

# THE USE OF IB ASSESSMENT RUBRICS; TEACHER AND STUDENT VIEWS COMPARED

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the results of two surveys, one given to teachers, the other to students, at an international school in Suzhou, China. The surveys were designed to determine the perceptions of the usefulness and fairness of rubrics for assessment and feedback. The results show that around 50% of both groups believed that rubrics can be difficult to understand and fail to show students how to get a good grade. The article concludes that rubrics, which are commonly used in schools, fail to provide the quality feedback which face-to-face interaction and detailed written feedback offer.

## 摘要

本文分析了对中国苏州一所国际学校教师和学生分别所做的两项调查的结果。调查设计旨在了解师生如何看待‘评价和反馈量表’的有效性和公平性。调查结果表明，两组对象中各有50%左右的人群认为该量表很难理解，不能向学生展示如何取得好成绩。文章最后指出尽管该量表在学校普遍使用，但与传统面对面交流和详细的书面反馈相比，不能提供高质量的反馈信息。

## INTRODUCTION

Authentic assessment is an alternative to standardized testing. Wiggins (1993) defines authentic assessment as tasks based on “engaging and worthy problems or questions of importance”. Authentic assessment is also referred to as “direct assessment” or “performance assessment” because students show what they can do, rather than what they can recall (Mueller, 2014). An authentic assessment is based on a product such as a research essay, physical creation, or performance (such as an oral presentation or a skit) and generally involves the use of a rubric (also referred to as a ‘band descriptor’ or ‘rating scale’), a grid delineating levels of performance across a range of criteria representing the major aspects of the assignment. Brookhart (2013) suggests that clear expectations conveyed through rubrics will not only help students succeed by crystallizing the key concepts of the unit, but can also serve as tools for both formative, peer, and self-assessment. Additionally, rubrics are intended to clarify unit or course objectives in a way that is less time-consuming for both students and teachers.

The authors’ school, at which the research for this article was conducted, is a full International Baccalaureate (IB) school located in Suzhou, China. Students attending this school follow the Primary Years Program (PYP) in Grades 1-5 (ages 6-11), the Middle Years Program (MYP) in Grades 6-10 (ages 11-16), and the Diploma Program (DP) in Grades 11 and 12 (ages 16-18). Approximately 80% of the 1200 students enrolled speak English as a second language.

Assessment at the school follows IB guidelines, which for authentic summative assessments require the use of IB-standardized evaluation criteria and subject-specific rubrics. The IBMYP, which is the area of focus in this investigation, allows some latitude in the way each course is taught. Although

details of the evaluation criteria and an assessment rubric must be included in all summative assessments, neither is mandated for formative assessments. Graded assessments are returned to the students and include feedback consisting of either a rubric only, a rubric with relevant sections highlighted, written comments, oral feedback, or a combination of these, depending on the task and teacher.

A typical MYP student at the authors’ school encounters approximately 120 summative assessment rubrics during one academic year. Students study eight subjects with each subject programme consisting of four to five units of study on different topics delivered over the academic year. These units are assessed summatively using IB rubrics based on IB criteria, typically four for each subject area. The school requirement is to assess each of these criteria twice per semester, or four times per academic year. As a result, these MYP students can be considered to be knowledgeable end-users of rubrics. Similarly, the teachers encounter a large number of rubrics each year and can also be considered ‘expert’ users of rubrics.

This wealth of experience provided the initial spark for the investigation. The researchers were curious to know what the student and teacher views of IB assessments rubrics are. There were three main questions being considered:

1. Do the teachers and students share similar views about IB rubrics?
2. Are IB rubrics seen to be a fair way of grading assignments?
3. Do they provide valuable feedback?

Through this investigation, the researchers hoped to answer these questions and obtain any additional insights these rubric users could offer. They also believed that these answers and insights could be of interest to other rubric users at all levels

of education.

## THE USE OF RUBRICS

A rubric is a simple indicator of what performance measures will be considered and how success is defined. Rubrics can be divided into two main varieties: holistic and analytic. A holistic rubric provides feedback on student performance as a whole. Analytic rubrics, on the other hand, consider the various aspects of assessment, such as content, presentation, and use of language, separately (Center for Advanced Research in Language Acquisition, 2015). Because analytic rubrics provide more detail to students, they are more widely used. A third type of rubric, task-specific, is unique to an assessment task, and each different task requires a different rubric.

