

## A Conundrum: Rubrics or Creativity/Metacognitive Development?

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*by Valerie G. Chapman and M. Duane Inman*

### **Abstract**

The goal of this article is raising awareness of several issues recently brought to the authors' attention. Among them are concerns that rubrics are a pervasive assessment tool in current educational settings. The authors posit how the pervasive use of rubrics broaches concerns about teachers' grading practices with rubrics and students' expectations of delimiting guidance related to specificity within rubrics.

### **A Conundrum: Rubrics or Creativity/Metacognitive Development?**

A graduate student who has an eleven-year-old daughter in fifth grade recently described an incident that underscored concerns the writers and other professional teacher educators have felt for some time. Briefly, the eleven-year-old had a science assignment to complete as homework. Her parent, attempting to help, offered several suggestions for enhancing the project. The child's response to each suggestion was: "No, that's not on the rubric. Here's the rubric, Mother. This is all we're supposed to do."

Leaving aside the inherent possibility that the child might have misrepresented her teacher's intent slightly, we were struck by a child's veracity about the restrictions a rubric-oriented teaching force places on our learners. Such restrictions may be real: the students must adhere strictly to prescribed criteria with no deviations, per the teacher's instructions, or student culture may impose restrictions (i.e., "Those criteria represent all I have to do in order to have a 'perfect' assignment.").

The rubric referred to here has a table format. To achieve a set number of points, each cell on a row includes specific elements that are either absent or present. To construct such a tool, a teacher needs to

anticipate various possible responses to the given assignment and delineate what is acceptable and unacceptable. In the real world that degree of thoroughness and anticipation by most classroom teachers is the exception, not the norm.

That leads to several questions: Is the teacher merely requiring identical or nearly identical artifacts from the students to grade “fairly”? If so, do the teachers recognize broader ramifications? Moreover, are students involved in a rubric paradigm that makes them see such guidance as the way school and society should operate?

### Grading Fairly

In the first instance (i.e., using rubrics to generate nearly identical artifacts for grading), our concern is that the teacher is restricting students’ problem solving, decision-making, and creativity—traits needed in a democratic society for governance as well as for economic productivity. Are today’s educators systematically discouraging creative thought and actions by our P-12 learners? Matching their work to a teacher-designed template (i.e., a scoring rubric) is different from analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating elements as students pull a product together for an assignment. That loss can affect not only individual students but also our entire society. Regarding a class not guided by scoring rubrics, one of our initial-certification students recently volunteered: “I actually had to think and process information to complete this assignment. It wasn’t already laid out for me.” Even if it seems more difficult to grade the variety among artifacts, those are the types of assignments that we believe students should be undertaking.

Hand-in-hand with this first example is the question of whether teachers set the bar low with such scoring rubrics so that all students reach the bar. Given the wide range of achievement levels that exists in any given class, some students will grasp concepts and some will merely grasp at concepts. A teacher must purposely set the passing bar low if the great majority of the class population is to demonstrate competency. Should teachers set a minimally acceptable product as the middle rung on their scoring rubric because that is all students need demonstrate to meet national, state, or local “standards,” and work both up and down from there? If teachers use such scoring rubrics to assign grades on products, how receptive will they be to a majority earning less than a high score? Likely not at all. If, instead, a minimally acceptable product is the top rung, then how close to the standards does a mere “C” come? And more alarmingly, what incentive is there for any student to go beyond what is required to simply clear the bar or achieve whatever competence level they decide on, based on rubric minimums?

## Rubrics as Expected Guidance

In the second instance (i.e., students' perceptions under a rubric paradigm) there may well be even more debilitating effects. When we were in school, many of us interpreted assignments according to the minimums we thought necessary to earn our desired grade. Teachers, however, might allow many open-ended options: for example, allowing students to include a visual with a report on ancient Egypt. The visual might be a three-dimensional, self-constructed model, a two-dimensional diagram of a pyramid, or any number of other options. Allowing a visual is not the same as specifying criteria about a required visual. Without "a visual" delineated as full-size poster board showing a particular outcome, we often pushed ourselves to do more "just to be safe."

