CHAPTER 17.

THE RADICAL EQUITY OF GRADING CONTRACTS IN ONLINE WRITING COURSES

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In this chapter, the authors describe **contract grading** *used in online asynchronous learning; online, real-time learning; online, any time learning; and hybrid learning. Specifically, the authors help online writing teachers implement anti-racist assessment practices through the creation of grading contracts using two approaches: one that emphasizes consistent approach to all the labor in an online course with the other focusing on contracts that align to the labor of the individual assignments. In describing their "better practice," this chapter addresses the themes of accessibility and inclusivity, assessment, and professional learning for online teachers.*

FRAMEWORKS AND PRINCIPLES IN THIS CHAPTER

- **GSOLE Principle 1.4:** The student-user experience should be prioritized when designing online courses, which includes mobile-friendly content, interaction affordances, and economic needs.
- **CCCC Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing, 1:** [Writing instruction] emphasizes the rhetorical nature of writing.
- **CCCC Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing, 12:** [Writing instruction] is assessed through a collaborative effort that focuses on student learning within and beyond writing courses.

GUIDING QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU BEGIN READING

- What learning outcomes do your assessment practices measure? Do these metrics systematically benefit some students and/or disadvantage others?
- How might an anti-racist approach be useful in conversations with your students as it relates to grading contracts?

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- How do you sell grading contracts to a student audience who have been indoctrinated by the ideologies of A–F assessment? How do you make these arguments through the digital technologies that mediate your online course?
- How do grading contracts make instructor and assignment expectations more transparent?
- How do you leverage the affordances of the digital technologies that mediate the online course to create a system of labor or engagement that fits organically into the course?

INTRODUCTION

I, Kole, observed my first composition course as a graduate student-teacher shadowing a composition instructor. At first unsure of how I would manage a composition teaching load, I was soon relieved when the teacher arrived and began instruction on the five-paragraph essay, a writing instruction approach I knew and could teach!

Later that semester, after the instructor delivered lessons grounded in current-traditional rhetorical philosophy, the students' first essay was due. Again, following the lead of the veteran teacher, I received my first stack of papers and began identifying, describing, and counting the number of errors I found in the students' essays. Each of these errors resulted in a point deduction from the essay grade, which dropped some students' grades as much as two letters, regardless of the quality of thought or insightfulness of the content.

Despite this assessment practice's prevalent precedence, something just didn't feel right. Here I was, demanding students (1) write five-paragraph essays, a form that does not clearly exist beyond placement testing and first-year composition (FYC) classes and (2) demonstrate "academic diction" proficiency—which I have come to believe echoes White language normativity. After teaching on my own for several years, I met Megan Weaver who invited me to participate in the research project that became her award-winning dissertation, "Critical Language Awareness Pedagogy in First-Year Composition: A Design-Based Research Study" (2020), an investigation into the strategies for developing critical language awareness in instructors and students alike. During this two-year process of reading groups, discussions with colleagues, and eventually class observations and teaching interventions and reflections, I experienced a realization in my pedagogy: my grading upheld biased, if institutional, and White normative understandings of writing.

My habits of assignment designing and grading might have been understood as a kind of linguistic segregation in which some White, academically sanctioned

language habits were demanded in some places, while other language habits were forbidden. While this code-switching, or accepting "mother tongues" on early drafts while demanding Standard Academic English (SAE) on final drafts, has been common practice among progressive writing educators (Elbow, 1999), I began to realize that separate is not equal, especially in terms of our linguistic practices. To refuse non-standard language and genres on final submission was to announce to my students that these communicative forms were not legible in academic spaces. How could I reconcile a demand for linguistic justice (Baker-Bell, 2020) on one hand, while on the other hand demand that students code switch? Educators are either for White language supremacy or against it. Any middle ground is complicit racism—a racism that Kevin also acknowledges has characterized his own instructional practices and that we believe many in our audience will find familiar.

To understand and work to resist the racism in our own pedagogical practices, we had to understand the *habitus* that we privileged—a term grading contract advocate Asao Inoue (2019) borrows from Pierre Bourdieu (1990) to describe "linguistic, bodily, and performative dispositions" (2019, p. 5). To understand habitus, one should reflect on the ways that they appear, speak, act, and behave in contexts, like their homes, when they are with people who make them feel comfortable. Then reflect upon those ways of being in other contexts, especially professional contexts or contexts in which we are being judged. While most people alter their ways of being from one context to the next, the shifts that the White, middle- and upper-class populations of American society are asked to make are minimal compared to those in minoritized populations or at the intersection of multiple minoritized populations. For them the expectation is often to adopt the "linguistic, bodily, and performative dispositions" of their White, middle- and upper-class peers (Inoue, 2019). As Inoue (2019) argues, most educational decisions are designed to accommodate this privileged population, a practice that carries over to online instruction.

In writing studies, over the last 25 years, scholars (Ball, 1997; Haswell & Haswell, 1996; Yancey, 1999) have asserted that traditional practices of grading student writing are unreliable and invalid. Implicit biases and subjectivity inhibit a grader's ability to objectively assess student writing: what one instructor sees as an asset to writing can be viewed by another as a weakness. For example, when literacy instructors primarily access writing for its approximation to privileged habitus, they systematically disadvantage many student populations, including English language learners (CCCC *Statement on Second Language Writers and Writing*, 2020; Ortmeier-Hooper, 2013; Ruecker, 2015) and other students not immersed in this habitus.

