

# FEARFUL SYMMETRIES: RUBRICS AND ASSESSMENT

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## Measurement

[a]

If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character, the  
Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all  
things & stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull  
round over again.

[b]II

Reason or the ratio of all we have already known is not the same  
that it shall be when we know more.

William Blake, *There Is No Natural Religion* (1-2)<sup>1</sup>

IN THIS CRYPTIC WORK, BLAKE famously and obliquely makes a case for the “Poetic or Prophetic character,” which he understands as a mental capacity that can be at work in any kind of thought or expression. Our minds, he argues, are capable of learning that is not bounded by what we perceive in the material world or by what is already known and taught. Learning can grow beyond what is known, and when it does, it has a poetic and prophetic character: a shaping force and an intimation of things to come.

Philosophy and experimental science, he implies, may stop at repeating the logic of what is known; it is the power of science to be predictably reproducible. But he also implies that not only in poetry but also in philosophy and all of the known sciences, a certain kind of learning may happen that breaks the boundaries of what is known—that, we would say now, changes paradigms, or introduces a depth or complexity to matters once thought self-evidently clear. This is where the romantic notion of the scientist as discoverer reclaims science as a sublime undertaking: thus Keats, in “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” compares reading Homer to an astronomer discovering a new star, or to “stout Cortez” charting a new continent.<sup>2</sup>

That kind of learning may seem to have little to do with undergraduate education and learning outcomes assessment. It could be argued that yes, our

philosophers and poets and scientists are directing their work toward breakthroughs: new solutions to old problems, new forms of expression, new molecules and technologies; but our undergraduates learn the foundations of the disciplines, basic knowledge, principles, syntagms, conceptual and integrative tools and models. We don't expect breakthroughs or new paradigms from undergraduate students, so they are not typically in our learning goals and our assessment rubrics. In the influential "Essential Learning Outcomes" developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) under the auspices of its "Liberal Education and America's Promise" (LEAP) initiative, "Critical and creative thinking" is listed among several other "Intellectual and Practical Skills"; the culminating outcome is "Integrative and Applied Learning, including synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies" (AAC&U 3). We sense that this "advanced accomplishment" does not encompass Blake's "Poetic or Prophetic character."

Can we imagine Blake's response to this sense of what we want our students to learn in college? Would he draw a line at the sixteenth year of institutional education and say, "Now let the real learning begin"? Or might we take a cue from Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and consider what possible role our sense of the "Poetic and Prophetic character" might play in the education of college students? As many colleges undertake to establish goals for our students' learning, devise rubrics based on those goals, and conduct time-consuming and sometimes expensive assessments to determine how well our students are meeting those goals, we might legitimately ask whether we are applying our own disciplines' most complex hermeneutics to this work. We could answer that the learning goal of "creative thinking" that appears on the LEAP list of goals and in the rubrics based on them is one way of saying that we do ask our undergraduate students to create new knowledge, interpretive models, exegeses, and creative works: we apprentice them in, among other things, work of a prophetic or poetic character. Their attempts may be as Calculus 1 is to higher mathematics—assuming here that higher mathematics includes sublime learning—but we aim to get them as far along as we can.<sup>3</sup> Should we be able to articulate where this learning happens, what it looks like, and when it happens at the most advanced level—even when, paradoxically, the project is to express something unknown, ineffable, unrecognizable, or mute?

The project of assessment has its roots in an Enlightenment conception of education as profoundly rational: assessment is a form of knowledge-gathering, of *Wissenschaft* or research; the object of study is our students' learning. Its research methods presume that this knowledge exists and can be discovered, broken down, analyzed, and evaluated piece by piece. We practice this research in a post-Enlightenment context that does not allow for easy positivism. There is no discipline today in which the status of evidence is not at least somewhat contested, the epistemologies at least somewhat unstable. It may be facile to assert that the romantic challenge to Enlightenment positivism is still in force in our radical questioning of what we can know and discover. But alongside that fundamental doubt, so evident in Blake's assertions above, another romantic notion persists that might also seem to thwart the project of estab-

lishing goals, rubrics, and assessments for student learning: that is the notion that our highest learning is sublime, somehow ineffable, even terrifying, intuited as the poetic or prophetic character and best described in metaphor rather than abstraction. Many faculty members would likely dismiss such a notion as fuzzy, irrational—or romantic. And yet we also recognize that the metadiscourses in our disciplines, our foundational theories, nearly always lead to irresolvable contradictions or unknowable conditions. Very often, the work we admire most addresses or realigns the assumptions under which we pursue our learning and, ostensibly, our teaching. Some of us might even argue that our ambition for our best students is that they come to understand how fault-ridden the foundations of our inquiry are. Thus it seems that our goals for their *creative* thinking are closely aligned with *critical* thinking: with understanding the ways our knowledge is contingent, fragmentary, and anything but disinterested.

