

Chapter I. Introduction

“Do we imagine that those who live with disabilities live less valuable lives—and if so, how does that seep into our work? Are we prepared to reach toward a radical liberatory corporeal politics that imagines and makes space for truly free Black bodies of all abilities?”

– Bailey and Mobley 26

While Bailey and Mobley are promoting a “Black feminist disability framework” in order to address the ways oppression operates intersectionality in two disciplines, I read their questions in the above epigraph as a call, one that applies to my own work with labor-based grading in college classrooms. Their discussion makes me ask: Have I “imagined those who live with disabilities [to] live less valuable lives” in the way I construct my labor-based grading ecologies? How does this concern intersect with the varied habits and dispositions of BIPOC students? Or have I not made enough room in labor-based grading (LBG) to imagine those with disabilities or neurodivergencies? How might LBG ecologies more explicitly cultivate a “radical liberatory corporeal politics that imagines and makes space” for all bodies, each with their own capacities?

I realized the importance of these questions more poignantly from two discussions, both of which I’m grateful for and indebted to. The first was published in 2020 by Kathleen Kryger and Griffin X. Zimmerman, “Neurodivergence and Intersectionality in Labor-Based Grading Contracts.” The second was published in 2021 by Ellen C. Carillo, *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading*. These scholars have shown me some ways to pay closer attention to the ableist and neurotypical aspects of labor expectations in all grading ecologies, especially in LBG. This was something on my radar when writing the book. In fact, when discussing universal design principles that agree with LBG, I say: “In terms of the scholarship and impressive work being done around UDL and disability studies, I am still learning and perhaps most excited about ways it may help improve labor-based grading contracts. I feel I have a lot to learn and perhaps alter in my own practices” (*Labor-Based Grading* 229/225).¹ This monograph takes up this revisioning of LBG in a more robust way.

The main aim of my discussion in this monograph is to consider ways to continue moving the practice and theory of LBG forward by incorporating insights

1. Throughout this monograph, I cite both editions of *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom* when I reference pages. The first page in any parenthetical citation will be from the 1st edition (2019) and the second page number after the forward slash will be the same reference in the 2nd edition (2022). The second edition is available in open-access formats on the WAC Clearinghouse at <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/labor/>.

from Disability Studies. In particular, I attempt to consider ways one might “crip labor-based grading ecologies” in order to build more equity in the practice. However, I believe my discussion is not just for teachers or scholars who are interested in LBG. Whether a teacher uses labor to grade or not, I think all teachers might pay close attention to how labor is defined, functions, and circulates in their ecologies. Labor, expected or actually done by students, is always an equity issue, even when we don’t use it for grading purposes. As Carillo’s critique of LBG reminds us, without accounting for the ways student labor can become a normative, ableist, and neurotypical standard, any assessment ecology can reproduce this equity problem.

Labor is always expected of our students when we assign or expect learning from them. Thus, while such discussions as Carillo’s are squarely focused on LBG, I find her concerns applicable to all grading ecologies. Her criticisms are, however, centered on LBG, and so the question I wish to consider in this book is: How can labor-based grading evolve so that it addresses the concerns around inequitable access to or expectations of labor that students with disabilities, neurodivergencies, illnesses, or limited time in the semester may face? This is a big problem to solve. It isn’t one solely created by our grading systems. Like many issues of inequity in our educational systems, it is also not fully in the control of the teacher, students, or our course activities. However, these are not reasons to avoid the very real concerns around labor that can create inequitable learning conditions for many of our students.

And so, throughout this monograph, I offer a rethinking of LBG ecologies. I often use my own evolving practice of LBG that tries to account for students with disabilities and neurodivergencies as a way to think through the ideas, but I begin by drawing on disability studies to help me rethink and expand my own antiracist grading ecology. I should also note that I released a second edition of *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom* in November of 2022, so I will reference both the first and second editions in this monograph in parenthetical citations. In those citations, the first-page number refers to the first edition, while the second-page number references the location in the second edition, such as: (100/97).

