

guides, that have been given to the judges, coaches and athletes in advance," Wolf explains. "There is an extreme significance to the fact that not only the judges know how to score the performance, but that the coaches and the athletes know what is expected from them in advance." This is only one example of how assessment rubrics help make the learning target more clear for students. Wolf notes, "They are able to hit the target when they know what it is."

Besides creating a more accessible learning target, assessment rubrics help students who are unfamiliar with an academic culture, such as first-generation college students or students from unconventional backgrounds. Wolf was himself a first-generation college student and was faced with confusion and uncertainty when he was told to do a research paper in his first year of college. "I wasn't exactly sure what was expected. An assessment rubric describing key features of the expected performance would have gone a long way in helping me."

For more information about creating an assessment rubric, check out this article by Wolf and Ellen Stevens, director of the Center for Faculty Development, at ucdenver.edu/about/departments/assessmentoffice/Documents/Role%20of%20Rubrics.pdf.

Writing Rubrics for Online Courses a Challenge; a Must



Joanne Addison

A student's facial expressions say a lot about what he or she is thinking. Are they confused? Enthused? Bored? The lack of one-on-one interaction can be an obstacle when teaching an online course, explains Joanne Addison, associate professor of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. That's why an easy-to-read, easy-to-find rubric is a must.

"One of the most challenging aspects of an online course is maintaining a vibrant discussion area for all students," she says. Addison answers this challenge by fostering conversation about the goals defined in the rubric with her students throughout the course.

"For me, the challenge is not only find ways to foster useful online discussions, but to do so in ways that are tied to program-based outcomes."

Establishing expectations early on in the course is paramount when teaching online – and in the traditional classroom. That's where rubrics come in. "When students take an online course for the first time, they have a lot to learn – the more direction you can give the student the better."

Addison views rubrics as important educational technology and understands that the technology has the potential to both generate knowledge and aid in problem solving.

In that vein, the process of writing a rubric has to be thought out from the very beginning stages of course design, she says. "As with the use of any technology, rubrics can't be seen as simply something you 'add on' in the final stages of the writing process," she says. "Rather, the ways in which rubrics are used systematically to improve one's writing must be integrated throughout the writing process."

Whether for the traditional classroom or an online course, Addison, a literacy researcher and teacher of writing, approaches rubrics as an art. "Indeed, the best rubrics allow for systematic treatment of the art of writing in ways that lead writers – whether novice or expert – to an improved understanding of writing as well as an improved product." Addison's use of rubrics extends beyond the college classroom as she believes the use of rubrics helps writers understand the conventions of various genres in academic, workplace and social settings. Her most recent research, a nationwide study and review of writing in high schools and colleges funded by a grant from NCTE/CCCC, addresses the issue of the extent to which engaging instruction and quality writing is marked by clear expectations as well as transfer and articulation across contexts—best practices that can be strongly fostered by the use of rubrics.

Go to ucdenver.edu/facultydevelopment for updated information on faculty resources.

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Newsletter

Latitude

Freedom Found in Guidelines? You Bet!

You wouldn't think, would you, that setting rules and strict guidelines of what is expected of you could bring freedom. Rafael Moreno, assistant professor of geography in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, has found that using rubrics in his Sustainability in Resources Management course is actually liberating for his students.

"The final project of what the rubric is for is very hard to define given that it is relative to the specific social and environmental contexts for the selected case study," he says. "The rubric gives the parameters for what is a good paper, a not so good paper and a terrible paper."



Rafael Moreno

The assignment is a critical review report of a sustainable development project that is due at the end of the semester. Moreno has found that students do a better job of planning, addressing and working on each of the points in their report when the expectations and deadlines for progress reports are set at the beginning of the term.

"I use the rubric as a tool to help students see how the body of knowledge that we are building in the course can be applied to analyze a real world sustainable development project," Moreno explains. "They serve as a point of reference to understand and resolve disagreements on the grade assigned to an activity."

The rubric itself is an ever-evolving document, Moreno says. Faculty must be careful to provide direction without limiting creativity and exploration of different approaches. It's also tough to incorporate everything that is relevant and break it down into performance expectations.

That's when feedback comes into play. Moreno notes that it is important to gather insight from students on the clarity and value of the rubrics to continually improve them. This feedback should be sought during and at the end of the semester when they are used. Also, valuable feedback can be obtained from former and graduating students long after the semester is completed.

