The Benefits of Using Rubrics to Assess Student Work

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ABSTRACT: A rubric is one of the assessment tools used in academia by tutors to evaluate the performance of their students. This article reviews the existing literature on the benefits of using rubrics and its impact on student achievements. The article explores current literature on the use of rubrics by both tutors and students, the former to assess student performance and the latter to plan their work. The author's personal experience is also included to demonstrate the usefulness of having a set criteria while communicating expectations through rubrics. Since the use of rubrics is a recent practice in schools and colleges of Bhutan, it has become important to study what the existing literature reveals about using rubrics for academic purposes. This review of a wide array of the existing literature shows the significant impact of rubrics in evaluating and enhancing student performance.

Keywords: rubrics, assessment, performance, holistic rubric.

Introduction

A rubric is an assessment tool widely used in academia today. It is used for marking assignments as well as in assessing student classroom participation. Today, the use of rubrics has become popular among students and teachers at all levels, from schools to colleges (Simon & Forgette-Giroux, 2001; Reddy Y. M., 2007). This is mainly because rubrics can be used to provide clear feedback and communicate the teacher's expectations on assessments like presentation, group work, activities, and role-plays. In Bhutan, however, the use of rubrics is a fairly recent phenomenon, although it has now become common for tutors to develop rubrics for every assignment they give to students.

Literature shows that the word "rubric" originated in the 15th Century among Christian monks. In Latin, the word rubric indicated a heading on a document written in 'red ink' and used by monks for conducting church services. Over a period of time, educators came to define 'a rubric' to describe guiding rules in the evaluation of student performance. While some say rubrics are important tools for grading that augment transparency in assessment (Silvestri & Oescher, 2006), others define it as a tool that support student learning and development of higher level of critical thinking skills. It is also seen as enablingteachers to justify the assigned grades to the parents of the student (Andrade H. , 2000).

The main objective of this article is to review existing literature on the meaning, benefits, and challenges of using rubrics as an educational tool.

What exactly is a rubric?

A rubric is a tool that specifies the criteria and levels used to evaluate a task and provide feedback to students on their assignments and other assigned tasks (Reddy & Andrade, 2010; Jonsson & Svingby, 2007). Further, Hafner and Hafner (2003) added that rubrics are descriptive scoring schemes that facilitate the process of evaluation and reporting of student achievement by educators. A rubric it generally contains three main features: criteria for students to guide them in completing their assignment, markers of quality, and scoring (Berkeley Center for Teaching & Learning- Rubrics, n.d).

According to Andrade (2005), rubrics denote the process of communicating expectations, providing continuous feedback, and evaluation. However, Wiggins (1991) states that rubrics are the conditions a performance must meet to be successful. Other researchers define rubrics as a set of indicators, guides, list of measures or qualities required of a student to meet an outcome.

Brookhart (2008) in her article titled 'Appropriate Criteria: Key to Effective Rubrics', states that 'Rating Scale' and 'Checklist' which was both used to evaluate student work, can be confused with rubrics. It is mentioned that checklist asks for dichotomous decisions like yes/no, has/doesn't have for each criteria, and rating scales ask for decisions across a scale (that includes numerical scales (e.g., 1–5), evaluative scales (e.g., Excellent-Good-Fair-Poor), and frequency scales (e.g., Always, Usually-Sometimes-Never) that do not describe the performance. These two are different from rubrics. Hence, the presence of criteria and performance level descriptions makes rubrics different from rating scale and checklist. Criteria expresses what to look for in the work while performance level descriptions describe how those criteria look like in work at varying quality levels, from low to high.

Rubrics are mainly categorized into two kinds: Analytic or Holistic, and General or Task-specific (Chowdhury, 2018). Analytic rubrics are the assessment technique where criteria are evaluated separately, making the use of it time consuming. Whereas, holistic rubric takes all the relevant criteria at once and evaluates all the criteria simultaneously. Holistic rubric can provide summative feedbacks and takes less time compared to analytic rubric. However, educators and instructors tend to prefer analytic rubrics since they allow for more detailed feedback.

On the other hand, general rubrics are more general in nature and assess criteria like basic knowledge and skills that would be useful for students to accomplish certain learning outcomes. While task-specific rubrics, as the name suggests, are developed for specific assignments.

Benefits of using rubrics

According to Chowdhury (2018), some of the benefits of using rubrics are:
   a.   It notifies student of a tutor's expectations;
   b.   It provides information and feedback on time;
   c.   It helps in fair assessments, and;
   d.   It helps students in learning and self-assessment.

Campbell (2005), in his paper about the application and process of rubrics, states similar benefits. Like Chowdhury (2018), Song (2006) states that rubrics can be useful in providing constructive feedback which can help students identify areas for improvement.

Andrade H. G.,(2005, p. 27) in her paper titled "Teaching with Rubrics: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly" reflected on the use of instructional rubrics. In her experience as an assistant professor, she mentioned that "I have found that whether they are good, bad, or even ugly depends on how they are created and how they are used". She further stated that rubrics are not entirely self-explanatory. So teachers must help students to understand rubrics and its uses. Issues of validity, reliability and fairness apply to rubrics too. If rubrics are not developed well on these three qualities, it can turn ugly.

Berkeley's Centre for Teaching & Learning, lists the following benefits of using rubrics for tutors and students:

a. Helps tutors provide students with clear and focused feedback to improve learning;
b. Tutors could reduce time spent on grading, and increase time spent on teaching;
c. Develops consistency in how tutors evaluate student learning;
d. Helps students focus their efforts on completing assignments in line with clearly set expectations, and;
e. Helps student with self-learning and peer reflection of his/her learning leading to desired learning level.

