CHAPTER 16.

ITERATIVE PROCESSES FOR ALL: REWARDS AND RISKS IN CONTRACT GRADING

Shawn Bowers and Jennifer Smith Daniel
Queens University of Charlotte

In this chapter, the authors describe **contract grading** *used in online, real-time learning. Specifically, the authors explain contract grading as a practice which can be adapted to asynchronous online learning and hybrid learning contexts with particular attention to honoring students' processes, engagement, and labor. In describing their "better practice," this chapter addresses the themes of accessibility and assessment.*

FRAMEWORKS AND PRINCIPLES IN THIS CHAPTER

- **Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Engagement**: A sense of investment and involvement in learning.
- **Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, Creativity**: The ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas.
- **GSOLE 3.1**: Instructors should be familiar with online instructional delivery practices to ensure the same level and hours of instruction across all OLI settings.

GUIDING QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU BEGIN READING

- How would your pedagogy change if you cultivated a "beginner's mind" in regards to grading practices?
- Outside of institutional constraints, what additional concerns does ungrading bring up for you given your experience with grades as a student? As an instructor?
- What models of ungrading are you familiar with? What might a starting place be to implement ungrading in your curricular, instructional, and assessment practices?

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- What challenges do you think ungrading could solve? What challenges do you think it could create?

INTRODUCTION

Ideas have a habit of floating around and landing in opportune moments.

We first began to pay closer attention to inequities in grading with Dr. Asao Inoue's keynote address at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in Pittsburgh (2019). Well, we'd both been teaching for a decade and knew that grading was a flawed system, but something about the "call-ins" to dismantle racism in the classroom from Dr. Inoue's keynote and, again, from Dr. Vershawn Young's CCCC Chair's Speech (2021) lodged themselves into our consciousness.

Specifically, Young and Inoue's naming of our complicity—that is, complicity in a system built on White language supremacy—made us uncomfortable enough to check our own practices. To answer these "call-ins," we investigated ungrading as a way to address a curricular, instructional, and assessment ecosystem that sets students up to fail in many ways, especially given the hegemonic systems that privilege certain literacy practices over others.

Ungrading is an approach that shifts away from subjective summary judgment by removing traditional letter and numeric grades from assessment of the artifact to focus feedback on the process (Blum, 2020). Then came the pandemic, which drove us to triage our classes for the spring semester. It is important to note that the call-ins were the exigence for the shift, not the conditions brought on by emergency remote teaching during the pandemic. Fortuitously, we had both chosen to take advantage of a professional development opportunity through our institution in the summer of 2020 to reflect and to revise our course designs with intentionality; in particular, we began with some reflection in order to understand who our students were and what knowledge(s) they brought with them into the classroom. We can imagine that it seems obvious that as instructors we would start with what our students know. What we learned in our workshop was that we made a lot of assumptions about their previous classroom experiences. This workshop stopped us short, calling us back to the "beginner's mind" and inducing us to shed our preconceptions (Hartman, 2022). The concept of the beginner's mind draws on Buddhist philosophy which invites introspection from the perspective of the novice and not the expert. In short, the beginner's mind asks us to operate from the abundance of possibility. After a decade of teaching, we fell into the myth of what a first-year student would know about writing, even as they are new to the ecology of the college classroom. In typical academic fashion, it was another year before we were able to act on our ideas yet began to do so in the summer semester of 2021.

Moving from theory to practice was the biggest leap. At the level of theory, we had to get comfortable with this radical idea—that ungrading was a more equitable model of assessment, and that we needed to use it. At the level of practice, we simply had to carve out the time, space, and energy to revise our pedagogy. As the universe would have it, we had signed on to teach in a learning community together that next summer, 2021—two paired courses for the same students that would be delivered as online, any time learning. These were the ideal conditions to take our conversations from the drawing board to the classroom; that summer, we piloted a model of ungrading in two introductory level writing courses. We can admit that we didn't quite feel ready yet had that precise constellation of circumstances—the speeches echoing in our minds, the pandemic-induced remote teaching, the collaboration on our learning community courses—not presented itself, we likely would still be talking about ungrading instead of actually doing it. What we offer here is our thought process as we moved ungrading into online, any time classroom.

Thus, in the summer of 2021, we used a contract grading model and a portfolio model in lieu of traditional grading.

As noted above, our institution pairs courses, thematically, to form learning communities as the central delivery method of the general education program, which also houses the first-year composition (FYC) program. Because of the pandemic conditions at the time, these courses were delivered exclusively online in the summer of 2021; also, because we needed to anticipate challenges such as students in different time zones, we opted to deliver the courses as online, any time learning. The experience was rewarding, and it gave us some space to fully lean into this new way of supporting student writers that felt more equitable and pedagogically-driven instead of assessment-driven. Ungrading is pedagogically-driven because it centers ongoing formative feedback over summative grades; moreover, it is equitable as it accounts for a student's learning development. The arbitrary grading scale positions students to learn strategically and to minimize risk-taking. In courses that underscore the creative, recursive nature of writing, traditional grading methods discourage student engagement.