It seems, then, that we may have the rubrics for assessing “the Poetic or Prophetic character” of our students’ work, in the measures of creative and critical thinking. And yet there seems to be still too great a disjunction between what Blake intends and what rubrics can address. Rubrics, and assessments based upon them, surely have more in common with the “charter’d streets” (1) and “mind-forg’d manacles” (8) of Blake’s “London” than they do with prolific energies.<sup>4</sup> Is it in any way possible to view the rubric’s grid not as a constraint but instead as a means of liberation?

In this essay, as I develop an answer to that question, I will focus on the rubric as a tool for evaluation and assessment, based on my own experience in the classroom. I will argue that rubrics are useful; most importantly, they are deservedly seen as democratic, in that they make our assumptions and aims transparent and accessible to all students. But rubrics have their limitations: they may lead us to a false sense of safety, may make us miss openings onto new ideas and processes. Rubrics, like our goals for students’ learning and our assessments, must be conceived in an ongoing dialogue (explicit or implicit), and are themselves subject to evaluation. For them to work over a long-term process as part of teaching and learning, they must be expressed in terms that encourage both students and faculty to take risks, to go beyond the “same dull round”; if we can find the right language, they can also lead both students and faculty to be more ambitious, to reach the point of sublime wonder and awe. But still, I will argue, if the texts are well chosen and the assignment well designed, the best things that come out of the class will exceed the rubric.

Finally, I will argue that we can extend these lessons from the classroom to the role of rubrics in program-level assessments. And that both can be Blakeian and liberating in their energies.

## Rubrics

Rubrics have come to play a crucial role in the assessment of student learning. Well-designed rubrics, we know, emerge out of the criteria that we actually look for in our students’ best work. They clarify for both faculty and students just what it is we are looking for in their learning and achievements,

and they lay the groundwork for assessing student learning in the aggregate. Although the rubric as an instrument for grading a specific assignment is distinct from rubrics that are used for broad and aggregated assessments, both work on the same principle: the goals for the students' learning and achievement can be articulated as separate features and can be separately evaluated and measured. In grading, the rubric clarifies for faculty and student both the goals for the assignment and the criteria for grading. In program-level assessment, the rubric similarly is based upon the learning goals for the given unit of assessment (for example, a course or group of courses in a given discipline), and it both clarifies those goals and separates them into assessable units. A rubric for an individual assignment can be based upon the larger goals for a course or even for a major, and it can simultaneously inform the student, help faculty to evaluate the individual work, and lead to aggregated evaluations in a program-level assessment. As recent a work as Stevens' and Levi's 2005 book, *Introduction to Rubrics*, focuses almost exclusively on the rubric in the classroom, though it points out the usefulness of rubrics for broader assessments. For rubrics to translate to the programmatic level, faculty must collaborate on creating them. The recent work on rubrics edited by Terrell Rhodes and published by AAC&U opens by asking whether this undertaking is even possible:

Is there a shared set of expectations for learning that individual faculty can use in the classroom, that can be aggregated for programmatic evaluation and sampled for institutional reporting?... Can the shared expectations for learning be articulated so that students can use them to understand and make judgments about their own learning strengths and weaknesses?... Can we assess student learning in ways that actually provide faculty and students with information helpful to improve pedagogy and the development of learning over time as well as provide programs and institutions with summative information for reporting? (1)

The answer, implicitly, is yes, and this publication goes further than any other I know of to make the rubrics correspond genuinely to the most complex kinds of learning that faculty from multiple disciplines might be willing to agree on. In other words, rubrics here go well beyond the context of classroom use, and to get there, the faculty's "shared expectations" become the standard. Despite this major difference, the assessment rubric shares with the teaching rubric a fundamental structure: it spells out expectations for students' learning in multiple categories that then serve as the basis for evaluation.

Because my concern here is to scrutinize closely how a rubric works, and whether it works as a constraint or a liberating framework, I begin here with the rubric's narrowest scope: the individual assignment. I remember clearly the first time I saw a rubric for grading papers; it was in a pedagogy workshop well over a decade ago at the college where I teach, and a respected faculty member distributed the rubric he used (see fig. 1). He explained that he gave the rubric to the students along with the paper assignment, so that they knew

what he was looking for; and he filled it out as he graded their papers, so that they could see the strengths and weaknesses very clearly.

1. Responds fully to assignment	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
2. Expresses its hypothesis, question, or problem clearly	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
3. Begins and ends effectively	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
4. The content is based on accurate information	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
5. Provides adequate supporting arguments, evidence, examples, and details	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
6. Is well organized and unified	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
7. Analyzes the data well	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
8. Uses appropriate, direct language for the defined audience	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
9. Uses adequate sources	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
10. Correctly acknowledges and documents sources	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
11. Is free of errors in grammar, punctuation, word choice, spelling, and format	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
12. Shows originality and creativity in realizing 1-9	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
OVERALL EVALUATION					

Fig. 1. Rubric for grading papers, author and date unknown.

