



# Rubrics for developing students' professional judgement: A study of sustainable assessment in arts education

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## ABSTRACT

The participation of students in assessment is known to generate higher-order learning outcomes. This study aims to determine the usefulness of rubrics in aiding the incorporation of undergraduate students into assessor teams for developing their professional judgement. A quasi-experimental study examined the effects of a brief training programme on the use of rubrics, and of the participation of students in rubric creation and moderation discussions. We calculated Cronbach's alphas, and intraclass correlation coefficients in order to examine the intra- and inter-rater reliability between all the members of the assessor teams. The results demonstrate that only participation in the rubric design and in the moderation discussions regulating their use helped undergraduate students to develop sound assessment skills. We infer that rubrics can help to promote professional judgement if they are conceived as instructional resources for defining and supporting the processes of negotiation and agreement that characterize an assessment culture.

## 1. Introduction

With their criticisms of instrumental rationality and of the separation inside disciplines between theory and practice, the theories of experiential learning (see Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983) and the theories of situated learning (see Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991) drew attention to the educational prejudices that this division reflects and its incompatibility with the knowledge society. These authors also claimed that the formation of experts is not limited to epistemological issues, but involves a complex process of integration into a professional culture. Saying that experts “know” their discipline means that they are familiar with its paradigms, methodologies and objects of study, with the social organization of work and the circuits and agents involved in the decision-making process, and with the everyday representations and practices they share with their colleagues.

This shift in the understanding of the discipline, from its conception as a mere epistemological construct to its acknowledgement as a professional culture, and the shift in the definition of the “expert”, are directly linked to the recognition of tacit knowledge, originally defined by Polanyi (1958, 1962). It is disputed whether tacit knowledge is a type of independent knowledge, or rather a dimension of knowledge which can be progressively formalized until it is transformed into explicit knowledge (see Duguid, 2005; Klein, 2008; Tsoukas, 2002). The possibility of a relatively unarticulated and unconceptualized form of knowledge determines an idea of the expert's judgement as an act of

connoisseurship which is founded both in metacognitive processes and in socially-situated interpretative practices.

Not even the approaches that explain metacognitive development as a progression from a tacit model to a formal model (e.g., Schraw and Moshman, 1995) deny the coexistence of mental processes characteristic of these models, or the predominance of one or the other depending on the circumstances. In contrast to Schraw and Moshman (1995), the models of Ecclestone (2001) and Suto and Greatorex (2008) regarding raters' cognitive operations in marking processes coincided in identifying a shift from mental processes characteristic of explicit knowledge to others more representative of tacit knowledge as the rater progressively gains experience. But these authors also acknowledged that both types of mental processes are active at all times and their use (by the expert as well) depends on their familiarity with the type of object being evaluated more than on its complexity.

## 2. Sustainable assessment for the development of professional judgement in students

The formation of experts requires the practice of judgement in real professional contexts or in teaching environments which simulate them. This training activity is centred on metacognition in order to develop autonomous learning skills. As part of the assessment for learning approach, authentic performance assessment points towards a socially and culturally located practice of assessment (Watson & Robbins, 2008); for

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its part, sustainable assessment aims to develop students' professional judgement and their capacity to participate in the discipline in an increasingly pertinent manner. Since the sustainable assessment theory adds the requirement that the assessment should promote lifelong learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2005; Boud, 2000; Singh & Terry, 2008), it can thus be considered as a form of assessment *as learning*. For a mere idea or an opinion to be transformed into a professional judgement, students must participate in the assessment by becoming integrated in real contexts, in which they can share their responsibility and discuss the assessment criteria and procedures with other more experienced raters (Beck, Skinner, & Schwabrow, 2013).

In this way, we can establish a connection between the sustainable assessment approach and the conception of universities as learning communities (e.g. Carroll, 2005; O'Malley, 2010; Ward & Selvester, 2012). Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) affirmed that authentic learning is an apprenticeship to a community of practice, taking 'professional culture' and 'community of practice' to be synonyms. Nobody today disputes the fact that communities of practice enhance learning and professional development: the distinctive trait of these informal and heterogeneous work groups is that they are organized in accordance with the principles of trust, support and collegiality and thus promote a free dialogue and collaborative review of professional practices. This approach assigns considerable importance to the processes of the social construction of knowledge and of the construction of identity which operate, together with the cognitive dimension, in learning (e. g., Kobayashi, Berge, Grout, & Østerberg Rump, 2017; Kwon & Park, 2017). Nonetheless, the concept of *community of practice* in the context of formal education has been challenged, and some authors have stressed the need to talk in terms of *communities of practice of learners* or – in vocational education – *quasi-communities of practice* (see Emad & Roth, 2016).

