

OTL 541 - Portfolio Project

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Part 1: Feedback and Rubrics: A Synthesis of My Research

Feedback and rubrics are the fundamental, bi-directional communication tools used between a learner and the facilitator in an academic course. These tools may be used formally or informally, but they always convey expectations or deliver results. Their effectiveness depends on whether they are properly designed and used correctly. I'll discuss feedback first, as I see rubrics as a sub-set of feedback.

Why is Feedback important?

In a distance education or online learning environment, feedback takes on a stronger significance than in a traditional classroom. In these remote settings, many of the implicit communication channels, such as facial expressions and vocal tone, which we normally call upon, are either missing or packaged in a very different media. Additionally, the physical separation experienced by both learner and facilitator adds a layer of complexity to the normal communications that occur during a learning event. Feedback, when designed properly, and used correctly, encourages a learner to connect, and stay connected, to their learning community. Feedback shows the learner that the facilitator is engaged in their learning, which may have a strong motivational effect. In a reciprocal fashion, feedback to the facilitator may point out instructional design or content development issues that the learner has encountered.

Race (2001) connects feedback to a key educational objective – developing competence. In his Competency model of learning, he marks two axes – competence and incompetence vs. unconscious and conscious (see graphic below). These axes define four quadrants where learners fall, based on their level of competence and their understanding of this competence. For the purposes of this paper, I've numbered each quadrant.



Race, 2001

Race comments that the overall educational objective is to move a learner from Quad 1, where the learner is not aware of what they are not competent to do; into Quad 2 where they have gained the awareness, but still lack competence; and finally, into Quad 3 where they are both aware and competent.

Quad 1 is the real focus of a facilitator's feedback. It is a challenging area for feedback, as the facilitator must bring about awareness of the learner's incompetence without damaging their confidence. As will be discussed later, this is a prime target for educative, motivational or communicative rubrics. Quad 2 is familiar territory for a facilitator. Its focus is to continue supporting a learner as they find their way towards competence. Quad 3 can also be a bit tricky for feedback. These learners know they are competent, so feedback must be at an appropriate level without being condescending. Formative, and perhaps summative, rubrics are effective feedback tools for these two quads. Quad 4 is typical of adult learners. They bring a wide range of competencies from their life experiences to their learning; however, they are often unaware of these competencies. Feedback that brings these competencies into their consciousness results in improved self-esteem, and is highly motivational. I love that Race calls it magic. ©

Feedback Characteristics

Feedback provides two functions: delivers information, as in an assessment or evaluation, or it acknowledges, as in automatic email response. But what does effective feedback look like? Race (2001) provides these characteristics,

- Timely – the sooner the better
- Intimate and individual – fits each learner’s achievement, individual nature, and personality
- Empowering – strengthen and consolidates learning, even if it is negative
- Opens doors, not closes them – single adjectives, such as ‘weak’ or ‘excellent’ have a finality that may stop consideration of other feedback. Instead, use comments with slightly greater detail that leads the learner to read to the end of the feedback
- Manageable – provide enough that learners or facilitators aren’t overwhelmed, either by the time commitment, or by the content (important vs. routine).

What is a Rubric?

Rubrics represent a formal feedback mechanism. The American Heritage Dictionary (2009) defines rubric (when used as a noun) as ‘an authoritative rule or direction’ and ‘a short commentary or explanation covering a broad subject.’ When used as an adjective, it is defined as ‘written in red.’ Considering all of these ideas, one can see that a rubric in an educational context suggests the idea of assessment and evaluation. Simply stated, a rubric is a ‘tool used to assess or guide a learner’s performance on a given task in a given context given certain standards’ (Varvel, 2004). To this I would add that a rubric may also be applied to a facilitator, a course, or an institution. This puts a rubric solidly into the arena of feedback.

Types and Formats of Rubrics

Generally, there are two types or approaches to creating a rubric: analytical or holistic. An analytical rubric is concerned with assessing or evaluating specific categories (criteria) of an artifact or a behavior. It attempts to break the thing apart in order to understand its whole, and therefore has several scales for each category under assessment. A holistic rubric is the flip-side of that coin. It looks at the whole in order to understand the broader level of achievement. A holistic rubric has only one scale, and all categories use it.

