

Framing Student Appropriation of Catholic Social Teachings and Tradition

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In its attempt to enhance the role of Catholic Social Teachings and Tradition (CST) in American Catholic colleges and universities, the Catholic Social Teaching Learning and Research Initiative has developed a rubric entitled “Student Appropriation of Catholic Social Teachings and Tradition.”¹ The rubric offers a starting point for articulating the expectations a CST program might have for its students. Several steps are still to follow in the rubric’s development; the most critical is piloting the rubric to learn what aspects of it resonate, along with what aspects miss the mark.² This article reviews the development of the rubric, discusses its structure and rationale, and indicates some limitations to its use. The aim is to lay the groundwork for further systematic inquiry into CST-based learning outcomes in higher education.

Background

The Catholic Social Teaching Learning and Research Initiative seeks to enhance college students’ appropriation of CST, particularly through high-quality CST programming. The focus is on how students at Catholic colleges and universities—whether they are Catholic or not—learn about and appropriate CST. Early on, the Initiative loosely defined “appropriation” as sustained identification with, and display of, any paradigm’s interdependent components, including but not limited to knowledge, attitudes, and values; actions, decisions, and behaviors; and skills.

Of the many potential approaches to enhancing CST programming, the Initiative took an early interest in assessment. The Initiative accordingly sought additional experienced members in institutional research and assessment to complement its cadre of dedicated CST practitioners, instructors, and scholars.

The Initiative met in April 2014 to welcome new members and to identify priority areas of investigation. The chief objective emerging from discussion was to demonstrate and improve the effectiveness of curricular and co-curricular CST programming for students.

The Initiative set about identifying successful CST programs, intending to begin by collecting the best practices of successful CST programming, and then to communicate these results for the benefit and improvement of CST programming elsewhere. Initial research quickly indicated, however, that no criteria could be identified in the scholarship to measure CST programming effectiveness. This lacuna led the members of the Initiative to assume responsibility for generating an assessment framework, which could serve as an essential starting point. Thus, the creation of a CST rubric became one of the Initiative's key projects.

The objective of the rubric team was to design and validate a framework distinguishing levels of CST appropriation. The task at hand appeared to be simple. In order to ask what CST programs could learn from other successful programs, it was necessary to ask which CST programs merited designation as "successful." This required a common definition of "high achieving."

In academic programming terms, the achievement sought is termed the "student learning outcome" (SLO), or in this case CST SLO. With no readily available CST student learning outcomes in the literature, the Initiative identified "student appropriation of CST" as a way of connoting a student's grasp of CST principles, the adoption of values informed by CST principles, and the influence of CST principles both in short- and long-term choices and behaviors.

In addition to defining success, the Initiative needed some way to evaluate the degree to which that success had been achieved. However, appropriation is a process that happens over time in fits and starts, and an institution's intended degree of CST appropriation by its second-semester freshmen is likely to vary significantly from the intentions it has for its graduates. For instance, one program may intend to bring a student from complete ignorance of CST to a point of openness toward the potential legitimacy of a range of social justice principles, while a different program may intend to facilitate a student's integration of CST principles exclusively into decisions about career track.

Rubric: Student Appropriation of Catholic Social Teachings and Tradition

This rubric regarding student appropriation of CST—Catholic social teachings and tradition—is intended to assess both curricular and co-curricular programs of long or short duration. The student with very little or no knowledge of CST (0) does not figure here.

CST addresses many issues such as interpersonal and structural violence, peace and war, active nonviolence, poverty, economic relations, racism, immigration, the environment, workers’ rights, gender relations, and the marginalization and oppression of some groups. This rubric does not name each of these issues in order to allow application to any and all of them. What we mean by “appropriation” encompasses knowledge of, appreciation for, and integration of CST, including an awareness of the importance of critiquing it.

This rubric (draft January 2016) is being developed by the Catholic Social Teaching Learning and Research Initiative: <http://blogs.nd.edu/cstresearch/>. To submit suggestions for improvement, contact Jennifer Reed-Bouley, jreed-bouley@csm.edu.