The standard analytic rubric, which is almost universally used (DePaul University Teaching Commons, 2015), is in grid form. The rows (usually four or five) of the rubric list the criteria to be assessed, while the columns (again usually four or five) describe the levels of success using terms such as “exceeds expectations”, “exemplary”, “needs work”, or “novice”. By expressing assignment requirements in terms of the final assessment criteria, rubrics represent a compact means to inform students about what is expected of them. The expectation is that students will frequently refer to it in order to produce higher-quality work.

## ADVANTAGES OF RUBRICS FOR TEACHERS

A survey of the educational literature reveals the following advantages of rubrics for teachers:

1. Rubrics help teachers tailor their teaching to student learning goals (Cooper and Gargan, 2009)
2. Rubrics represent consistency, standardizing assessments across different teachers as well as longitudinally across time (Valenza, 2000) ▶

- Using rubrics means that all students are evaluated the same way (Brookhart, 2008)
- Rubrics facilitate the task of grading, replacing individual comments with a common framework (Brookhart, 2008).

#### ADVANTAGES OF RUBRICS FOR STUDENTS

The following advantages of rubrics for students have also been noted:

- Rubrics are an instant organizer, allowing students to see both unit objectives and teacher feedback side by side (Brookhart, 2008).
- Students can use rubrics to evaluate themselves at any point during the progress of a unit to see where their strengths and weaknesses lie (Andrade, 2007).

For these reasons, rubrics are highly attractive to many teachers, allowing them to convey their expectations to their students simply and concisely. To these teachers, rubrics embody the learning standards in a fundamental way, making it clear that these standards apply to every student equally. Their compact nature makes them relatively easy to construct as well. Yet, it is as a marking tool that rubrics are viewed to be a real time-saver, with their array of pre-written, standardized comments.

#### DISADVANTAGES OF RUBRICS

Education researchers have also noted the following disadvantages of rubrics:

- Too often, rubrics are constructed without consideration of their validity or their reliability (Andrade, 2005).
- Rubrics lack objectivity because the descriptors used are vague and/or open to interpretation (Popham, 1997).
- Rubrics also fail to be objective because the scoring and weighting of the criteria being measured are arbitrary (Newkirk, 2000).

Jonsson and Svingby's (2007)

review of articles addressing the degree to which rubrics assessed performance found that well-constructed analytic rubrics increased the reliability of assessment, but that rubrics used in isolation for performance assessment were not sufficiently valid tools.

Taking another perspective, Kohn (2011) criticizes rubrics not on the basis of their shortcomings per se, but because they have been so widely adopted. In Kohn's view, when rubrics are given to students at the beginning of a unit to be used as guides, attention instantly shifts towards assessment at the expense of actual learning. In other words, students begin to self-consciously concentrate on what the teacher wants them to produce, rather than what they can independently discover.

#### METHODOLOGY

Students and teachers were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the analytic rubrics they used. A questionnaire was chosen as the most practical way to collect data for the investigation. After piloting the questions on a single class, the questionnaire was administered to 555 MYP students (44% of whom responded) and 72 teachers (33% of whom responded) through the school's Moodle 2.9-based Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), which enabled the researchers to distribute the survey easily to both students and teachers. Both groups accessed the survey through the VLE and answered the questions online.

Although 80% of the students are non-native English speakers, English is the medium of instruction and approximately 90% of these second-language students are considered to be 'intermediate' English language learners or higher. With more than 40 nationalities at the school, it was not feasible to translate the survey questions into all of the students' mother tongues. Therefore, the survey questions were written in English and students were asked to respond in English,

even though there was some concern that some questions may be misunderstood or misinterpreted in some way.