I was impressed by the rubric. It clarified things that had seemed murky, and I could see that it could help my grading be fair and consistent. Still, something about it made me uneasy: it must have been the boxes. They were too linear; they seemed to imply that each of these categories was clearly distinct from the others, and each could be assessed in an objective, almost scientific way. So when I made use of it the first time, I took away the boxes, leaving words on the page and perhaps believing there was a certain ambiguity in the white spaces. I found the rubric made my grading easier and quicker. I could attend principally to the categories on the sheet of paper, and my students could see just what they needed to revise. I spent less time writing comments, and achieved much the same thing, I thought, with check marks.

But very quickly, it seemed there was something missing. I tried to find words for it, and it wasn't easy. It was somewhere in the terrain of number 12: "Shows originality and creativity in realizing 1-9," and I found that I valued

that category disproportionately. For example, some papers that seemed really good did not necessarily express a clear thesis or hypothesis in the conventional way at the opening of the paper—and somehow got away with it. It seemed that an idea could be developed well with some awkward transitions; that sometimes a certain quality took over—something to do with the voice and the logic propelling the paper—that seemed even more important than the handling of transitions, for example, or the clarity of the conclusion. So I added a point to the rubric: “13. *Je ne sais quoi*.” I didn’t actually give it that much thought at the time; I just wanted the flexibility to be able to acknowledge a strong paper that broke some of the conventions.

Not too long after that, I took on an administrative role and stopped teaching for a time; the rubric went into a file in the back of the drawer, so it didn’t evolve. But that number 13—somehow aptly numbered—stayed with me. Why was it particularly satisfying that it was in another language that many of my students didn’t understand? That it alluded to *not* knowing rather than to knowledge? Or was this really just intellectual laziness, an unwillingness to think through and articulate what happens when a student paper has a quality that seems to elude the standard qualities, almost to rewrite the rules, in a way that seems surprisingly authoritative or authentic?

With this question in mind, I’ve looked at rubrics over the past several years in hopes of finding one that does articulate this quality. Arguably, that number 12 on the first one does: we may well be talking about “originality and creativity.” Those are terms out of the romantic lexicon, kin with “Poetic and Prophetic character.” Interestingly, most rubrics in my unscientific survey do not contain them. (This survey was so unscientific it consisted of slipping rubrics into a manila folder, sources unmarked, as I came across them over a period of some eight years, little thinking I would ever be writing about them and wishing I knew their sources.) They emphasize, to cite another one in my file: “Thesis, organization, transitions, development, evidence, conclusion, diction & style, mechanics”: all crucial aspects of good writing and clear thinking. Another rubric discussed in a workshop at my college a number of years ago—again, I no longer know the source—approaches the matter somewhat differently by providing language to describe whether the given paper achieves “High,” “Middle” or “Low” levels of success in four areas: Focus, Organization, Style, and Mechanics. Then it concludes with a series of questions about the degree to which the author has met these standards (see fig. 2). The questions make a difference in the tone and function of the rubric. Where a grid had suggested something quasi-scientific, a series of earnest

1. Does the author have a main idea, and does he or she stick to it?
2. Does the author make defensible assertions and supply adequate details to support these assertions?
3. Do the sentences and paragraphs flow smoothly?
4. Do the sentence patterns vary?
5. Is the essay relatively free of grammatical errors, punctuation errors, and misspellings?

Fig. 2. Rubric, author and date unknown.

questions implies that there is some kind of dialogue at work. That may make this rubric more effective as part of a formative process; but that sense of a dialogue is perhaps beside the point when a rubric is part of a summative and aggregated assessment. So the shift from abstract criteria to questions is not in fact a crucial one, methodologically. And in any case, we recognize again the familiar categories on the rubric and the implicit lines drawn between them. There is enough of a consensus now about these criteria that a Google search of the phrase “Thesis, organization, transitions, development, evidence, conclusion, diction & style, mechanics” turns up 37,500 hits, countless numbers of them rubrics from colleges and high schools. They are clearly in common use now as a teaching tool and as a basis for assessment. In either case, the rubrics that are commonly available from writing center websites, English departments and other humanities programs bear a family resemblance and, as far as I have seen, do not mention sublime learning.

In the literature about rubrics, we can trace their emergence to the 1961 publication from the Educational Testing Service that proposed five factors in good writing that could be isolated and used for purposes of evaluating writing. Bob Broad, in his book, *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*, quotes them:

*Ideas:* relevance, clarity, quantity, development, persuasiveness

*Form:* organization and analysis

*Flavor:* style, interest, sincerity

*Mechanics:* specific errors in punctuation, grammar, etc.

