

A Rubric - by any other name?

One of the problems endemic to assessment is that many of the learning outcomes we are trying to assess are complex. Whenever we are asked to make judgments about something, we have criteria that we use. Sometimes, however, we can't always clearly describe what those criteria are. As a result, there can be confusion when two or more individuals are judging the same thing. A good example of this is critical thinking. Even though it is a common learning outcome, it is also one that faculty find difficult to assess.

One reason for this difficulty is that the measurement of complex things tends to be more subjective as different individuals often have varying ideas about what is being measured and what is appropriate evidence that it has occurred. If, however, the individuals involved can come to a mutual agreement on what important elements should be evident in student products or performances, then more consistent assessment can occur since the performance criteria do not vary among those involved. Performance criteria are the guidelines, rules or principles by which the work will be judged. They describe what to look for in order to determine the quality of the work. For those whose work is being assessed, it makes performance expectations more public and less mysterious. This is where rubrics come in.

What is a rubric?

Rubrics are instruments that attempt to make subjective measurements as objective, clear, consistent, and as defensible as possible by explicitly defining the criteria on which performance or achievement should be judged. They are devices for organizing and interpreting data gathered from observations or learning artifacts (papers, products, etc.) of student learning. Rubrics are designed to allow for the differentiation between levels of achievement, or development, by communicating detailed information about what constitutes excellence.

What is the difference between a checklist, a performance list and a rubric?

It is sometimes unclear what the differences are between a checklist, a performance list and a rubric. A checklist is an instrument in which the required elements of a performance or product are listed and a score is assigned based on whether the element is present or not. They are useful devices for assessing simple performances or achievement in which the individual elements being assessed typically involve dichotomous types of judgments. For example, I may use a checklist that includes an element like the one listed below if I were assessing a student's ability to apply a Gibney basketweave tape job for a lateral ankle sprain.

Tape anchors applied to shin and foot: Yes (1 pt) No (0 pt)

Notice that this checklist element does not address the concept of quality of the work and does not easily inform the rater what to do with partial performances. In the

example above, which word should be circled if the student only applied an anchor to the shin and not to the foot, or applied anchors that were too tight, too loose or wrinkled?

As we increase the complexity of the outcome being addressed, the next level of instrument could be considered to be a performance list. Like checklists, performance lists outline the elements to be addressed. Unlike checklists, performance lists include a quality dimension by incorporating some kind of scaled scoring system. For example, one of the items on my performance list for assessing a student's writing sample might be:

Appropriate spelling and grammar is used 1 (poor) 2 (satisfactory) 3 (excellent)

Performance lists allow for more flexibility in scoring by varying the point values used in the scale (1 to 3, 1 to 5, etc.) and for allowing a weighting of the elements. However, the performance judgments still allow for a great deal of subjectivity as the criteria by which scores are selected is not clear. Even though the example above includes single-word descriptors to clarify what the numbers represent, it is still not clear how the rater will distinguish between a 1 and a 2 or a 2 and a 3. As a result, the device itself adds an element of inconsistency to the measurement. This is not to say that performance lists should not be used; they are useful for assessing somewhat simple products or performances.

The difference between a performance list and a rubric is the degree to which the elements and performance levels are described. In order for the scoring of the performance product to be as objective, clear, consistent and defensible as possible, the performance criteria must clearly describe the essence of what is being assessed and what level of quality is associated with each score.

For a simple example, a faculty member wants to include a peer assessment of group work as one measure of a group project. She leads the class in a discussion about what good group work should look like and they settle on eleven performance criteria. One criterion is participation in group problem solving. Below are three examples showing the differences between a checklist, a performance list, and a rubric for assessing participation in group solving. Which do you prefer?

Checklist

Participates in group problem-solving	Yes	No
---------------------------------------	-----	----

Performance list

Participates in group problem solving
4 (Outstanding)

- 3 (Satisfactory)
- 2 (Tolerable)
- 1 (Unsatisfactory)

Rubric

4 (Outstanding): Actively looks for and suggests solutions to problems

3 (Satisfactory): Does not actively look for solution; participates in the refining of solutions suggested by others

2 (Tolerable): Does not suggest solutions; does not refine solutions suggested by others; is willing to try out solutions suggested by others

1 (Unsatisfactory): Does not try to solve problems; does not help others solve problems; unwilling to try solutions suggested by others; does not provide any assistance

Next time: Constructing a Rubric