Moreno's discussion on rubrics can be found on the Elixir Merlot site available through the Center for Faculty Development at ucdenver.edu/facultydevelopment.

Rubrics Communicate the Key to Success

As with most areas of academia, to do your best you need to know what the best looks like. "The more clear the learning target, the easier it is to hit," says Kenny Wolf, director of assessment at the University of Colorado Denver. Rubrics are used for precisely that. Assessment rubrics are a scoring guide for a product or a performance. These rubrics, given to students prior to their performance, provide standards and deadlines so they know exactly what they need to have in order to succeed.



Kenny Wolf

"Assessment rubrics were an important behind-the-scenes feature of the Olympics this winter. The way a figure skating routine or a snowboarding aerial is scored is based on rubrics, or detailed scoring

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Latitude: The University of Colorado Denver faculty consistently reach for and attain new heights. The expanse of faculty and staff contributions to research and teaching enhancement go beyond the campus, encompassing, influencing and improving the globe. The Center for Faculty Development is a catalyst for inspiring and attaining this elevated level.

Designing an In-Depth Guide for Assessment



Lori Catalano

Lori Catalano was an early adopter and advocate for rubrics because of her interest in developing strategies to improve the quality of student learning in design studio. “As I began teaching design I was compelled by the question of how design could be taught in a way that did not merely rely on personal aesthetic judgment,” explains Catalano, senior instructor and associate chair in landscape architecture.

“In my initial teaching experience, I felt challenged when I thought I had communicated expectations; and yet students did not seem to ‘get it.’ I saw rubrics as a way to deal with this dilemma.”

Catalano teaches studio courses that are complex, and she uses rubrics to clearly communicate expectations and to assess students work. For example, in spring 2010 Catalano taught a six-credit studio master’s level course on urban design in the College of Architecture and Planning. The class was composed of 15 students with various backgrounds in architecture, landscape architecture and urban planning. The students were given the task to create alternate visions for a unique form of urbanism to be located along the canals of Metro Phoenix. The semester-long project included major presentations at midterm and at the end of the semester.

Studio reviews can be stressful and intimidating for students, therefore Catalano uses the rubrics to establish a framework of criteria for student achievement and to guide the discussion with invited professionals or jurors as they review the students work. “It seemed to make sense that if I could be more articulate in describing my expectations and explaining why some students’ projects were more successful than others, students would excel.” she also explains that these projects evolve in response to the student discoveries made during the design process. Therefore, the specific course expectations and content of the rubrics develop as the projects progress.

What began as a desire to improve her teaching abilities has evolved to a greater appreciation of the value of rubrics for establishing expectations. “As a teacher I feel more successful at inspiring students to explore, and helping students achieve depth and complexity in their projects.”

Rubrics with a Reach

Center for Faculty Development a global outlet in faculty education

Let’s get visual! Always on the move, always in the know and always setting and sharing best practices, the Center for Faculty Development has reached beyond the University of Colorado Denver’s two campuses to educate faculty on a global scale. As part of the nationwide Elixr Merlot project, the center launched videos and documents that educate and reflect the importance, multiple uses and varied dynamics of rubrics in traditional and online courses.

“A rubric is an assessment tool that provides students standards and guidelines,” Ellen Stevens, director for the Center for Faculty Development, explains. “We’ve been wanting to do a project such as this for a long time. Kenny Wolf is our local expert on rubrics . . . that was the beginning.”

Stevens, Wolf, associate professor and director of assessment, and Joni Dunlap,



Ellen Stevens and Jessica Lance

associate professor and UC Denver, Faculty Fellow for Teaching, secured funding for the project and sent out a successful call for participants. But, Stevens stressed, it was videographer Jessica Lance who made the magic.

“Jess really put it together,” Stevens says. “She pulled these stories out of our faculty and made an important, engaging and instructional series of videos.”

Lance, a second-year theater, film and video production instructor in the College of Arts and Media, saw the call to

participate as a way to learn more about rubrics, connect with colleagues and learn more about the university.

“Being part of the Department of Theater and Film, we often get asked for help in video production,” she explains. “I wanted to take this on myself.”

Lance was able to take the experience and compose rubrics that best apply to her courses. “I am using rubrics in my classes now. I was sold,” she explains. “I work with a lot of freshmen. It’s helpful to show them, ‘these are the expectations, this is the outcome...these are the actual things I’m looking for in your work.’”

