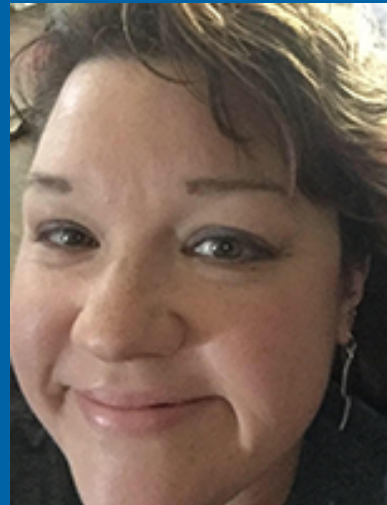# FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

Collaboration is the key to innovation.

Dr. Audrey Deterding

COURSE ALIGNMENT & RUBRICS

Thank you, Dr. Deterding, for your willingness to share and collaborate!

Course Alignment & Rubrics

All courses are designed to help students achieve certain learning goals. These goals are often written as learning outcomes that clearly and specifically describe the knowledge, skills, and abilities students are expected to acquire and demonstrate upon completion of the course. Course alignment is the process of ensuring that each component of a course contributes to the achievement of the learning goals. All instructional materials, learning activities, and assessments should be focused, purposeful, and support the achievement of desired learning outcomes. Alignment provides clarity and transparency for instructors and students alike and eliminates any extraneous time spent on activities that do not contribute to the achievement of learning outcomes. For students who lack motivation or perceive assignments as busywork, clear alignment between tasks and learning goals can motivate them to engage in each instructional step needed to achieve mastery. When performance expectations are explicit and clear, students benefit from increased metacognitive awareness of the learning process and have the opportunity to self-assess and improve their performance during assessment activities.

How do you ensure that course assignments measure Student Learning Outcomes?

I look at the SLOs and determine what we want students to get from the class. In my undergrad days, I was a secondary ed major and took many of the courses before I decided I wanted to pursue graduate school to teach college. We used SWBAT (Students Will Be Able To) as a way to think about the tangible part of learning. I still use that today, so when I see an SLO (for example, in my COMM 1003 class, I have the SLO: Produce an active listening response in reaction to a concrete situation using appropriate verbal and nonverbal elements), I look at it and say- but what are they doing?- with emphasis on *doing.* I know they are doing a "listening response" and using "appropriate strategies." I can get to that in several ways- I could do something more nonverbal with speeches or I could do something more verbal with interpersonal listening. I created an assignment years ago about interpersonal listening with active listening responses, and I created a rubric which measures to what degree the students are successful with producing an appropriate response. Based on that, then I know how well the students can *do* material that the SLO is about.

I also have "larger" SLOs such as: Deliver a speech using appropriate public speaking principles. Then I have to determine which of those "appropriate principles" I want to measure. For that, I focus on what is considered most important in the discipline: eye contact, central idea identification during speech, organization, etc.

Do your students make the important connection between learning goals, assignments, and grading criteria?

About a decade ago, I started putting SLO information next to the assignment information in my syllabus so the students can see why they are doing the assignments. I talk about it on the first day, but then I remind them of that throughout the semester- "Remember when I talked about outcomes and assignments? Well, we are doing this assignment to see how well you can do this outcome" While I'm not sure if the students truly understand the connection, I can say that since I've started doing this I have virtually no comments about "busy work" in my student evaluations because I explain how it fits. I also pull up rubrics in class and show the students how to read them and how they can get maximum points on the assignment.

This past week, I walked my intro classes through the whole process for the listening activity they will soon be doing: here's the course SLO, I knew I needed an assignment to measure it, I created this one, I created a rubric to measure your mastery, then I went through the rubric with the students, and explained how I will use what I find. I really think I saw some lightbulbs from them because no one had ever explained the behind-the-scenes connections and how it all works together.

How do you collect evidence of student learning, and what do you do with the data?

I was taught about two types of student learning evidence: direct and indirect. The direct are the rubrics which measure student learning. The indirect are student evaluations, emails from students, etc which are more of a measure of student liking.