Additionally, we were fortunate enough to have low enrollment in our courses, so we were afforded the time and space to pay close attention to students' reactions (and our own) regarding this new way of assessing writing. We note that here to describe the context for our summer course, and understand that not all instructors—especially those who are contingent faculty—have such a luxury.

The modality of the learning community gave us an opportunity to test and develop this new-to-us grading system, which helped us explicitly signal to students that—as teachers of writing—what we value is a revision process informed by a student's curiosity about their ideas and their ability to use language to

communicate those ideas. The specific ungrading practices described in this chapter—contract grading and portfolios—began first as an attempt to develop better practices for online teaching although we later adapted ungrading pedagogies beyond this modality. Because we were already committed to redesigning this course, we decided to "go for it" on ungrading, too, exploring the opportunity to collaboratively rethink our courses from all angles.

In this deliberate move away from traditional grading models, we hoped for a space where students would feel emboldened to write for themselves and not perform as a "good student" for a grade—a grade that is predicated on a constructed idea of what qualifies as good writing. Put differently, the evaluation of writing (whether it is formative or summative feedback) is subjective to the biases and perspectives of the grader, which is in turn informed by culture, social location, and the myriad identities we carry with us. Because many writing instructors hold privileged identities, we grade from our privileged habitus, as Inoue, Young, and others suggest. The concept of habitus we are using here is based on the ideas of the French sociologist, Pierre Bordieu. Habitus as theorized by Bordieu "is a 'system of dispositions' or acquired patterns of thought, behavior, and taste that correspond to social position" (Beare & Stenberg, 2020, p. 105). In other words, our own positionalities, which have been externally conditioned, inform how we show up in the classroom. Same for students.

Any time you move from "this is how we've always done it," there will be unease. Still, we find this approach a far better way to assess student learning because it shifts the emphasis from the grades to the students' engagement in the course. We do not claim this shift to be only embraced as a student-centered pedagogy. In fact, it is as much a teacher-centered move. We see this shift as akin to Christina Cedillo and Phil Bratta's (2019) assertions that "[t]here are times when centering the teacher's experience may contribute to a student-centered pedagogy" (p. 216). Logically, it seems to us that if instructors have negative feelings towards grading using the current model, those feelings are more apt to show up in the evaluation process.

Put another way, what makes a good student for one instructor may not always translate to other instructors, leaving students to strategically enact a performative stance for every course context. If a student matriculates as a multiply marginalized learner in a system not built to value their literacy practices, then they are at a disadvantage for navigating education in its current state. Simply put, it is unlikely they are aware of all the tacit rules that higher education has deemed "good writing" (i.e., using Standard American English). All of these factors reinforce the idea that ungrading is a "better practice" in the teaching of writing, especially in our online, any time context.

So, after two years of ungrading, we've adopted this approach in other courses and cannot imagine going back. Even on hard days, when we find a student expressing their intense discomfort with ungrading, we remember the same angsty feeling that other students expressed from our first iteration of ungrading; coincidentally, this is the same angsty feeling we had initially. We then rest in the knowledge that growth can often come from uncertainty. Writing has taught us that uncertainty leads to growth; now ungrading is teaching us again.

CONTRACT GRADING

Contract grading, as one specific practice of ungrading, shifts the focus from the evaluation of some unattainable standard to focus on and assess the ways students pursue deep learning. Other forms include the aforementioned portfolios, specs grading, self-assessment to name a few (Blum, 2020). Susan Blum (2020) states "Grading contracts convey expectations about what is required for each potential grade . . . Students work toward the grade they want to achieve, and goalposts don't unexpectedly shift" (p. 38). We patterned our own contract grading after Inoue's (2019) "kind of grading contract, one that calculates final course grades purely by the labor students complete, not by any judgments of the quality of their writing" (*Labor-Based Grading Contracts,* p. 3).

We see ungrading as an opportunity to ameliorate some of the ways students feel judged and, occasionally and unfortunately, shamed for their writing. These strong emotions hinder the ability for students to develop impressionistic thinking. Barbara Bird (2012), advancing the work of Charles Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia, asserts that one criterion for developing deep thinking habits is through impressionistic thinking, defined as "an emotional commitment to what is being learned" (p. 2). Students who feel a sense of embarrassment about their writing are unlikely to commit to learning about writing or being a writer.

For our courses, we chose to use contract grading to invite students to see the value in an iterative process of drafting and revising their writing. By unhitching grades from writing feedback and assessment, we hoped to offer students an environment that honors their process of learning. In courses that center writing processes, contract grading asks students to claim some ownership of their work by taking risks, framing mistakes as learning outposts, and valuing students' efforts. That effort varies by student, and is informed by students' own learning goals such as using feedback more effectively. Moreover, it encourages students to develop metacognitive skills to consider how their writing choices influence the effectiveness of their writing and its purpose.