Linguistic justice is an anti-racist response to the privileged habitus in literacy education. April Baker-Bell (2020) describes linguistic justice as an active corrective

to "Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and White linguistic hegemony and supremacy" that pedagogically "places Black Language at the center of Black students' language education and experiences" by affording "Black students the same kind of linguistic liberties that are afforded to white students" (p. 7). In short, linguistic justice seeks to raise the Black habitus to the level of intellectual legibility as the established habitus. We believe that a linguistic justice approach to online writing instruction, via pedagogical tools like grading contracts, fulfills the letter of GSOLE's *Online Literacy Instruction Principles and Tenets* (2019) first principle: "Online literacy instruction should be universally accessible and inclusive (GSOLE, 2019). Yet this principle's tenets focus primarily on digital technologies as the obstacle to be overcome for our diverse student body. We argue that habitus, including language, is a technology, or manipulation of the human environment, that needs to be accounted for in conjunction with online instruction's digital environments. So when Tenet 1.4 states, "The student-user experience should be prioritized when designing online courses, which includes mobile-friendly content, interaction affordances, and economic needs" (GSOLE, 2019), we emphasize the presence of language—specifically language variation—among the interaction affordances.

OUR RATIONALE FOR GRADING CONTRACTS

Grading contracts have been part of pedagogical conversation for the last half-century (Avakian, 1974; Barlow, 1974; Hassencahl, 1979). Our chapter adds to the current conversations about grading contracts in OLI (Laflen, 2020; Laflen & Sims, 2021) by arguing that grading contracts adopted for the online literacy context need to leverage the affordances of the digital applications instructors use to mediate their classes.

During the last two years, we have separately adopted grading contracts because, as Inoue (2019) notes, they "focus on negotiated learning processes and outcomes or goals for individual projects and are individualized to each student" (p. 64). We believe we are lucky to be teaching at an institution with a relatively diverse student population. Our campus has traditionally been a commuter campus serving mostly the local region (i.e., southeast Virginia); however, over the past decade, like many institutions, it has built an infrastructure to serve more residential students. Many of these students are working class and military-related, and over half of the students in 2019 took courses either off-campus or took a combination of on-campus and off-campus courses. Of the 24,286 students enrolled in 2020, 48.6 percent could be classified as BIPOC with 28.9 percent being Black Americans, 8.6 percent being Latinx, and 2.5 percent being "non-resident aliens" or international students. While we would personally like to see the university's administration foster a more diverse campus, we, more importantly, believe that an

emphasis should be placed on developing better strategies for teaching the diverse students we have, especially those online. Moreover, we are particularly responsive to the stories our diverse students tell us about previous K–12 teachers characterizing their English language use as "incorrect," "broken," and "ghetto." Therefore, the contracts that we have designed are our response to their lived experiences. Our assignments and grading contracts were designed to establish "outcomes and goals" for students to labor upon, correlating each student's labor with their grade. As all students are assessed based on their demonstrated quantity of labor, we try to ensure that no racial habitus, including linguistic practices, are privileged in our respective assessment designs. The logic of grading contracts, including our own, are illustrated in Figures 17.1 and 17.2.

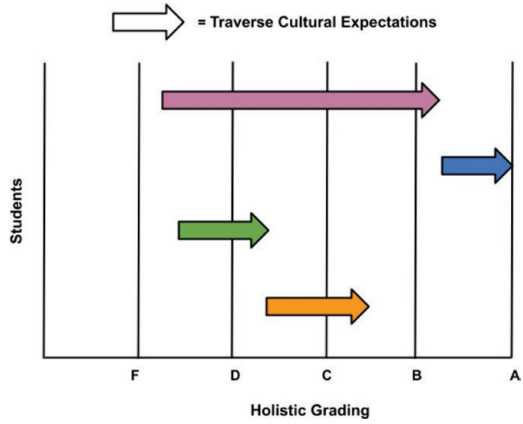

Figure 17.1. Example of how four hypothetical students are traditionally assessed.

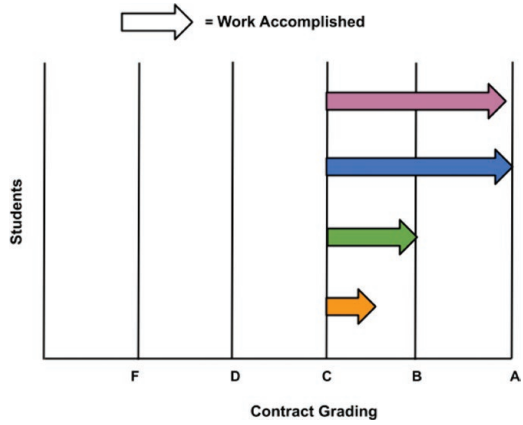

Figure 17.2. Example of how four hypothetical students are assessed based upon labor.

Figure 17.1 depicts how four hypothetical students' assessment moves through a holistically assessed course. Each arrow then represents a student's ability to learn—attempting to adopt the privileged habitus—and to move closer to many writing instructors and writing programs' expected ideals. To understand how grading contracts work, focus on the students represented by the purple (i.e., the top) and orange (i.e., the bottom) arrows. The purple arrow represents Student A who starts the semester with little background in the privileged habitus but over the course of the semester demonstrates both an ability to understand and appropriate the cultural expectations—such as language performance, Aristotelian logic. This student who arrives in our classes with knowledge and lived experience which the academy traditionally finds illegible must traverse more cultural ground, probably moving outside of their comfort zone or feeling culturally conflicted to reach an "A." Student B, the orange arrow, understands many of the privileged habitus, maybe because they are practiced at home, yet begins the semester struggling to demonstrate their proficiency in these practices. As this student understands the expectations of the academy, they tap into their knowledge of the White habitus and are able to raise their grade. As we look at all of them, we see that students do not come to our classes with the same understanding and ability to practice privileged cultural expectations, which systematically supports some students and disadvantages others. Thus, if we are trying to prioritize the student-user experience in our course designs, as advocated by GSOLE, then we need to acknowledge how the traditional assessment of writing perpetuates linguistic and cultural inequity.