*Wording:* choice and arrangement of words. (6)<sup>5</sup>

Broad, surveying the effect of rubrics on teaching and assessing writing, goes so far as to argue that their limitations have become clear: “The age of the rubric has passed,” he says: it gave us efficiency, but at the cost of truth (4). His critique of rubrics is founded on two related propositions: that they do not reflect what we actually value most in good writing; and that they contradict the real complexity of knowledge and thought (4). Another important critic of rubrics, Brian Huot, has argued that assessment of writing in particular has had “roots in a positivist epistemology” (“Toward a New Theory,” 160) that is divorced from “our understandings about the nature of language, written communication, and its teaching” (162). In the place of standardized rubrics, Huot has argued for assessment criteria that are holistic and “site-based,” that emerge from within specific contexts (162). Like Broad, then, he sees student writing and learning as being more complex than rubrics are able to capture. Not only are the various features of good writing interconnected, not only do they exist in shifting hierarchies, but they also depend to a surprising degree on the context in which the students are writing and learning. And “context” here is a large umbrella covering a wide range of factors, from the nature of the assignment and the course to larger factors such as the students’ subcultures and social identities, the kinds of academic sup-

port available, the nature of the institution, and the prevailing community expectations of students' writing.

Huot's and Broad's critiques are cogent and persuasive. My argument here, through the lens of Blake and by implication romantic challenges to Enlightenment rationalism, extends these two critiques of the common rubric. It may be difficult for any literary scholar working today, schooled in poststructuralist radical uncertainties, to see the rubric as anything but a flawed fiction, at best, and at worst a form of surveillance, in Foucault's sense of the word: the state's intrusion into learning. At the same time, I am not wholly willing to sacrifice the rubric's usefulness—not just as an instrument for evaluating student work, but as a fundamental principle in teaching: we should make our criteria known to our students, and they should be clear and attainable; our assessments should emerge clearly from them.<sup>6</sup> And when we do that, the criteria probably look a lot like the rubrics quoted above.

I do, without question, want my students to learn to manage each of the aspects of an essay that these rubrics outline. I even catch myself assigning a certain moral virtue to them: so, for example, I will share with students my disdain when a literary critic willfully disregards evidence in the text, or fails to organize an argument in a way that unfolds logically. We spend a lot of time talking about what kind of thesis is worth advancing and what kind of literary evidence is not only convincing but also accurate, even true. Most days of the week, I don't need more than those points on that rubric to assess my students' work or their learning. And then sometimes I do, and when that happens, it can seem as though a crack has opened up and I am not sure what I see through it. In the case that follows, an unusual student project led me to reconsider my standard categories of assessment, not only for that assignment but for student work in general. I learned that the greater the risks I take with my teaching, the more likely the students are to escape the "same dull round" as well, and the greater the likelihood that their education and mine seem bound with an urgency that is both satisfying and unsettling. To my surprise, I also learned that a rubric could help us to reach that point.

### **Sergio's burning shoes**

Recently, I taught a course for the second time that had previously fallen flat. The course is in Skidmore College's interdisciplinary Scribner Seminar program, part of the college's first-year experience. It was one of a cluster of eight seminars whose title was "Human Dilemmas." Of the 110 or so students in these eight seminars, about a third were admitted through our opportunity programs on full scholarship and thus came from disadvantaged backgrounds. The "Human Dilemmas" seminars aim to introduce all 110 of the students to some of the big questions addressed in a liberal arts education, and to show them how different disciplinary approaches to them complement each other. What can we know? How do we know what we know? What is a self? What is the relationship between the self and society? What is the relationship between the self and the natural world? These are the overarching questions that frame the course. Students read Plato, Peirce, Locke, Darwin, and some less canoni-

cal authors who model some approaches to these questions. Although it is not a literature course, it stresses the importance of the arts within the context of other modes of inquiry, and students write and revise frequent papers that rely on the kinds of close readings my students in literature courses also do.

“Human Dilemmas” is an immensely ambitious course and is notoriously difficult to teach, even with small class sizes that allow us to work closely with individual students. The texts are challenging and abstract; the students are in their first semester at college and are not all interested in epistemological uncertainty and Platonic metaphor; and often their papers read like high school papers: dutiful and disengaged. Because the students come from an extremely broad range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, the class can feel disjointed. After struggling through teaching it my first time, I was determined to try again and do it better. I was convinced that those big questions are inherently compelling, that the material was tough but rewarded close attention, and that this course could be a transformative experience for first-year students of any background. What seemed essential was to engage them from the very first day: to make the course feel more like a quest than a canon, to translate the questions into accessible language, to withhold some answers, to lend it a sense of adventure, and to keep it moving.

This involved a number of strategies, most of them pedagogical decisions aimed at engaging the students in multiple ways. I instituted a service-learning component to the seminar, with grant support from the AAC&U “Bringing Theory to Practice” program; I devised classroom activities that prevented them from sitting in the same seat every class and compelled them to interact and collaborate and talk about the readings in the context of their social identities and differences.

