

My Objections to Outcome [Note the Singular] Assessment

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When my goddaughter was eight years old, she was permitted to come from London to New York for a two-week visit. Elanor was precocious and had been asking when she could make this trip from the time she was four. When eight arrived, she was packed and ready. I had never had children, so living with an eight-year-old was an intense experience. What she mainly wanted to do was solve Rubik's Cube in five minutes flat. When that didn't happen, she erupted into a volcano of screams and tears. Eventually she figured out how to solve the puzzle and brought her completion time down to about three minutes.

If Ernő Rubik were naming his puzzle today, he would probably go for the pun and call it Rubric's Cube since rubrics are all people talk about now in education. Remember when the word "paradigm" appeared in every high-toned article? Well, it has been replaced by "rubric." Here a rubric, there a rubric, everywhere a rubric rubric. . . . Old MacDonald had several, and they all add up to little boxes far less colorful and ingenious than Rubik's Cube.

I'm betting that most of the people who use the word "rubric" know very little about its meaning or history. Rubric means red ochre—red earth—as in Bryce Canyon and Sedona. Red headers were used in medieval manuscripts as section or chapter markers, and you can bet that the Whore of Babylon got herself some fancy rubrics over the years. Through most of its history, the word has been attached to religious texts and liturgy; rubrics were used as direction indicators for conducting divine services. In a system that separates church and state, it's a wonder that the word has achieved so universal a secular makeover. Now it's just a fancy word for a scoring grid. Think boxes! Wouldn't they look sweet colored in red?

For decades I have been involved in university honors education. The essence of the honors approach is, dare I say, teaching "outside the box." Everyone knows that you can't put round ideas into square boxes, everyone except the people who do "outcomes assessment," the pervasive vogue in filling in squares with useless information. Here, for example, is the classic definition of "rubric" as spelled out by the authors of a terrifying little handbook designed to help people who are still awake at three in the morning looking to speed up grading papers: "At its most basic, a rubric is a scoring tool that lays out the specific expectations for an assignment" (Stevens and Levi 3). There it is, a "tool" to measure "specific expectations," and those are precisely what we do not want to elicit from students, especially in honors but to my mind across the university.

My goal is not to score or measure students against preconceived expectations but to encourage the unexpected, the breakthrough response that is utterly new, different, and thus exciting—such as a recent student analysis of Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" in light of the "Occupy Wall Street" movement, an approach that made me rethink the story altogether. The operative word here is "think." Students attend college, in part, to learn how to think, and we help them engage deeply in "critical thinking." Wouldn't it then be hypocritical to take their thoughtful reflections and score them like mindless robots, circling or checking little boxes? Sure it would. That is why, whenever I hear anyone suggest using a "rubric" to grade an essay, I want to let out the bloodcurdling (appropriately red image) scream of an eight-year-old. I'm practicing. I can do it.

What I can't and won't do is fill in the little boxes. My field is literature—that is, thought and sensibility expressed in words. My field encourages the subjective, anecdotal, oddly shaped experiences that constitute creative

writing. I can tell you a thousand stories about my students, how and what they learn and what will be the outcome of their education. I know their outcome (the plural is ugly) because I write to them for years after they leave school. Many are now my colleagues on campus and my friends all over the world. I can tell you their stories, but I can't and won't fill in boxes pretending that these will turn into measurable data. If my colleagues want to do the boxes, I won't object, but "I'd prefer not to."

Nor will I read portfolios and brood on what can be gathered about the student writers. English teachers read papers for a living. We assess them, write useful comments, and then return them graded to the students so that they can revise. Doing this is in our blood. For what reason would we dive into a pile of papers on which we are prohibited from writing comments for the sake of producing statistics that don't even go back to the authors? All writers need suggestions and corrections. If we are not reading papers with the express purpose of providing the students with constructive help, then the act of reading is a waste of time.

I regret to acknowledge that the language and fake measuring tools of the data crunchers have infected even my own department, which now has been coerced into producing lists of goals and objectives with such chalk-grating phrases as "students will use writing as a meaning-making tool" and "generate an interpretation of literature . . ." Not only the mechanistic language of the document but the fascistic insistence that students "will do" this or that strikes me as an utterly dystopian vision of a university education.

At the very least, English departments everywhere should be the ones to point out that goals and objectives are synonyms and that what the assessment folks really mean are goals and strategies for achieving them. But "goals and objectives" has become a cant phrase at the core of the outcomes ritual, and I'm afraid there is nothing much we can do to change that.