Category	Flourishing 4	Developing		Discovering 1
		3	2	
1. Description of CST Framework	Articulates well the roots of CST within the theological, philosophical, and scriptural traditions	Closer to flourishing than to discovering	Closer to discovering than to flourishing	Discusses in a preliminary way the roots of CST within the theological, philosophical, and scriptural traditions
2. Recognition of CST Principles	Demonstrates close familiarity with the commonly defined principles of CST	"	"	Demonstrates some familiarity with the commonly defined principles of CST
3. Knowledge of History of CST	Explains in a rich way the history of the tradition; key documents, leaders, and movements; and openness to critique and development	"	"	Grasps some of the history of the tradition; key documents, leaders, and movements; and openness to critique and development
4. Social Contexts/ Perspectives	Exhibits critical awareness of social privilege of some people and the marginalization of others on the basis of, for example, race, class, gender, religious traditions, and nationality	"	"	Exhibits initial awareness of social privilege of some people and the marginalization of others on the basis of, for example, race, class, gender, religious traditions, and nationality
5. Decision-Making Approach	Consistently assesses and makes decisions about practices, policies, and social institutions in light of CST	"	"	Is beginning to assess and make decisions about practices, policies, and social institutions in light of CST
6. Acting for Justice	Regularly acts in solidarity with and for others for the common good	"	"	Occasionally acts in solidarity with and for others for the common good
7. Vocational Implications	Fully integrates CST in vocational choices	"	"	Is becoming aware of implications of CST for vocational choices

Rubric Structure

Intended scope

By “appropriation,” the Initiative seeks to address (1) the integration of beliefs and values, (2) the adoption of corresponding behaviors, actions, and decisions, and (3) comprehension of the content, tradition, and context of CST principles.

The rubric’s scope targets undergraduates enrolled at Catholic higher education institutions who have been exposed to at least some formal CST programming delivered by that institution. Students with no exposure to CST programming do not figure in the rubric.

However, the rubric’s scope may be said to inadvertently target an even narrower pool of students. The targeted students enjoy life circumstances which allow them to access and attend post-secondary school. Accordingly, the targeted students for this rubric possess at least some degree of affluence or privilege. Furthermore, the rubric will perhaps apply best—if not exclusively—to American undergraduates, as all contributors to date have been contributors to the American Catholic higher education landscape.

The scope of the rubric is intentionally broad when it comes to faith orientations, in that it purposely does not include a category addressing students’ religiosity. Rigorous instruments to measure and interpret students’ faith levels, religious beliefs, and engagement are currently available. The rubric team focused on topics less-represented in the literature rather than duplicating existing contributions.

Scale

The scale describes a student’s degree of appropriating CST or achieving CST SLOs. The scale does not necessarily correlate to the frequency of a student’s exposure to CST programming. Any inclination to presume a student’s level of CST appropriation, based primarily on the quantity or frequency of a student’s exposure to CST programming, should be avoided.

Categories

The rubric includes seven categories.

Category	Category addresses student...
Description of CST Framework	comprehension of CST's religious and intellectual contexts
Recognition of CST Principles	comprehension of CST content
Knowledge of History of CST	comprehension of CST's historical context
Social Context/Perspectives	comprehension of the consequences of oppression
Decision-Making Approach	application of CST as a personal and civic value
Acting for Justice	behavior in response to the consequences of oppression
Vocational Implications	application of CST as a professional value

Intended Users and Uses

The rubric was designed with two primary users and one secondary user in mind. The primary users are faculty and staff who work with CST programming. Two uses are intended for this population. The first is to assist CST programs in designing or improving program assessment, so that the assessment better serves the success of the program. The second is for CST programs to consider the rubric in defining, or clarifying, their program objectives and CST SLOs.

The secondary intended users are scholars. The intended uses for scholars are to aid them in exploring new systematic inquiries into CST appropriation and to prod the continued refinement of a common CST appropriation framework across scholarly and practical pursuits.

Rubric Development

The Initiative formed a voluntary team to design the rubric. The rubric team was chaired by a member with experience designing rubrics. The chair's role was to provide and facilitate a process to transfer the expertise of the rubric team members into a coherent rubric.

Work on the rubric began in January 2015 with a review of content-relevant rubrics as well as a review of rubric design practices. The AAC&U's VALUE Rubrics served as helpful models.³ The next step was to identify the scale, which was originally envisioned as encompassing three levels. The terms "Discovering," "Developing," and "Flourishing" were chosen as labels for these levels.

The rubric team focused on describing the Flourishing level of appropriation. Input about topics, categories, and components were solicited from (1) the rubric team, (2) all members of the Initiative, and (3) attendees of the rubric team's presentation during a February 2015 CST conference at the University of Notre Dame. Conference attendees participated in small group discussion, completed a written questionnaire on-site, and received requests for input via e-mail after the session. Many of these proposed improvements were incorporated in the developing draft.

