



Two Reasons Why I Still Use Rubrics

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I began using grading rubrics for essays several years ago, and I was initially rather unhappy with how they worked. I found I was giving grades that I wouldn't have given when I graded without the rubric. Often the grades were higher, but not always. I gave enough lower grades to cause me to notice those as well. Furthermore, using rubrics did not save me any time in grading, as they had been promised to do. I still wrote ample comments on the paper as I was reading it. However, I decided to stick with the rubrics and I now understand why I had trouble at the beginning. I'd like to offer two reasons why I'm now in favor of using rubrics.

First, rubrics help students understand what is truly important in writing essays for my classes, which is especially helpful for students in the several sections of first-year composition that I teach every semester. Our students come from a wide variety of backgrounds, including those who've taken multiple AP English courses and those who readily admit that they've never written an academic essay. The rubric, especially when paired with sample essays from previous semesters, helps them see what I value in essays.

The rubric also identifies what I do not value, and that includes some aspects of papers that have counted for a significant portion of their grade previously. For example, many students have had teachers who were obsessed with the works cited page or with particular format issues. They tell me about teachers who would take off a point for every punctua-

tion mark that was incorrect on the works cited page, or teachers who measured margins and counted off points for the wrong formatting. When they look at my rubric, they see that there is no section for formatting at all (though I certainly mark their mistakes), and the section on citations only makes up 10 percent of their grade and includes in-text citations as well as the works cited page.

Instead, they see that thesis, evidence, and structure count for 60 to 70 percent of their grade. Add another 10 percent for their rough draft and peer editing, as I want them to learn the importance of writing multiple drafts and revising as part of a community, and there's not much left. The rubric offers a visual representation of my definition of academic writing: thesis-driven and evidence-based. If my students have lost points on their papers, they understand that they needed a more substantial argument and stronger evidence to support it, not a different margin or more commas.

Oddly enough, the second reason I still use rubrics relates to the grading problems I had with them at the beginning. What I have found is that using rubrics reminds me of what I really believe is important in essays. Students often accuse professors of grading subjectively, and sometimes they're right. However, rubrics keep me focused on what I have told the students is actually important for the essay I am grading at the time. It is too easy to see an essay with a good deal of red ink and give it a low grade, even if those red marks are evidence of minor errors repeated throughout the paper. When guided by the need to mark a rubric, I am forced to look at my own description of a C thesis

and see if that was honestly the problem with the essay or if the mistake was something less serious but persistent.

Also, when I am marking the essay as I read it, I am aware of what I need to circle on the rubric at the end. This guides my comments, making them more focused on the issues I have been teaching for the past few weeks. Instead of becoming frustrated because a student continues to use comma splices, I can help that student develop a clear thesis, something I have talked about and illustrated for several weeks but that he or she still does not yet seem to understand. Since the rubric keeps me focused on the two or three issues I say I am most concerned about, we spend more class time discussing those issues.

In the end, the grades ultimately sort-ed themselves out as I have focused more time in class on issues that I really believe are important. Students write, understanding what is important, and that helps them improve in those areas. This should be the way grading works—actually measuring what the professor deems most important in a course. ♥

In This Issue

Student-Formed or Instructor-Assigned Groups?	2
Challenges of Teaching My Students	3
Questions to Ask about the Appropriate Use of Large Classes	4
Lessons about Learning	4
Instruments: A Couple of Intriguing Options	5
Metacognitive Pestering for Beginning Students	6



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Student-Formed or Instructor-Assigned Groups?

If the course involves a graded group project, should instructors let students form their own groups or should the instructor create the groups? This decision is not always easy or obvious. Some students lobby hard to form their own groups, arguing that knowing each other ensures that they will be able to work together productively. On the other hand, in the world of work, most of the time employees do not get to pick their collaborators. There's a task, and those with knowledge and relevant skills are formed into a group and assigned to complete the project, solve the problem, or develop the product.

Behind those questions is a more basic one: Do students perform better in self-selected groups or in instructor-formed groups? That question was explored in the study referenced below but with a different twist. "Unlike prior studies, which have focused on group formation from an instructor's perspective, our study provides a student characterization of group-formation effects." (p. 15) The researchers looked at and combined both quantitative and qualitative data in their analysis.

