Rubrics and the Dehumanization of Education

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I used to have a folder on my computer called "rubrics," which contained over a dozen variations of rubrics for each writing class I taught. Some were point-based, others descriptive, such as the one below. I worked hard to craft these rubrics, taking care to make the language accessible and precise. If I could bottle all of the time and energy I have spent over the years revising and retweaking these rubrics, I could probably power a rocket to Mars.

Grading Rubric/Professor Hurley

Basic Requirements
Essay answers all parts of the prompt and meets the page minimum.

☐ Exceeds expectations   ☐ On the right track; room for improvement   ☐ Needs attention

Thesis
The thesis is clear, specific, and responds to all parts of the prompt.

☐ Exceeds expectations   ☐ On the right track; room for improvement   ☐ Needs attention

Critical Thinking & Reading
Writer shows strong critical thinking and perceptive reading; writer avoids "cherry picking," overgeneralizing, and other logical flaws. If required, writer responds to a counterargument.

☐ Exceeds expectations   ☐ On the right track; room for improvement   ☐ Needs attention

Development & Support
Writer explains ideas clearly and in detail, giving specific examples whenever possible. Writer supports his or her points with plenty of textual evidence.

☐ Exceeds expectations   ☐ On the right track; room for improvement   ☐ Needs attention

Organization
The writer uses essay format and logical organization. Each paragraph has one main idea, expressed in a topic sentence.

☐ Exceeds expectations   ☐ On the right track; room for improvement   ☐ Needs attention

Quotes and MLA Documentation
Quotes are well integrated and cited using correct in-text citations. If required, the essay includes a correctly formatted Works Cited page. The writer avoids plagiarism while summarizing.

☐ Exceeds expectations   ☐ On the right track; room for improvement   ☐ Needs attention

Effectiveness of Expression
Writing style is clear, concise, and professional. Essay appears to be proofread.

☐ Exceeds expectations   ☐ On the right track; room for improvement   ☐ Needs attention

About five years ago, I took that rubrics folder and dragged it into my trash bin on my Mac. The computer made that satisfying crumpling sound as it swallowed up all of those years of work. And then I sat and looked at my empty desktop, feeling definitely more free than I had previously.

Why did I throw away these carefully crafted rubrics? I might start by telling you why I spent so much time on them in the first place.

The best argument in favor of rubrics is that they are informative: They tell my students exactly what I'm looking for in a piece of academic writing, so that they are not left guessing, and they break those expectations down into clear categories. Students appreciate knowing what the teacher wants, and rubrics try to offer that. And in theory, rubrics make my job as a grader easier. All I have to do is look to see how well the student fulfilled each part of the rubric and assign points or a grade based on that. The rubric allows students to see the strengths and weaknesses in their work and create a plan for improvement. It sounds like a win-win!

The logic of rubrics is strong, so strong that I didn't even question the use of rubrics for over fifteen years of teaching. But once I began the questioning process, I finally began to understand why my efforts to create a "perfect" rubric would always be in vain.

The trouble with rubrics lies, in my view, with how students as people interact with them. When students encounter a rubric, especially in a writing class, they regard it as a complicated map telling them how to earn a good grade and what to do to avoid a bad grade. Many students try to follow the letter of the rubric faithfully, often missing the larger point of the assignment. Instead of thinking about the topic they are writing about, students begin to think about how to master the rubric. They become overly self-conscious about ticking all of the boxes in order to receive the grade they want, and many become downright fearful about making mistakes. Trying to write while also trying not to make a mistake is a near-impossible task, and not a task that leads to growth. In fact, at the heart of writing is vulnerability and experimentation. We put a thought on the page, which in and of itself requires courage, and then we experiment with how to say it. Maybe our experiment succeeds and we communicate effectively. But everyone who has ever written anything knows that we often fail. Something that seemed completely clear in our own minds remains confusing to a reader. Should we really be punishing students for this by marking them down on a rubric?

Because make no mistake, students see any score below perfect as a black mark. We're living in a society of Yelp reviews and Uber ratings, where 5 stars is the default rating unless you screwed up. So it's hard for our students to see a low score or points deducted from a rubric with a growth mindset mentality. The best students can do this, but these students would thrive anyway. Most of the students that I encounter in a community college classroom have a fragile sense of confidence, even if they would say otherwise. They feel beaten down by low scores, and that's because we as a society have emphasized scores and grades as the chief markers of success and intelligence. It's my view that such an emphasis has created an environment hostile to learning, where we've trained students to care about outcomes over the excitement of discovery. Learning has to be "measurable," as on a rubric. However, all teachers know that the lightbulb moments in education are the most valuable moments, and these are not so easy to measure. A rubric can't measure how excited my student was while writing her essay, yet that excitement might mean more for my student's progress than anything else.

Rubrics are part of a larger culture of evaluation, which I believe runs counter to the inspiration and curiosity needed to create an environment where learning can flourish. Once we introduce evaluation into our learning spaces, we change the way we interact with student work. Instead of saying, "Why don't you try writing this as a letter?" we say, "This essay lacks adequate development of ideas." Instead of asking a student what she wants to say, we mark "Thesis is unclear" on the rubric. Honestly, rubrics are a pretty cold way to respond to student writing. Teachers often try to soften the coldness by adding personal comments, but students have told me that they think of the grade or the rubric as the "truth" and the teacher's uplifting comments as a "lie." Once we bring evaluation into our interactions with student work, we compromise the ability to act as guides for our students; instead, we are authority figures, dispensers of points and grades.

None of this is the fault of teachers; rather, it stems from the corporatization of education, which has been suffusing our schools over the last few decades. Those in positions of power think that we can whip education into shape by treating it like a poorly performing corporation. In this model, teachers must turn out over 100 widgets per semester who can demonstrate "student learning outcomes." If society really wanted to do something to improve education, the simplest and most effective way would be to lessen teacher workloads, so that we could re-humanize education.

There are other arguments I could raise against rubrics. Often rubrics give students too much information, overwhelming them instead of empowering them. Rubrics also create teacher dependence by teaching my students that there is only one way to be a good writer, and that I know what it is; as such, they encourage students not to think for themselves. Rubrics are nonsensical to many students because terms like "organization," "development," or "coherence" cannot be explained, only experienced with practice. Rubrics favor the students who already speak the language of academia, and those students tend to be whiter and richer.

But I think the main reason to abandon rubrics is because they make education less human. After tossing my rubrics, I started to use audio feedback on my student essays. I stopped giving grades or points. I only gave comments and often assigned revisions. I just pressed record on my computer and thought out loud to my students about their work. This audio feedback was imperfect. Sometimes I rambled; other times my dogs barked and I lost my train of thought. There was no "paper trail" that recorded students' strengths and weaknesses. Some might have said my work was "inefficient," although it seemed much more valuable to me. Despite all of this, students loved the audio feedback and many even took the time to write me and say how much they appreciated it. I think it's what students wanted from me all along, during those years when I tinkered with my rubrics, a human voice, expressing what I saw and valued in their work.