

Application of scoring rubrics: A transformational assessment tool for sustainable learning at the University of Bahrain

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Abstract

This article aims to answer the research question: how practical can the application of scoring rubrics be as a transformational assessment tool in improving students' sustainable learning and performance? Action Research (AR) was conducted during the second semester of 2024-2025 to answer this research question. The target population consisted of 97 students enrolled in the Department of Mass Communication Tourism and Fine Arts at the College of Arts at the University of Bahrain. Different techniques were settled, such as observations, questionnaires, and interviews, to answer the AR question and promote the reliability and validity of the result.

The results show significant positive results of using scoring rubrics as an assessment tool to improve students' results and sustainable learning. The use of the rubrics enables the students to be aware of the criteria used in evaluating their performance. The scoring rubrics also offer the instructor the possibility to give consistent feedback and fair results.

Keywords: Rubric, higher education, transformational assessment, sustainable learning.

DOI: 10.7176/JEP/16-10-02

Publication date: September 30th 2025

1. Introduction

Education for sustainable development (ESD) requires that, as a university professor, the reposition of the existing curricula to address sustainability (UNESCO 2005a). There has been a rush worldwide to incorporate sustainability knowledge, skills, issues, and viewpoints into higher education curricula. Nonetheless, in order to assist students in developing the skills and dispositions required to create a more sustainable society, higher education pedagogy (i.e., the art and science of teaching) must change as well. Professorial lectures no longer dominate class time. Our pedagogy must consider the following factors: (1) we live in a society where students learn in new ways, for example, information is easily accessible on the Internet; and (2) we work with students who want to understand controversies and find solutions to problems that the world is currently facing (Clabough & Clabough, 2016).

Teachers should review the course content, teaching tactics, and their tasks to the students. Teaching and assignments activities should encourage higher order thinking abilities, decision-making, interactive learning, question creation, and challenge students to explore their worldviews and beliefs (UNESCO 2005b). Professors must teach in such a way that students become active learners, rather than passive recipients of published knowledge, for them to become knowledgeable, skilled, and empowered to create and co-create solutions. After all, this and the next generation of leaders will have to figure out how to establish a more sustainable society because we currently do not know how to do so. Indeed, sustainability concerns have their origins in the social, economic, political, and environmental domains (Robbins, 2004). As a result, the students must learn to analyse complex, difficult situations and find acceptable answers. This complication must be acknowledged in tasks and their evaluation. 'Simplistic measures cannot assess complex learning' (Steffl-Mabry 2004, p 21). Using rubrics to assess complicated learning allows for a systematic approach to complex learning.

However, rubrics in higher education have been generally overlooked except in Schools of Education. There are numerous ways in which these multi-purpose scoring guides for evaluating student work and performance advance the educational program's objectives. Rubrics are recommended by Stevens and Levi (2005) because they have immense promises since they help students learn and help them succeed. They also assist students in focusing their efforts, boosting student accomplishment, reducing grading time for the instructor, and improving the effectiveness of feedback. Furthermore, using rubrics for assessment increases grading consistency (Bukhari, 2021).

2. What are rubrics?

Rubrics serve as "score sheets" for higher education (Jönsson & Panadero, 2018). They appear in various types, but the criteria for evaluation and performance levels are always included in all rubrics used to score how successful the learner has been in accomplishing a certain job. Rubrics aren't just useful when the instructor teaches in person; they're critical when the teacher is doing it virtually (Kinne et al., 2014). For one thing, rubrics help instructors grade assignments faster (by saving time), but they also assist students to understand how you evaluate them and why they obtained a particular grade (Dawson, 2017). In addition, it gives students the impression that grading is objective rather than subjective (Ismail et al., 2014; Kaur et al., 2019). When creating a rubric, teachers must make sure that the evaluation criteria are in line with the task's learning goals (Fraile, 2017). It is reasonable to assume that whenever an instructor assigns a research project that requires students to write an annotated bibliography, they want to offer their students practice in finding credible research sources, citing them correctly, and summarizing them appropriately (Bukhari, 2021).

