

Chapter 10. A Look at Engagement-Based Grading

I wouldn't be doing enough to cripple labor if I didn't seriously consider alternatives to LBG. Carillo suggests "engagement-based grading contracts," in which "students choose their forms of engagement and are assessed on those" activities (56). Engagement-based contracts, she explains, would offer students "access points and value the range of ways that students make meaning" (58). Furthermore, this kind of system could be "less dependent on a normative conception of time and its relationship to labor" (60). She cites Tara Wood's discussion of crippling time in writing classrooms: "One way (not *the* way) to increase accessibility in composition classrooms is to rethink our conceptions of time" (Wood 267; Carillo 59). Drawing on Wood's discussion further, Carillo suggests that this grading system might cripple time by "increasing flexibility, avoiding rigidity, and lowering the stakes of writing (particularly at the beginning stages of a course)" (Wood 270; Carillo 59).

I believe such a grading ecology is a worthy goal to strive for, and engagement-based grading contracts may offer us exactly these things. In fact, the LBG practices that I have discussed in the previous chapters and list in Chapter 11 fit the spirit, if not the letter of, Carillo's idea of engagement-based grading contracts. I applaud the way Carillo foregrounds student choice, agency, and the diverse ways students make meaning and learn (engagement). Engagement-based grading (EBG) may be a good way forward if developed, however I am cautious about it. Carillo is not offering a fully realized model, rather an idea to be developed. As the title of her chapter suggests, she is offering directions to "forge ahead." This is likely because her main thrust in the book is to critique LBG, not offer a fully developed alternative.

Nevertheless, can some version of an EBG system be a viable alternative to LBG, or offer new ways to do LBG? Does it avoid the problems of a normative, ableist, and neurotypical standard of labor? This chapter investigates these questions.

The Trickiness of Student Choice

A key element of EBG from Carillo's description in Chapter 6 of her book is the presence of student choice of assignments or labor in the grading ecology (58-59). Students choose what will engage them in order to demonstrate course outcomes or goals. Student choice is a tricky element in any grading ecology; it shares in the ecological element of power. Student choice seems so right, so democratic, so student-centered, but classrooms are always determined places. As Raymond Williams explains, "determination" in the Marxist sense, is a condition in which there is a "setting of limits" and an "exertion of pressures" (87). Our intentions and actions are a function of the conditions around us that limit us and that present particular choices that seem like choices or seem like the right choices.

Grading ecologies also create boundaries and pressures in particular directions, even when a teacher says, “you choose. It’s your education. What will engage you most? Do that.” A student cannot choose just anything to do. And they certainly cannot choose to do nothing. They also have their histories of other classrooms and teachers working on them, sometimes tacitly, other times overtly. When a student makes any choice, we can consider how much of that choice was determined in the system, was coerced, or was a product of conditions that led to the student consenting to something they would not have under other conditions and influences. Keep in mind that we are always in determined conditions, that is, conditions that both limit our choices and direct us toward particular decisions.

Such determined conditions do not make student choice bad, nor even “false consciousness,” but they do call into question student agency as an exercise in freedom, control, or student interest and engagement. We cannot fully avoid these determined conditions in our courses, but knowing them, I think, helps us understand that student choice is not a 100% good thing, untainted from teacher expectations or influence, nor from the normative, ableist, and neurotypical world outside of the classroom. This might also help us consider how to arrange with our students the available choices at hand. So, how can an EBG system account for the ways student choices of engagement may be (over)determined in ways that create labor inequity?

While Carillo does not offer a fully realized EBG model, I think there are some reasonable things we might observe from her discussion. Students still labor, and they do so unevenly out of necessity. This is not necessarily a problem, just as it isn’t in LBG. Nevertheless, a teacher needs to account for as much of the unevenness in laboring as possible if that teacher wishes to know if their grading ecology is actually fair and not circulating normative, ableist, or neurotypical expectations of labor. This unevenness can easily be hidden or obscured if there is no way to account for it, no way to discern it. Keeping track of labor information and reflecting on it periodically are ways my students and I do this important work.

Affording choice to students is a democratic and important thing to do in all grading ecologies, but I doubt Carillo is suggesting that students have any choice to do anything they like at any moment. There are course objectives and goals, as well as topics and subjects that all courses usually have to focus on. Her example ecology then must assume that those students will be able to choose the things they can or are willing to do from a list of options created by the teacher, or perhaps generated with students. Regardless of how the list is created, the ecology still assumes that students know how to choose, know what things to consider as important factors for choosing, and that the choices students have available are not simply a range of similar options, each another version of ableist and neurotypical labor expectations. While these are concerns in EBG, they are not insurmountable. They will, however, take more time, thought, and energy on the part of both students and teachers.

Framing Student Choices Is an Equity Issue

To have an equitable EBG ecology, we have to figure out how exactly students will choose their assignments. Surely the time it will take to do the labor of the assignment is an important factor in any student's decision, even if this factor is different for each student when considering the same engagement option. This means that the choices available have to be commensurate in some way if the ecology is to justify one student doing option A and another doing option B. How will a student know how much time they need to do a particular option in an engagement-based system, which still requires their labor and their own estimations of labor? How has the system framed and set up that choice, helped students think about how to choose, or even made sure that the choices made by students are commensurate in labor time, yet also not ableist or neurotypical?

