Chapter 3 Building Learning Scales

I provide descriptions of my expectations for assignments.	I develop/ use rubrics that list or describe expectations for assignments.	I develop/ use instructional scales for each of my learning targets that define the increasing complexity of the skill progression.	I develop/ use benchmark sheets with exemplars to show each level of progression.

Commentary and Context

Learning scales have simplified our lives. Scales are technically rubrics, but in order to really understand their power, we suggest you think of them as an entirely different tool at first. A scale is a skill progression that includes the learning target. Some schools have the target farthest to the right (as the highest level of achievement), but we chose to have the target live in the third position from the left so that there are always steps leading up to and moving beyond the target. We will talk more about that "beyond" step (which we call the 4) in a little while.

There are significant differences between the traditional rubrics we used to use and our current instructional scales. Our old rubrics were primarily for assessment purposes; we would hand them out at the beginning of the unit (usually), but they were really there to help us grade work at the end of the learning. Scales, however, are designed to guide instruction and provide feedback along the way as well as assess achievement at the end. Scales show the continuum of learning, describing what achievement of the skill looks like at varying levels of complexity; our rubrics often showed expectations for a particular assessment, listing required components for success and pointing out that these components are missing at the levels below success. Scales allow for the development of multiple activities, practice, and assessments at each of the defined levels; our rubrics were often limited to a single assignment, with feedback on the success or lack of success on that assignment. Finally, scales use positive I can– type language; our rubrics usually used negative, deficit-based language.

Here's a rubric we used for years with our students, followed by a scale we now use for a similar skill:

Old Rubric for Evidence Old Rubric for Evidence

Uh-Oh (0%– 69%)	Needs Some Work (70%–79%)	Very Good (80%– 89%)	Excellent Work! (90%– 100%)
There is little to no evidence in this essay. It's not clear the student has read the novel.	The essay is missing some evidence or the evidence doesn't support the thesis. Evidence is not cited.	Evidence from the novel supports the thesis but isn't the best available. There are at least three pieces of evidence. Evidence is cited.	Evidence from the novel is well chosen and is clearly the best available. There are more than four pieces of evidence. Evidence is cited correctly.

New Scale for Evidence

New Scale for Evidence

Output: Use of Evidence	I can support my claim with my own ideas about my purpose.	I can support my claim with evidence that relates to my purpose.	I can support my claim with multiple, credible pieces of evidence that support my purpose.	I can support my claim with varied pieces of evidence that work together to help prove my purpose.

There were quite a few things wrong with our old evidence rubric (Did we really have a category called "Uh-Oh"?), but the most relevant differences between then and now have to do with the language in the boxes. While the rubric at first seems more specific in the top two levels, these requirements can be provided in a checklist accompanying the specific assignment and do not need to be included in the scale itself. The language describing success is vague and subjective (" best available" and "well-chosen"). In addition, note the negative language in the first two levels— rather than point out what a beginning student can do, it documents what's missing. This may be helpful for grading, but it is not at all helpful when trying to figure out how to improve on the skill itself. If we want students to see learning as a progression, then they need to see each step as a success on the way to the next, not as a deficit to the ultimate goal. The new evidence scale, in contrast, provides a clear progression of the skill of using evidence, and when accompanied by benchmarks (see Chapter 7), it makes expectations clear and learning positive.

Just to be clear, good rubrics are scales. Our old rubrics were not good rubrics, and in order to break ourselves of ineffective habits, we found that rebranding the tool and changing the name allowed us to change our practices more successfully.

An effective scale can really be the lynchpin of a successful standards-based classroom. At the beginning of a unit, we introduce our scales, designing high-engagement, low-risk activities that allow students to reach each progressing level of the skill. Students know what's expected and know what success will feel like, so they are more likely to reach the higher levels of learning when we begin working with complex, relevant content. Throughout the learning, we use the scales to design practice activities and formative assessments, provide feedback, and plan appropriately rigorous differentiated instruction. Students use the scales throughout the learning to self-monitor and provide feedback to their peers. When it's time for the summative assessment, students use the scales to guide their work and to self-assess, and we use them to assess and communicate learning. For students who need to relearn or reassess, the scales offer feedback and direction.

In other words, scales are everywhere in a standards-based classroom; once we have developed the scales, we— and our students— have everything we need to instruct, practice, assess, and report the learning.

The Practical Part

All levels of a scale are worded in language that shows what students can do, not what they can't do. This is not an everybody-gets-a-trophy feel-good philosophy. Learning happens on a continuum— skills grow and continue to improve over time and with practice, and when students see that learning is a progression (not a got-it-or-didn't), they are more likely to stick with it when it gets difficult. This is where the I can language comes in. Each box on the scale is a target for at least one of our students at any given time. If a student is currently at a 2 on our scale, then the 3 is what they are hoping to be able to do next. If they are at a 3, then they are shooting for the 4 (or whatever symbols/ language you are using for your scales). That means that each box needs to clearly establish what learning looks like at that level, not what it doesn't look like.

At the top of the next page is an example of a scale we used in our tenth-grade heterogeneous humanities course. Our target skill is the analysis of relationships, an important skill that crosses disciplines and grade levels. Surrounding the target, which is in bold, we have ratcheted up and down the complexity of this skill, providing steps leading up to and beyond the target itself.

Critical Thinking: Relationships	I can explain and define individual elements within specific historical periods, topics, or units of study.	I can show understanding of one-to-one relationships between elements of specific historical periods, topics, or units of study.	I can analyze multiple relationships between and among elements of specific historical periods, topics, or units of study.	I can evaluate relationships between and among elements of specific historical time periods, topics, or units of study, including how these relationships inform larger ideas.

We want students to see learning as a progression, not something that you either get or don't get. As we know from Carol Dweck's (2016) work, student mindset plays a much larger role in learning than much of what we do in class; if they believe they can improve and if they see learning as the result of hard work, students are much more likely to dig in and make large gains. Think of the scales as a staircase, and each step is an achievement on its own, leading us to the next step. These steps allow students to experience success at each level and reinforce the effectiveness of the growth mindset.

There is a tendency to want to pack content details or expectations into each level in order to be clear to students, but that's not the role of the scale. We suggest using checklists or task sheets (see Chapter 6) to provide the specific expectations you have for the activity or assessment and keeping the scale simple and transferable. We want students to understand that the skills they are learning are not specific to a single assignment or essay or project or even unit, so by keeping the scales transferable, they are more likely to be able to carry their learning forward into unfamiliar and unstructured situations.

Instructional scales not only help students know what learning looks like, but they also help us differentiate more effectively, as we can design learning opportunities that allow students to practice at a variety of levels. We know that students learn best when working in their zones of proximal development, and scales help teachers and students plan for the variety of readiness levels in our classes by defining a continuum of learning. The levels on the scale ratchet up or down the complexity of the same central skill. When writing scales, it can be helpful to start at the top of the staircase and articulate the learning you hope for. Then ask, what if students attempted to do this but were unable to do it yet? What would their attempt look like? In other words, what could they do before they are able to fully achieve the top level? If each level of the scale asks for a significantly different skill, then it is really difficult to show learning as a progression or to assess multiple levels using a single assessment, so keep the central skill consistent.