Writing Experiential Assessment Rubrics

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INTRODUCTION

These guidance notes were developed during the current review of assessment practices at Auckland International Campus (AIC). They are based on the work undertaken so far by four lecturers in AIC's Experiential Education Initiative working group, whose project is aimed at redesigning assessments in Applied Management, Construction and IT in order to make them more experiential and better suited to the development of employability skills. While the assessments themselves are discipline-specific, the guidance notes from the project are intended to be applicable in other vocational fields of tertiary education. Hence, they do not include technical jargon or non-educational terminology, nor do they provide guidelines or tips for writing standard academic assessment rubrics at any level. The focus throughout remains how to write such rubrics from an experiential perspective.

Experiential learning is based essentially on learning through doing and reflection (Moon, 2004) Consequently, the assessment of experiential learning should be more concerned with what students do or have done for a particular purpose than with what they think or believe about a general topic or question. Their activity will consist of actions taken, processes or procedures followed, choices and decisions made, problems solved, resulting in work for assessment being completed (whether it be a text or video, an artefact, etc) or an assessed performance being given (a presentation, interview, etc), or a combination of both. In the vocational sector, such tasks need to resemble the kind of work or performances undertaken in the workplace. Any suitable context in which they would normally be done in the real world will provide a *criterion situation* (Gulikers et al., 2004) which sets the standard against which student work or performance can be assessed. If it is to be at all experiential, vocational assessment therefore needs a context that is similar to an appropriate criterion situation, as well as criteria for evaluating how tasks have been completed or performed which would be considered valid in such a situation. The feedback given to students will likewise need to be grounded in relevant professional practice, in alignment with the rubric.

DESIGNING AN EXPERIENTIAL RUBRIC

So how to write these criteria? In view of the diversity of possible criterion situations, it would be pointless to follow a fixed recipe or employ a prescriptive technique. A task may only be assessed on the specific merits afforded by its context. However, certain principles or guidelines may be of use to the assessment writer.

1. **Decide what type of grading scheme you will adopt.**
   A *competency-based*, pass-or-fail approach(Wambui, 2024) has often been preferred for the real-world application of skills. On the other hand, grading bands can provide a more fine-grained assessment of complex tasks. It is also worth noting that employee performance in industry tends to be measured by means of a rating scale.

A third option might be a combination of both methods. But there might also be institutional constraints either preventing or limiting the use of one or the other.

2. **Identify what you would accept as a pass.**

   Regardless of your grading method and the layout of your assessment rubric, the best starting point is to define what degree of proficiency would be acceptable (as opposed to not acceptable) in the criterion situation. Here the assessment writer may rely on their own experience of such a situation, or that of their colleagues, or draw from any relevant research that might be available. But regardless of how it is defined, the required standard for a pass, or a minimum pass grade, should be realistic as regards actual achievement or behaviour in the workplace.

3. **Don't assume pass criteria are less challenging to write.**

   In a banded grading scheme (such as 10-9, 8-7, etc), the minimum pass grade will outline the basic require-ment(s) in relation to the criterion situation. Nevertheless, the language that best fits the descriptor for this band may not be any simpler in its vocabulary or syntax than that of the higher bands. It might even be more intricate. There is no reason why describing what is acceptable should be any easier from a linguistic point of view than describing what is outstanding, or what could lie in between.

4. **Use "and/or" in your criteria for below-pass grades.**

   Once a minimum pass grade is defined, the grading band below it can be seen as its negative formulation, so that what is deemed unacceptable can be readily identified and understood in contradistinction to its positive counterpart. Having said that, the student's work or performance may be assessed as below standard for not meeting the pass criterion to some extent, although not in every respect. This can be clearly indicated by using the double conjunction and/or to separate the descriptor into constituent parts, so that failure to meet one or more of these would prevent the student from passing the criterion as a whole.