One place that the expectations of labor may be understood is in the list of options available to students, that is, the engagements possible for students to choose from. Imagine that possible list and how you would present it to your students. How many choices seem reasonable? It cannot be endless, nor too open-ended. Why? Lots of research in cognitive psychology over the past few decades has shown the clear negative consequences of too many choices on students and consumers (Reutskaja et al. 632). Too many choices can often lead to not being able to make a choice or feeling overwhelmed or unsure about any choice made. So, choices of assignments in an EBG ecology likely must be framed, arranged, and set up for students in some way so that students can make good decisions. This arrangement will make limits and exert some pressure in particular directions.

What stipulations or guidelines must be given to students in order for them to make a choice? How many choices must they pick in the semester and when? I'm putting aside other issues like due dates, peer reviews, or teacher responses that may go with any choice, but those entanglements also would need to be figured out. Their arrangement affects fairness and the ecology's biases toward or away from ableist and neurotypical labor expectations. In short, what measures (and their biases) are being used to create the choices students pick from in order to engage in the course? Those measures directly affect students' labor. Just giving students choice doesn't solve, nor even address, ableist or neurotypical expectations of labor that may be residing in any given engagement choice a student makes, or in the conditions of the course that student must labor in after choosing their work.

Just because a student understands themselves well, has thought often and consciously about the ways they labor, as I believe most students who experience disability or neurodivergency have, and is afforded a choice in how they wish to engage in learning in a course, does not equate to accurate, wise, or even confident decisions about assignments in a particular course. I'm not saying most students don't know how to make a choice about the work they wish to do in a course. I'm saying the way any choice is framed as a choice among other choices and the conditions under which those choices are made and then become labor, can still create ableist

and neurotypical outcomes for students. Framing student choices is an equity issue. So I wonder how can an EBG system be designed to handle this problem?

In my experience with using student-derived rubrics in feedback processes, I have found that students can handle about four to five dimensions in any rubric when using them to make choices about what to give feedback on in drafts. Any more and it's too many dimensions to keep track of or decide from in a meaningful way. Any fewer and we've missed too many important aspects of the work in front of us to discuss in a project or paper and we don't really have much choice in many cases. This seems to fit the common wisdom in consumer choice studies conducted by psychologists that say: Consumers need choices in order to feel good and make a choice, but they can't have too many or too few choices (Schwartz; K n.p.). That research, which comes from psychologist George A. Miller, says that most people can choose from a list of seven items, give or take two items. So the sweet spot of options for most people is a range of five to nine items. My experience with four to five item rubrics matches Miller's findings. While my students' uses of those rubrics are not always about choice, they do involve memory and keeping items together in one's head at once. These were aspects of Miller's famous study, which suggests that giving students an open-ended choice—that is the choice to do anything that they feel will engage them—may not be wise. It may not help them make a good choice. It may not actually be a choice, but rather the most available option that first comes to mind.

So let us say that we decide to go by the research on consumer choice. We also realize that there are big differences in how consumers are confronted with choices to buy things and how students are offered choices to engage in learning activities. Still, we accept that students will do best with five to nine options for any assignment in our EBG ecology. How do we discover and articulate those choices to students?

If all the choices available expect a student to write or record in some way or another (e.g. blog post, video blog, audio recording, etc.) at least 900 words and to read two articles from the library, then there are normative and quantitative labor expectations in place. The same can be said for choices that are described only by quality characteristics or course outcomes. Such expectations also have, in this case, potential ableist and neurotypical expectations, depending on due dates and other factors in the semester. The questions and concerns around ableist and neurotypical standards of labor have not gone away just because we've given students choices based on their interests and senses of engagement. This isn't a cop out or a throwing up of our hands, saying, "well, I guess we just have to live with ableist and neurotypical labor standards." This observation suggest that we must address such equity issues in our grading ecologies in structural ways that work with student choice or agency. Such structures might inform and frame student choice, guiding students while affording opportunities to understand the framing and what their choices really mean to their laboring and learning. What, then, are the most important factors for choice in any given assignment?

For sure, students' choices in such an EBG system depend on several factors that make any list of options. When confronted with any list of options, students must calculate for each item their own estimations of the labor required, the difficulty or effort involved, and their goals or purposes for the work at hand. In lay terms, students might say that their choices are guided by at least three factors, which are really their own perceptions of them: time, difficulty, and the learning goal or purpose at hand. While Carillo's description does not appear to make these aspects of choice apparent for students, nor suggest ways to examine them with students, it seems wise to do so as a part of the initial stages of any assignment.

More importantly, there really needs to be an apparatus that helps students understand a few important labor-based elements that go into their choices. Even if time is something that is experienced differently by each student, it seems ethical to help students understand what time commitments they are taking on when they choose any given option to complete work. Without such labor-based information, the grading ecology can easily become unfair, ableist, and neurotypical.