Before using rubrics to assess student performance, it is common to explain them at the beginning of each assessment cycle. Obviously, the teacher makes every effort to ensure that these rubrics are accessible to learners through the learning tools and platforms. Prior to implementing each assessment, learners should be aware of the assessment and grading criteria. One of the best practices in the learning process is to align the rubrics with the activities allocated to learners and with the intended learning outcomes.

Rubrics for course assignments are frequently not properly communicated with students in practice (Dawson, 2017; Jönsson & Panadero, 2018), and as a result, students are not supplied with the correct guidance for their assignments. In general, rubrics are made available to students via the Internet without proper development. Subsequent criticism from professors or student participation has been shown to be ineffectual in benefiting them (Kaur et al., 2019). Assessment rubrics are frequently lacking in rigor and are neglected. This article discusses the success of using assessment rubrics in the MCO 350 course. This action research investigated students perceived and observed changes in their writing as measured by the course instructor using a new specialized rubric.

3. Research questions

The purpose of this study is to assess to which extent the application of scoring rubrics can improve students' sustainable learning and performance. The different cycles of the study will try to answer these research questions: (1) How does assessment rubric influence the effectiveness of students' report writing? (2) How do the students perceive the use of the rubrics? (3) What differences do students see in their written work due to their introduction utilizing the rubric?

Indeed, when rubrics were used to grade students' work in a few cases, the rubrics looked insufficient in articulating the requirements or reflecting performance standards. Students were eventually unable to fully benefit from such rubrics due to their imprecise criteria and lack of performance standard specification (Tierney & Simon, 2004), resulting in poor quality writing. Thus, in this research, the goal was to teach MCO350 students how to use rubrics and then compare the quality of their writing before and after they used the rubrics. To address concerns that of the existing rubric that may not give sufficient and specific guidance to students, this action research will launch an endeavor to create a new rubric that meets the standards for producing outstanding academic report writing.

4. Action research methodology

4.1 Participants

For this research, the target population consisted of 97 students (25 males and 72 females) enrolled in 1 section of *new trends in media* (MCO350), a third level course in the Communication, tourism, and art department at the University of Bahrain. The action research was conducted during the second semester of the academic year. The efficiency of analytic rubric was investigated based on the students' dissertation writing skills.

4.2 Data Collection

A triangulation data collection such as observations, questioners, and interviews was utilized to answer the AR questions and improve the reliability and validity of the research (Lauri, 2011). First, the drafts of the students' first reports, which were written without reference to any rubric, were reviewed. After creating, validating, and introducing a report written rubric, the students were then instructed to update their written reports using the newly revised rubric one more time. The new drafts were prepared to utilize the rubric were collected, and the changes

and the quality of the students' writing were analyzed. Then, semi-structured interviews were conducted among eight students (6 girls and 2 boys) to elicit their opinion and perception on their writing process with and without the rubrics. Data collection was stopped when the data saturation had been reached (Saunders et al., 2018). The interviews were conducted through MS-Teams and last from 6 to 14 minutes. Then the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The main goal was to answer the second research question related to the students' perception of the rubrics and their impact on their performance.

5. Research procedures

Students enrolled in the MCO350 course must submit a written report on emerging social media trends, according to the course requirements and syllabus. This is designed to make sure that students comprehend the subject matter and write a high-quality dissertation report. 3 cycles are used in this research which can help to answer the research questions (Fig. 1). The first cycle evaluates the students' written report without the use of the rubrics. In the second cycle the instructor introduces the use of the rubric to the students. Finally, in the last cycle the students resubmit a revised report based on the developed rubrics. To evaluate the students' perception about the use of the rubrics and its impact on the quality of their writing, semi-directives interviews were carried out with 8 students.

Table 1. Features of Action Research Progress

Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Absence of Writing Rubric	Development and Design of Writing Rubrics	Use of Writing Rubric
Students write and submit reports	Instructor develops and introduces the rubrics to the students	Students write and submit reports based on the rubrics

5.1 Cycle 1: Students write and submit the report without using writing rubrics

The totality of the 97 students of the section participated in this experience. After being told about the purpose of the research, all participants provided informed consent using the university's consent forms.

