

## Ep. 035: Rubrics 101

Take the pain out of evaluating the subjective elements of your students' learning. In this episode, we explore the advantages of developing and using rubrics. What makes a rubric more than a checklist? And how can rubrics help us gut-check out teaching, to make sure we're really focusing on what's important to students? Dr. Julie-Ann McFann, CTLT's Program Team leader, joins us to talk rubric construction, why language is as important as concepts when putting your "grid" together, and whether or not you should share your rubric with your students before they begin the assignment.

Podcast: <https://prodev.illinoisstate.edu/podcast/2017/ep035.shtml>

### Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

JULIE-ANN: And I'm Julie-Ann.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching.

JIM: Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching, a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee. Joining me today. Dr. Julie-Ann MCFann is back. Hi, Julie-Ann.

JULIE-ANN: Hi, Jim. I'm glad to be back. It's been a while. Too long.

JIM: Too long. Well, today we are talking about, we're going to nail down a topic that we keep talking about here on our podcast. And Claire said, you need to get Julie-Ann in to talk about rubrics, rubrics, we talk about rubrics, and we're gonna we're planning a couple episodes about rubrics. But today, we want to kind of do rubric 101, rubric 110, whatever the basic is.

JULIE-ANN: To help help everybody let go of their fear.

JIM: Well, let go of their fear. And in my case, we were talking before we started recording, I use something that I think is a rubric. But then again, I'm not entirely sure, it might just be a checklist. So, let's start with the very basics. What is a rubric? What's it for? And and what does it look like?

JULIE-ANN: Well, a rubric is kind of a magical tool, if I can use that term, where it enables us to take things that are more subjective and try to quantify it. So, um, I was talking to a faculty member earlier today. And she's like, I'm reading all these essays, and it's taking me forever. And I asked her if she had a rubric. And she said, no, and I kind of went, Oh, you'll want to use a rubric, because then you'll know what to grade and what not to grade. So, it's a reason I call it magical is because it makes your grading so much easier. Not that anybody's interested in that, of course,

JIM: Well, of course, yes. Now, it's it is I would actually call it more like a map. It's kind of like a roadmap, if it keeps you on course, is that.

JULIE-ANN: I think that's a good thing to say. I just want to say, you know, it makes grading so much easier. But it also makes learning for the students so much easier. Sure. It also helps them be able to achieve the goals you want them to achieve.

JIM: Mm hmm. And it allows us to be consistent to with our message. So.

JULIE-ANN: That's just crazy talk to you.

JIM: You know, that was going to be the title of our of our show, but we went with Let's Talk Teaching instead. So yeah, so the idea being that by staying on track, we were also able to what be consistent from beginning to end in what our expectations were.

JULIE-ANN: And not only be consistent, but articulate for ourselves what our expectations.

JIM: Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

JULIE-ANN: So, if I may tell a story. Sure. So, when I first started teaching college, I didn't really know much about rubrics, even though I have a degree in educational psychology. So, it's kind of embarrassing that I didn't. And so, I was teaching an advanced ed psych class. And most of my students were already schoolteachers. And I gave my students an assignment and one student beyond the paper. And he came to me after class and was quite upset, and said, why didn't I get an A on this paper? And okay, so the snarky side of me wanted to say, because when I threw the papers down the stairs, in order to grade them, yours didn't make it all the way to the bottom. But you know, we're not, we're not really supposed to grade papers that way, right? But I wasn't able to articulate for him why his was different than his classmate's paper, right? And so, then a colleague said, oh, you need to use a rubric. And once I started using rubrics, I could it was like, oh, this is what I am looking for. When I give you this assignment, you now know what the parameters are. I've been able to articulate for myself what I'm really looking for, not just I know it when I see it kind of thing. And the students, no, oh, here's, here's the objectives for this assignment. And here's what we're hoping to accomplish.

