At 12:30 p.m. on December 8, 1941, in front of a joint session of Congress, one day after Japanese planes struck Pearl Harbor and killed 2,402 Americans, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared December 7 a date that would live in infamy. He spoke of rage and betrayal, hardships and determination. Thirty-three minutes after he finished speaking, with only one dissenting vote, Congress responded by authorizing the president to sign a declaration of war against the Empire of Japan.

I bring up this powerful moment in history as a way to argue against many of those who argue against grading rubrics.

No, the Japanese did not utilize a 6+something grading rubric to determine the pass/fail call of “Tora! Tora! Tora!” Neither did President Roosevelt utilize such a rubric to write his speech, although looking at the corrections he made to his initial draft it is clear that he was concerned with voice, tone, audience, and many of the other buzzwords that seem to float around rubrics these days. That’s not where this particular analogy is headed, interesting as it might be.

The reason I’m talking about Pearl Harbor and infamy when I really want to talk about grading rubrics is that President Roosevelt declared war on Japan. He did not declare war on aviation. It seems like a silly thing to note, I know. But consider: The attack would not have happened without planes, so why not declare war on them? No more planes, no more attacks, so a war on aviation.

It is this same kind of false logic that is at work, I believe, in most of the recent assaults on grading rubrics. It’s what we might call category error, and it is a fairly rudimentary failure in logic; however, it is a mistake all too easy to make, especially when discussions become driven by emotional or rhetorical concerns. Such discussions, need it be said, are all too common in education. And no one is immune.

Rubric Critics

Take Alfie Kohn, for instance, who is widely considered one of the foremost voices in progressive education, and is “perhaps the country’s most outspoken critic of education’s fixation on grades [and] test scores” (http://www.alfiekohn.com). In 2006, Kohn mounted a broadside against the use of grading rubrics, including an oft-cited and very clever...
that explicit grading models (such as rubrics) can be a faulty means of assessment if they are poorly composed does not implicate all grading models; rather, it points out the necessity of careful crafting in their composition, which is true of any method of assessment (or any means of communication, for that matter). Improper use of a tool is not, technically speaking, the fault of the tool. After all, yelling at a hammer because I smashed my thumb with it makes as much sense as President Roosevelt declaring war on aviation. Aviation was not to blame, the Empire of Japan was: the fundamental difference between tool and user.

Kohn’s struggle against inappropriate use of rubrics by lazy instructors or lazier administrative bureaucrats of one stripe or another is commendable. Kohn’s notion that these problems of assessment are problems with rubrics themselves, however, as if bad end-user usage is a natural precondition to the tool, is illogical. Rubrics are no more to blame for that kind of problem than the hammer is to blame for me striking my thumb. So Kohn is right and wrong, it seems: right that it’s wrong to let efficiency of assessment rule all, but wrong to write that rubrics are necessarily tainted by this behavior.

In fact, rubrics can be a surprisingly useful step toward a subtle and positive minimizing of the “final” grading that Kohn finds so repulsive. Kohn echoes Maja Wilson, who in her book Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment argues that rubric grading produces assessment that is “stripped of the complexity that breathes life into good writing” (23). This may be true of many grading rubrics, but Kohn is hardly correct in viewing the problem as “inherent to the very idea of rubrics and the goals they serve” (14). After all, at least on a theoretical level, a rubric incorporating the category “complexity that breathes life into good writing” might arguably account for such a thing more clearly than any traditional number-out-of-the-grading-ether method of assessment. In fact, contra Kohn and Wilson, rubrics are arguably more likely to emphasize the complexity of good writing by illustrating that there are multiple components to a paper, not just an overarching letter grade result. Heidi Andrade makes a similar observation in a concise editorial rebuttal to Kohn, pointing out that rubrics can function as a mechanism for helping encourage
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our students to “get beyond grades by engaging them in thinking about quality.” And grading rubrics are extraordinarily useful, Andrade points out, for the way they “promote student learning, achievement, and self-regulation” (9).

How I Use Rubrics

My own experience bears out the positives of rubrics quite strongly. I grade papers using a rubric of my own design in which the work is assigned a 1 to 10 in each of five categories. On this rubric a 10 is essentially an A+ in my mind, a 9 is an A, an 8 is a B, and so forth, with 1–5 being varying shades of failure. A scale of 1 to 10 is something students are intimately familiar with—from the Olympics to Facebook surveys—and far more useful in its associations than a scale of 1 to 3 or 1 to 4. In the case of a typical composition essay, for instance, the five categories I measure, along with the questions I ask students to ask themselves about them, are the following:

- Argument. Do my paragraphs relate to my thesis? Do I cover counterarguments? Did I support my claims with evidence? Do I make connections?
- Grammar. Do I have spelling problems? Syntax faults? Punctuation errors? If I broke a rule, do I have a good reason?
- Formatting. Is my paper the correct length? What about margins, font, spacing, and style? Did I cite evidence correctly?
- Style/Misc. Did I stretch my abilities? Did I write with “style”?