A big part of the problem, as I see it, is that this engagement-based system appears to avoid discussions of labor. It is reasonable to assume that it will take students different amounts of labor time and engagement to complete the course, and they will need clear guides in order to make accurate and meaningful decisions along the way. So what are the markers of labor or engagement in this system that help students make their choices? Not having them seems to me to be an equity concern, since their absence calls into question the different amounts of time it will require students with disabilities and neurodivergencies to do whatever they have chosen. Just because someone chooses an assignment because they know they will be engaged in it does not mean they can or should engage in that work for that assignment or learning goal, or for just any amount of time. The quantity of time expected and needed to complete any assignment is still operating in EBG and must be accounted for in some way if the ecology is to be equitable. As Carillo reminds us (15-16), our students do not have all the time in the world to do our courses, and many have significantly less time than their more privileged peers. Labor time, even in EBG, is a central element that dictates learning, student experiences, and equitable grading practices.

Furthermore, I believe that labor time expected to complete any work is a deciding factor in most students' choices and in what any student can learn. If their time is so limited and they know they usually need more time to do work in school, then their expected labor time is going to be the first and most important priority a student will use when making an engagement choice. If I were doing an EBG system, I'd design into it a way to gather student information about three equity questions: Why did they choose the work they did; how was time on task a factor in their choice; and how accurate were their initial estimations of time to complete the work chosen?

Measures of Completeness

Another important aspect of EBG that must be figured out is how to determine the measures of completeness of assignments. In conventional grading systems, teachers use measures of quality by a single standard to determine grades or completion. Often such measures are articulated in rubrics and scoring guides. In LBG, teachers use measures of labor, like the number of words written, to determine completion only. As far as I can tell from Carillo's example, assignments done are assessed on measures of engagement, quality, or both, but it's not clear to me. Carillo is never direct about what those measures are or how to use them to determine completeness or grades.

So how exactly students' choices for engagement are assessed is not explained. What Carillo says is that "students choose their forms of engagement and are assessed on those" (56). But what does "assessed on those" choices mean? If you are not counting words or minutes of labor, then what are you assessing? Quality? How does that avoid White language supremacy, or languaging biases that will disadvantage students with disabilities or neurodivergencies? This is vital, even central, to doing EBG that purports to be socially just and equitable for students with disabilities or neurodivergencies, or BIPOC students, or multilingual students, etc. If the measures in one's grading system are mostly word counts, then EBG begins to be a version of LBG. If they are quality standards, then it becomes a conventional quality-based grading system.

Carillo explains: "Following the lead of labor-based grading contracts, engagement-based grading contracts still bracket quality but do not rely on a single standard of labor that is not realistic for an increasing number of students" (58). Quality is "bracketed," meaning not used as criteria for completion, rather "engagement" is used, which "remove[s] the focus on labor altogether—and the normative conception of time that accompanies it" (58). So at least in Carillo's version of EBG, there is no quality standard, nor is there a reliance on a labor standard. But what is left? What exactly is a measure of *engagement* when a teacher gets something from a student, and how do they explain their use of that measure to students?

One could turn to literature on measuring engagement in students for some possibilities. After considering research that measures engagement of students, particularly in college, Marcia Dixson explains that "*student engagement*, as a term, is not well defined" (4). George Kuh defines the concept as "the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities" (Kuh 25; Dixson 4), which Dixson explains was central to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). But Kuh and NSSE were looking at the full college experience, from entrance to exit, not individual assignments or courses. Drawing on several models, Dixson offers a comprehensive definition for online student engagement that I think is useful. She says:

Engagement involves students using time and energy to learn materials and skills, demonstrating that learning, interacting in a meaningful way with others in the class (enough so that those

people become “real”), and becoming at least somewhat emotionally involved with their learning (i.e., getting excited about an idea, enjoying the learning and/or interaction). Engagement is composed of individual attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors as well as communication with others. Student engagement is about students putting time, energy, thought, effort, and, to some extent, feelings into their learning. (4)

What I hear most in this definition of student engagement is time on tasks, effort, and the way students activate how they feel or emotionally respond to learning activities and their colleagues. There are other parts to this definition, content and materials, demonstrations of learning, interactions with peers, etc., but the core of engagement, like Kuh’s simpler definition, is time, energy, and effort. Measures of engagement, from the literature on it as a construct of student experiences, appears to be centrally about labor, time on task, and effort. That is, measures of labor are how these researchers assess student engagement in courses. Note that student choice is not in this definition, even if it may be assumed by many teachers and readers. That is, according to this research, choice of activities is not necessarily an element in student engagement.

In her discussion, Carillo continues to come back to the idea of crippling time, even suggesting we do this with students (61). This sounds great in theory, but she’s never quite specific about how to do any of this in her example. What crippled measures of engagement are possible? How are they different from quality or labor measures? How will they be used in the system to determine completeness or grades?

