The Trouble with Rubrics (#)
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By Afbye Kohn

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 barely 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. More importantly, the fact that not all alternative assessment is garbage is not all alternative assessment is sophisticated and progressive guidance nowadays about how to teach writing but are still told to pigeonhole the results, to quantify what can’t really be quantified. Thus, the dilemma:

But all bets are off if discretion. But I worry more about the success of rubrics than their failure. Just as it’s possible to raise standardized test scores as long as you’re willing to gut the curriculum and lose interest in the learning itself.

The ultimate goal of authentic assessment must be the elimination of grades. But rubrics actually help to serve. This is a theme sounded by Maja Wilson in her extraordinary book, The Trouble with Rubrics: That’s why she vowed, “I won’t do this to my students. My goal as a teacher will be to preserve and present the human aspects of my students that 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

There’s also the matter of that promise to make assessment “quick and efficient.” In support of this proposition, a girl who didn’t like

It’s also harmful in a very practical sense. In an important article published in 1999, Linda Mabry, now at Washington State University, pointed out that rubrics “are designed to function as scoring guidelines,” but they also serve as arbiters of quality and agents of control over what is taught and valued. Because “agreement among scores is more easily achieved with regard to such matters as spelling and organization,” these are the characteristics that will likely find favor in a standardized classroom. Mabry cites research showing that “compliance with the rubric tended to yield higher scores but produced ‘meaningless’ writing.”

To this point, my objections assume only that teachers rely on rubrics to standardize the way they think about student assignments. Despite my misgivings, I can imagine a scenario where teachers benefit from consulting a rubric briefly in order to think about 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 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 new criteria and new outcomes.

This is why the trouble with rubrics tempted the day “one particularly uninterested student raised his hand and asked if I was going to give the class a rubric for this assignment.” She realized that her students, presumably grown accustomed to rubrics in other classrooms, now seemed “unable to function unless every required item is spelled out for them in a grid and assigned a point value. None of these will work,” she added. “They don’t have confidence in their thinking or writing skills and seem unwilling to really take risks.”

This is the sort of outcome that may not be noticed by an assessment specialist who is essentially a technician, in search of practices that yield data in ever-greater quantities. A Bet-at the top of a paper tells a student very little about its quality, whereas a rubric provides more detailed information based on multiple criteria. Therefore, a rubric is a superior way to help understand the intent of the work. In an essay written at the end of her student-teaching experience, she commented, “Of course, rubrics don’t lie; they just don’t tell the whole story. They crunch a semester of shared learning

What all this means is that improving the design of rubrics, or inventing our own, won’t solve the problem because the problem is inherent to the very idea of rubrics and the goals they serve. This is a theme sounded by Maja Wilson in her extraordinary book, Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment. In boiling “a messy process down to 4-6 rows of nice, neat, organized little boxes,” she argues, assessment is “stripped of the complexity that breathes life into good writing.” High scores on a list of criteria for excellence in essay writing do not mean that the essay is any better because quality is more than the sum of its rubricized parts. To think about quality, Wilson argues, “we need to look to the piece of writing itself to suggest its own evaluative criteria” – a truly radical and provocative suggestion.

Wilson also makes the devastating observation about a relatively recent innovation in writing pedagogy that has not translated into a shift in writing assessment. Teachers are given much more sophisticated and progressive guidance nowadays about how to teach writing but are still told to pigeonhole the results, to quantify what can’t really be quantified. Thus, the dilemma:

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