A Very Brief Description of LBG

For those who may be less familiar with LBG, I offer this very brief account. LBG is a set of classroom agreements that are negotiated with all the students in a course. These agreements determine how much labor will be expected of students and how it will be accounted for or identified in order to get particular final course grades. Such agreements typically cover late policies, attendance (if applicable), what constitutes completed labor or enough labor in any given assignment, what markers of labor are usable, and any exceptions to these guidelines. Additionally, the contract is written for and applies to the entire class, not individual students, so in my practice, there is only one contract for everyone in a

course. Beyond being more logistically manageable on the part of a busy teacher, I believe we all should find ways to agree, make compromises for each other's benefit, and work together to learn in community.

Furthermore, creating and negotiating individual contracts for each student participates in at least two habits of White language (HOWL): A habit of "hyperindividualism" and a habit that favors a "rule-governed, contractual relationship" with the individual that tends to ignore the larger social community and its well-being.² I believe participating in such HOWLING in my grading ecologies would harm the larger learning environment by participating in White language supremacy (Inoue, *Above the Well* 12). Furthermore, a communal contract avoids several characteristics of White supremacy culture that are present when individual contracts are used. These characteristics of White supremacy culture are ones that Tema Okun identifies and are part of most organizations (Okun n.p.).

In short, if students do all the labor asked of them in the labor-based grading contract, then they will get the agreed upon grade, no matter what anyone, including the teacher, thinks of their writing or work. While quality judgements do not play a role in determining grades in LBG, they still play an important part in the feedback and other course processes, just as they do in conventional grading ecologies. The key distinction in LBG is that such feedback on quality is separated from decisions about completion of or grades on all individual assignments. LBG attempts to keep all grades out of the course and off assignments. It separates judgements of quality about student writing and other work from decisions about the completion of work or the final course grade. Completion of labor, instead, is used to make final grades.

I should note that there are many ways to do LBG, many ways teachers have written, negotiated (or not), and used LBG contracts in their courses. The practice can look really different depending on a range of factors, such as the teacher's understanding of the practice, their pedagogies, their department guidelines and requirements for courses, students' needs and conditions of learning, course goals, etc. Like all other assessment ecologies, it is a wide and varied practice. Unless otherwise noted, I can speak mostly about my own LBG ecologies in my own courses at Arizona State University, which typically are a mix of 15-week and 7.5-week courses, many are asynchronous online courses, as well as face-to-face ones.

LBG should also be understood as distinct from other contract grading practices, such as hybrid grading contracts that Danielewicz and Elbow offer. In hybrid grading contract ecologies, teachers usually use some judgements of quality to determine final course grades. Such judgements are typically deployed near the end of the semester for making final grade decisions between A and B course grades.

2. To learn more about HOWL, see my discussion of it in "Classroom Writing Assessment as an Antiracist Practice: Confronting White Supremacy in the Judgments of Language," and Chapter 6 in *Above the Well: An Antiracist Argument from A Boy of Color* (22-28).

Further, LBG contracts are not what some Education literature calls “learning contracts,” which I have discussed elsewhere (Inoue, *Labor-Based Grading* 63-65/61-63). In short, learning contracts determine learning goals for individual students and often avoid detailing precisely how grades are determined, at least in the literature I’ve reviewed on the practice. I do, however, place hybrid grading contracts and LBG contracts under the larger set of practices called “ungrading” (see Blum; Stommel, “Ungrading,” *Undoing the Grade*). They are one way to do ungrading in college courses, but LBG does not define all the practices of ungrading. Finally, LBG is not the same as Linda Nilson’s “specifications grading,” although there are some common features, such as no grades on assignments. This means I consider specifications grading another practice of ungrading.

If you still need more information about LBG, I offer resources for teachers and students, including my most recent LBG contract template, on my website’s resource page (“Labor-Based Grading Resources”). There is also a current version of my contract, as of this writing, in Appendix A. I’ve discussed LBG as an anti-racist grading ecology in several places over the last decade (“A Grade-less”; *Labor-Based Grading*; Chapter 4 of *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies*). I’ve also discussed the effectiveness of LBG (“Grading Contracts: Assessing”; and Chapter 7 in the 2nd edition of *Labor-Based Grading*) and the construction and frequency of failure in writing programs, which compares various kinds of failure made in conventional and LBG ecologies (“Theorizing Failure”). Keep in mind, some of these discussions stretch back to 2012, so likely, they offer a view of my evolving practice and theorizing of LBG.

