

Making it Messy: A Review of *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment* by Maja Wilson

MEG J. PETERSEN
PLYMOUTH STATE UNIVERSITY

Maja Wilson. *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 2006.

ALTHOUGH WILSON IS A HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHER, there is much in this book that speaks directly to teachers of all subjects at all levels. Particularly relevant for readers of *The WAC Journal* is the idea that we not settle for quick check-offs on a rubric, no matter how seductively easy that might be. If we do so, we squander both the potential for digging into disagreements in response that will help our students clarify their understandings of content and the potential for engaging with our students as fellow thinkers and writers.

The familiar and personal tone of the book suggests a teacher pulling up a chair to a classroom table as the light outside begins to wane at the end of a school day, and talking openly with a trusted colleague about her students, their work, and her teaching dilemmas. But the conversational tone belies the strong scholarly and intellectual foundation of this book in which Wilson questions not only rubrics themselves, but the whole philosophical underpinning of how we think about assessment.

In her introduction, before she begins to tell the reader about her difficulties with rubrics, she takes us with her on a writing retreat with other teachers and then pauses to wonder at the “huge no man’s land between my deeply held beliefs about the power of writing and some of my classroom practices” (xx). She then rhetorically takes on the whole concept of “best practices.” With an approach that portends how she will handle the entire book, she meticulously traces the origins of the term with its medical overtones and goes on to question the idea of developing prescriptions for good teaching. She argues that following established methods may lead us astray, away from “our deepest convictions about the complexities of the writing process” (xxiii). Only in the

last few sentences of her introduction does she come round to rubrics, surmising that her readers have picked up her book because of their concern that rubrics violate such deep convictions.

In the first chapter, Wilson discusses her concerns about rubrics in great depth, beginning from student writing samples gathered from her classroom. She discusses a paper which was “relatively straightforward” to score using the rubric provided by the state of Michigan. Then Wilson introduces Krystal’s poem. She found this to be a moving piece of writing, and the reader cannot help but agree. Its qualities cannot, however, be captured by the rubric. She calls to mind all of the papers we ourselves have graded that do not fit the rubric’s neat categories, where the whole is so much more than the sum of the parts. She investigates various rubrics in her quest to find one that detects the elusive quality of Krystal’s paper, until she finally concludes that “The MEAP and the 6+1 Trait® rubrics failed to recognize my values as a reader and Krystal’s strengths as a writer” (9).

Wilson then moves into a meaty chapter on the history of writing assessment and a brief readable introduction to psychometrics. She traces the history of college entrance exams and how the rise of standardization in the testing movement coincided with the development of the rubric. She describes how, in the scoring of writing samples, it was necessary to erase individual readings in order to cut the elements that resisted categorization and then challenges us to consider what is lost in the process. As she puts it, “The authors’ [of the ETS-sponsored study] search for clean categories of scientific thinking effectively stripped writing assessment of the complexity that breathes life into good writing” (23).

At this point, Wilson devotes a chapter to examining the arguments in favor of rubrics. She dismisses the most prevalent argument by saying, “An assessment method must convince us that it reflects our values about teaching writing before it seduces us with its claim to save time” (28). She notes that rubrics often substitute for meaningful response to writing. “When our purpose in reading student work is to defend a grade, we do not apply any of our natural responses to a text” (30) Instead, we search for ways in which it does not “measure up.” Wilson goes on to attack the idea of the determinism of factors and, in a point particularly relevant for readers of the *WAC Journal*, urges us instead to provide student writers with meaningful response that challenges their ideas. In other words, rather than looking at papers in terms of error correction, we should engage students as fellow thinkers in our respective fields. She cites Bob Broad’s comparison rubrics to the Vinland map of the “new world” providing only vague outlines of what is out there rooted in earlier understandings, and notes that

many contemporary and professional writers would score poorly on them. She wonders whether the reductive standardized categories of rubrics will produce standardized writers.

In the following chapter, she takes on the conflict between our more progressive constructivist pedagogies and the positivist assessment provided by rubrics. Positivism, she notes, puts the rich context of writing in conflict with “objectivity” and the push towards reliability will always pull us in this direction. We should seek, Wilson notes, congruence between our assessment and our pedagogy—our evaluation should indeed reflect what we value. This would seem to go to the heart of the difficulty with rubrics—they presume a separation between our pedagogy and our assessment, as if we could base our teaching on constructivist principles and our assessment on a positivist framework. Wilson challenges us with the notion that everything we do in the classroom is teaching our students something, although not always what we intend.

The fifth chapter is, for me, one of the most brilliant. Wilson recognizes that her readers are ready for some kind of alternative to rubrics, but rather than providing one, she lays out a philosophical foundation. She suggests that disagreement itself is valuable and should be a starting place for inquiry. The problem with developing our own rubrics is that they will not change the reductive nature of the rubric itself. Only by valuing disagreement over “groupthink” can we solve the problem of “subjectivity” by “helping students to wade through conflicting views of their work, honoring disagreement without getting lost in it” (60). She suggests that we trust our students to sort out conflicting responses to their work, as this will deepen their thinking. “By placing the onus on the writer to sift through conflicting judgments, we are asking readers to peel back the layers that create our assessments”(63). She concludes the chapter with a list of “Writing Assessment Principles Grounded in Contextual and Constructivist Paradigms.” These are strongly WAC-oriented. They included not only the value of extracting clarity from disagreement but consideration of the rhetorical positions of both readers and writers in sorting out response. These principles honor context and consider the writer’s and reader’s stances towards the material itself.

At this point the reader is primed for some sort of alternative to rubrics. Readers who are looking for answers will be disappointed in the final chapters, and on a first quick read I thought of this as a major flaw in the book. Yet, as Wilson has pointed out, it is the quest for easy answers that got us into trouble in the first place. In the following chapter, Wilson takes us into her classroom to illustrate response to writing in action and shows how students revise in response to formative assessments. The descriptions are detailed with examples of early drafts and revisions, which do not always result

in immediate improvement. Wilson reminds us that revision can be a messy, uneven process and pieces often get worse before they get better. In language familiar to *WAC Journal* readers, she urges us to attend to and honor that process, rather than taking shortcuts that focus only on the product.

In the following chapter on grading, she again fails to offer simple solutions. She suggests delaying grading as long as possible to allow the process to unfold and cites Linda Christensen's grading policy as an example of how to move beyond rubrics to a more criterion-referenced approach to grading. She encourages us to have students do process reflections and challenges us to devise assessments that are true to our values. Wilson concludes her book with a conversation with a colleague that raises questions about what assessment without rubrics can look like and where it will take us. We end the book still metaphorically sitting in Wilson's classroom after school, talking through ideas. This is not the sort of problem that lends itself to quick resolution, and Wilson honors that by acknowledging that "failing to meet the ideal is par for the course," but "we should trust our own teaching process—giving ourselves permission to fail, but viewing and reflecting on those failures in the light of our values and ideals"(98). Indeed, if we value our students as writers, we can do no less.