

2-17-2011

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Carolina Paz

The University of Western Ontario, calbuqu@uwo.ca

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Recommended Citation

Paz, Carolina (2011) "Developing a Grading Rubric in a Multi-TA Course," *Teaching Innovation Projects*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/tips/vol1/iss1/9>

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Developing a Grading Rubric in a Multi-TA Course

Summary

This project aims to assist the development of a grading rubric for marking essays in a biomedical ethics course although the process outlined can be applied to any multi-TA course. Guaranteeing grading consistency across teaching assistants (TAs) in courses with multiples TAs is challenging. Multi-TA courses are particularly challenging to maintain the consistency among TAs in respect to, for instance, teaching strategies and grading essays. Past teaching experiences, educational background, teaching perspectives, gender, and cultural background are some reasons why inconsistencies happen.

In an attempt to overcome this challenge, this project proposes a session that brings together TAs and the course instructor to develop a grading rubric that both makes sense for all TAs and meets the instructor's expectations of the content and format of the essay. It is true that TAs must have autonomy in terms of teaching strategies; however, some consistency in the grading process is necessary to guarantee fairness to all students. Research suggests that grading rubrics help TA to consistently mark students' written assignments. Furthermore, rubrics help TAs to provide constructive feedback to students and guarantee that students know the how their assignments will be marked.

Keywords

multi-TA course, consistency, constructive

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Objectives

The objective of this project is to bring together the TAs of the biomedical ethics course to:

- analyze the importance of a grading rubric;
- design together a grading rubric based on a past rubric provided by the instructor;
- test the rubric.

By the end of the meeting, the TA will be able to

- recognize the relevance of a grading rubric,
- identify the strengths and weaknesses of grading rubrics,
- efficiently apply the rubric.

Further goals are increasing TAs confidence in marking essays and in teaching tutorials, since the main objective of the tutorials is to help students with writing the essay for the course.

Summary of Relevant References

Taylor, S.S. (2007). Comments on lab reports by mechanical engineering teaching assistants: Typical practices and effects of using a grading rubric. Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 21(4), 402-424.

This article compares the performance of two TAs with different cultural backgrounds before and after using a grading rubric. The author concludes that grading rubrics helped the TAs to focus on important topics of the assignment and provide better responses to students' written assignment. Moreover, the TA took more time to grade the students' work because of the increase of the comments they wrote in the students' assignments.

Using the rubrics, the TAs tried to teach through their comments instead of just justify the grades. The author also suggests that TA should receive training in order to utilize grading rubrics.

Powe, A. & Moorhead, J. (2006). Grading lab reports effectively: Using rubrics developed collaboratively by ECE and technical writing instructors. Proceedings of the American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference and Exposition.

This study reports a collaborative design of a grading rubric. The authors assume that grading written assignments should ensure consistency among the grades, generate constructive feedbacks, save time, and evaluate relevant technical and stylistic correctness.

This collaboration generates positive feedbacks by instructors, TAs, and students. They point out that the rubric facilitated the grading process and ensured the fairness and consistency.

One important implication of the study is regarding the importance of the participation of teaching assistances and students in the design of a grading rubric. The authors stress that to include students and TA in this process would guarantee that all people involved in this process is aware of the content of the rubric. Also, TAs should work together with the instructor to have a first experience with grading process using a rubric.

Another implication is that holding grading sessions before marking the first assignment would ensure grade consistency among TAs. The authors suggest that TAs independently mark one or two sample assignments and then compare and discuss the

grades. This practice would decrease grading discrepancies among TAs and provide a change for the TAs adjust their practice according to a standard that they have discussed together. Equally important, the TAs would have an opportunity to develop with the instructor a set of best practices to grade written assignments using grading rubrics.

Kellogg, R. S., Mann, J. A. & Dieterich, A. (2001). Developing and using rubrics to evaluate subjective Engineering laboratory and design reports. *Proceedings of the 2001 American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference & Exposition*

The basic premise of the authors is that instructors, when possible, should make an effort to evaluate subjective assignments in an objective way. The use of rubrics seems to address this issue.

The authors also suggest that designing rubrics is complex and demanding. Well designed rubrics have many advantages: clearly communicate the assignment objectives and the instructor's expectations for the students; evaluate the assignment in a more objective way; help the instructor to grade consistently; help the students to have good practices according to the standard of their future profession; help instructors to provide constructive feedback to students; and document the progress of the students.

According to the study conducted by the authors, rubrics assisted instructors and teaching assistants to grade subjective assignments effectively and efficiently. However, rubrics should be tested to guarantee its effectiveness.

Another point is that instructor and TAs should discuss and evaluate the rubric prior to grading the first assignment. Moreover, TA should be given practical examples on how to grade using rubrics.

Miguel, A. & Larson, E. (2006). Efficient and effective grading of student work. *Proceedings of the American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference and Exposition.*

The focus of this paper is on providing advice for instructors about how to grade students fairly using a minimum time. Using grading rubrics to mark written assignments is one tip that the authors provide. They suggest that rubrics improve consistency during grading process; enhance learning by communicating to students expectations on the written assignment, and providing constructive feedbacks; increase the chances of the assignment be graded objectively; and save time.