Adding up the 1–10 numbers in these five categories produces a score out of 50 points, which can then be multiplied to reach the numerical portion of the student’s grade. I use an accumulative point system of grading in my courses, and all my papers are worth a number of points divisible by 50. At the same time, students can easily “convert” their grade to a more traditional percentile by multiplying the x/50 assessment by 2. Though I once did this particular conversion for them, I do not do it now: for one thing, I like the “distance” that the x/50 mark places between their expectations of percentile grading and the feedback they are receiving; for another thing, I’m a believer in holistic learning, so any chance I can take to make them do math is a chance that will be taken.

No single system will fit all conditions, just as no rubric could possibly satisfy every teacher. I can imagine, for instance, that some of my peers would object to my placement of formatting on equal ground with argument (each worth 20% of the total grade): while argument is a wondrously complex and vitally important component of a paper, formatting is admittedly almost entirely a simple standard of either following the directions or not. On the flip side, though, one could argue that following directions is a rather important skill in the world they will be facing. Following directions (which in my present case usually means bothering to open up the MLA style guide) is also, sadly, something that many students need to have weighed heavily before they will bother to do it. I point this out not to say that my decision to weigh them equally is thus correct; quite to the contrary, I want to reinforce that the use of any tool is ultimately specific to the user.1

I’m thus not arguing for the primacy of my personal setup here. My rubric is, and must be, a reflection of my personal interests in the classroom: I want students to take stances, to take chances, and to make strong rhetorical arguments based on evidence, all conveyed within the bounds of proper practice. This is how I define good writing to them.

It is also worth noting that I make no secret of these assessment intentions. I do not, as some critics would have it, keep such matters hidden from my students. In “The Trouble with Rubrics,” for instance, Kohn observes:

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 the early stages of designing a curriculum unit 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. (13)
This actually sounds perilously close to saying something positive about rubrics, but the devil is in the details here. It seems that Kohn can conjure up some theoretical positives to teachers pondering a rubric behind the scenes, but by no means should students see behind that same curtain: “all bets are off,” he writes, “if students are given the rubrics and asked to navigate by them.” Put simply, Kohn suggests that students should not “know ahead of time exactly how their projects will be evaluated” (13; italics in original). I strongly disagree.

In addition, while I generally agree with Andrade’s pro-rubric position rather than Kohn’s anti-rubric stance, I freely admit that my rubric is one that I create, not the kind of class-collaborative rubric creation proposed by both Andrade (9) and, in another response to Kohn, Vicki Spandel (19). I find it important that the students learn to write to the expectations of an external audience; it is this dynamic, after all, that they will generally encounter in the real world for which their education is meant to prepare them. At the same time, I must point out that my rubric is not intended to fit papers into a preconceived box. Assessment in the categories I have established is typically, in my estimation and usage, relative to the individual paper. Wilson proposes that we should “look to the piece of writing itself to suggest its own evaluative criteria” (Rethinking 42), and I agree in the sense that the Argument of Thesis X cannot be directly measured against the Argument of Thesis Y: each thesis will have its own scale of proper argumentation. Grammar, too, can be surprisingly individualized, particularly as students grow in their confidence and begin to take leaps beyond the rules of the book to meet the rules of higher rhetoric, where a fragment can be a powerful thing indeed. And my “Style/Misc.” category is blessedly vague: as I freely tell my students, one size can never fit all, and there must be a kind of “wiggle room” (in this case, 20% of the grade) that allows me to reward risks, to push voice, or to make whatever other subjective adjustments or encouragements I deem necessary.

My rubric, in short, fits me and my goals for students. Even so, to fill out my rubric and call my grading done would be almost as unfair as assigning, without guidance or comment, an irrevocable, inarguable number grade to my papers. Therefore, in addition to the five assessments in my rubric, I write each student a “letter” that provides both “whole-paper” reaction and specific content comments, the latter often cut-and-pasted from their work (a simple process since I do my grading via email).²