Each type of rubric, described above, generally uses different formats. Since an analytical rubric uses multiple scales, it appears as a grid or matrix, listing several categories (in rows) and several levels of achievement (in columns). At the intersection of a row and column is a description, which is used to compare with the artifact produced by the learner, or the learner's behavior. Here's an example I created:

Category	Unacceptable	Acceptable	Exceeds Expectations
Promptness and Frequency	You received reminders to participate 0 Points	You post to the discussion within 3 days, and contribute to each your colleague's posts within 2 days of their posting. 60 Points	You post to the discussion the day it opens, and contribute to each of your colleague's posts the same day as they post. 125 Points
Relevancy	Your responses are off topic, are sketchy, or are limited to "cheerleading" 0 Points	Your responses are on topic, may add new information, ask questions, challenge assumptions; they may include "cheerleading" 60 Points	Responses show investigation outside the strict boundaries of the topic; could be a tangential, but relevant, topic; increases the breadth or depth of the discussion; they are supportive of your colleague's learning. In each discussion, at least two of your posts (to your colleagues) are a challenge/counter-challenge, and one of your posts augments their position. 125 Points

Holistic rubrics have a couple of format options because they have only one scale. A checklist is one option. Although a checklist does not address the issue of quality in the same way that a matrix does, it does create a baseline of acceptable product or behavior. The checklist acts as the categories, and the simple yes/no response tells the learner and the facilitator whether the basic level of achievement has been met. Another option for a holistic rubric is a tool that ranks categories, such as a survey. The questions or statements act as the categories, and the scale describes the level of achievement. This format could be effective as both a pre-learning and post-learning assessment.

Purposes for Rubrics

As stated in Varvel's definition, the purpose of a rubric is to assess or guide. This translates into six purposes: formative or summative assessment, evaluation, educative, motivational, and communicative (Varvel, 2004). The table below briefly summarizes these types:

Purpose	Description
Formative Assessment	Used during a learning event; usually is an analytical rubric; may or may have points assigned to the level of achievement; determines the learner's strength or weakness with the topic; could also capture whether a project or group is on target to meet timelines or learning outcomes
Summative Assessment	Used at the end of a course; usually is an analytical rubric; captures the results of the learner's efforts during the learning event; may determine the next step for the learner's learning program; may or may not be scored; may be used with an individual or a group
Evaluation	Used at the end of a course; measures effectiveness and quality of course design and of the facilitator; usually is a holistic rubric; Could also be used before a course to measure prior knowledge, or learner expectations
Educative	Used during a learning event; usually is an analytical rubric; no scoring; focuses on a learner's self-assessment in understanding the content, for example, in preparation for an exam

Purpose	Description
Motivational	Used before or during a learning event; usually is an analytical rubric; no scoring; outlines expectations for a learner's artifact or behavior; no sub-par levels of achievement; connects learning outcomes with learner's real-life needs and wants; becomes motivational when the learner understand how they can do well on the assignment, in the class, etc.
Communicative	Used after a learning event; usually is an analytical rubric; a modification of a formative or summative rubric that outlines how and why a learner was evaluated in a particular manner. Audiences can be the learner, parents, or administrations.

After Varvel (2004).

Developing a Quality Rubric

Developing a quality rubric is usually an iterative process. Downing (n.d.) in preparing an abstract on two studies about the use of rubrics, comments that

Quality rubrics are not cast in stone—they are revised, based on students work. The use of “anchor papers” or exemplars at each level of achievement constructing or modifying a rubric is advocated. By using student work as a basis, teachers are more likely to be realistic in their expectations of students...Various researchers advocate scoring between six and 20 tasks before a determination of level of mastery accurately can be achieved.