The students who participated in the study worked in groups of four in an introductory financial accounting course. They completed a two-part, six-week project that involved analyzing accounting practices and the financial health of real and fictitious companies. The project was worth 25 percent of their final grade. The qualitative data was collected from journal reports students wrote about their group experiences. They described what was happening in their groups and their perceptions of those experiences. These journals were collected at four different times during the project. Participants were also surveyed before, during, and after the project's completion. They were asked about group experiences, group processes, and the outcomes.

Students in this course, which was

offered in multiple sections, had the option of forming their own groups or being assigned to a group by the instructor. Groups were formed during the fourth week of class. Fifty of the groups were self-selected and the instructor formed the other 34 using a random-number-generation process.

The qualitative data revealed one significant but predictable difference between the groups. Self-selected groups got off to a much quicker start on the project. Members already knew each other and could start to work immediately. In the instructor-formed groups, there was a period of getting to know one another before they could work productively on the task. The qualitative data uncovered another less obvious difference. Self-selected groups valued their similarities. What they shared from previous interactions helped them work together and made it less likely that any individual would let the group down. Students in the instructor-formed groups valued their differences. They saw each other as making different contributions to the group and felt that these differences enabled the group to produce a better product.

Interestingly, "although student-selected groups perceived they produced higher-quality work, the actual grades assigned to the group projects did not differ between group formation conditions." (p. 26) Despite this, these faculty researchers stop short of recommending that faculty always let students form their own groups. "Although we found that student-selected groups generally had a more positive experience than instructor-formed groups, we resist the temptation to conclude that student-selection is the superior method for forming groups. An important achievement by individuals in instructor-formed groups

PAGE 4

Challenges of Teaching My Students

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Teaching developmental English at a community college is not an easy task. It challenges me on several fronts. My students not only come with academic deficiencies, they also come with a variety of troubling backgrounds. Despite placement test scores and a writing sample used to determine the appropriate class level for them, my students are still very diverse in their knowledge, abilities, and motivation to learn.

I've been teaching developmental English for the past eight years. My academic goal is to get the students interested in writing and to teach them a writing process that will enable them to produce college-level essays in any given discipline. Along with that, like a detective, I have to uncover and address their educational deficiencies. I must help them arrive at a level where they can comfortably move forward with better-prepared students. And that is not all; I need to know my students well, including their anxieties, complicated lives, goals, and aspirations. My students might include a female student who has left an abusive

relationship; a young man who has been a drug addict since his teen years but is now rehabilitated; a middle-aged woman who has divorced her alcoholic husband; a male student who is out of jail on parole; and a 19-year-old woman who is pregnant, single, and will be delivering by mid-semester. They are all back in school and in my classroom.

Teaching developmental students is more than revising papers, correcting grammar, or drilling MLA format. Most of my students have little self-confidence or self-esteem. I must create an environment that will help them develop both. They need to learn self-discipline and must trust that they can write safely about their life experiences. They need to be validated.

I have thrown away words such as "test" or "quiz," and they like that! But that does not mean I do not measure their progress. I remind them that it is important to determine how much information they have absorbed and what they have learned. We use "MRI," which stands for Mental Registration Index, instead of "quiz." A rose is a rose by any other name!

I design instruction and assignments that build foundations. We work on

those foundations throughout the semester. They learn very quickly that missing class hinders their progress. We establish a buddy system for emergency purposes, because we all know that "life happens." I have learned to accept that my students will take time out to appear in court, go to the hospital to have a baby, or attend to numerous family emergencies.

Sharing their writings in class is not only part of the writing process; it also helps them to recognize that they are not alone. They share experiences as they struggle with similar problems in life and in school. Writing is therapeutic for most students. When they write about a coach, a counselor, a parole officer, or a member of the family who has intervened and saved them from falling off the cliff, I suggest they think of their writing as a gift of words and give that essay as a present to the person about whom they have written.

