

**The Value and Perception of Rubrics**

**In**

**Teacher Education**

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# The Value and Perception of Rubrics in Teacher Education

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**Abstract:** Based on a review of existing literature, both pros and cons of rubrics as tools of assessment in teacher education and instructional methods are presented and analyzed. Instructional applications both real and theoretical are examined and critiqued. Empirical data from one-on-one interviews is presented that provides a critical view of rubrics. A case is made against a bias in teacher education and for a more carefully considered view of rubrics as tools of assessment and pedagogy.

## Introduction

In teacher education, students are taught to become competent and skilled educators. They are shown the techniques that the discipline has come to value to ensure quality teaching. In fact, it is the mission of schools of education to impart those key techniques and packaged skills. Whether or not the goal is actually achieved... whether educators today actually become skilled and competent is not a question this article will address. Perhaps a more important question is whether that really makes one a good teacher.

So, while schools of education emphasize skills and competencies, what about going to college to develop a more sophisticated perspective, greater knowledge and problem solving abilities? In contrast to mere skills and competencies, an education can provide much more such as the development of understanding, perspective and even intuition as critical elements of learning and better thinking (Galloway, 2008). A review of this and other similar discussions about college will show a predominant focus on acquiring informational knowledge but not a great deal of specifics on understanding and critical thinking. Even the general public seems to have a vague notion that real learning, the kind of learning that causes change in oneself, amounts to something more than discrete experiences and mere information.

As preservice teachers are taught the mechanics of their profession, how to conduct the procedures and rituals of teaching, how to use the packaged protocols of instructional methods, they naturally acquire a perspective on what constitutes learning – the product of their endeavor. Key among these is the perception and use of rubrics, often prescribed as a critically necessary component of proper teaching.

## Rubric Structure and Format

There are all sorts of rubrics and indeed the concept of a rubric can be a very generalized notion. Rubrics can be different things in different circumstances (Edutopia, 2010) and for

different populations. This article focuses on rubrics as tools of grading and assessment in teacher education for common classroom application in K-12 and college teaching.

Rubrics provide a small set of skill or performance descriptions and are sequenced in a hierarchy with a corresponding point value. While they can vary considerably, a common structure is shown in Figure 1. Note that the descriptions are often labeled as shown in the column headers. Point values often begin with one rather than zero or even have four boxes instead of three. Regardless, the concept is the same.

<b>Target</b>	<b>Acceptable</b>	<b>Inadequate</b>
<b>2 points</b>	<b>1 point</b>	<b>0 points</b>
The reader will read this paper completely and understand every point with deep or profound insight and appreciation.	The reader will read this paper completely with a general or basic understanding of most points contained herein.	The reader fails to read this paper completely or fails to comprehend most points contained herein.

Figure 1. Sample rubric showing 3 levels.

If new to rubrics, then one might wonder how such descriptions are generated, especially considering that the possible range of achievement would more likely be continuous and wide-ranging. Figure 2 illustrates such a continuum concept with extremes at each end where learning ranges from the highly educated to the ignorant and beyond. That is, one might imagine either a greater achievement or worse than that covered by the rubric or even subtle distinctions between those descriptions in the boxes. Indeed, assuming one is empowered with sufficient insight and perception, one might identify any number of points along the continuum of learning as shown in Figure 2, A through M or the infinite number of points between them. Of course, the rubric has settled on three specific points (D, G, and J) to the exclusion of all others.

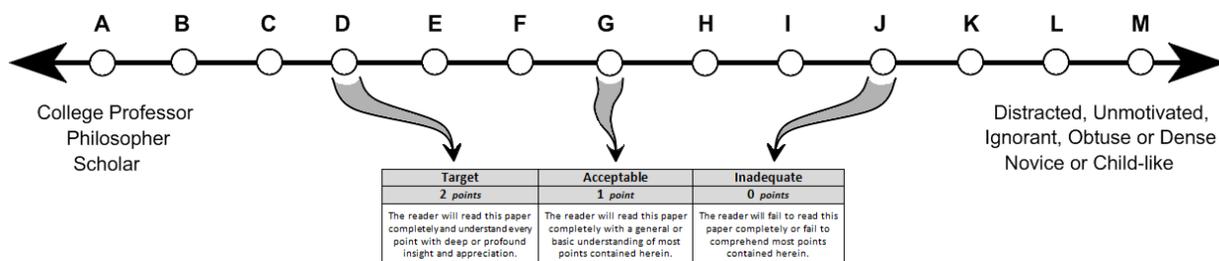


Figure 2. A learning or achievement continuum with select points (D, G, J) identified for a rubric.

