A Developmental Rubric for Assessment and Support of Dialogue Skills in Online Deliberation

an Interactivity Foundation project[1]

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Introduction

This is a rubric for assessing the quality of online discussions, aimed at college-level students. It was created as a supplement to the student and teacher "Guidebooks for Student-Facilitated Discussion in Online Courses" authored by Shannon Wheatley and Jack Byrd of the Interactivity Foundation. The rubric contains 13 sub-skills organized into 5 main categories, in the Table below.[2] The development of each sub-skill is described across four developmental levels, called First, Second, Third, and Fourth person cognition. The First Person level is basically describing what the *lack* of a skill looks like. Alternative names for these levels might be: 1st: Impulsive, Self-centered; 2nd: Conventional, Polite; 3rd: Rational, Inquisitive; and 4th: Perspectival, Systemic.

On average, the goal at the college level is to support movement from Third to Fourth person cognition. The rubric is applicable to secondary school also, where the goal on average is to support movement from Second to Third person cognition. It is possible to extend this scheme for adults in training for leadership, team or group work, dispute mediation, etc., by adding a Fifth person cognition. [3]

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[1] The initial draft of this work was completed with support from the Interactivity Foundation (http://www.interactivityfoundation.org).

[2] A starting point for this rubric was the Interactivity Foundation guidebook's principles for being: Developmental, Open-minded, Exploratory, Civil, and Interactive. Thanks Shannon Wheately, Jack Byrd, and Jeff Prudhomme from IF for feedback on this project.

[3] The developmental aspect is roughly based upon theories mentioned below, and particularly on O'Fallon's model. Compared to that model our First, Second, and Third person cognition are roughly aligned with O'Fallon's *Late* First, Second, and Third person perspectives; and our Fourth person cognition is aligned with O'Fallon's Early

The rubric can be used for: instructors evaluating students, student self-evaluation, student-peer evaluation, and students evaluating the overall quality of a discussion.

The most useful intended use is to provide timely feedback to students to allow them to reflect on and improve the quality of their discussions. Thus the purpose of the rubric is more to support learning-while-doing rather than as a way to provide final rank or grade to students. A check-mark or magnitude (e.g. 1-3) can be given to each cell in the rubric table, but numerical summation is not assumed or necessary.

About the Developmental Levels

The developmental levels describe a coordination and simplification of a number of developmental research and theory projects (e.g. K. Fischer, M. Commons, R. Kegan, J. Loevinger, K. Kitchener & P. King, T. O'Fallon, and D. Kuhn; whose research on reflective judgment, critical thinking, metacognition, ego development, leadership maturity, orders of consciousness, and hierarchical complexity have substantial overlap and congruence). The levels are called First, Second, Third, and Fourth Person cognition (terms I use here, but not used in most of the sources cited). Note that these levels describe how a person is showing up in a particular context. If one is stressed, fearful, overly ambitious, distracted, confused, unmotivated, etc., one can perform at levels below their usual or optimal level. The description of levels below is a simplification. It describes several sub-skills within each level as progressing together, which often happens, but subskills can track separately in more complex ways, and individuals and can display behavior at multiple levels (though they usually have a "center of gravity").

- **First Person** cognition is the stage of naïve narcissism in which a person can only see the world from their own perspective. It is characterized by black-and-white (and us-vs-them) thinking, by lack inability to reflect upon one's emotions, assumptions, or upon the larger context one is behaving within. One may live by rigid rules, but only those that serve egotistic needs or allow one to stay safe within social contexts. One's beliefs are taken as simply self-evident, or justified by appeals to authority. (Note that in this rubric the First Person category is used to demark narcissistic or anti-social behaviors, but in a more general sense expressions form a First Person developmental level can include positive expressions of, e.g. enthusiasm, concrete facts, etc.)
- **Second Person** cognition represents unsophisticated socialized (pro-social) behavior, and the beginnings of understanding how one must operate within the context of others' concrete needs and beliefs. At this level one is often motivated by the need to belong or fit in, and, though able to mount cogent arguments to defend one's beliefs, and may

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Fourth level. Thus, and extension to our scheme for adults would technically start with a Late Forth level. I want to acknowledge appreciation for O'Fallon's comments on a prior draft.

acknowledge that others have different beliefs that must be coped with, one finds it difficult to take the perspective of other world-views. One is also motivated to perform a job or role well, usually in the eyes of others or social norms. One can be self-reflective but mostly at a behavioral or concrete way (e.g. " I get too angry at times but I try not to"). One is oriented towards rules, but rules that serve one's in-groups or organization (perhaps in addition to serving one's own needs).