Every semester is unique and requires new strategies and flexibilities, but new challenges add to my repertoire of solutions as I work to do the very best for my students. I know that education can make a world of difference for them. 🍀

Lessons about Learning

A new edition of a classic book on the curriculum suggests eight lessons from the learning literature with implications for course and curriculum planning. Any list like this tends to simplify a lot of complicated research and offer generalizations that apply most, but certainly not all, of the time. Despite these caveats, lists like this are valuable. They give busy faculty a sense of the landscape and offer principles that can guide decision making, in this case about courses and curricula.

Assess students' prior knowledge and skills to avoid unfounded assump-

tions about what they know about the subject matter being studied. The only way to know what students bring to a course is to collect information from them that reveals their current levels of knowledge and understanding. That information can prevent many course and curricula planning errors.

Don't assume that students know how to learn. We can debate at length whether they should come to college knowing how to learn, but it's a mistake to plan a course assuming they do. Students must be introduced to appro-

priate learning strategies and made aware of the strategies that they use, especially if they are using approaches that do not expedite acquisition of the content.

Acknowledge that learning, motivation, and engagement are affected by attitudes and emotions. What students believe about themselves as learners matters. If they don't believe that they can learn some kinds of content, it will affect their motivation and performance in class. Teachers must discover and address

PAGE 6 🍀

Questions to Ask about the Appropriate Use of Large Classes

I happened on a list of reasons why classes should be small as opposed to large. The reasons are familiar. In large classes, teachers are more likely to lecture, students are less likely to be involved, teachers can't give students as much feedback, and students are less motivated to think deeply about course content. Given the current economic realities in higher education, however, I really can't think of a worse time to be arguing for small classes. Can you see administrators at your institution deciding to ban large classes or even significantly reduce the number that are being offered?

Despite that, I think it makes all sorts of sense to continue the discussion about class size, but I think the conversation ought to take a different tack than the usual small versus large debate. What we don't often talk about is who should take large courses, what content should be offered in that format, and who should teach the big classes. Let's explore each a bit further.

Who should take large classes? Given what we now know about the importance of that first semester and year in college, probably not beginning students. They need to get connected with other students and have the opportunity to interact with their instructors, both of which are hard to accomplish in large classes. At-risk students are also challenged by the big anonymous classroom. Often lacking self-confidence, they can be in a big class and imagine they are the only ones struggling with the content. They need to be in environments that develop their confidence and learning skills. Bright, mature, self-confident students are probably best able to handle big classes—but if they're honor students, we often reward them with small classes. Do we have good reasons for doing so?

What content should be delivered in the large class? This question can be asked about the content with a given curriculum and about content across disciplines. What reasons justify our deci-

sion to make lower-division "service" courses large? What might that say about our commitment to developing a working knowledge of our disciplines among those who will someday be called educated? But many would argue that courses for majors must be more intimate learning experiences. Is that true for all major courses or might some be presented to larger groups? This leads to the second question: Do some fields have content better suited to delivery in large courses?

If the learning requires a lot of feedback (like responses to writing or on artwork), then the courses must be small to manage the teacher's workload. This of course assumes that the one who delivers the instruction must be the one who grades the student's work. If the content is straightforward, tightly configured and not as discussable, then perhaps that content can be delivered in large classes. Granted, it would be highly unpopular to identify those fields with content "suitable" for large courses, but it seems to me the question of what content best fits the format legitimately belongs in the conversation.

Who should teach large classes? There are some faculty who do very well with large classes. Unfortunately, this particularly challenging kind of teaching is not always recognized or rewarded. And those faculty who do well with large courses often get to teach them for years because most faculty do not choose to do so. When no faculty volunteer for the large classes, these courses often become the teaching assignment of newcomers.

In most cases, new faculty should not be assigned large classes. Large classes are not the place to learn how to teach and have a positive experience doing so. More faculty might be willing to teach large classes if they were better supported in their efforts to prepare for this teaching assignment and if seasoned veterans were willing to mentor them through the first couple of semesters.