One rubric team member took the lead drafting the Discovering level components. This level was initially crafted without attempting to align each item to the Flourishing level. The early Discovery level draft was circulated among the rubric team members for revisions. The team members began fitting the Discovering and Flourishing level components together only after completing independent drafts of both.

At one point, the rubric team intended to create a middle level, but eventually the team decided, non-unanimously, to shift to a model of four levels with two middle levels unarticulated. A four-level model, it was thought, better reflects students' encounters with CST. For instance, a student's experience appropriating CST might challenge her preconceptions and long-held beliefs regarding social privilege and marginalization. She might toggle between embracing and rejecting aspects of CST—in some ways falling closer to Flourishing, in other ways closer to Discovering. Further research is necessary to articulate the supposed "arc" of CST appropriation, calling for the expertise of researchers concerned with young adults' cognitive and value development.

Finally, a plenary session at the Initiative's June 2015 meeting was dedicated to a review and discussion of the rubric draft. Multiple rounds of revisions followed.

Expert Input

Participation in the rubric development was open to anyone willing to contribute; national external input was solicited twice. The first solicitation was made at a February 2015 CST conference at Notre Dame led by several members of the Initiative. The second formal request for feedback was emailed through professional networks in October 2015. Rubric team members targeted CST experts in faculty, staff, and practitioner roles.

Responses were received from faculty and staff at eleven institutions. Significant themes reverberating through the feedback included the lack of recognition of privilege of the student

subject; the omission of issues related to the environment, workers' rights, and gender; an unbalanced emphasis on CST knowledge over values and action; and undue favoring of individual action over participation in group action. Additionally, several wording and editing recommendations were offered. These insights were embraced by the rubric team and efforts to integrate them began in November 2015.

The CST experts also offered recommendations for potential uses of the rubric. A majority suggested using it both to establish a baseline prior to students' participation in CST programming or CST courses and to assess achievement of student appropriation after such participation. This suggestion matched the Initiative's original intentions for the rubric. Another common recommendation was to provide the rubric to faculty members as a resource to aid effective integration of CST into existing courses. Other notable recommendations included (1) sharing the rubric with students, such as those in a first-year seminar, to make clear the goals of the course of study they were embarked upon; (2) introducing the rubric as a guide at the onset of a partnership with parties whose objectives do not include CST SLOs as a way to open discussion of intended partnership outcomes; and, finally, (3) applying the rubric to frame the analysis of existing qualitative data previously collected from students in CST programming.

Lessons from similar disciplines

The CST rubric team benefited from assessment work in the fields of community engagement and service learning. On its face, the practice of course-based service learning may appear to be inherently beneficial to all stakeholders. However, research on service learning community partner agencies reveals that unintended consequences and costs to service learning community partners can be so significant that these consequences outweigh the benefits agencies receive from the partnership.⁴ Unintended consequences can include the overburdening of an agency with more students than it can accommodate, which agencies sometimes allow when they fear that the erection of boundaries might either damage their relationship with the higher education institution in question, or decrease the likelihood of accessing future benefits from it. Costs can include the amount of time agency staff spend orienting, training, supervising, and evaluating students rather than attending to the agency's priorities. Another common cost to community partners can be the

need to pay overtime to staff to be on-site after hours, beyond the standard workday or workweek, in order to accommodate students' availability.

The Community Engagement (CE) Community Partnership Rubric was designed as a user's guide to CE partnerships, aimed at higher education practitioners with the best of intentions but without the opportunity to absorb the literature in the field about partnerships.⁵ Essentially, the CE rubric allows practitioners to reflect on and gauge the quality of their partnerships with community agencies, illustrating improvements that might be prioritized. With the lessons of the CE rubric in mind, the CST rubric was designed to offer goalposts to CST programs, to use not only for assessing CST SLOs, but for reflecting on what the SLOs should be.

Limitations

Motivations

The CST rubric does not maintain that students must self-identify primarily with CST in order to be considered "flourishing," and self-identification with CST criteria is not a criterion for measuring a student's level of CST appropriation. As was discussed in constructing the rubric, CST shares common values with other thought and belief systems. Only the knowledge-related rubric characteristics distinguish between student appropriation of CST and other thought and belief systems. The rubric team repeatedly attempted to interject CST-specific qualifiers onto the observable actions and values, and was repeatedly humbled by the challenge. Proponents of different systems may reach similar conclusions or pursue similar actions, leaving on-lookers unaware of differences in motivations and reasoning.

The CST rubric includes components that users might feasibly directly measure. The rubric addresses knowledge, attitudes and values, and actions and decisions because all three are essential components of appropriation. Arguably, the rubric emphasizes observable behavior and knowledge over attitudes and values. This observation, made by some respondents, points to a tension among rubric team members about the importance of motivation, intention, and self-awareness in defining CST appropriation.