The particular descriptions within the cells are, of course, a product of an expert's best effort but inevitably suffer the shortcomings and entrapments of language. Such might be considered a limitation of discrete levels whereas the mind's eye of the experienced professional

could more exactly perceive and identify subtle distinctions than may be captured in a verbal description.

The rubric informs the students exactly what they must do to get the top score of 2 or the acceptable level of 1, etc. Of course, even on its face it is easy to recognize certain problems with rubric descriptions in discrete boxes. For example, using the case in Figure 1 compare levels 2 and 1:

*The reader will read this paper completely ...*

- (2) - and understand every point with deep or profound insight and appreciation.
- (1) - with a general or basic understanding of most points contained herein.

So, one might easily see how understanding every point with deep insight but lacking appreciation might fall somewhere between the two levels – maybe a level E (Figure 2). Or, perhaps having profound insight and appreciation of only most points (but not all) could also fall somewhere between the two levels – maybe a level F (Figure 2). But, consider how understanding every point with significant insight (not deep or profound) and valuing those points (but not exactly appreciation) presents a problem common to all rubrics. The essence and relevance of level two is fully achieved but might not be reasonably described as shown in the box – for whatever reason. Consequently, the score of 2 is not permitted whereas the score of 1 is inappropriate. This is a natural dilemma of rubrics or any such formally prescribed verbiage.

### **Perceived Value of Rubrics**

One of the key purposes of rubrics is to take the individual teacher's judgment out of the picture. This might be important where multiple judges must evaluate students' work based on common or shared criteria. Very common in online and distance-education courses where there may be no classroom presence or teachers may be changed regularly, rubrics are thought to assist and enhance inter-rater reliability (Lunney & Sammarco, 2009). “Once we check our judgment at the door, we can all learn to give a 4 to exactly the same things” (Kohn, 2006, p.13).

While both pros and cons are difficult to find in any analysis of rubrics today, rubrics are thought to provide both objectivity and consistency in scoring (Teachnology, 2010a). While one might wonder why an educated and experienced educator can't achieve fairness without a rubric, the rubric automates the process. Rubrics are also considered to save time in assessments as educators can already know what they're looking for and what to think about student products. That is, what is to be thought about a student product is already written in the boxes which provide a categorization of issues on which to consider the product or behavior.

Students who are aware of or experienced with rubrics seem to value rubrics because they define and clarify their task. Whether or not a student should be informed of such details and expectations in a learning situation is both a pedagogical and epistemological question but it is by no means absolute. The popularity of rubrics in existing literature (Teachnology, 2010b) attests to the accepted notion that rubrics are considered necessary and proper for teaching and learning. Indeed, rubrics limit the task and the scope of learning. Rubrics objectify learning as action steps and provide the learner with things to do and the behavior they must correspondingly exhibit which relieves the learner of the challenge of internal change. Finally, rubrics can provide a summary case for grade challenge. That is, regardless of whether a teacher thinks differently, the rubric determines a basis for questioning the instructor's professional opinion.

### **Limitations of Rubrics**

It is generally unacceptable to challenge rubrics, yet another sacred cow among educators. Rubrics could be considered an obsession among teacher educators and believed to be a necessity in proper and valid teaching practices. A teacher educator colleague recently commented in committee that the issues of how to teach are settled and that "we [faculty] know good teaching practices, [period]." She was expressing the view that the science of proper and valid teaching is firmly established and that the challenge of the teacher educator is therefore to deliver it or to train and inform those who what to learn it. In a world where everyone believes they have all the answers then anyone asking questions seems ignorant. When everyone thinks they have figured it all out and has Moses-like confidence in their righteousness, then any dissent is viewed not as scholarly skepticism but as being uneducated, uninformed and unaware.

