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Designing Online Discussions: Grading with Holistic Rubrics [1]

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A quick perusal of the internet will turn up an unlimited number of extremely complicated rubrics for discussion boards. They can be overwhelming and scary. They can make you feel like you are nickel and diming your students for every aspect of their participation. Also, a callback to my previous post: discussions are not meant to serve as a platform for long-winded, one-sided speeches, but this is how it often translates online. Banal, wordy "discussions" can also translate into assessment burden and burnout for instructors.

Enter the Holistic Rubric

Holistic rubrics are not the be all, end all panacea for anyone's grading needs, but they do have their place in evaluation and assessment. I happen to love holistic rubrics because of their simplicity- all criteria are grouped together by performance level (see example below). I find them especially useful for discussions, because a true discussion involves back and forth and a holistic rubric allows you to grade with that in mind.

Holistic Rubrics cannot exist in a vacuum, as they don't give targeted feedback. They would be best applied in conjunction with other feedback mechanisms. Instructors should find a method that works for them: active participation in discussion boards, posting an announcement at the week's end summarizing and clarifying main concepts, and/or individual feedback using SpeedGrader. What works for you?

Example: Assignment Prompt and Corresponding Holistic Rubric

Here is a generic discussion prompt and corresponding holistic rubric:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly expanding and already impacts our day to day lives. Let's discuss the present and forecast the future of AI. Use the following questions to guide the discussion:

- **Reflect:**
  - How does AI currently impact your life?
  - What are your favorite applications of AI?
- **Predict:**
  - **?**How do you see AI evolving in the future?
- **Anticipate:**
  - How will AI continue to impact society (negatively or positively)?
  - Are there associated issues with AI that society needs to address?
- **Engage with your peers:**

- Does anything surprise you about their ideas for the evolution of AI and its impact on society?
- How do their thoughts on AI change or reinforce your initial predictions/anticipations?

This discussion could be assessed with the following holistic rubric (I've applied point ranges to account for differences in points awarded if necessary):

Score	8-10 points	4-7 points	0-3 points
Description	Reflects specifically on AI impact on personal life. Predicts specific future AI applications, and anticipates impacts, potential problems and solutions. Engages thoughtfully with peers: synthesizing ideas, problems, and/or solutions.	Reflects on AI impact on personal life. Predicts a future AI application, and anticipates an impact, potential problem, or solutions. Engages minimally to peers.	Does not reflect, predict, or anticipate impacts, applications, problems, or solutions of AI. Does not engage with peers.

As you can see, the holistic rubric has gathered all aspects of the discussion prompt together into a holistic(!) view and assessment of student participation and engagement. I advocate for using a point range for each level, as that gives you flexibility within each level if students aren't meeting the set standard.

Are you considering using a holistic rubric for any of your online discussions? What has worked for you (or challenged you) with online discussions design and assessment?

References

Gonzalez, J. (2014). Know your terms: Holistic, analytic, and single-point rubrics. Retrieved from https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/holistic-analytic-single-point-rubrics/ [3]

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