

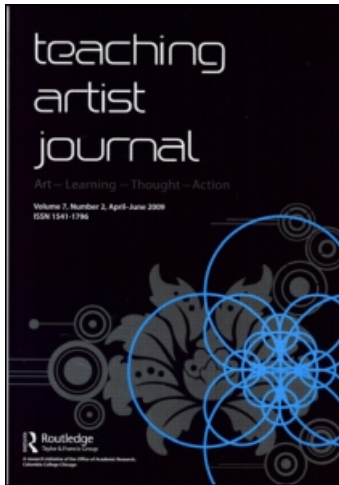
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### The Art of Rubrics: Painting by Numbers?

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## ABSTRACT

A teaching artist and painting professor moves from skepticism to the artful application of rubrics as tools for teaching and learning.

# The Art of Rubrics: Painting by Numbers?



Mary Connelly



Kenneth Wolf

*Authors' Note: While both authors participated in the development of this article, Mary Connelly wrote the article in the first person to capture the personal nature of her teaching story.*

At a recent midterm review with one of my undergraduate advanced painting students, I was completely taken aback when, in response to my suggestion that she look at the work of John Constable, Susan told me that she had no time to go to the library and look at the work of other artists. Up to this point my critique of her landscape paintings had centered on a discussion of various painting techniques and formal issues such as color and brushwork. When I shifted the discussion to the subject matter and meaning of the work, I was asking Susan to reflect on the broader issues and how her research of contemporary and historical landscape painting was driving her choices. I had successfully engaged in this same conversation concerning content and meaning with six other students, but here was a student who thought the goal of the class was simply “to teach her how to paint.”

I was shocked; had I really failed to communicate that research was one of the expectations of advanced work in painting? Perhaps I made an assumption that an advanced-level art student would recognize the importance of the relationship of practice and theory, form, and content? I made other suggestions about new techniques and approaches; Susan resisted and I backed off. Could it be that she—and possibly others—did not understand, or was not aware of, the expectations of the course?

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From the time I was an art student, the grading process in studio art has always been shrouded in mystery. The method of assessment in my college and graduate school instruction rested mainly on the ritual of the studio critique. Conducted in any number of ways, the studio critique reflects the prevailing belief among most art instructors in higher education that assessing art is a highly subjective process, and should not and cannot be systematically measured or judged. But in a typical critique, the language is anything but non-judgmental. My advisor in graduate school was the only art professor I knew who used a scoring sheet for midterm and final portfolio review in his undergraduate two-dimensional design course (a detailed evaluation sheet that I adopted). As with many teaching skills, graduate assistants' experience with grading was "trial by fire," painfully learning on the job about critical teaching issues such as assessment. In my first teaching position after graduate school at a small Midwestern university, I was grateful when more experienced colleagues shared their system for reviewing and scoring portfolios. Yet, I felt that the grading process for reviewing the portfolios of first-year students was too broad and subjective on the one hand and too narrow on the other, as we were evaluating only the finished product.

I don't believe that scoring rubrics should take the place of in-depth critical feedback that art students require through individual and group critiques. But as a strategy that enhances my students' learning, sharpens the focus of my teaching, and makes my assessment of student work more accurate and fair, it is worth a closer look (Arter & McTighe, 2001; Stiggins, 2001). I believe a rubric has much to offer to all instructors, but particularly to those in the visual arts. Rubrics come with risks such as potentially narrowing a

student's artistic vision because that vision does not appear to be valued on the rubric, or fragmenting a performance because the rubric leads the student to pay attention to the parts at the expense of the whole. However, when carefully designed, rubrics not only guide the assessment process in a studio course, they enrich the learning experience for

*As communication tool, the rubric encourages active learning and the artistic development of students by providing language for assessing process and product.*

students by giving language to what is important.

