

Checking Boxes

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, OCT 9 2013

Each week this semester I sit in on the student presentations in my undergraduate 'Dimensions of Diversity' class. These presentations are more properly referred to in my syllabus as 'Taught Classes' as they are much more than simple informative or explanative slideshows by the students; rather they are an opportunity for a group of two or three students to take over the teaching of a class on an assigned topic with the goal of making the subject matter interesting, accessible, and memorable. Students are charged with teaching their peers rather than presenting to them, the difference being far from semantic as the largest proportion of the grade they will earn is reserved for their success in facilitating student learning during their 90 minute session.

This year I have introduced a formal grading rubric for the students to refer to when crafting their class. This rubric ensures that the students are aware of my expectations and can – should the students follow the implied directions – help them to craft a near perfect class.

In developing the rubric I broke down the taught class into a series of interrelated but differently weighted elements.

The first is 'Presentation Skills' and accounts for 30% of the overall grade. Here students can see they earn points for having an effective public speaking style, for not turning their back to the audience, for using effective hand gestures and body language, for timing their class well enough to not run over time or finish too early, and other such 'basics' of the presentation and teaching game. With all students having completed a first year undergraduate course in public speaking before entering my classroom, these are basics that everyone should have down pat.

The second element relates to 'Slides and Supports' and is worth 10% of the overall grade. Maybe I am old school here but I weight far more heavily the speaking and presentation skills of the students than the slides they pull together. In my opinion a good speaker will be forgiven boring PowerPoint slides while, no matter how fancy the transitions and background music, good supports will never revive a dead speech.

Forty percent of the grade is reserved for 'Content and Structure'. Under this element I detail things like internal consistency in the analysis, evidence of wider research than simple Googling of a subject, the offering of opportunities for debate and discussion to the audience, and overall mastery of the subject or theme being presented. I also allow points for what I hold to be important structural elements like informing the audience of the point of the class, the learning outcomes to be achieved, and providing a clear introduction and conclusion.

'Sourcing' is worth 10% overall, as is 'Spoken English'. The former demands that the students completely source everything that they rely on to produce their presentation, be it a book, an article, a website or a report. The latter sees students earn points for maintaining college level, professional English, with particular attention paid to grammar, syntax and pronunciation.

In the last couple of weeks I have graded three presentations using this new rubric and so far it seems to be working. Two groups admitted – to my relief – that the rubric had guided them in preparing or at least polishing their presentation and these two groups, not coincidentally, earned strong grades (an A- and a B+). The third group performed less well and I can only imagine they did not refer very closely to the rubric given that they lost ten points (the equivalent of dropping a full letter grade) for multiple issues that could have been addressed in just a few

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minutes, had they chosen to address them.

Grading rubrics like this are useful in helping students as they prepare assignments as they outline clearly and quantifiably the expectations on the part of the professor. As well, they are useful to the professor as it ensures consistency in grading and easy identification of problem areas in student work. I'm happy with the way the new grading rubric is working so far this semester but – like everything in my courses – it will get reviewed as the semester closes down when, with more data points, I'll be able to assess its impact on student performance and the wider course experience.

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