

# Designing an Assessment Rubric with Students



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## Introduction

I will always consider my Information Behaviour class (INFO 6682) a grand experiment. Although I had gained teaching experience as a teaching assistant and an academic librarian, this was my first opportunity to instruct an entire course. The course began as a hypothetical project for CNLT 5000, Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, the theory component of the Certificate in University Teaching and Learning (CUTL) program offered by Dalhousie's Centre for Learning and Teaching. However, the Director of the School of Information Management (SIM) liked the premise of the course and I was asked to instruct it during the winter term of 2007. And thus began my exploration into learning and teaching.

While I was confident in the content, I knew from the CUTL program that knowing what to teach is only half the battle. The bigger challenges are delivering that content in an engaging way and in assessing students' learning. As my students assembled for our first evening class, little did they know that they were participants in a teaching experiment that would involve me putting to the test some of the theories I had learned in CNLT 5000; I would be seeing what active learning and assessment looked like in practice.

## The Course

The course focused on information behaviour, a topic pertaining to how people articulate their information needs and how they locate, evaluate, organize, and use information in their daily lives. Graduates of the SIM work in diverse settings, including academic, public, and special libraries. In these capacities they will require an awareness of the information-seeking behaviours of a range of people: children, seniors, scholars, health consumers and practitioners, and professionals such as lawyers, architects, journalists, etc. Each week in the course we focused on a particular group of information seekers or on a facet of information behaviour, such as evaluating information or making decisions about what is 'sufficient' or 'good' information.

## The Learners

My students were budding information professionals enrolled in the two-year Master of Library and Information Science program; one student was from the Master of Health Informatics program. The small number of students (14), and the fact that they were graduate students, made it feel more like a seminar course.

My goal was that they would make connections between the worlds of scholars and practitioners, and between theory and practice. For students, the research done by others can seem far removed from "real-world" applications. In their undergraduate years, these students may have had few opportunities to apply their knowledge and understanding in real world settings. My students

wanted tangible, experiential learning. I wanted to make them critical thinkers: to learn how to analyse, evaluate, and apply theory in information management practice. In particular, I wanted them to have the opportunity to play the roles of both purveyors and recipients of information in a classroom setting and to have them reflect upon these experiences within the framework of the theories we were studying.

## Seminar Assignment

To achieve these goals the students were asked to select two to three pertinent research articles on a subject of interest to them, integrate the ideas from these papers with their own views, share this with the class, and produce a handout summarizing the references and "take home message" of the seminar. The intent was for students to demonstrate the ability to select and critique pertinent research, identify the most salient aspects of the papers, and gain experience presenting to their peers.

I made peer evaluation a component of this assignment with half of each student's mark derived from the average of the grades assigned by their peers. Part of my rationale was to encourage students to pay attention: having to assess the presenter would keep students actively listening. Students earned a small portion of the grade for class participation from their work as peer evaluators. This both encouraged students to take the assignment seriously and gave those students not comfortable speaking in class an alternative way to earn participation marks.

In addition, since SIM emphasizes professional application, by assessing each other, students had the opportunity to practice giving and receiving feedback. This gave everyone a chance to be in the shoes of the presenter and the evaluator, and (I hoped) to develop compassion for the challenges associated with both of these roles.

### The Rubric

In order to incorporate peer evaluation into the seminar assignment, students needed guidance about how to apply assessment criteria for fairness and consistency. I decided that creating a rubric would assist us in this. Grading rubrics define the criteria by which learners will be assessed on a specific task.

There is a plethora of rubrics for assessing presentations. However, I wanted the rubric to be meaningful to my students and felt that, if they had a hand in its creation, the assessment would better reflect their ideas about what made for an effective seminar presentation. Working together in class, we considered the question, “What makes a good or a poor presentation?” and identified the qualities of an effective presenter and presentation. From their suggestions I created the criteria for the assessment rubric.

