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# Revisiting the value of rubrics for student engagement in assessment and feedback in the South African university classroom

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## Abstract

The so-called ‘massification’ of higher education challenges all spheres in institutions serving this education sector. The university classroom and its pivotal areas of teaching, learning and assessment is no exception. While the literature suggests that assessment has a strong influence on learning, it is also maintained that feedback related to assessment is a key determinant of learning attainment. However, conditions in higher education environments are not always conducive to feedback and therefore it remains a complex matter. By acknowledging these complexities and in pursuit of improving student performance by also enhancing their quality of learning, this paper explores the value of rubrics for promoting student engagement in the assessment and feedback processes by means of a conceptual analysis. The theoretical discourse is concluded by suggesting some areas in which applied research could be undertaken in order to establish the tangible value of rubrics for promoting student engagement in the assessment and feedback processes in the South African university classroom.

**Keywords:** Rubrics, feedback, student engagement, assessment, constructivism.

## Introduction and problem statement

In South Africa, as elsewhere, the higher education sector witnessed vigorous challenges and accelerated changes in recent years which are attributable to a range of reasons. Prominent amongst these reasons, is the escalation in student numbers resulting in a higher education profile which Kvale (2007:67) typifies as ‘mass education’. Not only do larger student numbers put considerable pressure on existing infrastructures of higher education institutions, but it also challenges the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Yet, higher education institutions are expected to improve their students’ performance in order to increase throughput rates and to decrease dropout rates. Institutions are therefore compelled to manage substantial student numbers by harmonizing their academic focus and educational responsibilities. Intermediary mechanisms such as the semesterization and modularization of courses, compressed timetables, an increase in student – lecturer ratios and the application of

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product-oriented assessment (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell & Litjens, 2008:56) became routine. However, these mechanisms may prove to be counterproductive to contemporary constructivist perspectives of teaching, learning and assessment. The resultant effect is that lecturers revert to 'teacher-centred' practices where content coverage rather than student engaged learning enjoys preference (Lombard, 2008:1038). Augmenting this view, Wilson and Scalise (2006:643) maintain that "lecturers go to great efforts to design effective learning experiences, paying careful attention to providing interesting, well-informed lectures, readings, and other aspects of the learning experiences, but neglect to implement effective practices to support [and] to scaffold learning".

The significance of assessment in the aforementioned is not only indisputable, but it is also underscored by Geysers's (2004:97) argument that assessment is "the most powerful lever educators have to influence the way students learn". Moreover, the pivotal role of assessment as indispensable part of the teaching and learning process is endorsed by the Department of Education (DoE) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Without referring to the school sector only, the DoE (2004:240) describes the main purpose of assessment as "to enhance individual growth and development, to monitor the progress of learners and to facilitate their learning". In addition, SAQA (2005:7) stipulates: "Assessment needs to be an integral part of ... teaching and learning activities". The aforementioned signifies the student as the primary beneficiary of assessment (Maclellan, 2004:312) since assessment ought to provide for potential learning opportunities (Clark & Rust, 2006: 74). However, Bailey and Garner (2010:188) warn that assessment within prevailing teaching and learning circumstances, such as the accommodation of high student numbers, turn out to be end-loaded, or product-oriented, rather than process-oriented. Botha, Fourie and Geysers (2005) share the same view. These authors caution that assessment in the context of rising student numbers may not sustain the anticipated constructive effect on students' learning since "it [assessment] is either likely to be done less well – less rigorously and *with less and more superficial feedback* – and [it] take[s] longer to be returned" (64) [my italics].

It is clear, then, that feedback emerges as a fundamental component of successful assessment. Crips (2007:579) states that feedback forms an essential part of assessment and is often considered as critical within higher education. Taras (2003:550) also affirms its usefulness as an educational device by stating that "there is a plethora of literature on feedback which emphasizes its centrality in student learning". However, Rust (2001), as cited by Snowball and Sayigh (2007:321), reasons that feedback is the first casualty of rising student numbers. In this regard Higgens, Hartley and Skelton (2002:55) allude to the fact that "the conditions may not be in place for feedback to 'work' as we would want it to". The same authors emphasise their concerns with regard to feedback by declaring: "feedback does not realize its full potential to become an integral part of the learning process" (Higgens, Hartley & Skelton, 2001:270). Hounsell *et al.* (2008:55) also assert that "feedback to students has long been acknowledged as an indispensable part of an effective teaching-learning environment in higher education" but that there are "concerns about a decline in the provision of feedback on assessment" (56). In an attempt to substantiate the apparent decline in supplying feedback, Yorke (2002) maintains that lecturers have less time to write comments on students' work or to interact constructively with them about their work.