Although at least some recognize that rubrics need to be properly structured (Lincoln University, 2008), there is such a scarcity of challenge of rubrics in the existing literature that it seems clear that quality teaching - even "valid" and proper teaching - is thought to be specifically dependent on the use of rubrics. To speak against this practice is considered both ignorant and incompetent.

*Possibly the chance is high that the truth lies in the fashionable direction. But, on the off-chance that it is in another direction - a direction obvious from an unfashionable view ... - who will find it? Only someone who has sacrificed himself by teaching himself ... from a peculiar and unusual point of view; one that he may have to invent for himself. I say sacrificed himself because he most likely will get nothing from it, because the truth may lie in another direction, perhaps even the fashionable one (Feynman, 1965, paragraph 63).*

Rubrics, by design, not only allow students to limit their achievement to predefined parameters, they in fact direct it to be so. By definition, a rubric limits and restricts expectations of and demands on students. But, valid teaching and student learning and progress can still occur without limiting expectations in a rubric. Rubrics do not address more open-ended teaching styles of student discovery and creativity simply because the parameters of success cannot be delimited in advance. To put it differently, delimiting the parameters of success in advance is contrary to promoting discovery and creativity.

“A rubric is a written description of what is expected from students in order for them to meet a certain level of performance” (Gunning, 2007, p. 46), thus the students will strive for exactly that and no more. Rubrics specifically direct students to think in terms of and to perceive learning activities as a means to achieving points rather than as a means to learning and self-fulfillment. While students may tend to think this way anyway, rubrics reinforce and exacerbate the phenomenon of a focus on grades rather than allowing instruction to work toward the more noble or important concern of learning. Feedback to students is automatically limited, concise, and delimited into discrete chunks or blurbs in a rubric. Constructive feedback, without rubrics, can be spread across a continuum of advice and guidance in addition to being completely personalized to the individual.

*The ultimate goal of authentic assessment must be the elimination of grades. But rubrics actually help to legitimate grades by offering a new way to derive them. They do nothing to address the terrible reality of students who have been led to focus on getting A's rather than on making sense of ideas. (Kohn, 2006, p.12)*

## **Hypothetical Scenario**

Two students want to learn about music. The teacher-musician says, “join me and you will learn...” and intends to convey a particular kind of appreciation, perspective and understanding. But, the teacher separates the students into two different rooms. For one, the student (Tom) is told nothing except to relax in preparation for a musical experience. For the other, the student (Fred) is provided with a detailed explanation of the exact purpose of the lesson and three specific learning objectives explaining the kinds of things to notice and consider in the music. For this second student (Fred), a rubric is provided describing the nature of the report the student is to make about things noticed and considered. Fred is provided an opportunity to ask any questions about the objectives and about the specifics of the target and acceptable levels of the kind of report the rubric will assess. It is a clear rubric and Fred has an understanding of exactly what elements will be considered in distinguishing the achievement levels described. That is, Fred knows what he'll need to report for full credit (the target level). He even has an option of

not trying as hard and settling on the lower score (the acceptable level). Their respective learning experiences begin.

At the completion of the first piece of music, having read very carefully what the rubric described, Fred was able to fashion a report that achieved a high score of three. Interestingly, halfway through the second piece of music, Fred interrupts, speaking over the music to be heard and asks hypothetically whether scoring below target on the second song will preclude the possibility for an A in the class. Then, receiving an acceptable score of two on the second song, Fred was concerned. So, during the third and last piece of music, Fred again speaks up over the music to ask whether there will be any opportunity for extra credit if he can generate the report earlier than expected, perhaps even without finishing that particular piece of music.

Tom, in the other room, was asked after the first piece of music what he thought about it. After hearing Tom's initial comments, the instructor dialogued with him yielding further insights. The instructor then selected the second piece of music based on Tom's comments and left him with the simple instruction to consider those elements in the new music. This pattern continued through Tom's third piece of music to which he listened without interruption.

