

Chapter 4. Normative, Ableist, and Neurotypical Critique of Labor in LBG

In *The Hidden Inequalities in Labor-Based Contract Grading*, Ellen Carillo offers the most detailed critique of labor in LBG. Because of this, I focus on her criticisms in this chapter. Summarizing Carillo's important criticisms of LBG has helped me understand its past flaws and move the practice forward, finding specific ways to crip LBG. I should start by saying that I understand the concerns around labor raised by Carillo as matters of degree, not a zero-sum game, which some readers may hear in her critique. I do not hear her saying that there is an either-or choice when it comes to using LBG. And yet, one could easily hear a criticism of LBG like Carillo's then take away the message that LBG is not an equitable grading system so don't use it. Carillo counters this near the end of her book, explaining that her goal is to "expan[d] current iterations of labor-based grading contracts with the goal of greater inclusivity" (64). This is similar to Kryger and Zimmerman's approach to LBG, which they explain as a "'both/and' mindset," saying they "resist the notion that grading contracts are either 'good' or 'bad' (3). Thus, Carillo's, Kryger and Zimmerman's and my goals are similar on this account.

In chapter one and two of her book, Carillo identifies what she understands as the assumptions that govern labor in my version of LBG as discussed in the first edition of *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*. The most central concern raised is that labor itself functions primarily as a neutral and quantifiable measure for determining final course grades. As I have argued, using labor in this way keeps grading from participating in language standards that often disadvantage students who come from raciolinguistic and sociolinguistic backgrounds that are different from the elite White languaging backgrounds that inform all university language standards.

But labor as a numerical value, Carillo explains, is far from neutral or equitable. She continues, "Students are often asked to record all of their labor by tracking the number of minutes spent on each task. In Inoue's classes, estimates of the amount of labor necessary for each task within each assignment are shared with students as part of the assignment" (11). Carillo concludes that "[w]hen labor is quantified in this way, though, labor-based contract grading inaccurately assumes that labor is a neutral measure—or at least that it is less inequitable a measure than quality" (11). To support this idea, she states, "Underscoring this point, Inoue [2019, 131] notes: 'One hour of labor is worth one hour of labor, regardless of the kind of labor you are engaged in during the hour'" (11). Ultimately, Carillo says that my conception and use of labor in this system is "normative, ableist, and neurotypical" (11).

In effect, Carillo argues that my version of LBG substitutes one standard of grading for another, that is, an ableist and neurotypical labor standard instead of a White language supremacist one (18). This is dangerous, she explains, because

“quantifiable information—the kind of information that is collected by students as they labor—gives the appearance of objectivity” (18). The switch to quantitative measures of labor, she argues, “obscures the single standard of labor upon which it depends, a standard that necessarily excludes the growing number of students in our classrooms for whom this standard is not really a reality” (18). So by addressing the racist language standard, Carillo argues, I’ve used another standard that oppresses students who inhabit bodies that may experience neurodivergency, disability, or have less access to time than what I assume in my labor instructions. Additionally, by ignoring the intersectional dimensions of students, my version of LBG ends up, at least from the data I show, not helping the very students whom I claim the system helps.

A Broad Response to Carillo

My own description of LBG in the book can easily be read in the way Carillo does, and this can be a problem for teachers using the book to design their own LBG ecologies. Part of the problem is that I didn’t articulate a definition of disability that could guide how a teacher might structure and explain labor, as well as how to understand the circulation of labor expectations. It isn’t hard for me to see now how using my discussion in the book could lead a teacher to use labor measures as if they were neutral, even as I knew they were not. But if I’m being honest, I’m sure my past versions of LBG likely participated in normative, ableist, and neurotypical standards of labor that didn’t account for those who may have had disabilities or illness, had less access to time in the semester because of work, family, or other obligations, or who embodied neurodivergency in some way. As I hope this monograph shows, I have been rethinking, retheorizing, and redesigning my own LBG ecologies, thanks to Carillo’s critique. And yet, I don’t think her account of LBG is completely accurate. My book’s discussion, and my past practice, provides some ways to account for several of the concerns that she identifies. I clearly did not treat the subject in enough detail and this is a function of my not engaging deeply enough with the good work in Disability Studies.

Carillo rightly focuses on how labor and its expectations are presented, used, and maintained as numerical norms that regulate the ecology in ableist and neurotypical ways, but she neglects the powerful ways that my students’ reflections and metacognitive practices help them make sense of their labor and talk back to those numerical measures. They cannot do this without keeping numerical and other data on their laboring. While this does not completely solve the problem of a normative, ableist, and neurotypical standard of labor circulating in the ecology, it can mediate a good portion of it, giving students some power over any labor measures circulating in the ecology. I believe such reflective work is vital to all grading ecologies.

Because each student embodies their laboring differently and has different capacities for laboring, I spend quite a bit of time in Chapter 3 discussing the

metacognitive nature of labor and what labor really means or can mean to each student. What labor means to a student is the main way I understand the success or effectiveness of the ecology, which I discuss in Chapter 7 of the book. While I do not describe it as such, the processes of reflecting upon labor in three dimensions can help students *crip* their labor. Most students likely would need some prompting to do this, and that was missing in the book.

