
Evaluating Classroom Community of Inquiry: For Course Instructors (November 2003)

The community of inquiry rubric is a framework for evaluating participation in classrooms that are committed to dialogical, inquiry-based learning. What follows is an outline of how you might implement this evaluation procedure in your classroom accompanied by an explanation justifying this particular approach. It is intended as a guide only.

What is the community of inquiry rubric?

The community of inquiry rubric analyzes classroom participation into four significant dimensions: cognitive virtues, social virtues, inquiry outcomes and relevance to teaching and learning. Excellence in classroom dialogue involves thinking well on one's own and with others, respectful relationships amongst the students, a deep understanding of the issues being discussed and meta-awareness of the teaching-learning process that one is a participant in. Within each of these dimensions the rubric identifies distinguishing capacities or abilities that students can look for and strive to master over the course of a semester.

This rubric is designed for students to use in the ongoing evaluation of their progress with respect to these virtues. It is a self-assessment instrument that encourages students taking greater responsibility for their teaching-learning. On a practical level it is necessitated by the large class sizes, and even more importantly, the difficulty in determining whether a person's failure to intervene in the dialogue results from an *inability* on their part or a *judgment* not to do so.

In dialogical inquiry-based learning the cognitive skills are developed in the context of a cooperative activity, which requires that their exercise be tempered by sensitivity to others – individuals are making judgments all the time about when and when not to intervene, as well as about the *kind* of intervention to make. For example, a student who has formulated a very interesting follow-up question makes the assessment not to ask it because she notices that some of the less vocal students are engaged in the more foundational work, of clarifying the terms. It is important therefore that the rubric address a student's cognitive skills, depth of understanding, and success in judgments of appropriateness. The students ask themselves, 'Can I reason well?' and 'Can I think creatively?' for example (Items 1 and 2) as well as 'Did I intervene at appropriate moments in appropriate ways?' (Items 6 and 7).

Students are also required to evaluate the level of their ability: failing to meet expectations, meeting expectations or exceeding expectations. The rubric differentiates these qualitatively distinct categories according to the frequency with which any student is able to demonstrate these virtues: from least frequent to most frequent. There are two reasons for this approach. Firstly, if the rubric is to be useful then it must be accessible to the students. In the initial stages students are more likely to be able to differentiate their

cognitive ability according to quantity than they are quality. The second reason is that to improvement in these virtues is reflected in their being exercised more spontaneously and with less effort.

As with all pedagogical and evaluation instruments, the community of inquiry rubric reflects an educational philosophy or ideal. It is an excellent means by which students can reflect on the philosophical dimensions of pedagogy and the pedagogical dimensions of philosophy. We encourage you to use the rubric as a text to stimulate inquiry about the educational ideal informing dialogical inquiry-based learning. Ask students whether they think becoming educated principally involves academic achievement or acquiring professional expertise. Should it be competitive or cooperative and why? How significant should the social dimensions of education be?

Difficulties you may encounter

Some of the difficulties that you might encounter in using the rubric are as follows:

1. Generally students are unused to evaluating themselves, so they can mistakenly assume that the rubric evaluates the course in relation to their performance in the class. To disabuse them of this misconception we recommend that you discuss the rubric and its purposes in some detail. Students may also be disinclined to participate in the self-assessment as an authentic process due to an overall cynicism about the education process. For example, a student who conceived of himself as an ‘uncreative thinker’ nonetheless gave himself a ‘4’ because he said that in education one needs to appear as though one knows, irrespective of whether one does or not.
2. Given a general lack of knowledge as to what is involved in “reasoning well’ or “self-correcting’ or “listening to others,” students filling in the rating sheet for the first time are inclined to rate themselves very highly. In a class of thirty, evaluations lower than 4 are rare. The purpose of using the rubric is to give them a more realistic sense of the difficulty of the task and their abilities with respect to the task.

This has two dimensions. Firstly, there are the cognitive skills which can require special tuition so that students become self-consciously adept at thinking critically. We recommend that you consider putting aside class time to engage the students in exercises that specifically practice making means/end distinctions, evaluating reasons, identifying assumptions and implications, engaging in hypothetical reasoning. The second dimension concerns our depth of understanding. Teachers and students frequently take for granted that they know what it is to give all opinions fair consideration and pay close attention to others, whereas to participate in a community of inquiry is to realize that one’s understanding of what it means to listen to others for example can deepen without limit. The irony of this rubric then is that the better the students become at dialogical inquiry-based learning, the more they appreciate how far they have to go and the lower their scores on the rating sheet.