Varvel (2004), in his excellent *Rubrics* tutorial, provides several benchmark questions about the results delivered by a rubric, as a way of assessing whether a redesign or iteration is necessary. These benchmark questions revolve around validity, reliability, consistency, objectivity, and usability. The focus of these benchmarks is to identify unexpected results, trends, difficulties, bias, etc. The benchmarks also focus on reusability, as a commonly stated benefit of rubrics is to help a facilitator improve efficiency in their practice, and to produce equivalent assessments from one facilitator to the next.

Rogers & Graham in their 1998 book titled *The High Performance Toolbox*, present a rubric for evaluating rubrics. They list four categories: emerging, developing, acceptable, and

exemplary. The table below is their rubric for an Exemplary rubric. This description aligns with Downing's comments on using examples of exemplary work, and reflects Varvel's benchmarks on validity, consistency, and usability.

<p>Exemplary Rubrics are consistently effective for accurate and thorough evaluations and/or guidance.</p>	<p>The rubric is...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • based on diverse, exemplary models of a clearly identified product, performance, or process, its intended purpose or impact, and the embedded targeted learning. • accompanied by 3 or more diverse, aligned examples for each level. • composed of clear, precise, thorough & accurate criteria to define each quality level. • each identified criteria for the exemplary level is accurately addressed for each level. • totally understood and easily used by all involved. • promoting and not stifling or penalizing of creative approaches.
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Criticism of Rubrics

Progressive Education evangelist, Alfie Kohn, writing an op-ed piece in the *English Journal* titled *The Trouble with Rubrics* (2006), comments that rubrics are no more of an authentic assessment than grade cards. He feels that rubrics are designed and used, not to replace grades, but to legitimize them by justifying how they are derived. He feels that trying to assess understanding of ideas, especially in children, is an imprecise, subjective exercise, one that involves more human judgment than a rubric allows. He also feels that rubrics, in the hands of students, are very de-motivating. Students work only to the quality issue – “how am I doing?” instead of focusing on the ideas – “what am I doing?” Instead of thinking about understanding, they focus on the assessment. Some students have anecdotally commented that they feel rubrics are a “gotcha” tool. Rubrics tell them what to do, and when they don’t or can’t, the instructors say “well, you had the rubric”. He also comments about studies which show the negative relationship between a student’s focus on quality (aka the assessment rubric) and shallow thinking, lack of perseverance in failure, and an attitude of “it’s just the way I am” when the

outcome isn't what was expected. He concludes his essay by reminding us that our focus in assessment is not on the 'how' but on the 'why'? Why do we assess? Are we attempting to rank students, or push them to try harder? Or are we looking for evidence that encourages students to be excited about what they are learning?

Conclusion to Part 1

Feedback and rubrics are critical communication tools in a distance education or online learning environment. They are the mechanisms that facilitators use to support learners as they move into a conscious competence with the courses' content. Since there are so many challenges to overcome with distance/online learning, it is important that facilitators understand how to effectively convey expectations and deliver results. Rubrics are an excellent, formal mechanism for providing this feedback that is appropriate for all audiences.

Part 2: Peer Module Review using Quality Matters (QM) Rubric

The course module provided to me by JenniferN concerns learning how to evaluate academic transcripts for credit at the baccalaureate level. The purpose of her course appears to be as training for a university employee, so it intersects both corporate training and academic learning – an interesting juxtaposition. In her preface, Jennifer notes that this course is only an introduction to commonly covered topics. This course module appears in a Power Point presentation, partly as an outline to the course, and partly as slides that are fully developed content, so I have looked for indications that additional development is expected/will be done. She presents the content in a logical manner. She uses a variety of media approaches, so the learner is not simply reading a lecture on the screen, and has designed the sections to be independent of each other, allowing the learner to direct his learning. Jennifer approaches the content as if the learner has no prior knowledge and explores a variety of conventional and

unconventional sources of academic transcripts. Reading the course, and her supporting paper, shows me that she is a subject matter expert in this topic; the content has a confident tone, and is strongly supported by resources.