One strategy in particular had major consequences for the students’ final papers and for my assessment of them. Our campus has an unusual museum, the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, that actively seeks to engage students and faculty in and through the curriculum. The artist Dario Robleto was due to open a show there early that fall (2008). A catalogue was available ahead of time, and something about his work just seemed exactly right for the material in the seminar.<sup>7</sup> The curator, Ian Berry, was willing to give the students a preview of the show with a close look at several of the works, and Robleto was willing to meet with them when his show was opening. This felt like a leap of faith: I couldn’t be sure that the students would respond to the works, that the artist would connect with them, that the works would in fact seem as closely related to our topics as I thought—or that this experience would enhance their learning in any way. But there was something about those objects that I thought might speak directly to them, if they, as a class, could get past their shared resistance and skepticism. In particular, Robleto’s work uses highly charged objects from everyday life that he processes in various ways and then combines into artifacts that work both metaphorically and metonymically with a peculiar power. For example, he may grind human bones or vinyl LPs to a powder and then bind the powder so that he can sculpt objects. He may introduce “authentic” objects, the detritus of past wars

or personal events: bullet casings, letters, hair, objects from his family, uniform buttons. The artifacts' titles list their components, and read almost like poems. His works in this particular exhibition had a common thematic thread about war, its personal and societal costs and dilemmas. Robleto is unafraid of affect, and looks for an emotional response in the viewer. This quality, combined with the sheer originality, beauty and creepiness of his works, makes them immediately accessible.<sup>8</sup>

Taking Robleto's objects as a starting point, the final assignment for my seminar asked the students to create objects of their own, using both metaphor and metonymy to communicate about one of the dilemmas we had studied; they also wrote a paper documenting and analyzing their objects in the light of some of the texts we had read together. They were asked to "process" at least one of the components in a way that could be read metaphorically: to pulverize, cook, chew, weave, burn, dissolve, glue, or otherwise change it, and to read that change as a mental as well as physical process. They took this part of the assignment on with such enthusiasm that one of my challenges became to save some of their more precious objects—ancestral documents, old love letters and photographs—from being destroyed. My hope in writing this assignment was that working with objects that are intrinsically powerful to them would help them to understand in more vivid terms the abstractions that we had been grappling with in the readings. Further, I was gambling that Robleto's works are themselves so provocative, and the museum setting so dramatically *visual*, that many of them would step into that space with some excitement and energy that could translate to their work.

I'm describing this assignment at length in part because I took such pleasure in designing it: it was, for me, unorthodox, exploratory, risky—maybe even, in Blake's sense, Poetic. As for the students' projects, let me begin by describing one. Sergio Hernandez took a pair of his shoes, filled them with dirt mixed with dead leaves and various shredded materials, took them outside in the snow, and lit them on fire. He filmed the shoes burning on his cell phone, then created a PowerPoint file with the burning shoes and an Avril Lavigne soundtrack, her song "Innocence." Sergio, the son of Mexican migrant workers and an extremely bright, motivated student, had said once in class, "If you're Mexican, everyone assumes that you walked here." That sentence came back to me when I watched his shoes burning. These were shoes of his from high school; they did not have an extraordinary history, at least none that he told us about. But I knew that he felt already, after four months of college, that he had changed a lot, and that the readings we had done for our seminar had been unsettling for him (as for all the students). When he talked about the project, he said, "Shoes are like knowledge. You walk in them a way, and then they wear out and you move on to a new pair." His paper elaborates on that point, with a particular focus on epistemology and Charles Sanders Peirce.

Without dramatizing this point too much, I want to describe what it feels like to watch Sergio's shoes burning. Nothing about this film clip is captured well by the rubrics I have quoted above, but I do not know that I have ever

seen quite such a powerful piece of student work. What they call to mind is again from Blake:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
 In the forests of the night;  
 What immortal hand or eye,  
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry?  
 In what distant deeps or skies  
 Burnt the fire of thine eyes!  
 On what wings dare he aspire?  
 What the hand, dare sieze the fire? (24)

It is all but impossible for me to experience these lines the way I did when I first read them some forty years ago, but the *matter* of them here is still familiar. It's what Emily Dickinson means when she says that poetry is what takes the top of her head off.<sup>9</sup> And that image itself echoes Job 4.13-17: "Then a Spirit passed before my face: the hair of my flesh stood up...."<sup>10</sup> Morton Paley (546) quotes this passage from Job in his reading of "The Tyger," and goes on to comment on the sublime force of fire in this poem: "The destructive fire of Wrath is also the energy of purification.... Blake's furnace is a perpetual source of power for transforming a dead world" (550).<sup>11</sup> Because transformation also means loss, because a new world also means the loss of an old one, to look at this power squarely and acknowledge its force may be to fear it as much as to welcome it. Sergio's burning shoes, crackling with flames, posed in a slightly vulnerable way with one toe touching the other, can seem both terrifying and beautiful.

