Appendix A. Labor-Based Grading Contract

Grading Contract for XXX

https://tinyurl.com/LBContract2023

Class:

Imagine that this wasn't an official course for credit at this school, but instead that you had seen my advertisement in the newspaper or on the Internet and were freely coming to my home studio for a class in cooking or yoga. We would have classes, workshops, or lessons, but there would be no official grading of omelets or yoga poses, since letters and numbers would be meaningless in those scenarios. But we all would learn, and perhaps in an encouraging, fun, and creative environment. In considering this course and that home studio scenario, we might ask ourselves several questions:

- Why are grades meaningless in that home studio setup?
- How do grades affect learning in classrooms?
- What is the nature of grades? What do we think they really do?
- What social dynamics does the presence of grades create? How do we react to them and why?

In both situations, students or participants receive evaluative and formative feedback, but in the home studio, many of you would help each other, even rely on each other during and outside of scheduled meetings. In fact, you'd likely get more feedback from your peers on your work and practices than in a conventional classroom where only the teacher is expected to evaluate and grade. So, what makes the presence of grades harmful in the classroom?

Three Arguments Against Grades in Our Course

First, using conventional classroom grading of essays and other work to compute course grades often leads students to think more about acquiring grades than about their writing or learning; to worry more about pleasing a teacher or fooling one than about figuring out what they really want to learn, or how they want to communicate something to someone for some purpose. Lots of research in education, writing studies, and psychology over the last 40 or so years have shown overwhelmingly how the presence of grades in classrooms negatively affects the learning and motivation of students. Alfie Kohn (2011), a well-known education researcher and teacher of teachers, makes this argument succinctly. Kohn argues that grades negatively affect students in at least three ways:

- Grades "diminish students' interest in whatever they're learning";

- Grades "create a preference for the easiest possible task"; and
- Grades "reduce the quality of students' thinking."

In short, grades do not help students learn. To put it another way, if learning is what we are here for, then grades just get in the way since they are the wrong goals to strive for. An "A" doesn't build a good bridge for an engineer, nor does it help a reporter write a good story, or an urban planner make good decisions for her city. It's the learning that their grades in school allegedly represent that provides the knowledge to do all that they need to. And so, how do we make sure that our goals aren't about grades in this course, but about learning to write?

Second, conventional grading may cause you to be reluctant to take risks with your writing or ideas. It doesn't allow you to fail at writing, which many suggest is a primary way in which people learn from their practices. Sometimes grades even lead to the feeling that you are working against your teacher, or that you cannot make a mistake, or that you have to hide part of yourself from your teacher and peers. The bottom line is, failure at writing is vital to learning how to write better. And we have to embrace our failures because they show us the places we can improve, learn, and get better. And aren't these the reasons we are in college? In short, grades on our work and writing do not allow us to productively or meaningfully fail. They create conditions that mostly punish failure, not reward it for the learning opportunity it can and should be.

As you might already notice, what I'm arguing for here is a different kind of classroom, and even education. Sir Ken Robinson (2010), a well-known education researcher, makes the argument in a TED talk (https://youtu.be/zDZF-cDGpL4U) that typical schooling, with grades and particular standards, is an old and mostly harmful system that we've inherited, but now needs to change. One harmful aspect of this old system is that it assumes everyone is the same, that every student develops at the same pace and in the same ways, that our brains are all the same and develop in the same ways and at the same rates, that variation in skills and literacies in a classroom is bad. It is clear the opposites of these things are truer if we think diversity is a strength and offers us valuable ways to innovate, learn new things, and understand old things from new angles and perspectives.

Third, and lastly, conventional grading often relies on uneven and inequitable expectations about how much labor or work any given student must do to get the grade they want. Typically, how much time you need to spend on something in a course is a hidden, even unspoken, part of the assignment. In most cases, the teacher and their grading system simply do not account for the time students spend on the work of the course. You are assigned something, and you must do it, if you want the grade. And yet, it may take one student an hour to read an assigned chapter or write a short 300-word response to an assigned topic, while it may take another student two or three times that amount of time to produce the same thing.

Our Grading System Should Value
and Honor Our Differences

We all labor differently and produce words, or read them, at different rates for a number of reasons, and most of these reasons we do not control. For instance, we all live different and complex lives in conditions that can vary dramatically from one student to another. Living in a busy dorm room affords very different periods of "homework" time than, say living in a quiet house off campus with your mother or father. Many of us work and go to school at the same time. Some of us don't. Each of our brains work differently, often dramatically differently, and function at different rates or speeds. Some of us experience chronic or periodic disabilities or illness. In fact, most of us will experience some disability in our lives, and all of us will experience illness. The point is, our grading system in this course should try to account for these very real and important neurological, biological, environmental, and social differences that make our ways of laboring possible.