In the process of doing so, we had to explore aspects of the culture tangentially related to the assignment. What does a student actually learn about the ancient culture by researching sufficiently to construct a 3-D model? After undertaking that research, how much more deeply does that student understand not only the ancient Egyptian culture but also how that culture may influence modern architecture? We are fairly certain that, with a list of specific criteria, we would have adhered to those criteria without doing more or doing differently, just like the graduate student's child. We would not have explored, demonstrated our strengths, or sought guidance from others' strengths. And heaven help us if our strengths did not match a teacher's preconceived idea of the minimums necessary for an assignment. In a real fashion, stressing specific criteria can minimize how students perceive their own empowerment to create and explore boundaries.

## Rubrics as a Grading Practice

In searching for a metaphor that somehow expresses our apprehensions about rubrics as a grading practice, the one that repeatedly came to mind was "Where is the rubber in rubric?" When we discussed the matter with fellow college of education faculty members, we were told—here may be a key concept—that "well-constructed" rubrics do allow for the creativity and flexibility we believe imperative in meaningful learning. Reviewing sample rubrics used in thirty undergraduate courses, however, we found little flexibility and even less encouragement of individual initiative: almost every rubric, along with samples of student work, pointed to a bland sameness. Standardization and uniformity seemed honored and, by extension, desired. If that is what we are modeling for our future teachers, what can we realistically expect them to put into practice? The axiom is "We tend to teach the way we are taught." If that is true, the bland efforts we see coming from so many of our K-12 students should not come as a surprise.

Examining what others have to say about rubrics, we came across several listings of advantages and disadvantages of rubrics:

### *Advantages*

- provide guidelines
- expectations explicit
- aligned with standards
- easy to use
- informative feedback for students

### *Disadvantages*

- evaluate “doing” versus understanding
- too vague
- dysfunctional detail
- “test mastery” over “skill mastering”

(Retrieved September 4, 2008, from <<http://coe.west.asu.edu/students/salvarez/Rubric%20Assessment%20Outline.htm>>.)

A second source (Varvel, n.d.) lists benefits versus disadvantages as:

### *Benefits*

- provide an answer key
- allow consistent assessment
- can be impartial
- document and communicate grading procedures
- allow one to be organized and clarify thoughts

### *Disadvantages*

- may not convey all we want students to know
- may limit imagination if students feel compelled to complete the assignment strictly as outlined in the rubric
- could lead to anxiety if too many criteria are included
- reliability can be a factor as more individuals use the rubric
- take time to develop, test, evaluate, and update

(Retrieved September 4, 2008, from <[http://www.ion.illinois.edu/resources/pointersclickers/2004\\_03/benefits.asp](http://www.ion.illinois.edu/resources/pointersclickers/2004_03/benefits.asp)>.)

It seems, then, that we are not the only professional educators cautionary about rubrics. We see their overuse limiting student imagination; focusing on students following, not on exploring; emphasizing students doing, not understanding; and constraining students within arbitrary boundaries—all matters of concern if our goal is to help our students become literate problem-solvers with well-developed creative-thinking skills.

Back to the metaphor: if we must use rubrics, as some mandates direct, can we effectively infuse enough rubber—that is, flexibility—to remove the restrictiveness many of us perceive? One suggestion we have encountered is to include a category for “creativity” within the rubric. Thus far, the authors/teacher educators referenced above have no effective and realistic proposals for placing creativity on a 1–5 scale, or furthermore how to separate creativity from other criteria an assignment might include. But if we must use rubrics, they see the necessity of allowing exploration, creativity, and initiative so our future teachers can carry the essentials of student (and thereby societal) development forward to succeeding generations. The alternative would seem to be compliance with a standardized sameness that might infiltrate nearly every phase of existence. Inevitably, sameness equates to mediocrity—not the state we need to accept in our personal performance, the performance of our students, or the eventual state of society.

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