5.1.1 Procedure and action

Students were asked during the first cycle to write and submit a report about the new trends in media. The students must consult their report, the coursebook, slides, and notes to write the report. However, most of them usually use the internet. On the other hand, students in MCO350 rarely obtain rubrics and consequently do not receive sufficient guidance for their work. When the professor receives the report, detailed feedback will be sent and discussed with the students individually.

5.1.2 Cycle 1 results

Cycle 1 produced several essential outcomes. The first outcome noticed that the majority of the students submitted low-quality written reports. The student's reports are not organized, grammar and vocabulary mistakes, the information is not related to the course material, and the essential theories learned during the class are missing. The instructor takes a long time to write and submit his feedback and explain to the students what their mistakes are. Students were not happy about their results and kept saying they could not know what was demanding to write. Some students felt lost and mentioned how it is unfair to get such bad grades.

The questionnaire results were similar to the observation and showed that students were unhappy about their results (Fig. 2).

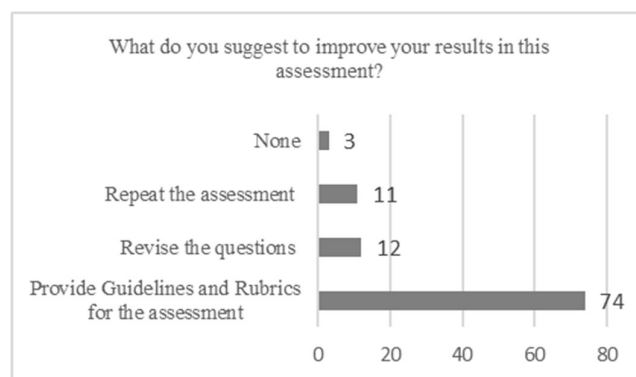


Figure 1. The obtained grades meet my expectations

The students enrolled in MCO350 were asked during the individual feedback sessions to give suggestions that could help them to improve their results. Most of the students suggest adding guidelines and rubrics (74%) to help them achieve high grades performance. Only 12% of the section want to revise the questions, and 11 % repeat the assessment (Fig. 3).

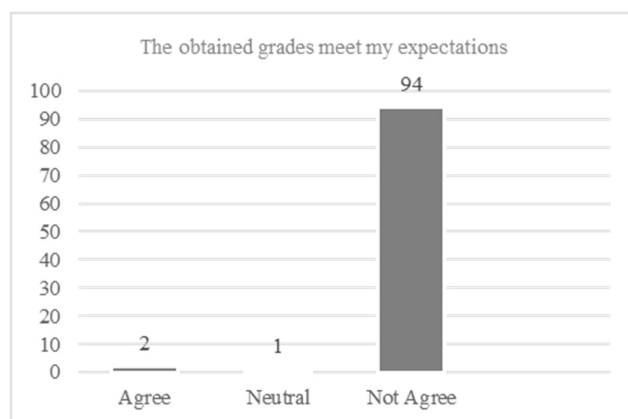


Figure 2. What do you suggest to improve your results in this assessment

5.2 Cycle 2: Instructor develops, introduces, and explains the rubrics to students

Based on the findings of the first cycle and the students' suggestions, the instructor decided to develop and introduce writing report rubrics.

5.2.1 Procedure and action

Because of the imprecise criteria and absence of performance standards (Tierney & Simon, 2004), students could not fully benefit from such rubrics, resulting in poor quality writing (Dawson, 2017). Therefore, during the second cycle the course instructor developed an assessment rubric to write the report. The professor developed the criteria based on the individual feedback sessions with the student. The professor developed a new assessment rubric in which he incorporated six evaluation/performance criteria to help students write their report (Table 1).

5.2.2 Cycle 2 results

The main outcome of cycle 2 was the development of the rubric of writing report related to course MCO 350. Therefore, according to the requirements of the department of Communication, tourism, and art department at the University of Bahrain, six evaluation criteria was developed to improve the performance and the sustainability of

student learning.