Interestingly, after the two sessions were completed both students scored an A- in the course. Fred had 8 out of 9 possible rubric points qualifying him for that grade. The instructor commented privately that Tom was able to express highly superior and mature perspectives on the music compared to Fred. The teacher thought that Tom was very imaginative and had perhaps profound insights and aesthetics on the renditions heard and even music in general. Indeed, the teacher thought that Tom would continue to get more out of music in the future compared to Fred.

Since the story is fictitious it is, of course, easy to have it turn out any way the author wants. But, the specifics and results are not implausible and one might think that the two scenarios each have some realistic merit. The more interesting point is how most teacher educators would likely view Tom's class, lacking rubrics, as improper, invalid and unsound as an educational experience. It is interesting that most educators would direct their student teachers to provide Fred's experience in spite of the more free-style discovery learning and arguably superior progress by Tom. More importantly, the method of teaching without rubrics and undeclared objectives is considered unprofessional and contrary to *good teaching practices*. The teacher, however, might rebut that an open-ended, unrestricted and free-style self-discovery approach can yield better results in this endeavor of music appreciation and understanding. But, a defense of the non-rubricized as perhaps a better method given what was to be learned is more likely viewed as backward or ignorant, unlearned and passé.

Another attack on the scenario might be that the assessment of Tom was more subjective than the objective assessments used for Fred. This, however, does not mean that those subjective evaluations are therefore less valid. Indeed, one might consider Tom's assessment as being more accurate and legitimate based on experience and professional

judgment faithfully applied compared to the prescribed and inflexible rubric categories used for Fred.

*Although rubrics promote reliability, they may simultaneously undermine validity, the more important determinant of the quality of an assessment. Writing rubrics can fail to predict the actual features of a student's writing, thereby creating a mismatch between scoring criteria and actual performance (Mabry, 1999, p. 674).*

## **Teacher and Student Interviews**

Through personal interviews and one-on-one discussion with the respondent in each case, all reported serious frustration, a sense of pointlessness, absurd folly and irrelevancy regarding the use of rubrics. These cases included the call for rubric-based assessment methods as proper and necessary elements of successful and responsible teaching.

### *Case #1*

A teacher was interviewed about her experiences in her department's review of textbooks. She was to evaluate a book for use in her class (and her department). The teacher was neither new to her subject area nor to the profession of teaching. That is, she knew her subject well and was considered to be an effective teacher. The teacher was not asked to review the book and identify what she perceived to be pros and cons. She was not asked to examine the book for misconceptions or flaws. She was instead to complete a scoring rubric that would yield a profile of numeric scores. The notion, of course, was that the final score would be a kind of quality representation of the book. Presumably, this quantification would provide her and other educators with the means of making a definitive decision about the book.

Her perception of the experience, however, was quite different. She reported completing the rubric as assigned but without finding any real value in what it addressed. That is, the rubric seemed pointless to her and left her without any usable data or perspective and she was unable to make any summary judgment about the book. She said, "I still don't know what I think of the book. But, I guess it's what I'll be using anyway." The rubric, for her, might best be described as impotent.

### *Case #2*

A student was interviewed about her experience in being assigned the task of reading a book or story and to fully comprehend, in a comprehensive fashion, the essence and full

meaning of the passage. This reading was to include a kind of appreciation, perhaps, of the author's intent, meaning, ideas and the message or moral from the reading.

This student both appreciated the value of the activity and fully accepted the purpose of the assignment. She was prepared to begin the activity and was confident that she was an intelligent, rational, reflective and experienced reader. She wanted to do well in the course.

However, this was not a case where she was to read the material and then present it to the class – like an old-fashioned book report. This was not a case where she was to read the passage and guide a class discussion or debate about the main points. Nor was she to offer a philosophical perspective or spiritual enlightenment or revelation gained from the passage. In fact, this was not even a case of open-ended, self-discovery learning where she might be free to gain whatever she might find in the material and to account for the task completion by documenting key facts from and insight on the passage.

