

VALUE Rubrics: Valuable Tools for Improving Teaching and Learning

Part 3: VALUE Rubrics and Assignment Design

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This project focuses on the use of AAC&U [VALUE Rubrics](#) as a pedagogical tool. The focus of Part I in this series was to broadly introduce these rubrics and other components of the [LEAP Project](#) and the context in which they were developed and are being used. The focus of Part 2 was to provide insight regarding some broad pedagogical implications that emerge when the VALUE Rubrics are mapped to the [Texas Core Objectives](#). The focus of this paper (Part 3) is to discuss the use of VALUE Rubrics in assignment design. The rubrics can be used effectively when creating assignments that will be used to develop and demonstrate learning relative to the Texas Core Objectives.

Standardizing the Objectives

The VALUE Rubrics align with the six Texas Core Objectives: critical thinking skills, communication skills, empirical and qualitative reasoning, teamwork, personal responsibility, and social responsibility. The core objectives should be ubiquitous across university courses. As students explore these objectives in multiple settings and within multiple disciplines, they gain practice that can be used to develop mastery. In order to develop mastery, student performance must be refined across experiences with the same tool. The VALUE Rubrics help align core objectives across disciplines and even across institutions. The rubrics are most effective in assignment design when the objective they assess is tied to content-related student learning outcomes. While communication in a theatre arts course and communication in a geology course may look very different, the VALUE Rubrics create a shared language of assessment that can help both theatre arts faculty and geology faculty similarly assess student competency in written or oral communication.

Assignment Design: Addressing the Fundamental Questions

When designing an assignment, we first must address some fundamental and interrelated questions.

1. What are students expected to learn?
2. What are students expected to do or produce?
3. How will student products be assessed?

What are students expected to learn?

Student learning objectives must first be tied to an appropriate discipline and secondly be connected with the core objectives. Some fields may have student learning outcomes that encompass both content objectives and core objectives that are parallel. For example, a teacher education class on social justice will likely have some iteration of social responsibility as both a discipline-specific and core objective-related outcome. An art history class, as another example, may have a student learning outcome related to understanding major art movements that is seemingly unrelated to any of the core objectives. Whether a skill or a competency, faculty need to be clear about what students are expected to learn in the classroom.

Moreover, these expectations need to be available to students and external reviewers (faculty, staff, administration, etc.). The clearer faculty can be about the expectations of a certain course can have a direct impact on how students recognize their role in the learning process, accept assessment practices connected with the advertised outcomes and competencies, and reflect on what they have learned. Clear expectations also help departments and administration assure that courses are aligned with institutional and departmental accreditation standards.

Student learning outcomes must be included on assignments so that both student and instructor share a language of expectations. While a good practice pedagogically, clarification of outcomes at the onset of assignments helps direct students toward meaningful student learning. Moreover, when these outcomes are connected to VALUE Rubrics, the inclusion of the rubric helps better explain the nuances of the objective. In short, to suggest that students need to display characteristics of teamwork is far too broad to direct students towards thoughtful action. However, if students read the AAC&U VALUE Rubric on [teamwork](#), they may see that they “[engage] team members in ways that facilitate their contributions to meetings by both constructively building upon or synthesizing the contributions of others as well as noticing when someone is not participating and inciting them to engage.”

What are students expected to do or produce?

Classroom activities and classroom products must clearly connect to student learning outcomes. The classroom deliverable both offers the student the opportunity to engage in learning and avails the instructor (or external reviewer) a chance to assess student learning. In essence it is a contract of learning to say that the student has applied lessons learned in the classroom to a particular task. Therefore, the student deliverable must have clear definitions, clear instructions, and clear goals.

Student products that are connected to rubrics of any kind have the added clarity of instructor expectation. Products that connect to VALUE Rubrics can be compared across classroom and even across discipline as institutions evaluate Texas Core Objectives.

How will student products be assessed?

The more that student products are assessed in connections with available rubrics, the more opportunities students have to reflect thoughtfully on how they met or did not meet certain benchmarks. Immediately, rubrics will clarify most grade disputes. Pedagogically, rubrics will add an additional tool of reflection for students to self-assess. The simple questions of “Do I agree with this rating?” or “What would I have rated it?” can be monumental in students’ abilities to take responsible for their own learning (a meta-objective for all higher education).

