Providing powerful feedback through rubrics

The important criteria might include creating hypotheses, recording results and discussing results. Levels of mastery would be defined to describe the gradations of learning. For example, gradations of performance on a four-level scale might be named Advanced, Meets Target Proficiency, Displays Beginning Proficiency and Below Proficiency. Or on a three-level scale: Exceeds Standards, Meets Standards, Does Not Meet Standards. (Some rubrics include a final level: Not Present.) Once developed, the rubric would be shared with the students, who would be responsible for demonstrating the learning. The student would then use the rubric to help assess the performance. (Sample rubrics and a generic template are available at our Web site, www.luc.edu/ccse.)

The advantages of using rubrics are several-fold. One, rubrics clearly communicate what is expected in terms of students performance. Well-constructed rubrics provide detailed information about criteria for mastery on a particular learning performance. Two, using rubrics creates a sense of transparency for evaluating student work and removes the guessing for students about what is expected in terms of the final product. It also provides a structured framework in which teachers can give students specific feedback about performance as well as information on how to improve performance. Once a product is turned in for grading, the evaluator can use the agreed-upon standards for grading.

Finally, the use of rubrics can provide a quasi-standardized framework for performance evaluation across evaluators. This allows for the possibility for same-grade level or same-content class teachers to compare student performance, which, in turn, allows for a databased discussion of instructional strategies to increase learning for all students.

Creating rubrics

There are several steps for creating effective rubrics:

- Identify the concepts/skills that you will be teaching.
- Determine the essential criteria that must be demonstrated in order for you to know that students have mastered this concept/skill.
- Describe what mastery looks like for each of the criteria. In this step, be sure to use language that is observable and measurable (i.e., "How can I see that my students have shown mastery of this concept/skill?").

Important note: By describing expected/targeted performance for all criteria first, teachers develop a detailed proficiency target—what is acceptable mastery for students at this level—that they can use to ground all instructional decisions in the unit. Describing the full acceptable performance first leads to much better learning results and much better rubrics than the alternative approach—namely, describing all levels of performance for each single criterion.

- Next, determine what partial mastery looks like. Avoid comparative language for describing performance at each level. The more the descriptions at each level can stand...
on their own, the more useful they become for guiding student performance and giving feedback.

- Now, describe what non-mastery would look like. Use words that describe the non-mastery in non-judgmental language.
- Publish the rubric. Share this with your students to let them know what mastery will look like.
- Provide samples or examples of student work whenever possible to help students visualize or model expected performance.

**Difficulties with using rubrics**

While the advantages to using rubrics to provide feedback may seem readily apparent, teachers sometimes can be reluctant to use them for a number of reasons. Clear and valid rubrics are very difficult to develop; it may take several uses with students over time and input from colleagues to get a really good rubric. Effective rubrics depend on pre-planning. Creating the rubrics after the fact, that is, toward the end of the unit right before the final product is to be created, defeats their primary purpose of providing specific feedback to students and teachers as they move through the instructional process toward the end result.

**Pitfalls to avoid in developing rubrics**

- **Listing superfluous criteria as opposed to essential criteria.** The strength of a rubric is that it should clearly detail what mastery on a particular task looks like. If the specific criteria and descriptors are not clearly delineated or cleanly articulated, it becomes extremely difficult to describe the desired level of performance in a way that is helpful to students. When creating rubrics, it is important that only the essential criteria required for mastery be listed. Placing minor details into the rubric will “water down” the criteria and descriptors and distract both the student and the teacher from the essential elements of mastery. The criteria should reflect the most important learning that should be demonstrated in the performance.
- **Using vague, merely comparative or judgmental descriptors.** In defining the levels of mastery, each level of the performance should contain language that is observable and measurable. That is, the descriptions should concretely describe the expected performance and avoid vague and ambiguous descriptions. Likewise, simply adding words like “more” or “less” to a descriptor, or “very good” or “poor,” fails to provide students with specific information they can use to assess their current level of performance and to show them what they need to do to improve.
- **Translating rubrics to grade books.** Effective use of rubrics is primarily about feedback and assessment, not grading. However, teachers need to give grades, and the performance descriptors in rubrics provide a useful framework. The mistake comes with assigning a one-to-one correlation of rubric points with the grade. For example, a rubric with four performance levels (4—exemplary, 3—meets proficiency, 2—beginning proficiency, 1—below proficiency) and three criteria could be construed to have a possible maximum of 12 points. If teachers assign a grade based simply on counting, we find that points translated into percents would look like this: 100 (four level 4 performances); 91 (two level 4 performances and one level 3); 83 (three level 3 performances); 83 (two level 4 performances and one level 2); 66 (two level 3 performances and one level 2), etc. If level 3 represents fully acceptable or targeted mastery, then a complete level 3 using only points translates into a very low B.

Furthermore, exemplary performance on two criteria and beginning proficiency on one criterion results in the same grade. Fully proficient performance on two criteria and beginning proficiency on one criterion results in a failing grade. There is not space in this column to address many other points about determining grades from rubrics. The important caution is that teachers must determine beforehand how the rubric will translate into grades, based on the agreed-upon proficiency targets.

**Next steps**

If you have a chance to work with a teaching partner, try developing a rubric together using the steps outlined above. Then, use the rubric to assess student work. De-brief with your students and find out how this may have helped their performance. Are there areas of the rubric that were not so clear? This provides an area for future revision.

At a professional sharing meeting, bring examples of rubrics you use. Share them with your colleagues and use them as “critical friends.”

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**References**


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