Using Discussion Forum Rubrics as a Teaching Strategy to Enhance Collaborative Learning in Online Courses

EdMedia/ACCE 2012 Conference
Thursday, June 28
4:00-4:20 p.m.

Margaret R. Lee, Ph.D., PMP
Lee Consultants
www.lee4consulting.com
Acknowledgements

The published study used as a basis for this best practice session is:

The research - Purpose

- To examine the impact of using a discussion forum rubric to enhance discussion posts submitted by students in the virtual project management classroom.
The research - Design

- Participants: 53 MBA students enrolled in three sections of the course from October 2010 through May 2011
- One control group of 20 students
- Two experimental groups of 16 students and 17 students
The two experimental groups were given the specific grading rubric and instructions designed to encourage online conversation.

The control group of the virtual project management classroom had no rubric, and the protocols and evaluation criteria were minimal or loosely defined.
The research - Design

- The evaluation involved how:
  - the addition of facilitator guidelines influenced meaningful discourse
  - the posting of these guidelines influenced meaningful discourse
  - the addition of an evaluation rubric influenced meaningful discourse
The research - Results

- The use of the rubric:
  - increased online classroom participation
  - enhanced the educational experience
The research - Results

- The results:
  - indicated that there was a statistical difference in average postings per student between the two experimental groups and the control group
  - showed no statistical difference between the two experimental groups
The research - Results

- Suggest that the use of a rubric specifically designed to engage the student and expand the student’s learning experience can increase online classroom participation.
- As a consequence, the use of a rubric can enhance the educational experience for the online student and strengthen the university’s program.
Introduction to rubrics

A rubric is:
- a scoring tool for a piece of work
- a helpful tool for both the learner and the instructor
- a guide to evaluate the quality of students’ constructed responses
Rubrics as a pedagogical strategy to augment online teaching

- Benefits of using rubrics include:
  - efficiency in grading assignments
  - validity and accuracy of grading
  - similarity to “grading” tools used in the workplace
  - clarity of expectations for the student
Rubrics as a pedagogical strategy to augment online teaching

- Rubrics can:
  - clarify expectations for the instructor
  - help students focus on the work
  - provide unbiased feedback without excessive instructor grading
Rubrics as a pedagogical strategy to augment online teaching

- The result of using rubrics is often improvement in the quality of work and the learning experience for the student
Developing your rubric

- Three features of rubrics
  1. Evaluative criteria
  2. Quality definitions
  3. Scoring strategy
Developing your rubric

- General rubric categories for grading online posts:
  - level of participation
  - interactivity
  - focus on or thoroughness of understanding the discussion prompt
  - professional tone, clarity, and mechanics
Developing your rubric

- No more than five columns
- Grading for each column should be either 0 or 5/10, indicating that the learner either did not complete the task successfully (0) or completed the task successfully (5/10)
Developing your rubric

Topics for the five columns to score an initial post:

1. Insightful, thorough, and interesting analysis; new and useful information; understanding of the topic
2. Includes examples from the text
3. Includes examples of other academic resources
4. Completeness of response to discussion prompt
5. Learner shares personal examples and experiences on the subject
Developing your rubric

- Topics for the five columns to score a response post:
  1. Insight/Depth
  2. Reference to the text
  3. Additional academic references
  4. Required number of responses to other learners
  5. Learner responds to more than the minimum required number of learners
## Sample rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEEK #</th>
<th>DQ = 50%</th>
<th>Rspnse = 50%</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insight/Depth</td>
<td>Book ref?</td>
<td>Any Other ref?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAME HERE</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAME HERE</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAME HERE</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Challenges in designing rubrics

- Too complicated or detailed
- Not entirely self-explanatory
- Criteria that are not relevant or too general
- Missing the key attributes of the learning being assessed
Challenges in designing rubrics

- Learners’ inability to agree with the grade
- Students often are not good at self-assessment
- Students cannot properly use the rubric
- Misused as a substitute for valuable teaching and mentoring opportunities
Mitigating the challenges

- Issues with the rubric not being entirely self-explanatory can be resolved by providing the rubric as an Excel spreadsheet.
- The learners can self-evaluate the quality of their posts and responses, and the totals will sum automatically.
- The simple spreadsheet mitigates the potential problem that students may not be able to properly use the rubric.
Mitigating the challenges

- To compensate for the possible lack of professor feedback to help the learner understand the requirements for posts or misuse of the rubric as a substitute for valuable teaching and mentoring opportunities, the rubric scores were presented along with comments to help the learners.
Implementing your rubric

- Detailed instructions for grading process and the rubric
- Each student is required to acknowledge the instructor’s post that includes instructions and a copy of the rubric as an Excel worksheet and confirm that he or she has read the instructions and viewed the rubric
Implementing your rubric

- Must have upper-level support for the rubric
- Needs to be standard for all classes
- Should be standard for all departments
Implementing your rubric

- Be prepared to have “mad” students
- Prepare detailed explanations (from the instructions for the grading process and the rubric) and save them for reuse
- Send a copy of the completed rubric to students to help them “see” it in action
Challenges to implementing rubrics

- It can be difficult to move online students to a formal rubric-based grading system for discussion forums, but the benefits are effective and measurable.
- The students often go “kicking and screaming” into the formal grading process.
Why use rubrics?

• Inclusion of effective grading rubrics for discussion forums in online courses represents:
  ◦ a movement toward higher standards in the classroom
  ◦ increased satisfaction and learning for the students
  ◦ improved quality and quantity of online discussions

• These improvements should, as a result, enhance and strengthen the university’s online program
References

- Strang, K. D. 2011, How can discussion forum questions be effective in online MBA courses? *Campus-Wide Information Systems*, vol. 28, no. 2, 80-92. doi: 10.1108/10650741111117789
Questions?

- Any questions?
- Feel free to contact me personally with questions about using rubrics in your courses.
- Thank you!
About the speaker

- **Margaret R. Lee,** PMP®, has a doctorate in Organization and Management/Project Management and is principal for LEE Consultants (www.lee4consulting.com). Her consulting firm assists educational facilities in strategic planning and assessment, develops project management curricula for academic institutions, facilitates basic project management training for organizations, and provides professional writing and editing services.

- Dr. Lee’s professional experience includes corporate trainer, instructional designer and project manager. She currently teaches at Blackburn College in Carlinville, Illinois, and online for Florida Institute of Technology and the University of Northwestern Ohio.

- She is a referee for the *International Journal of Project Management*, on the Editorial Review Board for the *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, and was a reviewer for the 2012 Project Management Institute’s Research & Education Conference Committee. An active member of the PMI Central Illinois Chapter, she is a facilitator for the Springfield, Illinois division’s PMP Exam Review Course Certification Training.

- **Email:** peg.lee1@gmail.com  
  **Phone:** 217-947-2046  
  **Web:** http://www.lee4consulting.com  
  **LinkedIn:** Margaret Lee