Learning from Students’ Publications: Using AACU VALUE Rubrics to Assess Student Writing
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Assessing student learning outcomes in ways that can lead to curricular change is difficult. We evaluated students’ manuscripts using a rubric developed in-house and two AACU VALUE rubrics. We connect this work to cognitive processing skills and demonstrate that these rubrics provide information that leads to ways to improve curricula.

The Problem: Employers and graduate programs want students that write and think clearly, critically, and analytically. Assessing how students think remains difficult. Assessing student learning outcomes in ways that lead to course and curricular change is even more elusive.

The Assessment: As a longitudinal assessment of student writing, articles from Capital University’s student journal for empirical research, Epistem, were scored using three rubrics:
- Psychology Department rubric: http://www.capital.edu/psychology-resources/, and
- The AACU VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) Rubrics (http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics) for Critical Thinking and Inquiry and Analysis.
  - Two individuals scored 27 published articles, comprising five years of the campus journal.
  - Articles represented several disciplines, with half of the articles written by psychology students; there was no difference in scores across disciplines.
  - With the three rubrics combined, each manuscript was evaluated on 14 categories.
  - When the two raters’ scores differed by two or more points for a category, a third individual rescored the manuscript for that category; 8% of scores were reassessed by a third rater.
  - Inter-rater reliability was 0.793.

Key Findings: Students were weakest in the “position” category of the Critical Thinking rubric and the “limitation” category of the Inquiry and Analysis rubric (see data chart).

Conclusions:
- The levels of mastery articulated for these two rubric categories (i.e., position and limitation) are consistent with the cognitive domain of Bloom’s Taxonomy:
  - The rubrics’ lower categories address lower cognitive skills (i.e., basic knowledge).
  - The rubrics’ higher categories address more complex cognition (i.e., analysis and synthesis).
- The findings point to areas of focus for working with student researchers: Faculty who teach scientific writing classes or mentor student researchers might consider ways to help students understand and articulate higher order thinking associated with the position they take in their writing and the limitations of their work.

Recommendations:
- Work with students in Research Methods and Experimental Psychology to help them understand and articulate the strengths and weaknesses of their hypotheses.
- Provide prompts in Research Methods to help strengthen the discussion section of papers and revisit the issue in Experimental Psychology in order to refine the skill and make the skill a habit of mind.

This research was presented at the Teaching Institute of the Association for Psychological Science, Chicago, IL, May 2012.
Portions of this research have been submitted for publication with the Council on Undergraduate Research: http://www.cur.org/
A copy of the poster can be found at: http://www.capital.edu/psychology-resources/
No rubrics were harmed during the research process.