It is one thing to say that we must be flexible with our expectations of labor and time. No compassionate and thoughtful teacher would disagree with this idea. I do not disagree with it. It is foundational to LBG, just as I think it is for Carillo and the idea of EBG. It’s another thing entirely, though, to figure out how to make this good idea (EBG) a reality as a grading ecology. I’m assuming that if engagement is used as a way to determine completeness of an assignment, then measures of engagement would be listed or explained with the choices possible. And if *crip time* is used as a marker of engagement, then how is it done and how is it explained to students so they understand? I don’t see this level of detail in Carillo’s example, and it feels pretty crucial to accepting EBG contracts as a viable and equitable grading system. Without such details, I fear EBG could end up being the same old grading by quality standards, just with some student choice included, and no ways to interrogate the actual labor happening in the course—no way of noticing any inequity.

A Hypothetical Example

Up to this point, my concerns about EBG are only theoretical, so let me develop an example. And I want to be as fair and open minded as possible because I really like

this idea. My example is not meant to bash EBG, rather it is meant to make it work in the spirit I hear Carillo offering the idea, while also testing its reasonable limits.

If I were designing an EBG ecology in the spirit of Carillo's discussion, I would first throw out all standards of labor like time on task, even words written or read as a way to determine completion of tasks or assignments. I'd describe engagement choices for all of our work in other ways, substantive and topical ways, even connect those choices to our course's objectives or goals. I might still offer the number of words or pages to produce but frame them as approximate targets for the work expected, and only as suggestions or estimations of what "many students" likely need in order to be fully engaged. These estimates are only guides or examples to help students figure out what choice seems most engaging to them. I would also provide generous due dates and would not penalize those who turn in their assignments late.

You likely notice so far that all these elements are present in LBG. I also recognize that Carillo did have problems with offering students labor estimates as guides because labor is not neutral in how it can be numerically represented and can embody a normative, ableist, and neurotypical standard (11-12). But I don't know how else to define options here. My own limitations and lack of creativity keep me from imagining other ways to define and explain work or assignments in a course that aren't some version of "read my mind," so I must lean on numerical guides, like approximate words written or read. However, it is important to note in this example that quantitative labor estimates function as necessary guides in defining work. They are not used to determine the completion of any work. They are not a labor standard. Instead, they are a way for students to make choices, or consider their possible engagements.

There are a few differences between this imagined EBG ecology and my own typical LBG ecology. The most obvious difference is that my LBG ecologies ask for a number of words written as a marker of completion of most assignments. That is, I use this measure to determine when an assignment is complete. My students also do not get to choose every assignment option they wish to do. I provide guides for time on tasks based on a mean labor time that I've estimated for each assignment. Students are expected to translate these labor guides to help them do the work.

But perhaps the biggest way this EBG system diverges from my LBG ecologies is in measures of engagement. To do an EBG system, I would need to include measures of engagement on each assignment choice. I also would feel obligated to explain how I use them to determine completion of assignments. Such measures cannot be the quantity of time or number of words written. I can imagine an EBG system that did use such engagement markers to determine if an assignment is complete without grades or even levels of accomplishment on any assignment, but then, I think, the system becomes a LBG one. Now, if I'm going to avoid such labor measures, I'm not sure what I'm left with, especially if quality is also to be excluded. Keep in mind, we are not talking about feedback on quality or

development; that's happening too, just like in LBG, but it just isn't connected to my judgement of an assignment being complete in order to tabulate a student's final course grade, just like in LBG.

So, what measures might be used? Well, I could offer engagement measures that I think mark engagement in drafts or work. Better yet, my students and I could make lists of such possible measures for each assignment. Next, I could ask students to include a reflective document that chooses the three key engagement measures they want me to use to determine completion of their assignment. This affords more student choice and agency. In that reflective document, they'd also explain how they were engaged and why or how they understood what they did to fulfill the engagement requirements of this assignment. I would not put a word count on this reflective document. This kind of engagement-based grading ecology feels very student-centered, flexible, and doable. It also structurally accounts for a wide range of students and their varying conditions of learning.

But we come back to this question of what exactly are those markers of engagement? What are the range of options that my students and I can come up with? We would need to have several discussions about this as a class. Will students unintentionally use markers that participate in habits of White language (HOWL) and White language supremacy? Will they impose ableist and neurotypical engagement expectations on themselves because they've likely been surrounded by those kinds of expectations their entire lives? That is, do they know any other markers of engagement than ones that easily act as normative, ableist, and neurotypical standards? How much control should I, the teacher, have in creating those engagement measures in order to avoid students participating in their own linguistic oppression?

I know that time on task is often a marker of engagement (but not always), as is the number of words produced for an assignment (but again, not always). These markers can easily participate in ableist and neurotypical biases if used as strict labor standards with strict due dates or time frames. Would the perceived depth or quality of a writing be a measure of engagement, would the frequency of questions offered be a measure? These last two measures risk relying on the judge's (or teacher's) habits of language, thus on habits of White language (HOWL) that too often participate in White language supremacy if used as expectations for grading (Inoue, *Above the Well* 24-28). I would avoid them in determining completion of work.

Perhaps I could offer students Dixson's definition of engagement, or a boiled down list of possible items that come from her discussion. This could help determine possible measures of engagement. Here's one possible list using Dixson's language from the previous cited material (Dixson 4). I'm also assuming that each item has some ways for us to discern it in students' work and activities.

