

## **Critique of the 2012 Blackboard Exemplary Course Rubric**

The 2012 Blackboard Exemplary Course Rubric is an observation checklist designed by Blackboard Learn for the Blackboard Learn Catalyst Awards—specifically the award category titled “Exemplary Course.” The Catalyst Awards were designed to “honor those who push the boundaries of their educational programs and technology in order to deliver innovative and effective learning experiences” (Blackboard Website). The awards are part of Blackboard’s community program “Learn From Your Peers.”

The 2012 Exemplary Course Award recognizes course creators whose courses demonstrate best practices in Course Design, Interaction and Collaboration, Assessment, and Learner Support. Nominated courses are evaluated by volunteer “peer reviewers” who undergo a free, online training program provided by Blackboard. The reviewers use this rubric to judge the course. Winners are then recognized at the BbWorld 2012 Conference in New Orleans.

The rubric can be described as a summative evaluation tool—it is an evaluation of the worth and merit of a course once it is fully developed. It is also both an internal and external evaluation tool—it is used both for self-assessment and by outside reviewers. The rubric was designed to be publicly available for nominees to download. The award requires the nominee to analyze their own course using this rubric, and provide that data in the submission. In this sense, it is used as a self-evaluation tool. It is useful because nominees are able to evaluate their own course by the criteria set forth by Blackboard, as well as view feedback from other professionals in curriculum and instruction who are familiar with Blackboard.

To evaluate this instrument, I will use the definition and four-part rubric model provided by Dannelle D. Stevens and Antonia J. Levi in *Introduction to Rubrics*. I will then analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the tool and provide recommendations for improvement.

## The Rubric as an Evaluative Instrument

According to Dannelle D. Stevens and Antonia J. Levi, a rubric is “a scoring tool that lays out the specific expectations of an assignment. Rubrics divide an assignment into its component parts and provide a detailed description of what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable levels of performance for each of those parts” (3). Traditionally, rubrics are used to grade assignments in academia. In the case of the Blackboard Awards, the submitted course can be viewed as the “assignment” and the rubric describes expectations that Blackboard has put in place; in meeting these expectations, the course was designed to meet Blackboard’s expectations for what constitutes an “exemplary course.”

Stevens and Levi claim that rubrics can be broken down into four parts: the task description, a scale of some sort, the dimensions of the assignment, and descriptions of what constitutes each level of performance (5). These parts are all laid out on a grid. Blackboard’s Exemplary Course Rubric follows this format.

# Element

## Course Design (page 1 of 2)

Course Design addresses elements of instructional design. For the purpose of this program, course design includes such elements as structure of the course, learning objectives, organization of content, and instructional strategies.

## Task Description

### Dimensions

	Exemplary	Accomplished	Promising	Incomplete	Scale
Goals and Objectives	Goals and objectives are easily located within the course; are clearly written at the appropriate level and reflect desired outcomes; are written in measurable outcomes (students know what they are expected to be able to do), are made available in a variety of areas in the course (within the syllabus and each individual learning unit)	Goals and objectives are located within the course syllabus or the individual learning units; objectives are written to reflect desired learning outcomes, although not all are written as measurable outcomes; students have some understanding of what is expected of them;	Goals and objectives are not easily located within the course; are not clearly written in measurable learning outcomes; students may be unsure of what they are expected to be able to do; the level does not match the desired outcomes;	Goals and objectives are not easily located within the course; some are missing and others poorly written; the level does not match the desired learning outcomes;	
Content Presentation	Content is made available or "chunked" in manageable segments (i.e., presented in distinct learning units or modules); navigation is intuitive; content flows in a logical progression; content is presented using a variety of appropriate mechanisms (content modules, single pages, links to external resources, RSS Feeds, print material); content is enhanced with visual and auditory elements; supplementary resources are made available (course CDs, textbooks, course manuals, etc.)	Content is made available or "chunked" in manageable segments (i.e., presented in distinct learning units or modules); navigation is somewhat intuitive, but some "exploring" is required to determine the flow of content; content is presented using a variety of mechanisms (content modules, single pages, links to external resources, RSS Feeds, print material); visual and/or auditory elements occasionally enhance the content; supplementary resources are made available (course CDs, textbooks, course manuals, etc.);	Some content segments are overly large (or possibly too small) for the specified objectives; navigation is only occasionally intuitive, thus the flow of content is sometimes not easily determined; the design does not avail of the content presentation tools (content modules, single pages, links); few or no visual and/or auditory elements are used to enhance the content; supplementary resources may be made available (course CDs, textbooks, course manuals, etc.)	Content is not "chunked" into manageable segments; navigation is not intuitive and the flow of content is unclear; the design does not avail of the content presentation tools (content modules, single pages, links); no visual or auditory elements are used to enhance the content; supplementary resources are not made available (course CDs, textbooks, course manuals, etc.)	
Description of the Dimensions					

Figure 1. The Blackboard Rubric and its Parts

### *Task Description*

Blackboard's rubric is broken down into four elements: "Course Design," "Interaction and Collaboration," "Assessment," and "Learner Support." Each of these elements has a task description. The task description is framed by the expectations of Blackboard, complete with definitions of the elements.

### *Scale*

Stevens and Levi claim that the scale "describes how well or poorly any given task has been performed" (8). There are four levels to Blackboard's scale: "Exemplary," "Accomplished," "Promising," and "Incomplete."

### *Dimensions*

The dimensions of the rubric lay out the parts of the task. They are essentially the "categories" that will be judged. They identify which components are more important in evaluation and how much weight is given to each.