Figure 17.2 depicts how contracted grades are earned for four hypothetical students. In this example, all students are guaranteed a base grade of C for demonstrating the minimum amount of effort and/or a demonstration of competency, as illustrated by all four arrows beginning on the same line. Being the same students from *Figure 17.1,* they come to class with different relationships to the privileged habitus, yet they all start the class with the same passing grade and the same opportunity to raise their grade; in many ways, very few are systematically disadvantaged. Again, Student A, the top purple arrow, starts the course with little background in the privileged habitus, yet, by doing the contracted extra labor, can earn an A without having to demonstrate conformity to the White supremist habitus. This does not mean that students do not fail; grades will be lowered when students fail to do the work or meet certain assignment criteria. Or Student B, the orange arrow (i.e., bottom), begins the course proficient in the privileged habitus but chooses to do little work beyond the minimum requirements; thus they earn a C. Student B may have struggled in the class because they had difficulty understanding the expectations or chose

to put minimal effort into this course because of work, athletics, or a desire to focus on more major related classes. Rather than starting all students at a perfect grade and finding reasons to lower those grades, students start from an average or good grade and are given multiple opportunities to improve upon this assessment through extra labor, including revisions. Students' grades will only go down if they are not doing the work or if they are struggling to meet certain expectations. While some of these expectations can be objective (e.g., meeting a word length, demonstrating one has read the text), others are more subjective (e.g., sufficient explanation of the evidence) and, admittedly, pushes against the culturally sustaining nature of the practice.

Benefits of Contract Grading

The grading contracts we describe in detail is our step towards imagining new futures. We approach these grading contracts and our rationales for them with humility, understanding that students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds have and will continue to succeed according to traditional assessment methods. But we also recognize that most writing instructors can imagine how grading contracts alleviate the psychological stress for students who have been told that they "write wrong"—a situation further exacerbated when the online instructor only knows you by an English that others have called "broken." Perhaps, this is a fundamental benefit which grading contracts have on teaching and learning from the student perspective, especially those previously demoralized ones. As Alan Blackstock and Virginia Exton (2014) have noted, "the use of grading contracts can provide those students with space to grow in confidence, skill, and perhaps even love of writing" (p. 278). As teachers who love writing, perhaps we can instill this same love in our students by means of our teaching and our assessment practices.

Challenges of Contract Grading

Most of the concern about grading contacts in online classes, up until this edited collection, has been about how learning management system (LMS) gradebooks can be adapted to accommodate them (Laflan, 2020). The emphasis is on how and whether the affordances of grading contracts mesh with the affordances of the course mediating technologies. Grading contracts are not a one-size fits all practice as some instructors design different contracts for different types of classes and others create universal contracts. In many ways it depends upon the instructor's negotiation of their pedagogical goals, their values, and the affordances of the technological application used to mediate the class.

For our online writing classes, we have grading contracts that have not only been designed to challenge the assessment paradigms that privilege students who have more experience with academic expectations, but their designs emphasize our respective values as writing instructors—such as effort, student agency, collaborative learning—and leverage the affordances of the applications we have adopted to mediate our courses' curriculum and communication (see Figure 17.3). Our assessment systems—our versions of the labor-based grading contracts—are a product of our reflection upon our pedagogical goals, our personal values, and the application's affordances. But both the compromises that we make and the strong justification are depicted in the ways reflection is recursive and moves both ways.

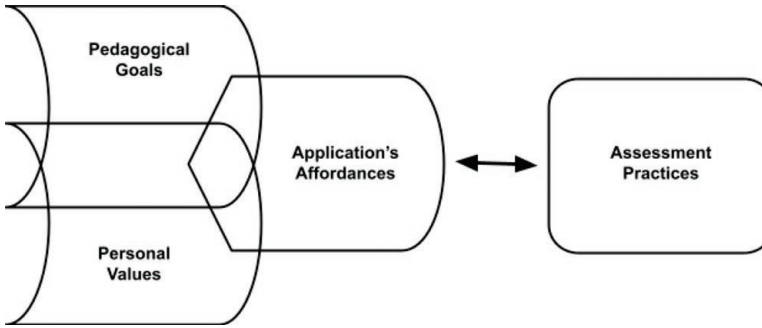

Figure 17.3. Instructor's assessment practices decision-making process within the online instructional context.

EXAMPLE CONTRACT APPROACHES

In this chapter, we will detail two approaches for online labor-based grading contracts, one that illustrates a single assessment approach that can be applied to all assignments in the online course and another that focuses more on contracts that are unique to the labor of the individual assignments. First, Kevin has designed a grading contract based upon an assessment approach he has coined as MICE which measures whether work submitted in Google Documents is missing, incomplete, complete, or extra. Second, Kole has developed a grading contract inspired by the Council of Writing Program Administrators' (WPA) Outcomes Statement for FYC in which students self-select how they might demonstrate each outcome—rhetorical knowledge, information literacy, processes, and conventions—in their writing. While we will reference the specific technologies that we have adopted to give the audience a point of reference for our practices, we understand that technologies come and go, change, and are not accessible at all campuses. Therefore, we will focus more on the affordances

of the applications we use and encourage you to also consider using applications with similar features that you are comfortable using.

MICE: Kevin's Approach to Contract Grading

On the first day students are provided with the course website which includes both a page and a video that explain the MICE grading contract's method, summarized in the TILT handout.