The video series is composed of more than 34 individual clips showing the expanse of rubric use. However, Lance followed six participants, five UC Denver faculty and an instructor from the Community College of Denver, and explored different aspects

of rubric use. An informal, informational round table discussion by participants is also featured.

Stevens sees the series as a means to help faculty at UC Denver and on the global scale find a new appreciation for rubrics and dispel some negative notions. “We often hear resistance because of the ‘rigid’ structure,” Stevens said. “The Elixr Merlot project emphasizes that it does not have to be that way.”

Creativity can flourish amid standardized expectations, Stevens and Lance stressed. The UC Denver faculty participation in the Elixr Merlot project is an excellent example. “I was astonished by the way faculty use rubrics,” Stevens says. “The way they approach teaching makes me very proud to call them my colleagues.”

Check out the videos at: <http://elixr.merlot.org/assessment-evaluation/assessment-rubrics/assessment-rubrics4>

Melding the Worlds of Arts and Structure

Ah, the art of rubrics! And no, that’s not an oxymoron. The unique creativity and imagination of the art student can indeed be loosed and explored within the structure of the rubric. Mary Connelly, assistant professor in the College of Arts & Media, does this by setting parameters for her students then allowing them to fill in the blanks.

“What I work on is how to say it with less,” Connelly explains as part of the Elixr Merlot project. “I think of it as my teaching statement in a structured way.”

One of Connelly’s course projects is “Making Money,” a study of the Golden Mean in currency design. Students

create their own design for U.S. currency using the visual principle of the Golden Rectangle. The design must include 3-D figures, forms or objects created from the student’s imagination. During the class critique, as a springboard for evaluating the projects, she gives her students a rubric that only specifies the four levels of performance across the top, “But the rubric does not mention specific criteria, but rather asks the students to devise their own,” she says. “It combines both self assessment and peer review.”

Not everyone agrees with the use of rubrics in art courses. Connelly says some disagreement still exists about using rubrics

from some of the visual arts faculty. “Especially on the upper-level classes, there is disagreement because of the notion that, in an advanced-level painting class, there is no way, you can have a rubric to assess the student’s performance,” she explains.

There has not been resistance from the students. “They’re almost surprised or relieved that there is an organized way to put down one’s thoughts.”

In working with her foundation-level drawing class, students reported on midterm surveys that they know what is expected of them and that this understanding is helpful in



Mary Connelly

clarifying the purpose of weekly projects.

“I imagine that many art instructors have had the experience of a student who, in asking for feedback during class, blurts out, ‘is this what you wanted?’” Connelly says. “Rubrics plan an important function in providing the framework that helps them identify and set their own goals supported by my guidelines.”

Establishing Guides for Goals a Good Time Investment

Ronica Rooks, PhD, sees herself as a rubric novice after using the same rubric for the past three years. As Rooks progresses with the implementation of rubrics, she has come to discover their attributes. “On a positive, reflective note, while this rubric was time consuming to create and needs further iterations, thus far it is an effective tool for achieving the course goals.”

Rooks, assistant professor of health and behavioral sciences in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, instructs the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) course. Her course objectives are to enable students to explore the social context of physical and mental health, illness and the health care system in the United States, with some cross-national discussions. The class is small in size; in fall of 2009 Rooks had only nine registered students, made up mostly of women who are seniors or at the master’s level and have some background in sociological, psychological and/or biomedical aspects of health.

The SDOH course requires students to engage in a service learning project. The service learning is a bridge between classroom learning and community volunteerism, she says. “Students’ service learning projects allow them to apply their classroom knowledge to a real-world health problem, gain insight about and become better advocates for their causes, and acquire networks for their career development.” With the complexity of assessing a student on a service learning project, Rooks created an assessment rubric for the service learning project.

Rooks’ rubric has three rating levels including inadequate, adequate and advanced, based on how the student demonstrates his/her knowledge of an assignment. Across these ratings, if students do not discuss any examples from their textbook,



Ronica Rooks

in-class discussions, service learning experiences, peer-review discussions, etc., they are graded as inadequate. If they discuss a few examples in their assignments, they are graded as adequate. If they discuss multiple examples and are thinking about and presenting possible solutions to social issues in their assignments, they are graded as advanced.

“I use the rubric to give students information and clarity about my expectations for grading up front in the syllabus; to improve my grading consistency and justify to students why points might be deducted from their service learning assignments,” Rooks stresses. “Rubrics help document if student learning and progress in their assignments throughout the semester are enhanced by service learning.”