1. Some identified learning that has occurred
1. Markers of time, energy, and/or effort
2. Interactions in a meaningful way with others in the class

3. Emotional involvement with their learning (i.e., getting excited about an idea, enjoying the learning and/or interaction).
4. Attitudes, thoughts, and/or behaviors as well as communication with others
5. Feelings about their learning

The first challenge, I think, is making clear that most of these items refer to states of mind or body that are difficult or impossible to demonstrate in a way that is measurable by a teacher. How can a teacher know the feelings or emotional involvement of a student in any engagement they are judging? Items 1, 4, 5, and 6 fall into this category. They also require more assumptions and judgements about what demonstrates each that are hard to pin down or agree upon. They are slippery. If a demonstration of “learning” or “thought” is required in an assignment, then the teacher and student must agree upon what the universe of possible markers of those two constructs actually reference in a text or product. The same goes for each of the other items in the list.

The difference with items 2 and 3 is that perhaps there is more agreement, or easier ways to agree, about what markers might be used to show things like adequate time, or energy, or effort. In short, those measures can be quantified, just as interactions with others in the course can be. When quantified, items 2 and 3 use fewer habits of White language to determine as well. But now, our markers for engagement start to look a lot like markers of labor. That is, labor seems to be a clear way to mark engagement, even if it is not definitively so.

Even using the above list to begin discussions with students, I find myself confronting the inevitable fact that all measures that my students and I might craft accumulate biases that can determine ableist, neurotypical, or White language supremacist outcomes when used in my EBG ecology to determine grades or progress. I think this problem has to do with the degree of subjectivity that a concept like “engagement” has, which includes most of the items in the list above. Engagement is so individualized, and so phenomenological. It surely is not universal in what it looks or feels like, what it produces, or how others around the engaged person experience that person’s engagement. As a metric used in a grading ecology, it’s pretty slippery, even as it’s important and central to good learning environments. And yet, the only measures of engagement that I can discern that are meaningful, useful, and communicable to students are labor-based ones, time on task and number of words. Perhaps this is my bias.

Let’s put aside these problems with the measures of engagement and solve them by giving students control over them for their chosen assignments. Let’s also assume that they will not oppress themselves and not ask for measures of engagement that are normative, ableist, and neurotypical. Thus, with the above guidance, I leave the question of measures of engagement open for each student to determine on their own, from their own experiences of engagement. I also leave open the option for students to choose measures that are considered labor-based

or even quality-based. While this means that in some cases students' choices of measures will not bracket quality, I think this is the most generous way to apply EBG, even if it risks making a grading ecology that is severely imbalanced. That is, some corners of it use very different kinds of judgements to determine grades than others, quality-based, labor-based, engagement-based. And with this imbalance comes uneven power relations and outcomes, an ecology in which some students have less power and more oppression than others, because of their choices. Given this caveat, what might reasonably happen?

A Hypothetical Student Response

Let's say a student in this grading ecology chose to modify a short essay assignment that was based on doing some research and discussing a question they find important or significant. The goal of this engagement is to get feedback from peers and the teacher, to dialogue about their ideas and writing on a topic of their interest while practicing engaging with sources in their writing. Usually students will write an essay, or something similar, of about three pages (900 words) with at least three sources they engage with, three other voices on the topic they are thinking about. Some options in our imagined list of engagements could be videos, podcasts, blog posts, summary-responses, and reflective journal entries.

Now, in my example, modifying existing engagement choices is okay. If a student has free choice to pick from a range of things, like a discussion board posting instead of an essay, an example that Carillo gives (61), then they should be able to choose to modify an option on the list with an okay from the teacher. A fictional student in my course then turns in this:

I've spent a good part of Saturday researching various academic fields to understand what it means to be human and how I might define "being human." This question is vital to us all, as we all are human and learning more about ourselves is beneficial to both ourselves and our world. The sciences discuss humans as evolving organisms in biological systems. Social sciences explain humans as social animals who create groups, governments, and societies. And in the Humanities, scholars speak of the human as an ethical and language-based creature. Finally, when I ask ChatGPT (an openly accessible AI), it explains that "Being human refers to the characteristic of being a member of the *Homo sapiens* species, characterized by qualities such as consciousness, emotions, reasoning, and the ability to communicate and form relationships. It also encompasses the cultural, social, and personal experiences that shape an individual's identity." Thus, I've come to this tentative conclusion: *Humans, or homo sapiens, can be defined as biologically the same species of animal, who*

have consciousness, emotions, and reasoning, form social groups and societies, who can use languages of various kinds, and who understand themselves as ethical or following some larger set of guiding values.