Inferred from the above, the unwieldy position of feedback on assessment within the context of large student numbers becomes apparent. On the one hand feedback on assessment is valued and recognised as a powerful element in the teaching and learning process, and on the

other hand it is exceptionally challenging to operationalize within the contemporary higher education milieu.

### **Purpose of the article**

In pursuit of improving student performance by also enhancing their quality of learning, this article intends to revisit the value of rubrics as a way of promoting student engagement in assessment and feedback in the context of South African higher education by means of a theoretical review.

### **Research methodology**

The theoretical review will be performed by applying a non-interactive, qualitative research design (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:26). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006:27), non-interactive designs are sometimes also referred to as analytical research and are mostly used to investigate concepts or events through an analysis of documents. In this particular case, a conceptual study will be performed. Nieuwenhuis (2007:71) defines a conceptual study as a study "... that is largely based on secondary sources, that ... critically engages with the understanding of concepts, and that ... aims to add to [the] existing body of knowledge and understanding ...". The envisaged conceptual study will be anchored in a concept analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:424). Duncan, Cloutier and Bailey (2007:294) define concepts as "linguistic representations or mental images of phenomena that are necessary for effective communication". Baldwin and Rose (2009:780) describe concept analysis as a method of enquiry "that is capable of contributing to increasing the body of knowledge". Expanding on this view, Baldwin (2008:50) indicates that concept analysis not only brings about clarification of the meaning of words, but provides a knowledge base for practice through enabling understanding rather than mere knowing. Baldwin (2008:56) and Baldwin and Rose (2009:782) further maintain that concept analysis is a pragmatic, rigorous and rational inquiry into the meaning of concepts which serves as a necessary preceding step for the development of hypotheses and any subsequent testing. Argued from these viewpoints, the aforementioned points to a distinction between a concept analysis and a literature review.

In the following two sections the concepts *rubrics* and *feedback* will be analysed and clarified in order to revisit the value of the former in terms of the latter within the domain of assessment in the context of higher education. Rubrics will be conceptualized in terms of how it is defined, the types of rubrics that can be distinguished, its use as teaching and assessment tools and by considering its strengths and weaknesses. With regard to feedback a conceptual clarification will be given, after which feedback practices as found in the literature will be examined.

## Rubrics

### Defining rubrics

There is a wide range of contributions in the literature to define rubrics. For Popham (1997:72) a rubric “refers to a scoring guide used to evaluate the quality of students’ constructed responses”. Initially Goodrich (1996/1997:14) defined a rubric as “a scoring tool that lists the criteria for a piece of work, or ‘what counts’; it also articulates gradations of quality for each criterion, from excellent to poor”. She added later: “At their very best, rubrics are also teaching tools that support student learning and the development of sophisticated thinking skills” (Goodrich Andrade, 2000:13). Cooper and Gargan (2009:54) explain that a rubric within the classroom context “may mean a set of categories, criteria for assessment, and the gradients for presenting and evaluating learning”. They state, furthermore, that a rubric serves as “a standard and a descriptive statement that illustrates how the standard is to be achieved” (Ibid., 2009:55). Signalling its versatility, Gallavan and Kottler (2009:157) point out that rubrics “provide *conceptual descriptions* and *practical details* of outcomes and emphasize both the *process* and *product* as one combined event at various levels ... to *record progress* and *report feedback*” [my italics]. More recently Reddy and Andrade (2010:435) and Andrade, Du and Mycek (2010:200) ratified Goodrich’s 1996/1997 definition by reiterating that a rubric is a “document that articulates the expectations for an assignment by listing the criteria or what counts, and describing levels of quality from excellent to poor”.