Other researchers, for example, Bolton (2006), have indicated that using rubrics and communicating to students about its use helps them to assess themselves and notify them of their weaknesses and strengths. Bolton's findings were based on the responses of 150 Business students using rubrics in class.

A further advantage of rubrics is that it can help students monitor and assess their own progress in a task, both during its execution and upon completing it (Panadero & Jonsson, 2013). The paper by Panadero and Jonsson further found that the formative use of rubrics improves students' performance as it reduces anxiety, increases transparency, and enhances the feedback process for both teacher and student, improved self-efficacy. Another study conducted by Andrade and Du (2005) indicated that students who used rubrics scored higher in their assignments and produced better quality work.

In a survey of BRAC University Students of Dhaka, which focused on whether or not rubrics helped in student's performance, Uddin (2014) found that 72% of the students strongly agreed that rubrics helped them achieve the expectation of their tutor. They also said that rubrics helped them to score higher grades. Another 72% of the respondents wanted their teachers to use rubrics. This shows that students can be highly motivated by the use of rubrics. The survey also revealed that 7 out of 8 teachers from the same university were contended with the use of rubrics and said it helped them in their students' assessment. The teachers stated that the use of rubrics should be institutionalised to evaluate student performance.

The most important task for teachers is to communicate expectations from students through the use of rubrics (Montgomery, 2002). Clear rubrics should not only be communicated but also explained so that the desired outcomes are met by the students and that needs to be done well in advance before the student begins to work on the assignment (Davies & Brant, 2006).

Researchers around the world have stated that students are able to recognise their strengths and

weaknesses when their performance is evaluated against a set of predetermined criteria. Petkov and Petkova (2006) evaluated the final performance of two different classes, one where rubrics were provided in advance and another where rubrics were not provided. Their findings revealed that the performance of the students who had access to rubrics was better than the ones who did not use them. However, merely providing the rubrics is not enough for better performances. Instead students must be taught to co-create and use them for their own evaluation and to assess their works-in-progress and thereby guide revision and improvement (Andrade, 2001).

135 Psychology undergraduates at the University of Barcelona participated in another study to see the usefulness of formative assessment and rubrics to student performance. It was found that those students who had used the rubrics and/or attended the feedback classes had lower anxiety levels during exams and performed better. Further, exposure to rubrics had also lowered their negative attitude toward the subject (Bono & Pena, 2019).

A study done by Reynolds-Keefer (2010) was conducted to explore student uses and perceptions of rubrics, as well as how student use of rubrics might impact potential use of rubrics as a future teacher. 45 undergraduate students of University of Michigan-Dearborn, participated. The findings brought out that students found rubrics helpful in completing their assignment and the findings also revealed that those students who are exposed to rubrics as students report a greater likelihood of using rubrics in the future as teacher

Is developing rubrics challenging?

One recommended procedure in developing rubrics involves three steps: end product of the task; (2) define the rating scale and weight of each criterion; (3) determine who will assign the score (Lunsford & Melear, 2004).

According to Uddin (2014) 5 out of 8 teachers strongly agreed that developing/making rubrics is taxing and tutors need lots of time to develop one. Further, the paper also found that 4 out of 8 teachers strongly agree that making rubrics requires specialized knowledge. Some instructors resist the use of rubrics as most of them have no training or little preparation as teachers and do not have the access to training on new teaching and assessment trends (Hafner & Hafner, 2003).

Developing descriptions of performance takes time, so it should be developed only for important and complex assignments. Moreover, poorly designed rubrics could actually diminish the learning process (Wolf & Stevens, 2007). Wolf and Stevens also state that it is meaningless to have irrelevant and broad evaluation criteria. A rubric, in other words should not be too narrow or too broad.

The literature findings suggest that the art of using rubrics is more important than just knowing what rubrics are. For instance, Jeong (2015) states that teachers who are experienced and trained in using rubrics were clear of what was expected from their students and knew how to use rubrics to assess their students' performances. He further says that teachers who are new to the profession and have not received training in using rubrics usually rate students based on their overall impression

Likewise, Andrade (2005) states that rubrics literacy is not only about possessing the knowledge of what rubrics are but also about knowing how to use them correctly. However using rubrics is better

than not using them, since not using rubrics makes evaluation more subjective as it may be influenced by the subjective judgment of the grader (Spandel, 2006).

Conclusion

Today, rubrics are frequently used in the classroom to evaluate student performance. E Literatures on rubrics as well as my own teaching experience indicate the usefulness of rubrics in evaluating student performance. It is interesting to note that a rubric can act as a supervisor in the absence of the real supervisor. This has become even more important in the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic that has forced schools and colleges to remain closed for an extended period of time. In fact, with rubrics in place, Covid-19 has come as an opportunity of sorts to promote autonomous learning among students. This literature review thus reveals that rubrics are useful not only in communicating teacher expectations but also in motivating learners and encouraging autonomous learning.

The author's personal experience indicates that often teachers must communicate expectations clearly and keep reminding students to follow the rubrics. Rubrics become a base for grading wherein the tutor can provide immediate feedback and suggest areas for improvement. Subjectivity can be eliminated with the use of rubrics. When criteria are clearly communicated and each tutor knows what is expected from the specific assignment, students also clearly know their teacher's expectation thereby making it easy for them to realize their weaknesses and shortfalls.

It appears that more and more educational institutions want to introduce rubrics as a basis for assessing student assignments. However, rubrics should not simply be used as a scoring tool, and is important to continue to explore ways to take rubrics beyond their current use. Students should learn to monitor their own progress and enhance the quality of their educational aspirations.

There are some challenges, though. Developing rubrics can be time consuming, and too broad or too simple rubrics will not be very effective in grading student performance. It is also observed that along with communicating rubrics to students in advance, the use of formative assessment through continuous feedback and timely marking by the teacher also allows students to improve their overall academic performance.

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