Purpose

The MICE grading contract is probably different from any grading you have experienced before. It evaluates you on the completion of your work rather than on how well you have mastered the competencies the completion criteria are asking you to practice. In this asynchronous course, your work will consist of submitting weekly Entries—prompt-driven 350–500-word responses or assignment drafts—and an ePortfolio at the end of the semester. Because you are being evaluated on whether you attempted all criteria detailed in the Entry instructions, you do not have to be concerned with how your performance on each Entry differs from my ideal expectation (or 100%). This allows you to "step up to the plate and take a swing" and get credit towards a B grade even if you miss the ball. Furthermore, you are allowed to use a variation of English that is comfortable for you and take risks with thinking, grammar, or conventions (as discussed in the first module). You will still receive feedback based upon my expectations that is meant to be the beginning of a conversation between us rather than a justification for why you did not receive 100 percent credit. Engaging in this conversation with me and/or engaging your peers in conversations about their writing and your own writing will help you to hone your thinking, understand audiences' expectations, and work toward earning an A in the course.

Task

Every week read through each Entry's instructions using the Purdue OWL's page "Understanding Writing Assignments" (https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/common_writing_assignments/understanding_writing_assignments.html) to help you identify the Entry's specific tasks to complete. Compose the Entry attempting to complete each criterion. There is no right answer for each criterion or right expression of language when composing these entries. If you are struggling to fulfill a criterion, try to explain what you think is being asked of you and why you are struggling to fulfill the criteria; this will also earn you complete credit. Again, it is useful to view each Entry as the beginning of a conversation between us.

Practice

The following marks are used to assess your work:

- M = Missing. The work is not submitted when the instructor finishes grading an Entry.
- I = Incomplete. You submit timely work, but you fail to perform one or more required criterion. You can revise this work for complete credit.
- C = Complete. You submit timely work and perform all required tasks.
- E = Extra. You respond to questions posed by the instructors or visibly converse with your peers.

Skills

- The ability to provide specific examples from the text or your own experiences to reach a minimum word count.
- The ability to apply a course concept to a personal experience and/or an assigned text.
- The ability to compare how writers of different document types apply the course concepts.
- The ability to find and explain relevant sections of a text to exemplify your point.
- The ability to use a recognized citation format.
- The ability to rethink your own writing.
- The ability to challenge the instructor's perception of a topic.
- The ability to explain a point in a way that your audience can imagine your perspective.
- The ability to make rhetorical decision about your writing.
- The ability to engage a peer in a productive discussion about each other's writing.

The Contract

Kevin's approach to contract grading—an approach he is calling MICE based upon the marks used—is designed to be adopted and adapted as the primary assessment strategy throughout the semester until A–F grades need to be assigned at the end. This example of contract grading, which is introduced at the beginning of the semester in writing, in a video, and during second week conferences, establishes the assessment practices for students' weekly entries—prompt-driven 350–500-word responses or assignment drafts—which are mostly based upon objective evaluations of whether their work meets (or attempts)

certain competencies (e.g., meeting the word limit, defining a course concept, responding to the assigned readings). Because Kevin values students engaging with him and each other, he poses questions to his students about their writing and encourages students, assigned to small groups to interrogate each other's writing via technological affordances like the document comment function and email. Students earn extra work credit by responding to the instructor or each other.

How The Contract Works During the Semester

Students in Kevin's online writing class are assigned a personal Google Drive folder that is populated with two Module Workbooks (Google Documents),[1] an Extra Work Journal (Google Document), and a Module Documents folder that is itself populated with six blank documents with the title of each "major assignment." Each Module Workbook has the instructions for seven or eight entries that are a series of sequenced writing opportunities that build upon previous entries in that workbook or the previous workbook. Each week students, working asynchronously, compose 350–500 words, cite the readings to apply the course concept (e.g., audience, genre) to their own experiences, and compare how the course concepts are applied in some example texts (e.g., a review of *In the Heights*). If a student does all that labor, the student receives complete work credit with feedback describing the quality of that labor and what that student can work on to improve the quality of that labor. However, if the student does not write 350 words, does not cite the course reading, or does not make the required comparison, then the student will receive incomplete credit for the entry and will be given explicit instructions on how to revise the entry for complete credit—which they have until the end of the semester to do.[2]

Since the entries are sequenced and built toward the final entries of each Module Workbook, Kevin has students engage with him and/or each other to earn extra work credit. Students can earn extra work credit when they 1) respond to the questions he poses in the marginal comments, 2) respond to his end comments via email, 3) pose questions to their peers in their peer's workbook, or 4) respond to questions posed by their peers. Using any combination of these four methods, students must compose an extra 250 words a week and record it in the Extra Work Journal to earn extra work credit. Most of this extra engagement would be doing work that not only modeled expectations of

1 As readers will see later, these Module Workbooks are shared with other students in the class to allow them to pose questions to each other. To be compliant with FERPA regulations and not let peers see how the instructor was evaluating a student's work, the instructor sent summative comments and his evaluation to the students via email.

2 Kevin checks these documents every few weeks until the end of the semester.

academic writing but would be useful thinking that can be drawn upon later when composing future entries in that module. Furthermore, this method of feedback leverages one technological affordance of the word processing and email programs used.

Calculating the Final Grade

At the end of the semester, Kevin needs to shift students' grades from MICE to the traditional A–F grading scale (see Figure 17.4). Understanding that almost all students, at this modestly selective public university, bring communicative competence to their work in his class, he has set a B as the baseline grade that all students will receive entering the course. Since he needs to submit an A-F grade to each student, he uses the scale in Figure 17.4 to calculate a final course score based upon the number of missing entries, unresolved incomplete entries, complete entries, and completed extra work.

Overall Course Grade

At the end of the semester the instructor will keep track of your labor based upon how many of each mark (c, e, i, and m) you earn. Each mark has the following effect to the baseline "B" grade.

