039-300-027

October 2001

Ohio Literacy Resource Center

Enhancing Adult Literacy in Ohio

http://literacy.kent.edu

Teacher to Teacher

Using Rubrics

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Anyone who has ever ordered a pizza has used a rubric. Pizza lovers always have opinions about what makes a great pizza--do you like thin crust or thick? Do you like meat on your pizza or not? Do you like anchovies? Do you like pineapple? The very fact that you are ordering a pizza to begin with means that you have decided that you want pizza rather than some other food. We all subconsciously use rubrics every day, whether we are thinking about buying a car, or deciding on what to wear, or (dare I say it?) sizing up someone as a potential husband or wife.

Such decisions ordinarily involve choices based on criteria. When we make choices, we are essentially making evaluations. The very root word of "evaluate" means to place value on something. Using a rubric allows us to get the evaluation process out in the open, so that everyone--both the evaluator and the person whose work is being evaluated--understands the criteria that are forming the basis for this evaluation. The purpose of this brief publication is to provide a rationale for using rubrics with adult learners and to show how rubrics are developed and utilized.

What is a rubric?

Rubrics are tools that formalize the process of evaluation. Rubrics keep us honest by keeping the focus on the criteria established to begin with. In the past, evaluation has tended to be overly subjective in that the evaluator had some notion of what "excellent" and "satisfactory" and so on looked like, without really communicating these notions explicitly to the person being evaluated. The person being evaluated then had to guess what his or her instructor meant by "excellent." By agreeing on the criteria up front and by stating the criteria explicitly in the form of a rubric, the person being evaluated knows exactly what he or she needs to do to achieve excellence. Moreover, the person being evaluated has the tool (the rubric) needed for self-evaluation throughout the entire process. A constant self-evaluation can be taking place throughout the process (rather than the more traditional way of handing the product over to the evaluator and seeing if the work is "excellent" or not at the end of the process).

Why use rubrics in adult education?

Rubrics may be very helpful to adult educators in helping to evaluate the Uniform Portfolio (UPS) that must be kept on every student within your program, according to The Ohio Performance Accountability System (http://literacy.kent.edu/opas/portfoliomodel.html).

The Ohio Department of Education requires the following items in all portfolios: record of student attendance; documentation log with documentation of mastery attached; goal sheet; Individual Learning Plan; test results record or log. Additional student work may also be included. "Assessments may be standardized tests or performance-based assessments with standardized scoring rubrics that reflect the skills areas identified in the NRS educational levels" (http://literacy.kent.edu/opas/portfoliomodel.html). The benefit of using rubrics is that they allow you to create something that is unique to your local needs, yet fulfill the mandate of having a system that is "uniform and consistent." Using such a holistic system may also be beneficial if students are not present long enough for a valid post-test to be administered (http://literacy.kent.edu/opas/portfoliomodel.html).

The process of selection and reflection that is inherent in the portfolio process is useful for both students and teachers, and it is always tied to some kind of rubric, so that growth can be "measured" by both the learner and the instructor in a systematic way. Some questions to ask when developing a rubric might be: What are the criteria for growth for the individual evidence? What are the pieces of evidence that can be accumulated that reflect that growth? What are the student's learning goals? Are they realistic? Are they appropriate? Can they be achieved in a timely fashion? What does

the learner say about his or her growth in a reflective statement? What can the teacher glean from this process to make future instructional decisions? At the "end" of the process (although this kind of portfolio assessment is ongoing), a rubric could be created that looks at the student's entire body of work included in the portfolio. Both the learner and the instructor could complete this rubric.

Summative and diagnostic uses

Rubrics can be used to evaluate an individual work or a student's entire body of work. When evaluating a single work, such as a project or a paper, the instructor might look at the outcome of the rubric evaluation and propose a course of action for the student. That rubrics have, by nature, individual criteria listed makes it relatively easy to determine students' strengths and weaknesses. In a more holistic system of evaluation (grades such as "A," "B," and so on) it is more difficult to tell exactly why the student got the evaluation he or she did. Rubrics allow instructors and students to pinpoint exactly what skills within a specific task need to be worked on through further instruction.

Rubrics can also be used to look across all of a student's assignments, the student's entire body of work. Such a rubric would evaluate a student's entire portfolio, which would allow for an overall evaluation of student progress. When portfolio assessment is utilized, both student and teacher would complete the overarching rubric. The rubric forms the basis for both evaluation by the instructor and self-evaluation by the student. This kind of assessment becomes a "two-way street," instead of a one-way conversation from teacher to student.

Indeed, rubrics have many uses. But no matter how they are being used, the steps for developing a rubric are much the same.

Developing a rubric

A rubric must be developed before the evaluation begins. It isn't fair to create the rubric after the work has already been done! This would be analogous to the pizza maker's trying to make the pizza without any directions from the customer. Then the customer comes in and describes his or her ideal pizza!