In the table below, I have looked for evidence of each of the QM Rubrics standards. If I found a slide that at least moderately met the idea of the standard, I listed it in the Evidence column. If an item appears to be missing, I've noted it as well. Jennifer (or others) might disagree with me as to whether some of the standards are, in fact, missing. In those situations, I'd suggest that the standard needs to be made more strongly evident in the course. The QM Rubric assigns points for each standard; those that I felt were present are shown in red. The points total to 54, which misses the review expectations of 72 points. In addition, Jennifer's course did not meet all of the 3-point Essential Standards.

In the sub-sections below the table, I've addressed some specific standards where I felt the course needs some attention.

	Standard	Evidence	Points
Course Overview & Introduction	1.1 Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components.	Missing	3
	1.2 A statement introduces the student to the purpose of the course and to its components; in the case of a hybrid course, the statement clarifies the relationship between the face-to-face and online components.	Slide3, Slide8, Slide 9	3
	1.3 Etiquette expectations (sometimes called "netiquette" for online discussions, email, and other forms of communication are stated clearly.	Missing	1
	1.4 The self-introduction by the instructor is appropriate and available online.	Missing	1
	1.5 Students are asked to introduce themselves to the class.	Missing	1
	1.6 Minimum student preparation, and, if applicable, prerequisite knowledge in the discipline are clearly stated.	Missing	1
	1.7 Minimum technical skills expected of the student are clearly stated.	Missing	1
			TOTAL: 3 points

	Standard	Evidence	Points
Learning Objectives	2.1 The course learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable.	Slide 5, 6	3
	2.2 The module/unit learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable and consistent with the course-level objectives.	Missing	3
	2.3 All learning objectives are stated clearly and written from the students' perspective.	Slide 5, 6	3
	2.4 Instructions to students on how to meet the learning objectives are adequate and stated clearly.	Missing	3
	2.5 The learning objectives are appropriately designed for the level of the course.	Slide 5,6	2
			TOTAL: 8 points
Assessment & Measurement	3.1 The types of assessments selected measure the stated learning objectives and are consistent with course activities and resources.	Slide 24, 60, 66	3
	3.2 The course grading policy is stated clearly.	Slide 14, however, information about how 'demonstration of mastery' happens and how to determine certification is missing	3
	3.3 Specific and descriptive criteria are provided for the evaluation of students' work and participation.	Missing	3
	3.4 The assessment instruments selected are sequenced, varied, and appropriate to the content being assessed.	Slide 26, Slide 77	2
	3.5 "Self-check" or practice assignments are provided, with timely feedback to students.	Not present, except if the quizzes are considered self-assessment, rather than facilitator-type assessments.	2
			TOTAL: 8 points
Resources & Materials	4.1 The instructional materials contribute to the achievement of the stated course and module/unit learning objectives.	Slide 29	3
	4.2 The relationship between the instructional materials and the learning activities is clearly explained to the student.	Slide 29, 71	3
	4.3 The instructional materials have sufficient breadth, depth, and currency for the student to learn the subject.	Slide 29, 71	2
	4.4. All resources and materials used in the course are appropriately cited.	Slide 32	1
			TOTAL: 9 points
Learner Engagement	5.1 The learning activities promote the achievement of the stated learning objectives.	Slide 37	3
	5.2 Learning activities foster instructor-student, content-student, and if appropriate to the course, student-student interaction.	Slide 37,51, 55,71– content/student, Slide 50, 26 – student/student; Missing – facilitator/student	3
	5.3 Clear standards are set for instructor responsiveness and availability (turn-around time for email, grade posting, etc.)	Slide 11	2
	5.4 The requirements for student interaction are clearly articulated.	Missing: The Research Activities (37, 51, 55) are great, but there is no output. Just reading.	2
			TOTAL: 8 points

