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Heidi Goodrich Andrade

To cite this article: Heidi Goodrich Andrade (2005) Teaching With Rubrics: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly, College Teaching, 53:1, 27-31, DOI: [10.3200/CTCH.53.1.27-31](https://doi.org/10.3200/CTCH.53.1.27-31)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.3200/CTCH.53.1.27-31>



Published online: 07 Aug 2010.



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TEACHING WITH RUBRICS

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Heidi Goodrich Andrade

Abstract. This article gives a brief overview of the structure and purposes of rubrics; reviews the benefits of using rubrics as both teaching and grading tools; warns against approaches that limit the effectiveness of rubrics; and urges instructors to take simple steps toward ensuring the validity, reliability, and fairness of their rubrics. Tips for using rubrics with undergraduate and graduate students are also included.

In earlier articles on instructional rubrics, I reported on my work as a researcher interested in how rubrics might (or might not) support academic achievement (Andrade 2000, 2001; Goodrich 1997). This article is a reflection on my use of instructional rubrics as a teacher. Although the two perspectives are complementary, my recent experiences as an assistant professor have taught me a lot about teaching with rubrics. I have found that whether they are good, bad, or even ugly depends on how they are created and how they are used.

A Brief Review of the Basics

A rubric is an assessment tool that lists the criteria for a piece of work or what counts (for example, purpose, organization, details, voice, and mechanics often

are what count in a written essay) and articulates gradations of quality for each criterion, from excellent to poor (Goodrich 1997; Popham 1997). The example in table 1 is a rubric that I cocreated with students and a colleague for an undergraduate course on educational psychology. We used it for an assignment that required students to create a fifteen-minute role-play of instruction they designed, drawing on the theories of learning and human development introduced in the course.

The gradations of quality in this rubric, from A to D/F, are what distinguish this or any rubric from a checklist that lists only the criteria for an assignment. Although checklists can be useful assessment tools (I use several of them), they cannot do what rubrics can do, which is to describe desirable qualities as well as common pitfalls in student work. Such descriptions tend to be quite informative for students, thereby helping them think,

learn, and produce high quality work (Andrade 2000).

At the most basic level, then, a rubric lists criteria and levels of quality. What makes a rubric an instructional rubric? The ways in which it is used in the classroom. A rubric used exclusively by a teacher to assign grades is a scoring rubric. A rubric that is cocreated with students; handed out; used to facilitate peer assessment, self-assessment, and teacher feedback; and only then used to assign grades is an instructional rubric. It is not just about evaluation anymore; it is about teaching. Teaching with rubrics is where it gets good.

The Good

Whether we teach elementary school or graduate students, rubrics orient us toward our goals as teachers. We use them to clarify our learning goals, design instruction that addresses those goals, communicate the goals to students, guide our feedback on students' progress toward the goals, and judge final products in terms of the degree to which the goals were met. Like many teachers, I use rubrics before, during, and after I deliver instruction, and the benefits are numerous.

Instructional rubrics help me clarify my expectations and focus my instruction. To begin the process of creating a unit or a course, I list my goals for students, choose or create a project that will help them learn and demonstrate their learning, and draft a rubric for the project.

Heidi Goodrich Andrade is an assistant professor in the Division of Educational Psychology and Methodology at the University at Albany.

TABLE 1. Learning Vignettes (LV) Performance Rubric for Educational Psychology Course