There were 11 statements based on our questions about rubrics given to both teachers and students and seven additional questions given to teachers. Respondents used a 1 to 5 scale (a.k.a. Likert scale), in response to a statement derived from the questions. Responses remained anonymous and confidential. Students were free to comment on rubric use in all school subjects and teachers answered according to their experience of using rubrics in their subject area. All respondents, both students and teachers, were asked to add their comments to supplement their answers and to clarify their concerns (Appendix A). Following the completion of the survey, the VLE software provided a basic analysis of the responses. The analysis gave an average of all the 1-5 responses and also showed the number of respondents for each choice from 1 to 5 on the scale and the percentage of all respondents the figure represents.

#### RESULTS

##### STUDENT SURVEY

The Likert scale used for the survey was atypical with 'strongly agree' requiring a response of '1' and 'strongly disagree' a response of '5'. For all of the questions, the mean student responses fell between option 2 ("agree") and option 3 ("neither agree nor disagree"). More precisely, the averages fell between 2.5 and 2.9, generally indicating tepid support for rubrics overall. A closer look at the data revealed that between 25 and 35 percent of respondents selected option 3 for each question and sixty-six entries (28%) in the comments section neither supported nor criticized rubrics. However, the remaining comments revealed a stark divide between those who found rubrics genuinely helpful and those who found them frustrating.

The most common frustration was not an unexpected one. Forty-three out of 237 respondents (18%) explicitly

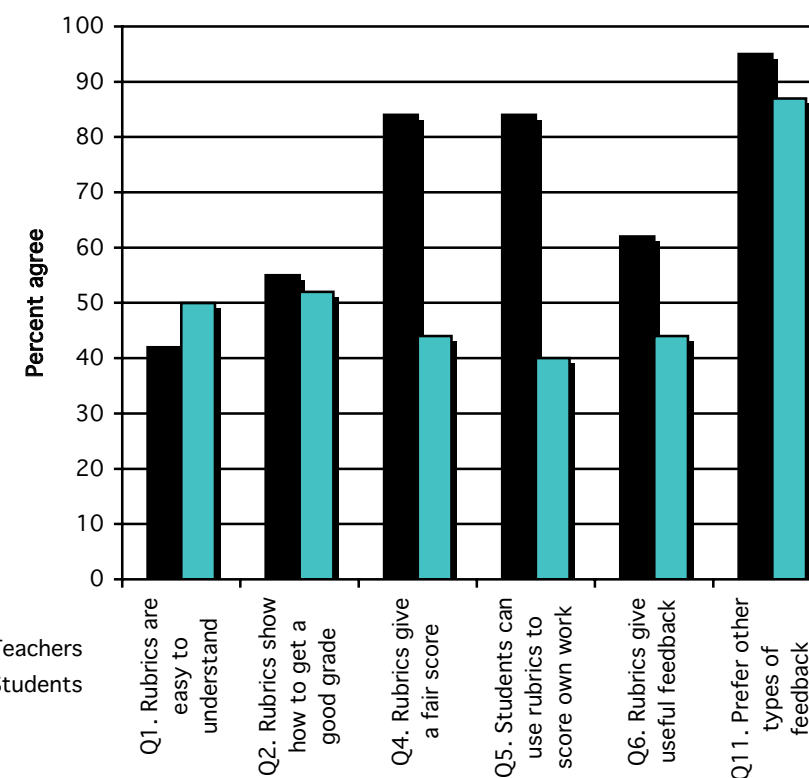


Figure 1. Comparison of teacher and student survey results. The "percent agree" axis corresponds to survey responses of '1' ("strongly agree") and '2' ("agree").

remarked that the rubrics were confusing or difficult to understand, not only making it hard for them to interpret their grade, but also how to improve. The second major frustration, reported by 47 students (20%) was a related one, namely that rubrics, whether used alone or in conjunction with other types of feedback, often failed to provide sufficient detail, either to adequately summarize student performance or to indicate paths toward improvement. Thus, rubrics failed many students due to a lack of actionable information.

On the other hand, 52 comments (22%) were positive. These comments were not very detailed, though some specifically mentioned that rubrics were indeed clear and easy to use. Several positive comments were qualified, however. In fact, a few overlapped with the negative ones above. For example, three students liked the rubrics

themselves but complained that some teachers did not interpret them as they were written.

