Chapter XIV

Performance Assessment: A Case for Rubrics in the Virtual Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines a performance assessment tool (i.e., rubric) that is increasingly being utilized in online courses. The concept of performance assessment in the virtual classroom environment is discussed, including the proposition that using traditional assessment tools alone is not sufficient. Issues related to rubrics are identified, and guidelines are presented for online instructors and course developers. Emerging trends and future research opportunities are also provided.

INTRODUCTION

“What did I do to deserve a C on my paper?”

This question probably sounds familiar to faculty members, who have heard it countless times from students. Online instructors may receive many e-mails asking
variant forms of this question. The problem stems from assigning activities without absolute answers (e.g., true or false; multiple choice formats), in which students oftentimes do not know what is fully expected from them. An instructor needs to communicate clearly in advance the required assessment criteria, in the form of a rubric, which is commonly organized into a grid or scale.

The concept of a rubric is not new. Rubrics have been widely used in educational settings for decades. As information technology, especially the Internet, has created a new means of course delivery and a new educational environment, the issue of student assessment needs to be revisited since tools used in a traditional classroom may no longer be applicable for this new setting. This chapter will, therefore, explore the use of assessment rubrics in teaching technologies in the virtual classroom in higher education.

The objectives of this chapter include a description of performance assessment and a recommendation on how it can be used successfully in the virtual classroom. Arguments are provided herein as to why traditional assessment tools alone are not sufficient. The chapter addresses one of the performance assessment tools known as ‘a rubric’ that has been utilized successfully in the virtual classroom. Issues related to rubrics are identified, and guidelines are provided for online instructors and course developers. Emerging trends and future research opportunities are presented at the end of this chapter.

BACKGROUND

Student performance assessment is a continuous process examining what a student is able to do. Performance assessment consists of two major components: tasks and criteria (Rudner & Boston, 1994). Assessment tasks include identifying learning objectives and audiences, matching assessment techniques to learning objectives, and specifying illustrative tasks where students demonstrate sets of skills and mastery of the desired outcomes (Herman et al., 1992). Assessment criteria, or “the standards of achievement,” need to be communicated to students before the tasks are assigned (Wangsatorntanakhun, 1999). One of the most popular tools used to organize and present these criteria is known as a rubric.

The word rubric dates to the Middle Ages, derived from the Latin word ‘ruber,’ meaning “red.” According to Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary (1998), the earliest references to rubrics include when scribes would write performance instructions in red for the priest in church missals to distinguish prescribed actions or rules from the actual text that the priest would deliver. Modern use of rubrics within education has increased in the last decade; the use of this tool is congruent with the recent movement towards alternative and authentic assessment.

A rubric serves as both an assessment and communication instrument between students and an instructor. To measure how much students learn, a rubric provides
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