

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Leveling the Field: Using Rubrics to Achieve Greater Equity in Teaching and Grading

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The student body is changing on most American campuses with increasing numbers of minority students, first generation students, and non-native English speakers. Such students bring to campus and classrooms a vital and exhilarating breadth of experience. Yet they also bring new challenges (Gregory, 2000).

One major challenge is simply retention. First generation students' drop-out rate is almost double that of students whose parents attended college. Minority students and non-native English speakers are also at greater risk than more traditional students. And many students fall not in just one of these categories, but in all of them: many minority students, for example, are also first generation and nonnative English speakers.

There is no single way to address this challenge. New social, financial, and academic support systems are needed and are slowly coming into being (Rodriguez, 2003), but there are smaller things professors can do in their classes to help such students and others thrive.

One of these things is to use rubrics both as a grading tool and teaching device (Stevens & Levi, 2005).

Rubrics assist minority, first generation, and/or non-native English speaking students in four fundamental ways:

- Rubrics spell out explicit expectations for individual assignments. In so doing, they carefully describe hidden and often unspoken assumptions of academic culture such as the need for citations to avoid plagiarism, the importance of punctuality, and the terminology of academic and disciplinary discourses.
- Rubrics delineate both the strongest and weakest ways that students can complete an assignment within given skill areas. Over multiple assignments, feedback on these skill areas allows students to recognize and address their strengths and weaknesses.
- Rubrics foster equitable grading practices for both students and professors.

• Rubrics facilitate communication with support services and help these services focus their efforts.

What is a rubric?

A rubric is a grading tool that lays out assignment expectations on a grid. Most grading rubrics describe the expectations of an assignment across 3 to 5 levels of performance, for example, from exemplary to developing. Explicit descriptions of the different levels of performance emphasize a developmental view of education. In addition, the task is divided into dimensions or criteria that label the various sub-skills required to complete the assignment, for example, "organization," "content," and "conventions". The 3-level rubric with four dimensions at the end of this essay was created to grade short papers for a film class containing an unusual number of non-native English speakers and first generation students.

Clarifying Expectations

This sample rubric notifies students of expectations before they begin writing. By discussing the expectations when the rubric is handed out, a teacher clarifies the task. Such preliminary discussions allow many misconceptions to be corrected. In the "content" dimension in the sample rubric, for example, discussion of the need for centralizing themes and supporting evidence for all claims is useful for students, but particularly for those who may not be familiar with this component of American scholarly practice. Such discussion can also help define words that may seem colloquially familiar to students but that have a very different meaning in academic usage. In one class, for example, a student was unfamiliar with the word "theme" in any context

except his senior prom. Similarly, the "organization" dimension clarifies the need to structure paragraphs and sentences so as to move the reader along in a logical way. The "conventions" dimension is particularly revealing to non-native English speakers because it clarifies the fact that English skills are only one part of writing a good paper and that it is possible to excel in all other areas even if this one is weak. The rubric also reminds the professor of that fact. Finally, the "rules" dimension clarifies the importance of punctuality in a way that links it directly to the grading process. Integrating rubrics into class discussion and written work in this way also forces students to take greater responsibility for their learning and to become more active learners. With rubrics, students have the opportunity to grade their own work before turning it in. Professors may also find that peer reviews of student work using the rubric can strengthen performance as well as the understanding of task expectations.

Charting Progress

The skill-related dimensions on the rubric are especially useful in classes that have a large number of written assignments because they allow students to gauge their own progress and to become more active, self-motivated learners. Professors can increase this utility by encouraging students to save their rubrics and compare them over a period of time. Doing so helps students see a pattern of strengths and weaknesses and then develop a plan to address areas where they consistently receive low marks. Ideally, students should also begin to see a pattern of improvement on subsequent rubrics in those dimensions after a period of time. Such self-directed analyses of learning

problems and plans for improvement are useful for all students, but they are often a revelation for those whose previous educational experience and/or cultural background stressed dependence on the teacher.

Equity

Studies indicate that freshmen are more likely than other students to feel that they are graded unfairly. This seems to be even more true for minority and first generation students (Smedley, Meyers & Harrell, 1993). Even when this perception is utterly mistaken, it cannot be dismissed since the perception itself can have a negative impact on student learning. By spelling out the criteria used in grading, and emphasizing that the same criteria are used for all students, rubrics can do much to alleviate this concern.

Rubrics can also be reassuring for professors who often wonder if their grading is as equitable as they want it to be. Their concern may be about whether the first paper on the stack is graded in the same way and with the same criteria as the last. Using rubrics provides them with a fair degree of certainty that they are consistent in their grading practices.

References and Resources

Gregory, S. T. (April, 2000). *Selected innovations in higher education designed to enhance the racial climate for students of color in predominately White colleges and universities*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.

Rodriguez, S. (2003). What helps some first generation students succeed. *About Campus*, 8(4), 17-23.

Support Services

Most institutions have support services in place for non-traditional students such as writing centers, tutoring services, libraries, counselors, and peer tutoring groups. Rubrics—along with syllabi, assignments, and other classroom handouts—can be invaluable in helping support services determine what kind of help each student needs. Professors should encourage their students to bring their rubrics (including those already used to grade specific assignments) along with them when they utilize these services.

One Small Step

Using rubrics for grading and then integrating them into classroom teaching is a step on the path toward greater equity for all students. This grading tool can also have a powerful effect on student learning and retention. Because they make explicit a wide variety of unspoken assumptions and expectations in academic culture, rubrics are particularly helpful for minority students, first generation students, and non-native English speakers.

Smedley, B., Myers, H., & Harrell, S. (1993). Minority-status stresses and the college adjustment of ethnic minority freshman. *Journal of Higher Education*, 64, 434-52.

Stevens, D. D., & Levi, A. J. (2005). *Introduction to rubrics: An assessment tool to save grading time, convey effective feedback and promote student learning*. Sterling, VA; Stylus.