	A	B	C	D/F
Instructional objectives	Communicates objectives to audience verbally and in writing and shows how they connect to the assessment of the project. Objectives reflect the generativity of the topic and include ≥ 1 high-level thinking goal(s) (critique, metacognition, analyze, interpret, solve complex problems, apply, etc.).	Communicates objectives verbally and in writing but does not connect them to assessment. Objectives only tend to reflect the generativity of the topic and include one high-level thinking goal for students.	Communicates learning objectives to audience by simply saying them or writing a list. Objectives do not reflect the generativity of the topic and/or do not include high-level thinking objectives.	Does not communicate learning objectives effectively and/or objectives do not reflect the generativity of topic and/or does not include high-level thinking objectives.
Instructional theories and techniques	Uses a wide variety of techniques that promote the learning objectives, e.g., modeling, metacognition/thinking skills, attention to misconceptions and motivation, student interaction, wait time, the theory of multiple intelligences (MI), constructivism, ongoing feedback, transfer, reflection on prior knowledge, positive reinforcement, teacher expectations, etc.	Uses a variety of techniques. Most are appropriate for the learning objectives of the lesson. Some may not be well matched with objectives, but none are blatantly inappropriate.	Uses a few teaching techniques. The appropriateness of one or more may be unclear, seem “crammed in,” or random.	Uses only one or two approaches to instruction. The approaches used may be limited to “traditional” techniques such as memorization or lecture.
Active engagement	All or most of the instruction involves active engagement on the part of students. The teacher(s) act(s) as a monitor and resource.	Most of the instruction involves active engagement. Lecture and seat work, if used, require thoughtful participation by students.	Lots of teacher talk. Some active engagement is used, but the bulk of the instruction does not rely on it.	Instruction rarely or never actively engages students in learning, e.g., it relies on lecture, worksheets, etc. The teacher acts as director.
Adaptations for atypical students	Student’s behavior reflects the case profile. Seamless attention to atypical student. The instruction focuses on the student’s needs, uses a variety of appropriate strategies for meeting those needs, and creates a supportive environment that fosters self-worth. Is consistent with laws, policies, and procedures.	Student’s behavior tends to reflect the case profile. LV focuses on individual needs, uses some appropriate strategies but overlooks others. Some elements of a supportive learning environment are evident, but others are missing.	Student’s behavior does not reflect case profile. The teacher may create a dependency on the part of the student. There is recognition of student’s needs but the interventions either do not fill it or single the student out by focusing too much on her/him.	Deals only with typical development or uses only inappropriate strategies, e.g., punishment is the only strategy used with an ADHD student.
Developmental appropriateness	At least one attempt is made to explicitly promote development by addressing common milestones in cognitive, linguistic, personal, social, and/or moral development. All activities and concepts are age appropriate.	All activities and concepts are age appropriate.	Most activities and concepts are age appropriate, but there is one example of a content or a teaching technique that is either too simple or too sophisticated.	Several activities or concepts are not age appropriate.

(table continues)

TABLE 1. (Continued)

	A	B	C	D/F
Presentation	Organized and interesting. Actors know their lines and are professionally dressed. Costumes, scenery, humor, and narration are used effectively. Performance is fifteen minutes long.	Professional. May over-rely on telling instead of showing how techniques are used. Actors talked too fast and/or too quietly.	Some parts were out of character, unpolished, and/or unprofessional. The LV was choppy and/or blah. Went over fifteen-minute time limit.	Inappropriate dress and/or language. No clear attempt to engage audience. Actors read from notes.

By working backwards in this way, I can design daily lesson plans and choose reading assignments that focus on developing the concepts and skills that students need to do well on the project.

Instructional rubrics help my students understand the goal of an assignment and focus their efforts. I often cocreate a rubric with students by discussing strong and weak examples of student work with them, asking them to brainstorm criteria for their own work, and using the resulting list to write a draft rubric for their comment (see Andrade 2000; Goodrich 1997). As a result, I never hear a student complain that she “didn’t know what I wanted.”

Instructional rubrics help me give more informative feedback to my students without spending every evening and weekend on this task. We all know that feedback is profoundly educative. Research has shown that feedback can improve learning, especially when it gives students specific information about the strengths and weaknesses of their work (Black and Wiliam 1998). The problem is that giving focused feedback is wildly time consuming. A good rubric allows me to provide individualized, constructive critique in a manageable time frame. I will admit that I still spend a lot of time giving my students written and verbal feedback in addition to a marked-up rubric; I think that it is important. But if I were to simply circle boxes on a rubric and give it back with an assignment, I would still be providing more feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of the work than if I had just assigned a letter grade, and it would not take me any longer.