Engagement reflection: I don't engage very well with sources like academic articles or books. I just get bored when reading that stuff. I have a hard time keeping track of the ideas, so I lose interest when I read too much. But when I'm really interested in a topic, I can read all day, or when I listen to a podcast or something like that, such as Joe Rogan's podcast. In my own writing, while I can retell the arguments I've heard, I don't usually keep track of who said what all the time. I mean, the important stuff are the ideas, that's what I engage with, that's what I'm interested in. In this case, I spent most of my Saturday afternoon reading and thinking about what I might write here, then on Sunday evening, I spent about an hour re-reading my statement and revising it. So the three engagement measures I'd like you to use are: (1) Did I spend a significant amount of my time on this assignment? (2) Is the product of that time a clear and succinct statement on my question? Finally, (3) does my statement encourage responses and feedback from my readers? To help me with this third measure, I shared versions of my statement with my roommate and three other friends over the weekend, and it created lots of different ideas and discussion from everyone. We talked for over two hours. So I believe I've met all three engagement criteria for this assignment.

Does this assignment merit full credit, full engagement for the kind of work you imagine students would do for such a research and writing assignment? What grade might this get? In my fictional course, I would have to give it full credit. But I wonder how fair it is that this student does this, while another spends eight or ten hours researching and writing a more conventional three-page, three-sourced essay? Did the above student's engagement provide for the goals of the assignment? Perhaps I'm thinking too much of equality in products turned in, but disregarding how such standards may not be equitable in the time needed to demonstrate such languaging goals? But then what is an equitable arrangement here?

If the above student continues along this course of decisions, are they likely to spend roughly the amount of time on our course as the U.S. Department of Education dictates (135 hours)? I'm not asking this rhetorically or in some snarky way. I really do see the value and potential in the example I'm trying to flesh out here. I also see the value in the U.S. Department of Education's guideline of 135 hours. I just don't know if this example is commensurate work, and I don't know if the above student is just relying on old habits of reading and writing and not

doing the languaging learning the course is designed to get them to practice, try out, experiment with. I don't even know for sure how exactly they are engaged in this activity.

Is this student engaging with the goals of this assignment and developing as a communicator or as a languager? I don't know how I'd know that beyond the measures the student has offered me. But what if I don't trust those measures to tell me what I need to know about their engagement? That is, how the student uses the measures listed don't give me as a particular reader enough information to know how engaged this student was, even as I agree with the measures the student has chosen? Do I, the teacher, need to be fully satisfied with the measures used to determine assignment completion? While this student surely knows themselves well, I do not. And I'm the audience for understanding engagement, a dimension of learning that is difficult to know by others.

But let's look closer at the three measures of engagement this student offers, which seem reasonable to me at first glance. The first item about time is not described in precise terms for me, but precision in time, as Kafer, Samuels, and Woods argue, can be deceptive, since time is often experienced quite differently by each person. But is one's experience of time, whatever it may be, enough for such an engagement measure? Or is experience of time a meaningful measure for determining grades or completion of work in a course? It's certainly important for good, sustainable learning, but is it good enough as a measure for grades?

Putting such larger questions aside, I still want my questions about precision answered better than "most of my Saturday reading and thinking" if time on task is going to be a measure in this case. Remember, I didn't ask for time. The student chose it. As it's stated, this measure is too fuzzy for me to make any decision about this writer's engagement. I'm not saying I don't trust or believe the student. I'm saying if we are trying to measure engagement then the time on task should be clear, not fuzzy. There should be agreement about that clarity, if this is the measure the student chooses to show their engagement. I also think there should be at least one other outside criterion used to help compare or validate what something like time means, such as the 135-hour guideline. I think this problem can be solved by returning this assignment to the student and asking them to add information about this item so that it is more precise and I can use it to make a judgement about whether the student was engaged enough in the work through their time on task.

But then, what happens if I disagree after this extra work is done? Not only did the student do more work to prove their engagement because we don't agree about how to describe measures of engagement, or I don't understand their descriptions, but such extra work now risks becoming unfair to the very students I'm trying to help. Or what happens if I think the engagement criterion of "Did I spend a significant amount of my time on this assignment?" isn't really a good criterion of engagement. Or what if I don't think most of a Saturday is enough time to engage in this learning goal?

To honor the student's choices here, I can only agree with what they say if they say that "I spent a significant amount of my time on this assignment," even if that time was only an hour or less. That could be a "significant amount of time" for that person, depending on their circumstances. But is it significant enough to get the learning expected by most students in the course? If we multiply this situation by 25 or 30 assignments across a semester, then the gap widens between the time commitment I and the U.S. Department of Education thinks the student should have and what the student feels they can do.

While I know this rubs against the issues of equity that Carillo and others have highlighted about students having less and less time to commit to college work because of socioeconomic issues, it is still a problem of learning. Learning takes time. Writing and reading take time. I realize that this situation is not fair for anyone. What would be fairer is that all students going to college have sufficient time to dedicate to college. College isn't a hobby done on Saturday nights only, or it should not be, unless you don't mind taking a long time to complete it. But in our present society, it's equally unfair to pretend that a student has met the engagement requirements necessary for college when they haven't come close to meeting some minimum time requirements, when engagement means only an hour or so of work a week. That is not enough time no matter who you are or how you experience it.

The second engagement criterion above is also problematic as a measure. My first reaction as someone who has thought a lot about judgement and assessment is this: I don't understand how succinctness of the student's statement tells me anything about the student's engagement in the work. This relationship would need explaining if I am to deploy it as a reader to make such a judgement based on succinctness, and this can be unfair to the student. It places a larger burden on students who wish to use such criteria for engagement. Don't fewer words mean less time drafting, or less engagement in the work? Or maybe it means they spent more time crafting and honing their ideas and words down to the essential ones.