Large classes (defined as having 35 students in some institutions and 350 or others) are a reality in higher education and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. Given that reality, it makes sense to change the conversation and start serious dialogue about which students should take large classes, what content makes the most sense to offer in large classes, and who ought to be teaching those big classes. Exchanges on these topics would make the conversation more viable and the decisions about large classes more thoughtful. ♥

GROUP SELECTION

FROM PAGE 2

involved learning to develop trust in others with whom they had no prior contact. Indeed, one might view the development of trust as a superior outcome to the comparatively less challenging experience of maintaining the trust that already existed within student-selected groups." (p. 31)

Reference: Hilton, S. and Phillips, F. (2010). Instructor-assigned and student-selected groups: A view from the inside. *Issues in Accounting Education*, 25 (1), 15-33. ♥

Correction

The byline for Douglas Groothuis' piece in last month's issue titled "Banning Laptops from the Classroom" should have identified his institutional affiliations as Denver Seminary and Metropolitan State College of Denver. We apologize.

Instruments: A Couple of Intriguing Options

Very few faculty members speak favorably of the end-of-semester instrument used to assess their courses and teaching. They object to the inclusion of some items and exclusion of others. They think a five-point rating scale would be better than a seven-point scale (or vice versa). They quibble over the wording of some items. They think the results and comparisons should be calculated in a different way.

Some of these gripes are legitimate, others are not. Unfortunately, they have made many faculty members reluctant to seek feedback from students. Others have come to doubt that any instrument can generate feedback that is truly insightful and useful.

It is this last conclusion that merits challenging. The literature is full of survey instruments that instructors can use to gain a deeper understanding of how their teaching is impacting students' efforts to learn. Generally, these instruments have been developed for use in empirical inquiries—inquiries that often address interesting and pragmatic research questions. Consider two examples.

Approaches to Teaching Inventory—Not all the useful instruments are ones designed to solicit student feedback. This particular inventory (developed by Keith Trigwell and Michael Prosser) is completed by faculty.

It's been used in 15 countries by faculty across a wide range of disciplines. The instrument gives instructors a read on how they approach teaching. The results are important because other research has established that the approaches teachers take have a direct impact on the approaches students use when they study. If you are interested in those teaching approaches that encourage students to learn and master the material, as opposed to just memorizing it, then this instrument is worth completing.

The instrument appears at the very end of the research article referenced below. It would be best to take the survey first and then read the article.

Teaching Behaviors Checklist—Here's an instrument that students complete. Its creators began by surveying a group of award-winning psychology teachers, asking them to describe the ingredients of their success. A synthesis of the responses enabled researchers to identify 28 distinct qualities. Several student and faculty groups rated the importance of the items. Much agreement was found among the ratings given by all groups. Finally, students looked at the list of characteristics and were asked to identify specific behaviors that reflected the qualities. The result is an instrument that lists 28 different teacher qualities and the behaviors that indicate the presence of those qualities. If the score on a particu-

lar item is lower than other scores, the list of behaviors gives an instructor a place to start working and makes this instrument one that can truly help instructors improve.

Findings confirm its construct validity, in that it measures what it purports to measure, and its reliability, meaning raters are interpreting items similarly and rating the same instruction with some consistency.

Important lessons can be learned from feedback provided by instruments like these. Using an empirically developed instrument reduces the likelihood of bogus data or findings that don't make any sense. Instruments that ask relevant questions or seek feedback on something of interest to the instructor can reaffirm the value of assessment activities. Good feedback becomes a window through which new understandings of teaching and learning can be seen.

References: Trigwell, K. and Prosser, M. (2004). Development and uses of the Approaches to Teaching Inventory. *Educational Psychology Review*, 16 (4), 409-424.

Keeley, J., Smith, D., and Buskist, W. (2006). The Teaching Behaviors Checklist: Factor analysis of its utility for evaluating teaching. *Teaching of Psychology*, 33 (2), 84-91. ♥

METACOGNITIVE PESTERING

FROM PAGE 6

provided the scaffolding students need to begin writing a rough draft: helping them determine what their theses are, allowing them to complete the research for their assignments, and having them plan in class the form their essays will take. But I follow this first pestering email with others, some containing blunt reminders like this one.

DON'T CRAM WRITE

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Some of this "metacognitive pestering" is self-serving, in that the more students avoid cram writing, the more organized and clear their essays are. This makes my job of responding to their rough drafts easier.