### Types of rubrics

Different types of rubrics are also identified in the literature. Amongst others, Popham (1997), Whittaker *et al.* (2001), Gallavan and Kottler (2009) and East (2009) differentiate between holistic and analytic rubrics. Incidentally, these appear to be the most conventional types of rubrics. With a holistic rubric an assessment task is assessed in its totality and performance levels serve as guidelines to arrive at an overall quality judgement. With analytic rubrics an assessment task is assessed by using several categories of performance indicators which are rated separately and different performance levels within categories. Meier, Rich and Cady (2006:70) allude to an annotated holistic rubric. This represents a hybrid of an analytic and a holistic rubric and allows for holistic scoring while the inclusion of comments on the general strengths and weaknesses of the assessment task supports the scoring. Two other types of rubrics mentioned by Goodrich Andrade (2000:13, 16) are instructional rubrics and thinking-centred rubrics. The former could be used to provide students with informative feedback about their work in progress and to give detailed evaluations of their final products, while the latter could be used to stimulate students’ thinking. Perlman (2002:8) refers to general and specific rubrics where the first are generic and flexible assessment tools which can be applied to a variety of assessment tasks; whereas the second is tailor made for specific tasks. Arter (2002:16) even talks about a meta-rubric which serves as an archetype for the development of high quality rubrics.

## **An exploration of the use of rubrics**

Wiggins (1998:153) asserts that a rubric is one of the assessor's basic tools. Goodrich (1996/1997:14) postulates that rubrics are helpful for defining quality in that it clarifies expectations and therefore "are powerful tools for both teaching and assessment". In a subsequent article, Goodrich Andrade (2000:13) reports that rubrics "blur the distinction between instruction and assessment". Though Popham (1997:72) initially claims that rubrics should primarily be used to judge the adequacy of students' performance, the reciprocal purpose rubrics could fulfil in both the fields of teaching and assessment impels him to describe it as "instructional illuminators" (Popham, 1997:75). Andrade and Du (2005) suggest that rubrics could support teaching and learning. Gallavan and Kottler (2009:155) confirm its value in the realm of teaching and learning when arguing that it is essential for students to receive rubrics once an assignment is introduced. In addition, Cooper and Gargan (2009:55) contend that rubrics could assist lecturers to think critically about what they are teaching and what students are supposed to learn. To accentuate its value within the domains of teaching and assessment, Wilson and Scalise (2006:644) and Kerby and Romine (2009:176) encapsulate the dual purpose of rubrics when referring to it as 'embedded' assessment strategies.

According to Goodrich Andrade (2000:14), "rubrics have become very popular ... a recognizable trend in education" in recent years. She substantiates her viewpoint by putting forward the following reasons (Goodrich, 1996/1997:15):

- it assists students to become more thoughtful judges of the quality of their own and others' work,
- it reduces the time spent on evaluation,
- it provides students with informative feedback,
- it helps to accommodate differences in heterogeneous classes, and
- it is relatively easy to use.

These reasons are underscored by Whittaker, Salend and Duhaney (2001:9/10) who add that rubrics help students to understand the qualities associated with a specific task, it assists in developing critical thinking skills, it directs learning, it clarifies and communicates expectations and it establishes standards of excellence. Mansilla, Duraisingh, Wolfe and Haynes (2009:335) are of the opinion that a rubric serves to clarify the learning contract between lecturer and student and that it makes the results of student learning visible. In addition, the same authors highlight the fact that "the power of rubrics rests on the degree to which it captures meaningful dimensions of the work without which a quality product could not be achieved" (Ibid., 2009:337). Both Popham (1997) and Andrade (2000) share the conviction that rubrics are appropriate mechanisms for communicating performance expectations to students, providing purposeful feedback on work in progress, and for evaluating students' final products. As has been stated earlier, Meier, Rich and Cady (2006: 70) suggest that rubrics give students specific criteria detailing what is expected and what constitutes a complete response.

