

# The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading

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## Introduction

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, there has been more widespread attention to grading practices than ever before. Schools nationwide adjusted their approaches to grading, including their grading scales and procedures. Many postsecondary institutions, in particular, gave students a great deal of choice regarding how they would be assessed. Students could choose, for example, whether they wanted to receive a letter grade or take their courses on a pass/fail basis. At some institutions, students could view their letter grades first and then make this choice, giving students maximum flexibility. Students were also given more time to withdraw from courses with limited or no consequences, and some institutions even invented new grading protocols wherein grades were accompanied by a specific marker that reminds anyone reviewing that academic transcript that those courses were taken during the pandemic.

I am not suggesting that this heightened attention to grading was an outgrowth of deep and prolonged engagement with the research and scholarship on grading practices. It was, instead, a very pragmatic response to a pandemic that posed a range of challenges for students and disproportionately so for students of color. Still, this was a moment wherein grading—on perhaps the largest scale we can imagine—ceased to be taken for granted. The status quo was disrupted. Of course, those in education, writing studies, educational psychology, and other

fields have never taken grading for granted. Studying assessment practices has always been an important part of the research and scholarship in these fields. By the time this manuscript is published, grading practices will likely have reverted to their seemingly unproblematic pre-pandemic status. I would hope, though, that the complexities associated with grading (both on this large scale and at the more local level in our classrooms) exposed by the pandemic might lead to some change, particularly when considered alongside the systemic racism embedded across institutions in the United States that the pandemic also underscored and exacerbated.

With racial disparities at the forefront of Americans' minds, and further magnified by the murder of George Floyd in the early months of the pandemic, many instructors, including those at the postsecondary level, found themselves reflecting on their role in perpetuating these injustices. Although antiracist pedagogy is not without its detractors, many postsecondary instructors across the country began committing themselves to becoming antiracist educators who deliberately sought to dismantle the educational structures that contributed to racism. Part of this work involved revisiting and revising their assessment practices.

One form of assessment that emerged well before 2020 but gained much more traction in light of the spotlight on racial disparities in American culture is labor-based contract grading. This form of assessment has been popularized most consistently and recently by scholar-teacher Asao Inoue, who has been an invaluable leader in writing studies as the field contends with grading practices that perpetuate a single, dominant standard. Inoue and others, including Wonderful Faison, Carmen Kynard, Mya Poe, and Vershawn Ashanti Young have pointed out how these and related pedagogical practices can impede

learning and are disproportionately harmful to students of color and raciolinguistically diverse students. This population of students is especially important to me as I teach and direct a writing program at a campus where 48 percent of students identify as students of color and 51 percent report being first-generation college students. While the campus does not have statistics on the linguistic diversity of students, in my own experience teaching at the institution for close to fifteen years, I would say that at least 50 percent of students in each class that I teach speak a language other than English. Over the years, those languages have included Spanish, Russian, Albanian, and Farsi with an increasing number of students who speak Chinese. As such, these discussions surrounding how assessment practices affect racially and linguistically diverse students are especially relevant to my own teaching. In fact, my commitment to this population of students compelled me to enter this discussion. In particular, I am invested in contributing to the already rich conversation about labor-based contract grading, a form of assessment that has now been adopted by instructors across the country.

I was also moved to enter this conversation because of Inoue's openness in Chapter 6 of *Labor-Based Contract Grading: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom* to critiques and questions about labor-based contract grading. Inoue (2019, 18) describes the chapter as a "kind of FAQ" that "contains fourteen questions concerning the use of labor-based grading contracts . . . gathered from various teachers and others from across the US and on the WPA-L [Writing Program Administrators' Listserv]." In that chapter, Inoue (2019) welcomes opportunities to improve his assessment practices so that they are informed by scholarship in disability studies. Inoue (2019, 228) notes that "a good assessment ecology, one that is socially just in every way, should be self-consciously

designed to meet the principles of universal design.” Moreover, he admits that “in terms of the scholarship and impressive work being done around UDL [Universal Design for Learning] and disability studies, I am still learning and perhaps most excited about ways it may help improve labor-based grading contracts. I feel I have a lot to learn and perhaps to alter in my own practices” (229). This essay takes Inoue’s call seriously, picking up this thread in order to explore—through a disability studies lens—some of the shortcomings in current iterations of labor-based grading contracts, which Inoue seems to anticipate above.

