

Proposal for 2012 AAPT Workshop-Conference

Title: Creating the best rubric for assessing argumentative writing in philosophy, both for grading and for program assessment: A group exercise

Description:

Overview: Rubrics are now common in assessing writing, both for grading individual course assignments and for program assessment. In philosophy, our writing is typically argumentative, and the development of argumentative writing skills is a standard learning outcome for individual courses and for philosophy programs as a whole. The best practices for program assessment include the use of common rubrics where possible. Yet instructors differ considerably in their expectations for argumentative writing, and they differ greatly in what types of argumentative writing assignments they require. The main question of the session is this: What would the best rubric for all argumentative writing in philosophy be, and what expectations would it contain? Participants in the session will work toward creating such a rubric, through group work informed by data from assessment of 50 writing samples by philosophy majors at a small four-year comprehensive institution.

My own experience is that there are at least family resemblance relations among different instructor expectations for writing assignments, if not a set of outright shared goals and expectations. But what common features do we all share, or mostly share, when it comes to our expectations for philosophical writing? How should those expectations carry over into creating a rubric for assessing student writing in both individual courses and for program assessment?

For the session, the first step in answering these questions to identify some shared expectations, and individual surveys followed by paired and group discussion should accomplish this. Ideally there will be some further details identified as to what precisely would count as meeting a particular expectation, as well as the ways in which a paper might fail to meet that expectation. Next, by way of refining those results, one might take some existing assessment results as a guide. In my own department, we have been gathering and assessing student papers for the last three years, and the results so far have tentatively identified a number of strengths and weaknesses. After a short presentation of those results, participants in the session then will consider further refinements and/or additions to the group's rubric-in-progress. Strengths in student writing might be emphasized or deemphasized in the rubric, or added to or deleted from the rubric, depending on whether that strength corresponds to a significant expectation for argumentative writing. The same applies for weaknesses. Again, paired and group work ought to generate further progress. The result for the session should be a rubric giving the group's shared expectations for writing in philosophy, as well as a better understanding of what successful argumentative writing by our students ought to entail.

Activities of participants:

1. Individual surveys to canvass general expectations for argumentative writing in philosophy

2. Paired and group discussion to identify shared expectations, and to give conditions for meeting those conditions.
3. Paired and group discussion to refine expectations for writing given some results of program assessment

Goals of session:

1. Identification of shared expectations in argumentative writing in philosophy
2. Critical discussion of expectations for argumentative writing in philosophy
3. Creation of a common rubric for argumentative writing in philosophy

References:

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Flateby, T. 2010. A system for fostering and assessing writing and critical thinking skills. *Assessment Update* 22 (3), 1-2, 14-15.

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Newell, G. et al. 2011. Teaching and learning argumentative reading and writing: A review of research. *Reading Research Quarterly* 46 (3), 273-304. (dx.doi.org/10/1598/RRQ.46.3.4)

Stevens, D. and Levi, A. 2005. *Introduction to Rubrics: An Assessment Tool to Save Grading Time, Convey Effective Feedback and Promote Student Learning*. Stylus.

Vaughn, L. 2006. *Writing Philosophy: A Student's Guide to Writing Philosophy Essays*. Oxford.

Walvoord, B. 2010. *Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education*. 2nd Ed. Jossey-Bass.

Walvoord, B. and Anderson, V. 1998. *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment*. Jossey-Bass.

Williams, J. and Colomb, G. 2010. *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 10th Ed. Longman.

Williams, J. and Colomb, G. 2012. *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*. 4th Ed. Longman.

Handouts: Rubric used for grading and assessment, tables of assessment results, blank rubric for workshop/discussion

Equipment needed: Laptop, projection unit, screen