To collect the direct evidence, I put my rubrics into Blackboard and grade from there for a few reasons: 1. I won't lose them, 2. Students get to see where they landed on the rubric (and not just a number grade), and 3. Blackboard will run all of the data assessment for me with a click of a button. When I get the data, I look at it to see where the class as a whole did well and what needs improvement. That informs the changes I make to the class the next semester. I use this in my annual reports (FSEs here) to show student learning in my classes and I also include a narrative of my explanation as to how I can take this and make the assignment/rubric better. Rubrics are ALWAYS a living document which are being tweaked and modified because they are never perfect.

How do you build a well-aligned rubric and why is it important for assessment?

That's a million-dollar question! It's important not to conflate grading sheet and rubric (yes, I grade using a rubric, but a rubric explains exactly what a student needs to do to earn points...a grading sheet is more of a record of the grade/points without an explanation of the categories that comprise the grade). The two most important things to know about rubrics are 1. They are not easy to make, and 2. They are living documents.

Honestly, it's not beneficial to students if the rubric is vague and unclear. I wish rubrics were a panacea for grading clarity, but they aren't. I've seen some truly awful ones, and my first drafts aren't that great either. It's not a quick process, but the effort is so worth it. I think of rubrics like tools in my teaching toolbox. I need to have the right tool for the right job. Just like physicians aren't going to use a blood pressure cuff to determine my blood sugar levels, I need to ensure that I have the right tool for the job. In this case, I have myriad rubrics for assignments. Each rubric is unique to that assignment because it's the correct tool to measure the learning for that assignment.

I also know that at a moment's notice, I can email my direct evidence of student learning to anyone who wants it. I keep up with assessment each semester and compile it in a document with my narratives. It doesn't matter to me if my department or school or college wants it or not at any given point. It's my job to ensure that I am teaching my students in a way that leads to their learning, and assessment data does that.

SLOs — MLOs — Materials — Activities — Assessment

Will you share some tips for building a well-aligned rubric?

First, making a quality rubric is hard! It really requires a faculty member to sit down and think about the assignment. What are all the parts of the assignment? So, I put that down the left hand column (or y-axis if it's easier to think of that way!). Then, I have 3 or 4 more columns added for the varying degrees of execution. The labels are somewhat arbitrary (the "perfect" column could be called excellent, mastery, Blackboard default is proficient...but whatever I choose to indicate that it's the highest level). Then I have a middle-of-the-road (good, competent, meets standards, etc.) and then a didn't meet standards column (blackboard calls this novice). At the top of those columns, (the x-axis), are the labels of mastery levels.

So, I have this empty grid and then the real work begins! How do I clearly articulate the difference between excellent and good and in a way that makes sense and is as objective as possible- What does an excellent in that category need to do? And what does a good look like? How are they different? Am I explaining it in a way that students would understand? What part of the assignment did I initially not include on the rubric?

Personally, I do not use a range of points because it doesn't work for me. I need to be able to clearly tell my students why they got the score they got, and if excellent has a range of 8-10, I need to be able to explain what the objective difference is between an 8 and a 9 and a 10. I can't do that, so it ends up being a subjective "well it just doesn't "feel" like a 9 or 10, or it's not as strong as a 10" so I don't use it. I typically stick with a clear point allotment for each category.

Rubrics are not a one-and-done thing but something that I am always making sure are as clear as I need them to be. I may need to tweak language, maybe even make another middle column (so I have an excellent, a good, an average, and a poor column....more grade-like—A, B, C, D/F), sometimes add another row because there's a part of the assignment that I didn't properly measure. Once I get a good rubric and have used it for years, I don't usually make too many tweaks, but I never consider them "in stone." For example, the listening one I talked about earlier, and have been using for more than a decade, I recently modified a bit because I realized that I was allowing a type of listening response that shouldn't be in the exercise, so after many years of not messing with the rubric, last fall I had to tweak it to be clearer.

VIEW SAMPLES
BY DR. DETERDING
MAP, ASSIGNMENT
RUBRIC, DATA

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