- **Third Person** cognition represents the maturing of abstract or formal thinking. Critical thinking about the ideas of others and even about one' own belief's and assumptions is now possible. Valid knowledge must be justified with evidence and logic, and information sources verified. One can take the perspective of "the generalized other", or any reasonable person, that represents the "third person perspective" (and is the basis of the scientific method and modern understandings of moral capacity). One is motivated to excel and create, and enacts an autonomy that is not as constrained by the norm. One becomes skilled at considering multiple potential reasons or outcomes for situations. At this level there can be a predomination of hyper-logical thinking, and a motivation to find the one best answer or solution—to the degree that the deeper needs of other interlocutors, or other stakeholders, are not fully or empathetically considered. One takes more control and responsibility over one's condition, actions and engages in self-directed learning and rigorous inquiry. Individuals working at this level are able to manage or oversee others and take the 'bigger picture" into account.

- **Fourth Person** cognition represents a further increase in the complexity and depth of thought and perspective-taking. One becomes better at understanding systems and larger contexts; and better able to tolerate the levels of uncertainty, ambiguity, vulnerability and complexity that come with real-life problems and dilemmas. One begins to understand that real problems can have the complexity of multiple feedback loops, ecosystems and other non-linear dynamics. One sees that there can be many perspectives on an issue, and that there is rarely a single clear or best solution to complex problems. Opinion changes fluidly as new evidence and perspectives are seen (and sought). One sees logic as a tool and understands some of its limitations, and also begins to understand how cognitive biases of various sorts can effect even one's own reasoning. One can have the deep empathy to put oneself in the shoes of others increases, even those who are very different than ones-self, to the point where certainly about one's beliefs is sometimes deeply challenged. At this level one sees that not only ones' knowledge and skill, but ones' very way of being in the world, is an object of inquiry, intentional growth, and transformation. One moves from management skills to deeper leadership and mentoring skills. Challenges at this level (which is partly overcome at Fifth Person cognition) include an overly relativistic view of morality (everybody's perspective is equally valid) and being overwhelmed with the number of perspectives or inter-penetrating relationships within an issue.

Rubric Table

Items in a given category add evidence for, but are not requirements for, being in that category. I.E. read the items as A or B or C (as disjunctive rather than conjunctive).

		First Person Cogn. (Impulsive, Self-centered)	Second Person Cogn. (Conventional, Polite)	Third Person Cogn. (Rational, Inquisitive)	Fourth Person Cogn. (Perspectival, Systemic)
C. Civility **(respect, etiquette, leadership)**	**1. Responsiveness & Sharing the road**	- Dominates dialogue with emotion-laden reactions - OR is silent or almost silent throughout	- Does not dominate unreflectively (2) - Posts are very short or overly long - Low but acceptable number of posts - Mostly responsible to commitments - Begins after the conversation midpoint	- Posts are appropriate length; much more than min. number of posts - Responds thoughtfully to most participants, distributed over the discussion time - Responds to others specifically, with quotes or on particular points - fully responsible to one's commitments	- Actively encourages participation, conflict resolution, or deeper dialogue among others - Works enthusiastically over and above ones commitments
	2. Respectfulness, mutuality, leadership	- May posts sexist, racists, disrespectful, etc. comments - Tone is hateful, cynical, threatening, blaming, or defensive, or "manipulative" (including use of charm as a tool)	- Does not violate basic social decorum for civil conversation - Posts are relevant to other's posts, but can be insistent in tone or vague in reasoning	- Does not start late - Mentions non-productive behavior in others but in a blaming or critical tone - Reflects some ideas back to check understanding	- Points out non-productive behavior in others in skillful, non-threatening language - Voices appreciation for productive behavior in others - Actively tries to uplift tone of the conversation - Often reflects ideas back to deepen mutual understanding
O. Open Mindedness **(perspectival, empathy, self-critical)**	**1. Open to perspectives (discussants & stakeholders)**	- Blames, or attacks others - Defensive emotional, or manipulative reactions to others	- *Acknowledges* others' perspectives, but vaguely—'being nice'	- *Considers* others' perspectives, but may be competitive - Considers perspectives of multiple stakeholder groups	- *Empathizes* with others' perspectives - Empathizes with perspectives of multiple stakeholder groups
	2. Perspective	- Does not consider	- *Acknowledges* that	- *Weighs* pros and cons,	- *Integrates* others' pros and