Instead, her grade and performance assessment was structured by specific elements in a rubric. The various elements of performance are best summarized by the charge to find seven interesting ideas presented in the passage. A lesser grade could be achieved by only finding five interesting ideas and an unsatisfactory evaluation could be had for finding only three or fewer interesting ideas.

Apparently, there were numerous ideas and situations present in the story, all of which could be identified and recognized and most, if not all, even memorized by this student. That was not the issue as the rubric did not prescribe performance expectations on that basis. The student was disappointed and very negative about having to settle for a lesser grade because she only found five of the ideas worthy and interesting. This was in spite of the fact that the student was able to describe how she simply had not considered the other ideas present in the passage as particularly interesting even though her awareness of the material was reportedly quite insightful and comprehensive. The rubric apparently did not call for her to defend her interpretation or to debate the issue. Other quantified elements of reading comprehension or reading achievement delimited throughout the rubric were not discussed.

More importantly, the student, while originally interested in reading and enjoying the exploration of new ideas, found the experience to be a foolish contrivance of meaningless behaviors having little or nothing to do with learning anything. She retained a negative sense of the reading experience.

### *Case #3*

A kindergarten teacher was interviewed who had been teaching science to children. This included a variety of teaching methods such as group discussion, self-discovery and reflection and hands-on experimentation. The teacher and kids experienced daily closeness and intimate interaction with each other and the material. The teacher was highly confident in her understanding of the students, what they are able to do, what they knew and understood.

Specifically, the teacher was highly confident of being able to track the children's progress, quickly determine students' needs for new or remedial activities. The teacher seemed particularly aware of the children's needs to address misconceptions, learn fundamentals, grasp concepts and relationships, not merely in principle but specifically on a child-by-child and topic-by-topic basis.

This teacher reported that a kind of district consultant and learning specialist visited her class and specifically challenged her with the issue of assessment. She was asked what form of assessment she uses. She essentially conveyed the informal nature of her tracking and monitoring of students' learning but the consultant was not impressed. The teacher was directed to design a series of rubrics to more properly assess the students' learning. It was explained how, with a series of descriptions in discrete boxes representing perhaps 3-4 levels of performance, documentation could be performed by simply checking the boxes for each of the students.

After further discussion, the teacher essentially dismissed the demand for formal rubrics as unnecessary for improving her science teaching. But, she subsequently faced at least minor recriminations for rejecting the professional development – considered a kind of disobedience by the district consultant.

Of course, the designing of rubrics would naturally take time away from the intimate teaching experience. Much like the principle that one picture is worth a thousand words, the many intimate aspects of the teaching experience and moment-by-moment awareness of student learning cannot possibly be captured in rubricized descriptions. To think that forms for each child, perhaps carried on a clipboard or arranged on a desk like a kind of assessment station, could somehow be marked, filled-in and completed without distraction from the learning process is surely naïve. To think that the time and energy devoted to such tasks and responsibilities would not find a reduction and waning of other teaching responsibilities and performances is equally naïve. These sorts of consequences naturally translate into additional learning obstacles for children.

There is also the notion of, if it isn't broken, don't fix it. Is the purpose of the rubric-based assessment really to facilitate an evolving instructional process – to improve instruction? Surely it is worth asking whether such formalized rubrics would be for the sake of improving this specific teacher's instruction of these particular kids or if, instead, the rubric documentation is for some other purpose such as evidentiary proofs for the administration, parents, accreditations or worse: the simple demand for obedience, conformity or political correctness.

### **Rubrics – Pro and Con Summary**

Rubrics can let students know what is expected of them and provide clarity for their mission. Of course, like telling the punch line of a joke first, an educator may not want everything revealed in advance.

Rubrics can demystify grades by clearly stating, in age-appropriate vocabulary, the expectations for a project. However, declaring and prescribing expectations also limits achievement.

Rubrics help students see that learning is about gaining specific skills and how to demonstrate those skills in specific behaviors. However, only some learning is about skills and such discrete rubric descriptions do little to address the development of understanding, perspectives, critical thinking and problem solving abilities. Providing expected behaviors in advance can allow students to mimic those behaviors and brings into question whether internal change has actually occurred.