One way to value and honor our differences is to have a definition of "disability" that allows us NOT to create "normal" and "abnormal" kinds of laboring or progress in the course. This definition will help us negotiate this grading contract in ways that afford what is called "universal design for learning" (UDL) principles. Most disability scholars and researchers understand that the idea of disability, what it looks like and how to define it, is not something that is inherent in people. That is, disability is not an abnormal biological or medical condition. We all have biological and medically defined conditions. It's just that some of our conditions have been deemed to be "normal" and others not. And we've designed our world in ways that better fit those deemed "normal," which causes problems for others. No ramps and only stairs is a classic example of this. Imagine a world where stairs didn't exist, only ramps. Those who currently can not access buildings because there are no ramps would not have any problems getting to doors, and would not be considered disabled in this way. So we might ask: Where are our ramps in our grading contract? Are there enough of them?

In her book *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Allison Kafer, a scholar who is disabled, offers this definition of disability:

> The definitional shift away from the medical/individual model makes room for new understandings of how best to solve the "problem" of disability. In the alternative perspective, which I call the political/relational model, **the problem of disability no longer resides in the minds or bodies of individuals but in built environments and social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds, and ways of being . . .** the problem of disability is **located in inaccessible buildings, discriminatory attitudes, and ideological systems that attribute normalcy and deviance to particular minds and bodies.**

> The problem of disability is solved not through medical inter-
> vention or surgical normalization but through social change
> and political transformation. (my emphasis)

The social change or political transformation we can make in our grading con-
tract comes out of the negotiations we have about our grading contract that value
and honor our differences while still accomplishing our stated learning goals.

To help us further, I offer the key principles of universal design for learning
(UDL) that come from the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 and the
National Center for Universal Design (see also CAST). If we've got the right con-
tract, then it will engage with these principles:

- Provide **multiple means of representation**, or offer information and
  learning to students in a variety of ways.
- Provide **multiple means of action and expression**, or offer a variety of
  ways to do the learning.
- Provide **multiple means of engagement**, or offer a variety of reasons why
  students should do or engage with the learning asked of them.

While I've tried very hard to use the above definition and UDL principles to
design our course's grading contract and our labor instructions in flexible ways,
I may have missed something or a good idea that you can help us with. Keep
in mind that the above principles are for curriculum design, not assessment or
grading system design. They need translating when thinking about our grading
contract. So we might boil a good part of the above principles down to this design
principle, which I'll call a universal designed for assessment (UDA):

> Afford **multiple and collaborative means of judging and as-
> sessing** student performances and learning, which includes
> standards or expectations that are responsive to all students'
> needs and learning conditions

Thus, as you consider this grading contract ask yourself: *How do we make
our grading contract flexible enough so that everyone can learn and succeed in this
course? What barriers to learning and progress are there in our grading contract?
How are our multiple and collaborative means of judging and assessing responsive
to our needs and our learning conditions?*

And So . . .

I offer this first draft of a contract that focuses on the responsibilities we'll assume,
the labors we'll do, not the things to which someone else (usually the teacher) will
hold you accountable. The shift I'm suggesting is in part a cultural one, one that
I would like you to control. Therefore, we will try to approximate the evaluative
conditions of a home studio course. That is, we will try to create a culture of

support, or rather a *community of compassion*, a group of people who genuinely care about the wellbeing of each other—and part of that caring, that compassion, is doing things for each other. It turns out, this also helps you learn. The best way to learn is to teach others, to help, to serve. So we will function as collaborators, allies, as fellow-travelers with various skills, abilities, experiences, and talents that we offer the group, rather than adversaries working against each other for grades or a teacher's approval.

Do not worry. You will get lots of assessments on your writing and other work during the semester from your colleagues and me. Use these assessments (written and verbal) to rethink ideas and improve your writing and practices, to take risks, in short to fail and learn from that failing. Always know that I will read everything and shape our classroom assessment activities and discussions around your work, but you will not receive grades from me. Sometimes, I will not even comment directly on your work, except in class when we use it or discuss it. I want you not only to rely on your colleagues and yourself for assessment and revision advice, but to build strategies of self-assessment that function apart from a teacher's approval.

Thus, the default grade for the course is an "A+" (4.33). In a nutshell, if you do all that is asked of you in the manner and spirit it is asked, if you work through the processes we establish and the work assign in the labor instructions during the quarter, if you do all the labor asked of you, then you'll get an "A+" course grade, the highest grade possible. It will not matter what I or your colleagues think of your writing, only that you are listening to our feedback compassionately and doing what you can to respond to it. We may disagree or misunderstand your writing, but if you put in the labor, you are guaranteed an A+ course grade. If you do not participate fully, turn in assignments late, forget to do assignments, or do not follow the labor instructions, you will get a lower course grade (see the final breakdown grade table at the end of this contract).

"A+" Grades

You are guaranteed a course grade of "A+" (4.33) if you meet all of the following conditions.

1. **Participate in good faith**. You agree to fully participate in good faith in all of the labor instructions that are posted. This includes using Slack as prescribed in the labor instructions. While many labor instructions look similar, the details often are not the same, so carefully reading all labor instructions before you plan on doing them is vital if you wish to participate fully and manage your time effectively. This does NOT mean that you must follow the labor instructions to the letter. Your job is to participate as fully as possible in the spirit those labor instructions are given and meet our course goals and your personal learning goals.

