

Using Rubrics to Assess Journal Entries*

The instructor in charge of the service-learning course must rely on the student's journal entries and other types of feedback to ascertain the quality and value of the service experience. Reflections the university student gives to the instructor needs to be insightful and succinct, while the feedback the university instructor gives to the student must be clear and consistent.

Rubrics provide a useful means to assess quickly a student's writing and to reiterate consistently the criteria expected of him or her. Rubrics are an assessment instrument laid out in a grid format. The assessment criteria are listed along one axis, and a ranked scale (such as "Excellent," "Very Good," "Satisfactory," "Needs Work," "Unsatisfactory") is projected along the other axis. Each cell of the matrix contains short phrases or sentences describing what must be done to attain those criteria at that level of achievement. These descriptors do not, of course, exhaust everything that might be done at that level; they are indicators typical of that level of achievement.

By providing specific responses to written journal entries according to clearly defined criteria, students see immediately where they need to improve their performance. Moreover, by responding to each journal entry with a rubric, the criteria are constantly reiterated. Rubric assessments are a very quick, efficient, and accurate way to evaluate student's writing. It is suggested that instructors share the rubric with students as a part of the course syllabus as a strategy to assist students in understanding how to write their journal entries.

One disadvantage of rubrics is that they can appear stiff and arbitrary to the student. In practice, when reviewing a student's journal entry, written comments can be made by the instructor to soften any rigidity the rubric form might suggest to the student.

*Adapted from, "A Service Learning Rubric," by David Burton, *VCU Teaching*, March 1999.

CRITERIA Score	EXCELLENT 4	VERY GOOD 3	SATISFACTORY 2	NEEDS WORK 1	UNSATISFACTORY 0
Writing Quality	Strong writing style with clear ability to express thoughts and point of view. Excellent grammar, syntax, spelling, etc.	Good writing style with solid ability to convey meaning. Very good grammar, syntax, spelling, etc.	Writing style conveys meaning adequately. Some grammar, syntax and spelling errors.	Difficulty expressing ideas, feelings or descriptions. Limited syntax. Needs to work on grammar, spelling, etc.	Considerable difficulty expressing ideas or descriptions clearly. Many grammatical, syntactical, and spelling errors.
WHAT?	4	3	2	1	0
Description of Service-Learning Session(s)	Clear incisive description that reveals situation and dynamics vividly. Excellent use of adjectives, metaphors, etc. Sensitive and perceptive.	Solid description that fully discloses the scene. Some interpretation of events, meanings, etc.	Factual description of sequence of events with little "texture" or interpretation. Clearly not fully developed.	Brief or general statement with few details. Little if any sense of meaning.	Little description at all, or brief, perfunctory statements glossing over the event(s). The reader has little idea what transpired.
SO WHAT?	4	3	2	1	0
Insights and Understanding	Definite insights into issues and implications of events for self and students. Aware of increased complexity of issues and situations.	Some insights into situations, issues and personal change/growth. Making connections with implications for self or students . Some sense of complexity.	Positive experience at an intuitive or emotive level. Gains affectively from the 'experience' but insights based on conscious reflection are few or simplistic.	Doing the assignment. Neutral experience without personal resonance or impact.	Rigid attitude. Resistant to change in established point of view.
NOW WHAT?	4	3	2	1	0
Commitment and Challenge	Creates a personal plan of action or personal challenge based on commitment to class or insights into teaching.	Creates a 'next step' based on previous events or progress in teaching.	Committed to class through rapport or personal caring. Notes class' progress.	Somewhat committed to class and/or teaching. Unchallenged.	Not committed to the class or teaching. Definitely not exerting self to a level of commitment.
	4	3	2	1	0
Progress and Leadership Development	Significant growth or personal development. Evidence of synthesis of experience into goals or plan of action, with implications for the future.	Increased sensitivity, change of attitude, and awareness of connections.	Steady course. Incremental progress of which the teaching assistant may not be personally aware.	No progress. Repetitious experience and reflection.	Losing ground. Bored or frustrated. Negative attitude in reflection.

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