This approach matters to us because we believe that "to educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn" (hooks, 1994, p.

13). Our university, a predominantly White institution, has seen record growth in Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and first-generation students, which reflects the national shift in student demographics in higher education (Hanson, 2021). Old practices that reinforce Paulo Freire's conception of the "banking model" (Freire, 2014) and the current bureaucracy of our educational system's myopic focus on assessment do not always account for the divergent literacies that are now part of our landscape. Contract grading, with its expressed focus on engagement and effort, can provide more access to more students to demonstrate learning.

Performance to Action: GSOLE & Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing

This framing of education's purpose is our call to practice what we believe with intentional pedagogies that challenge us to move from ideation to action. Furthermore, intentionality is an essential consideration for teaching in any modality. One such resource that advises our work is GSOLE's *Online Literacy Instruction Principles and Tenets* (2019). The third tenet, which affirms "iterative processes of course and instructional material design, development, assessment, and revision" speaks to our approach (n.d., OLI Principle 3). These iterative processes are imperative for the sake of ethical course design.

The world is different; our students are different. As instructors, it is our duty to adapt our pedagogies to meet the students where they are and with the variety of knowledge that they bring to the learning space. Teaching online took us out of the "muscle memory" of in-person, real-time learning, such as our reliance on a well-timed student question for clarifying our instructions or reminding them of a deadline. Teaching this ungrading practice in an online, any time learning environment necessitated that we thoughtfully considered every aspect of the communications that we shared with the students. We had to repeatedly check in with ourselves, each other, and our students to ensure that we weren't just cramming old lessons into a new format. Ungrading provided the added benefit of keeping us anchored in these new (to us) ways of teaching without the crutch of verbal clarification. We approached this class with an intentional pedagogy informed particularly by GSOLE's third principle as it helped us attend to the rhetorical situation of the asynchronous online course; by necessity, such courses are mediated by written text, course materials, the learning management system (LMS), and students' prior experiences with writing courses. Having a beginner's mindset with both the practice of ungrading and the new course modality kept us accountable for being explicit in our teaching.

Both contract grading and the third tenet of GSOLE are infused with the practice of revision. Not only do the students need to revise to get their best work—we as instructors need to revise our practices, too. Contract grading offered students a tangible signal to invest in the revision process; the third tenet offered in GSOLE's framework gave us a tangible guide for teaching well in an online space that was newer to us. In order to ensure we didn't create more labor for students by having them decipher our tacit expectations, we had to be quite explicit about the purpose of the course, the assignments, and how we intended students to engage. For example, our assignment guidelines became lengthier as we articulated our expectations explicitly. While this tenet was written as a framework for online modalities, frankly, we find it to just be an ethical practice in any modality to commit to "iterative processes that develop, revise, and refine all aspects of teaching and tutoring to include pedagogy" (Global Society of Online Literacy Educators, 2019).

Furthermore, the GSOLE principle cultivates useful transferable skills that extend not just to other classes but to working environments as well and aligns nicely with the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (2011) developed by National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), Writing Program Administrators (WPA), and National Writing Project (NWP). This framework focuses on habits of mind that are paramount to a student's success in the collegiate landscape. Within the enumerated eight habits of mind, several can be enacted with contract grading. Chief among these are engagement and creativity. Ungrading affords the opportunity for students to buy into the revision process of writing for the sake of learning, highlighting the way that engagement can encourage "investment and involvement" and creativity can be a key part of "generating, investigating, and representing" ideas.

We've seen tangible outcomes of this revision investment as more students came to us with ideas for their drafts after receiving our formative feedback—often with more draft iterations than were assigned in the courses. This departure from earlier semesters displays a level of curiosity in their writing not previously seen by us. For instance, anecdotal evidence would suggest that students felt a greater sense of agency to make changes to their work beyond the scope of our feedback. While we are not making empirical, quantitatively-measured claims here about changes in students' levels of engagement, we do believe that most students saw the process of writing as more than aiming for a grade.

We also noticed demonstrable expressions of creativity. We have each received emails from students that show a clear desire to be more playful in their writing, which we interpret as a discrete ability to investigate and generate new ideas. This commitment to the possibilities of what the writing can do is represented

in questions about a draft going in new directions. Take for example, this email from a student:

> However, I would like to ask . . . is there such a thing as "too much" of a change? I have started rearranging and reconstructing my poem. In doing so I have noticed that the main focal point and foundation of my poem is shifting. Shifting in a good way. Though I must say . . . it has evolved so much so that it looks like a completely different work. It bears little to no evidence of its previous version. (Student Email, personal communication, 2021)