##### TEACHER SURVEY

Teachers were generally more positive about the use of rubrics than the students were. 18 respondents (75%) recommended or strongly recommended rubrics for teachers or students while the remaining six (25%) were neutral. None of the teacher participants believed rubrics should not be used and a full 75% felt that rubrics accurately measured student performance. These figures suggest most teachers view rubrics as an effective tool for grading.

Teachers were less enthusiastic, however, when it came to statements such as, "Rubrics clearly tell students what they need to do to achieve a good grade" where agreement fell to 55%, or "The rubrics are easy for students to understand" which only 42% agreed with. Teachers also felt

that students generally did not really use the rubrics; only 9 out of 24 (38%) believed that they did. While 63% felt that rubrics were easy to score, only 34% felt that "Rubrics are easy to construct". Fully 80% supported the statement that "Some rubrics are better than others", indicating that rubrics often failed to meet their promise of consistency. Finally, teachers overwhelmingly (95%) preferred other types of feedback. Teacher comments also reflected a much more qualified support of rubrics compared to the survey data. Teachers are certainly aware of the need for clarity on behalf of their second language students and several remarked that the IBMYP rubrics were not helpful in this regard. Others felt that the MYP rubrics were "narrow and rigid", on the one hand, or "too broad" on the other.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This investigation started ▶



with three main questions. The first was whether teachers and students viewed rubrics in the same way. A side-by-side analysis of the results of the teacher and student surveys (see Figure 1) reveals some visible parallels on one hand and some notable discrepancies on the other. For example, the survey data suggest close agreement between teachers (55%) and students (51%) on the question of whether IB rubrics clearly told students how to get a good grade (Q2). Conversely, there was a stark difference (teachers 84%, students 40%) over the question of whether students could use the rubrics to score their own work (Q5). These results show that teachers and students do not share the same views on all matters related to the use of rubrics.

The second research question concerned the fairness of grading with rubrics. The survey shows that students and teachers have strikingly different perspectives when it comes to the fairness of rubrics (Q4). While 84% of teachers felt that a rubric-derived score was fair, only 44% of students concurred, supporting Andrade's (2005) and Popham's (1997) findings that rubrics are often subjective. One student noted that, "I think that some teachers give the same comment on same [sic] rubric...even though our work is different." Confirming the veracity of this comment is beyond the scope of this research, but it does raise an important issue related to fairness of grading with rubrics: How can students be convinced that teachers use rubrics carefully and fairly? This question could be a line of inquiry for further research.

For a rubric to be fair, it would need to convey teacher expectations clearly to all students, but only 55% of teachers and 51% of students felt that the IB rubrics clearly told students how to get a good grade (Q2). Interestingly, it should be noted that although only 42% of teachers judged the IB rubrics easy for their students to understand (Q1), fully 84% felt that students could use the rubrics to score their own work (Q5). It is difficult to draw a

conclusion from this seemingly contradictory piece of evidence. Perhaps teachers are expecting students to persevere in using the rubrics despite their lack of clarity.

The third research question concerned the use of rubrics for feedback. Since many teachers were supplementing IB rubrics with other types of feedback, the authors suspected that they did not feel that these rubrics are fully effective. In fact, the survey results confirm that both students and teachers find that the capacity of the IB rubrics for giving detailed and useful feedback is indeed limited. Comments by students about the lack of detail the rubrics give for feedback and the confusing nature of the language used in the rubrics support Popham's (1997) findings that rubrics are unclear and open to interpretation. One student commented that he found the rubrics to be vague and confusing. On the other hand, written teacher comments gave him a clear picture not only of ways he could improve, but also of what he did correctly. Comments like these cast doubt on the ultimate usefulness of the IB rubrics for giving feedback. In fact, while only 8% of teachers felt that rubrics did not give useful feedback (Q6), 24% of students felt this way. These survey results suggest that many students do not find rubrics as suitable for this purpose as their teachers do.