## **Strengths and weaknesses of rubrics**

The literature suggests widespread support for rubrics by mentioning the following strengths. Whittaker *et al.* (2001:10) portray rubrics as objective assessment instruments contributing to

consistency. Mansilla *et al.* (2009:336) reason that rubrics provide for fair, more consistent assessment since it contributes to making assessment criteria more explicit and different levels of performance more comprehensible. East (2009:108) also alludes to the fact that rubrics yield consistent scoring because it clarifies differentiated performance levels. Amongst others, Moskal and Leydens (2002:31/32), East (2009:105) and Reddy and Andrade (2010:441), observe significant levels of inter-rater and intra-rater reliability of rubrics. Inter-rater reliability refers to consistency of scores allocated by different assessors and intra-rater reliability refers to consistency of scores allocated by the same assessor.

Whilst O'Donovan, Price and Rust (2004) argue that lecturers' expectations often remain tacit; Barringer (2008) argues that well-constructed rubrics disclose and stipulate lecturers' expectations which enable students to work towards clearly defined targets. As a consequence, students approach assessment tasks with increased levels of confidence and self-efficacy (Andrade, Wang, Du & Akawi, 2009: 288). This, in turn, stimulates self-assessment, improved learning (Goodrich Andrade, 2000:15), higher quality discussions and even better products (Andrade, *et al.*, 2009:287).

Even though plausible evidence to substantiate the value of rubrics is found in the literature, one's attention is also drawn to some points of criticism which could be interpreted as weaknesses of rubrics. Mansilla *et al.* (2009:337) express the concern that rubrics may foster shallow learning and promote conformity and standardization, which in effect, could weaken the ideal of student-centredness. On a similar note, Chapman and Inman (2009:199) mention the fear that students' problem-solving, decision-making and creativity may be restricted by rubrics since standardization rather than independent thinking is encouraged. They further advise that criteria should not be accentuated in such a way that it will "minimize students' own empowerment to create and explore boundaries" and that "compliance with standard sameness" should be eliminated to allow for flexibility and creativity (Chapman & Inman, 2009:200, 202). Still on the issue of standardization, Price (2005:219) insists that "criteria may limit the expectations of staff and students about what could be achieved if only threshold standards are defined". Norton's (2004) view that detailed criteria provided by means of rubrics can encourage a mechanistic, mark-oriented approach by students, is attested by O'Donovan, *et al.* (2004:333) who declare: "We must refrain from the temptation to give yet more explanatory detail".

On the construction of rubrics, Cooper and Gargan (2009:55) raise the opinion that rubrics require effort to construct. Popham (1997:73 – 75) alerts to the fact that "excessively general evaluative criteria" and "dysfunctional detail" should be avoided when constructing rubrics. Tierney and Simon (2004) note that language is one of the most challenging aspects when designing a rubric, since it impacts significantly on validity.

The way in which rubrics are used by lecturers when assessing students' work also raises some concerns, which contribute to the list of rubrics' possible weaknesses. According to Meier *et al.* (2006:70) rubrics could produce a leniency error when most students are scored at the upper end of the rubric while the lower end is avoided. In addition, the same authors suggest that rubrics could cause severity errors when students are assessed more rigorously resulting in more scores at the lower end of the scale. Alternatively, central tendency errors may occur when scores are centred on the middle point of the scoring scale or a halo effect may be created when scoring is affected by lecturers' subjective dispositions towards individual students.

## Feedback

### A conceptual clarification of feedback

Pellegrino, Chudowsky and Glaser (2001:87) argue that ‘knowledge of results’ is key to attaining learning success. In turn, Gallavan and Kottler (2009:157) declare that “feedback is essential for growth and change”. Regardless of its ostensible prominence in assessment literature and its claimed centrifugal effect on learning, Higgins *et al.* (2002:54) allege that feedback is still a relatively underexplored phenomenon. One possible reason why it warrants further exploration could be attributable to the fact that prevailing attempts to describe feedback are inclined to confine it to formative assessment. In so doing the potential formative function feedback could fulfil in summative assessment is condoned; thereby also reducing its educational value. It therefore seems necessary to expand the formative function of feedback to include summative assessment as well.