Rubrics can take many forms. Using the pizza analogy again, let's say you have a general picture in your mind of the ideal pizza. This general picture encompasses the overall criteria you have in mind bundled for evaluating a pizza. You might also have a general description of the average pizza in your mind. And you might have a general description of a below average pizza in your mind. These general descriptions of a ideal pizza, an average pizza, and a below average pizza would be essentially what is called a "holistic" rubric--a set of generalized descriptions of what "above average," "average," and "below average" are in your mind. (Of course, you may have more than three levels of descriptions--you may have as many as you want!) What you are evaluating is then measured against these descriptions to see where it fits best--is it an "above average" pizza, an "average" pizza, or a "below average" pizza according to the general descriptions of your pre-determined criteria? In using these general descriptions, you may want to use terms that demonstrate degrees of understanding ("thorough," "substantial," "partial," and "misunderstanding") or degrees of frequency ("usually," "frequently," "sometimes," or "rarely") or degrees of effectiveness ("highly effective," "effective," "moderately effective," or "ineffective") (Maryland Assessment Consortium, http://mac.cl.k12.md.us:2000/).

Or let's say you decide to make your own pizzas. Yes, you are serious about pizzas! You might have a general description of what your ideal pizza would look like at each stage of the pizza-making process. This kind of rubric is called "developmental." What is being evaluated is put on this continuum of stages.

Often when we are evaluating things such as pizzas, however, there are different facets or components to evaluate, each with its own set of criteria. For instance, when looking for pizzas we are evaluating size, type of crust, toppings, and so on. Therefore, it may be most helpful to develop an "analytic" rubric, which allows us to measure something against several different criteria. Because this is such a useful rubric to use when evaluating anything that is multi-dimensional, the development of such a rubric is described below.

Guidelines for developing analytic rubrics

The process of developing an analytic rubric has several steps (Pate, Homestead, & McGinnis, 1993). The first step is making a list of desired characteristics. In adult literacy programs, these desired characteristics may come from the O-PAS, students' additional desired goals, or both. The number of desired characteristics can be limitless--however many you want to measure. Obviously, these should also be based on your curricular goals. What do you want your students to be able to do?

Next, looking at each characteristic, decide what "excellent," "above average," "average," and "below average" look like. (Again, you may have as many levels of judgment as you want. In this description, I am using four levels.) You should be as specific as possible when deciding what "excellent" is. When looking for an ideal pizza, one that has crust that is two inches thick would be "excellent," one that has one-inch crust would be "above average," and so on.

The last step in designing an analytic rubric is to weight each criterion. Sometimes, I find it helpful to use a base of 10 when figuring the weighting. For example, out of a possible 10 weighting "points," I might allocate 4 to "Crust," 4 to "Toppings," 1 to "Temperature," and 1 to "Appearance." Using a base of 10 means that a pizza that got a 4 on all four outcomes would get a perfect score of 40 points.

Score x Weight = Total				
Crust	_____	x 4	=	_____
Toppings	_____	x 4	=	_____
Temperature	_____	x 1	=	_____
Appearance	_____	x 1	=	_____
			Grand Total	_____

Below is a blank rubric for evaluating an essay. The evaluator has decided that four characteristics will be evaluated: content, organization, language, and writing conventions.

	Content	Organization	Language	Writing Conventions
Excellent (4)				
Above Average (3)				
Average (2)				
Below Average (1)				

The next step is to decide how much weight to give each characteristic. The evaluator has decided that content should be 40% of the final score, organization should be 30% and language and writing conventions should be 15%.

	Content 4	Organization 3	Language 1.5	Writing Conventions 1.5
Excellent (4)				
Above Average (3)				
Average (2)				
Below Average (1)				

The next step is to begin to fill in what your criteria will be for "excellent," "above average," "average," and "below average" in each characteristic. Below is an example of what these might look like in the characteristic of "Writing Conventions."

	Content 4	Organization 3	Language 1.5	Writing Conventions 1.5
Excellent (4)				No errors
Above Average (3)				One error
Average (2)				Two errors
Below Average (1)				Three or more errors

Once you fill in all of the boxes, you will have your rubric and will be ready to start evaluating. It's always best to practice using it by perhaps reading through some of the student work and picking out one or two "anchor papers" that are clearly an "excellent" in each outcome. Also pick out one or two that are clearly "above average" and so on.

Summary

Rubrics are great tools for helping teachers and students to keep on track, sticking to original criteria that we have set forth to begin with. Also, they are helpful for students so that they know exactly what they need to "shoot for." Designing a rubric is fairly easy no matter what is being evaluated. The design work is easily worth the effort. Rubrics help us attain any goal to which we aspire, from achieving literacy, to writing a great paper, to finding the perfect pizza!

References and Resources

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