Table 2. Rubric for MCO350

Criteria & Learning outcome (LO)	Exceeds Expectations (4-5pts)	Meets Expectations (2-3pts)	Below Expectations (0-1pts)	Score
Research context/ questions & objectives	Well defined context, the research questions and objectives are feasible, related to the problem statement and clearly defined. They Align closely with the problem statement.	The research context, objectives and questions does not go beyond the information provided by the instructor. They reflect slightly the subject and are somewhat related to the problem statement.	The research context, objectives and questions are not feasible, unclear and weak. They lack alignment with each other and do not reflect the problem statement.	/5
Introduction/ Background	Exceptional introduction and detailed background.	Inadequate introduction and general background.	Introduction lacks information and evidence.	/5
Conceptual Framework	Key factors, concepts and variables are clearly defined, explained and organized.	Key factors, concepts and variables are somewhat defined, loosely explained and overall, it can be improved.	Key factors, concepts and variables are confusing and/or not accurate and lack of theoretical support.	/5
Organization: Structure and quality of information and evidence	Clear, concise, well structured, and excellent transition between paragraphs	Somewhat clear and logical development of ideas. Adequate transitions between paragraphs.	Lacks clear, unstructured, and weak transition between ideas, and paragraphs.	/5
Language	Consistently perfect grammar, spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing. Minimal grammatical and lexical mistakes.	Minimum errors in grammar, spelling and sentence structure, and word usage.	Bolded words and inconsistent paragraphing. Numerous severe grammatical and lexical errors.	/5
References/Documentation	Sources are current and well-integrated, supporting student statements.	Sources support some claims and not enough integrated. Inconsistent citations and do not well support students' statements.	Improper use of the research sources, not well integrated, and do not support students' statements.	/5

After developing the rubric, the instructor introduced and explained the six elements of the report writing rubric. The six elements and scale were discussed, and students' questions were answered, and some clarifications were added. Most of the students (82/97) expressed high enthusiasm and declared that they would adopt and follow the rubric when writing the final report (fig. 4).

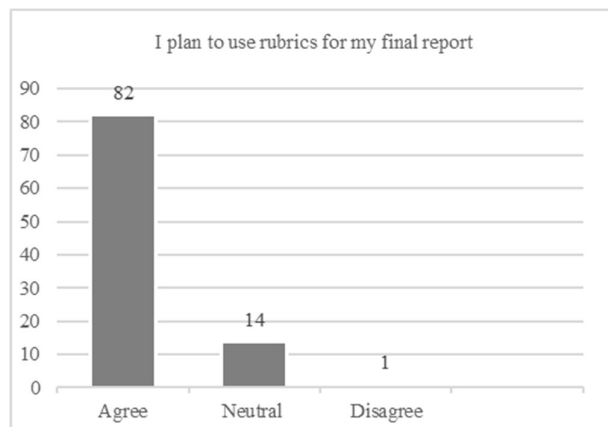


Figure 3. I plan to use rubrics for my final report.

5.3 Cycle 3: Students revise and submit the final report based on the rubric

Based on cycle one and cycle 2, the students were asked to write the final report using the new report rubric, which helped the instructor to assess their performance.

5.3.1 Procedure and action

Students were engaged in writing their final report per the new rubric and submitting it on the due date. The reports were corrected; the grades and feedback were submitted to the students. Semi-directive interviews were conducted with eight students to explore the students' opinions about their writing processes with and without rubrics.

5.3.2 Cycle 3 results

During the third cycle, the MCO350 showed a high level of independence, and The newly developed rubric with six traits helped the instructor to assess MCO350 students' final report. A total score shows that 87% of the students meet or exceed expectations (Fig. 5).

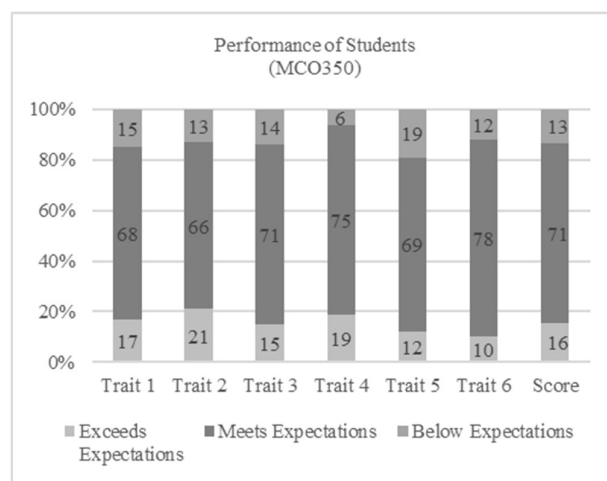


Figure 4. Students' performance

5.4 Students performance

The qualitative content analysis was used to analyses students' interviews. The results of the interview confirm the outcomes obtained during the 3 cycles.