Importantly, for rubrics to be most effective, the rubric needs to be chosen or modified before the assignment is assigned. While many rubrics can be used to assess student products created without the rubric in mind, those that have an *a priori* identified rubric and use the rubric to set learning expectations and assessment expectations will be more productive.

Finally, instructors need to meet the promises of assessment made by the introduction of a rubric. Faculty assessment of student artifacts must be tied to the assigned rubric if this is part of the original contract or plan. Faculty whose assessments delineate form suggested rubrics jeopardizes students by confusing expectations and undermining the “contract” of the assignment.

Assignment Design: Fostering Student Success

Once an appropriate assignment has been identified, Instructors must design the assignment in such a way that helps students succeed. Good assignment design facilitates student success and student learning. Poor assignment design can actually mislead students and may be detrimental to student learning (particularly underprepared students).

A key strategy for fostering student success for all students is to provide clear, transparent expectations and instructions for the assignment and its assessment. Once again, the VALUE Rubrics can aid in this process. The following suggests one way of using a rubric in the lifetime of an assignment.

1. Provide the rubric to the students at the beginning of the semester. This allows the rubric to be used as a teaching tool and not just an assessment tool.
2. Invest some instructional time in explaining the assignment and the rubric to better clarify the expectations. For example, the [written communication VALUE Rubric](#) includes five performance criteria, or “qualities of a good paper.” Explain to students that their work will be assessed relative to each of these criteria or qualities. Point out that the language at the “Capstone” level of each VALUE Rubric expresses the highest expectation for each performance criterion.
3. Have the students use the VALUE Rubric to assess examples of the artifact. This might be a peer assessment of a rough draft or an exercise where everyone in the class assesses instructor-provided artifacts generated as a result of the same assignment. This classroom calibration

exercise can go a long way in building student confidence in understanding the assignment and the rubric. Students get to see complete artifacts and see how their own student work will be assessed (further strengthening the contract of the assignment).

4. Use the rubric to both assess and explain different levels of student achievement. The more the rubric can be used within a classroom, the more students will begin to understand the learning objective it assesses.

Student success can be further fostered by using the VALUE Rubrics to provide both formative feedback and summative evaluation of student work. The learning outcomes that make up the Texas Core Objectives are largely skills which need to be practiced. As students are practicing a skill, formative feedback communicates the progress they are making and the improvements needed to meet expectations. For example, using the Written Communication VALUE Rubric to provide feedback on the first draft and subsequent drafts of a writing assignment can be helpful as students prepare a final version. When instructors then use the same rubric to assess the final version, students can be more confident in the assessment they receive.

VALUE Rubrics can also be used to design assignments that facilitate the integration of learning. One well-designed assignment can and should address multiple learning outcomes. For instance if students are expected to write about an experience that is intended to help them develop social responsibility, while acquiring content-specific knowledge, then all outcomes, [written communication](#), [civic engagement-local and global](#), and the content knowledge can be addressed (and assessed) through a single, well-designed assignment.

Assessing Student Artifacts

Too often assessment of student artifacts is relegated to one instructor pouring over student assignments. While necessary for a good number of classes, one of the benefits of using AAC&U VALUE Rubrics is that other faculty members can calibrate the rubric used and assess student learning for multiple artifacts. While instructors of record should retain final grading authority, when artifacts are used for department-level or institutional assessment reports (particularly those highlighting core objective assessment) large scale assessment is both more productive and more rigorous.

Instructors and those in charge of assessing and reporting core objective assessment should consider the benefits of multiple raters in a discipline (ex: all first-year writing instructors rating personal responsibility in a reflective essay on ethics), faculty in a particular college (ex: engineering faculty from multiple departments evaluating written communication on a final engineering project) or faculty across disciplines (ex: calibration and rating exercise sponsored by the office of the provost that looks at teamwork across multiple projects and disciplines).

Practice Makes Perfect

The more that instructors use rubrics in the classroom, the more that students, faculty and administration will be able to capitalize on the tools. Core Objective assessment is as important to higher education classrooms as content-related objectives. To best serve students and ensure that

student learning is happening, instructors must create assignments that incorporate core objectives and content-related objectives. Building content-related assignments that can be assessed with a VALUE Rubric is an important step towards integrating all aspects of student learning in the classroom.

Resources

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