JIM: And so, when we're talking about expectations, we should probably just get this out of the way now, I guess from what we have, when we were talking Off mic. There are- is more than one camp. As far as with this question, should you give the rubric to the students ahead of time or not? So, where you fall in there.

JULIE-ANN: I'm in the give-it-to-them-ahead-of-time camp, and I am too by the way, and and I think it's from a pragmatic point of view. I think it will help reduce the number of questions your students are asking as they're trying to complete the assignment because they right in front of them it says I want you to do XY and Z. And here's the caliber. In order to get an A, you need to be doing this in order to get a B, this and, you know, if you don't do these things, you're you're not succeeding.

JIM: Right. And I guess the argument on the opposite side would be that all the fear is that they would just do the minimum. In order to get the grade, they were looking for, I guess, or something.

JULIE-ANN: And I've heard that argument. And, and so sometimes when the professor says to me, but they only do what's on that rubric; and my reaction is, well, if you've used a grid kind of format, rather than just more of a holistic point, value thing, if you give them that grid, you've already said, here's, here's the components you need in order to excel. And if they excel, isn't that a good thing?

JIM: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. Right. Yeah, exactly.

JULIE-ANN: So, I'm thinking it's good.

JIM: And I would imagine in this, we may not get too deep into this for this episode. But I would imagine a lot of it depends on what are those, those cues that you're writing up? And are they aspirational enough? Are they clear enough? Are they broad enough? So that something that is excellent, really does represent a lot of work and learning?

JULIE-ANN: Yes. So, for my undergraduate learning and motivation, class, Intro to ed psych, what their assignment was, is they had to read a scholarly article related to whatever topic we were learning about in class, and then go out into the classroom related to and observe teachers and see if they're seeing this article topic in action or not. So, because I wanted them to do a scholarly article, if they use the caption, which is the journal for educators, then they would get an average grade for that particular aspect of the assignment. If they used a more scholarly article, then they would get an above average, if they were willing to tackle the Journal of Educational Psychology, then they would get exemplary for that, because they were going above and beyond. But in a conversation, they knew, Okay, what I'm expecting from you where you are right now, I would expect you to be able to read an article from the caption and be able to understand what it's talking about and see what's now if they were using something like teaching K eight, or the National Enquirer, then they were going to lose points on that aspect. But there were other things that they could get points on.

JIM: Right, right. Now, that's good. You know, before we get into like, the structure of a rubric, or a rubric that works well, before we get into that, not entirely sure how to say this. But I have found that since I've started using rubrics, I've been using them for a long time. Because as people are tired of hearing on this podcast, I teach often a broadcast performance class, which is just inherent subjectivity, there's just a lot of as long as you don't set yourself on fire, you've met kind of the minimum criteria. And it hasn't happened yet. And if they do set themselves on fire, they must have to do it in an interesting way. There you go. Yeah, so no, but in all seriousness, I have found but I do have a lot of writing involved in my class. And I've done this for other courses, too. You know, we, we, I find myself as fair as I tried to be, I, by the end of a long semester, and I'm grading those final papers, I do find myself thinking about everything that I that students have gone through together, the good and the bad. And I find that the rubric is a good gut check. When I have to ask myself, Am I being too hard on this

student? Yes. Am I Am I flinging them alive for their less than stellar grammar? When that's not really a learning outcome for my class?

JULIE-ANN: Yes. I, I think you're right on target with that, because I think it goes back to that making the subjective, more objective, because all you're doing is looking at that map, right, saying, you know, have they chosen something above and beyond? Or are they right, where they should be for that particular thing? And if it's right there in that paper, or that performance or whatever, then you can't say, well, you know, I don't think so. And you start feeling maybe bitter, or.

JIM: I think what I've encountered before is that I have to, I have to ask myself, am I being too hard on them for whatever reason? And you know, the other part of it is, is this the first paper I've been I'm grading or is it the 21st because if I do it all in one shot, and by the time I get to the 20/21, I'm either maybe really hard on them, or maybe being really easy on them to be totally honest. And the point is you're not getting adequate feedback, correct. Oh, and whatnot. So.

