

Student-Selected Performance Rubrics: An Option for Increased Academic Rigor

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Abstract: This study examined whether undergraduate and graduate education students would self-select to meet the requirements of a more strenuous rubric when no additional incentives were offered. The use of multiple rubrics was considered in order to meet the needs of learners with a broad spectrum of abilities, to make the course more academically challenging for those with advanced skills, and to provide motivated students something to strive for beyond the basic course requirements.

Keywords: Rubric, rigor, motivation

The purpose of this study is to ascertain whether students would choose to meet the requirements of a higher-level rubric for a major assignment within an online course. All students within the course were able to select which rubric they choose to meet. They let the instructor know via the assignment link. If a student did not inform the instructor, he/she was assessed using a standard level rubric for the course. No extra credit or any other consideration was given to students choosing to meet the higher standards. In the past, many students have chosen to perform over and above the requirements of the rubric. Additionally, comments from course evaluations in the past have suggested that some students desired to be more intellectually challenged. Student-selected performance rubrics would give those students the opportunity to reach for a higher personal goal. Additionally, it allowed students to share their finished products with their peers, which may ultimately inspire others to perform to a higher level.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Some people question whether rubrics, in general, set the academic bar lower so the majority can demonstrate competency. Chapman and Inman (2009, p. 199) pose the question, "What incentive is there for any student to go beyond what is required to simply clear the bar or achieve whatever competence level they decide on?" According to a 2005 survey conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, nearly 90% of high

school-level students indicated they would exert more effort academically if more were expected of them (as cited in Matusevich, O'Connor, & Hargett, 2009).

According to Kover and Worrell (2010), intrinsic motivation can be linked to the self-determination theory posed by Deci and Ryan in 1985. They believed that students engaged in tasks because they interested them or they found them to be pleasurable. Their justification was that intrinsic motivation within people was due to the fact that individuals aspired to be both proficient and independent. Earlier studies suggested that value and the expansion of abilities led to higher intrinsic motivation. Others contended that inner motivation was more influenced by a person's desire for freedom to pursue actions that they deemed valuable (Kover & Worrell, 2010). Kover and Worrell also believed that there may be a performance-contingency aspect to intrinsic motivation. Past studies have indicated that students become more motivated when evaluated and feedback was provided to the student. Some students enjoyed being held to a standard when competence in the task was evaluated. In fact, motivation actually decreased when a reward was offered (Kover & Worrell, 2010).

Further review of the literature revealed that motivation may not be due solely to intrinsic motivation as initially thought. Students may be either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to attempt this challenge. If they carry out the behavior for personal satisfaction without regard for reward, the behavior is intrinsically motivated. If on the other hand, there is no pressure to engage in the behavior, but it aligns with one's values it is the *identified regulation* type of extrinsic motivation (Brouse, Basch, LeBlanc, McKnight, & Lei, 2010). Another type of extrinsic motivation is the *introjected type* in which the person engages in the behavior to meet his or her own personal expectations (Maurer, Allen, Gatch, Shankar, & Sturges, 2013).

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Purposive sampling was used to select one section of an undergraduate course and two sections of a graduate course resulting in 76 students being identified to participate. Of those students, the response rate was 36% for undergraduate students and 33% for graduate students. The participants included students enrolled in SPED 440—Behavioral Management and EDUC 512—Technology and Mediated Instruction. These courses took place in fall 2013 and summer 2014. The students enrolled in SPED 440 were upper-level undergraduate students. The students enrolled in EDUC 512 were entry-level graduate students. No inducements were offered for study participation.

SURVEY PROCESS

The survey was conducted using an electronic media survey service, Survey Monkey, Inc. (www.surveymonkey.com), which contained the actual survey instrument. Students were made aware of the study in Week one of the eight-week courses and reminded of the option to choose one of two rubrics at least once before the assignment was due and then again during the week of the assignment. Students were able to participate in the study regardless of the level of rubric selected. A reminder

email was sent out through the course room at the end of the course. Following completion of the course, a link to the survey was emailed to students who had completed the consent form. The electronic service was also utilized to collect and tabulate data.

DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

The development of the survey instrument was guided by the following questions: (a) Will undergraduate and graduate students choose to complete a more challenging assignment solely for the purpose of enriching their experience?; (b) Is there a central reason students choose to perform a less challenging or standard rubric assignment?; (c) Is there a central reason students choose to perform a more challenging rubric assignment?; and, (d) Do students believe the self-selected rubric to be a good option in future classes?

A non-experimental design was used. Survey questions were developed to determine if self-selected rubrics were feasible solutions to addressing academic rigor, intrinsic motivation, and self-determination in undergraduate and entry-level graduate courses.

An invitation was posted in the Blackboard course room asking for voluntary participation in the study. The post contained an invitational letter, which informed the recipient about the purpose of the study and a link to a consent form. The actual survey link was not sent to the students until after the course was completed.

The survey contained five questions. The survey service provided the basic numerical results, which were expressed in raw numbers of responses and percentages. Those numbers were examined to determine where clear preferences or trends existed for each item. The final question was open ended. It allowed the participants to tell in their own words what they thought about the use of self-selected rubrics and why. The survey instrument is available in the Appendix.

RESULTS

Results from the survey of students revealed that an average of 42% of respondents (44% undergraduate and 41% graduate) would complete a more challenging assignment solely for the purpose of enriching their experience. Participants were asked to check all answers that applied when telling why they chose either the advanced or the standard rubric. The following is a brief summary of the results. A full breakdown of how each item was scored can be found in the Appendix. Averages are provided for all participants, undergraduates, and graduates.

Of those who selected the advanced rubric, 55% said they chose it because it more closely aligned with their personal goals for the project. Surprisingly, 75% of undergraduates who chose the advanced rubric did so for this reason as compared to 42% of graduates. The fact that they chose the advanced rubric because it matched with their personal goals indicated that those individuals were extrinsically motivated (Brouse et al., 2010; Mourer et al., 2013).

The second most selected reason for using the advanced rubric (45%) was that it provided a challenge. Participant #4 stated, "I love challenges and the rubric was well constructed and stated specifically what was needed to be accomplished" (2013). Another stated,

I am a perfectionist and like to do the best I can. I was very leery at first to choose the advanced rubric because I wanted an "A" out of the class and I was afraid if did not meet the standards I would get a "B". However, with my drive, I chose the advanced one (Participant #16, 2014).

It appeared that graduate students were more intrinsically motivated because 57% indicated they chose the advanced rubric because they enjoyed academic challenges, whereas only 25% of the undergraduate students chose this option. This aligns with Deci & Ryan's (1985, as cited in Kover & Worrell, 2010) self-determination theory which claimed that students who engaged in more difficult tasks because they found them interesting or pleasurable were intrinsically motivated.

Of those who chose the standard rubric, the primary reason 80% of undergraduate students selected it was due to time constraints. The timing of the project was noted in the comments as the reason for selecting the standard rubric because the undergraduate assignment was due close to Thanksgiving in fall 2013 as evidenced by the following comment.

I started out working toward the advanced option, but the timing of the due date became a problem for me. If the due date had been the week or two after Thanksgiving instead of right before, I would have had enough time. I did appreciate having the option (Participant #9, 2014).

The second most selected option (50%) was unfamiliarity with technology. Student age may have been a factor as far as technology was concerned. Both groups utilized the same types of technology for their assignments. Seventy percent of the graduate-level group who chose the standard level rubric did so because they were unfamiliar with the technology. No one in the undergraduate-level selected unfamiliarity with technology as a reason for selected the standard level rubric. Participant #25 expressed it this way; "I like the choices of the rubrics since I don't feel comfortable with technology" (2014). It appeared that unfamiliarity with technology in the graduate technology course kept some students from attempting the advanced rubric. The researchers are interested in expanding the study to find out whether more students would attempt a more challenging rubric if it did not involve a potentially unfamiliar technological component.