Summary of Chapters

This monograph has eleven chapters and two appendices. In Chapter 2, I define “disability” from an intersectional perspective for labor-based grading, drawing on Alison Kafer’s definition of disability and Moya Bailey and Izzetta Autumn Mobley’s Black feminist framework. This discussion helps me consider several ideas that Carillo and others have raised, namely the importance of intersectional ways that oppression works through labor expectations in groups of students. I advocate for defining explicitly disability in LBG ecologies so that the definition can inform the grading contract design and negotiations. I lean heavily on Alison Kafer’s discussions of disability and “imagined futures,” and consider the ways race is already implicated in our notions of disability that come out of Bailey and Mobley’s work. In Chapter 3, I explore the concept of “crip time” by considering “crip labor” in LBG. In addition to Kafer, I draw on Tara Wood’s discussion of crippling composition, Ellen Samuels’ experiences of crip time, and Jack Halberstam’s “queer art of failure” in order to conceive of crip labor in LBG ecologies.

Chapters 4 through 8 discuss labor-based concerns that I’m attempting to rethink and understand from a disability theory orientation. They focus centrally on making LBG ecologies more equitable for students with disabilities and

neurodivergency. Chapter 4 begins this section of chapters by summarizing the main criticisms Carillo has of LBG, as discussed in *The Hidden Inequities of Labor-Based Contract Grading* since they have been central to my rethinking. I consider the ways LBG can use a normative, ableist, and neurotypical standard of labor and ways out of this problem. I also argue that such a problem is a universal one, not as a way to alleviate my own need to address concerns that students with disabilities and neurodivergencies reveal about LBG, but to show that we all must deal with this same concern, regardless of our grading system. I think this reveals a meaningful paradox.

Chapter 5 considers “cripping labor” in contract negotiations in LBG ecologies. I discuss the important concepts of “forced intimacy” and principles of universal design for learning (UDL). I incorporate Kerschbaum’s notion of “learning with” students in order to understand their differences in grading ecologies that require such negotiations. The chapter ends with an important aspect of my grading ecologies, the charter for compassion, which I argue can help create conditions favorable to Mingus’ idea of “access intimacy” and opens the door for the practice to be anti-ableist and address concerns around students with neurodivergencies.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the nature and circulation of quantitative labor measures as guides in assignments and as standards for determining competition of those assignments. This chapter responds to the ways labor measures and standards in an LBG ecology can function as normative, ableist, and neurotypical. I discuss the biases that accumulate in all measures used to grade in writing courses. I also return to my construct of “a willingness to labor” that I use to assess my LBG ecology’s effectiveness, which uses quantitative measures of labor, and I consider how it actually helps me crip LBG.

In Chapter 7, I focus on redirecting the biases that accumulate in measures in LBG ecologies that can participate in normative, ableist, and neurotypical standards of labor. I direct attention to the circulation of measures as the main way those measures accumulate their biases. I offer a way to design measures for grading with biases in mind, which I argue is not a typical way most writing teachers design their grading practices. I also demonstrate one way to understand equity in labor expectations in a grading ecology by looking at the dispersion of labor done by students.

In Chapter 8, I discuss the hidden judgements of quality in LBG. I consider deeper concerns of equity brought up by Carillo, ones that suggest BIPOC students actually are harmed more in LBG. I show that actually there is no way to tell if BIPOC students do more work for lower grades than their White peers. Furthermore, I demonstrate that it is likely that the opposite conclusion is truer, that BIPOC students do better and labor exactly along our contract guidelines for the grades they get. Chapter 9 centers on concerns about predictability and clarity in LBG ecologies. Such aspects of a grading ecology can create inequalities for students who experience neurodivergency. My discussion also engages with other discussions that focus on the affective dimensions of grades that Kryger and Zimmerman reference in their discussions about these issues.