3. Ideally, students in a classroom community of inquiry would collaborate together to develop their own particular standards of excellence for their dialogical inquiry. These would be based on a collective understanding of their objectives, their resources as well as their specific weaknesses and strengths. This rubric presents a pre-determined set of virtues and so is extrinsic to any individual classroom community. It comes to the students from a source that is external to them, without their having chosen to adopt it, and is therefore imposed. It follows then that students will have less ownership of the rubric than if they had devised it themselves.

It is for this reason that we recommend presenting the rubric to the students as a document that they can critique and modify in light of their own discussions and conclusions as to what constitutes a successful community of inquiry. For example, students frequently see the need to include humor as a virtue that is both cognitive and social.

What follows is a schedule for implementing the community of inquiry rubric that attempts to overcome these three difficulties so that students get a sense of themselves as taking responsibility for their involvement in the course and not simply responding to it, as discovering their own perfectibility with respect to these virtues, and reflecting critically on the necessary conditions for dialogical inquiry-based learning.

Schedule for implementing the Community of Inquiry Rubric

A semester is approximately fifteen weeks long. The aim over the fifteen weeks is that the students fill in the assessment rating sheet twice and that these self-assessments be as accurate as possible. What follows is an outline for how best to ensure this.

Before Class

- Make one copy of the rubric and explanatory sheet for each student.
- Make three copies of the assessment rating sheet to be given out at various points over the semester.
- If you have Blackboard for your class, include the rubric and the explanatory and assessment rating sheets in the course documents.
- Familiarize yourself with the rubric.

Week One:

- Give each student a hard copy of the rubric, as well as the assessment rating and explanatory sheets.
- Present it as a framework for thinking about and evaluating participation.
- It is important that you introduce the idea of self-assessment and invite them to discuss why it might be important as well as what problems it might have.

- Have them read it in class, invite questions and ask questions like, ‘Have any of you had anything like this before?’, ‘Do you understand each of the categories?’
- Ask them to read it again at home.

Weeks Two to Seven:

- Engage in an informal self-evaluation at the end of each class, using either some or all of the items on the score sheet. This can be done using something as simple as thumbs up and thumbs down.
- Ask the students to reflect on the results. For example, ask them whether or not they would like to evaluate the dialogue with criteria not referred to in the rubric. Ask them for strategies on how to improve in the areas of identified weakness.
- Wherever possible connect these discussions with the material covered in class. For example, what philosophy of education informs the community of inquiry rubric? What philosophy of education might lead one to be frustrated with dialogical inquiry and so on?

Week Eight:

- Have the students fill in an assessment rating sheet that you bring to class.
- Collect the assessment rating sheets.
- Analyze the assessment rating sheets for overall trends in response. For example a lot of people might be giving themselves ‘5’ for an ability that isn’t being demonstrated by the students.

Week Nine:

- Share with the students what you learnt from the score sheets inviting them to have a discussion about it. You may want to return the sheets to individual students with comments.

Weeks Ten to Fourteen:

- Same as weeks two to seven.

Week Fifteen:

- Have the students fill in an assessment rating sheet that you bring to class.
- Emphasize that this is summative self-evaluation and not formative.
- Collect the assessment rating sheets.

- After you have completed your analysis (but no longer than two weeks after you collect the rating sheets) put them in Tamara Lucas' mailbox (outside Chapin 207).

Benefits of using the community of inquiry rubric

There are many benefits to having the students engage in weekly or bi-weekly informal and public self-evaluation. It enables students to get a sense of how their peers are responding to the class relative to themselves, which is important because it ameliorates any sense of isolation a student might have as a result of class practice. For example, they see very quickly that they are not alone in having difficulty following the dialogue or that they are not the only one to feel hurt or frustrated by the rudeness of some class members. It also allows the class to identify patterns or trends in a response. If an overwhelming majority of the students in the class identify that they were unable to follow or keep up with the dialogue, then this becomes something that needs to be addressed in future classes thereby giving students an opportunity to propose pedagogical strategies for everyone to practice or at least experiment with in the future.

Another benefit of this approach is that it allows the professor to compare his or her own assessment of students who are interested, disinterested, struggling etc. with the students' assessment of themselves. You discover that some of the time you are correct in your estimation of the student and sometimes you are not. It allows for an open and importantly non-threatening dialogue about why students may and may not engage in a class. For example, I had noticed a student who really didn't seem to want to be in the class. Given that we can never be sure, I watched with some interest how he evaluated his level of engagement in the class. His self-evaluation indicated that my judgement of his lack of enthusiasm was correct. It was at this point that I asked those students who had indicated a low level of engagement in the class to explain why this might be the case and invited the class to propose ways in which this might be ameliorated. If nothing else, this acknowledges and takes seriously their presence in the class and their needs in relation to the educational environment.