JULIE-ANN: And that's one of the other things I love about rubrics is that, and why I love the grid format, even we're not getting getting into it right now. But one of the reasons I love the grid format is that enables you to give that feedback sometimes by just circling the box, right?

JIM: So, so, that's let's, let's get into the form, okay, because, and, of course, one of the challenges of doing an audio podcast is that we're talking now about something very visual. So, we will have some examples will link to on the website for this the Show page for this show. And there are a couple other websites we'll talk about here in a little bit, or some online resources. But when you're saying a grid, what I'm envisioning is not my fear. Sometimes it is just a checklist, but it is something with multiple. What do you want to it's a continuum that you're in? Okay, yes.

JULIE-ANN: And so, kind of thinking about the grid, if you think of the first column going down that column, put down the the goals for that assignment, what are you hoping that they achieve? What are you hoping they will learn? And it could be like, going back to that example, I said, with my Ed psych students tackling scholarly articles, right? And perhaps it's- are you able to work in the library, whatever is appropriate for whatever that assignment is. And also, a way to get away from the becoming a proofreader while we're grading?

JIM: Yes, yes, he is.

JULIE-ANN: And is that what I often do? Is I include within that part of that weighting, not everything has to be weighted the same amount, is that maybe five or 10% of the grade is communication? Can I understand the message they are trying to send to me? Can I- is it and unsatisfactory might be there's so many grammatical errors, I can't understand your message. And I 10% of that grade, then, you know, if I can't understand their message, then it it's not an exemplary paper. It's not an A paper.

JIM: So, I guess what I'm getting though is, also is that the idea of a grid is that you have your learning objectives on the left-hand side, what are the goals for the exercise, but then the rest of the grid, it is more than just a binary proposition typically, except maybe like, did they turn it in or not? But right beyond that, there, you know, you are laying out a continuum, you're laying out a spectrum of choices.

JULIE-ANN: And so, some of the choices that people like to use across that continuum, they need to be non-judgy sounding, they need to be non-judgmental. Okay. So, some popular terms would be mastery, partial mastery, progressing emerging. Distinguish proficient, intermediate novice, accomplished, average, developing beginning, sophisticated, competent, partial, partly competent, not yet competent, which kind of sounds judgy. To me, I know it's popular. What I like to use is developing average, above average, and exemplary. Because sometimes it is developing is like, here, you need some help here. But I'm not ready to write to off. And so, then what is exemplary mean to you. So, some a big part of creating a rubric and why it's so good at helping you develop the assignment is because you have to ask yourself some questions. Why did you create this assignment? I know that.

JIM: Wow. No, that's, that's actually a very good question once in a while, especially if you've been doing it over and over again, semester after semester, and it's like, why am I doing this again?

JULIE-ANN: That's right. You know, what, what, what learning outcome? Is it associated with? Right? Um, how, how does this assignment relate to the rest of what you're teaching? What skills really hammering down? What are those skills you want your students to have? Or develop? And what exactly do you want them to do? So, in the process of creating the rubric, and articulating, okay, this is what a developing aspect looks like. This is what an average looks like. It really forces you to think about, Am I clear in what I'm asking the students to do? Do I need to tweak it a little bit? And when you create a well-designed assignment or exam, then it makes also makes it easier to grade? Yes, everything works together.

JIM: Yeah. Yeah, no, that makes a lot of sense to me. And so, by answering those kinds of higher fundamental questions that you brought up, that informs what are the actual prompts on the rubric? What are the actual read? Because you're narrowing in only on what is important, correct? What is what a cheat? What answers this question provides the answer to those questions. Now, I think that's great. So, a couple other little technical things about the rubric. How, how long does it have to be? Does it have to be something that's, can you, can you get away with a simple little something? Or is it too? I mean...