Her response made us wonder whether she had ever considered such a question within typical assessment systems of grading prior to this class. Given her intersectional identities (cisgender, Creole, Haitian American), we also wondered if she perhaps didn't feel comfortable enough to ask her instructor about this given traditional models of assessment? As Lisa Delpit (1988) asserts, students learn within a "culture of power" (p. 282). Further, education as an institution "systematically domesticates our bodies; it incarcerates them in rows of wooden desks, robs them of spontaneity through rigid demarcations of time and space, and in fact devotes a great deal of energy to hiding the fact that we have bodies at all" (Pineau, 2002, p. 45). All students operate in an educational frame that, most often, hinders improvisation and choice. In a system where "passive students are indoctrinated into social mores as well as socioeconomic positions," multiply-marginalized students may internalize their "otherness" as something to hide in performance of "good student" (Pineau, 2002, p. 42). In short, our very classrooms and curriculum may deny our students freedom. Equity-informed course design promotes accessibility by removing the gatekeeping utility of grades. Students can choose their path to learning as opposed to simply editing to fulfill whatever proclivities a singular professor holds about what constitutes good writing.

It is important to address that one of the scholars we look to in this work, Inoue, critiqued the thinking that informed the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (2011). In his CCCC address, Inoue (2019) challenges our field by saying:

> Do you think that White racial habitus, that the historical White language biases in our disciplines and lives, have affected these places, or the building of something like the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*? Or your own pedagogies? Or your own ways of judging student writing,

> what you see, and can see, as clear, effective, and compelling?
> Do you think you're special, immune to the biases?

Indeed, Inoue's critique is part of a larger conversation of how the White habitus influenced many of the central documents and professional organizations within the field of writing studies.

This might be a good place to share our own subject positionalities. I, Jennifer Daniel, am a cisgendered, neurodivergent, straight White woman. I've moved through some marginalized spaces related to class, gender, and ability that inform my desire to be an inclusive teacher and human in a flawed world. I, Shawn Bowers, was born in Costa Rica, am a bilingual, biracial cisgendered, straight woman and had to adopt a pen name that sounded more "Latina" to be taken seriously as a Latinx writer. In response to Inoue, we know we are not immune to biases, hidden and transparent alike. We respect and appreciate Inoue's critique. We acknowledge that the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (2011) was most certainly influenced by the White habitus, yet it still offers us a place to start. What the Framework does offer, as suggested by Tristan Abbott (2020), is a "rhetorical neutrality" that operates "as a sort of distancing mechanism within the institutional systems that claim writing can be objectively assessed" (p. 177). Abbott reminds us that while we can never be objective, the Habits of Mind articulated in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (2011) can help us design assessment that values the process-oriented ethos of our classrooms instead of a product-oriented ethos.

Looking Inward: Teacher-Researcher Practice and Positionality

Any pedagogical choices we make as teachers ought to originate from intentional, ethical, and informed positions. Times of crises might limit our ability to build new practices out of reflective intention, but our responsibilities to our students require us to make our best efforts towards such a position, regardless of external factors. In concert with the GSOLE principle of iterative processes for course design, our experiences as teacher-researchers give us a practical and material path towards this liberatory educational stance. For the purposes of our chapter, we claim the position of teacher-researcher as instructors who "accept the close relationship between the writing process and the human growth process" and who are observer-participants who also learn and create knowledge within the classroom context (Mohr, 1980, para. 7). We learn alongside our students.

Our practices are also informed by several educational, compositional, and rhetorical theories, but originate in the critical pedagogies of Freire and his

critique of education's banking model, "where teachers seek to make deposits or fill students up with all of the essential points and right answers" (Pappas & Zecker, 2001, p. 3). The grade is the marker for what a student has learned to do independently within an assessment system designed to confine knowledge to a narrow understanding that sustains the dominant systems of power and oppression. In contrast, reflective and critical teaching moves us to consider what our students already know and to leverage that knowledge. We also want to offer that critical pedagogy also calls us to a stance of "radical hope" understood by education scholar Darren Webb (2013) as the "profound confidence in the transformative capacities of human agency, a confidence that enables real subjects to insert themselves into history and commit themselves to confronting and overcoming the 'limit situations' that face them" (p. 410). As teachers, we have profound confidence in the transformative capacities of our students' human agency; we were just done with grades mediating the relationship we wanted to develop with them.

IN AND AROUND THE COURSE CONTEXT

In both the pilot sections and in our subsequent courses, we positioned ungrading as the primary mechanisms for our assessment system. Our grading contracts are informed by the work of Jesse Stommel, Blum, and, as noted above, Inoue. For instructors interested in this approach, we recommend starting with Stommel's "How to Ungrade" (2018), and Blum's (2020) text *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and what to do instead)*. While we studied Stommel to better understand contract grading—he contends that "[g]rading contracts convey expectations about what is required for each potential grade" and students are given the freedom to choose goals for themselves (2018, p. 2)—we also zeroed in on portfolios as another alternate approach to assessment. This focus led us to consider a combination for the pilot: we opted for grading contracts with a final portfolio of work that would be assessed as well. We see this move as a focus on the students' efforts and not the professors' predilection for particular writing styles.

