

The Trouble with Rubrics (excerpt)

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 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 would look good. I eventually came to understand that not all alternative assessments are authentic. My growing doubts about rubrics in particular were prompted by the assumptions on which this technique rested and 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 justify to parents and others the grades that they assign to students" (Andrade, "Using" 13). To which the only appropriate response is: Uh-oh.

First of all, something that's commended to teachers as a handy strategy of self-justification during parent conferences ("Look at all these 3s, Mrs. Grommet! How could I have given Zach anything but a B?") doesn't seem particularly promising for inviting teachers to improve their practices, let alone rethink their premises.

Second, I'd been looking for an alternative to grades because research shows three reliable effects when students are graded: They tend to think less deeply, avoid taking risks, and lose interest in the learning itself.¹ 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. They do nothing 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 that promise to make assessment "quick and efficient." I've graded enough student papers to understand 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.

Kohn, A. (2006). The trouble with rubrics. English Journal, 95(4), 12-15