The goal of this extended essay is to further enrich the conversation surrounding labor-based contract grading by expanding its scope. To do so, I explore some of the assumptions inherent in labor-based contract grading and highlight the groups of students, including students with disabilities and students that are twice or more marginalized, that remain disadvantaged by this increasingly popular assessment practice. Specifically, I draw on the field of disability studies, recognizing that “disability enables insight—critical, experiential, cognitive, sensory, and pedagogical insight” (Brueggeman 2001, 795). I will suggest some avenues those of us in writing studies might pursue, such as developing engagement-based grading contracts, in order to address the shortcomings I outline surrounding labor-based contract grading. In keeping with the approach of its predecessors in the series, though, this essay will primarily define, describe, and consider the implications of these problems.

Arguing for assessment practices that address the growing number of students with physical disabilities, as well as students with neurodivergent conditions, including anxiety and depression, this essay contributes to efforts toward creating more equitable assessment practices in our classrooms. Ultimately, there is important research to be done on grading contracts, and it

can't come soon enough. Indebted to those who have looked at this issue from the perspective of racial formations, this essay explores the nonracially motivated standards and biases that are exposed when we take a closer look at labor-based grading contracts.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF CONTRACT GRADING

According to “A Legacy of Grading Contracts for Composition,” Michelle Cowan’s (2020) incredibly comprehensive, century-long history and examination of grading contracts, this form of assessment been used in classrooms since the 1920s. However, it was in the 1960s and 1970s that we begin to see an increase in the number of articles on grading contracts—or what were then often called learning contracts. Most articles on the subject were published in the field of education (both secondary and postsecondary), but in the developing field of composition, Peter Elbow emerged as a pioneer, publishing “A Method for Teaching English” in 1968. Elbow’s article outlines an approach to including students in both the development of the curriculum and in assessment practices. The kinds of contracts described in scholarship from this period varied widely with some scholar-teachers reporting their development of full-class contracts and many others focused on individualized contracts meant to promote self-directed learning. The ways in which students contributed to these contracts also varied: in some cases, students were involved in the creation and negotiation of the contracts while in other cases instructors developed the contracts independently of input from students. While instructors reported different reasons for adopting learning contracts, Cowan points out that many instructors were compelled by their investment in seeking fairer and more transparent forms

of assessment. Some teacher-scholars, like Elbow, were looking for ways to circumvent traditional grading altogether.

Although contracts continued to vary widely, as they do today, with the rise of the process movement in the field of composition over the next two decades, contracts often reflected an emphasis on practicality, and, in writing courses specifically, focused on students' goals and processes rather than their products (Cowan). It's not until the 1990s that instructors began to consistently and deliberately situate these contracts as "instruments of emancipation" (Cowan) and a means to more socially just and anti-oppressive teaching and grading practices. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, this approach to assessment began coalescing into a form we would recognize today with three major categories of grading contracts: contracts based on the quality of students' work; contracts based on the labor students expended to complete the work; and hybrid contracts that value both labor and quality.

In this essay, I am interested in considering labor-based grading contracts specifically, and the role they are intended to play in creating more socially just forms of assessment. While writing within the contemporary moment does not afford me the perspective Cowan was afforded in her historical study of this assessment practice, I have become concerned with how labor-based grading contracts, which are intended to promote equality and social justice, unintentionally privilege some students over others. This project seeks to draw others' attention to this issue and encourages instructors, both within and beyond writing studies—and even beyond the humanities—to create assessments that recognize students' intersectional identities and are inclusive of students with various disabilities.