Our Purpose and Intention for Contract Grading

Our primary purpose for using contract grading was to promote a writing-to-learn experience so that students saw the value of using writing to understand their intersectional identities and how those intersectional identities were shaped by a sense of place. We hoped that students would come to see writing as a tool for learning and not just a way of mimicking standardized models of writing.

Moving through multiple drafts—with steps including ideation, messy first attempts, and employing feedback—is a critical series of steps for creative thinking that is at the heart of addressing rhetorical situations and making meaning. We echo Hubrig and Barritt in Chapter 9 of this text, as we also recognize that this is not a codified, singular process. Ungrading allows students the flexibility to work through this process in their own manner.

Again, as writing teachers for over a decade, we each understood that this experience would be our students' first with ungrading; thus, we opted for a simple contract that primarily used narrative descriptions to scale expectations of the assignments and other important components of the courses. We share the example below to illustrate the language we used to explain the grading contract to students; in this sample, the "I" is Jennifer as the contract is from her FYC course at Queens University of Charlotte, our institution.

QEN 102: Contract Grading

Note: Our version of the contract is borrowed heavily from versions that Stommel has generously shared widely across multiple platforms including various academic talks and his professional website: https://www.jessestommel.com/. He graciously allowed us to use our adapted model in this chapter.

Purpose: What is contract grading exactly?

Contract grading is a way to honor your labor and give you space to take risks without fearing failure. Indeed, failure is one of the best learning tools we have. Often grading isn't really about learning. It's about assessment, which measures neither your work, nor your potential. There is quite a bit of research in both education and writing studies that indicates that grading negatively impacts students' actual learning as well as motivation for learning (Kohn, 2011). Ultimately, I want you to drive and own your learning and to set goals appropriate for that purpose. Below is the contract grading scale that YOU may select for this class. If you object to this, please let me know via email and we can set up a meeting to discuss a different way of grading that suits your academic needs. If this scale sounds like something you want to pursue, take some time to read through your options. Choose the one that feels best for you as a learner and your goals as a student in this class. Once you decide on a level of work, you will commit to it in Canvas.

Criteria for Success:

Please be sure to note that you will have the option to adjust up or down as the course proceeds. Here are the options:

1. Turn in all formal assignments on time with the assignment guidelines fulfilled.
2. Turn in all (full) drafts of formal assignments on time—except one may be late.
3. Turn in all Process Writings on time.
4. Complete 90% of all Free Writings at the satisfactory level.*
5. Complete 90% of all Practice Writings at the satisfactory level.*

1. Turn in all formal assignments on time with the assignment guidelines fulfilled.
2. Turn in all drafts of formal assignments on time—except two may be late.
3. Turn in all Process Writings on time.
4. Complete 85% of all Free Writings at the satisfactory level.*
5. Complete 85% of all Practice Writings at the satisfactory level.*

1. Turn in all formal assignments on time with the majority of the assignment guidelines fulfilled.
2. Turn in all drafts of formal assignments on time—except three may be late.
3. Turn in all Process Writings on time.
4. Complete 75% of all Free Writings at the satisfactory level.*
5. Complete 75% of all Practice Writings at the satisfactory level.*

* Satisfactory means that you met the minimum of the prompt guidelines. Example, for a free write, you will write a robust paragraph that's appx 300 words. The professor reserves the right to award a grade of D or F to anyone who fails to meet a contractual obligation in a systematic way. A "D" grade denotes some minimal fulfillment of the contract. An "F" is absence of enough satisfactory work, as contracted, to warrant passing of the course. Both a "D" and "F" denote a breakdown of the contractual relationship implied by signing any of the contracts described above.

I also reserve the right to reward exceptional work throughout the semester using the full range of Queens' grading scale. If you contract for a "B," for instance, and submit particularly strong pieces to fulfill that contract, I may elect to raise your contracted grade to a "B+."

Likewise, if you consistently submit mediocre work in fulfillment of your contract, I reserve the right to adjust your grade one half-step down (e.g., from "A" to "A –") or even, in extreme cases, a full step.

Contract Adjustments

Periodically during the semester, I will ask you to evaluate your work thus far and compare it against what you agreed in your grade contract. In these moments,

you can also take the opportunity to request an adjustment to your contract in either direction. If you find that you will be unable to meet the obligations of your contract, you may request to move to the next lowest grade and its requirements. Alternatively, if you find that you've been performing above the obligations of your contract, you may request to fulfill the requirements for the next higher grade.

Important Note: In order to effectively evaluate your own progress, you must keep track of your work including when/if items were late or not satisfactory.[1]

Final Notes

Professor Bowers and I wrote our grading contracts collaboratively, so they may have similar or the same language.

