

In the Classroom 103

Using Rubrics in Your Classroom

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. This week, I would like to talk about a tool I have been using for over 40 years. This tool is a rubric. It helps to standardize assessment. When I was in the Air Force, we used a variation of a rubric called go-no-go checklist. Primarily used for skill assessment. In academics, rubrics tend to be more multi-dimensional. Although for specifications, grading, which I've talked about in the previous episode, rubrics can also be go-no-go.

Let's take a look at how we can use this tool to improve student performance in the classroom. First of all, what are rubrics? Well, basically rubrics are scoring charts. They spell out specific criteria for assignment and provide descriptors and performance levels that you can use to measure assignments or performance on a team and take them through various processes or various steps of an assignment.

It basically identifies what specific criteria will be assessed, descriptors that are associated with each criterion and levels of performance. Rubrics are a wonderful tool for students to use for self-assessment to determine if they're succeeding or not and it helps develop consensus between the student and the instructor. You can sit down with a rubric, each individual can look at the rubric, assess a piece of work, and then determine how they compare on the assessment and work to get to a more common rating.

Like I mentioned, rubrics can be used as a guide throughout the assignment, but also as a monitoring tool for the faculty member, the instructor that they can look at a student's performance as they're working on the assignment and point to different pieces of the criterion and guide a student to better performance. Finally, they get to standardize grading within a course and across similar courses.

Why do you want to use a rubric? Mia McMeekin created this very useful infographic highlighting many of the reasons you would want to use rubrics. First of all, rubrics enable teachers to better focus on each learning event to address the rubric's elements and helps to make it more learner-centric. You can break down different elements of an assignment where you're focusing on a specific piece. It could be that it is a writing assignment and you're using MLA or APA citation and so you can just focus in on that portion of it to ensure that they have proper references, that they're citing information correctly, that maybe the format for the document, it meets APA specifications.

With a developed rubric, a rubric allows teachers to assess based on the expectations in the rubric. It helps to keep everything focused that the instructor knows exactly the criteria that they're looking at and don't introduce additional

criteria. If it's not on the rubric, then pretty much you would try to keep it out. I think one of the most important pieces is a rubric lets a learner know what's expected right from the beginning and you can tie the criteria directly to learning objectives.

With that, you basically trying to add clarity to what a student needs to produce to meet a certain grade. By tying it to the objectives, you can ensure that they're going to accomplish what you want them to in terms of course. Because a rubric specifies each assignment element, the learner can focus on those pieces. Sometimes just starting with a blank sheet of paper, it's difficult to pull thoughts together, but when an assignment is basically drafted out, a student can look at each of the different criteria, go back to their assignment and ensure that that is incorporated into the product that they are producing.

Because rubrics are specified in uniform for everyone, it encourages consistent grading. That way you don't have students coming back saying that they were graded unfairly. They can see how they measure against that specific criterion and that just removes some of that ambiguity that sometimes you have for the projects that are a little more subjective. One of the things I'm going to mention is that you should make sure that the rubric is in the hands of students before they start the assignment. That way they can compare their work to the rubric before submission.

This is also a great tool, not just for self-assessment, but for peer assessment. You could have student peers review a product and work their way through the rubric to provide that particular student with some feedback to help them improve their product. Rubrics are definitely used as a guide for teachers. They can help them address and provide feedback for very specific issues and once all the rubrics are completed across all the projects for the students, you can look for areas, basically, trends that are happening across that particular class or across multiple classes and use that as information to go back and improve your instruction.

Not only does it provide feedback to the student, but it provides feedback to the instructor where they can improve the instruction for their class. Rubrics are also very efficient. They can help with speeding up of grading and make it easier to grade. They also provide immediate feedback to the students once you're done grading. Mcmeekin also provided some different reasons on how to use rubrics. When you are creating a rubric, you want to make sure that it makes sense for your assignment. It's really important to look at each of the criterion and make sure that that is useful for that particular assignment.

Use it as a teaching tool in your classroom. Provide it to your students, read the rubric to the students, see if they have any questions that way you can add clarity right upfront. Like I said, you want to make sure that students are aware that a rubric is going to be used. One of the things that I do, and it's also recommended if you have an assignment, say a paper that you actually copy the rubric, paste it to the end of the document and mark the rubric on the document before you hand it back.

Or in a learning management system, the rubric can be part of the learning management system, then you mark the rubric right there where you're providing the grade. You want to make sure that you're giving the rubric back graded so students

know how they did. You also want to make sure that you're following the rubric. You're using it to, in fact, grade the assignment.

Once you're done grading prior to the next assignment, you may want to update your rubric to adjust it for expectations. I know that I've created rubrics in the past and I thought I had it right, but then when it met the assignment and I started grading it, I saw definitely room for improvement. I went back and made modifications to the rubric so when I did a similar assignment later that I would have that improved rubric.

You're going to end up building a set of standard rubrics throughout the year for different types of assignments. You're going to build a library that you can use, and that's one way how you want to be able to use them so you have something that you can use and even share it with colleagues.

When you're creating and implementing rubrics, there's some practices that you should take into consideration. In the end, you probably want to try to create rubrics for all your assignments, but it takes time. It takes time to develop a good one, but once you have one, these rubrics can help raise student performances. Where to start? Sometimes a blank page can hold you back. Fortunately, the internet has countless examples where you can start to get eight ideas to develop your own rubric.

