Good Practice in Assessment Case Study – Student Assessment Literacy in the Bachelor of Business.
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This case study demonstrates how, by scaffolding the development of students’ ability to judge standards of quality in a range of exemplars of an assessment task, they develop their assessment literacy and improve their performance on a related assessment task.

Context
The Bachelor of Business course Management Concepts (1001MGT) is a first-year core course for several Bachelor of Business degree programs. It is taught at two campus locations, Nathan and Gold Coast. The course provides students with a general introduction to organisations and the functions of management. Topic areas address issues related to organisations, management and society. The course covers the core management functions of leading, planning, controlling and organising.

The Griffith Business School (GBS) is one of a few business schools in Australia accredited with the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). This accreditation requires that quality assurance of learning outcomes is considered a core activity taken in accredited schools. GBS has approached this requirement by the use throughout its programs of explicit statements of program-level learning outcomes and assessment rubrics that contain descriptors of a range of achievement standards for the criteria associated with each objective. These rubrics are deployed in the courses taught in the School and the distribution of students’ results is used in annual reviews of the performance and design of the School’s programs. A rubric is used in the Management Concepts course to assess how well students have responded to a written report task.

There are known problems with the use of rubrics. The most significant of these is that the language used to describe the expected standards of work within each criterion is of necessity brief, of a summary nature, and therefore often opaque to students. This is because students typically lack the expertise necessary to discern either the range of dimensions against which to assess work in the discipline, or the shades of grey implied in the standards descriptors. This problem is most severe for first-year students. Another way to understand this problem is to recall that a good rubric typically contains a summary of the lecturer’s schema for judging what is being assessed. Providing scaffolding for students that is designed to induct them into the lecturer’s way of judging quality is a step not often used to support the rubric in its implementation. Thus it is most often the case that the rubric is provided to students in the anticipation that it will guide them as they prepare their responses, yet there is little done to help them understand the rubric itself. Rather, the rubric is assumed to be self-explanatory.
This renders it less useful for assisting students with their assessment. There are other problems with rubrics. Some of these include: the fact that the pre-set criteria that constitute the rubric can represent only a sample of the relevant, possible criteria available; criteria do not in practice operate alone in student responses, they often overlap yet they are treated separately in a rubric; different teachers and students will interpret the same criteria and standards descriptors differently; some criteria are intangible and cannot be described adequately and yet can be vitally important to the essence of the student response; and the methods for combining scores cell-by-cell are not easily communicated if there are weighting rules incorporated (Sadler, 2009).

A major problem with rubrics (also known as the analytic method of assessment) is that the overall judgement, or gut feeling, a marker can have about the quality might not tally with the result of the criteria-by-criteria breakdown. It does not allow for the holistic appraisal of the work whereby the quality equals more than the sum of its parts or less than the sum of its parts (Sadler, 2009). When teachers mark using a rubric it is common that two parallel processes are engaged simultaneously. One process appraises the overall quality of the work on holistic grounds. The second focuses on appraising the quality of the work in relation to each of the pre-specified criteria in the rubric and against their summarised descriptors of quality standards. These parallel agendas are not necessarily picked up when using a rubric on its own (Sadler, 2009). These are the issues that were targeted in the design of the intervention described in this case study.

This document details an intervention that was designed to do two things. The first was to aid students in using the rubric by developing their understanding of the purposes and practices of assessment, and their ability to make judgments of different levels of quality. The strategy is based on work done by others including published accounts such as the long-term research project based at Oxford Brookes University into criterion-referenced assessment tools and processes by Price, Rust and O’Donovan (Rust, Price, & O'Donovan, 2003, 2004). The second was to establish a base-line for their assessment literacy and measure any change to that literacy after the intervention.

**About the assessment task**
The assessment task (worth 30% of the grade) was a 1,500 word Literature Review and Report based on a management problem that students identified from the supplied Case Study and related to issues covered in the course i.e., organisational structure, management ethics, management planning). It was designed to enable students to develop their skills in problem identification and problem solving, critical thinking, research and report writing as well as their understanding of the chosen topic. Students were assessed on their analytical, reflective and evaluative skills using the assessment rubric provided to them. The written work was due in Week 9 and the rubric against which student responses would be judged was provided in the lecture in Week 6.
About the intervention

In previous iterations of this course the assessment task was described, a rubric setting out the marking criteria provided, and students given the opportunity to ask questions. No specific work was done on, or with, the rubric unless questions from students prompted specific discussions about it. In all, this original process might have taken about ten minutes of the fifty minute lecture.

This time, the Program Convenor gathered and prepared some example responses to a similar assessment task to that facing the current students. These examples were selected on the basis of their quality standards: exhibiting ‘good’ and ‘not so good’ characteristics.

The Convenor conducted the intervention activity which involved presenting the assessment rubric applicable to the forthcoming assessment task and asking students to read, discuss with peers, and judge the quality of the examples distributed on entry to the lecture hall. Questions to prompt discussion included: Was one example better than the other? For each of the ‘good’ and ‘not so good’ responses what characteristics did they display? What was good and bad about each of the examples? How could they have been done better?

Those judgements were discussed across the class using a roaming microphone facility and throughout those discussions students identified and shared the reasons for their judgements. By a show of hands, students ‘marked’ the example responses and came very close to their lecturer’s judgement.

