Correlating Benchmarks with Rubrics

Assessing a learning outcome involves using a rubric to produce numerical scores for each student assessed and assigning a benchmark value that is used to determine if the learning outcome is successfully being achieved. The typical benchmark value for a learning outcome assessment is 70% which coincides with the usual threshold for passing a course with a grade of “C”. However 70% may or may not be an appropriate benchmark, depending on the design of the rubric used in the assessment. For example, a rubric may be designed as follows:

Exemplary – 3  Satisfactory – 2  Unsatisfactory – 1

Assuming “Satisfactory” to be the benchmark, the benchmark for a rubric designed in this way would be 2 out of a possible 3 points or 67%. Other rubrics may be designed like these examples:

Exemplary – 4  Satisfactory – 2  Unsatisfactory – 0

OR

Exemplary – 4  Good – 3  Satisfactory – 2  Unsatisfactory – 1

For each of these rubrics, “Satisfactory” is 2 out of 4 and thus the benchmark would be 50%. For another common rubric design, the benchmark would be 3 out of 5 or 60%:

Exemplary – 5  Satisfactory – 3  Unsatisfactory – 1

As you can see by these examples, a uniform (or arbitrary) benchmark for learning outcome assessments is not appropriate unless there is uniformity in rubric design. If a uniform benchmark such as 70% is desirable for all learning outcomes, then all rubrics used should be designed such that “Satisfactory” is actually 70% as in the example below:

Exemplary – 10  Satisfactory – 7  Unsatisfactory – 5  Unacceptable – 3

A rubric designed in this way not only sets a “Satisfactory” benchmark of 70%, but also coincides well with familiar grading scales since 100% is “Exemplary”, 50% is “Unsatisfactory”, and 30% is “Unacceptable”.

Whether or not there is uniformity in benchmark values and rubric designs, it is essential that the benchmark correlates with an acceptable or desirable level of performance. Thus if a benchmark is to be useful in determining if a learning outcome has been achieved, it must be defined in specific relation to the rubric used for the assessment.