Most of the interviewed students mentioned how the rubric guide them in writing their reports: "with the rubric in

front of me, I can see which subtopics need more explanation and which points need to be included. It made writing a lot easier for me”; “the rubric has assisted me a lot in writing my report”; “several improvements... more effective thesis writing”.

Most of the students were asked about their thoughts on the rubrics used to compose the report. They provided favorable comments, stating that the rubrics were detailed and easy to utilize as a writing guide: “In my opinion, the rubrics are more explicit and more precise”; “I like the rubric because it is more thorough, and I can see what I should write”.

Then, when students are asked about the changes perceived in their written work as a result of consulting the rubric during the writing of their report, the majority of the students agreed about the positive impact of using a rubric on the quality of their written work after they revise their work: “previously, I wrote about new trends in media in general without making any connection to the learning process. Now, I comprehend the need to be specific and thorough”; “I am more confident in writing the report because the rubric specified clear criteria and materials required”; “now we have a better idea of what we should write in the report”.

6. Evaluation and Reflection

The study's primary goal was to investigate the usefulness of utilizing an assessment rubric to help students improve their writing abilities for their report and investigate students' impressions of using rubrics in an MCO 350 course. This study addressed two research questions, and this section will describe the study's conclusions based on each question individually.

When the rubric's criteria were introduced and discussed with the students, they felt satisfaction since they could write with purpose and clarity instead of adding irrelevant information and material. After applying the rubric, their writing became more focused, particularly when characterizing the research topic, creating research questions, and expressing operational definitions of essential variables. The students began to write more consciously, referring to and linking their present work to their respective research areas.

How does an assessment rubric influence the effectiveness of students' report writing?

Based on the analyses of the students' two writing attempts and their interview responses, there is evidence that the adoption of an evaluation rubric, in general, has a favourable influence on students' capacity to write their reports. Students are aware of the report's required components. The rubric's performance standards serve as crucial instructions in assisting students to satisfy the required specifications and properly compose their reports.

What differences do students see in their written work due to their introduction utilizing the rubric?

When the professor introduced and explained the rubric to the students, they expressed satisfaction since they could write with focus and precision without spending time adding irrelevant information and materials. After utilizing the new rubric in the 2nd report (3rd cycle), their writing became more focused, particularly when characterizing the research topic, generating research questions, and expressing operational definitions of key variables. The students began to write more consciously, referring to and relating their present work to their respective research areas. Their reflections and feedback also supported their conclusions.

What do students think about the assessment rubric?

The students believed that writing rubrics were effective in helping them improve their reports and self-assess their work on their assignments. Analyses of the students' second report, the teacher's written feedback on the students' manuscripts, and the students' responses from the interview sessions revealed that the more precise rubric benefited both the students and the teacher. The new rubric made the required criteria and their explanations clear. Nonetheless, the new rubric requires more changes because some phrases and terms were new and challenging to understand.

7. Conclusion

This three-cycle action research investigated using assessment rubrics to help MCO 350 students write reports. The findings demonstrated that using rubrics improved students' research writing and taught them sustainably on the task's specific criteria. A well-designed and validated rubric fitted to the program and course objectives will help students learn (Clabough & Clabough, 2016; Carson & Kavish, 2018; Jonsson & Panadero, 2018; Bukhari, 2021). Students can benefit from evaluation rubrics with some teacher assistance and constructive feedback (Fraile

et al., 2017).

A well-designed rubric allows students to critically evaluate their work (Huskin, 2016) and build critical thinking and decision-making skills. Students can self-regulate their learning by regularly assessing their performance against the rubric's performance criteria (Kaur et al., 2019).

Only 97 students from one section were evaluated. We recognize the importance of testing the new criteria with more students from the department and related fields. Prospective future researchers who value accuracy may focus on expanding the rubric for the remaining report writing.

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