Whoever came up with the phrase "outcomes assessment" probably has no idea how a liberal education works. We teach, students learn, and, if we are lucky, students reciprocally teach us something in a symbiotic relationship that does not require external administration. It works like this: students attend classes, read, write, engage in labs and other learning activities, pass their courses, even do well, and in time graduate. Faculty enjoy teaching and feel rewarded by the successes of their students. Bingo. That's it. Nothing more to say or prove. No boxes to fill in. Anyone with an urge to produce data can take attendance at Commencement.

Other horrors have bubbled up to pollute the waters of our Pierian Spring. In addition to rubrics, we now have templates for everything we do. A template is essentially a mold that lets us replicate a structure. In different industries it means a gauge or guide, a horizontal beam functioning to distribute weight, or a wedge used to support a ship's keel. You can find out more at students' new best friend, <<http://www.dictionary.com>>. Yet nowhere in this most accessible word hoard is there a specifically academic meaning for "template," a word that must come up at least once in every academic meeting. The template craze implies that everything we do can and must be measured to fit a certain mold. Not only the word but the increasing use of templates in the university reveal the degree to which academia has become an industrial operation.

In fact, we don't need templates any more than we need rubrics. They come from the same family of low-level ideas responsible for the mechanical modes of teaching that I reject. If I were a medievalist, I would write an allegorical morality play, an updated version of *The Castle of Perseverance*, in which virtuous Professors battle vicious Rubrics and Templates, winning the day by driving them off with Open Books—I concede, maybe Digital Books!

University education, what's left of it, is at a decisive crossroad that requires us to take a stand against the models that administrations and consultants and accrediting agencies are forcing on us. The liberal arts and sciences are under serious attack, and, if we don't defend the virtues of imagination and spontaneity in our classes, we will all be teaching from rigid syllabi according to rubrics and templates spelled out week by week as teachers of fifth-grade classes are forced to do.

It so happens that my grandmother, born in 1887, was a fifth-grade teacher. Every Sunday evening she sat at the kitchen table filling out hour-by-hour syllabi for the week to come. I remember a book with little cards, like the library cards we used to tuck into book pockets. No pun intended, but her last name was Tuck. Even then my grandmother resented the mechanical nature of her obligation, calling it with utter contempt "busy work."

Part of what convinced me to go into college teaching was the desire to avoid busy work and to teach what I was trained to do without people peering over my shoulder or making me fill out needless forms. Throughout my career I have given students general reading lists, telling them that we will get through as many of the works as our discussions allow, eliminate some and add others if our interests take us in different directions. I always say, "There

are no literature police to come and check on whether we have read exactly what is printed on this paper.”

But now the literature police have arrived. More and more there is pressure to write a syllabus and stick to it so as to meet absurdly regimented, generally fictitious, and misnamed goals and objectives. This is no way to run a university course and is instead the surest way to drive inspiration out of university teaching and learning.

Tragically, the university is rapidly becoming fifth grade. The terminology that has seeped into university teaching from the lower grades has, to my great horror, also mated with business so that the demons we are now facing believe that we will do as we are told by top-down management so that we attract students, bring in tuition dollars, increase endowments, and pass Go with our regional accreditation bodies. If this sounds like a board game, it is—or perhaps a computer game since everything seems to be played out in distance learning, distance teaching, anything but face-to-face, open-ended, free-form discussion and debate. This pernicious trend has made me one Angry Bird!

Around the campus I see that my young colleagues are running scared. They are afraid that they won't get tenure and that tenure itself will soon disappear. They are afraid that their small department will be absorbed by another, bigger one. They are afraid that their classes will be cancelled and they will ultimately lose their jobs. We are not in familiar territory because all of the power and control have been misappropriated by business operatives calling for outcomes. We need to remind them that a university—and especially an honors program—is in essence a faculty teaching students. Administrators are hired hands secondary to this endeavor. Moreover, only one outcome is important: students graduate and go into the world to become the next generation of educated people. We need to clear all the rubrics and templates out of the way so that we can teach and they can learn.

To my mind there is nothing but folly in searching for “measurable outcomes”; this is a quest as doomed as searching for the meaning of life. Those who remember Monty Python will get the idea and imagine the Knights Templars dressed up in rubric baldrics, entertaining us with a jolly good “Outcomes Assessment Joust.”

REFERENCE

Stevens, Dannelle D., and Levi, Antonia J. *Introduction to Rubrics: An Assessment Tool to Save Grading Time, Convey Effective Feedback and Promote Student Learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2013.

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