Review of Introduction to Rubrics: An Assessment Tool To Save Grading Time, Convey Effective Feedback and Promote Student Learning


Rubrics save time, provide timely, meaningful feedback for students, and have the potential to become an effective part of the teaching and learning process. In fact, the main reason we don’t use rubrics more often is simply because most of us have been unaware of them. Rubrics were not part of our own experience as students, and most of us find that we often teach as we were taught.

To test this theory, I conducted an informal survey of some of my faculty colleagues asking these 3 questions: 1) Do you use rubrics?, 2) How do you use rubrics?, and 3) Have you had formal instruction in how to construct rubrics? Approximately one third responded with “What’s a rubric?” Others knew what rubrics were, and wanted to incorporate them into their classes in the future. The final group (~30%) had previously used rubrics for grading, rubrics typically sourced from other instructors at teaching workshops. Only 1 person had actually created rubrics for her own use, a skill she learned from her own professor in graduate school. Clearly, I am not the only faculty member who could benefit from reading Introduction to Rubrics.

Dannelle Stevens and Antonia Levi, associate professors at Portland State Univ., do an outstanding job of defining rubrics and explaining how to create and use them in different contexts. The book is peppered with anecdotes drawn from their own teaching experiences, and the mechanistic aspects of rubric construction are presented in a straightforward, conversational style. Before describing rubric construction, the authors note that although it can be time consuming and intimidating at first, the process becomes easier with experience, particularly through adaptation of existing rubrics for other uses.

Briefly, rubrics are scoring instruments in the form of a matrix or a grid. One axis of the matrix lists the specific components of the assignment while the other axis provides detailed descriptions of the levels of achievement for each task. In addition to facilitating a more rapid and equitable grading of papers, presentations, class participation, lab reports, and other assignments, rubrics clearly elaborate for students the specific expectations for an assignment.

The process of creating rubrics is broken into 4 basic stages: (1) Reflecting on the purpose of the assignment, our expectations, and what we hope students will learn from it. (2) Listing the precise details of the assignment, including specific learning objectives. (3) Grouping and labeling expectations, using clear and neutral performance descriptions. (4) Applying the parameters outlined in stage 3 to the grid format of the rubric.

The authors guide us through the reflection stage by posing precise questions that allow us to articulate what we already know: “Why did you create this assignment? Have you given this assignment before? How does this assignment relate to the rest of what you are teaching? What exactly is the task assigned? What are the highest expectations you have for student performance on this assignment?” Thoughtful answers to these questions lead us to a rubric design that encompasses the most important aspects of an assignment.

Although all stages are clearly described in the text with meticulous instructions, the section on grouping and labeling expectations was the most useful for me. The authors give numerous examples of a variety of rubrics, including rubrics for students at various developmental learning stages, and rubrics with varying levels of detail (3 to 5 performance levels).

My only criticism is that the book includes examples taken primarily from liberal arts and business disciplines. However, there is 1 sample rubric for laboratory science broken into 3 performance levels (exemplary, competent, needs work) and 7 task dimensions (materials, procedure, safety, purpose, data collection, data analysis, and evaluation of experiment). This example could be slightly modified for use in food chemistry or other food science laboratory applications.
Part II of the book is targeted to teachers who already have a working knowledge of rubric construction and use, and are ready to move to a higher level. Chapter 4 deals specifically with involving students in rubric construction, detailing 5 models of collaborative rubric design. The rationales for including students in rubric construction are preventing misunderstandings that negatively influence grades, increasing student understanding of the importance of their assignments, and enhancing critical thinking skills. Student involvement can range from simple feedback about a rubric to construction of an entire rubric with final approval by the instructor. Other potential collaborators for rubric design and construction include teaching assistants, tutors, and colleagues who coteach our courses.

This book, which is enjoyable to read, serves as an essential resource for higher education faculty by highlighting the important role of rubrics, and detailing the design and implementation process. In addition to a comprehensive description of how to integrate rubrics into your teaching, the book offers tips on fostering student feedback and gives an interesting perspective on how students think and what motivates them to learn. The authors also offer practical advice regarding which rubric models work best for different types of classes, students, and assignments.

The authors state that “because of the rubric format, students may notice for themselves the patterns of recurring problems or ongoing improvement in their work, and this self-discovery is one of the happiest outcomes of using rubrics.” Sounds like reason enough to give them a try!

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