5. **Avoid formulaic phrases from templates.**

   As regards the other grading bands, the rubric writer is advised to think carefully about how best to convey the degree of proficiency that is looked for in each case with direct reference, if possible, to the wording of the descriptor for the minimum pass. On the other hand, applying formulaic phrases and sentence patterns across different grading bands may lead to false distinctions (e.g. between *comprehensive* and *detailed*) or insufficient clarity for distinguishing between grades (e.g. between mostly and generally). The safest approach is probably to ask of each descriptor: *What would this work or performance look like in real life, i.e. in the criterion situation? How would you know that it matches this descriptor and not another grading band? What would be the distinguishing features?*

6. **Keep improving your band descriptors.**

   Like most forms of writing, assessment rubrics emerge from a recursive process. Without prior experience, the writer is unlikely to produce a one hundred percent effective rubric for a given task in a single draft. Fine-tuning occurs by setting one descriptor against another to see not only how they might differ, but how accentuating differences could help to refine, or even redefine, distinctions between grading bands. Yet throughout this pro-cess, it must be remembered that only the criterion situation can help you to determine whether or not a rubric is ultimately fit for purpose. In other words, it is the judgement of professionals in a real-world *community of*

practice (Wenger, 1998) and not simply traditional academic standards, that should be described in experiential assessment criteria.

7. **Stay focused on the criterion situation.**

   Traditional assessment rubrics are designed for the kind of academic work which students normally do in their studies, but experiential assessment rubrics are written for a different purpose. While they share a number of characteristics with more traditional rubrics, their point of reference will be the criterion situation, which is itself defined and determined by a specific community of practice beyond academia (unless standard academic practice happens to be the targeted professional skill). The defining purpose of an academic rubric is to assess the student's knowledge and understanding of the course content in relation to its discipline. The purpose of a vocational experiential rubric is to assess the student's ability to function in the relevant criterion situation. This key difference must remain to the fore in the writer's mind when designing an experiential rubric.

8. **Consider quality and quantity.**

   The grading of the vocational student's work or performance can be conceptualised in terms of two main axes. The first one is derived from the trade-off between *quality* and *quantity*. Whatever standards of quality apply in the criterion situation should be used to assess the student's work. It is the role of the course to develop the students' knowledge and skills to ensure they can meet the relevant professional standards. By the same token, it is the role of the assessment writer to ensure that the rubric is based on a realistic interpretation of these standards and does not aim instead for an idealised view of what they think professional practice should be. The quantitative aspect of the rubric, meanwhile, also needs to be realistic in relation to the amount of work which can be reasonably expected within the conditions of assessment, especially the time available for completion. Taken together, considerations of quality and quantity will determine how much the student needs to produce, and how well.

9. **Consider scope and depth.**

   The second axis represents the balance between *scope* and *depth*. Just as quality tends to be regarded as more important than quantity as an indicator of competence, the depth of a student's work or performance tends to be valued over and above its scope or its range. Nevertheless, this will not always be the case. Depending on the nature of the assessment task, they may be equally important, or the scope may in fact be more significant and useful in a given professional context, as determined by the criterion situation. A market study, for example, requires in-depth analysis of a specific market. A marketing strategy, on the other hand, should provide a detailed action plan with a range of different tactics and channels to reach potential customers. Similarly, a brainstorming task in IT design may depend more for its overall success in identifying an innovative solution on the quantity of ideas generated than on their inherent quality (Paulus et al., 2011).

10. **Always relate cognition to the workplace context.**

    Finally, it is advisable either to avoid referring to cognitive states or cognitive effort in experiential criteria, or to look for evidence of the student's thinking only in relation to their work / performance in a clearly defined professional context. In general terms, an academic rubric is designed to provide "a description of critical thinking in a discipline and how it might be distinguished from lower levels of thinking" (Orrell, 2023, p.3). An experiential vocational rubric, on the other hand, should be more focused on what students have done in their field of practice, as well as their reflection on what they have done. Adjectives like critical, insightful and perceptive

might not appropriately describe the standards expected in the relevant criterion situation. Conversely, when they are appropriate, their meaning will depend on the professional context on which the assessment task is set. Outside of that context, the assessor's judgement may lack objective credibility.

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