Initially I felt a resistance to using rubrics. Like many of my colleagues I believed that any systematic scoring method would be too rigid for evaluating the visual arts—a field that encourages non-conformity and the search for a unique, personal voice. What could I accurately measure? Was a rubric more suited to introductory foundation-level courses? What if I was assessing advanced or graduate drawing or painting? Would a rubric slant my evaluation more towards quantity over quality?

This article is intended to be a chronicle of a personal journey rather than a systematic study of the role that scoring rubrics—essentially a matrix that describes the key features of a student's work at various performance levels—can play in a college-level course. My aim was to try out a new instructional and assessment strategy and then describe for my visual arts colleagues the possibilities and pitfalls of such an approach. In addition to presenting the rubric that I use in my own class (Table 1), we have also included a description of the steps in creating an effective rubric (Table 2), along with an example of a generic "rubric for assessing an oral performance" (Table 3).

TABLE 1  
Rubric for Advanced Painting Midterm Review

Evaluation Criteria	Outstanding 4 points	Proficient 3 points	Evolving 2 points	Below Expectations 1 point
Inventiveness (25%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes risks and tests new approaches</li> <li>• Applies knowledge from research to solve problems and enhance work</li> <li>• Demonstrates unique style and voice</li> </ul>	Shows high degree of risk-taking by testing new approaches; researches and utilizes new approaches to enhance work; expresses a unique, personal style and voice.	Demonstrates some risk-taking and experimentation; ideas are researched and gathered from different sources; starting to take an independent direction and style.	Not taking risks in process or ideas; does not research or seek multiple visual sources to approach work from several angles; holding too closely to an established style.	Risk-taking and experimentation are not evident; supporting research is missing; lacks independent direction.
Craftsmanship (25%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates knowledge and mastery of tools and materials</li> <li>• Presents work in professional manner</li> <li>• Researches contemporary and historical approaches to craft</li> </ul>	Demonstrates a high degree of knowledge; presents work in a highly professional manner; always seeking to learn more about the medium and tools to improve expertise.	Skilled with and knowledgeable of tools and materials; presents work in a professional manner; carries out research on methods and materials of his/her craft.	Demonstrates incomplete knowledge of and mastery of tools; presentation of work is not professional; neglects research of craft.	No or little evidence of craftsmanship; work habits appear disorganized; care and use of materials and tools appears haphazard and unaligned with project.
Productivity (25%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Produces sufficient amount of work</li> <li>• Uses class time effectively</li> <li>• Seeks input of instructors and peers</li> </ul>	Produces more than 10 paintings in the semester including studies and drawings for major works; highly focused in class; actively seeks input from instructor and peers.	Produces the minimum of 10 paintings in the semester; makes good use of time in class; welcomes input from professor and peers.	Produces less than 10 paintings in the semester; begins several directions, but not able to finish all works; reluctant to engage regularly with instructor and peers	Produces few paintings; has difficulty in getting started in class or does not attend; shows no consistency in working styles; does not engage with others.
Sketchbook (10%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contains sufficient of sketches</li> <li>• Includes ideas/plans for paintings</li> <li>• Includes study of modern and master artists</li> </ul>	Exceeds 70 pages; Contains drawings from life, includes ideas for paintings; includes multiple studies of one or more master artists.	Meets the minimum 70 pages; contains drawings from life and ideas for paintings; contains studies of master artists.	Does not meet the minimum 70 pages; lacks ideas for future paintings; insufficient study of master artists.	Sketchbook entries are few; lacks ideas/plans for future painting; master artist studies are missing.

Note. Required writing assignments to represent the remaining 15% of the grade.

**TABLE 2**  
**Designing a Rubric**

Below are three steps in designing a rubric, along with an example of a generic rubric for assessing oral presentations in a classroom setting.