Kathy Schrock has put together a wonderful list to start your journey into rubrics. I've put those into the show notes. Go check what she has to share, but that's a great place to start. Once again, it's just, you know, to generate ideas and then you can start moving forward. Another place to start is look at previous assignments that you've handed out. When you're looking at the assignments, look at actually products students have turned in. Order those by best to worse and figure out what made an assignment a best performance and what made it worse performance. You can start identifying the criterion that helps to delineate from best to worst. What determines each level and being able to document that into a rubric.

When you're writing your rubric, you want understandable language. You're going to use consistent language throughout the rubric, ensure that you're using action verbs that identify the objectives that you want part of that rubric, and make sure that the rubric is easy to read from left to right, for example. That the criterion has clearly identified, the descriptors, the levels of performance, everything is clear, making sure that the description in terms of the criteria and level of performance is correctly worded, that it adequately reflects what that level of performance is.

The language has to be learning level appropriate. As academics, we can write in such a way that we can make things very obscure, but to improve student performance, you want to make sure that it's as clear as possible for the students. When you have created a rubric, put it out in front of the students and get their feedback and look for points where you can clarify this, because it's going to be used as a teaching tool.

You definitely going to want to hand it out as part of the assignment. You're going to want to explain the assignment and explain why you're using a rubric and explain

how to use the rubric to improve their performance. Another thing that you're to want to do is keep the rubric simple. Try to avoid too many columns. You can have nuances in performance levels, but at a certain point, what's the difference between a five, a six and a seven? How do you identify that?

When you're looking at that, I would recommend that you take a look at the Fibonacci sequence. Instead of five, six and seven, which, how do you determine what makes a six better than a five? What's the difference? If you can change it so you can tell the difference between a three, five, and eight, which is very much in line with the Fibonacci sequence, that's a lot easier to figure out. You can tell the difference between a three and a five and a five and an eight. Try to use those type of ratings. Don't make it so it's so close to each other in terms of ratings.

Also, you don't want to script this so tightly that you're, in fact, creating a recipe where they're just doing it step by step by step and every product that you get is exactly the same. You don't want to do that. Finally, try to keep the rubric to one page. Some assignments require a lot more complexity so you may not be able to do that, but for a lot of assignments, you're going to try to keep it to one page.

Now, when possible, try to write them as generic as possible. The reason that you want to do this, as you're trying to leverage the principles of universal design for learning. What I mean is when you create an assignment, try to create assignments that students have choice in what they turn in. You write the assignment where you just want them to demonstrate that their knowledge of certain principles. Does it matter if they turn in an essay? Does it matter if they turn in and say a newsletter or a podcast, or a video, or a presentation or a play?

As long as they are demonstrating knowledge of the content that you want them to produce. Things, being able to cite it correctly, being able to demonstrate that they have references and such, but you can do this with all these different products. If you keep your rubric generic enough, you can grade different types of products with the same rubric. Try to think in that line.

I'm also going to talk about being specific in a second, but if you make a rubric too specific, you're going to quash creativity and you're going to end up with the same product. When I'm talking about specificity, try to avoid words that are meaningless. Oh, this was good. This was excellent. Instead, be specific. If you're using phrasing to talk about APA formatting, indicating that there are zero APA formatting errors is being more specific or no more than five APA errors. That's being very specific. Another example is used three or more sources from peer-reviewed journal. That's being a little more specific.

Because you don't want to create a recipe, you're also trying to create a rubric that outlines what's necessary for a passing grade but also encouraging students to stretch and develop exceptional work. You want to encourage some type of risk-taking and get students to exceed the requirements of the rubric. That can be a little more challenging. Students have a tendency to check off the boxes to make sure that they're doing what they're required for the assignment. You may have to, in your rubric, figure out how to stretch them, how to get them to do that risk-taking.

Your rubrics can also be used for process development. In a faculty focus articles, Stephanie Almagno provided some ideas for using rubrics throughout an assignment. Check the show notes. There's an article called Rubrics: An Undervalued Teaching Tool that you can tap into. You can use rubrics for different steps in the assignment. The initial coming up with the idea, you can develop a rubric there, but then getting into the drafting of the product and having peer feedback. Rubrics can be used for that peer feedback as I mentioned before.

Another way is when it gets into, they've turned in a draft for the revision, the instructor can use the rubric to look for areas that the student would have to go back and revise, and they can use the rubric to identify those particular page places. As I mentioned before, rubrics once they're graded, you can look for areas where it's trending and students are falling short on a specific thing. You can therefore use a rubric for many lessons using that data to produce a teachable moment, to go back to students. Finally a rubric, therefore making grades visible, where students can self-score that you want them to, before they turn in their product, use a rubric to score themselves before turning it in.

As you're developing your rubric, make sure that you test it. Go back to previous assignments that you've already graded and run them through your rubric and see how they compare to what you already graded and see if they come up with the same results. Then you may want to take those same assignments, give them to a colleague with your rubric and see if they grade it in the same way that you graded.

Another way that you can test this is pull out some sample assignments, strip them of identifying information, go ahead and grade them with your rubric so you know how you would grade them, then give them to your students and have them grade those sample assignments and do a comparison and talk through the points where you don't align. Then finally for implementing this, use your learning management system, if possible. Once you've got your rubric designed and tested, put it into your learning management system, attach it to those assignments, and that will help speed up the grading process.

Rubrics add a lot of clarity to those very obscure assignments. What makes a great paper? This helps to identify those particular elements. Or what makes a great presentation or what makes a great video? That there are elements that you're looking for. Being able to identify those elements and provide some levels of performance will help with the grading and help students see where they are falling short.

I've always been a fan of rubrics. I think they're a very powerful tool and you should definitely give them a try. I attached a lot of different articles that'll point you in the right direction. Go check out the show notes for that. With that, here's a quick plug for my book.