Rubrics in Education

Old Term, New Meanings

By Bruce S. Cooper and Anne Gargan

The term "*rubric*" is used widely in education. In the classroom, rubric may mean a set of categories, criteria for assessment, and the gradients for presenting and evaluating learning. When grading a student's essay, for example, a teacher may apply a rubric for its quality of organization, giving a 3 for Advanced Proficient, 2 for Proficient, and a 1 for Partially Proficient. Other criteria that could be rubrics include the use of examples, paragraph structure, grammar, and overall quality.

Yet, like many terms in education, the meaning of *rubric* is confusing. For example, Wiggins defines a rubric as "one of the basic *tools* in the assessor's kit. . . telling us what elements matter most" (1998, p. 153). Schmoker states that a rubric "simply means a *rule* or *guide*. . . by which students' performance or product is judged. It nails down the *criteria*, making them available to schools, teachers, parents, and students and providing clear direction and focus" (2006, pp. 70-71). And Guskey explains that rubrics "are specific guidelines that can be used to describe students' work in reading, writing, mathematics, and other content areas" (1994, p. 25). The term, apparently, can refer to almost anything: rule, guide, criterion, or description that is used to assess the progress of students in their academic subjects, as well as the grading system for assessing each criterion.

A SOPHISTICATED PRIMER

The term *rubric* has been used in English since the 1400s, making it as old as it is interesting. The root of *rubric* refers to the color red or red earth. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives an example of the term used in 1607: "this marrow of a deer in sheep's milk with rubric and soft pitch, drunk every day, helps the digestion and obstructions." Another meaning, closer to how it is currently used in education, is the heading of a chapter or division of a book, written or printed in red ink or underlined in red for emphasis. In 1658, Phillips stated that a rubric is "a noted Sentence of any Book marked with red Letters."

The Catholic Church has long employed the term for the directions for conducting the Mass, which are printed in red and inserted into liturgical books. Foxe in 1583 explained that a rubric is part of "the whole Canon of the Masse, with the Rubricke thereof, as it standeth in the Masse/booke." John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, stated that "as a Minister, I teach her Doctrines. I use her Offices. I conform to her Rubricks."

And in law, a rubric is a heading or title of a statute or section of a legal code (again, originally printed in red ink). In 1634, Kirk explained that "When this Act came to be heard in open Parliament, his Majestie

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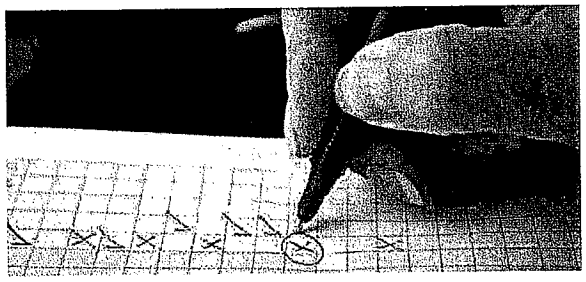
gave orders to read only the rubricks of it." Red delineations, headings, and divisions — the term rubric has a long and interesting history.

APPLYING RUBRICS

Educators today use *rubric* to refer to a category of behavior that can be used to evaluate performance. The term is currently so popular that no one writing a funding proposal would ignore laying out the rubric for evaluating the program's success.

Today's rubrics involve creating a standard and a descriptive statement that illustrates how the standard is to be achieved. For example, a rubric for judging an essay would list everything a student



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needs to include to receive a certain grade on that essay. Generally, the rubric also would specify what is needed to achieve different levels of performance, such as what is needed for an A, a B, etc.

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In addition to helping students know what they need to do to achieve a certain grade, rubrics have other benefits:

1. A rubric can help teachers think carefully and critically about what they are teaching and what students need to learn.

The rubric is a predetermined set of categories. Whatever the subject or project for which it's used, a rubric will help teachers consider what's important for them to teach and how to determine the level at which students have learned what's been taught.

2. Rubrics can make the expectations and standards for performance clear to students, parents, teachers, educators, and others.

Using rubrics forces educators to spell out what they're teaching and the standards they'll use to grade students' performances. Sharing the rubric with students and parents allows them to see just what is expected of them.

3. Rubrics provide opportunities for reflection, feedback, and continued learning.

Using rubrics in education may be a clear sign of real progress both in constructing students' assignments and tests and in assessing their quality. Before using rubrics, tests consisted primarily of short-answer, multiple-choice, and fill-in-the-blank questions. When essays were assigned, the students and the teacher didn't have a common set of criteria for determining the quality of the work.

Unfortunately, using rubrics also has its pitfalls.

1. Rubrics can still be subjective.

This is especially true when rubrics are used to convert lists of qualitative terms, each critical and independent, into a set of scores that can be summed, averaged, and transformed into a grade.

2. Rubrics can make more work.

Creating and using rubrics can be particularly burdensome for teachers who already feel overwhelmed.

3. Rubrics may restrict education.

Both poorly designed rubrics and highly prescriptive ones can stifle students' creativity as teachers measure student work strictly by the rubric. Rubrics can become the overbearing framework that shapes student work, forcing everyone to look at problems and solutions in the same way, thus discouraging new ideas and approaches. Creative students — those thinking "outside the box" and beyond the rubric — will be penalized.

MAKING THE MOST OF RUBRICS

Despite all of their problems, using rubrics is a major step forward in education. School leaders need to provide the time and training to help all teachers understand the purpose of rubrics and their relationship to quality teaching and learning, as well as how to design and use rubrics. School leaders, curriculum directors, and instructional coaches need to provide exemplars so they can be reviewed, analyzed, and discussed at various faculty gatherings to help create a shared level of expectation.

Educators must communicate with and educate other stakeholders about the purpose and value of rubrics in guiding student work. Parents, business and community members, and other stakeholders should understand that, while rubrics may never replace letter and numeric grades, they do reveal considerably more about what students know and can do.

In these days of national standards and accountability, teachers need to ensure their students meet certain criteria. The rubric can be used as the basic architecture for courses, assignments, and assessments to ensure that all students reach proficiency. K

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