In terms of illuminating definitions of feedback, Taras (2005:470) quotes Ramaprasad (1983) who contends that “feedback is information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way”. Another frequently quoted definition originates from Wiggins (1998:182) portraying feedback as “...information that provides the performer with direct, usable insights into current performance, based on tangible differences between current performance and hoped for performance”. Complementing the aforementioned Clynes and Raftery (2008:405/406) believe that many definitions of feedback share the following common characteristics:

- it is an interactive process,
- it aims at providing learners with some understanding and insight into their performance,
- depending on its purpose, feedback could be provided in formal and informal ways,
- feedback should be timely,
- feedback includes opinion and judgement,
- feedback is analytical and interpretative in nature,
- it explores options for improvement,
- feedback allows for reflection by both the provider and receiver, and
- it is often broadly categorized as positive or negative.

Based on a synthesis of feedback literature Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006:205) propose the following seven principles of good quality feedback which articulate its typical features as well:

- it clarifies what good performance is,
- it facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection),
- it delivers high quality information to students about their learning,
- it encourages dialogue around learning,
- it encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem,
- it provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance, and
- it provides information to shape teaching.

Deduced from the above definitions, principles and characteristics, feedback denotes an extraneous source of intervention directed at minimizing the disparity between existing

performance and expected performance. Viewed in this way, the correspondence between feedback and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is perceptible given that Vygotsky (1978:86) describes the ZPD as "closing the distance between the actual developmental level ... and the level of potential development ... under ... guidance or in collaboration with [someone]".

### Feedback practices

Feedback manifests itself in several formats. It could be presented in a written fashion in the form of a scoring mark or symbol, comments on assignment coversheets or notes in the text or margins. It could also be offered in a verbal fashion by means of verbal directives or remarks or in a symbolic manner, using representative images typifying specific feedback information. Feedback could even be provided in a non-verbal style through gestures or kinetic behaviour.

Feedback is furthermore presented in variable qualities. According to Higgins *et al.* (2002:56), the impression that written feedback is not read by students often result in poor quality feedback which is impersonal, too general and too vague to be of any help. They continue by saying that students sometimes find lecturers' handwriting difficult to read which implies that feedback is seldom of any value and where students' work is of acceptable or good quality, detailed feedback is rarely provided (Higgins *et al.* 2002:56). Wilson and Scalise (2006:636) endorse the fact that detailed feedback is often limited and ascribe this to resource constraints. Pellegrino, *et al.* (2001:87) mention that feedback is occasionally deprived of quality because it is untimely or not informative enough to be of any learning benefit. Citing Brockbank and McGill (1998), Orsmond, Merry and Reiling (2005:370) state that students are dissatisfied with feedback when the language is vague and unfamiliar, when the quantity of information is overwhelming and when there is an amorphous mix of positive and negative comments.

In the next section student engagement in the assessment process will be contemplated by connecting the concepts rubrics and feedback.

### Student engagement in the assessment processes

Sadler (1989:121) says that "students have to be able to judge the quality of what they are producing and be able to regulate what they are doing during the doing of it". Black and Wiliam (1998:148) contend that effective regulation of learning requires three things. These include the awareness of measures on which judgements will be based, information about the status of learning according to the said measures and how to improve learning. According to Orsmond *et al.* (2005: 370), views such as the aforementioned are firmly rooted in constructivism which purports scaffolding as a means of attaining learning success. Maclellan (2004:311) argues that when operationalized, such views may result in reflective, constructive and self-regulated learning which could be typified as meaningful learning.

Fundamental to arguments such as the above, are the notions of the implicit educational value of assessment tasks and student-centredness. With regard to the educational value of assessment, Barringer (2008:47) reminds us that because of its very nature, assessment tasks



provide some compelling reasons for students to perform well but also inform them about the status of their performance. Therefore, students are supposed to learn from their assessment tasks. As for student-centred approaches, Reddy and Andrade (2010:437) indicate that these are supposed to help students to understand learning targets and quality standards relevant to a particular piece of work in order to assist them to make dependable judgements about their own work. Hence, the inextricable interrelatedness between teaching, learning and assessment, learning targets and feedback underpinning learning success within a student-centred, constructivist teaching and learning milieu is noticeable. Moreover, it could be claimed that when the said milieu is configured on Lave and Wenger's (1991) conception of a "community of practice" and Northedge's (2003) idea of a "discourse community" it would facilitate scholarly dialogue between lecturer and students and amongst students to promote learning success. Circumstances such as the aforementioned also anticipate Gallavan and Kottler's (2009:155) argument that students should become immersed in the complexities of assessment as well as O'Donovan *et al.* (2004) and Elwood and Klenowski's (2002) contention about students' engagement in the assessment process.

