Rubrics: Beyond Scoring, An Enabler of Deeper Learning

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Introduction

Rubrics are scoring guides commonly used by educators to facilitate the grading of students’ submissions and performance in a course. According to Andrade (2000), a rubric is defined as “a scoring tool that lists the criteria for a piece of work or ‘what counts’” (pp. 13). Rubrics provide a scheme of measurement for a piece of work submitted by a student (Moskal, 2000). A rubric typically has three components:

- the **criteria** which count for the assignment,
- the **levels of quality gradations** which define students’ performances, and
- a **scoring strategy** which determines how all the criteria are considered in assessment.

A scoring strategy is holistic if all criteria are considered aggregately to make an overall judgment. However, if the assessment is done on a criterion by criterion basis, which may or may not result in an overall final score, the scoring strategy is described as analytical.

Depending on how they are used, rubrics can be described as scoring rubrics or instructional rubrics (Moskal, 2000; Andrade, 2000). A scoring rubric is used exclusively for the purpose of assigning a grade to a finished piece of work, while an instructional rubric is one which is used throughout the course of teaching a module to encourage student performances in desired areas of learning.

The following sections describe how rubrics could afford deeper learning and the potential pitfalls to avoid.

Articulating Learning Outcomes and Expectations

A well-designed instructional rubric can serve to articulate lecturers’ expectations clearly and encourage students to be thoughtful of what is required of their efforts in an assignment. For example, in an oral presentation, a lecturer may wish to encourage students to actively engage the audience. The quality of “active engagement” can be communicated by articulating what is expected of students without simply relying on a vague term like “active” (Table 1).

### Table 1. Example of a rubric for presentations (Andrade, 1997).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Quality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engaging the audience</td>
<td>Asks a few questions, provides insights that spark audience’s interest in topic; relates [topic] to personal experiences; shows a visual that catches the audience’s attention; makes use of interesting illustrations.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delivers topic content smoothly and clearly; provides one or two illustrations to highlight content; waits for the audience to respond.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No attempts to gain audience’s attention; delivers speech promptly.</td>
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</tbody>
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In the example shown in Table 1, the rubric helps the lecturer to provide information on an important aspect of the assignment (criterion); what students can do to meet expectations specified in the criterion (quality) and how a student has fared after completing the task (feedback).

As an ongoing reference for students in a course, a well-designed rubric can direct them to attain the desired level of performance through a system of feedback. The descriptions accompanying each level of quality in a rubric serve as a guide for actions students can undertake in the initial stages of their preparation for an assignment. Following the completion of an assignment, the lecturer can provide specific or customised face-to-face feedback to each student based on the rubrics, or give additional written comments on the rubrics document. These multiple approaches to feedback, facilitated by rubrics, help students to have a clear picture of how they have performed in their assignments.

### Enabling Higher-order Thinking Skills

Rubrics can help to encourage higher order thinking in learning too. Very often, students submit assignments and project reports which have been meticulously completed, but lack the critical insight and reflection that are desired in higher education. To overcome this challenge, it is useful to incorporate Bloom’s Taxonomy into instructional rubrics to communicate what is expected and desired in a completed piece of work.

For example, in a written report where critical evaluation is required, the articulation of what “critical evaluation” encompasses provides direction for students to channel their efforts optimally in order to meet the expectations articulated. If such critical evaluations include the ability to synthesise and evaluate, the rubrics communicated ought to incorporate these desired performance indicators. The example in Table 2 provides a comprehensive view of a lecturer’s expectations of what “critical evaluation” means.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rubric for Project Reports</th>
<th>Quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Critical Evaluation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(Synthesis and Evaluation)</strong></td>
<td><strong>The work demonstrates strong ability to put together findings and identify contradictions, tensions, and alignments in observations to come up with something new or unique; and to discriminate amongst these ideas, information, procedures and solutions etc...so as to decide on well-considered choices and opinions.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The work demonstrates adequate ability to put together findings and identify contradictions, tensions, and alignments in observations to come up with something new or unique; and to discriminate amongst these ideas, information, procedures and solutions etc...so as to decide on well-considered choices and opinions.</strong></td>
<td><strong>The work demonstrates uneven and superficial ability to put together findings and identify contradictions, tensions, and alignments in observations to come up with something new or unique as well as a limited ability to discriminate amongst these ideas, information, procedures and solutions etc...so as to decide on well-considered choices and opinions.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The work demonstrates weak ability to put together findings and identify contradictions, tensions, alignments in observations to come up with something new or unique as well as a limited ability to discriminate amongst these ideas, information, procedures and solutions etc...so as to decide on well-considered choices and opinions.</strong></td>
<td></td>
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**Table 2. Example of a rubric for project reports (Peirce, 2006).**
Relying on Rubrics: Potential Pitfalls

As with all measures of performance, the quality of gradations may be debatable for users of rubrics. Since, according to Andrade (2005), rubrics are not self-explanatory, it is desirable for lecturers to discuss and communicate to students, through the use of examples and illustrations before each class/assignment, what each criteria/gradation means prior to the implementation of a rubric. In addition, incorporating additional feedback mechanism, such as a general comment, or peer feedback, will enrich the use of rubrics as an instructional tool (Andrade, 2005).

Another issue that may arise with the use of rubrics is the tendency for students, as well as lecturers (for the sake of convenience) to link a ‘score’ to each gradation of quality. For example, in the illustration cited in Table 2, “strong ability” may be perceived to be equivalent to a grade “A”, while “weak ability” may be associated with a “D”. This is counterintuitive to the use of instructional rubrics and should be avoided. It is important that lecturers stick to the fundamental motivation of using instructional rubrics as a developmental tool and ensure students are informed of the bases of the rubrics used prior to implementation.

Conclusion

While many critics have expounded on how rubrics are rigid and may stifle students’ motivations to learn beyond what would count towards their final grades, these views are often a result of rubrics being used to make marking more efficient with little consideration for students’ learning outcomes. Indeed, if used correctly and appropriately, rubrics not only facilitate classroom evaluations and feedback mechanisms, they also promote the level of learning desired by instructors for their students. Ultimately, the usefulness of rubrics is dependent on how they are used.

References


About the Author

Ms Chua Siew Beng currently teaches Level 1000 and 2000 modules in the areas of Management & Organisation, Human Resource Management and Human Relations. She believes that the best way to engage students is by instilling the values of passion, mindfulness and creativity through innovative pedagogy and a supportive classroom climate.