- m = -1 to the baseline
- i = every 2 i's is 1 m
- c = no change to your grade
- e = +1 to the baseline

With a "B" being equal to zero (0), I will count the amount of each type of mark to determine your deviation from the baseline. The following scale will determine your final grade in English 110C.

Extra Work	Base-line	Missing Work
A = 7 or more "e" A- = 5 or 6 "e" B+ = 3 or 4 "e"	B = 0 (equal to no e's or m's) 1 or 2 "e" 1 or 2 "m"	B- = 3 or 4 "m" C+ = 5 "m" C = 6 "m" C- = 7 "m" D+ = 8 "m" D = 9 "m" D- = 10 "m" F = 11 or more "m" OR any missing Module Documents

Figure 17.4. MICE to A–F scale.

This assessment practice only minimally penalizes students who experience setbacks during the semester—whether they are responsible for these instances or not. However, complete disengagement from the course results in failing the class. For each week students earn extra work credit, their final grade will gradually be raised from a B to a B+ to an A– to an A. Because Kevin does not use an LMS gradebook, Kevin has created a place on each module where students can record the marks on each entry and use the MICE A-F Scale (see Figure 17.4) to keep track of their grade. Or students can just email the instructor and ask.

Benefits and Challenges of this Contract Design

The MICE approach has benefits and challenges for both students and instructors. Because all students start the course with a B and know that this is the grade they will earn if they complete all their work, they do not have to be anxious that their diverse *habitus* will prevent them from passing the class. Likewise, the assessment system gives them some agency to weigh their time and effort more accurately against the final grade they want to earn (Inoue, 2019). The single parent who balances raising two kids and a 40-hour-a-week job with their college work can look at the syllabus and know how to earn their desired grade. They also know if life goes sideways once or twice during the semester, there are ways to compensate and still earn the desired grade. MICE also encourages students to predominantly focus on the writing itself at the level of ideas. Since students know their "score" when they begin writing, they can engage with cognitive tasks rather than worrying about the work's correctness. For example, one student who did extra work mentioned multiple times that they appreciated being allowed to express their academic ideas and respond to their peers in a "gooberish" way. By writing as a "goober," they use a comfortable *habitus* to articulate their evolving academic ideas without being penalized for violating the rules of Standard Academic English. MICE, however, is not without its challenges. Students need to buy into it without worrying about it being designed to sabotage their GPAs or humiliate them. This assessment practice works against twelve years of A–F assessment and the ideologies it has indoctrinated into students. Furthermore, MICE also problematically assumes that the labor of completing one's work does not disadvantage some students along socioeconomic and racial lines; students who can afford to "just be students" are better positioned to complete the labor for their classes than students who must pick and choose priorities. But by identifying students who are failing to start the work and those who struggle with the course's rhetorical tasks, the instructor can point students to institutional resources they need.

For the instructor, MICE creates two tasks: 1) look for the criteria to be accomplished and 2) review the rhetorical effectiveness of the students' composition. The

former decides their grade if they complete the criteria; the latter, depending upon the assignment's purpose, becomes a teachable moment to raise questions about expectations and ask students to consider how various intended audiences might experience these tasks. The instructor's comments are almost exclusively formative, individually asynchronously teaching about future writings. These conversations, should students choose to engage in them, provide a relatively organic means to create instructor presence (Garrison et al., 1999) for students who want more one-to-one instruction. Moreover, the affordances of the technologies they are already using to do their work support these conversations. Although I can imagine how instructors can adopt the LMSs' affordances to support similar practices.

Because of the focus on the student's rhetorical decisions and the desire to engage them in conversations about them, this approach can be labor-intensive. Instructors need to decide which submissions will just be assigned a MICE mark and which ones will also receive comments. Trying to review and comment upon all submissions can become overwhelming, so some submissions should just be evaluated for completion based upon a criterion like how much a student wrote. Also Kevin still pedagogically struggles assigning completion marks to a longer entry that is really thoughtful and well-articulated and another entry that barely makes the word count and demonstrates minimal comprehension and proficiency at applying the course concepts. His long-standing immersion in a traditional grading system tells him that the former student should be rewarded for their acumen. And if the former student does not do extra work—and the latter student who does not qualitatively write as well does do it—then the "weaker writer" earns a better grade than the "stronger writer." While Kevin has questioned whether this is fair, he is also reminded that traditional meritocratic assessment practices are questionably fair too (Gibbs, 2020).

Choosing Practices: Kole's Approach to Contract Grading

Kole's approach to contract grading is described within the context of FYC. In this course, students are challenged to develop effective writing processes in accordance with various rhetorical situations. Students are presented with a general grading contract at the beginning of the semester which introduces the grading rationale and forecasts how each assignment sheet will contain its own unique criteria. As such, Kole's labor-based grading contracts are uniquely designed for each assignment to help students understand the writing competencies that he wants them to focus on for each assignment.

To develop a grading contract for a particular assignment, Kole first considers the WPA Outcomes Statement for FYC (2014) as a means of articulating the target competencies or goals of the writing assignment. These outcomes include

rhetorical knowledge, information literacy, processes, and conventions, and students are challenged to demonstrate these outcomes in writing on all major assignments. After considering the WPA Outcomes Statement, Kole then develops his assignment-specific grading contracts by articulating specific ways students can demonstrate these outcomes in target practices of writing. In this way, every assignment sheet Kole delivers to students includes an assignment-specific collection of target practices of writing that students can select from. Importantly, a grading contract for a rhetorical analysis essay looks very different from a creative narrative, simply by virtue of the unique rhetorical knowledge(s) and processes that are inherent to these genres and assignments.

An example contract is featured below as a part of an assignment sheet for a rhetorical analysis essay. In this assignment sheet, Kole reminds students of the four WPA learning outcomes and explains general practices involved when conducting and writing a rhetorical analysis. After instructing students on the steps of completing the assignment in the Task section, Kole then presents the assignment's grading contract. Therein, students are met with a variety of target practices in writing from which they might select to earn a grade.

