The Trouble with Rubrics (♯)
Once upon a time I vaguely thought of assessment in dichotomous terms: The old approach, which consisted mostly of letter grades, was crude and uninformative, while the new approach, which included things like portfolios and rubrics, was detailed and authentic. Only much later did I look more carefully at the individual floats rolling by in the alternative assessment parade and — stop cheering.

For starters, I realized that it’s hardly sufficient to recommend a given approach on the basis of its being better than old-fashioned report cards. By that criterion, just about anything is better than anything. My growth came instead from realizing that the rubrics that got all attention at the start were premised on assumptions about which this technique rested and also the criteria by which they (and assessment itself) were typically judged. These doubts were stoked not only by murmurs of dissent I heard from thoughtful educators but also by the case made for this technique by its enthusiastic proponents. For example, I read in one article that "rubrics make assessing student work quick and efficient, and they help teachers to justify to parents and others the grades they give to students" to which the only appropriate response is: oh — first of all, something that’s recommended to teachers as a handy strategy of self-justification during parent conferences (look at all those 3’s, Mrs. Gromet! How could I have given a B?"

And in the same article, I came across a scenario that pushed me over the edge. On the day when the teacher finally read the final drafts of the essays, there were a bunch of 5’s, a few 4’s, and a surprising number of 3’s and 2’s. The explanation for these grades, after endless discussion and debate, was that the students had been too distracted by the rubric to write anything of genuine depth or originality! Consideration of the rubric was strictly mechanical, most of them had nothing to do with the essays themselves! "You lost interest in the learning itself," said the teacher (who seemed to think that her authority was absolute). I was amazed by the number of educators whose opposition to standardized tests and standardized curricula mysteriously fails to extend to standardized in-class assessments.

The appeal of rubrics is supposed to be their high barrier to entry, finally delivered to Language arts. A list of criteria for what should be awarded the highest possible score when evaluating an essay is supposed to reflect near-unanimous agreement on various criteria by which to assess what students end up doing. As long as the rubric is only one of several sources, as long as it doesn’t drive the instruction, it could conceivably play a constructive role. But all bets are off if students are given the rubric and asked to use it. The prophe...