Once the students had practiced judging the examples and explained their reasons for those judgements, they were asked to relate their decisions to the assessment rubric against which their own work would be judged. More discussion ensued as students looked for ways to anchor their judgements to the criteria (or characteristics) that they would need to address in their own work, and the quality standards against which that work would be measured. Not surprisingly students found this part of the exercise harder than explaining their own reasons for judging the example responses and in some cases required them to realign their thinking. The lecturer was ready to ‘walk them through’ applying the rubric to the concrete examples they had been working with and placed on the document-visualiser his marked-up copies so that students could see exactly what his comments referred to and how he justified his judgement.

Demonstration of Benefits

This intervention offered students the opportunity to judge examples and consider them in relation to an assessment rubric over a fifty-minute period of structured activity. This contrasts with past iterations of the course in which students were engaged for less time in a much more transmissive illustration of the use of the rubric. In just fifty minutes of practice, students’ use of the rubric and making judgements of quality brought their understanding of the process closer to that of their lecturer. Data collected during the intervention also showed that enhancing students’ ability to judge work lead to improved learning and assessment outcomes.
Principles of Good Practice illustrated in this activity

*Fairness and transparency in assessment*
Fairness dictates that students should be told prior to their production of their response to the assessment task the grounds upon which it will be judged. Further, each student’s response should be assessed on its own merits. But just *telling* students your expectations on the criteria and standards—even in a detailed rubric—is not sufficient (Sadler, 2009 and Price et al, 2004).
Students becoming more competent judges of their own work and variation theory of learning

Setting up an environment that develops the critical discernment of quality as a key element of learning is desirable. Hence students should be given the opportunity to make holistic judgements about the quality of work by practicing on concrete examples. From this activity criteria and standards of quality emerge to justify their judgement (Sadler, 2009).

Bowden and Marton (1998) reiterate how important it is to expose students to a range of ways of understanding an idea that displays different characteristics in order to develop their capacity to discern the differences between them. Only by experiencing the variations of a particular concept can that concept come to have meaning for them. For example, to understand the concept of colour one would need to experience more than one colour. So examples of different colours (variety) would help build students’ capacity to discern the distinctions between them (brown, red, and green). Because students can now see the differences among colours the concept of colour can be understood as an abstract idea. This idea extends to the discernment of the different shades within a colour analogous to different standards within a criterion.

This principle therefore applies perfectly well to the question of how to help students develop their ability to make judgements about the quality of work. This is why the intervention was designed to get students to look at responses that were chosen to illustrate differing standards of quality; analyse what was good and bad about them; and derive for themselves a way of judging those works.

By comparing responses that exemplified different levels of quality our students learned to notice the ways in which the responses varied. They therefore learned how to establish a set of characteristics or criteria that were needed to judge the response in order to discern how well the response performed on the criteria. In other words they began to learn how to judge standards of quality. If students can learn how to judge responses using analytical dimensions (criteria) and against quality standards then two things result. They become better able to judge and improve their own work; and they can better understand the role and use of a rubric for assessment.

Schema convergence

Another way of seeing a rubric is as an embodiment of the lecturer’s schema for judging responses. The task of the intervention is to help students develop a schema that converges with their lecturer’s. Through the act of forming their own schema for judging responses followed by the act of comparing it with the lecturer’s (as summarised in the rubric) a shared understanding is established. Hence, one of the key problems of using rubrics is addressed.

Constructive Alignment
Biggs’ (1996) notion of constructive alignment proposes that effective course design is dependent on the degree to which there is congruence between the objectives of the course, the activities students engage in, and the assessment tasks set for them. In this case, the intervention itself was highly aligned since it operated as a teaching and learning activity that the students engaged in, and was directly related to developing their understanding of not just the assessment task but also how it would be assessed. The intervention helped develop students’ emerging expertise in their ability to judge work of the same kind they were about to attempt and the relevant criteria and achievement standards against which it would be assessed.

**Students’ assessment literacy as a goal of good assessment**

Rust et al., (2003, 2004) have shown that developing students’ understanding of the use of assessment criteria and processes improves learning outcomes. In this case study, we took a research-oriented view to explore this notion further. Characterising the idea put forward by Rust and colleagues as the development of students’ assessment literacy, we designed measures of students’ literacy and ran a pseudo experiment in which one campus cohort acted as a control group to test the effect of the intervention deployed with the other student cohort. This allowed us to identify a multi-dimensional model of student assessment literacy, to test whether the intervention improved students’ assessment literacy, and to test whether the impact translated into marks on the assessment task.

The results show that:

- assessment literacy could be understood to have underlying dimensions (using assessment to improve learning; ability to judge my own and others’ work; understanding the rules and processes associated with assessment);
- students’ assessment literacy was improved by the intervention;
- improvements in literacy were associated with better marks on the assessment task; and
- the ability to judge own and others’ work was the most significant contributor to those gains in student results.

Thus, it is defensible to design assessment practices that are aimed at developing student’s assessment literacy—especially their ability to judge the quality of work and interpret the criteria against which it will be assessed. This will help them to understand their own work; judge how good or bad it is in relation to the relevant academic achievement standard; and work out how it can be improved. As a further benefit, such an approach would act as a preparation for self- and peer-assessment.

**Future directions**

This case study took a focused approach to evaluating the impact of a specific kind of intervention deployed within a single course. The Convenor now plans to continue to deploy the intervention in this Course as a result of the compelling
evidence of its effectiveness. Further work is also planned for the implementation of a similar intervention in other courses within the program.

References