Composing a Rhetorical Analysis

Purpose

Demonstrate rhetorical knowledge, information literacy, process, and conventions by composing a rhetorical analysis essay.

Practices

This assignment will help you develop the following skills . . .

- Read for inquiry, learning, critical thinking, and communicating.
- Analyze a source for it rhetorical effect.
- Incorporate outside materials in your own writing through quotations, paraphrase, and summary, as well as interpretation, synthesis, and critique.
- Work through multiple drafts of an essay and recognizing the role of reflecting, revising, and editing.
- Practice genre conventions for structure and paragraphing.
- Understand the concepts of intellectual property that motivate documentation conventions through application of citation style.

Knowledge

This assignment will help you develop knowledge in rhetorical studies. Rhetorical studies explores what makes communication effective and persuasive.

The study of rhetoric is attributed to Aristotle, who sought to explain effective processes and strategies for crafting great speeches that would influence events in Athenian democracy. Today, we think of rhetoric in many contexts to include politics, sales, and online writing contexts. Knowledge in rhetorical studies will help you better understand effective communication both as a listener and speaker.

Task

In completing this assignment, you should do the following:

- Locate a source (advertisement, social media post, etc.) from your everyday life.
- Examine a source for its topic and purpose.
- Analyze the source for rhetorical features, identifying how the source demonstrates logos, pathos, ethos, kairos, and/or telos as taught by readings and explored in previous low-stakes writing assignments.
- Argue for or against how effective the source is.
- Support your argument with evidence based on specific features of the source.

Grading Contract

For an A, complete eight of the following target practices. For a B, complete four. Late work is accepted for a C.

- Write at least 750 words.
- Draft a 100-word introduction paragraph to include background information, general to specific information, anecdote, or some other introductory strategy.
- Explain how the source does or does not demonstrate logos.
- Explain how the source does or does not demonstrate ethos.
- Explain how the source does or does not demonstrate pathos.
- Draft a 100-word conclusion which demonstrates summary, future contextualization, or a call to action.
- Produce a figure, graphic, or image to support your writing.
- Include a credible quote from an online source, with bibliographic statement, in your essay.
- Find a reputable source from the library website to support your writing.
- Submit an outline with your essay.
- Book a conference with the instructor to engage a "brainstorming session."

- Book a conference with the instructor to receive feedback on a completed draft.
- Email the instructor with an essay draft to receive feedback.
- Format the essay to MLA or another style (e.g., header/heading, spacing).
- Produce a full text citation of your source on the Works Cited page.
- Develop clear transition sentences between paragraphs.
- Write in Standard American English (SAE).
- Write in a language other than SAE.
- Propose an additional way the essay might be graded.

The assignment sheet and corresponding grading contract above is introduced to students after scaffolded course work is completed, explained below, which is designed to prepare students for writing the major essay. For example, one low-stakes assignment students encounter in Kole's asynchronous learning environment is a reading response assignment, in which students are introduced to a collection of genre-specific readings that relate to an upcoming essay assignment. Specifically, students encounter both instructional and model readings. In the unit on rhetorical analysis, for example, students complete readings that define rhetorical appeals—such as logos, pathos, and ethos—and that demonstrate rhetorical analysis in action. As per this assignment's instructions, students must not only read but also respond in writing. As such, students must not only read the words on the page, but also monitor their reading progress by focusing on main ideas and purposes presented by the author, taking notes on their observations. Simply put, students not only encounter the text but also leave the text having deduced at least one important point to share, respond to, or debate. After having completed the reading and note-taking process outlined in the reading response assignment sheet, students are then instructed—via the assignment sheet—to review the notes and produce a summary paragraph of the important points from the reading, offering a citation thereof, while concluding their reading responses with their personal reactions to the text.

After engaging multiple steps in completing their reading responses, students are tasked to join a class community forum in which they are challenged with situating their knowledge gained from reading within a broader class discussion. Generally, the prompts in the community Writing Forum, available via the course LMS, task students with extending the discussion that they began in their reading response. They can share their opinions on topics from readings or introduce a related topic to the forum, commenting on their peers' responses and responding to their peers in turn. Finally, after having joined and participated in the Writing Forum, students then encounter the essay assignment that

encourages them to leverage their initial Reading, developed by the Writing Forum, as invention for a longer essay.

Importantly, Kole offers feedback—via synchronous video conferences and asynchronous comments embedded in student writing—on each of these assignments, which is designed to aid students in their learning process leading up to the Rhetorical Analysis Essay. Instructor feedback relates to accurate uptake of concepts relevant to the rhetorical analysis unit. Feedback on the reading response, for example, might comment on the accurate summarization—and uptake—of concepts foundational to the assigned readings and rhetorical analysis unit. Feedback, importantly, is both constructive and complementary.

With preliminary assignments complete with instructor feedback, students are prepared to continue their learning in essay form. This is when students encounter the essay's grading contract, which is included at the end of the assignment sheet for their Rhetorical Analysis essay. Within this assignment sheet, students are encouraged to review the necessary practices and knowledge required in completing a rhetorical analysis. Furthermore, a writing process is explained as the task of the assignment. With an understanding of the assignment, students then consider the assignment's grading contract. As the assignment sheet and corresponding grading contract states, there are more than a dozen target practices that constitute success on this assignment, each of which is reflective of a WPA learning outcome. Importantly, students are in control of shaping their writing according to the disciplinary standards articulated in the grading contract. In this way, teaching and assessment become complementary if not simultaneous. These target practices, which have been the focus of low-stakes assignments and instructor feedback, shape the grading contract for the rhetorical analysis essay. Crucially, these practices correlate with a guaranteed grade. This practice can also alleviate some of the grading workload for the teacher once assignments are submitted. As assessment is embedded in the instructional process, teachers have already encountered, and by consequence "graded," student work within the aforementioned assignment scaffold.

