Soft(a)ware in the English Classroom: Reassessing How We "See" Students: The Blessing and Blight of Rubrics (and Software) in Education

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Reassessing How We "See" Students: The Blessing and Blight of Rubrics (and Software) in Education

The word *rubric* appears in the English language in the 1400s, etymologically rooted in a similar French word meaning *red*. In this early usage, the word *rubric* referred to annotations in clerics' liturgy books—written by church officials. Writing in fiery crimson, the marginalia were intended to guide priests through the Mass to ensure human error did not interfere with the sacred event ("Rubric"). Today, rubrics have become a controversial mainstay in education. Several years ago, *English Journal* ran a pairing of columns to surface the debate on rubrics with Vicki Spandel arguing for the use of rubrics and Alfie Kohn arguing against. In essence, those in favor of the use of rubrics say that outlining expectations and providing a shared language for assessment is beneficial to both students and teachers. Opponents offer counterpoints, including the fact that providing students with rubrics, for instance, when teaching writing, results in students suppressing their own voices to comply with the preordained tenor the grid provides. Today, we must add that rubrics are used not only here in the land of human beings who say Mass and teach students, but are an instrument to generate data for the world of software.

Rubrics take many forms, but their primary function has changed little over the last seven centuries. Rubrics are devices created to limit the scope of messy social events to generate consensus, which in modern terms often means quantitative data. We identify *six* traits (plus one, of course) to assess writing or teacher evaluation rubrics that distill the complexity of pedagogy into *four* domains. This act of breaking apart phenomena into predetermined discrete elements is fundamentally computational. Similar to the way software developers define for us the ways we can engage with software space—we click on buttons, links, check boxes, bubbles—rubrics reduce the wide-open plains of human creativity and choice to mere selections that accord with the ideological and technical needs of those who create them. Like software, rubrics can be used to serve human and socioculturally responsive ends or they can be used to serve what Peter M. Taubman calls "audit culture" and the needs of sophisticated computational assemblages, including information systems (Lynch, *The Hidden Role*).

Allow me to walk you through a brief example from a longer study (Lynch, "Holy Interfaces") to demonstrate how rubrics function as software. When preparing to implement the Danielson Framework (Danielson), one district in New York State posted a video of a principal and assistant principal using the popular rubric to assess teachers. The video shows the principal observing pedagogy, taking notes, and using the rubric with the teacher to discuss how he can continue to grow as a professional. Whereas the video shows the rubric being used primarily to facilitate a shared conversation between educators, the reality of how the rubric is used is quite different. Months later, when the same district rolled out the new teacher evaluation system to all educators, they required principals to enter teacher evaluation data into a software application. The same principal who might have used the rubric to engage in professional dialogue with a new educator was given the additional—and not innocuous—step of distilling the teacher's pedagogy into a number and entering that number into software space.

There is a subtle but important difference in the two evaluation scenarios above. In the first, the rubric is used to facilitate a shared

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