1. Identify Performance Criteria (and Attributes).
  - Three to seven performance criteria work best (e.g., Delivery) so that people can easily remember them.
  - Specify weight or percentage for each criterion if not evenly weighted.
  - Keep number of attributes (e.g., Volume, Pacing, Rapport) equal for all criteria.
2. Set Performance Levels
  - Three to six performance levels (e.g., Developing, Proficient, Accomplished) are most effective because people often have trouble reliably distinguishing among more levels.
  - Fewer levels are better if the primary purpose of the assessment is summative (e.g., pass/fail), while more levels are better for formative assessment (e.g., feedback).
  - Decide on level headings using developmental language (e.g., emerging) or mastery language (e.g., below proficient) as appropriate.
3. Create Performance Descriptions
  - Make paragraph descriptions parallel across levels (and aligned with attributes).
  - Provide specific description of performance when possible (e.g., speaker varies volume).
  - Rubric should be brief enough so that students, teachers, and scorers can internalize it.

## Advanced Painting Course Description

I teach an undergraduate advanced painting class at a mid-sized, urban, public university that takes pride in its diversity. Some of my students might be first-generation college students, or students who must balance full-time jobs and family responsibilities. And, as in the case of Susan, many are adult students who are returning to college after a long hiatus or beginning an undergraduate degree in art for the first time. My students are in their final year of a four-year Bachelor of Fine Arts program focusing on the development of an individual artistic direction. Advanced-level work consists of a more independent exploration of technical, formal, conceptual, and professional goals in painting. My expectations are very high—not simply in terms of productivity and technical capability, but intellectual rigor and awareness of contemporary and historical critical issues in painting. This course constitutes the student's greatest developmental challenge as an artist thus far; it is the departure point for professional artistic activity. The development of individual artistic direction, or "voice," as evidenced by conceptual invention and discovery, is one of the central goals of this course.

The format of the class is self-directed studio work, critiques, and intensive tutorial. The committed student will work in the studio fifteen hours per week as a minimum, including class time. Individual and group critiques are the cornerstone of the class; I support an ongoing critical dialogue that challenges my students through interactions with visiting artists and their peers. Lectures by guest artists, and visits to galleries and museums in addition to studio activity are critical at the advanced level to develop an individual direction and professional attitude. Class time is also devoted to lectures, student presentations, and discussions that focus on critical issues in historical and contemporary traditions of painting. By semester's end, each student is expected to create a body of ten paintings (mid-size) and complete related work and art historical research.

TABLE 3  
Rubric for Assessing an Oral Presentation

Levels Criteria	Accomplished 3 points	Proficient 2 points	Developing 1 point
Delivery (25%) Volume Pacing Rapport	Speaker varies volume to fit the message, with a pace that is appropriate to the rhythms of the topic. Audience is clearly engaged.	Speaker is easy to hear and pace keeps audience's attention.	Speaker is difficult to hear, and the pace is either too slow or too fast. Speaker has little connection with audience.
Content (25%) Accuracy Relevance Organization	The content is precise and comprehensive, and customized to the audience and appropriate for the topic. The organization of ideas is powerful.	The content is mostly accurate and complete, and relevant to topic and audience. The content is well sequenced and the relationship among ideas clear.	The content of the speech is inaccurate or incomplete, or not relevant to the topic or audience. The sequence of ideas is confusing.
Language (25%) Vocabulary Enunciation Grammar	Vocabulary is rich and vivid, and appropriate to audience and topic. Speech is clear and easy to understand, with careful attention to pronunciation. Grammatical and syntactical structures are complex and effective.	Vocabulary is appropriate to audience and topic. Speech is clear and easy to understand. Grammar and syntax are sound.	Vocabulary is simplistic or trite, or is not appropriate to audience or topic. Speech is sprinkled with "ums" or is difficult to understand. Speaker makes many grammatical mistakes.
Physicality (25%) Body Eye Facial	Body movement and gestures are customized to context and topic. Speaker engages audience through eye contact and facial expressions.	Body movement is appropriate to the context. Speaker makes regular eye contact with audience, and varies facial expressions.	Body movement is too much or too little. Speaker displays little eye contact and facial expression.