### *Description of the Dimensions*

The description of the dimensions is a description of each level of performance. It should begin with the highest level of expectations, and each description lower indicates the difference between that level of performance and the ideal level of performance. In the Blackboard rubric, the description within the "Exemplary" level contains all of the expectations of Blackboard, while the "Incomplete" level is missing all of those expectations.

Now that I have established an understanding of the basic parts to a rubric, I will analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the rubric with reference to these parts.

## **Strengths**

There are several strengths in the scaling system of the Blackboard rubric. For one, the scale is repeated when a particular element takes up multiple pages. This eliminates the need for the reviewer to constantly refer back to the first page of the rubric.

Secondly, the scale does not imply negativity. The first three labels refer to the course actually containing the dimension, while the fourth, "Incomplete," establishes that the

course does not contain the dimension at all. If you take this into consideration, “Promising” is the most negative of the four labels, indicating that the course contains the dimension, but there is room for improvement. Blackboard could have implemented an “Exemplary,” “Proficient,” “Marginal,” and “Unacceptable” scale. This scale would have provided a more negative tone, as “Unacceptable, and even “Marginal” remind us that the course is flawed; Blackboard’s scale is positive, using “incomplete” and “promising,” and reminds us that their purpose is to encourage course builders to *seek improvement* in their courses, not to point out flaws.

Stevens and Levi emphasize that rubrics are almost always confined to three or five levels of performance (8). However, the four levels of this scale are suitable to the purpose of the Blackboard Rubric. By adding the fourth level, course builders are able to see which dimensions their courses lack entirely and which dimensions are included, but need improvement.

The Blackboard Rubric’s task descriptions are very useful in establishing exactly what elements the courses are evaluated on. For example, “interaction” and “collaboration” are clearly defined on page 4 of the rubric. This helps eliminate any misunderstandings or miscommunications about the definitions of the elements of the rubric.

Finally, the use of the rubric as an evaluative tool enables objective, consistent evaluation for the volunteer peer reviewers. From the perspective of the course designer, by having access to the rubric they are able to be better judges of the quality of their own courses, as well. The fact that the rubric is both an internal and an external evaluation tool makes it very useful in evaluating Blackboard courses.

## **Weaknesses**

One weakness in the Blackboard Rubric lies in the essence of using a rubric itself. The dimension descriptions are very precise, and certain courses might not fit neatly into one column or the other. Since this rubric is attached to an award, this could cause problems in deciding which course has attained more of Blackboard’s expectations than another course, and in the ultimate decision of who the “winner” is.

Another weakness lies in the use of the acronym ECP in the rubric. Within the task descriptions, “ECP Criteria” are referenced (Rubric, 4). As a course builder, I was unsure of

what “ECP Criteria” were since the acronym had not been referenced within the rubric. After I conducted some research, I found that ECP referred to the “Exemplary Course Program,” (the overarching program for which the “Exemplary Course Award” was located under). I overlooked this because I had not encountered this title or the acronym before, only “Exemplary Course Award.” Nominees for the program could easily get confused without a complete reference to the acronym in the rubric.

Finally, it is unclear how the rubric will produce a “score” to establish a “winner” in the competition. Does the reviewer count up how many dimensions meet the “Exemplary” standards and the course with the most wins the award? Are different elements and/or dimensions within these elements weighted more in the scoring? Is there a numbering system involved—perhaps “Exemplary” is worth 3 points, “Accomplished” worth 2 points, “Promising” worth 1 point, and “Incomplete” worth no points? As a course developer, I am interested in whether there is a weighted system in the rubric to establish which elements and dimensions are particularly important to focus on.

## **Quality of the Rubric**

The rubric itself is an evaluative tool used by the Blackboard Catalyst Awards to eliminate bias in evaluator judgment. Because the dimension descriptions in the rubric are so precise, reviewers must evaluate consistently and objectively. However, small amount of personal judgment might occur when a course falls between two columns, but as a whole, I feel that the rubric is an excellent tool to evaluate whether a certain course was designed to meet Blackboard’s standards.

## **Recommendations for Revision**

My main recommendation for revision would be for Blackboard to explain how a “winner” is established in the competition. Again, one of the weaknesses for the rubric is that it doesn’t include a point system or establish whether certain elements and dimensions are weighted more than others. I am interested to see how Blackboard will define a “winner” without a scoring or weighting system.

I’m also interested in how they justify their decision if a certain course would fall within two categories—it would meet the requirements for two different dimension

descriptions. This could play a huge part in the final “score” of the course and the final decision. Blackboard should establish the protocol this type of situation to eliminate questioning and concern from individuals submitting courses for the reward.

Overall, the Blackboard rubric is an effective method for evaluating a course based on Blackboard’s set standards. With these minor adjustments, I feel that the rubric could be even more effective in accomplishing the rubric’s objective—providing high quality feedback for course designers to improve Blackboard courses—while also clearly establishing how Blackboard determines a winner in the competition.

## **Works Cited**

Blackboard Learn. (2012). 2012 Blackboard Exemplary Course Rubric. Retrieved from [www.blackboard.com/getdoc/7deaf501-4674-41b9-b2f2-554441ba099b/2012-Blackboard-Exemplary-Course-Rubric.aspx](http://www.blackboard.com/getdoc/7deaf501-4674-41b9-b2f2-554441ba099b/2012-Blackboard-Exemplary-Course-Rubric.aspx)

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