

Designing Effective Projects: Assessing Projects Examining Rubrics

Using Rubrics

The days of using only tests and quizzes to evaluate student knowledge are long gone. This type of traditional classroom assessment can be subjective and limits the ability for students to learn from their mistakes and improve upon them. Project-based learning demands a more progressive means of assessment where students can view learning as a process and use problem-solving skills to meet or exceed project expectations. Rubrics have been implemented into today's classroom to give students and teachers a better understanding of what is being evaluated, what criteria grades are based upon, and what clear and compelling product standards are addressed. The focus of a rubric is to monitor and adjust progress rather than just to assess the end result. Though the use of rubrics is a good thing, they are not always used in the right way. The definition we will use to define a rubric is best stated by Heidi Goodrich (1997), a rubrics expert. Simply put, a rubric is a "scoring tool that lists the criteria for a piece of work or what counts."

Rubrics can be thought of as a scoring scale that shows levels of quality with a set of descriptors for each level of performance. A holistic rubric is used to obtain an overall impression of the quality of a performance (Wiggins & McTighe, 2004). They are most effectively used as a final evaluation that provides a single score for the complete performance or product. An analytical rubric involves the use of separate criteria in scoring work, typically involving separate rubrics for each key criterion (Wiggins & McTighe, 2004). They are most effectively used when diagnosing individual student progress and needs. They are developed to evaluate very specific content or processes and provide the student feedback about the performance or product.

Rubrics can be teacher generated but are even more effective when generated with student input. Students tend to be even more critical of their own work than teachers, and they can create more challenging rubrics than teachers create on their own. This practice also gives the students an opportunity to own their learning and the outcome because standards and expectations are committed to from the beginning. At the very least, rubrics must be shared and discussed with students.

Using Checklists with Rubrics

One self-managing tool that is excellent to use in conjunction with a rubric is a checklist. Checklists are self-managing tools that can be created from the content of the rubric. Checklists specify steps or conditions that must be present in a performance or product, and students then check off the presence or absence of the traits listed. The checklist puts students in charge of their progress by giving them a tool to prioritize tasks and manage their time efficiently. This in turn places students in the center of the learning process, which is a guiding characteristic of a project-based learning environment. In a project-based learning unit there may be many tasks to complete in order to reach the final product. A checklist can assist the teacher and student through the project requirements outlined on the rubric.

It is apparent that the primary reason to use rubrics and checklists is to increase the quality of work. They define clear expectations and force students to be responsible for the work they create. With the use of rubrics, students are able to articulate what they've learned and know exactly what they need to do to be successful. Rubrics are tools for clear communication with students, teachers, and parents. This communication allows everyone involved to understand the expectations and ensures student learning and success.