Advanced-level studios are a challenge for most students who are more accustomed to courses that focus solely on technique or who need frequent deadlines and assigned projects to stay on course.

## Rubric for the Advanced Painting Course

As midterm evaluations approached I observed that several students did not seem to fully grasp the expectations of the course even though I knew the goals were covered in my syllabus and in my comments on the first day of class. I decided to try a rubric after I attended a faculty workshop on "using scoring rubrics to improve teaching and learning" as a way to underscore the goals and requirements of the course. In particular, I wanted to stress the importance of experimental practice and theory, and to clearly state how each requirement would be weighted in the grading process. Meeting individually with my students at midterm to assess their progress and to discuss the strengths and weaknesses in their studio practice, I used the rubric to better organize my comments and questions during the one-on-one critiques.

An advanced student's developing artistic direction and voice is difficult to measure. Students come to class with a variety of ideas and attitudes concerning what art is, and



Critique in an Advanced Painting class: (l to r) Emily McAllister and Mary K. Connelly.

what it is not, and what it means to be an artist as shaped by diverse cultural, economic, and social influences. Similarly, the instructor will have his/her own predilections or tastes, for example, a preference for painting that is more experimental over work that follows an established or traditional style. One of the most critical reasons for using a rubric is to state in a straightforward way to my students what I mean by “voice.” Measuring voice includes both the notion of progress or maturity of technical skill in the work, and, in equal parts, the range of experimentation and invention. Thus, the rubric provides the detailed criteria for both theory and practice and spells out explicit expectations giving specific descriptions of actions to take, helpful to both the transfer student from local community colleges and the upper-division students accustomed to intermediate-level painting courses that focus on skill-building alone. By placing the emphasis on process and self-reflection, my students are supported as they discover their “voice” and unique style.

My upper-division painting students are evaluated not according to individual projects per se, but by four process-based criteria: *inventiveness*, *craftsmanship*, *productivity*, and *sketchbook* (see rubric Table 1). Each of the four criteria on the rubric is defined by three key attributes or actions. For example, under the criterion of *productivity* are the following three attributes: “produces sufficient amount of work, uses class time effectively, seeks input of instructor and peers.” The sketchbook as the fourth criterion on the rubric is regarded not as a “project” but as evidence of the process of idea development. The criteria of *productivity* and *sketchbook* are clearly quantifiable; I set a minimum number of required paintings and sketchbook entries my students must create by the midterm and final review. However, measuring performance in the first two criteria, *inventiveness* and *craftsmanship*, requires a more holistic approach. This is a qualitative process of evaluation keeping a log of individual studio activity, and my ongoing notes reflecting on both one-to-one and group critiques. In the group critiques, for example, I ask my students to work in teams and evaluate each other’s work by determining the criteria on a blank rubric, scoring their partner’s work, and articulating before the class the formal and conceptual issues in each other’s work. The critique becomes an active-



learning experience that offers me the opportunity to observe or “measure” my students’ performance.

I have designed the rubric to reward process, be it experimenting with “gel-transfer images” or mastering the technique of oil glazing. I look for evidence of risk taking and research in all of their work, but I do not assume students will all enter my class with a desire to take risks or do research. The rubric is one way to stress the importance of art historical research, while also encouraging experimental and innovative practices found in contemporary art movements. My aim is to encourage students to experiment, take risks, and reach beyond their comfort zones. It is clear to me that even for my advanced students articulating their ideas in a critique or a written assignment is definitely outside their comfort zone. I encounter students who simply have a fear of speaking in public and others for whom the idea of locating “meaning” in a work of art is an entirely new expectation in an art class. But, the student who is taking risks and independently researching new ideas is more likely to learn how to think critically and effectively articulate (in both verbal and written forms) the formal and conceptual issues in their work.

