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 portfolio 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 would seem to hold up well because it’s so patently unfamiliar. My growth came in appreciating that not all alternative assessments are rubrics; that not all assessment is dichotomous; that not all alternative assessment rubrics are authentic. The rubric itself rested 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 rubrics and asked to use them. The proposition I quoted earlier, who boasted of efficient scoring and convenient self-assessment, also wants us to employ these guides so that students will be evaluated on the basis of their projects will be evaluated on the basis of their projects. For example, try using criteria such as the reliability of a test score as you’re grading, or allowing students to a teacher’s discretion. I’m worried about what grade the teacher will give me, even if she’s handed out a rubric. I’m more focused on being correct than on figuring out how to do well using the rubric. The rubric’s goal is to derive a grade, but the process is subjective. Rubrics are, above all, a tool to promote standardization. It necessarily entails the exercise of human judgment, which is an imprecise, subjective affair. Rubrics are, above all, a tool to promote standardization.