
Letters to *EJ*

The Trouble with a Narrow View of Rubrics

I read Alfie Kohn's recent article, "The Trouble with Rubrics" (March 2006), with great interest. Mr. Kohn levels serious charges against rubrics, some of which I share. Many of his concerns are valid, however, only if we take the narrowest view of rubric-as-grading-tool. Kohn's anti-grading agenda has led him to distort or oversimplify rubric-referenced approaches to classroom assessment. I am writing to present a broader view of rubric use as a way to promote student learning, achievement, and self-regulation.

Kohn worries that rubrics focus attention on only the most quantifiable and least important qualities of assignments. He points out that rubrics that emphasize spelling and organization result in "vacuous writing." This is not a new problem spawned by rubrics; it is a chronic, age-old problem of emphasizing conventions over content. Too many writing rubrics stress only low-level skills and knowledge, perhaps because some teachers believe that the qualities of good writing cannot be captured in a rubric. The irony is that those same teachers work hard to create cultures of critique in their classrooms. They have sophisticated vocabularies and detailed processes of critique that can be, and occasionally are, described in a rubric. Heeding the advice of assessment scholar Lauren Resnick, who notes that we get what we assess, I encourage teachers to include sophisticated criteria in their rubrics such as voice and tone, considering other points of view, raising questions, taking risks, and making connections. Because we get what we assess, we must assess what matters.

Kohn also complains that rubrics can become assignment maps that students mindlessly follow. He quotes a sixth grader who says, "The whole time I'm writing, I'm not thinking about what I'm saying or how I'm saying it. I'm worried about what grade the teacher will give me . . ." (14). Again, it is disingenuous to pretend that a rubric caused that

problem. Years of focusing solely on grades caused it. Rubrics can help students get beyond grades by engaging them in thinking about quality. With this goal in mind, I often cocreate rubrics with my students. They then use their rubric to give feedback to themselves and their peers. Rubric-referenced formative assessment can encourage mindful approaches to learning, and free students from the tyranny of a classroom where the teacher is the sole judge of quality.

Perhaps most alarming to me is Kohn's insistence that students should not be given rubrics, even when their teachers use them to "think about various criteria by which to assess what students end up doing" (13). Withholding one's expectations strikes me as dishonest and disrespectful. Perhaps Kohn should review the growing body of research on student self-assessment, which reveals both the need for trusting relationships between teachers and students and the effects of formative self-assessment (*not* self-grading) on student attitudes and achievement.

Research on the role of feedback in learning has demonstrated that students enjoy and benefit from ongoing, constructive comments on their work. Calling for assessment that can "offer feedback that will help [students] become more adept at, and excited about what they're doing," Kohn at the same time denies the role rubrics can play in helping teachers do just that. His denial reflects his position regarding the negative effects of grades. I hope he is eventually successful in eliminating grades from our classrooms. In the meantime, those of us who must grade seek ways to make our assessments meaningful for our students, including and especially rubrics.

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