



## Empathy, Inclusion, and Reciprocity in the Writing Classroom

### *Perspectives on Labor-Based Grading Contracts*

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Drawing in Inoue (2019), a labor-based grading contract is an assessment practice that does not assign grades to students' individual assignments or activities. Instead, students consider choices in their writing based on frequent feedback they receive from their instructor and peers. Students' final course grade is determined by the amount of labor they are willing and able to do throughout the semester, and this final course grade is the only grade students receive.

Labor-based grading contracts create the space for empathy, inclusion, and reciprocity in my writing classrooms. In my courses, I take an anti-racist approach to teaching and assessment by centering students' experiences and perspectives and collaboratively drawing on those experiences and perspectives as a lens to study and practice writing rhetorically. I find that there is deep learning and growth that happens when no grade is attached to the individual work students do. For example, I am able to work with students to investigate their "language attitudes" (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 11) in relation to their writing experiences and build on those attitudes to support students in making intentional rhetorical choices in their work. For me, teaching and assessing are also

more meaningful because I get to engage with students about their writing goals and steps they might take to achieve those goals in a way that is not impeded by grades.

How I assess students tells them what I value, so involving them in their own assessment helps build reciprocity and trust in the classroom. Labor-based grading contracts allow me to put emphasis on the labor students are willing and able to do and not on the quality of their work; I find this to be an empathetic and inclusive assessment practice. Grades tend to hinder productivity because students might be more concerned with improving their grade than taking risks with their work and challenging themselves as thinkers and writers.

### Student Comments

In my WRT 2060 Introduction to Writing Studies course, a fully online writing intensive course with synchronous meetings once a week, some students had the following to say about their experience with our labor-based grading contract:

- “For the time, I was not worried about my writing in the sense of conforming to white mainstream English. For the first time, I felt liberated and open to expressing my ideas in my own ways and voice. It gave me the freedom and tools to think outside of the box and not worry about meeting the expectations of a rubric.”
- “I must admit, the prospect of labor-based contract grading at the beginning of the semester seemed terrifying and uncomfortable. However, as the semester went on, I found myself not even caring about grades simply because there were none to care about. That, I think, made me appreciate commentary even more because the focus really was on my specific choices and strategies that were effective instead of a letter that represented my abilities in general.”
- “It is kind of funny because there was an element about just trying your best and not worrying about a grade at the end. Inevitably though there is a grade at the end of this, there has to be. So even though I know I was doing my best I was still nervous that there was not a tangible grade in front of my face. This is a result of grades almost always seeming to be-all-end-all. If you are ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ it normally reflects within your ‘grade.’ Not having this security net was alarming, yet productive. Putting in the work is what will get that ‘A grade,’ and you have to trust in that.”
- “Honestly, at the beginning of the semester I didn’t fully grasp what the labor-based contract grading system was going to be like. But when I started to do assignments for this class, I wasn’t afraid to speak my mind or even say what was on my mind. I felt that this grading system didn’t penalize me for expressing what I thought or believed in. That this class was a way to express myself and share my ideas. Labor-based contract grading made me feel that my contribution to any of the assignments were enough because I put in the effort and I was able

to express my ideas and thoughts. I wish more classes had this approach to grading because it gives students less anxiety and the room to express themselves without getting penalized for it.”

## Conclusion

It is important to note that while labor-based grading contracts create opportunities for instructors to practice a more equitable and inclusive form of assessment, this assessment practice is not inherently anti-racist. In other words instructors must have an anti-racist orientation to teaching (Inoue, 2019) for labor-based grading contracts to be anti-racist. It is also important to keep in mind that students have intersectional identities, so they will not all labor in the same ways (Carrillo, 2021). Some students will spend more time and effort in their laboring for the class, so the concept of “labor” needs to be critically considered so that some students are not placed at a disadvantage because of factors that are out of their control. Finally, learning management systems are not designed with ungrading practices in mind, so [working closely with e-LIS](#) early in the process to set up a gradeless class is vital.

## References and Resources

Baker-Bell, A. (2020). Dismantling anti-black linguistic racism in English language arts classrooms: Toward an anti-racist black language pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice*, 59(1), 8-21.

Carrillo, E. C. (2021). *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading*. University Press of Colorado.

Inoue, A. B. (2019). *Labor-based grading contracts: Building equity and inclusion in the compassionate writing classroom*. Fort Collins, CO: WAC Clearinghouse.

## About the Author

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