In the Rhetorical Analysis Essay grading contract, for a "B," students are challenged to demonstrate in writing at least four of the grading contract items. More labor is required, however, for an "A." Accordingly, Kole asks students to meet eight items on the grading contract to earn the highest possible grade. For example, one student who wants to earn a "B" on the Rhetorical Analysis Essay might draft a 100-word introduction for the essay to include a description of the chosen source; explain how that source demonstrates ethos and pathos; and draft a 100-word conclusion which demonstrates summary, future contextualization, or a call to action. This will earn a "B" for completing four items on the grading contract. Another student might earn an "A" by completing the aforementioned four items of the grading contract—for example, booking a conference with

the instructor, finding a reputable source on Google to support their writing, developing a multimodal graphic, and formatting the essay to MLA for a total of eight grading contract items. Once students meet the contracted practices in their own writing, the essay grade, as promised, is posted to the course LMS.

Importantly, Kole's approach to contract grading accounts for the quality, relevance, and punctuality of student writing. To be eligible for these grades, students must meet assignment expectations and submit their essays on or before the due date. Nevertheless, Kole also accounts for students who do not successfully meet assignment expectations or deadlines in that late work is accepted for a C. Writing that does not meet assignment expectations is not accepted. For example, if instead of submitting a rhetorical analysis, the student submits an opinion piece on an unassigned topic, Kole returns the writing for revision and resubmission. At this point in time, the assignment is considered late and is then only eligible to earn a C if successfully resubmitted. In short, students cannot submit just anything and receive credit. Their writing must meet the contracted expectations. However, Kole has never had to return an essay to a student that did not meet expectations, provided that students completed the preliminary reading and writing assignments listed above. Rather, he has only had to return essays to students who were not present for the various and scaffolded lessons and assignments that prepared students to meet the expectations of a respective grading contract.

Furthermore, in considering antiracist perspectives on what makes an effective argument, during synchronous class discussions about rhetorical appeals, students are encouraged to question what constitutes an effective demonstration of rhetorical appeals, especially in terms of how such an understanding might be rooted in White racial *habitus*. For example, what one might deem credible in one culture might not be viewed with the same level of credibility in another. This is why, on the assignment's grading contract, students might argue how a particular source does or does not constitute an effective demonstration of a rhetorical appeal. In furthermore supporting anti-racist perspectives in accordance with target practices, students might choose to write in Standard American English (SAE) or a language other than SAE on their essays, demonstrating linguistic competency as they so choose. In Kole's experience, students appreciate the opportunity to write in ways that reflect their lived experience and linguistic background for a graded assignment.

REFLECTION ON PRACTICE: CREATING YOUR GRADING CONTRACT

Educators interested in applying grading contracts to their courses can use this practice to create contracts that align with their values, course outcomes, and

target practices of writing. First, **pedagogical values and course outcomes must be considered,** especially in terms of what students are tasked to practice. The grading contract must outline target practices and writing goals for students to demonstrate what constitutes a successful essay. These tangible goals should be reflective of disciplinary expectations and course learning outcomes.

After having considered the values or goals of a particular assignment, instructors should identify specific ways students can demonstrate pedagogical values in their knowledge making and composing practices as they complete their assignment. Importantly, the students' demonstration of knowledge making is idiosyncratic to a particular genre of writing or essay topic. To accomplish this, instructors might list a variety of ways students can be successful on a particular assignment, naming these features of writing an assignment's grading contract.

Importantly, lesson plans that build up to each assignment should be represented in the gradable values. The target practices in the grading contract must be taught to students and practiced prior to a major assignment's due date. When teaching students how to meet these contracted expectations, offer feedback as the assignment process unfolds. These target practices should be foregrounded as lessons and low-stakes assignments are introduced to students, as these practices are specific to and necessary for the successful completion of their respective assignment.

Considering Affordances of Grading Contracts in OLI

In considering affordances in OLI, to delineate the kind of affordance students experience when encountering various types of online learning materials is important. For example, when considering the affordances of grading contracts, we might clarify what grading contracts afford students and teachers in teaching, composing, and grading practices, especially as they relate to the WPA outcomes of rhetorical knowledge, information literacy, processes, and conventions.

For example, in teaching students about information literacy—guiding them through texts and encouraging their responses thereof—a number of usability affordances present themselves in online contexts in the facilitation of this learning outcome. For example, delivering reading in online contexts enhances the accessibility of course materials. Sharing readings online—especially Open Access readings—minimizes socioeconomic barriers to education. Simply put, in making readings available one click away, all students can access the course materials, provided they have a device and internet connection. Accordingly, when students are tasked to practice information literacy, the online writing course is better equipped to provide students with the necessary learning materials to integrate sources in their own writing, as per the target practice of utilizing quotations and summary of outside sources for their own purposes.

As students engage in digital composing practices, a number of rhetorical affordances are available to students, regardless of their field of interest. For example, for a major essay, students might create a multimodal feature to the written assignment such as a graphic organizer with Google drawing, a meme, or some other kind of digital image which interprets or supports the written assignment, as per the assignment's grading contract. Leveraging the rhetorical affordances of multimodal communication, arguably, creates a more rhetorically effective composition, and furthermore in doing so, demonstrates their acquisition of the target learning outcome. This is one way students can demonstrate their rhetorical knowledge in online writing contexts, while also meeting the expectations of an assignment's grading contract.