This kind of "hovering," aimed at making students think about when and how they are completing their assignments, doesn't work at all if students aren't checking their college emails. Early

in the course I offer reminders about the importance of these frequent email checks. I'm sure, for those of you more adept at texting and other social networking media, the potential for using other modes of communication is limited only by your time. I'm not recommending this approach for students at all levels. But I do think beginning students benefit when their teachers intervene with the kind of advice and reminders that set in place successful approaches to learning. ♥

Metacognitive Pestering for Beginning Students

By Matt Birkenbauer, Northern Kentucky University
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Watching my own son spend his first semester in college struggling with meeting deadlines was an up-close reminder of something I have learned after 30 years of teaching. Beginning college students have lots on their minds and need help in that commonplace of contemporary pedagogy called metacognitive thinking.

Most of us know what metacognitive thinking is. John Flavell, the psychologist who coined the term in the late 1970s, defines it as “one’s knowledge concerning one’s own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them, for example, learning relevant properties or information or data.” More simply, it can be described as “thinking about one’s own thinking” or, as a colleague of mine likes to say, “making thinking visible.”

How can college teachers “make thinking visible” for harried, busy, and not always terribly mature freshmen who

don’t just take classes but work, date, and attempt to straddle the line between studying and partying? One way is to pester them—be “helicopter instructors,” at least to some extent. I do agree wholeheartedly with those who warn against the dangers of helicopter parents. But I don’t think it’s the same when college teachers work to clarify the demands and culture of higher education for beginning students. Many are first-generation college students and need mentors to “hover” around them in those first college courses.

I think a lot of us already do this. Thankfully several of my son’s instructors had these kinds of conversations with him as he was floundering in his first semester. I do it in my introductory writing classes by using Blackboard to pester my students. For example, many of them used “cram writing” to get through four years of high school. I start talking about cram writing in class the first two weeks of the semester. Then I reinforce that message with this email, which I send out through Blackboard as the deadline for their first

major writing assignment nears. If the assignment is due Tuesday, this is the note students receive on Saturday:

If you want to write a quality essay, avoid what I call “cram writing,” which is about as effective in writing as it is in studying. What is cram writing? Cram writing is waiting until the night before the rough draft is due to begin writing. This causes you to write quickly and unthinkingly; it also denies you the opportunity to creatively reflect on what you wrote—to chew over it a bit.

Today is Saturday. If you haven’t done so yet, begin drafting an introduction today. Look at it for a few minutes before you go to bed tonight. Look at it again in the morning. Try to write another half or third of your essay tomorrow. Then think how much less work you’ll have left to do by Tuesday.

I don’t send this email out until I have

PAGE 5

LESSONS ABOUT LEARNING

FROM PAGE 3

attitudes that hinder learning. Ignoring the role of attitudes and emotions in course planning will likely compromise learning outcomes.

Design academic plans that connect students’ personal and academic goals to enhance motivation and engagement.

Students need to see how what they are being asked to learn is relevant to their goals and future plans. Teachers can address students’ goals in course planning only if they have discovered what those goals are. Knowing what students care about and where they are headed makes it possible to design courses that connect with students and more effectively engage them in learning.

Recognize that students with different beliefs about knowledge have differ-

ent expectations of their instructors and different attitudes toward learning activities.

They should be encouraged to take responsibility for their learning by examining their views about education and considering how those views influence their learning experiences. Again, knowing what students believe and expect makes it easier to plan meaningful learning experiences.

Treat students as apprentices who need assistance in learning the language, ways of thinking, and inquiry methods of academic fields.

Students don’t come to our fields knowing how knowledge there is organized or advanced. That must be taught explicitly, and students must be given the opportunity to make connections between course content and their own experiences and prior understandings.

Promote development of complex

views of knowledge and recognize that students are at different stages of epistemological development.

“Challenge students to apply, integrate, evaluate, and construct knowledge by engaging them in collaborative, complex problem-solving activities.” (p. 181) Students should not just be knowledge consumers. They should also be knowledge producers.

Learn about learning and discuss with colleagues how knowledge about student learning can be put to use in courses and programs.

The abilities of students should be viewed as malleable. Different abilities can be tapped in different courses and by different curricula.

Reference: Lattuca, L.R. and Stark, J.S. *Shaping the College Curriculum: Academic Plans in Context*. 2nd Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009. [This particular list appears on pp. 140-1.]