The dilemma with the foregoing, however, is that the information provided by lecturers regarding assessment tasks is often incomprehensible in that it is vague, overpowering, or amorphous. Bailey and Garner (2010:189) confirm this trend when stating: "expectations remain tacit and the meanings of descriptive terms ... are often opaque". What's more, the tension in university classrooms to embody learning environments conducive to student-centred and constructivist thinking is intensified by, amongst others, excessive student numbers as elucidated on earlier in this paper.

### **The promising value of rubrics for student engagement in the assessment process and for promoting feedback**

Factors alluded to in the former sub-section, together with the preceding theoretical outline on rubrics and feedback, presuppose that the value of rubrics for fostering student engagement in the assessment process and for promoting feedback in the university classroom warrants reflection. To substantiate this claim further, Table 1 reveals the possible significance of rubrics in the aforementioned regard, by drawing a comparison of its latent characteristics as cited in the literature as well as mentioning its concomitant properties.

Embedded in Table 1, is the covert element of continuous self-assessment as determining factor to promote student engagement in the assessment and feedback processes. Andrade and Boulay (2003:21) point to the fact that although feedback promotes learning, it remains problematic; especially with regard to its preparation. They add, however, that students themselves are useful resources of feedback by means of self-assessment. In follow-up research, Andrade and Myceck (2010:199) declare that self-assessment is a "process of formative assessment during which students reflect on the quality of their work, judge the degree to which it reflects explicitly stated goals or criteria, and revise accordingly". Therefore, the promising value of rubrics for promoting student engagement in the assessment and feedback processes undeniably lies in the fact that rubrics, when prepared well, could serve an "instructional function" (as mentioned elsewhere in this paper), in that it provides all required guidelines to complete an assessment task successfully in the form of performance goals, performance levels and performance indicators. In this instance, the design and development of a rubric is dictated by factors such as the learning goals to be

attained, the relevant content and the material from which the content can be obtained. For East (2009:93) this signifies “a priori” or pre-developed rubrics; while for Goodrich (1996/1997:15) it signals the “learning leverage” of rubrics. By using the information contained in the rubrics as benchmarks, students are able to direct and monitor their own performance. This signifies the pre-emptive purpose of rubrics (Lombard, 2009).

**Table 1: The latent characteristics and concomitant properties of rubrics for fostering student engagement in assessment and promoting feedback**

Latent characteristics of rubrics					Concomitant properties of rubrics for fostering student engagement		Continual opportunities for reflection, feedback and learning
Whittaker, et al. (2001)	Andrade et al (2009)	Gallavan & Kottler (2009)	Kerby & Romine (2009)	Reddy & Andrade (2010)			
Categories for determining major components of assessment task	Communicating expectations	Outcomes are clearly indicated	Standardized descriptions to provide uniform message regarding expectations	Evaluation criteria which reflect processes and content to be judged for determining the quality of work	List and clarify performance goals which “captures the essential ingredients” (Popham, 1997:73) of the task that students can use as directives while working on a task and for checking the successful completion of a task	Performance goals	
Levels of performance for determining quality of congruent categories	Providing focused feedback	Clear articulation of quality of demonstration of learning	Competency categories	Quality definitions which are detailed explanations of levels of achievement	List and clarify performance levels which serve as benchmarks against which students can monitor their progress or to judge the quality of their final product in terms of the stipulated performance goals	Performance levels	
Set of indicators that reflect specific features of various levels of performance within categories	Grading final products	Communicating results in relation with the showcasing of expectations		Scoring strategy for interpreting judgements	Anticipated scores related to performance goals and performance levels which serve as predictors or indicators of performance and which students can use for classifying overall performance of the task	Performance indicators	

The same rubric can also be used for feedback and scoring purposes in the sense that the quality of the completed task be indicated in accordance to the attained performance goals, performance levels and performance indicators. In this regard the rubric serves a

consequential purpose (Lombard, 2009). Barringer (2008: 47) highlights the fact that a rubric is a viable feedback instrument in that it replaces handwritten comments; making feedback quicker and more focused. Moreover, it accommodates positive and negative comments since performance benchmarks are already phrased in a positive manner (Barringer, 2008:52).