I emphasize the practice of self-reflection and writing in advanced painting to prepare my students for their senior Thesis Review—basically a “defense” of their work in front of a panel of faculty. There is a shared belief in my department concerning the criteria for the B.F.A. degree; a student must attain mastery in both their media/craft and the expression of their ideas in oral or written form. When I introduced assignments focusing on art history or theory the first time I taught the advanced level, many students voiced dissatisfaction on course evaluations: “*Why do we have to write papers in a studio course. I resent doing research; I’d rather have the time in the studio.*” Changing teaching practices, introducing assessment tools, I knew that I might encounter resistance and run the risk of lower course evaluations. The tide is turning in all the upper-level studio courses, and students have come to regard communication skills as important survival skills as they become cognizant of the intense competition artists face. Yet, the Romantic notion of “being discovered” without making any effort towards self-promotion, or Milton Avery’s famous statement, “*Why talk when you can paint,*” must still linger in art students’ minds, ignoring or dismissing the practical importance of clarity in verbal and written expression.

Such common misconceptions about what it takes to become an artist or focusing only on the “skill set” needed in the business world can narrow an otherwise broad education that is available in a university art program. Given the vastly different cultural backgrounds of my students, using a rubric is essential in clearly laying out the steps in the learning experience and showing the broader qualities, activities, and research that define a practicing artist. There are many students who have had limited access to museums and have not had contact with professional artists or galleries. Conscious experience of what’s come before and what is currently happening will stimulate and inspire students to react or respond—and whatever the style or form they choose, a more self-reflective studio practice and point of view will emerge. From my perspective, inventiveness is unlikely to come about without extensive research, exploration, and creation, which is why I emphasize this point in my teaching and in the rubric.

Scoring is based on a 4.0 scale for each criterion on the rubric; to assess quality, there are four levels of performance—*outstanding, proficient, evolving, and below expectations*. The language under each level of performance follows the order of the three attributes of the criteria (see rubric example Table 1). The student can compare the difference



between outstanding and proficient, for example, under each criterion to understand why she/he has achieved proficient rather than outstanding under the inventiveness, craftsmanship or production categories. These three criteria are equally weighted at 25% of the final grade, with the sketchbook at 10%. These four categories are added for a project score that equals 85% of the final grade. The additional writing and research requirements are graded pass/fail and comprise the remaining 15% of the final grade.

## Reflections on the Process

Using a rubric for an advanced course that is highly self-directed without frequent project deadlines felt like a huge risk. I feared that I was imposing a cold and impersonal method of evaluation upon artwork that is inherently unique and individual and hard to measure. I also had the preconceived notion that rubrics are an easy way out of writing lengthy comments to each student following the midterm or final critique. But, to my surprise, developing and using a rubric has been labor intensive and very challenging, and I *still* continue to write comments at the end of the rubric! I realized how much in the visual arts is difficult to assess and measure, and a rubric cannot replace the personal touch of a hand-written comment. My willingness to try rubrics turned into a larger project as I reexamined and reevaluated my teaching methods and goals. Now that I have set the criteria, I wonder if I am doing my part to help my students reach these goals.

I wanted to try a rubric in my studio courses to see if learning and performance could be evaluated in a more unbiased and objective way. I must admit I first thought about this in the context of foundation-level courses, where there are very specific concepts being taught. A rubric for two-dimensional design would be structured around particular projects that were assigned to introduce major principles such as balance, rhythm, or contrast.

About a week after my advanced students received their midterm evaluations in the form of a rubric, I met with them and asked for feedback. I was very curious to know from the students whether it was necessary and fair. They were all very positive about the rubric, making comments about my level of detail and effort. When I asked if the rubric seemed too rigid or overly structured for a studio art course, they disagreed and said they welcomed having more structure and appreciated that it made the grading process more objective. This brought up other comments—some students expressed the need for more structure (and deadlines) in the course. One student remarked that it is very helpful to get a rubric at the beginning of the semester with the syllabus to be informed of the goals of the course in a clear, objective way. Again, this was offered as a positive suggestion, not as a complaint. What about the areas that are difficult to measure? When I asked my students if they would add any other criteria, they said “effort.” But, I was concerned that without a clear definition and some kind of systematic documentation, assessing effort would depend more on the observer’s biases than on the student’s behaviors. But the students said that they trusted that their professors could fairly assess their work habits by observation, especially given the six contact hours a week in the studio classroom.