	Standard	Evidence	Points
Course Technology	6.1 The tools and media support the learning objectives, and are appropriately chosen to deliver the content of the course.	Slide 64, 60, 70, and others, though in some cases it seems that external resources (links) are used in place of real instruction on a topic	3
	6.2 The tools and media support student engagement and guide the student to become an active learner.	Slide 64	3
	6.3 Navigation throughout the online components of the course is logical, consistent, and efficient.	Slide 4	3
	6.4 Students have ready access to the technologies required in the course.	Slide 10	2
	6.5 The course components are compatible with current standards for delivery modes.	Slide 64	1
	6.6 Instructions on how to access resources at a distance are sufficient and easy to understand.	Missing: Links are present, but just assumed that learner knows how to use them.	1
	6.7 The course design takes full advantage of available tools and media.	Links to web – many; Video discussions – Slide 64; Discussion forum – slide 60; Online quiz – Slides 24, 60, 66; Sample Transcripts - 70	1
			TOTAL: 13 points
Learner Support	7.1 The course instructions articulate or link to clear description of the technical support offered.	Slide 10	2
	7.2 Course instructions articulate or link to an explanation of how the institution's academic support system can assist the student in effectively using the resources provided.	Missing	2
	7.3 Course instructions articulate or link to an explanation of how the institution's student support services can help students reach their educational goals.	Missing	1
	7.4 Course instructions answer basic questions related to research, writing, technology, etc., or link to tutorials or other resources that provide the information.	Missing	1
			TOTAL: 2 points
Accessibility	8.1 The course incorporates ADA standards and reflect conformance with institutional policy regarding accessibility in online and hybrid courses.	Slide 8	3
	8.2 Course pages and course materials provide equivalent alternatives to auditory and visual content.	Not explicitly stated	2
	8.3 Course pages have links that are self-describing and meaningful.	Slide 4	2
	8.4 The course ensures screen readability.	Not explicitly stated	1
			TOTAL: 3 points

Total: 54 points.

Course Overview & Introduction

The PowerPoint presentation (PPT) has 12 slides (out of 78) that fall under this standard, so I was quite surprised to see so many of the sub-points missing entirely. The missing points focus around things that I believe Jennifer would implicitly expect to have happen during the start up of the course, or be provided by the LMS, such as introductions

discussion questions and netiquette; however, stating learner's prior knowledge requirements explicitly is very important. Improving this section would deliver an additional seven points.

Learning Objectives

There is a mismatch between the level of cognitive process Jennifer has used in writing her learning objectives, and the actual coursework. I found words like Identify, Classify, and Recognize in the learning objectives, which are at the lowest (Remember/Knowledge) level as described by Bloom's Taxonomy. However, I found that the assessments (activities, discussions, research, etc.) draw from **all** of the other cognitive processes. Additionally, these assessments ask the students to draw on their meta-cognition. This is fantastic! I believe that the learning objectives need to be reworked to match the excellent cognitive range that the content already possesses.

Unfortunately, there is no information in the course about how learners are to meet these learning objectives, in other words, a performance rubric. QM considers this an Essential Standard. Meeting this standard would provide an additional three points.

Assessment & Measurement

This standard was hard to sort out in Jennifer's course, partly because of the wide variety of activities that are present (see *Learner Engagement* section below). There are 3 or 4 online quizzes, which are more like "Checking Your Understanding". In other words, they are somewhat lacking in their rigorousness as an assessment. These quizzes might, however, be considered as the 'self-check' standard. There are two Assessment Activities (Slides 69 and 70); however, there is no content leading up to the assessment on Slide 69, and there are no instructions as to how the learner is to deliver his answers for the assessment on Slide 70.

Additionally, there are no rubrics (or notations that a rubric will be included in the final development) for either of these assessments.

There is another disconnect between the Course Grading Policy, which states there are no grades but that there will be a “demonstration of mastery”, and a Certification of Competency. I did not find anything in the course (as developed thus far) that shows how a learner demonstrates their mastery to the facilitator (i.e., a mechanism), or how a facilitator can justify providing the certification. In addition to lacking an effective mechanism, there is no mention of a rubric that would guide a facilitator as they made their assessments and evaluation. The rubric is a QM Essential Standard. Meeting this standard would provide an additional 3 points.

Resources & Materials

This was another standard that was difficult to sort out in Jennifer’s course, primarily because of the last sub-point, which involves proper citation of resources and materials.

