The Trouble with Rubrics (#)
The Trouble with Rubrics
By Alfie 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 uninformed, 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 else. My growing doubts about rubrics got their initial impetus when students are given a rubric – and all too often when presented to theextent that they tend to think less deeply, avoid taking risks, and lose interest in the learning itself. (2) The ultimate goal of authentic assessment must be the elimination of grades. But rubrics actually help to legitimate grades by offering a new way to derive them. One does not have to address the terrible reality of students who have been led to focus on getting A’s rather than on making sense of ideas. Finally, there’s the matter of the difficulty of assessing student papers to “quick and efficient” criteria. In any event, the appeal here, but the best teachers would react to that selling point with skepticism, if not disdain. They’d immediately ask what we had to sacrifice in order to spit out a series of tidy judgments about the quality of student learning. To ponder that question is to understand how something that presents itself as an innocuous scoring guide can be so profoundly wrongheaded.

Consistent and uniform standards are admirable, and maybe even workable, when we’re talking about, say, the manufacture of TV dozers. The process of trying to gauge children’s understanding of ideas is a very different matter. However, it necessarily entails the exercise of human judgment, which is an imprecise, subjective affair. Rubrics are, above all, a tool to promote standardization, to turn teachers into grade machines or at least to present that what they’re doing is exact and objective. Frankly, I’m 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 interrater reliability, 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-unanimity on the part of the people who designed the rubric and is supposed to assist all those who use it to figure out (that is, to discover rather than to decide) which essays meet those criteria.

Now some observers criticize rubrics because they can never deliver the promised precision; judgments ultimately turn on adjectives that are murky and end up being left to the teacher’s discretion. I worry even more about the success of rubrics in terms of actual student learning, as so-called standard test scores as as you’re willing to gut the curriculum and turn the class into a test-preparation factory, so it’s possible to get a bunch of people to agree on what rating to give an assignment as long as they’re willing to accept and apply someone else’s narrow criteria for what merits that rating. Or, as we check our judgment at the door, we can all learn to give a 4 to exactly the same things. This attempt to deny the subjectivity of human judgment is inexcusable in such a practical sense. It’s also harmful in a very practical sense. In an important article published in 1999, Linda McRary, 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 scorers is more easily achieved with regard to such matters as spelling and organization,” these are the characteristics that will likely find favor in a ritualized classroom.

Macy cites research showing that “compliance with the rubric tended to yield higher scores but produced ‘seasoonal’ writing.”[3] To my 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 techniques of staging assignments. However, they will be just as likely to use the rubric as a checklist and will pay little attention to the feedback that it requires to provide. That is, they’ll know what to say but not how to say it. To quote, Macy writes, “Research has shown that when students are given a rubric for an essay, they don’t have confidence in their thinking or writing skills and seem unwilling to take risks.”[5] 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. 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 in a way that will be fair to them. In support of this proposition, a girl who didn’t like her rubric was quoted as complaining, “If you get something wrong, your teacher can prove you knew what you were supposed to do.”[4] Here we’re invited to have a good laugh at this student’s expense. The implication is that kids’ dislike of these things proves their uselessness – a kind of “gotta” justification.

Just as standardizing assessment for teachers makes it easier to assign grades to assignments, so it provides the illusion of fairness to the students. In another recent study based on this assumption, a student teacher who worked in a middle school classroom saw the promise of the rubric. Wendy North, a Michigan teacher and former school board member told me that she began “resisting the rubric temptation” 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.” She asked her students, “Do you have confidence in your thinking or writing skills and do you think you’re able to function without the guidance of a rubric?” She added, “They do not have confidence in their thinking or writing skills and seem unwilling to really take risks.”[6]

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 that book “a messy process down to 4-0 win 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 quality than the sum of its ritualized 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 that a relatively recent observation that teaching writing but that teaching writing has not translated into a shift in writing pedagogy has not translated into a shift in writing instruction. That is, students who are asked to learn to write as if they were reading. The flaw in this logic is revealed by a line of research in educational psychology showing that students whose attention is consistently focused on how well they’re doing often become less engaged with what they’re doing. There’s a big difference between thinking about the context of a story or a study you’re reading (for example, trying to puzzle out why a character made a certain decision), and thinking about your net proficiency at reading. “Only extraordinary education is concerned with learning,” the writer Marilyn French once observed, “with what is concerned with being on behalf of and for young minds, these two are very nearly opposites.”[5] In light of this distinction, it’s shortsighted to assume that an assessment technique is valuable in direct proportion to how much information it provides. At a minimum, this criterion misses the mark.

But the news is even worse than that. Students who know that too much attention is associated with more superficial thinking, less interest in what one is doing, less perseverance in the face of failure, and a tendency to attribute the outcome to innate ability and other factors thought to be beyond one’s control.[7] To that extent, more detailed and frequent evaluations of a student’s accomplishments may be downright counterproductive. As one sixth grader put it, “The whole time I’m writing, I’m not thinking about what I’m doing. I’m just writing about what I’m thinking.” In fact, it’s more about what I’m thinking than what I’m thinking about. I’m more interested in how I’m being on behalf of writing.” [8]

In many cases, the word even in that second sentence might be replaced with especially. But, in this respect at least, rubrics aren’t uniquely destructive. Any form of assessment that encourages students to keep asking, “How am I doing?” is indeed capable of changing them at themselves and at what they’re learning, usually for the worse. 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. 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.

The ultimate goal of authentic assessment must be the elimination of grades. But rubrics actually help to legitimate grades by offering a new way to derive them. One does not have to address the terrible reality of students who have been led to focus on getting A’s rather than on making sense of ideas. Finally, there’s the matter of the difficulty of assessing student papers to “quick and efficient” criteria. In any event, the appeal here, but the best teachers would react to that selling point with skepticism, if not disdain. They’d immediately ask what we had to sacrifice in order to spit out a series of tidy judgments about the quality of student learning. To ponder that question is to understand how something that presents itself as an innocuous scoring guide can be so profoundly wrongheaded.

Notes
2. I review this research in Published by Authors (Naghtin, H., City University of New York, 1999), as is “ ‘From Boring to De-Glamming,’ High School Magazine, March 1999.
3. Marilyn French, Beyond Power: From 工men to Women (New York: Doubleday, 1985). As a student teacher, Nathan was disturbed to find that her performance, too, was evaluated by means of a rubric that offered a ready guide for evaluating student projects. These doubts were stoked not only by murmurs of dissent I have discovered rather than to decide) which essays meet those criteria.
4. Mindy Nathan, personal communication, October 26, 2004. As a student teacher, Nathan was disturbed to find that her performance, too, was evaluated by means of a rubric that offered a ready guide for evaluating student projects. These doubts were stoked not only by murmurs of dissent I have discovered rather than to decide) which essays meet those criteria.
5. Maja Wilson, Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment, p. 367.