

The Value of Critical Thinking

Designing Assignments that Evaluate Critical Thinking Using AAC&U VALUE Rubrics: A Pilot Study

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Background

Critical thinking is an essential competency in nursing education. It includes “questioning, analysis, synthesis, interpretation, inference, inductive and deductive reasoning, intuition, application, and creativity” (AACN, 2008, p. 36). Assessments in nursing education are frequently designed to evaluate proficiency in critical thinking.

The initial step in a research project to measure students’ critical thinking compelled the authors of this pilot to examine the assignment prompts and grading rubrics for two assignments in an RN-BSN nursing informatics course to determine if explicit cues to prompt critical thinking were included.

Conclusion

- Strategies for adapting the AAC&U VALUE rubrics to authentically evaluate critical thinking within nursing coursework were clearly identified.
- The findings and outcomes of this pilot project were instrumental in advancing measurement of critical thinking of nursing students in subsequent research funded by Lumina Foundation and the DETA Center at UW-Milwaukee.

Purpose

Nursing faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee tested a process for directly evaluating evidence of student critical thinking within course assessments using a rubric developed by the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project led by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U).



The purpose of this project was to assess and revise two written assignments designed to assess critical thinking in relation to specific course content. The written assignments were used in both a traditional online and in a competency-based version of an RN-to-BSN nursing course offered through the UW Flexible Option. Our aims were to:

- (1) Precisely define the elements of critical thinking within the assignment prompts (i.e., task description) based on the VALUE rubric.
- (2) Align key elements of the grading and VALUE rubrics to facilitate valid assessment of critical thinking.

Method

The method used was content analysis. The data sources were the AAC&U Critical Thinking VALUE rubric and the analytic grading rubrics for two assessments in the competency-based and online RN-BSN nursing course.

- The criteria in the grading rubric were compared (mapped) with the criteria in the Critical Thinking VALUE rubric to identify the key elements of critical thinking.
- The levels of proficiency in the grading rubric were compared with the levels in the Critical Thinking VALUE rubric.
- The description of each characteristic at each level of mastery in the grading rubric was compared with the characteristics in the Critical Thinking VALUE rubric.
- Assignment prompts (i.e., assignment description) were examined for alignment with the revised grading rubrics.



About AAC&U

AAC&U is the leading national association concerned with the quality and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. The mission of AAC&U is to reinforce the commitment to liberal education and inclusive excellence at national and local levels and to help individual institutions keep the quality of student learning at the core of their work. For more information on AAC&U see www.aacu.org.



The AAC&U VALUE Rubrics

VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) is a campus-based assessment initiative sponsored by AAC&U as part of its Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative. Sixteen VALUE rubrics or scoring guides were created by teams of faculty experts from more than 100 institutions. The VALUE rubrics are currently used at more than 3,000 institutions as a valid tool to determine whether and how well students are achieving learning outcomes that faculty consider essential.

Results

Rubric for Assessment 1:

- Two of the five criteria were substantively changed to align with the VALUE rubric.
- Level of proficiency descriptions were substantively changed for four of five criteria to align with the VALUE rubric.
- Assignment prompts were changed to include development of critical thinking as a purpose of the assignment.

Rubric for Assessment 2:

- Three of the five criteria were substantively changed to align with the VALUE rubric.
- One criterion was added to the rubric to elicit the student perspective.
- Level of proficiency descriptions were substantively changed for two of five criteria.
- Descriptions were added for the new criterion
- Assignment prompts were changed to include development of critical thinking as a purpose of the assignment.

Discussion

- Careful scrutiny of assignment prompts and guidelines is essential to ensure that the purpose of the assessment is clearly conveyed.
- “Influence of Context and Assumptions” and “Student’s Perspective” were the two elements from the Critical Thinking VALUE rubric that were missing from the grading rubrics.
- Clear, explicit rubric criteria and descriptions of proficiency are essential to further communicate expectations and to cue students’ critical thinking.

References

- American Association of Colleges of Nursing. (2008). The Essentials of Baccalaureate Education for Professional Nursing Practice. <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/publications/order-form/baccalaureate-essentials>
- AAC&U. (2011). Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric. <https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/critical-thinking>
- Lumina Grant for the Study of the UW Flexible Option. <https://www.wisconsin.edu/lumina-grant/>
- National Research Center for Distance Education and Technological Advancements (DETA) <http://www.uwm.edu/deta>
- UW Flexible Option. <http://www.flex.wisconsin.edu>

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