	weighing	multiple perspectives	there are different perspectives - or compromises but with little deliberation	looking for best; negotiates differences - Allows for diversity of opinion as a necessary evil	cons into a larger system/whole - Sees diversity of opinion as beneficial; invites diverse opinions from the group
	3. Self-reflection & authenticity	- No reflection on own knowledge or behavior	- Non-reactive to those offering critique or alternatives - Willing to admit flaws in own ideas, but does not work to improve them	- Acknowledges grains of truth in others who disagree with one - Reflects on, critiques, and improves ones own ideas - Reveals relevance of topic to self	- Asks for and appreciates criticism - Uses criticism to systematically improve ideas and communication - Transparent about feelings, reactions, intentions
E. Exploration (knowledge breadth, creativity)	**1. Multi-Dimensions (1)**	- Does not introduce new topics - Focuses on one Dimension	- *Addresses* several Dimensions of the topic	- *Introduces* new Dimensions - Discusses cause/effect in several Dimensions	- *Explores* Dimensions systematically - Uses questions/inquiry to encourage others to investigate Dimensions
	2. Originality	- Snubs new avenues of exploration from others (that don't meet one's needs)	- Stays close to scope of prior posts	- Makes original or creative contributions	- Makes insightful or unexpected contributions - Proposes general mechanisms, principles
	3. Temporal reach	- Posts are of an immediate reactionary nature, or completely related to self	- Talks about two within: past, present, future (but vaguely)	- Talks about all three of: past, present, future	- Integrates/relates past/present/future causes or trends
K. Knowledge Building (knowledge depth, development, growth)	**1. Building upon others**	- No reference to others, or is reactive	- Refers to others but mostly in disagreement - OR Responses are polite or noncommittal and don't add much	- Acknowledges others with mostly "yes, *but*" challenges - OR Only refer to ideas one agrees with - Compares and contrasts ideas but only toward right 'answer'	- Acknowledges with "yes, *and*" style - Ties discrepant ideas of others together - Deconstructs to improve and reconstruct ideas

	2. Topic relevance and nuance	- Mostly or fully off-topic	- Mostly on-topic - Mostly repeats what has been said or is commonly known	- Introduces new ideas adding to breadth or depth - Some ideas sensitive and adaptive to situation - Sometimes re-frames others' ideas productively	- Adds nuance and clarity to the discussion - Acutely aware of the influence of contexts - Skillfully frames ideas to advance the dialogue
R. Rational & Critical Thinking **(clarity, analysis)**	**1. Explanatory & Coherent**	- Emotions may dominate tone and content - Unreflectively contradictory or irrelevant posts	- Gives opinions but not clear explanation or justification - Ideas are expressed understandably - Ideas not chaotically organized	- Offers justifications, evidence, explanations, or analysis - Ideas expressed with strong clarity and organization	- Weaves justification/explanation into systemic or nuanced narrative or whole - Some ideas expressed with elegance or insight
	2. Critical thinking	- Lack of critical thinking	- Logical but concrete and not very critical thinking	- Shows critical thinking	- Critical thinking looks at systems, nuances, multiple-perspectives
	3. Accuracy	- Post blatantly inaccurate facts - Does not seem to care about validity, truth	- Few or no inaccurate facts - Uses but does not reflect on sources	- Clearly differentiates facts from opinions - Cites sources - Questions or addresses the validity of information sources	- Nuanced, non-definitive discussion about validity of sources