Structure

The decision not to articulate the levels between Discovering and Flourishing, for better or worse, leaves a great deal of room for interpretation and the harboring of conflicting assumptions about how to identify a student's location on the scale. For instance, a student who expresses skepticism about CST may be considered by some to be in or below the Discovering phase, while, depending on the context, others might see that student as nearing the Flourishing stage. Interpretations will likely depend on the user's (1) experiences with students appropriating CST; (2) academic or professional discipline; and (3) personal familiarity with theories of development, conversion, etc. A future step for the development of the rubric could be articulation of Levels Two and Three in the light of scholarly theories of development and the like.

Rubric team composition

The volunteers participating in the Initiative were identified through the networks of those who received the initial grant to begin a study on CST in higher education. They personally represent a dominant social perspective, and while their institutions' student bodies include a variety of points along socio-economic and other social spectra, they are primarily white institutions. The Initiative members' disciplines span across the humanities and social sciences, including Women's Studies and Peace Studies. As of January 2016, the only well-represented marginalized group to contribute to the framework's development is women. Accordingly, it is fair to say that the rubric largely has been composed from a dominant cultural perspective. It does not directly address the perspective of non-dominant cultures, though it has been modified more than once in an attempt to reduce the exclusion of non-dominant perspectives. A current step in the rubric's development is the intentional recruitment of Initiative members with non-dominant perspectives as well as solicitation of input from experts with non-dominant perspectives.

It should also be acknowledged that the rubric represents the perspectives of higher education CST experts and practitioners. To date, design and validation of the tool have not included testing with students. This step is planned to begin in spring 2016.

Tensions and Unintended Consequences

Finally, a few CST experts noted sincere concern, bordering on distress, to see CST student appropriation parsed into a rubric. They worried that any framework, not just this one, carries the

risk of oversimplifying or reducing CST appropriation to the sum of its parts, which they consider to be wholly contrary to the heart of CST. Such a negative, unintended consequence could inadvertently undermine the intended impact of the rubric, so it warrants consideration. As it is stated, the concern assumes that the rubric will replace current sensibilities and knowledge of CST efforts in higher education, and that it will stand alone, rather than alongside, existing and developing canon on the topic.

In response, one point to note is that the definition of “appropriation” and the inclusion of multiple components are meant to suggest that the components are interdependent. An interesting question here is whether appropriation of some of the components, but not all, would be better or worse than appropriation of none at all. In any event, the rubric team took to heart the concern that the spirit of CST might be stymied from entering the hearts of students once the letter had been “bound” into a table. This concern invites a caution: the rubric is not a substitute for transformative experiences. In the end, the answer to the question of whether this rubric inspires more and better proliferation of CST programming rests in the hands of dedicated faculty, staff, and students.

Conclusion

The CST rubric was designed to begin filling a gap in the literature that prevented the systematic investigation of the quality of CST programming for higher education students. Systematic investigation depends on a recognized framework. By offering a framework to the field, the Initiative’s intention is both to contribute to the improvement and proliferation of CST programming and to spur a variety of inquiries into existing and future CST SLOs.

As it happens, the creation of the rubric has already achieved one of its goals. The very act of designing the rubric and inviting feedback has elevated discussion regarding the effectiveness and quality of CST programming and student learning outcomes. It is the rubric team’s hope that the public release of its work will fire the further development of this discussion in years to come.

Notes

1. The “rubric team” consisted principally of Heather Mack, now of Heather Mack Consulting LLC, formerly of Loyola University New Orleans; Bernard Prusak of King’s College (PA); Jennifer Reed-Bouley of the College of Saint Mary (NE); Margarita Rose likewise of King’s College; and Kathleen Maas Weigert of Loyola University Chicago. A full list of the collaborators in the Catholic Social Teaching Learning and Research Initiative is available at <http://blogs.nd.edu/cstresearch/collaborators/>.
2. It is expected the rubric will be finalized at the June 2016 meeting of the CST Learning and Research Initiative. Check <http://blogs.nd.edu/cstresearch/> for updates.
3. See <https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics>.
4. See Littlepage et al. 2012; Mack 2013; and Sandy and Holland 2006.
5. See Brotzman et al. 2014.

Works Cited

- Brotzman, Kelly, Joseph Deegan, and Heather Mack. 2014. “Community Partnerships Rubric.” Paper presented at the meeting of the International Association for Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 28, 2014.
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