Sergio's artifact is not alone in conveying such intensity; the students were remarkably engaged in producing these objects, and they created some startling, eerie, thought-provoking artifacts. Zachary Peyser filled a milk bottle from his grandmother's farm with soil from his future grave site and surrounded it with a triptych of x-rays of his skull. Kristin Zhou, a first-generation Chinese-American, used a scale to "weigh" the relative importance of her two cultures, their currencies and their music, burning two CDs until they melted into one another at the overlap. Stephen Bissonnette made a paper boat out of his Selective Service letter and put in it a rosary and wallet that his great-grandparents had brought when they emigrated from Portugal. The students' papers were uneven, reflecting to some extent their varying pre-college preparation; but all of them represented profound engagement with some of the central issues in "Human Dilemmas." It seemed that the one point on that first rubric that did apply, universally, was "shows originality and creativity." For most, I would need to go further and add something like the "*Je ne sais quoi*" category, except that the phrase is too flip for the earnestness of the students' work, and the awe that I still feel looking at photographs of it. This project went well beyond a "certain something" in the students' creativity; they were looking backward at who they had been, and forward at who they were becoming, in a way that seemed urgent to them.

And all of this feels inadequate as a description, because I cannot capture the way that the project culminated a semester of challenging readings, discussions that were sometimes uncomfortable, many moments of resistance or unhappiness, much slapdash work and skepticism, and occasional glimpses, revelations, of how it all fit together in their minds. That context is essential to understanding and conveying what is at work, for example, in the pair of burning shoes. Recent scholarship on contexts and their role in rubrics and assessment provides a conceptual framework for understanding just how essential—but also complex—contexts are. When, for example, a student who is bi-cultural and for whom English is a second language is struggling to express herself, her “errors,” in the context of this assignment, can also be read as signs of her lived experience, her courage and her progress. In a sense, each student’s context requires—and to some extent surely receives from the faculty, even if we have trouble articulating it—a private rubric that parallels the public one.<sup>12</sup>

In part because this assignment was as foreign to me as it was to my students, I created a rubric for it and distributed it beforehand. They had seemed puzzled by the assignment, nervous about how it would be graded, and hesitant to launch into it, and I thought a rubric would reassure them that the assignment was indeed to be taken at its word. At the same time, I didn’t know what to expect from them, and was charting new territory myself (see fig. 3). It did prove to be immensely useful when I evaluated the students’ projects and papers.

Your projects will be evaluated according to the following criteria. In each case, the possible answers are: very well; well; somewhat; not very well; not at all.

I. Objects

1. How well does the object express the dilemma it is meant to represent?
2. How well does it incorporate materials from different sources that embody aspects of that dilemma in your life?
3. How well does it present materials that have been processed in a way that is metaphorically suggestive?
4. How well do the elements of the object come together into a whole?
5. How well do the object and the dilemma it embodies relate to concepts we have studied in the course?

II. Commentaries

1. How well does the commentary explain the object and its representation of a dilemma?
2. How well does it describe the processes used to create it, including any metaphors or metonymies?
3. How well does the commentary draw connections between this particular dilemma and each of the readings that it integrates?
4. How well does the commentary draw connections to your own life?
5. How clearly and effectively is the commentary written?

III. Grading

Work that earns a grade in the A range will be marked “very well” in most cases above. “Well” translates to the B range; “Somewhat” to the C range, etc. This evaluation is an inexact science. The categories above are not equally weighted. Most important are: conceptual richness and clarity; connections to the readings; and creative thought.

Fig. 3. Rubric evaluating the Museum of Dilemmas projects, Sarah Webster Goodwin, date unknown.

If I had at hand a rubric on assignments, to assess how well they serve students' learning, I would check the boxes saying that this assignment clearly served the students' engagement, reflection, and sense of intellectual community. Their papers lacked the polish and shape of the conventional, revised expository essay, but they were rich in some qualities that ranked high in this particular course: the ability to draw connections among the readings and concepts, and to see how the abstract issues we were considering manifest themselves in our actual lives. To use Blake's phrase, the work they did, and my experience of it, were about as far from the "same dull round" of the classroom as I can imagine. The rubric, in this instance, emphasized creativity and the specific processes within which they would have considerable freedom. In doing this, and in assuring the students that the assignment was to be taken seriously in every detail, and that I would be looking closely at their work, the rubric seems to have freed them to do extraordinary things.

Crucial to the success of this culminating assignment were several factors. The students had the opportunity to meet the artist, and Dario Robleto's passion, affability, genuine interest in them, and generosity in talking about his works and his life gave them the chance to feel like insiders in the museum and to understand the full scope of Robleto's ambition. His works are inherently powerful because of the materials he uses: he represents extremes of life and death and emotions. All of this helped to engage the students. But I also think an important factor was my own excited uneasiness about the assignment. It took me into new terrain, and I even found myself wishing I could do it myself. The project, I insisted to the students, was not a work of art and would not be evaluated as one; with its accompanying paper, it was both a visual and a verbal conceptual response to Robleto's works and our readings. My own sense that this assignment was a risk and that a lot was at stake provided an important part of the context for them. They were responding not only to Robleto and the readings, but to me, and their work taught me to take more seriously the ways that the dialogue between teacher and student informs their work. If there was a rubric that faculty could use to assess their assignments, here are some things that might be on it:

1. The topic is engaging for the faculty member as well as the students.
2. The topic leads the students to take risks, to learn some new concepts and to synthesize familiar ones.
3. The topic has a certain *je ne sais quoi*. And most importantly,
4. The topic continues the dialogue between the teacher and the students in ways that are not fully scripted, channeled or contained.