In Chapter 10, I consider Carillo's alternative to LBG, "engagement-based grading contracts." While she does not provide an example contract or any details about what one might look like, nor how exactly to enact one, she does gesture to some ideas around engagement-based grading. I try to imagine in a generous way how I would enact an engagement-based grading contract and consider how students would experience such a system. This exercise helps me discover insights that we might learn from engagement-based grading models and how different (or not) those models are from LBG. While the exercise leads me back to LBG, I explore this as an alternative that has value to writing and languaging teachers, and value to me as a teacher who still finds LBG a more equitable practice.

Chapter 11 brings all the insights I've discussed together as a list of changes and possible elements that might be used in an LBG ecology, or perhaps any grading ecology. They amount to crippling labor in grading ecologies. The list constitutes the more practical insights and practices that are at the heart of this monograph. In all eight cases but one, I have practiced the ideas and offer a few observations from my experiences. In one case (the last practice), I offer what I think might be possibilities, but have not incorporated that idea into my own practices yet.

I end with a short afterword that collects just a few student voices speaking directly to their own experiences of LBG. Two are from other teachers and their LBG ecologies, one is from my own courses. These student voices speak not only to their experiences with crippling labor but several of the important affordances of LBG that this monograph discusses. Two appendices follow the afterword. One includes a new template LBG contract that incorporates the crippling practices listed in Chapter 11. The second appendix provides a key document I ask students to read and engage with before we negotiate our contract. This labor document helps orient students to the course and how we will think about and reflect upon labor, which includes how it is calculated in the course.

Ecological Terms

One important note about how I discuss LBG and my practices is my ecological perspective. In the rest of my discussion, I try to emphasize the entire ecology, the larger system that is more than the sum of its elements (Inoue, *Antiracist Writing Assessment* 86). As I've discussed elsewhere, an assessment ecology is made up of at least seven elements: purposes (133), power (121), parts (125), processes (151), people (138), places (158), and products (155). Focusing on the interlocking and complex interactions that make up an ecology de-emphasizes the importance of one element of it, such as the ecological part of the contract itself. I do not believe that a teacher could just take my contract template, use it in their course, then think that they are crafting an antiracist or socially just LBG ecology in the ways I try to discuss in *Labor-Based Grading Contracts* or in this monograph.

My classrooms' LBG ecologies are more than simply the ecological part of the contract that is negotiated with students, more than labor logs, tracking documents,

and labor instructions (other parts that describe processes), more than individual students (people that are consubstantial to places made in the ecology), and more than labor processes that produce assessments and grades (learning products). The ecology is a whole that has all these elements, each of which may be transforming or changing. This is the nature of complex systems, and it is why my *Labor-Based Grading Ecologies* only has one chapter, 39 out of 311 pages of text (or 39 out of 363 pages in the 2nd edition), that focuses on discussing the contract directly. The contract itself, however, is an important ecological part—I do have an appendix that offers the template contract—so I do not want to suggest that it is insignificant. It is simply not the only thing that needs discussing when we think about how labor and its expectations circulate in an LBG ecology.

Therefore, I use the term “LBG ecologies” when referencing what many others tend to reference as “labor-based grading contracts” or “labor-based contract grading.” My term is meant to reflect the way my students and I try to cultivate our grading ecologies, as larger systems, ecologies that have at least seven elements we might consider together. So at times, I say “LBG ecology,” while Carillo, for instance, tends to refer to “labor-based contract grading,” which for me places too much attention on the contract itself as the central and primary element of the system. It is not, even as it is very important to the ecology.

I also use the term “labor-based grading” (LBG) when I speak broadly of the practice and not specifically about my grading ecologies, or when I reference others who don’t discuss the practice as an ecological one. When I use LBG as a term, I may be discussing the larger set of practices that are diverse and different, or I may be referencing a perspective or practice that does not explicitly use an ecological orientation to grading. That is, I do not want to assume other’s ecological orientation when they have not expressed that in their discussions of LBG. Ultimately, my terms are meant to point to the importance of the entire grading ecology without misrepresenting others’ positions.

A Note of Indebtedness

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