### Responses to the Rubric

Some students were not comfortable with the peer evaluation component or the notion of rubrics. I must admit I did not expect these reservations, but I took the opportunity to discuss these

issues with the group. For some, the idea of judging one’s peers was upsetting. Given the close-knit nature of SIM, classmates are also friends. What if I give my honest opinion and someone feels hurt? What if that someone is me? In addition, some students who had rubrics applied in other levels of their education felt they were too rigid. As a result of these concerns, I ensured that the feedback was anonymous. I compiled the peer evaluations for each speaker and typed up the comments, handing them over to the presenter with my own. This enabled me to “filter” any critique that was not framed in a constructive manner. The rubric (see p.11) used a simple three-point scale to rate whether the presenter/presentation met the criteria “completely,” “partially,” or “not at all.” Space was provided for the evaluator to comment on

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the “highlight” of the presentation and to assign a mark out of 10.

### My own reflections

Incorporating peer review was aimed in part at encouraging attendance and attention, but more importantly at developing empathy for being a presenter and an

audience member. Speakers also benefited from viewing multiple perspectives on their work because it gave them a better understanding of how others take in and process information—a key idea of the course content. Through the peer evaluation and the seminar itself, I was able to incorporate elements of active learning. Succinctly defined, active learning is “anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they

are doing” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 2). Active learning has three components: information and ideas; experiences; and reflection (Fink, 2003). Through the seminars, students shared information and ideas with others and gained experience in the roles of speaking and critiquing. In addition, evaluating others and viewing feedback from the instructor and classmates, students had an opportunity to reflect on what makes an effective presentation, and thus to better understand how to apply this learning to their own practice as information management specialists. According to Fink, incorporating the three elements of active learning into this assignment provided a foundation for holistic learning that contributed to the growth of learners.

### Conclusion

In summary, despite students’ initial concerns over peer evaluation and rubrics, the seminar assignments were successful—both for the students and for me, their teacher. Students demonstrated that they could give praise and focus on the positive elements of classmates’ seminars, but could also suggest improvements and alternative ways of approaching the presentation or topic. I think that giving students a say in how they were evaluated goes a long way towards empowering them. It gives the learners some control over the assessment process by enabling them to communicate what they believe are valuable and appropriate evaluation criteria. But it also enhances students’ understanding of why they have been given a particular assignment

and of the intended learning outcomes and the expectations of their teacher and classmates. The success of this experiment is due in large part to the maturity and open-mindedness of the participants; it may prove more difficult to

implement with larger classes or with less experienced students.

This experience also helped me to grow as a teacher. I gained more insight into students' feelings around assessment and the assignments we give them. I

also gained more confidence in my role as an experimenter. Not everything went as planned, but I accomplished what I set out to and learned more in the unexpected. Isn't that what teaching is about?

## References

Bonwell, C.C., & Eison, J.A. (1991). *Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 1. Washington, DC: The George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development.

Fink, L.D. (2003). *Creating significant learning experiences: An integrated approach to designing college courses*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

INFO 6682 Information Behaviour  
Evaluation Criteria for Seminar Presentations

Title of presentation: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of presenter(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### The Presentation:

- was organized logically	Yes	Partially	No	Comments:
- engaged my interest	Yes	Partially	No	Comments:
- contained substantial content	Yes	Partially	No	Comments:
- included questions to stimulate class discussion	Yes	Partially	No	Comments:
- included a handout with the presenter(s)' references and "take home message"	Yes	Partially	No	Comments:

### The Presenter(s):

- facilitated class discussion effectively	Yes	Partially	No	Comments:
- demonstrated enthusiasm and knowledge of the topic	Yes	Partially	No	Comments:
- interacted with the audience through body language, humour, or other learning activities	Yes	Partially	No	Comments:
- brought their own perspective, ideas, and opinions to the topic	Yes	Partially	No	Comments:
- expressed their ideas clearly	Yes	Partially	No	Comments:

The highlights of this seminar for me were: \_\_\_\_\_

My assessment of this presentation is: \_\_\_\_\_ /10