Perhaps, but I think a conscientious teacher needs an explanation here, so that they can make the judgement they need to. And if the latter is the case, then a teacher might want to see the other words that were discarded, the previous drafts, some record of the previous thinking. That would show a teacher like me some kind of engagement as I understand it. While I have to trust the student on all three measures, this one in particular I have to really trust in this student when they say that when their writing is shorter, more succinct, they are more engaged. But how and why? Why is concision so vital to engagement by this writer? How do you have deeper ideas or conversations if your goal is fewer words or fewer ideas?

This measure seems counter to what I understand the goals of a typical writing course are. It makes me question if the use of student-determined measures of engagement as the main way to determine students' progress in a course is appropriate. Keep in mind that I'm not saying that we shouldn't design ways in a course for students to be maximally engaged—we should always do that. Engagement is important to learning. I'm saying that now I have deep concerns about using

measures of engagement to grade when I look carefully at how I'd try to use them and what I might reasonably get.

Finally, the last measure of engagement the student offers is about whether the statement affords a robust reader response. Again, the student and I start at very different places, so I need more information to help me use this measure to judge their level of engagement in this assignment. Generally speaking, I don't think that the level of engagement by peers or anyone else indicates anything about any writer's engagement in drafting something. The student still has to convince me of the utility of this measure, and that's kind of unfair, isn't it? I do, however, agree with Dixson's articulation of a similar dimension of engagement. Her focus is on the individual's responses to colleagues and peers, not their responses to what the writer produces. Dixson's measure is not if others respond and react to the student's ideas. Her measure is about the student in question's responses and reactions to peers and colleagues. Furthermore, getting responses to one's work is an aspect of our learning and languaging that we mostly do not control. Social media proves this every day. Many tweets and posts that literally were done while doing other things go viral all the time. Such evidence in our world of other communications and social exchanges suggests, at least to me, that how readers respond to a statement offers very little about whether or not the writer was engaged at all in the assignment while doing it.

What I think this mental exercise helps me understand better is how difficult a task it is to create a rubric and measures for engagement, especially by students. I mean, it can take a lot of extra time and discussions with students, time teachers and students are short on, to do this kind of EBG ecology well. It requires that students and teachers not only agree on the range of measures that will demonstrate engagement but how a teacher will use them to determine grades or completeness of work. It also requires that students have pretty sophisticated understandings of how judgement from measures work. All I'm trying to do is determine if this assignment is complete or not. Did they engage enough or not? Additionally, I have to multiply this scenario by 25 or 30 students on just this one assignment.

I'd also like to point out a contradiction or tension in my imagined student response. The actual assignment that the student has chosen as a way to engage is 199 words long, while their reflective statement is 249 words long. I've already said that the reflective statement doesn't offer enough information for me, so it likely needs to be longer to work, maybe 350 or 400 words. Some students may have problems with an assignment accounting device, like the second paragraph, that is longer than the actual assignment, even though it surely does more interesting reflective work for the student than the assignment itself. Of course, this is set up by my hypothetical situation, and I could likely create a table or list of questions that may reduce the need for a long and composed response by students, but the substantive questions I have about the measures likely would still exist.

The core issues around what the measures mean and how differently they may be used/judged by teacher and student would still be there. I'm not sure how to

avoid this problem if student choice is to be central in deciding on engagement measures. On the flip side, I do see much value in engaging students with these kinds of questions in a writing course, since they probe deeply many concerns we already deal with in those places: how judgement and language work; the function of biases in our languaging; ethically balancing our own perspectives with the reasonable needs our audiences have; supporting claims; and more.

Ultimately, I'm forced to question if this product and its reflective document gives enough information to understand this student's engagement in any way, even if I believe (as I would) that the student was engaged, since they say they were. So is that all it takes to have a fully equitable and meaningful grading ecology, one that escapes ableist and neurotypical standards of labor, one that also helps students in the learning enterprise of the course? Do we just need a student's word on their engagement? Maybe. I'm not suggesting we don't trust students when they say they are fully engaged. I'm saying the phenomenological fact of engagement is one thing, the meaningful evidence of it for others is another. The first is necessary for the student and their learning. The second is necessary for the teacher and their grading practices in an EBG system, but such mutual understandings about student engagement is also illusive because of the phenomenological nature of engagement, making it difficult to judge in others.

Some Conclusions

After running through my hypothetical example, as flawed as it may be, I'm left questioning if any set of measures can give me enough information the first time through to determine if a student has engaged enough in an assignment. Furthermore, if I'm being honest here, as self-aware as this example is, I would have reservations about a grading ecology in a writing course that allowed so little writing. This student doesn't demonstrate the kinds of reading, writing, and revising I have come to expect in my writing course's practices that I understand are meaningful to students for learning to communicate and engage with each other. Then again, I am probably holding on to my own need to guide, even control, many of these reading and writing practices in my courses, and there likely are some ableist and neurotypical biases that I've yet to root out. But then again, don't we all have some habits, ideals, values, and practices that we hold on to as teachers because we believe in them, and because we have evidence that they have worked well in the past?