Rubric-referenced peer- and self-assessment are required for each major assignment in my class, so students get

ongoing feedback from a variety of sources. Self-assessment is done simply by circling the text on the rubric that best describes a student’s own work and attaching the marked-up rubric to the assignment before handing it in. Peer-assessment is usually done by giving rubric-referenced verbal feedback in class. Neither the self- nor the peer-assessments count toward final grades. As a result, students come to see assessment as a “source of insight and help instead of its being the occasion for meting out rewards and punishments” (Shepard 2000, 10), and they tend to use the feedback to improve on their assignments.

Instructional rubrics allow me to assign more challenging work than I otherwise could. If I had assigned the “learning vignettes” instructional design project (see the rubric in table 1) to my students without a rubric and the accompanying feedback, they likely would have balked or created grasping, unfocused projects. I might have concluded that they were not up to the challenge and lowered my standards. Quite the opposite is true: My students amaze me every time, and my expectations continue to rise.

Instructional rubrics keep me fair and unbiased in my grading. I will admit that I struggle with the temptation to assign grades based in part on irrelevant things such as effort or fondness—but not much. Rubrics keep me honest.

The Bad

Rubrics are not entirely self-explanatory. Students need help in understanding rubrics and their use. When I once handed out a rubric that we had cocreated in class and assumed that students knew what to do with it because we had cocreated it, I was in for a surprise. The more motivated students anguished over what to do with it,

and the less motivated filed it in their notebooks and promptly forgot about it. Most of them had never seen a rubric before, so I needed to explain it and give them a bit of practice with it by doing a mock critique as a class.

Similarly, rubrics are not a replacement for good instruction. Even a fabulous rubric does not change the fact that students need models, feedback, and opportunities to ask questions, think, revise, and so on. Anyone can download a rubric from the Web, but using it to support good instruction is another matter. (See <http://www.thinkinggear.com/tools/> for an example of how the Web can support the happy marriage of rubrics and instruction.)

Students are not always good at peer- and self-assessment at first, even with a rubric in hand. At their worst, peer assessments can be cruel or disorienting, and self-assessment can be misguided or delusional. Students become good at both, however, once they are convinced of their value and have had some practice (Falchikov 1986). Knowing they can use the feedback they get from their peers and themselves to revise for a better grade helps, as does being held accountable for their assessments by having to sign off on them and hand them in.

Instructional rubrics are not just scoring tools. As I noted earlier, rubrics can serve the purposes of teaching and learning as well as evaluation. Rubrics used only to assign final grades represent not only a missed opportunity to teach but also a regrettable instance of the teacher-as-sole-judge-of-quality model that puts our students in a position of mindlessness and powerlessness.

The Ugly

Issues of validity, reliability, and fairness apply to rubrics, too. We need to

worry more about the quality of the rubrics that we use. I have seen some very idiosyncratic rubrics in my day, and this is where it gets ugly. “Alternative” or “authentic” assessments are not exempt from the demands of validity, reliability, and equity (Moskal and Leydens 2000). Reliability and validity are concerned with the consistency and accuracy of the judgments we make about students and their work (Payne 2003). At a minimum, an instructional rubric must be aligned with reasonable and respectable standards and with the curriculum being taught in order to be valid. It must pass a test of reliability by resulting in similar ratings when used by different people. Issues of equity must be addressed by checking to see if the ratings that students receive have too much to do with gender, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

These concerns do not require us to perform complex statistical analyses but, rather, that we simply worry enough

about them to subject our rubrics to critique. Rubrics improve when we compare them to published standards, show them to another teacher, or ask a colleague to coscore some student work. Payne (2003) suggests that “sitting and listening to students critique assessments can be the best source of information about how good evaluations really are” (433), and I agree. These things just take time, guts, and a concern about quality. As teachers, we have plenty of guts and concern for quality; we just need to make time for validity, reliability, and equity. By attending to these important issues, the good of instructional rubrics can far outweigh the bad.

Key words: rubrics, assessment, grading

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