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NOTES for using the Rubric Table

- (1) "**Dimensions**" refers to the various aspects of human life that can be related to a given topic or situation: Economic, Moral/ethical/normative, Environmental, Cultural, Technological, Public safety, Health/biological, Social, Psychological, Spiritual or religious, Political, etc.
- (2) Some negative behaviors, such as dominating a conversation, are not as undesirable if the student does so **reflectively**. E.g. "sorry I am taking up so much space here, but I'm really passionate about this topic."
- References to "**emotional**" refer to reactive and usually negative emotions, not to mature expressions of emotion.

- Within a given **subcategory the items are disjunctive**, e.g. x or y or z. For many categories, especially for lower developmental levels, there are both introvert and extrovert variations. For example, First Person Cognition includes both very aggressive and very passive participation. In Second Person Cognition, the style can be either accommodating (fitting in, being nice), or argumentative.
- The rubric is mean to characterize a person's **behavior *during a given discussion***, and not to judge their cognitive or social-emotional skill overall.
- Read for the movement of each sub-skill across the four levels to get a feel for the developmental progression. Unless it is clearly otherwise, a given **level assumes all the earlier skills** at for that sub-skill are present (so they don't need to be repeated at each level).
- The most easily or consistently usable rubrics use clear observable behavioral phenomena (e.g. the number of posts). However, the skills, attitudes, and capacities we are interested in are **too subtle to be described in purely behavioral** terms. Thus there will be a significant degree of subjective opinion involved in the rating. This should be taken into account especially with peer-assessment. Alternative versions of the rubric that are more behavioral might be possible. The rubric can also be used sparsely—i.e. the evaluator can use it to note *striking* behaviors or skills to critique or appreciate, and not give every cell in the matrix a value.
- These categories are an attempt to describe and assess a complex set of interacting phenomena. They were developed based on consideration of a number of related rubrics and theories in educational psychology. But they are **not psychometrically validated** and quantitative applications should be done with caution.
- For quantitative use, instructors can **assign weights to each category** or subcategory; and/or can assign a value from 1-3 or 1-5 (strongly agree, agree,...strongly disagree) to each category or subcategory, and then sum the numbers per sub-skill, per category, or even per level.   Also, the literature usually differentiates more granular developmental levels—each of our four levels covers a fairly wide range. Thus one might assign an early, mid, or late (low, medium, high) score within a level, e.g. "late Second Person".
- Instructors, facilitators, and participants can **mention each guideline by name/number in discussion**. I.E. to note specifically what is missing, violated, or appreciated whenever one makes a "meta-dialogical" comment. This supports reflection upon (and thus deeper learning of) the quality of dialogue itself, and the differentiation of types of skills.
- Some instructors assessing online dialogue have noted a **ceiling effect in evaluations** for online dialogue—most students get pretty high marks. This rubric is designed to address this to some extent. However it is important to note that many dialogue contexts do not provide opportunities to use anything but the most basic skills—for example, if the content is dry, technical, or non-controversial. Also, online forums that are geared toward group problem solving, project work, or offering homework discussion and peer-help may have a very different character than those focused

on controversial or everyday-life issues. The former may require more "project management" facilitator skills, while the later may require more "dispute mediation" type skills.

- Rubric scores such as "poor--fair--good" or "unsatisfactory...proficient...Exemplary" may not be as useful in this domain. There can be a **wide range of developmental capacities within a given grade** or age, and the goal is to give students individual feedback on skills they have, and skills they can build, rather than to compare them to others. However, an instructor could still note the target level for each sub-skill that they hope the class (or each student individually) will aim for.
- In the future we hope to produce **guidelines for improving** each sub-skill, based on the level one is at.