Another of my fears was that I would encounter backlash or frustration from the class for not giving them the rubric well ahead of time to know what my expectations were. But as I considered the criteria on the rubric, I knew they were clearly presented in my syllabus. By having this discussion with my students, I was really asking them (and myself), had I communicated the importance of the criteria in the various teaching

activities—lectures, individual critiques, discussion groups? Had I made an assumption that they knew the importance of art historical research to the painting process or did some students just miss the point? I am encouraged by the idea that providing a rubric along with my syllabi at the beginning of the semester will help keep my students *and me* on course.

Using a rubric for the first time at midterm raised the issue of how effectively had I reinforced the goals of the course. What began as a discussion with my students about the design of the rubric, evolved into a larger conversation about their experience in advanced painting. Not only was I getting positive feedback on the rubric, I heard useful constructive criticism on the format of the course. Getting this feedback at mid-semester provided adequate time before their final reviews to make adjustments in the rubric and the structure of the class as I gathered suggestions from my students and colleagues. An important goal for me from the beginning was to develop a fair grading tool that could assess both process and product. I didn't want to grade individual paintings, but rather evaluate the learning process. When I was asked by a colleague, "Shouldn't *invention* be weighted more heavily than *production* when it comes to evaluating art?" I was reminded of the quote attributed to the American inventor, Thomas Edison: "*Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.*"

## Looking Ahead

As the semester comes to a close, I am already thinking about the next one, anxious to begin my classes by providing the rubric with the syllabus on the first day of class. The most important lesson learned from my advanced painting class, and in particular from my student who "*just wanted to learn how to paint,*" was the importance of clarifying my expectations at the beginning of the semester. Not only did Susan overlook the aspect of art historical inquiry, she neglected to turn in her writing assignments. There was obviously a connection here; this student seemed to think of painting strictly in terms of formal and technical issues and avoided or was oblivious to the theoretical and philosophical dimension.



Critique in an Advanced Painting class: (l to r) Marical Farner and Mary K. Connelly.

As I read more about assessment, I learned that my situation with Susan wasn't unique. For the non-traditional student like Susan, I had a responsibility to make explicit the various assumptions and expectations in art school or the academic art department. As an artist it is critical that I share my own work and model for my students the ongoing process of honing one's craft in concert with exploring new ideas. With more first-generation and adult students on campus, the issue of access must be considered on the most fundamental levels. Student success depends, in part, on demystifying the process of evaluating art, where students can see clearly what is their responsibility (under their control), and be assured that grading isn't dictated by the idiosyncratic taste or subjective bias of the professor.

Currently, there is an emphasis on "accountability" in public education, especially in K-12 education but increasingly in higher education as well. Hand in hand with the accountability movement there is an increasing emphasis on assessment, and standardized assessments of student learning in particular. While rubrics may appear to be a part of this movement, appearances can be deceiving. Standardized assessments typically target what is easier to measure (e.g., knowledge of historical dates), whereas rubrics target more complex performances (e.g., staging of a screen play). In fact, rubrics can offer some protection against the negative consequences of standardized testing and the ways that these types of tests can fragment the learning experience and narrow the curriculum.

As communication tool, the rubric encourages active learning and the artistic development of students by providing language for assessing process and product. In particular, a rubric "communicates" what the learning target is, so that students are better able to hit it, and what the assessment criteria are, so that faculty are more consistent in their evaluations. As well, a rubric fosters communication by giving students a shared vocabulary for talking about their work. The rubric also serves as an outline of my teaching philosophy—making clear my role as a facilitator, actively engaging the student in his/her own learning though hard work, creative inquiry, and skilled execution.

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