Furthermore, communicative affordances of OLI are embedded within the grading contract options for the demonstration of writing as a process. Specifically, barriers to communication must be negotiated by leveraging the communicative affordances of the online real-time and any time modes. All Kole's grading contracts encourage students to practice writing as a process by communicating with the instructor in various phases of drafting. To satisfy practices of the grading contract, students might submit a draft to the instructor for feedback asynchronously or to meet with the instructor for a real-time brainstorming session during office hours. As such, students are provided the option in the grading contract to access the instructor for feedback in the online modality that best suits their needs. Receiving feedback is one of the gradable practices from which students may choose in selecting their desired grades. In this way, the communicative affordances of online instruction are leveraged to provide students feedback while they meet the contracted expectations for demonstrating writing as a process.

Kole believes that grading contracts afford transparency, as the grading protocol is made clear to students. Specific expectations are set for students to meet in order to earn a guaranteed grade. The grading process is transparent and not left to subjective judgments about student writing, but rather agreed-upon practices and goals for student writing. Furthermore, grading contracts promote equity, as a measurable amount of labor is equal to all students, without privileging students who have been trained in cultures and education systems that reflect White habits of languaging.

Kole hopes this assessment method progressively approaches antiracist grading practice as what students do in relation to assignment goals is foregrounded, not students' linguistic practices. Furthermore, these gradable assignment goals are reflective of traditional and antiracist understandings of what writing can do in the FYC classroom and beyond. Grading contracts have the potential of encouraging students to engage online literacy as they become more confident

writers. Furthermore, assessment is less about subjective judgment from the instructor and more about students' volition in composing and communicating. Accordingly, teachers might consider how they can enhance transparent and equitable grading practices by developing their own grading contracts that are reflective of pedagogical goals of disciplinary knowledge and practices.

Reflections

Even if we approach it in different ways, both of us, Kevin and Kole, value giving all our students the opportunity to succeed in our online writing classes. After being introduced to our grading contracts, students begin the semester knowing what work they must do to not only pass the class but to excel at the class. Students, who do not come to our online classes with the *habitus* often expected of writing students, are taught these expectations but given the opportunity to attempt them or to deliberately resist them. Although we both expect students to provide evidence that they can perform certain rhetorical moves—whether they are providing examples to support or illustrate claims or being able to examine a source for its topics and purpose—we leverage the technological affordances of online education to engage our students and build upon further individual instruction to provide the necessary evidence. However, our different approaches also reflect the ways that our values differ—which also probably reflects our different ranks, responsibilities, and the ways we negotiate these aspects of our lives with what we most value in the students' experience with online writing instruction. While Kevin honors students' engagement with him and with each other, Kole rewards them for choosing to demonstrate proficiencies relevant to specific types of writing assignments.

CONCLUSION

We hope that this chapter does not suggest that we have figured out the problem of grading equity. Nothing can be further from the truth. But what we have done is taken a step away from the traditional approaches used for evaluating students' work, giving us the opportunity to interrogate the old ways of assessment and explore and scrutinize new assessment methods. As you make this step, practice forgiveness with yourself. You will make misjudgments. You will continue to harm some students—both because you will not always get it right and because you cannot get some students to trust the expectations of this assessment system. But what is important is that you take that first step. Arguably this step is particularly significant in online literacy instruction where decisions have been made to design simpler courses to make them more manageable for those

within the underprepared labor pools often asked to teach these courses (DePew et al., 2006). Instead, administrators and instructors need to find ways to apply GSOLE's principle of accessibility and inclusivity.

Challenging the established *habitus* of the academy, by adopting such practices as the development of critical language awareness is a threat to our established norms of schooling, both in terms of teaching philosophies and institutional norms. There will be unlearning. There will be resistance. There will be challenges to overcome. You will be doubted. You will be criticized. You will feel discouraged. While all of this is true, we ask you to work to foster a radical equity towards your students. Generations of BIPOC students have undergone a similar kind of scrutiny; however, these students did not choose to be doubted, criticized, or discouraged. Traditional systems of education have made it so. This is why it is our privilege and responsibility, as instructors, to break the racist cycles we have perpetuated every day in the writing classroom. It is our privilege and responsibility to take on the judgment, anger, and vitriol which is typically reserved for our BIPOC students when their voices enter the conversation. To create space for all students is our moral and ethical obligation, so all students, and hopefully one day all instructors, experience learning that is based on a nurtured understanding of better practices in teaching and grading.

MOVING BETTER PRACTICES ACROSS MODALITIES

- **In-Person, Real-Time Learning:** Having conversations about ungrading and its intentional differences from traditional grading systems should be held in-class. Students need activities, like reflective prompts, that help them situate their past experiences with grading and consider how this new method of assessment will differ from those experiences while also providing them with space for new areas of focus, like growth. Helping students navigate the emotional and academic reactions to new forms of grading is important in establishing trust in the new ungrading system. You might ask students, "What have your experiences with grades and grading been in the past? How do you feel about grades/grading? Along with these feelings, what thoughts or questions do you have about grades and grading?"
- **Online, Real-Time Learning:** Similar conversations summarized above can be adapted for breakout rooms, discussion boards, or collaborative whiteboard spaces.
- **Online, Any Time Learning:** Students can complete discussion board posts situating their experiences and feelings in relation to their peers. Then, they can offer feedback to peers' posts using sentence stems, like

"I agree that ____." "I, too, have experienced ____." Provide students with optional or required check-ins to gauge their feelings about this new form of assessment and answer any additional questions.

- **Hybrid Learning:** You can begin conversations about ungrading in in-person meetings with options for students to continue exploring their thoughts and ideas asynchronously after the class meeting. When students come back together, you can field lingering questions and ensure all students feel confident in how their learning will be evaluated using the ungrading system.

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