

CTL Bulletin

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A bi-weekly information sheet by the Center for Teaching and Learning

Why does Professor Cirbur Love Rubrics?

Rubrics have increasingly become a tool for grading complex work in higher education. Many faculty, especially in Education, have come to like them; some faculty seem mildly amused about them; and others just absolutely can't stand them because they feel rubrics pretend to quantify expert judgment into neat algorithms.

This Bulletin gives an introduction to scoring rubrics and their benefits to the skeptics among you and to those still unfamiliar with them. It addresses two main points:

1. What are the parts of a rubric, and how are they used for scoring assignments?
2. What are rubrics' benefits for the instructor and the students?

We have also created a new addition to the CTL website that provides sample rubrics that NEIU's General Education Committee has created and is using for assessing the Gen-Ed program. Additional information will be added to this website in the coming weeks and months. So check periodically if you are interested in learning more about this topic, at: www.neiu.edu/~ctl/teaching.html

The Mechanics of a Rubric

First some distinctions are in order: There are Holistic Rubrics, and then there are Analytical Trait Rubrics; there are also Generic Rubrics, and there are Task-Specific Rubrics. The distinctions relate to the task at hand: Holistic rubrics allow you to judge simple products or performances (such as response to an essay question) without going into much detail. Analytical trait rubrics are much more precise and distinguish a variety of dimensions on which you evaluate a student's performance (e.g. on a term paper). Generic rubrics are used for any number of similar performances (such as the quality of writing across papers in more than one course or even more than one discipline; NEIU's Gen-Ed Assessment rubrics fall into this category). Task-specific rubrics are created for a single task in a course. They specifically list what the instructor wants to see in a particular assignment, so that scoring is quick and unproblematic. This Bulletin will focus on analytical trait rubrics because, while they take more time to develop and apply, their educational value is superior to that of the other types of rubrics.

Analytical Trait Rubrics consist of four elements, the most important one being the criteria into which we break quality performance on a given task. Take NEIU's Critical Thinking Rubric for General Education assessment. Six criteria characterize what we are looking for in a critical thinker who needs to be able to: (1) Identify and explain issues, (2) Recognize stakeholders and contexts, (3) Frame own and others'

Please R.S.V.P.
for April 9 symposium:
The Future of E-Learning at NEIU.

Our symposium on April 9 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. in SU-214 brings you speakers from on and off campus, and showcases of online and hybrid courses by several NEIU colleagues. More details about the program are available at: <http://www.neiu.edu/~ctl/bulletins/Bulletin51.pdf>.

Lunch will be provided for participants who register in advance by calling x4467 or e-mail the CTL at e-hansen@neiu.edu.

perspectives, (4) Identify and evaluate assumptions, (5) Identify and evaluate evidence, and (6) Identify and evaluate implications. Of course, not all assignments require all six criteria; some may just focus on two or three of these.

Once those criteria have been identified, one needs to determine how many levels of proficiency on each one of these criteria should be used to arrive at meaningful performance distinctions within the group of students one wants to assess. In many cases, four proficiency levels should be enough: High Proficiency, Proficiency, Some Proficiency, No or Limited Proficiency.

Element 3 of a rubric deals with the actual scores assigned to each criterion and the way the various scores are translated into grades. Depending on the purpose of a given assignment, some criteria may be weighted more heavily than others, especially if only two or three criteria are selected for an assignment. For example, early on in a semester, one may want to emphasize the importance of clearly *identifying the issues* in a complex problem scenario more heavily than *identifying all the implications* derived from this problem. Therefore the former criterion is given twice the weight (and twice the number of possible points) that the latter criterion receives. The more criteria are used for an assignment, the less meaningful it is to assign different weights to each criterion.

Many people stop at this point in their rubric design and leave out the fourth element of an analytical trait rubric: the description of what the students' performance would look like for each criterion at each proficiency level. Admittedly, such descriptions are quite difficult to construct. They require considerable experience with many students and their typical abilities. It may be best to start with what characteristics one would expect from a "proficient" student (not an exceptional and not a below-average one) on any given criterion. Being able to describe in a sentence or two what typically characterizes performance at a high, medium, and low proficiency level is what makes a rubric more than a grading tool. It turns it into a teaching tool.

Benefits of Rubrics

Arter and McTighe in their 2001 book *Scoring Rubrics in the Classroom* list three major goals and benefits of scoring rubrics:

1. They help clarify the targets of instruction, especially those that are complex and hard to define
2. They provide valid and reliable assessment of student learning on these same complex and hard-to-assess student outcomes
3. They improve student motivation and achievement by helping students understand the nature of quality for performances and products. (p. ix)

Experts know a good performance when they see one. Because expertise is usually connected with skills that have become tacit sometime in the past, it can be difficult for an expert to explain the components that contribute to excellent performance. Creating or adapting rubrics is a good exercise for a faculty member to once again uncover what has become tacit. Breaking a complex performance into several steps or components helps faculty clarify what needs to be made explicit, while it helps students recognize how to make a complex task more manageable. Most faculty using well-designed rubrics agree that this has dramatically reduced student complaints about grading because performance criteria were communicated upfront. In fact, one creative application is to teach students how to use a rubric to score their own papers before they hand them in so they themselves develop the critical judgment for identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their own work. If an analytical trait rubric—such as NEIU's Critical Thinking Rubric—is utilized repeatedly in the same or in different courses, students will eventually internalize the criteria with repeated applications across different contexts.

So why does Professor CIRBUR love rubrics? He may not be able to fully explain it to you, but it's been part of his nature all along. And if you can't understand that, just call out his name... only spell it backwards! (My apologies, but this is the April 1st edition!)