## Dialogue, Innocence and Experience

### Nurse's Song

When the voices of children are heard on the green  
 And laughing is heard on the hill,  
 My heart is at rest within my breast  
 And everything else is still

Then come home my children, the sun is gone down  
 And the dews of night arise  
 Come come leave off play, and let us away  
 Till the morning appears in the skies

No no let us play, for it is yet day  
 And we cannot go to sleep  
 Besides in the sky, the little birds fly  
 And the hills are all covered with sheep

Well well go & play till the light fades away  
 And then go home to bed  
 The little ones leaped & shouted & laugh'd  
 And all the hills ecchoed

William Blake, *Songs of Innocence* (15)

If we read this poem as a scene of instruction, as many of Blake's *Songs* are, it seems to offer a benign view of teaching, a sort of "Summerhill" pedagogy, child-centered, flexible, and communal. These children are a long way from putting pen to paper, and the Nurse is an even longer way from designing a rubric to describe her expectations of their learning. In the world of this poem, no one is worried about whether the village school will meet the state standards, nor whether these children will find jobs when they graduate or be able to perform adequately in them if they do. And yet I would argue that the poem—especially in the context of Blake's work as a whole, which allows us to extend our interpretation pretty far—offers a real and feasible model for the classroom and a way to make room for sublime learning.

Summarized briefly, the pedagogical reading of this poem might look like this: The Nurse possesses adult knowledge—of night, of time, of death, and of everything that they import into the world of the poem; she knows that the children need to learn these things. But when she instructs them, she also listens to their response, and she learns something even more capacious from them: that they, and she, are part of larger natural cycles that can become a source of even greater knowledge and understanding. The poem presents two kinds of sublime knowledge: the terrifying one, and a reassuring one. Ending as it does on the idea of echo, in which Nurse, children, sheep and hills all

echo each other, and in which the poem's own rhymes seem to extend into our reading space, this *Nurse's Song* emphasizes reciprocity, dialogue, learning as a mutually reinforcing undertaking. With those qualities, our collective learning reaches to the farthest point: an understanding and acceptance of our human constraints, and a celebration of the ways that we can escape the "same dull round." Blake presents an alternative scene of instruction in the "Nurse's Song" from *Experience*, and in it he suggests that without those qualities of dialogue and reciprocity, we have no resources to face human losses and our fear of death:

Then come home my children, the sun is gone down  
And the dews of night arise  
Your spring & your day, are wasted in play  
And your winter and night in disguise. (23)

This Nurse speaks essentially to herself, and from the children she hears "whisperings" rather than shouts of joy. The affect is all negative and inward-turning. I would venture to say that every teacher has moments like hers in the classroom, when we blame the students for their ignorance, silently envy them their youth, and distrust them in fundamental ways. We probably all carry both models of teaching within us, along with others. What we may not do, though, is consider what is at stake if we do not open ourselves to the kind of learning Blake is talking about.<sup>13</sup>

We want our students not only to produce facsimiles of "good writing," but to be "engaged." This means that they are willing to work hard, and also that they care about the work: that they have positive affect—that they experience joy. And perhaps also that they have opportunities to express negative affect, candidly, as part of the planned, anticipated learning experience. In these two poems, Blake suggests that our pedagogical thinking may start from one place (the poems share three lines), and then reach a fork: in one direction lie open and honest exchange, a transformation on both sides, shared pleasure, and a point that touches our deepest longing, our wish for our learning to be meaningful in the face of death. In the other direction lie "disguise," a perpetuation of roles and constraints, isolation, and an inability to touch together the core of what matters.

In an actual classroom, we can't approach sublime learning every Monday, Wednesday and Friday; if we did, it would become the "same dull round." But I believe that my best teaching, and my students' best learning, happens when I sense an openness in the students, and they in me, and we go to an edge and peer over it.

Not only isn't there a stable rubric for this kind of learning, it is singularly difficult to measure. When does measurement offer a clarifying and liberating constraint, a usefully defining boundary, and when does it prevent us from escaping the machinery of the quotidian? What does this escape look like, when it happens? We may not be able to define it in advance, precisely because it pushes beyond what is known. "Known" is a relative term: we feel our stu-

dents' exhilaration when their conscious knowledge expands, when they are working at the edge of what they can articulate. It may involve paradox, taboo, conflict; it may elude logic and be expressed best by metaphor or metonymy; it may be tentative, contingent, fleeting. When it happens in our students, it has usually happened in us at about the same time: a risk, a discovery, something we didn't know before. It may be more likely to happen if we invite it, by putting it on the rubric.