There are abundant resources, primarily as links, but only 1 source citation. This created the following questions in my mind:

- Is the lack of citations for sources because Jennifer is writing from a position of strength (aka, she’s a SME), and therefore, hasn’t used external sources to build the content? Would another developer have a similarly cited course?
- Is the abundant use of links a roundabout way of citing her sources? Or are these links really just part of learning activities?

I found in many cases that the slide did not contain any instructions or information about how the student was to understand the link – was it an informational resource or a learning activity that they needed to investigate? I believe she intends these to be part of

learning activities; however, the lack of the usual APA formatted citations, and the lack of instructions, left me with questions.

Learner Engagement

The Learner Engagement standards are about the content – how and how well does the content in the course keep the learner involved and moving forward? As I have completed OTL 541, I have come to see that the activities in the content are often formative assessments. As I considered Jennifer's course, I found myself trying to figure out whether an activity was, in fact, an assessment. Jennifer has put a lot of effort into providing a diverse learning experience, however, it feels sloppy. The course has a Learning Activity (Slide 75), a Review Activity (Slide 71), two Assessment Activities (Slides 69, 70), two Research Activities (37, 51), two Application Activities (Slides 77), two Analysis Activities (28, 55), and all of them have essentially the same approach: go read/review something online. Only some ask the learner to develop a response of some type. In other words, it is not clear what makes a Review activity different from an Analysis activity. If the intent is to work at various cognitive levels, which I think would be awesome, then the intent needs to be more rigorous. Using the verbs from Bloom's Taxonomy would be extremely helpful. I also believe the learner would be better served if these activities were 'branded' with a single name, require a response from the learner in every situation (write a paper, go to the discussion forum, upload a practice evaluation, etc.), give clear and concise instructions for that response (which are missing on nearly all of these slides), and a designation as to whether it is a practice activity or an assessment activity. And provide the assessment rubrics. ☺ Improving the level of learner instruction would provide an additional two points.

Conclusion to Part 2

In reviewing Jennifer's PPT, I found an engaging, content-rich, but only partially designed course that had already begun development. Strong in the Course Technology and the Resources & Materials standards, the design lacks a substantial amount in Course Overview and Introduction. I also found that, although the design mustered enough evidence for me to consider that the standard had been met, such as Learner Engagement and Assessments & Measurement standards, the design is at a draft level and needs considerable rework before developing. I would love to take the completed course.

Part 3: The Quality Matters (QM) Rubric

In order to evaluate the QM Rubric, I needed a rubric, or at least a checklist of what constitutes a good rubric. The QM Rubric is a holistic evaluation rubric, so here's a checklist of criteria that I've chosen:

- Does the rubric relate to the outcome(s) being measured?
- Does it cover important criteria for student performance?
- Does the top end of the rubric reflect excellence?
- Are the criteria and scales well-defined?
- Can the rubric be applied consistently by different scorers?

(Stevens & Levi, 2005). Since the QM rubric is about evaluating *course* performance, instead of student performance, I am going to change the wording of the 2nd bullet point to reflect this.

History

The Quality Matters™ Rubric was developed by MarylandOnline, Inc. in 2003 with funding from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). The three-

year project goal was to build a repeatable quality assurance and course improvement process, which would begin to align online programs at the state and national levels (MarylandOnline, 2006). At the end of the grant project, MarylandOnline, Inc. has continued as a self-supporting organization. Its focus is on peer-based course evaluations, using the QM Rubric, and on training faculty to implement QM-based curriculum reviews in their own organizations. QM focuses on academic online or hybrid courses, and does not evaluate any corporate university programs. The rubric has undergone two revisions since 2006; each revision is “in effect” for approximately two years. During a revision, peer-reviewed journals, educational databases, and dissertation abstractions published since the previous QM revision, are reviewed for themes, etc (MarylandOnline, 2006).

Evaluating the QM Rubric

All of the evidence given in the table below comes from direct quotes on the Quality Matters.org website, from the QM Rubric itself, or from the Quality Matters Rubric Workbook, 2008-2010 editions (MarylandOnline).

