Rubrics, Narrative Evaluations, and Criteria for Student Learning at Antioch University

Jon Wergin
For the Assessment Resource Team
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The University Academic Council has asked each academic program to develop assessment rubrics as complements to existing narrative evaluations. This request was made for two reasons, one external and one internal. In its last comprehensive re-accreditation report the Higher Learning Commission wrote, "A set of standards is needed for the entire University (whether uniform for the entire institution or specific for each campus site), as is a system to monitor [narrative evaluations] to ensure the proper application of those standards."[1] Later on, the evaluators wrote, "Based on reviews of numerous student files, the system [of narrative evaluations] is used inconsistently, and there is no quality review to ensure the integrity of the system of evaluation" (p.18). Thus, the problem with HLC evaluators was not Antioch's use of narrative evaluations *per se*, but rather the lack of quality control over their consistency and reliability. We need to demonstrate that our "quality review" has become stronger since 2002. The internal reason for the UAC's request is that, while narrative student evaluations provide far more complete information on student learning than traditional grades, they are also far more time-intensive for the faculty; and the problem is compounded when a program has large numbers of students and substantial teaching by adjunct faculty who are overworked and underpaid. The temptation to use "boilerplate" narratives that contain little constructive feedback to students becomes very strong.

We need to seek a way to ensure that narrative evaluations are consistent and reliable from one grader to another, while ensuring also the freedom of faculty to personalize narratives in a way that provides detailed and useful feedback. This led to the mandate on rubrics, which require that students be evaluated on a common set of criteria. Rubrics are thus a means to an end, which is to insure that students are evaluated consistently on a standard set of criteria that are transparent to students and other faculty. This is what the HLC is holding us accountable for. Rubrics can also be a very useful and efficient way of sorting through student work without making the evaluation too reductionist.

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[1] "Report of a Comprehensive Evaluation Visit to Antioch University," October 2002, pp. 7-8.

It's important to be clear about what exactly constitutes a "rubric." A rubric is a scoring guide that evaluates student performance on a set of criteria, one at a time. Usually these criteria take the form of learning objectives, but they can also be behaviors or qualities. Rubrics are usually expressed as a range of performance, arranged in levels indicating the degree to which learning standards have been met. Rubrics can be either holistic, looking at a student's performance as a whole, or analytic, identifying and assessing components of that performance. Here are two examples of rubrics, one holistic, one analytic:

Fiction Writing Content Rubric – Holistic

- **5** – The plot, setting, and characters are developed fully and organized well. The *who, what, where, when,* and *why* are explained using interesting language and sufficient detail.

- **4** – Most parts of the story mentioned in a score of 5 above are developed and organized well. A couple of aspects may need to be more fully or more interestingly developed.

- **3** – Some aspects of the story are developed and organized well, but not as much detail or organization is expressed as in a score of 4.

- **2** – A few parts of the story are developed somewhat. Organization and language usage need improvement.

- **1** – Parts of the story are addressed without attention to detail or organization.

Fiction Writing Content Rubric – Analytic

Criteria	4	3	2	1
PLOT: "What" and "Why"	Both *plot* parts are fully developed.	One of the *plot* parts is fully developed and the less developed part is at least addressed.	Both *plot* parts are addressed but not fully developed.	Neither *plot* parts are fully developed.
SETTING: "When" and "Where"	Both *setting* parts are fully developed.	One of the *setting* parts is fully developed and the less developed part is at least addressed.	Both *setting* parts of the story are addressed but not fully developed.	Neither *setting* parts are developed.

CHARACTERS: "Who" described by behavior, appearance, personality, and character traits	The main *characters* are fully developed with much descriptive detail. The reader has a vivid image of the characters.	The main *characters* are developed with some descriptive detail. The reader has a vague idea of the characters.	The main *characters* are identified by name only.	None of the *characters* are developed or named.

Either format works. Rubrics can even have just two performance levels: "criterion met" and "criterion not met." This is the system used in the PhD in Leadership & Change program. Students are required to accomplish a sequence of "learning achievements," each of which has a set of evaluation criteria spelled out and made available to the student. All criteria must be met to the satisfaction of the faculty evaluator in order for credit for the learning achievement to be awarded. Any work that does not meet all of the criteria is sent back for revision. For example, one of the learning achievements is a "Nature of Leadership Essay," typically completed during the student's first year in the program. Students have to demonstrate each of the following:

1. Critical and reflective learning by discussing theories, concepts, and themes drawn from the literature, analyzing and synthesizing them.
2. Understanding the historical, social, cultural, and/or political contexts of these theories, concepts, and themes.
3. Understanding the power dynamics underlying these theories, concepts, and themes, making some groups as the "norm" and putting others on the margin.
4. The ability to apply significant and relevant theories, concepts, and themes to an area of interest, and/or organizational context.

Once the paper is deemed acceptable, a second faculty evaluator, usually the student's advisor, reads it, along with the first evaluator's narrative comments about each criterion. Discrepancies between evaluators are discussed and resolved by the faculty.

The general point of this example is that rubrics can take many forms, depending on the objectives and pedagogies of the program's faculty. Requiring rubrics is not a Trojan Horse strategy for forcing a more traditional

grading system in through the back door; rubrics are, rather, a way to ensure that evaluation of student learning is authentic, transparent, credible, and trustworthy. In this way rubrics can actually support narrative evaluations by making them less vulnerable to charges of bias. Moreover, rubrics help students improve their performance by clearly showing them what is expected and how their work will be evaluated, by providing them with more informative feedback about their strengths and weaknesses, and by helping them become better judges of the quality of their work. Finally, rubrics ensure a measure of consistency among evaluators, while preserving the opportunity to personalize student feedback through additional narrative comments.

Rubrics allow for quality review of two kinds. "Content validity" is demonstrated with consensus of program faculty on what the evaluation criteria should be. "Inter-rater reliability" is demonstrated when independent evaluators come to essentially the same judgment about a student's performance, given what the faculty deem to be acceptable variations (i.e., not so much variability that a student's evaluation depends more on the identity of the evaluator than on her/his own learning). Passing muster with the Higher Learning Commission will require that we engage in both kinds of assessment review on a regular basis.

Rubric development at Antioch is embedded with other related work, most especially the Program Profiles requested as part of the University's Self Study for the Higher Learning Commission. Each Profile must contain student learning outcomes for the program and assessment strategies for those outcomes. For programs highly dependent on narrative evaluations rubrics will be a core assessment strategy.

The University Academic Council has asked that programs include rubrics for student learning *at the program level* in their annual program review report, December 2011, and rubrics for student learning *at the course level* no later than their December 2012 annual program review report, so that rubrics at all levels will be available for the visiting team from the HLC in Spring 2013.