To Rubric or not To Rubric: Presentation 4

Grading is probably the most difficult and most contentious aspect of student-instructor interaction.

Conflict is usually about the grade a student expects versus the one they received. There are other points of disagreement, but both sides will generally agree, this is the big one. Most often the root of the issue is not performance (does a student know the material or not); rather it is a disconnect between student expectations and instructor evaluations. The issue is communication, not facts.

If we can accept this as a given, and based on my experiences as a student, instructor, and instructional designer, the resolution lies not in teachers teaching better or students learning better; the resolution of this key conflict depends on improved communication of expectations from faculty to student.

What we believe here at EP is that rubrics are the best way to communicate your expectations to your students because they offer a transparent view of your grading criteria. No interpretations necessary.

Authentic assessments are in most cases, are criterion referenced. That is, the results or grades are issued based on the comparison of the completed work to a set of criteria established in advance of the performance.

These criteria are, in most cases, established by the instructor. So far, so good. The source of our problems lies in the next step. Communicating those criteria to students. Traditionally, the standards for evaluating student work are closely guarded secrets. I’m not really sure why that’s so, but this feeling transcends disciplines, generations, and quality of institutions.

Here are some actual quotes from instructors I have worked with;

1. “I know an ‘A’ paper when I see one.”
2. I establish the framework using the best and worst work, then everyone else sort of slots in between.
3. There is no way everyone in the class can earn an ‘A’.
4. “I don’t tell them what I expect because if I do, they won’t do their best, they’ll only do enough to get an A.”

If you have ever spoken any of these phrases aloud or if any of these thoughts guide your grading, you are not using criteria to grade student work, you are using a “norm-referenced” assessment method. The problem is, Norm referenced assessments do not tell you what students know, only how well they compare to one in other in a certain knowledge domain.
Personally, I don’t really care if the engineer who designed my plan did better or worse than the student in the next seat, I want him or her to know how to build safe airplanes.

Setting standards for performance is “setting the bar”, to use a high jump metaphor. By using a norm-referenced assessment methodology you are moving the bar after you set it.

You are either telling students what they will have to do to meet standards and changing your mind after they celebrate success, or you never communicated the expected performance at all and when they landed you told them; “Sorry, you have to jump a foot higher or you fail.”

By using a norm-referenced approach, students have no way to measure their own performance because that performance is done in isolation. The individual or team producing the work has no idea what the other students or team are doing, nor do they have any way to know what criteria if any, will be used to measure the relative quality of their work against the work of their classmates.

Such a grading method undermines student performance and naturally creates dissatisfaction and distrust.

Criterion-referenced assessments are the best way to evaluate student work. When you use this assessment model, it is important that the standards used to assess student work be available to the students.

Ideally the standards are available when the work is assigned so students are aware from the outset what criteria will be used to measure the quality of work. In effect, you are telling them how high the bar is set.

When communicating assessment standards to students, the rubric is the best way. This is a pretty powerful statement, but it is true.

A rubric is simply an established set of standards for measuring student work. Ideally, students will have the rubric prior to beginning their assignment. They can then use the rubric to avoid making obvious errors and ensure their work meets established standards. This works only if they understand the material. If they do not understand what they are supposed to do or why, it is unlikely that rubrics will help them succeed. However, a detailed, customized rubric will dramatically improve if not eliminate the disconnect between faculty and student expectations.

So what does a rubric look like?
Rubrics are often presented in grid or table form like this example of for grading discussion forum posts.

Generally speaking, a rubric consists of three parts. Criteria used to evaluate student work, a description of the performance levels expected, and values or scores assigned to those levels.

In this case, the criteria are listed in the left column. Quality of the work, relevance, and community value are the three basic criteria.

The majority of the grid is occupied by descriptions of performance levels. It is these descriptions that determine the quality and effectiveness of your rubric.

You can see, by examining the descriptions of the “relevance” criteria that the instructor's expectations are stated plainly and clearly.

Finally, there are point values associated with each intersection of criteria and performance level.

A student who posts, but participates minimally, contributed posts that are now related to the discussion, and does not assist in the development in the learning community would end up with a maximum of 9 points out of a possible 21.

Using a rubric for grading, especially when looking at qualitative style assessments with subjective grading points, removing as much ambiguity as possible from the assessment process helps students understand what is expected and puts them in charge of their own learning.

Using a well-crafted rubric, your students should be able to grade their own work before they hand it in. In fact, self-assessment can be a powerful tool in your assessment repertoire.

Thank you for watching. Please view the video titled “An introduction to Rubrics” for more insight into the theory and practice of using this assessment tool.