REFLECTION ON THE CONTRACT

In reviewing this contract, we wish to emphasize a few important details that are essential to this practice. After first providing an extended definition of contract grading, we lay out descriptions that both qualify and quantify process work into a three-tiered scale: strong (typically considered "A" work), satisfactory (typically considered "B" work), and developing (typically considered "C" work). We also included a brief narrative about "D" and "F" work. We chose to pair traditional letter grades with our contract grading descriptions as a bridge for students to scaffold from previous learning landscapes to this new one. Of course, at the end of the semester, the institution required a letter grade. While we cannot avoid all summative grading, we were able to delay a focus on grades until time to translate contract grades to the university's alphabetic grading system. In our classroom discussions introducing grading contracts, we were explicit in framing traditional letter grades as a subjective construct. What constitutes an A for one professor may be a B for a different professor. Performance then becomes a strategic endeavor to meet the quirks of the instructor.

By describing strong, satisfactory, and developing work in terms of quantity[2] (all drafts or some drafts being turned in, for example) and quality[3] (in reference

1 Our LMS system is Canvas, which allows assignments to be marked as "Complete/Incomplete" in place of a letter or numeric grade. We and the students used this setting to track dates of submissions. Additionally, we provided the formative feedback directly within the LMS system both within the body of the assignments and the global comments function.

2 By quantity, we mean did the student complete all or the majority of the assignments of the class. We provided targets for page ranges, but not specific page or word count.

3 By quality, we gave descriptions for what we considered quality work. We understand quality is subjective. We attempted to mitigate the subjectivity through other tools in the course such as SLOs and explicitly repeated feedback that we were not prioritizing lower order concerns (i.e., grammar).

to assignment guidelines), we attempted to give students explicit requirements. The expectations described the process and work, and not the student. In Jen's class, students indicated which level of work (and ultimately, grade) they wanted to strive for at the beginning of the semester. At any point in the course, students could change their minds. For Shawn, students were not required to specify the grade they were aspiring to. We both used language from the grading contracts (strong, satisfactory, developing) in our feedback to students, so they understood their standing in the course with each assignment. Also, each assignment's guidelines explicitly detailed what constituted strong, satisfactory, and developing work. We feel it important to note that while we used the same grading framework and intentionally aligned our contracts because of the learning community aspect, we did deviate from each other on occasion. The biggest deviation was that students in Jen's composition course chose which grade they were contracting to, whereas in Shawn's course, students did not articulate a specific grade. We point this out to underscore that this practice is not a one-size-fits-all and to encourage readers to adapt their contracts to best suit the needs of the learning environment and students they teach. In fact, we did the very same thing for ourselves.

Our summer enrollment was exceptionally low, and initially we worried about the process of piloting a new grading system with only three students in our learning community but continued with our plan given that contract grading doesn't necessitate a particular number of students to be successful. In fact, contract grading saved us from the tendency to compare students to one another within the course. In the fall term of 2021, as the university went back to mostly in-person, real-time learning, our courses saw healthier enrollment numbers, and we decided to again apply our ungrading practices in a new set of courses.

Of note, a significant distinction of the fall slate of classes is that they are not part of the general education program and therefore are not linked to other courses in learning communities. Instead, these writing-intensive courses are housed in the English department, serving all three of our major tracks: professional writing and rhetoric, literary studies, and creative writing. The language of the contracts shifted slightly to accommodate the specific writing assignments of each course and addressed issues of "engagement" differently to better reflect the course modality. For example, the peer review process in our respective courses had different aims and, therefore, required students engage differently with peers.

Also, because we had a larger sample size, we felt we could implement an anonymous midterm student evaluation to check in on students' perceptions towards ungrading without risk of disclosure of identifying information. (Had we done this over the summer with our three participants, we feel we would have been able to ascertain students' identities based on the responses). The student feedback illuminated things we already suspected; it affirmed that ungrading is a pedagogical

approach that—when paired with other antiracist and inclusive teaching practices such as self-evaluation, encouraging multilingualism, and creativity around genre artifacts—creates a less fraught, more inclusive environment that is conducive for deep learning (see Felicia Chavez, 2021; Hogan & Sathy, 2022).

As we reflect on how this distinct approach to assessment impacts our teaching, we see a great number of advantages to ungrading with the use of grading contracts. Chief among them is how it has changed the way we provide feedback to student writing. Our feedback has become more robust and conversational as we seek to guide students to self-discovery as it relates to topics, lines of argument, and rhetorical techniques. One example of this is how the feedback we offered stopped policing grammatical conventions. Free from having to "correct" a composition based on Standard American English, formative feedback was individualized, tailored to the students' goals expressed in the scaffolded pre-writing assignments. While we still give feedback on grammar and mechanics, it does not factor into our evaluations process.

At another level, this alternative assessment practice released us from grammar policing to ceding space for real conversations about themselves as writers. For example, Shawn noticed a pattern in her feedback to students where she responded to writing from two lenses: a human making personal connections to human experiences and then as an instructor offering advice about how to better engage an audience. Before ungrading, it felt odd to assign a grade to a personal narrative where trauma or abuse was disclosed. That is not to say that we ignore all conventions of academic writing but prioritize responding to the writer's choices using the language of rhetoric around audience, purpose, genre, and other more global features of their work. We offer a different focus that does not ask the student to eschew their literacy practices by codeswitching or imitating language born from the hegemonic educational systems in service of a grade (Young, 2021). Like other instructors who embrace contract grading, we believe that if the goal is meaning making, we must include students in the process of assigning value to their learning.