This may sound like I don't trust students. I work hard at trusting my students, but I also trust my own experience and expertise in assessing equitably student learning. My experience and expertise is usually far greater than those of any student who walks into my classroom. This is not to say I don't trust their own knowledge and awareness of themselves. It is to say that all teachers have knowledge and experience about teaching and learning, and for me this includes knowledge and experience with assessment. For instance, most of my students

with disabilities or neurodivergencies likely have not read the research on disability and neurodivergency that I've used in this book, nor have they read the research and scholarship on assessment or writing studies that I have and have contributed to. They have deeper phenomenological knowledge of disability and neurodivergency. I have deeper knowledge of the scholarship that considers such issues in educational and judging contexts.

Most crucially, what my knowledge and experience tell me is that, in this example, the things that work are already elements of LBG. Because of the highly subjective nature of engagement as an individualized phenomenological experience, I find it problematic as a way to grade or determine progress, even as engagement is vital to all learning environments. This may be due to my own lack of imagination. What are appropriate and equitable measures of engagement that can be used to determine grades in a writing course? I don't know. In Carillo's discussion, engagement appears to be a synonym for student choice. That's just not enough for me because that leaves the important and central concern of what will be used to determine grades or completion of assignments open and vague, and it doesn't account for the biases that will accumulate in those measures when I use them to determine completion of work.

When we leave vague how we will assess "engagement" and what measures we'll use to do so, what is left is for teachers and students to fall back on HOWL, singular standards of quality, and assumptions about labor that may be very disparate among students—that is, measures of engagement that are left vague may too often participate in White language supremacy and reproduce ableist and neurotypical standards. And so, if we can't use our language habits as measures of engagement, then I think we have to rely on labor-based ones. Ultimately, this means that EBG is really just LBG that highlights student choice in the work they do, which itself is not antithetical to LBG, and may be a good revision to it.

I also leave my imaginary example questioning engagement itself, not just as something we can measure in meaningful and equitable ways, but as a good way to determine work to do in a college writing course where learning is a communal goal, not simply a personal interest. Sometimes, you gotta do the work even when you don't like the work initially because it's good for you and those around you. Sometimes, work is good for you even when you think you don't engage with that kind of work beforehand because you just aren't experienced enough to know any better. You haven't given those practices a try yet.

Often, if we have a generous orientation, we come to find out that where we were not engaged before, we become so through working and trying to engage. Call this "fake it until you make it," or even "going through the motions," but it points to a phenomenon that I explore with students in my courses every semester through our negotiations around our charter for compassion. We consider how our initial ideas of engagement and interest are not always the best ways to decide on what to do next or how to do things better tomorrow. Our individual interests may not always be the best metric to use if our goals are to learn new things, open

up new interests for ourselves, understand ourselves in different ways, develop our capacities, and participate in community-oriented educational endeavors, ones that are not directed at the individual learning but seek to engage in labors for the sake of those around us. That is, can't compassionate engaged learning be other-centered or community-centered? Having said that, I also acknowledge that this orientation to engagement and labor in a course should be tempered with what we understand about students with disabilities and neurodivergencies.

Might engagement in any learning activity be like the practice of compassion? Real compassion, the kind we laud in others like Thich Nhat Hanh or Mother Theresa, are not actions that those individuals do because they already feel something for others. They don't "suffer with" others because they think they'll be engaged in that suffering with the other. They act compassionately because they have made a commitment to do so for others' sake regardless of how they feel about that person or what they must do for or with them. Engagement might be like this. We engage in a learning activity because we make a commitment to do so for learning's sake and for the sake of those around us, not because we like the labors before we do them or anticipate more engagement in them. I think, perhaps, engagement is something that might be grown, nurtured, cultivated first, especially in habits and practices that we know we want to develop, like writing, or communicating, or analyzing stuff, that is, habits and practices we have less experience doing with others. Those others bring to the activities new ideas, different languaging, and other practices.

I don't mean to boil down engagement to just liking an activity or being interested in it. I know it is more dynamic and varied than these things, but this is my point. Engagement is so slippery and elusive, even Carillo cannot tell you the measures to use to judge its presence or degree. If someone does have a good way to do this, I'm game. There is research on measuring engagement, but most of it seems to be labor based, at least in my initial look, which I admit can be deeper. As I've mentioned, I think there are things to keep in EBG, such as student choice and flexibility in how and when things are turned in. But this points me back to LBG. Those things are already there or can be.

Finally, I should also mention that in my exploration in this chapter, I have neglected completely how grades are calculated, as does Carillo. I'm guessing she may imagine a point system or something like that, where so many assignments must be completed during the semester for a student to get a particular grade. This could be a system like Linda Nilson's "specifications grading." I bring this up only because how a teacher designs and implements this aspect of their EBG ecology will affect how ableist, neurotypical, or racist it is or is not. Regardless, that is another aspect of the ecology that must be worked out and clearly communicated to students.