JULIE-ANN: So... That's a great question, because I have seen some rubric rubrics, and I'm putting that in quotations that have that are so complex, that they're almost worthless.

JIM: I mean, like tax code level. Yes, yes. Yeah. And, and I think, and I've seen those too. And I've always thought, at least from a student standpoint, I'd be wiggled out by that, or or I would never bother to even look at it correct. I just roll the dice to see if I how well I read.

JULIE-ANN: And, and when you have too many dimensions, then it's harder for you to differentiate between the different levels on that continuum. So, I would say maybe five, learning outcomes or tasks or something on the column, down column, and then really no more than five, but three to four degrees seems to be ideal. And that that goes back to, you know, developing average and above average, and exemplary.

JIM: And one thing that Claire and I talked about in a previous episode, Claire Lamonica, director was getting open comments. So, when so on some of my rubrics, I have, in fact, most of them, I leave blank bullet points at the bottom of the grid, to remind me to don't just say, good job, but try to give some specific feedback. How does that play into to a rubric? Or is that kind of separate from the rubric process?

JULIE-ANN: I don't think it's separate. What is nice about a rubric is it is often used as a summative grading tool, you know, you have your assignment, you're going to give a grade. So that gives you that formative thing you're doing well, here, this is where you need to develop. But then at the bottom for those comments of, okay, this is what I saw you did this part really well. Good job, keep up with that. You you stumbled in this area here, and this is why you got you know, you've got the circle, I circled the boxes. Um, and this is why you got that there. So, you might want to think about XY and Z or, or something like that. So, I think they complement each other.

JIM: Okay, that makes sense. That makes sense. So, one final thought about rubrics that I have is that I have actually congratulated, I don't know if this is if I'm fooling myself or not. So, I'm going to ask the expert here. You tell me, because there have been times when I've gotten gotten done evaluating those papers. And occasionally, you know, I'll go, and I'll add up. Okay, what what are all the numbers add up to in the rubric? And all along? I've kind of felt no, it's kind of a b paper, and it ended up being a B. Yeah, it's kind of a paper. Oh, look, it was an A. So, I don't know if that means I have created an instrument that I can use Well, or if it means that I am somehow a genius, or if it just means I'm really good at anticipating what I'm going to circle on the rubric. I haven't figured that out yet. And there may not be an answer to that.

JULIE-ANN: I think it's because you have taken the time to think about what does a B constitute? What does the C what's an A, that it enables? As you're reading? It's like, yeah, this kind of, yeah, this goes right in there. And so you've already done the laid the foundation. Before we go, I just want to talk about a great resource. Yeah, please, we're, we are going to put resources on the page. But Rupa star, and I don't know the whole URL, so we'll have the link there. So it's technically designed for the K-12 environment. But it is a tool that you can use to create rubrics. And the reason why I like sending faculty there is because they've got thousands of different rubrics that teachers have created, and college professors have created. And there may be something in your subject area, your disciplinary area that you can do a search on. And even if it isn't exactly what you're looking for, at least it can get your juices flowing. And enable you to think oh, yeah, I forgot. I want to include something like that. Or when you're drawing it blank, and you're like, what if because the top and the bottom levels are always easier to articulate than what's in the middle? Sure. And by going to Ruby star, I've done this as like, what is what am I trying to say for the middle? Oh,

yeah, this is it. So, Ruby star, and it's from Digit Department of Education, it's gonna ask you for your zip code. And I just say use the university's zip code and that's fine. There's no- that's my little plug.

JIM: I think that's great. Julie-Anne, thank you so much.

JULIE-ANN: Thank you for having me.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. Find out more about our podcast and get all of the links that we talked about for today's episode by going to our website [CTLT.IllinoisState.edu](http://CTLT.IllinoisState.edu). For Dr. Julie-Ann – big fan – and all my colleagues here at the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology, until we talk again, Happy Teaching!