The researchers acknowledge that the sample size of 76 students and the response rate of 34% are both relatively low and they may not be representative of the whole group of students enrolled in these courses or Peru State College students in general. These results apply to two specific groups of students studied at a particular time. The results may only be applicable to the researchers' institution. Therefore, it is left up to the reader to determine transferability of the results.

IMPORTANCE TO THE FIELD

In the past, course evaluations for the education department as a whole revealed that some students did not feel academically challenged enough. The researchers initially discussed how to increase the level of challenge in a graduate level technology class without overwhelming students who were less technologically proficient. It was discussed how some students chose to go over and above the rubric requirements on assignments. The researchers wondered how different levels of rubrics would be received if no extra credit was offered based on the level of rubric selected. The decision was made to try it in both an undergraduate and a graduate course. When this idea was shared with other teachers in the School of Education they expressed interest in the possible results.

Overwhelmingly, 92% of the participants (89% undergraduate & 94% graduate) liked having the option to select which rubric they would like to work towards. The following statement from a participant summed it up very well.

I appreciated the self-selected rubric. It allowed for students with more knowledge in the subject matter to have a more challenging assignment. I am sure the students that didn't feel comfortable with the assignment equally appreciated the standard level for the same reason (Participant #15, 2014).

This is something that could be adapted to other courses to increase the level of academic challenge. As mentioned earlier in the paper, it would be interesting to determine whether more students would attempt the more advanced rubric option if it did not involve the use of unfamiliar technology. The researchers began exploring this option in another undergraduate course which was offered again in fall 2014.

Another question arose when analyzing the results. What type of student would chose to respond to a survey such as this when no incentives were offered for participation? In the initial survey we did not ask student age. A question was added to the fall 2014 survey to determine whether the undergraduate students who participated were traditional age or non-traditional age students. Of the eight that responded from the undergraduate course offer fall 2014, 75% were non-traditional age students.

Finally, the researchers noticed what seemed to be an overall improvement in the quality of submissions, regardless of rubric selected, over prior semesters' submissions. Might the opportunity to work towards a higher standard have influenced students to put forth more effort? The researchers added the following question. "Did the option of two different levels of rubrics influence you to put forth greater effort than you normally would? (Please answer regardless of rubric level selected.)" Preliminary data from students is mixed. This area could warrant further study.

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APPENDIX: STUDENT-SELECTED PERFORMANCE RUBRICS SURVEY

UG - undergraduate

G - graduate

1. Which rubric did you use for the assignment?
 - a. Standard-level (58% Avg., 56% UG, 59% G)
 - b. Advanced-level (42% Avg., 44% UG, 41% G)

2. If you chose the standard rubric, please indicate which factors influenced your decision.
 - a. Time constraints (60% Avg., 80% UG, 50% G)
 - b. Unfamiliar with technology (47% Avg., 0% UG, 70% G)
 - c. Standard level rubric provided sufficient challenge (33% Avg., 40% UG, 30% G)
 - d. Concerned it would impact grade (20% Avg., 20% UG, 20% G)
 - e. Other obligations (7% Avg., 0% UG, 10% G)
 - f. Other: _____

3. If you chose the advanced-level rubric, please indicate which factors influenced your decision.
 - a. Able to devote additional time to the project (9% Avg., 25% UG, 0% G)
 - b. Enjoy academic challenges (45% Avg., 25% UG, 57% G)
 - c. Advanced-level rubric provided additional challenge (45% Avg., 50% UG, 43% G)
 - d. Advanced-level rubric more closely aligned with personal goals for the assignment (55% Avg., 75% UG, 43% G)
 - e. Personality trait (18% Avg., 25% UG, 14% G)
 - f. Other: _____

4. Would you like to see this option provided in other courses to increase the level of academic challenge?
 - a. Yes (92% Avg., 89% UG, 94% G)

b. No (8% Avg., 11% UG, 6% G)

5. Any additional comments and feedback can be written here.