In the specific domain of assessment and evaluation, Bird and Yucel (2013); Brooks (2012), and Price (2005) noted the benefits of teachers' teams that work as communities of practice in the generation of shared assessment constructs and in the consistent application of the assessment procedures. The literature has focused fundamentally on faculty learning communities, but some studies also consider the participation of students. For example, Kearney (2013) tested two models of authentic assessment for sustainable learning grounded in legitimate peripheral participation in approximately 300 undergraduate education students. In this process, learners are inducted into communities of practice, take on more complex responsibilities, and occupy more important positions as their professional development progresses.

The concept of *communities of practice (of learners)* is relevant here because the sustainable assessment theory removes the idea of assessment as a learning activity and places the reflective practice of assessment at the centre of the teaching environment. Equipping the students with the skills to assess each situation, to identify their own learning needs and, in addition, to do this independently and responsibly, is not something that can be achieved by developing certain learning activities in isolation. Although the specialized literature has shown the positive influence of establishing self- and peer-assessment activities – focusing on professional situations, strengthening feedback and feed-forward, and promoting student discussion and negotiation of the assessment system itself – it should not be forgotten that the sustainable assessment approach is a model of curriculum design.

Boud and Soler (2016) affirmed that assessment is always relational and there are no intrinsic qualities in the learning activity or assessment method that guarantee the attainment of the required learning outcomes. The need for a holistic perspective focused on assessment makes it possible to talk about teaching strategies because the aim is to create an educational environment that favours metacognition, self-regulation and the social and professional evaluative skills on which the concept of sustainable assessment is based. If this theory places the development of informed judgment by students among the main educational goals (Boud & Falchikov, 2007), then pedagogy appears as a set of planned

actions – strategies – whose coherence depends on the dynamism and flexibility that allow mutual recognition, the sharing of responsibilities, and collaboration among all the participating agents.

### 3. Rubrics as a resource for constructing professional judgement

The participation of students in marking constitutes an important way to learn a professional culture. Marking is consistent with sustainable assessment when it is used not as an aim in itself but a means for the development of higher-order evaluative processes. The question is whether the incorporation of students into assessors' teams should be promoted. The challenge is to make the expert's judgement comprehensible to students, and in this regard rubrics may be a particularly useful resource.

Researchers have insisted that assessment should include useful information which both helps students to understand the learning outcomes established and determines the extent to which they have achieved these outcomes, and put learning strategies into practice in order to enhance their performance (e.g., Lipnevich, McCallen, Miles, & Smith, 2014). There is sufficient evidence in the literature that prior knowledge of the criteria, performance levels and quality definitions for each of the assessment activities contributes to student learning. However, we should be careful not to see rubrics as an educational panacea. Three review articles on the subject coincide in calling for more methodologically sound research before a direct relationship between the use of rubrics and academic outcomes can be claimed (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007; Panadero & Jonsson, 2013; Reddy & Andrade, 2010). Asserting that rubrics have a positive effect on student learning is not the same as identifying their specific effect compared with other teaching resources applied simultaneously, or assessing the quality of the learning outcomes that they provide for.

The first key point regarding rubrics resides in the difficulty of assessing complex phenomena. Sadler (2009) noted the existence of structural inadequacies in the methods of analytic grading – the problem of indeterminacy, in the author's own words – which invalidate them for the assessment of complex student works. Brooks (2012) stressed that the understanding of the criteria and the application of the assessment procedures require a complex process of familiarization which takes place inside the communities of assessors; this process generates specific adaptations of the assessment practices involved in the shift from a criterion-referenced assessment to a construct-referenced assessment.

Even if rubrics generate clear and transparent criteria, this clarity and transparency are not sufficient to guarantee a consistent application of the criteria, because these criteria are subject to social processes of the construction of meaning (Knight, 2006) and because rubrics do not include the implicit processes of judgement that are also included in assessment (Moskal & Leydens, 2001). This explains why students do not understand learning expectations or teachers' evaluations of their learning outcomes (O'Donovan et al., 2004; O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2004) and why there are doubts about the effectiveness of students' use of rubrics (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007; Venning & Buisman-Pijlman, 2013), even when they are aware of the assessment criteria. Even studies of students' perceptions of rubrics present limitations: the fact that students value receiving information on assessment criteria sheds little light on how they interpret this information, or whether their interpretation benefits their learning achievements (El-Mowafy, 2014; Surgenor, 2013).

The second key point is the temptation of simplifying the phenomenon being assessed in order to facilitate a shared and consistent use of rubrics by many assessors. Examples of bad practices are limiting rubrics to easily observable aspects of the object under assessment, or limiting the assessment to a mechanical identification of the components specified in the rubrics. In the first case, the risk is that students may concentrate on trivial aspects (Bell, Madenovic, & Price, 2013), which impedes their understanding of the object being assessed and of

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