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Using rubrics in economics

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ABSTRACT

We detail the use of a technique which has the potential to better correlate class activities and learning objectives and reduce time spent in assessing learning while also addressing the issue of subjectivity in grading. Rubrics contain an explicit description of evaluation criteria and standards of competency which aid the development of course materials and support objective grading of assignments. We present an introduction to rubric use in economics, describing examples of their use as a student- and an instructor-centered (formative and summative) assessment tool in two very different types of courses: micro principles and quantitative methods.

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1. Introduction

Rubrics are widely applicable to a range of economics courses and classroom settings, and have benefits for both students and instructors. Rubrics aid instructors in aligning course assignments and materials with objectives, serve as a guide for students as they learn the analytical processes associated with thinking like an economist, and provide a method for enhancing objectivity and consistency in grading. Because rubric use can benefit the faculty member, rubrics are applicable regardless of class size or specific course content. Constructing a rubric begins with identification of learning objectives associated with the assignment (or, more broadly, the course or subject) which are described as evaluation criteria, listed as rows of the rubric table. Indicators of increasing degrees of competency provide columnar labels. Describing how the level of competency associated with each criterion is expected to be demonstrated fills out cells in the matrix. (Details about the rubric construction process are provided below.)

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Given the scarcity of documented rubric examples in economics, we describe motivations for and the process of developing a rubric followed by descriptions of ways we have integrated this tool in our economics classes. We begin with a brief overview of demonstrated rubric use, both within economics and across academe, summarizing the advantages they bring, as well as the limits to current research on quantitative measures of benefits. Our description of rubrics as an assessment tool articulates the distinction between holistic and analytical rubrics. Focusing on the use of analytical rubrics, we provide two detailed examples: one designed as a student-centered formative and summative tool while the other focuses on instructor-centered use in the development of course materials. We conclude with a discussion on the challenges of gathering evidence regarding the effectiveness of rubrics.

2. Rubric use across the academy and in economics

Most of published research on rubrics describes general processes for development and focuses on student-centered classroom use. For example, [Stevens and Levi \(2012\)](#) discuss the benefits to students of using rubrics and provide a step-by-step process for creating rubrics, from identifying specific course goals to implementing and evaluating the rubric. Other studies (see, for example, [Johnson et al., 1998](#); [Arter and McTighe, 2000](#); [Richlin, 2006](#); [Suskie, 2009](#)) are primarily descriptive and emphasize construction and implementation, relying on an extensive education literature to conclude that rubrics are helpful in assessing student understanding on more subjective assignments.

The use of rubrics is getting more attention in academe, notably as a method of articulating the previously unquantified success of academic endeavors. The Association of Academic Colleges and Universities' LEAP¹ initiative seeks to move the discussion to the national level. Additionally, rubrics are being employed throughout the accrediting process: organizations like the North Central Association (NCA) utilizes rubrics when visiting institutions,² and institutions find it helpful to incorporate rubrics used in the classroom as evidence of academic success as part of the reaccreditation process ([Lund, 2006](#)). While different accrediting bodies discuss rubrics in different contexts, rubrics have become a common method of evaluating standards for reaccreditation.³ This specific purpose for rubrics suggests that their usefulness extends beyond the novice instructor, one who is learning the process of aligning objectives, materials, and outcomes assessment.

Existing research on the discipline-specific use of rubrics is limited to “the liberal arts, information technology, medicine, nursing, management, dentistry, food management, teacher education, and film technology.” ([Reddy and Andrade, 2010](#), p. 5) Disciplinary studies typically focus on the role of rubrics as a summative assessment tool ([Campbell, 2005](#); [Song, 2006](#)), although some formative assessment examples exist ([Andrade, 2005](#); [Andrade and Du, 2005](#)). The few studies measuring the impact of rubrics on student learning provide limited evidence for their effectiveness. [Petkov and Petkova \(2006\)](#), and [Reitmeier et al. \(2004\)](#) both report gains in student learning whereas [Green and Bowser \(2006\)](#) find no significant difference resulting from the use of rubrics.

In economics, we located only two examples of student (as opposed to programmatic) assessment-driven uses of rubrics. [Santos and Lavin \(2004\)](#) develop a rubric for use as a summative assessment tool to evaluate “analytical (problem solving), written and information literacy competencies” (p. 150) associated with an assignment that requires students to download, manipulate, and chart data as well as interpret their findings. The rubric provides a description of specific skill outcomes that would merit each of five different grade categories. For example, a grade of 90 percent or above would require the student to demonstrate “a clear explanation and synthesis of ideas,” a grade of 80–89 percent is consistent with “a capacity for explanation and synthesis of ideas, though it is not fully realized,” and a grade of 70–79 percent is generated by “some weakness or inconsistency in its explanation and synthesis of ideas.” (p. 158). Students were provided with a copy of this rubric along with the

¹ See a discussion of the Liberal Education and America's Promise at <http://www.aacu.org/leap/index.cfm>.

² See, for example, the NCA's accrediting standards at http://www.ncacasi.org/extranet/docs/nca_casi_accreditation_standards.pdf.

³ See the VALUE: Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education at the Association of American Colleges and Universities website at <http://www.aacu.org/value/index.cfm>. See also [Lund \(2006\)](#) to see the role that assignment rubrics can play in identifying content and rigor for the accreditation process. The NCATE website at <http://tinyurl.com/89vxno3> offers a rubric analysis of the content standards found at <http://tinyurl.com/733f2aq>.

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