2. **Practice compassion.** You agree to negotiate in good faith and use to the best of your abilities our Charter for Compassion, which contains the behaviors and actions we agree will cultivate a culture of compassion.

3. **Avoid turning in late or incomplete work.** You agree to turn in properly and on time all of the work and assignments expected of you in the spirit they are assigned, which means you'll complete all of the labor instructions for each assignment. Additionally, during the semester, you may turn in any assignments late, but **only some kinds of assignments (labors) will count against your contract as late**. Those labors are ones that most directly negatively affect your colleagues when you do not do them on time. These labors are labeled as "**fixed due date**." These kinds of labors turned in late are counted against your contract (see the breakdown table on the last page). The exact number of those late assignments is stipulated in the table on the last page of this contract, which we negotiate. Late/Incomplete work is defined as any work or document due that is turned in AFTER the due date/time BUT before the last day of the term. Please note that some labors will not get any responses (from your peers or me, your professor) if turned in late, depending on when they are turned in. This means you will not be able to get valuable feedback for your learning if you turn in some labors late or too late in the term.

4. **Do not miss work**. You agree not to miss any work expected of you. Missed work is any work unaccounted for in the term by the last day of the term (before finals week). This means, at that point, I have no record of you doing it or turning it in. My sense is that missing the work so crucial to one's development as a learner in our community is bad and unacceptable, so accumulating any "missed" work will keep you from meeting our contract expectations quickly (see table below).

5. **Complete all work in the spirit it is assigned, on time, and in good faith.** You agree to turn in on time and in the appropriate manner all the labor assigned in the spirit it is assigned. This means you'll follow, in good faith, the LABOR INSTRUCTIONS given for the assignment/labor and be thoughtful about how much time you need and can spend doing the labor of the course.

Knowing Where You Stand

This system is better than regular grading for giving you a clear idea of what your final grade looks like at any moment. If you are doing everything as directed and turning things in on time (no matter what anyone says about the nature or quality of your work), you're getting an A+ (4.33) course grade. To know about any late or missed assignments I have recorded that may lower your final grade, you agree to check your Canvas grade book frequently. There, I will mark any labor you've done that is late as "late" and any labor not completed yet as "missing." Once you

do the labor appropriately, then I'll change that designation to "late" if it is an essay or assessment letter. I'll mark it as "complete" and "on time" if it is any other kind of labor, which doesn't count against your contract. You can count up how many late labors and missed you have on your Canvas grade book page, then consult our breakdown table at the end of this agreement (below).

Thus, the grade of A+ (4.33) depends primarily on behavior and labor. Have you shown responsible effort and consistency in our class? Have you done what was asked of you in the spirit it was asked? Have you put in the appropriate amount of labor? But if you turn in too many late essays or assessment labor goals or miss labors, your grade will drop (see the grade breakdown table below).

Breakdown of the Main Components

Below is a table that shows the components that affect your successful compliance with our contract. The grades in the far left column are the ONLY grades you may receive in this course (there are no in-between grades, like a C+ or a B-). The labors goals (assignments) that count against anyone's contract when turned in after their due dates are labeled on Canvas as "**fixed due date**" next to them. They are mostly the essay labors (2 possible), assessment letter labors (3 possible), and the final project labor (1 possible).

Most of the other labor goals (assignments) turned in after their unit's due date do not count against one's contract, but still must be done or they count as missed labors if those labor goals are not completed by the last day of the term. Because of its importance to each student's learning, the **Final Project will count as 2 missed labor goals** if not completed. Thus, missing that labor will result in a D course grade.

	# non-Partic Days	# of Late/Incomplete Assigns.	# of Missed Assigns.
A+ (4.33)	3	2	0
A (4.0)	3	3	0
B (3.0)	4	4	0
C (2.0)	5	5	1
D (1.0)	6	6	2
E (0.0)	7	7	3

ONE Gimme. I (Asao), as the administrator of our contract, will decide in consultation with the student whether a gimme is warranted in any case. This will be done in our final conference at the end of the term. Our primary concern will be to make fair and equitable arrangements, ones that will be fair and equitable

to all in the class and still meet the university's regulations on attendance, con-
duct, and workload in classes. You may use a gimme for any reason. Please keep
in mind that the contract is a public, social contract, one agreed upon through
group discussion and negotiation, so my job is to make sure that whatever agree-
ment we come to about a gimme will not be unfair to others in class. A gimme
does not allow you to ignore any work expected of everyone in the class, nor can it
change a rule we've agreed upon in this contract. A gimme may do the following:

- Make 1 late assignment into an "on time" assignment
- Make 1 missed assignment into a late one (but not the final project labor)

A gimme MAY NOT be used to make a missed final project into a late one
because the final project is vital to all students' learning in this course.

By staying in this course and attending class, you accept this contract and
agree to abide by it, in effect "signing" it. I (Asao) also agree to abide by the con-
tract and administer it fairly and equitably.