Most telling, perhaps, was the broad consensus about how rubrics compared to other types of feedback (Q11). Both teachers (95%) and students (86%) overwhelmingly preferred either teacher-written comments or an oral feedback session to either rubrics alone or highlighted rubrics. Of course, teachers are often constrained by time, but both groups recognize the need for in-depth feedback, which seems to be beyond the scope of the IB rubrics used alone. This suggests that IB rubrics should always be used in conjunction with other types of feedback.

As mentioned above, rubrics have been promoted on the basis of certain advantages: they are meant to standardize grading and to be easy for teachers to

use. Rubrics are also meant to encourage students to evaluate themselves over the course of the unit, thereby directing their focus to improvement. However, less than half (42%) of the teachers believed the rubrics were easy for their students to understand and teacher comments such as 'narrow and rigid' and 'too broad' suggest a lack of clarity in the rubrics. Therefore, although the survey results indicated that IB rubrics were easy for teachers to implement, given the fact that many teachers and students found them unclear, the IB rubrics failed to achieve the goal of grade standardization. In addition, as the IB rubrics are used in a summative (end-of-unit), rather than in a formative (mid-unit) capacity, they did not particularly help students adjust their performance over the course of the unit.

Rubrics have been criticized as invalid, unreliable, unfair, and/or subjective to some degree (Andrade, 2005; Popham, 1997). Our research did not aim to fully evaluate the reliability and validity of the IB rubrics. However, the aggregate student response revealed serious doubts regarding the fairness and objectivity of the use of IB rubrics. A closer look at the rubrics themselves would certainly be useful in terms of evaluating their potential. Further investigation should attempt to determine whether there are specific qualities of rubrics that students and teachers consider more effective or whether rubrics have inherent limitations that cannot be overcome.

In conclusion, the study revealed both agreement and disagreement between teachers and students concerning the use of IB rubrics for grading and feedback at the authors' school. The difference in teacher and student views about the fairness of rubric-scored grades could be of major importance to the wider educational community. Similarly, the difference in teacher and student views about the use of rubrics for giving feedback should be a cause for concern. The study suggests that the use of IB rubrics for both grading and giving feedback should be re-evaluated and steps taken to address the students' concerns

so that rubrics are not used for feedback in isolation. Rather, face-to-face interaction and detailed written feedback should also be part of the assessment equation. Other institutions in which rubrics are used, whether IB or not, may also wish to consider the relevance of these research findings within their own context. **O**

#### APPENDIX A

This appendix contains the teacher and student survey statements and the questions from which they were derived. The 11 overlapping statements common to both surveys were:

1. The rubrics are easy to understand.
2. Rubrics clearly tell what is needed for a good grade.
3. During assessment, students use rubrics to help themselves.
4. Rubrics give students a fair score.
5. Students can use rubrics to score their own work.
6. Rubrics provide useful feedback.
7. Rubrics help students to learn.
8. Some rubrics are better than others.
9. Teachers use simplified rubrics (for the benefit of ESL students).
10. Teachers use a variety of assessment methods (besides rubrics).
11. What is the best type of feedback after an assessment?
  - a. rubric only
  - b. highlighted rubric
  - c. teacher written comments
  - d. teacher oral comments

The following were the seven additional questions given to the teachers:

1. Which levels of English did they teach? [Respondents could choose up to 4 levels out of 8 options ranging from beginner level 2 to native speaker fluency.]
2. How often do you share rubrics with students after an assessment?
3. How often do you share rubrics at the beginning of a unit?
4. Are rubrics easy to construct?
5. Are rubrics easy to score?
6. Do rubrics give me an accurate picture of student performance?
7. Do you recommend rubrics for teachers and students?

The questions the statements were derived from:

1. Are rubrics used easy to understand?
2. Do the rubrics clearly tell what is needed for a good grade?
3. During assessment, do students use rubrics to help themselves?
4. Do rubrics provide a fair score?
5. Do students use rubrics to score their own work?
6. Do rubrics provide useful feedback?
7. Do rubrics aid learning?
8. Are some rubrics better than others?
9. Do teachers use simplified rubrics?
10. Do teachers use a variety of assessment methods?
11. What is the best type of feedback after an assessment?
  - a. rubric only
  - b. highlighted rubric
  - c. teacher written comments
  - d. teacher oral comments

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