

# Rubrics and Adult Learners: Andragogy and Assessment

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OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, considerable attention has been focused on the development and use of rubrics in the assessment of student learning (Moran, 2001; Montgomery, 2002; Suskie, 2004). The value of rubrics as tools for improving performance at both individual and program levels has been clearly demonstrated (Moran, 2001; Suskie, 2004). This essay builds on these ideas by linking the concepts of adult learning to the use of rubrics in assessing learner performance.

## Andragogy

The idea that adults learn differently from younger students has been well documented in the literature (Knowles, 1980, 1984; Holton, Swanson, and Naquin, 2001; Zemke, 2002). Malcolm Knowles (1980, 1984) attempted to describe this distinction by introducing the concept of andragogy, which provides a basis for demonstrating the value of using rubrics to assess adults.

Adherents to the concept of andragogy accept that adults learn differently from younger students; adults want to know why something is important to learn. In addition, adults approach learning as problem solving and will not readily learn until they are ready and motivated to learn. Finally, the concept of andragogy indicates that adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value to them (Knowles, 1980, 1984).

The use of rubrics helps adult learners identify critical components of an assign-

ment by indicating why something is important and setting the initial framework for problem solving. The importance of an assignment is communicated both as a link to specific objectives and to the ever-important tangible grade. Grading templates provide a first step toward completing the assignment by identifying what the instructor feels is important.

## Rubrics

While rubrics, or grading templates, have been an important tool for assessing performance in education for many years

allows the student to concentrate on critical areas and reduces uncertainty associated with unclear instructions. A rubric creates a guide that students can follow to achieve the highest possible level of performance (Muirhead, 2002; Suskie, 2004).

Development of an effective rubric is a critical activity. Because the rubric becomes the basis of an agreement with the student about expectations, it must be clear and unambiguous. This places an added burden on the instructor to identify learning objectives, expected student outcomes, and the criteria by which performance will be assessed. Once complete, rubrics are es-

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(Montgomery, 2002; Muirhead, 2002), only recently has the use of these tools gained attention among most faculty. Unfortunately, this attention has not resonated with faculty who teach adults. Faculty resistance has limited adaptation of these tools for a population that is well suited to their use.

While rubrics may vary in complexity based both on the type of assignment and the perspective of the individual instructor, they all provide the student with an early appreciation of faculty expectations. They give students a performance outline and an understanding of the factors that an instructor considers important. This al-

pecially valuable to students because they provide objective criteria for the evaluation of assignments and clearly link the assignment to outcomes as well as objectives.

## Research Question and Method

Adult students might be expected to have a greater appreciation for rubrics because they reduce uncertainty; clearly articulate the issues that an instructor feels are important; and provide the student with a link between assignment, expected outcome, and learning objective. This hypothesis was tested with a convenience sample of over 150 adult undergraduate

and graduate students enrolled in accelerated business degree programs at Averett University. During twelve management courses, students were graded on individual papers, individual presentations, and group projects, using rubrics that were provided to the students when the assignment was made. During the final meeting of each class, students were asked to complete a questionnaire that included three questions regarding the use of rubrics. Following administration of the questionnaire, students participated in focus group discussions that reviewed the actual use of the rubric in the course.

## Findings

With very few exceptions (all but 3 of over 150), students liked rubrics. Students regularly indicated that they preferred the use of rubrics to other techniques, particularly unclear subjective grading scales. Several positive features were commonly identified, including the use of rubrics as a guide for performance, the use of rubrics in establishing expectations and standards of performance, the value of rubrics in identifying critical issues, and the value of rubrics in providing feedback on weaknesses.

Students repeatedly indicated that rubrics were useful in setting goals. A common comment was that rubrics “give you a guideline and show exactly what is expected.” This helped students provide relevant content in assignments with little fluff or filler material.

Many students also commented that rubrics help “you know what the standards are when preparing assignments.” By reviewing the criteria for evaluating performance, students could determine much of their grade before turning in an assignment. This reduced uncertainty and permitted an individual determination of the amount of effort needed for a specific assignment.

From the instructor’s perspective, rubrics provided considerable value. Through careful preparation of rubrics, critical issues that students should focus

on were identified. This helped students pay more attention to primary content and reduced their efforts to add unnecessary material to assignments. Instructors observed that clear articulation of expectations resulted in reduced conflict over grades and limited potential for successful grade appeals.

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Students also saw rubrics as a valuable grading tool. They routinely commented that rubrics provide “immediate” and “positive feedback.” Students valued the rubrics because they help to “tell you about your weaknesses.” This in turn allows students to focus their efforts and improve performance on subsequent assignments.

Occasionally, students expressed dissatisfaction with rubrics. In more than 150 sets of student comments, the most common weakness identified was the potential for rubrics to limit student creativity in preparing assignments. When queried, students indicated that rubrics create a “restrictive environment with little room for interpretation.” Other students countered this comment by describing the benefits provided by clear guidance and known grading criteria.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

As shown in this and other research (Montgomery, 2002; Muirhead, 2002; Suskie, 2004), the rubric is a valuable tool both for students and instructors. The value of these tools is even more apparent among adults; rubrics provide reinforcement of the andragogical perspective.

The use of rubrics helps the adult student understand the link between learning objective and desired outcome by articulating required elements of a successful assignment. Rubrics assist in the problem-solving process as students attempt to de-

termine what factors an instructor considers important. By providing a more objective evaluation format, rubrics help improve performance as they reduce uncertainty and ambiguity.

Rubrics are valued by students and deserve more attention from all faculty members. While their development may

take time and attention, the time spent is more than justified by improved student performance.

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