Reflection on Practice

First, we want to assert that contract grading is not a magic solution, and there are certainly challenges still present in adopting this method of assessment. Sherri Craig (2021) rightly contends in her recent essay from the summer 2021 *WPA Journal*'s "Anti-Racist Classroom Practices" section, "Your Contract Grading Ain't It," "[contract grading] is low hanging fruit that does the most injustice to our Black students, to our Black faculty because it attempts to convince them that the university cares for their lives and their experiences" (p. 146).

Principally, Craig reminds educators that inequity and racism is not eradicated by a singular teaching intervention in the face of systemic oppression. Moreover, she warns us that marginalized students still have to navigate within this system, so the practices must serve our students and not our guilt-laden egos. Craig's position is sharply pointed and certainly needed. We recognize the recent trend to use contract grading does not address the systemic issues in higher education related to writing and language—a system whose very DNA is imbued with White-supremacy using the tools of language and writing as its custodians as suggested by educators and scholars such as Delpit and Rosina Lippi-Green. Ungrading was just part of a larger suite of changes we made as we reflected on our teaching practices that also included revisions in attendance policies, minor shifts in flexibility of deadlines, and transparent assignment design.

In her extended essay, *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading*, Ellen Carillo (2021) extends this critique and elaborates on a couple considerations we have found true in our own practice. Namely, there is a clear risk of substituting one standard for another. Carillo (2021) warns, "This sort of substitution is especially dangerous because quantifiable information—the kind of information that is collected by students as they labor—gives the appearance of objectivity" (p. 18). Carillo troubles the antiracist claim championed by antiracist practice advocates, specifically about the ways that accounting for labor may create biased practices for students with disabilities. When we substitute labor for other grading criteria we need to be careful in how we define labor because it is not neutral. Ungrading practices that assess students based on time-on-task could disadvantage disabled individuals whose learning is supported by accessible pedagogies such as crip time defined as "a flexible approach to normative time frames" (Price, 2011, p. 62). If antiracist practices are about inclusivity, then they must be inclusive with relation to accessibility as well. In using Stommel's version, which provided descriptions that speak to both quantity and quality, we hoped that our grading contracts center student engagement over quantifiable labor, though we are still thinking through this issue each semester. As DePew and Matheson point out in their chapter on grading contracts in this collection, your contract should align with your pedagogical values and be intentionally designed to create the learning environment and behaviors that encourage student success (see Chapter 17, this collection).

Moreover, we would be remiss if we left readers thinking that the process was easy for both us and the students. In fact, we have both engaged in uncomfortable conversations with students who were deeply opposed to this new form of assessment. Interestingly, these resistant reactions came from students on a continuum of social locations: neurodivergent students, honors students, and BIPOC students are just three of our demographics that responded in negative

ways. They expressed feelings of angst, asserting that while they understood our intentions, they were uneasy about not having the grades to validate themselves as good students, which is a fraught term that is not really even achievable as its definition is circumscribed by race, gender, class, ability.

Students continue to return often to check in, to ensure that they are on track with their work, and we have responded with affirming language. As teachers, and humans in an uncertain world, we see this as a chance to support them in learning to understand that they are valuable—not just as good students, but as people in the world. This can be difficult in online landscapes, where communication is usually expressed solely in writing. We found that by utilizing office hours, where we could meet students over video platforms (or, on occasion, in person) created an atmosphere that allowed for real-time dialogue so that we could respond to each concern. Their resistance begs the question: what are we doing as educators if our students need grades to know that they are valuable as human beings?

Reticence to adapt a new way of assessing might reflect the false narrative that grades are the only way to teach; however, the custom of grading as we know it is a nineteenth century invention. To continue embracing a single system that upholds grading as the only way to capture student learning is deeply problematic. Stommel (2020) posits that "[g]rading is so ingrained in our educational systems that small acts of pedagogical disobedience can't do enough to change the larger (and hostile) culture of grading and assessment" (para. 14). We acknowledge that this disobedience required much labor on our part to enact this practice, but it was a labor of love to make our teaching pedagogies match our teaching philosophies. Recalling the work of bell hooks, grades do not "create participatory spaces for the sharing of knowledge" because students have no input into the grading design (hooks, 1994, p. 15). In fact, students who have completed our courses come back and talk about their experiences returning to courses that use the traditional alphabetic grading system. They report a new awareness of just how much their attention was oriented towards the grade at the expense of their learning.

