study about the effectiveness of the rubric. *Action research* is characterized as research conducted by practitioners who design and conduct the study, and then analyze the data to improve their own practice (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004). Action research in higher education, which is considered key to *the scholarship of teaching and learning* (Bender & Gray, 1999), has gained increased attention and importance as part of faculty scholarship. As with other scholarly work, the scholarship of teaching and learning requires that inquiry be reflective, systematic, replicable, and shared with the public.

During the spring 2008 semester, I administered an “Instructional Methods Survey” to students in my undergraduate *Teacher, School and Society* class, which included one open-ended question about the effectiveness of the rubric. The survey was part of a larger study I was conducting on a variety of methods I was using in my classes (e.g., book clubs, wikis). I administered the survey to students during the last face-to-face class meeting. Of the 22 students in the class, 17 responded to the item about the rubric (77.27%).

In addition to data from the survey question, I also reviewed University End-of-Course Evaluations for each of the classes in which I had used the standard rubric. The evaluations include one open-ended item that allows students to make comments about the class. Of the 71 written comments across 8 classes, 19 were related to assessment; these comments were used as data in the study. I analyzed these comments and the Instructional Methods Survey data by categorizing responses according to prominent themes.

Finally, I developed a brief reflection of my experience implementing the standard rubric in my classes. Reflection is a key component of the action research process (Mertler, 2009), as action research is inherently about examining one’s own practice (McLean, 1995).

Results

Instructional Methods Survey Question

The following is the open-ended question about the effectiveness of the standard rubric used in the spring 2008 *Teacher, School and Society* class: During this course, assessment was conducted using a common rubric structure with a “3” indicating that a student clearly demonstrates understanding of and ability to apply content, and a “4” indicating that a student demonstrates in-depth understanding and ability to apply content that goes beyond “3” performance criteria. Was this assessment method effective for you? Why or why not? Student responses to the question were all positive. The most common theme across the student responses was that the rubric provided feedback that allowed them to monitor their progress. Other common themes were that the rubric provided clear expectations and motivation. The following representative student quotations support these themes:

Feedback and Progress Monitoring:

“Yes, I knew exactly why I got the grade I did and knew what to do for the next time.”

“I really liked this method it was an easy way to check how I was doing and see if I was performing well.”

“Yes, because it set standards for me and let me know if improvements needed to be made.”

“Yes, it helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses.”

Clear Expectations:

“Yes, it clearly said what was needed for each assignment, it helped me know what I needed to do to make a 4 on each assignment.”

“Yes, because I knew exactly what you expected out of me.”

“Yes, I knew what I needed to do.”

Motivation:

“Yes, it motivated me. Let me know where I stand in the class.”

“Yes, because it made me work extra hard to get a 4.”

University End-of-Course Evaluations

From the open-ended question on University End-of-Course Evaluations, the majority of student comments that were related to assessment were positive. The most common themes from the student comments were that expectations were clear and good feedback was provided. Another theme was that students were positive about the use of rubrics in the classes in general. Finally, there were two criticisms related to assessment. The following representative student quotations support these themes:

Clear Expectations:

“She made her expectations clear.”

“It is nice having a grad class with clear, challenging standards.”

“She is consistent with grading policy and expectations. You always know what is expected out of you.”

“I appreciate [the instructor’s] clear expectations and specific feedback.”

Good Feedback:

“Provided great feedback that enabled me to adjust my work.”

“The feedback she gave was prompt and meaningful.”

“Prompt, constructive feedback was always given on assignments I submitted.”

“She offers meaningful and useful feedback.”

Positive Perception of Rubric:

“[The instructor’s] use of the rubric was a great tool. I believe it improved the level of responses on Blackboard [online discussions] that reflected more graduate level proficiencies.”

“I like the rubric used for grading. It is concise and fair.”

“Course was well-organized, designed for student learning, used rubrics to guide assignments.”

Criticisms Related to Assessment:

“Graded too picky.”

“Expectations at times could have been clearer.”

Professor Reflection

From my perspective, implementing the standard rubric improved the assessment process in my courses. The rubric maintained and motivated high standards, and promoted fairness and assessment for learning. As mentioned previously, the appeal of the rubric format was using the score of “4” on the scale to accommodate, reward, and motivate student performance that went beyond what was expected.

Although students were often skeptical and concerned about the rubric scale when I first introduced it to them, they became familiar with the format and expectations quickly—it helped that I used the rubric for nearly all assignments and projects. After the first assignment and use of the rubric, students seemed to catch on and I always noticed a general improvement in student work on the next assignment. However, one issue I encountered early on was that students often thought that a score of “4” was about quantity—i.e., they just needed to write more. To help students better understand “4” performance, I often shared examples of “4” level student work as exemplars when reviewing an assignment so that students could see that quality and quantity are not the same thing.

In addition, I think the rubric promoted fairness and assessment for learning. Students knew upfront what was expected of them and could use the rubrics as guides for self-assessing their work. When they received feedback with the rubric, they could identify their strengths and diagnose areas for improvement. They could also monitor their progress across assignments because of the standard rubric format.

Developing the rubrics, specifically the performance criteria, for each assignment and project made me focus on the instructional goals and expectations and clearly describe what quality work looks like. The rubric also helped me to be more consistent when grading and to focus my feedback on what really matters. The most challenging aspect of using the rubric was maintaining the “beyond expectations”

indicated by a score of “4.” I had to make sure that I was reserving a score of “4” for work that truly represented in-depth understanding and application that went beyond basic expectations.

Based on the results of the exploratory action research study and my positive experience using the standard rubric, I will continue to implement this type of rubric in my courses. However, I plan to involve my students more in the assessment process by having them help determine the performance criteria for course projects to further integrate assessment into the instructional process and promote assessment for learning. As Stiggins (2001) contends, “The heart of academic competence resides in students’ ability to use their own knowledge and understanding to continuously improve their performance until they achieve success. Therefore, there is a direct link between performance criteria and student involvement” (p. 295).

Conclusion

Overall, the standard rubric based on the work of Marzano and Haystead improved the assessment process in my courses. Based on student data, the rubric supported clear expectations, good feedback, progress monitoring, and motivation. Based on my experience, it helped me maintain high standards and motivate students to do their best, and promoted fairness and assessment for learning. However, because this was an exploratory action research study conducted with pre-service and in-service educators, more research needs to be conducted using action research, other methodologies, and with post-secondary students across disciplines to get a more complete picture of the effectiveness of implementing the standard rubric in college and university courses.

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Responses using a Likert-like scale were reported as mean scores with standard deviations. Responses to the other closed questions were tabulated. The professor received a report that provided a profile of the class, which helped him to understand his students' backgrounds better and to frame his discussions of the writing assignment. Writing is often discussed as a skill or a set of abilities, but affective traits like motivation and expectations for achievement can greatly impact a student's writing. This survey reminds both faculty and students of this fact. The writing center staff also benefited from knowing the number of students who considered themselves non-native speakers of English.

Rubrics for Assessment

A rubric is an explicit set of criteria used for assessing a particular type of work or performance (TLT Group, n.d.) and provides more details than a single grade or mark. Rubrics, therefore, will help you grade more objectively. Have your students ever asked, "Why did you grade me that way?" or stated, "You never told us that we would be graded on grammar!"

Types of Rubrics

Determining which type of rubric to use depends on what and how you plan to evaluate. There are several types of rubrics including holistic, analytical, general, and task-specific. Each of these will be described below.