Standard	Evidence	Rating		
		Always 	Mostly 	Never 
Does the rubric relate to the outcome(s) being measured?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is a nationally recognized, faculty-centered, peer review process designed to certify the quality of online courses and online components (website, Home page). • The distinguishing feature of courses for which this rubric is applicable is the use of technology (a course management system) to structure and drive the teaching and learning in the course (workbook, p. 1). • Specifically focuses on course design, rather than on course delivery or course academic content. For the purposes of a review, consider the design aspect to include the faculty's role in the forethought and planning of the course, as well as the creation, assembly, and layout of instructions and course components (workbook, pg. 1). 			
Does it cover important criteria for course performance?	<p>The rubric covers eight broad standards including:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Course Overview and Introduction 2. Learning Objectives 3. Assessment and Measurement 4. Resources and Materials 5. Learner Engagement 6. Course Technology 7. Learner Support 8. Accessibility <p>(website, Rubric page)</p>			
Does the top end of the rubric reflect excellence?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Quality Matters Rubric consists of 40 standards assigned different points depending on their relative importance. Seventeen (17) of the standards are considered essential in a quality online course and have the highest point value of three (3) (workbook, p. 2). 			

Standard	Evidence	Rating		
		Always 	Mostly 	Never 
Are the criteria and scales well-defined?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each standard is defined – for example, Course Overview and Introduction says “The overall design of the course is made clear to the student at the beginning of the course (QM Rubric) • The Quality Matters Rubric consists of 40 standards assigned different points depending on their relative importance. Seventeen (17) of the standards are considered essential in a quality online course and have the highest point value of three (3). The remaining 23 standards are assigned 1 or 2 points. The maximum number of possible points is 85. (workbook, p. 2) • The reviewer looks for evidence of the standard in the course, and decides if it meets the standard 85% of the time. (workbook, p. 1) 			
Can the rubric be applied consistently by different scorers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While Quality Matters (QM) is known for its course review process and peer reviewer certification program, QM also offers a variety of courses that are designed to help and support faculty in the development of effective online courses (website, Training page) • Provides training in Peer Review Certification, Master Review Certification, workshops on various standards, Building and improving an online course using the QM Rubric (website, Training page) 			

Comparing QM against Best Practices

In 2006, Maryland Online, Inc. undertook a comparison of the QM Rubric with the 2001 *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs*, as published by the eight regional accrediting bodies and endorsed by Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). This best practices document is no longer available, except as outlined in the comparison authored by Maryland Online, Inc.’s Executive Director, Ronald Legon. Overall, the comparison found that the QM Rubric matched the best practices for course-level items. Institutional-level items obviously are not the forte of the QM Rubric. The review found three

areas where the QM Rubric might benefit from fine tuning. These were: the nature, availability and effectiveness of technical support services; security and confidentiality in testing; and, the security of personal information in the grade book (Legon, p. 8).

Legon's conclusion was that the QM Rubric was fully consistent with the best practices, and that using the QM Rubric at the course level may reflect on the institution's commitment to quality assurance.

Conclusion

It is hard to suggest changes to a tool that has so obviously been well considered, well designed, and routinely maintained. As I used the QM Rubric to evaluate Jennifer's course, I had only the standards in the rubric to guide me (i.e., I did not have the annotations of the workbook). Later, when I found the workbook annotations online, I reviewed the evaluation that I'd given previously. I only changed two items, things that I had marked as N/A, but which I changed to Missing once I fully understood the context of the standard. While reading the workbook annotations, I had only one point that I questioned. This was the instruction to look for evidence of the standard, and decide if it meets the standard 85% of the time (Maryland Online, 2009, p. 1). Initially, I wanted more information about how to make that decision; eventually, I decided that was a fault on my part, and not on the rubric's. My experience tells me that the QM Rubric is effective and usable. As a rubric for academic courses, I feel that the MarylandOnline organization has demonstrated their commitment to routinely reviewing the rubric against new research. I wish they would apply tackle corporate online courses next. ☺

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