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7-2008

Using Rubrics to Improve Online Teaching, Learning, and Retention

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Using Rubrics to Improve Online Teaching, Learning, and Retention

By: Cindy Rippé in Online Education

I have always enjoyed teaching in the classroom environment. There is something special about watching a student's eyes light up as a new concept changes perceptions. When I first taught in the online environment, I wondered how I would communicate with students without seeing them in person. Would they get my assignments? Would they understand the requirements? Could they produce the level of work I expected? Could we overcome the potential miscommunications of the written word?

It is one thing to have a misunderstanding about an idea in discussion and quite another for a student to misinterpret a major project. If a final project is not communicated effectively, this could affect a student's grade and overall online learning experience. If a student has a negative learning experience, this may adversely affect retention. Instructors must go above and beyond to clearly communicate assignment directions and expectations. The best way to communicate these expectations is through rubric creation and implementation.

A well-designed rubric is an effective communication tool. It emphasizes the important skills or concepts to demonstrate. It provides criteria for evaluation and takes the intangible on an unfamiliar assignment and makes it more tangible. While rubrics clarify assignments for students, a rubric does so much more for the online instructor.

A rubric streamlines the grading process. It helps teachers to efficiently work through a stack of ungraded papers. It quantifies the elusive expectations and makes them clear. There can be no claims from students saying, "You never told us that was needed." One cannot argue with the on-screen, printed standards. It makes estimates more scientific and grading fairer. There is no room for bias or subjective prejudice in rubric utilization, because a rubric is impartial. A student either meets the defined objectives or does not. This helps promote fairness and increases satisfaction, since there is no preferential treatment when everyone is measured using the same benchmarks.

A rubric is surprisingly versatile and can be crafted to meet the needs of any assignment. The variety of rubrics available creates flexibility to meet a wide range of assignments. Holistic rubrics identify all factors for an assignment using a checklist or description. Analytical rubrics provide scales and a set of scores for multiple criteria (2008). There is a wealth of rubric resources available to help instructors build their own. Any search on the Internet for "rubric builder" will provide many sites. There also are many websites with specific assignment examples by topic for instructors.

The online learning environment brought many unexpected benefits. My initial concerns about communicating with students have vanished. Thanks to the use of rubrics, I am confident of a student's ability to understand the assignment criteria and to meet it. Rubrics have increased the efficiency of my students in creating projects and have maximized my effectiveness in grading them. When it comes to teaching online, rubrics are a necessary tool.

References
Assessing Student Performance—Types of Rubrics. Retrieved May 2, 2008, from MarkED Career Paths website, www.mark-ed.com/assessment/TypesOfRubrics.htm. Cindy Rippé is a marketing, sales, and business instructor for Bryant and Stratton Online Education.