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

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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).

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.

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.
• Clear, explicit rubric criteria and descriptions of proficiency are essential to further communicate expectations and to cue students’ critical thinking.

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” (ACCN, 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.

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 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 of 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.

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.

References
• Lumina Grant for the Study of the UW Flexible Option. https://www.wisconsin.edu/lumina-grant/
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