Strategic learners figure out the system, which is to say those who learn how to manage their professors and play the game of school, end up performing a show of knowledge and risk not making deeper connections in their learning. Our experience tells us that grades don't necessarily demonstrate deep learning. Take this instance of a student who openly admitted she knew how to write papers in response to texts she never read and earned high marks on the essays. For her midterm reflection in an ungraded course, where she was asked to make connections between the texts and her learning, she admitted the process was both freeing and more academically challenging. She was invited to learn for the sake of personal development and not an arbitrary GPA. The crux of the issue is that she knew how to write the paper without engaging the texts. Why? Because

her social location meant that she had "the accouterments of the culture of power" (Delpit, 1988, p. 283.) In this course, she was afforded an opportunity to name how she's been able to game the system. Would she have taken that risk had she known she was performing for a grade? Without the freedom from the subjective grading, how would she have shared this pivotal learning moment? Would she even have had it?

If education is about freedom, grades can shackle a student's agency. Grades assess what a student knows at that particular moment. To be explicit and to use the parlance of assessment, grades indicate mastery, while ungrading turns the eye to a student's potential.[4] We want to challenge the system that accounts for what a student has already learned to do independently in favor of options that make visible to the student their potential development and growth. Using development and growth as an inducement for engagement in learning potentially shifts student motivation from extrinsic (grades) to intrinsic (potential growth). Prior to ungrading, we used feedback to justify the alpha grade. Once we stopped using the feedback to justify a grade, the nature of the communication with our students changed. We approached their work with bigger questions, rooted in the principles of the rhetorical situation. I (Shawn) found myself using the phrase, "I wonder if" to open space for broader ideation; I (Jen) found myself modeling specific connecting sentences to help students see pathways to develop ideas. Feedback became the most tangible way our students experienced us as teachers. We (Jen and Shawn) want to be teachers, not gatekeepers. Feedback was highly personalized, differentiated for each learner, and the goal line was different for each student. This practice was, of course, more work for us as teachers, but it was also more meaningful. Whatever discomfort we initially felt by throwing the old rulebook away was quickly replaced by joy. Reimaging assessment and feedback as collaborative dialogue with our students transformed the learning environment (regardless of modality) to a space of shared governance. Obviously, we can't erase grades from the institution, but we can redirect student focus to learning that serves them beyond the classroom. We stopped policing and started teaching.

CONCLUSION: EMBRACING CHANGE

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled us to reconsider our priorities as teachers of writing in unexpected ways—ways that we didn't know at the time would be generative, positive, and energizing in a time when everything around us wasn't. Now,

4 We acknowledge the fraught nature of the word "mastery" both as a fixed goal that can ever be achieved for any academic standard, but also as a term that evokes the traumatic history of our country's enslavement of millions of Africans and indigenous peoples.

we carry back with us into the teaching landscape a heart for what really matters: agency (for students and faculty alike) and a reclamation of joy. We want to be architects of better learning spaces. Ungrading equips instructors with a different foundational starting point. Ultimately, design is what drives outcomes and realities. If we start from the point of design, we can dream of learning spaces meant for everyone . . . including us. Contract grading and other ungrading methods, when designed with the students in mind, can be employed in any educational modality. Stuckey and Wilson's chapter give examples of the contract in play in two different online, any time settings (Chapter 18, this collection). Since writing this chapter, we have each utilized grading contracts in in-person, real-time and hybrid learning environments. Across *all* modalities, contract grading has become an adaptable tool in our teaching practices; we can assess what we need for that course in order to align with our own teaching ethos.

We warn you, starting the work of dismantling our old grading systems had a snowballing effect. What started with contract grading has led to significant changes in feedback, assignment design, and engagement practices. While there is still a lot of research to be done in this space, contract grading does seem to be a stepping stone towards more inclusive pedagogies that underscore the importance of acknowledging students' many knowledges. Starting this process in the online, any time learning class provided the impetus to design and implement from the understanding that, throughout the course, we would need to revise and adjust our teaching practices to ensure that students felt supported. Inclusive practices—whether for antiracist stances or accessibility—should always inform our teaching in every modality. Moving to the online format afforded us a break from our face-to-face practices that had become comfortable; it gave us a beginner mindset. Ultimately, that discomfort motivated our curiosity for ungrading and invited us to enact our commitment to critical pedagogies that offer students experiences with education not as a place defined by correctness but by freedom.

MOVING BETTER PRACTICES ACROSS MODALITIES

- **In-Person, Real-Time Learning:** This modality offers dedicated space to engage in class conversations that recenter learning over grades and making visible the uneven expectations grades set up. Students can share experiences around grades that might help alleviate the competition that grades encourage.
- **Online, Real-Time Learning:** Similar to in-person, real-time learning—instructors can use class time discussing student experiences with grading to recenter learning.

- **Online, Any Time Learning:** Ungrading practices offer a variety of assessment measures that support building a relationship between student and instructor that might otherwise be hindered in this modality as there is no real-time class.
- **Hybrid Learning:** As with online, any time learning, this modality reduces face time between student and instructor, so ungrading may feel more flexible for students.

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