Rubrics can help a teacher authentically monitor a student's learning process and develop and revise a lesson plan. On the other hand, shouldn't teachers be able to monitor and be cognizant of students' progress without the rubric?

Rubrics give students the opportunity to do self-assessment and to reflect on the learning process. Sometimes figuring out what is expected of one can be as important in learning as the content itself. For example, in the 1973 movie *The Paper Chase*, the opening scenes show a law student struggling with an interrogation at the mercy of law Professor Kingsfield, Jr., played by actor John Houseman. It was clear that no Rubric was provided and that a certain lack of clarity was an integral part of that interrogation. A rubric might have been preferred by the student but would presumably have compromised that particular learning experience. This is an important consideration as the use of a Rubric changes the nature of the learning experience.

Rubrics provide a way for a student and a teacher to measure the quality of a body of work. When a student's assessment of his or her work and a teacher's assessment don't agree, they can schedule a conference to let the student explain his or her understanding of the content and justify the method of presentation. While a teacher might be firmly confident in the accuracy and fairness of an assessment even without a rubric, the rubric serves as a political or negotiation tool and can consequently undermine teacher authority. That is, as rubrics dictate what is to be learned and direct students how to behave to demonstrate it, rubrics remove the instructor/expert from influence, control and judgment. The student answers to the rubric, not to the instructor. Interestingly, so does the instructor.

Regarding the instructor, a kind of rule-mentality results. For example, is going 50 mph driving in an unsafe manner? What factors might be at issue in making this determination? The surprising answer is none - if the posted speed limit is 40mph. This is *rule-mentality*. The many variables in the situation such as weather, visibility, vehicle, tires, traffic and thousands of other concerns are all rendered irrelevant when the rule (the posted speed limit) determines what is and is not safe. Rubrics determining what does and does not constitute learning and therefore what grade is to apply is a sort of rule-mentality.

Rubrics might be the right choice for students who (a) do not trust a teacher having an expert opinion; (b) do not trust a teacher's personal assessment as consistent and equitable; or (c) cannot or will not follow a teacher-directed learning path.

Rubrics might be the right choice for teachers who (a) will not lead and mentor students in the learning process; (b) will not generate a personalized assessment; or (c) fear charges of bias, inequity and unfairness.

Rubrics might be the right choice for anyone who (a) believes students need and deserve to know the limits and scope of their learning in advance; (b) believes real learning fits neatly into 4 boxes; or (c) prefers and finds value in a rule-mentality.

Rubrics are an accepted – perhaps a blindly accepted – part of teacher education. Valid teaching is commonly thought to require the use of rubrics. While some learning experiences might actually benefit from the use of rubrics, it cannot be assumed that all teaching and learning experiences must have rubrics. Rubrics are by no means an indicator of or necessity for proper and valid teaching. The use of rubrics or not each provide different learning experiences both of which may be completely valid and sound methodologies. However, teacher education tends to provide a one-sided and biased perspective.

So, with Rubrics in hand both guiding and defining the learning, one might ask of the students on graduation day: “Have you achieved all of the target outcomes? Have you produced at least that described in the ‘acceptable’ box? Have you achieved the 8 things or the 12 things or the 17 things called for in the rubric(s)?” Of course, one might prefer to ask, “Have you actually learned?” And, by that one might mean: have students achieved new insights and understandings? Have their perspectives developed and matured and have they learned how to learn? Have they learned what constitutes meaningfulness? Have they acquired new knowledge along with the wisdom of how to use it?

To the question of learning the answer from the masses comes, “Oh yes, absolutely! We have scored a 3 – the target score – thus our mission is complete, our goal fully and completely achieved, our task accomplished and our challenge at an end.” Of course, asking the question differently can solicit a different response. “Have you learned?” will yield the predictably confident and inevitably proud affirmative. Yet again, when asked “How do you know you have learned?” – they will surely answer “because the rubric tells me so.”

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