The addition of this personalized “letter” is, I feel, vitally important: as Spandel argues, grading rubrics cannot and should not “require teachers to abandon individuality or cease responding on a personal level” (21). To do so would be to fall into the worst practices of ease-over-content that Kohn so rightly rejects. In this regard I agree with Wilson who, in a brief article entitled “Why I Won’t Be Using Rubrics to Respond to Students’ Writing,” worries about how the feedback that rubrics “offered to students was still generic because they weren’t uttered in reaction to the students’ actual work” (63). She’s right. No matter how flexible I think my rubric is, it cannot stand alone. At the same time, I cannot agree with her subsequent decision to toss out the rubric as an assessment tool; nor can I agree with her final characterization of rubrics, brutally eloquent though it is: “they tear at the foundations of the rhetorical heart of writing, reducing student essays and our responses to an exercise in purposelessness” (63). Again, I do not doubt that some rubrics can be so destructive, tragic as it is. I also do not doubt that the same kind of condemnation could be made of any method of assessment at some point under some circumstances. Wilson, like Kohn before her, appears guilty of category error, forgetting that all-important difference between tool and user. As Eric D. Turley and Chris W. Gallagher observe in their attempt to reframe the debate over rubrics into relative questions about appropriate or inappropriate use rather than bifurcating judgments about right and wrong, “It makes little sense to dismiss or embrace a tool as such—that is, without careful attention to why, how, by whom, and in what contexts it is used” (87).

Advantages of Rubrics for Students

I find the positives of using a flexible, individuated rubric within a system of grading to be many. Though the system as a whole is ultimately subjective—as I think any grading system must be—the rubric provides a small measure of objectivity by insisting that the teacher have a basis for the final assessment. As Spandel argues, rubrics thus
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“make us accountable for scores or grades that affect human lives” (21). Few things are more frustrating for students than unexplained grades (“Why is mine a 73 and hers a 78?”), and it is one of the great powers of the rubric to bring us closer to explaining the inherently inexplicable notion of what makes a piece of writing work. The rubric gives me more confidence in my own grading, and—far more importantly—it gives students more confidence in the reliability of how they are being assessed, which in turn gives them confidence that they can improve their assessments: the world is not solely the whim of the grader. And when it comes to improvement, such a rubric allows students to see the core problem or problems on a paper. Comparing paper to paper, they can even begin to self-identify trends in need of strong correction. As previously stated, it is my experience that in practice this process of “legitimizing” the final grade has the odd and positive effect of minimizing it: the students become more concerned about how they can craft a better argument, for instance, than in how they can get the elusive final “A” mark on the paper as a whole (which would be a 45–50 on my 50-point scale). While it is true that the student’s end-goal is that higher final grade—and I can almost hear Kohn arguing already, because I keep talking about grading—the rubric is forcing those involved in the process, both student and teacher, into a dialogue about the specifics of language and communication.

And it appears, by any measure I currently have, that the students like it. Anonymously asked to compare the particular e-grading methods I am utilizing to other grading methods they had encountered, my students from the fall 2010 semester gave the feedback presented in Figure 1 (accumulated percentages).

FIGURE 1. Feedback on Grading Methods from Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Worst</th>
<th>Worse</th>
<th>OK</th>
<th>Better</th>
<th>Best</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doing it all by email</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The speed of feedback</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The five-part grade breakdown</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting whole-paper feedback</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting detailed grammar corrections</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is no scientific study, to be sure, and it is an undeniable fact that, as Y. Malini Reddy and Heidi Andrade showed in a recent overview of rubric usage in higher education, scientific research is exactly what is needed to expand on the existing studies that show the effectiveness of rubrics in teaching writing. In the meantime, though, I am confident that my rubric is giving the students the kind of actionable intelligence that they need. I am giving them a greater opportunity to hone their skills. And, yes, I am getting this useful feedback to them faster than I can through traditional grading methods, giving me more time to think of new ways to push their horizons by getting new material and new methods into their minds.

I can’t imagine how any of that is a bad thing. In a perfect world, I suppose, we would snap our fingers and teach in classrooms without all the infamy of this binding, at-times-limiting, and always-pressuring system of grades and assessment. I imagine this would make critics like Alfie Kohn very happy indeed.

In the meantime, though, I have a stack of papers that needs grading. 

Notes

1. It follows, then, that the making of a rubric (or any other method of assessment) is also particular to the user. To produce my rubric, for instance, I spent more than a semester grading multiple classes of first-year composition papers twice over: first, I graded them in the “traditional” method of assigning the grades I felt were individually appropriate; second, after a delay of a few days to “reset” my mind as best I could, I graded them using a sequence of different rubric procedures. Fine-tuning this method paper by paper, I arrived at a rubric whose principles and practical results matched my personal assessment approaches. It worked for me, but by no means can I say it would work for everyone.

2. For the practical details of this grading system, see Michael Livingston, “GGrading.”

3. See, for instance, the work of Veronica Boix Mansilla et al. While I cannot help but favor any effort to accumulate usable data about grading effectiveness, I would also caution that since a rubric is of necessity particular to the user, comparing one teacher’s usage of them to another’s is fraught with the same kind of difficulties that plague administrative attempts to measure a teacher’s effectiveness with numerical computations.

Works Cited


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