The authors also argue that grading is an activity that is improved by experience. This is why instructors who rely on TA to grade student's work should clearly communicate their expectations in respect to the grading process. Rubrics are a good way to address this issue.

The authors acknowledge that there are situations that a rubric can not assess the problem that the instructor wants to grade. However, they do not provide concrete examples of such situation.

Content and organization

Total workshop time: 90 minutes

In this section, I will present the components of the session with its respective objective(s) and duration. The participants of the session will be the course instructor, and all the eight TAs assigned for this course.

Activity	Objective	Time
1. Welcome, presentation of the objectives of the session,	Participants will recognize the objectives of the session	05 min

and outline of the session	in relation to the general overview of the activities they will perform	
2. Brainstorm session: What is grading rubrics? How rubric help instructors, TAs, and students? What are the characteristics of an effective and efficient rubric?	Participants will analyze the utilization of rubrics and recognize their importance to the instructor, TAs, and students.	15 min
3. Presentation of the grading rubric developed by the course instructor	Participants will recognize or recall a grading rubric that the instructor developed	05 min
4. Discussion about the rubric just presented: Is the rubric comprehensive? Is this rubric consistent with the characteristics of a good rubric discussed above? Is it easy to understand? What make this rubric effective? Is there something that makes this rubric ineffective? If so, is there any way to improve this rubric?	Participants will analyze and interpret the rubric to propose changes if needed. Then, the participants will prepare a final rubric to be utilized in the following portions of the session.	25 min
5. Testing the rubric: each participant will grade the same short essay individually.	Participants will apply the rubric.	20 min
6. Grades comparison and discussion: participants will share their final mark with the other participants and discuss: Are there any similarities among the grades? Are there discrepancies? If so, how to address this issue? In what way your grade is different from the others? Is the grading rubric facilitates the grading process? Do you feel comfortable in using this rubric? Do you need further assistance?	Participants will identify the strengths and weakness of the rubric and propose additional changes or validate the rubric. If any discrepancy is detected, participants will analyze how to address this issue. Participants will also share their feelings about the rubric and set up ways to tackle this issue.	15 min
7. Conclusion: evaluation of the session, grading rubric agenda, and concluding remarks	Participants will evaluate the session and if necessary, set up future directions for the process of developing a grading rubric.	05 min

Presentation strategies

This section will clarify how the activities above will be performed by the participants and the facilitator and detail why the activity was designed in this way.

Activity	How?	Why?
1. Welcome, presentation of the objectives of the session,	The facilitator will prepare a power-point presentation on	Participants need to understand the objectives of

and outline of the session	the topic. The facilitator will also ask for a volunteer to help the leader to take notes of following activity of the session.	the session in order to engage in the discussions. Also, having a participant other than the leader taking note will (1) help the leader, (2) provide a written track of the session, and (3) foster a democratic climate during the session
2. Brainstorm session	The facilitator will present the question in the power-point, animate the discussion, and write on the blackboard the contributions of the participants. In the last minutes the facilitator will ask the person who is taking notes to articulate a final synthesis of the discussion.	Having the question projected all the time of the discussion will guarantee that all participants see and reflect on the question. Also, the visualization of the contributions will ensure that all participants understand the contributions. In the end, this visualization will facilitate the participants integrate the discussion into the following discussion about the rubric. The final synthesis of the note taker will be important to provide a climate of closure and identify if some relevant comment is missing from the blackboard notes.
3. Presentation of the grading rubric	The facilitator will hand out the rubric for the participants and give them 2-3 minutes to read the rubric.	With the rubric in hand, the participants will be able to read thoroughly the rubric and take notes.
4. Discussion about the rubric just presented	The facilitator will project the questions of this activity and animate the discussion. Again, the facilitator will ask for another volunteer to take notes of the discussion and make notes on the blackboard. If necessary, the facilitator will adjust the rubric displayed to the final format developed by the participants. In the end, the note takes will provide a summary of the discussion.	Same as activity#2. Since it will not be possible to hand out the modified version of the rubric, the participants will be able to follow the displayed rubric.
5. Testing the rubric	The facilitator will hand out a five paragraph essay to all participants and explain that they should use the new version of the rubric.	This activity will provide an opportunity to the participants to put in practice the rubric in order to have a greater understand of the marking process. This will also provide a first marking experience for TAs who have never marked essays before.

<p>6. Grades comparison and discussion</p>	<p>The facilitator will ask the participants to share the grade they gave to the essay and write it on the board. Then, the facilitator will open the discussion with the question in the power-point. Again, another person will volunteer to take notes of the discussion.</p>	<p>This activity is central to ratify or rectify the rubric. Also, this activity will promote shared understanding of the rubric and identify other areas for improvement in the rubric.</p>
<p>7. Conclusion</p>	<p>The facilitator will ask for quick feedback from the participants and, if necessary, ask for the participants to set up an agenda for future improvement of the rubric. The facilitator will ask the instructor to provide a brief concluding remark about the session.</p>	<p>Since the discussion may not be completed during the session, it is important to dedicate a time for the group think about the future directions for possible improvement of the rubric. Having the instructor providing the final remark will ensure that the instructor will have the final word regarding the rubric.</p>