### **Assessment**

How much of this dimension of the rubric in the classroom translates to the scene of programmatic assessment? The challenge here is one of scale: if the scene of instruction in "Nurse's Song" has just one adult and a handful of children, can it be scaled up to the size of a department, a college, a university? I would propose that all of the conclusions above about rubrics in the classroom hold as well for the larger project of assessment.

In brief: assessment rubrics that are based on clear and visible goals for student learning serve the democratic and liberating function of a liberal arts education by clarifying for *all* constituents what that education is about and how the student can expect to be transformed. Assessment rubrics have their limitations: they may encourage us to overlook qualities in student work that are not on the rubric but that we do or could value; we need to build in ways to counteract this. Dialogue is essential to the creation of rubrics and assessment processes: among faculty, between faculty and students, between disciplines, even between campus constituencies and alumnae. The process of deciding what it matters to learn is ongoing and communal, and it responds to local contingencies and to shifts over time.<sup>14</sup> Like any rubric, those used for assessment are themselves subject to evaluation; this is part of the dialogue. And finally, rubrics may work best if they do not play it too safe. Assessments should and must bring faculty to reconsider some sacred cows. Should affect, for example, have a larger role in what we hope our students will learn? In addition to analytic acumen and proficiency in writing, should they learn to communicate visually? Do we have the courage to say that we aim for our students to be able to communicate effectively across racial identities, and to develop the pedagogies that make that possible? What are the most ambitious goals of a liberal arts education? Ambition has a place in every assessment rubric, and that may mean ferreting out unspoken assumptions and talking through strenuous differences.

If we undertake the shaping of the assessment rubric in a creative spirit, and with an ear to the ground, we may find ourselves rethinking what we want our students to learn and how they are most likely to do that. As the new Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubric for "Creative Thinking" says, the highest level of creative thinking yields work that "[a]ctively seeks out and follows through on untested and potentially risky directions or approaches ..." and work that "[t]ransforms ideas or solutions into entirely new forms" (Rhodes 27). We should ask this of our students, and of ourselves: if the rubric can help the teacher learn, as well as the student,

and if it can take both to the outer edge of our understanding, it will have a Prophetic or Poetic character. As Blake wrote, “Reason or the ratio of all we have already known is not the same that it shall be when we know more.”

## NOTES

- 1 All quotations from Blake are from the Erdman edition and use Blake’s eccentric spellings and punctuation.
- 2 See Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*, 113 and *passim*.
- 3 For an elaboration of this concept of sublime learning with an emphasis on the cognitive and affective processes the learner undergoes, see Donna Heiland’s essay in this volume.
- 4 Blake wrote of a kind of dialectic between the “Prolific” and the “Devouring,” mutually dependent beings or forces of creativity and consumption: “Thus one portion of being, is the Prolific, the other, the Devouring: to the devourer it seems as if the producer was in his chains, but it is not so, he only takes portions of existence and fancies that the whole. But the Prolific would cease to be Prolific unless the Devourer as a sea received the excess of his delights” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 39).
- 5 According to Broad, “And thus was born what became the standard, traditional, five-point rubric, by some version of which nearly every large-scale assessment of writing since 1961 has been strictly guided” (6).
- 6 Or, as Grant Wiggins has put it: “A liberal arts assessment system has to be based on known, clear, public, non-arbitrary standards, and criteria. There is no conceivable way for the student to be empowered and to become a masterful liberal artist if the criteria and standards are not known in advance. The student is kept fundamentally off-balance, intellectually and morally, if the professor has a secret test and secret scoring criteria.”
- 7 See Berry, ed., *Dario Robleto: Alloy of Love* for more information on the exhibition.
- 8 To view some of his works, see the selected pieces on the D’Amelio Terras Gallery website.
- 9 “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry.” Reported by T. W. Higginson in an undated letter to his wife (Halio 41).
- 10 Quoted by Paley (546), no edition given, but the text is from the King James version.
- 11 As Paley also notes (550), Blake illustrated this sentence on plate 9 of his illuminated *Book of Job*. For Paley, in this poem, printed in 1793, Blake is in some sense justifying the terror of the French Revolution. But it is clearly more than a simple allegory; it is a scene of sublime learning.
- 12 See also Huot and Williamson, “Rethinking Portfolios for Evaluating Writing: Issues of Assessment and Power,” and Ball, “Expanding the Dialogue on Culture as a Critical Component When Assessing Writing.”

- 13 My reading of these poems is indebted to Heather Glen's classic book, where she notes the way the "Nurse's Song" from *Innocence* is a dialogue in which both the children and the nurse listen to and echo each other (19-23). For more on how Blake's *Songs* embodied critiques of contemporary pedagogies, see Richardson.
- 14 See Morgaine's "Developing Rubrics: Lessons Learned," in Rhodes (11-14).

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## BIOGRAPHY

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