Considering the above and in accord with Yorke's (2003) reasoning, it appears as if the value of rubrics to promote student engagement in the assessment and feedback processes, is primarily located in the fact that it could alleviate the tension between the lecturer's role of supporting and facilitating students' learning and that of assessing their achievement. With regard to densely populated South African university classrooms, Yorke's (2003) reasoning also implies that rubrics could serve both pre-emptive and consequential purposes in order to enhance student engagement in assessment and feedback, improve student performance and realize quality learning.

## **Conclusion**

In an era where institutional effectiveness is measured against student throughput rates, quality learning is apparently viewed as secondary to pass rates. However, if institutions are serious about learning excellence it is imperative to reinforce student engagement in teaching, learning and assessment to facilitate this aspiration.

The point that has been argued in this paper centred on the engagement of students and the assistance given to them during the assessment and feedback processes to enable them to produce better assessment products and by enhancing the quality of their learning. A conceptual analysis of rubrics and feedback served as impetus for this purpose.

In winding up this paper, Baldwin (2008) and Baldwin and Rose's (2009) stance (as stated earlier in this paper), that concept analysis could serve as antecedent for developing hypotheses and assuming further research, calls for attention. To this end, several potential areas related to the focus of this paper which require rigorous research, are identified.

Following the deliberations of Arter (2002) and Moskal and Leydens (2002) regarding the incorporation of quality criteria such as clarity, practicality, technical soundness, content-, construct-, and criterion-related evidence when developing rubrics, it would be interesting to investigate to what extent these criteria are addressed in rubrics developed within the South African higher education (and other) contexts. In addition, the soundness and quality of these criteria for encouraging student engagement in assessment and feedback could also be researched.

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- Pondering on rubrics from a lecturer's angle, a synopsis of what is found in the literature is included below.

- Kerby and Romine (2009) point to the apparent potential of rubrics for staff development purposes to enhance inter-rater reliability as well as for feedback purposes which will enable staff to adjust or revise future assignments and/or instructional approaches. The same authors also indicate that feedback gathered from rubrics could prompt curriculum revision. Song (2006) confirms that feedback gathered from rubrics could serve to improve instruction while Campbell (2005) is of the opinion that rubrics could result in more consistent marking. Hounsell (2003) expands on the aforementioned by indicating that through the use of rubrics greater consistency in terms of marking and performance across departments could be achieved; thereby indicating that rubrics could contribute towards quality assurance within an institution. In addition, Hounsell (2003) states that when criteria and outcomes related to assessment are articulated by means of rubrics, it could serve to support and introduce new staff to quality criteria and standards. For Meier, Rich and Cady (2006) the development of rubrics by academic staff could also reflect the quality (and quantity) of their subject knowledge.
- In terms of the above, rigorous research of the development and the use of rubrics by lecturers and academic departments is required. Possible research areas could include: the contribution of rubrics towards curriculum development; the application of rubrics as reflective tools for academic staff, and the extent, nature and quality of rubric development and usage by academic staff.
- From a student's angle, Kerby and Romine (2009) believe that through the use of rubrics students are in a better position to understand their performance strengths and weaknesses and are more aware of where to direct their future efforts for improvement. Saam, Sorgman and Calhoun (2007) indicate that the use of rubrics could assist students to complete better quality assignments since it helps them to understand lecturers' expectations. Andrade and Du (2005) assume that students feel less anxious about an assessment task when they have a rubric at hand.
- Possible research related to rubrics and students could focus on the effect of the use of rubrics on intra- and inter-departmental student performance and the development of students' reflexive competence by means of rubrics.
- With regard to feedback, research could be undertaken to establish the frequency, nature and quality of feedback provided by lecturers, in which forms students would prefer to get feedback and how feedback contributes to better performance.
- Finally, the exploratory nature of the conceptual analysis initiated in this paper should be explored further by means of applied research to establish the tangible value of rubrics for promoting student engagement in the assessment and feedback processes in the South African university classroom.

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