Use of AAC&U VALUE Rubrics

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The University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) has been working with the VALUE rubrics since 2008–9, when we participated in one of the rounds of piloting. We’ve used them in three ways:

1. As part of our general education assessment process at the end of that year, we adopted the VALUE rubrics for written communication, inquiry and analysis, information literacy, and critical thinking.
2. Various rubrics have also been used for assessment in the majors, including inquiry and analysis, critical thinking, and oral communication.
3. Finally, we used single dimensions from several VALUE rubrics in order to create a rubric to assess student reflections after applied learning experiences in our pilot Quality Enhancement Plan projects: “analysis of knowledge” from the civic engagement rubric, “transfer” from the foundations for lifelong learning rubric, and both “connections to experience” and “reflection and self-assessment” from the integrative learning rubric. Because some of these dimensions are duplicative, we were able to evaluate which, if any, of them aligned well with learning outcomes related to combining subject-matter content and skills-in-practice and to reflecting on prior knowledge, outcomes of current actions, and future impact.

Additional Information about Our Process

The general education assessment processes is headed by the general education assessment director. UNCW has adopted an approach to assessing learning goals that uses assignments that are a regular part of the course content. One strength of this approach is that the student work products are an authentic part of the curriculum, and hence there is a natural alignment often missing in standardized assessments. Students are motivated to perform at their best because the assignments are part of the course content and the course grade. The assessment activities require little additional effort on the part of course faculty because the assignments used are a regular
Using the VALUE Rubrics for Improvement of Learning and Authentic Assessment

CASE STUDY: University of North Carolina Wilmington

part of the coursework. An additional strength of this method is that it requires the collaboration and full participation of the faculty in both the selection of the assignments and the scoring of the student work products.

The collected student work products are scored independently by trained scorers using a common rubric. The results of this scoring provide quantitative estimates of students’ performance and qualitative descriptions of what each performance level looks like, which, in turn, provides valuable information for the process of improvement. The normal disadvantage of this type of approach when compared to standardized tests is that results cannot be compared to those from other institutions. This disadvantage is mitigated, in part, by the use of the VALUE rubrics for many of the learning goals.

No one part of the general education curriculum, nor of the university experience as a whole, is solely responsible for helping students write well, think critically, or conduct responsible inquiry and analysis. These skills are practiced in many courses. Therefore, student work is sampled using a university studies curriculum map. From each component, courses are selected, and then sections are selected through stratified random sampling in order to ensure that sections are representative of faculty qualifications (tenure-track vs. part-time) and representative of content delivery (classroom-based, online, hybrid, honors, learning community–based, etc.). The eight learning goals are assessed cyclically, with each goal being assessed at least one time during every three-year cycle, according to a general education assessment schedule.

The general education assessment director presents the results of assessment efforts to the Learning Assessment Council (LAC) at the beginning of every academic year. The analysis of the results includes testing for differences in student scores based on student demographic and preparedness variables, delivery mode, and type of assignment (in-class vs. out-of-class). The LAC reviews and discusses the results, and makes recommendations to the provost and the faculty senate for actions to improve student learning. The final reports are disseminated to the faculty through the faculty senate, a general education assessment findings webpage, and Center for Teaching Excellence workshops. For example, we have started the UNCW Learning Goals Workshop Series. Each semester, a workshop for one of the learning goals is presented. At the workshop, the general education assessment director and one or more faculty members present the assessment findings and best practices in pedagogy related to the learning goal. In addition,
the general education assessment website contains a resource bank for both assessment and instruction for each of the learning goals.

Our scoring process includes having scorers work together, at first by reading a few common papers and creating specific assumptions or guidelines to help them apply the rubrics similarly. After each round of scoring, we solicit feedback—from both the scorers and the instructors from whose classes student work was sampled—about the fit of the rubrics to the learning outcomes and issues encountered while scoring. Following are some examples of assumptions made and feedback from scorers:

- Inquiry: Scorers felt that it does not follow that the level 2 quality criteria for the conclusions is “better” than the level 1 criteria, or visa versa. Because of this flaw, the level 3 criterion was too broad, requiring a score of 3 even if the conclusion was weak. There was one similar comment about the analysis dimension quality criterion, indicating a large jump between the level 2 and level 3 criteria.

- Information literacy: A few scorers suggested separating the first dimension, “determine the extent of information needed,” into two statements, one dealing with defining the scope of the thesis, and the other dealing with the type of information selected.

- Written communication: Four scorers commented that particular language in the rubric needed to be clarified or defined—for example, “some errors” vs. “few errors” and “skillful use” vs. “consistent use.”

There were two issues with the rubrics that we have addressed. The first is with the second dimension of the critical thinking rubric (“evidence”). The quality criterion for this dimension contains two distinct statements, one about interpreting/evaluating the information and developing a coherent analysis, and the other concerning whether or not the viewpoints of the author are questioned. We separated these statements into two dimensions so that both the analysis and the questioning of author’s viewpoint can be scored. As I noted in Peer Review, by separating the two statements we were able to identify students’ strengths in interpreting and analyzing sources and weakness in questioning viewpoints:

According to feedback we received from faculty scorers after the first round of using the VALUE critical thinking rubric, the second dimension, Evidence, was difficult to apply. This dimension contains two statements, one addressing the
level of interpretation and development of analysis, and the other focused on questioning the viewpoints of experts. Based on this feedback, we piloted a change to the rubric in which the two statements were applied independently. When we did this, the scores on the first part, interpreting the evidence and developing an analysis (CT2.1), are the highest of all dimensions, and the scores on the second part, questioning the viewpoints of the experts (CT 2.2), are the lowest of all dimensions. The information found from dissecting the dimension is quite important, as it suggests that students need to be instructed on the importance of including an author’s viewpoint in critical analysis. (Seifert 2012, 10–11).

The second issue concerns the “access and use of information ethically and legally” dimension of the information literacy rubric. The original presentation of this dimension was confusing to scorers. The dimension was modified, mainly in presentation, to (1) be consistent in language with the other dimensions, (2) bullet out the use strategies in order to make them easier to identify, (3) make it clear that student work exhibiting plagiarism should be scored 0, and (4) change “correct use” to “consistent use.” The next time we use this rubric, we plan to ask scorers to note which strategies were used so that we can provide that information to instructors.

We have learned that it is not likely that an assignment will address all dimensions of a rubric, especially in lower-division general education courses. For example, a laboratory report in an introductory biology course does not require students to select a topic or summarize existing knowledge in the field. However, this does not diminish the usefulness of the information received from scoring the other dimensions. But this does point to the fact that we must gather evidence from a larger variety of courses and assignments in order to get a complete picture of what students are capable of doing.

Reference