Throughout the book, I do try to show that labor in my LBG ecology is not a simple matter of adding up numbers, or asking everyone to do the same amount of labor in time spent on tasks or words written. Thus, the labor measures that we keep track of are not discussed as objective or neutral, as Carillo suggests, even if they can circulate as such in other places in the ecology, namely how grades are determined—and I realize this is a big exception, one I’ll come back to in Chapter 6. This very fact, that there are multiple ways our measures of labor circulate in our ecology, is a paradox we should face with students, particularly in reflections on their laboring. Regardless of this, keeping data on their laboring and frequently reflecting on that data provide students with ways to *crip* labor if prompted and if the ecology doesn’t send other contradictory messages.

In the same chapter, I also discuss the subjective nature of laboring and time, using Barbara Adam’s concept of time and timescapes, which I believe agrees with Wood, Kafer, and Samuel’s ideas of *crip* time. If measurements of time are to circulate in a grading ecology, then students should have some robust ideas about how various people experience time. Adam offers various ways to reflect upon time, which can be applied to reflections in labor logs and journals and considered in how labor instructions offer such labor time guidance. Adam offers seven ways time is experienced and her theorizing provides prompting that can be used to help make labor circulate in a wide variety of ways in a grading ecology, ways that dismantle notions of labor-time as objective (123-124; Adam, “Timescapes Challenge” 7-8). Beyond presenting Adam’s ideas about time for discussions in a course, reflective promptings on student labor data can help them *crip* time.

For instance, I discuss Adam’s ideas of time as “duration,” “sequence,” “temporal modalities,” “time frame,” and “tempo” (124/121-122). I end the chapter by arguing for “mindful laboring,” or laboring in the ecology that focuses on the work we can do at this moment in the places we are at (121/118). It’s a way to slow down labor and pay attention to it, make sense of it, and take learnings from it. It’s highly personal and subjective, especially the measurements of time. Again, my discussion of labor and time in the book is not a discussion about finding the magic number that represents the amount of labor that everyone can or should do. It’s not about deciding on a labor standard that works for everyone. It’s about understanding the highly subjective qualities and experiences of time as dimensions of our laboring.

There are no magic numbers that account for us all, even as we need some markers of labor to guide students and teachers in courses. Thus, in LBG, time estimates in labor instructions cannot be presented as objective or neutral measures, as Carillo reminds us. But I believe we still need measures to guide us, even

if they are flawed. So we have an obligation to understand the flaws and biases of our measures and work with them. Quantitative measures of labor can help us understand ourselves as three-dimensional and embodied learners who labor differently. In my conclusion to Chapter 3, I explain:

The important thing to remember when attempting to make labor more mindful in an assessment ecology, one that uses labor to determine course grades, is to honor whatever labor is offered by students, while still pushing students to ask hard questions about that labor. What happened in your labor? How did you experience it? Did you do enough? What shortcuts did you take? Could you change some things in your habits or weekly routines that would allow you to do more or labor differently? Thus, mindful laboring is practicing reading and writing self-consciously by noticing and articulating where and how our labor fits into our own personal time frames, how it and other things sync with good and bad moments in our life, and what the speed, intensity, and engagement of that labor is. (126-127/124)

What I hope is clear is that in this summing up of how labor is to be enacted and circulated, very little concern or attention is given to some universal standard operating in the ecology as a norm. What is most important is how each student experiences their laboring and what the data they collect on that laboring helps them understand about themselves as learners, readers, and writers.

The Importance of Three-Dimensional Labor

From Carillo's description of LBG, it may also sound like I use or promote students' labor logs as a method to determine their course grades, or that students may think I do. This could lead students to believe that their logs are objective measures of their success or failure. I do not use labor logs as a way to grade students, and I've never advocated this practice. I make this point clear in the book several times (203, 251/199, 247), including in Chapter 4, where I say explicitly that "I do not use labor logs to grade students on their labor, which I tell them up front," and that this is because those logs are used only to reflect upon their labor (154/150). As I explain in Chapter 3 (107, 113/104, 111), labor can be understood and reflected upon by students as three-dimensional, and this is what I ask them to do over the semester or term. Beyond having the potential to help crip labor, reflecting on labor in three dimensions can move students to ask the very kinds of questions that I believe Carillo is concerned with, ones that concern labor measures and guides as normative, ableist, and neurotypical.

In Chapter 3, I use a Marxian framework to explain how labor circulates in grading ecologies and how labor itself is a contested and flexible term used to understand learning and ourselves in the ecology. By paying mindful attention

to various ecological elements—most notably students themselves, their learning conditions, and their labor in quantitative and qualitative ways—labor accumulates a range of meanings, values, and worths. These meanings are contingent on the student, their life conditions, and what they reflect upon over the course of the semester (107/104).

The three dimensions of labor that I identify in the book are: “how students labor”; “that students labor”; and “what the labor means” to the student (107, 113/104, 111). This mindful, three-dimensional laboring is how each student in my LBG ecology understands their laboring and if they’ve accomplished their goals. Thus, a student’s three-dimensional labor is only articulable by the student and not by me. At the end of Chapter 3, I explain:

There are no bad ways to labor if laboring is done in a compassionate spirit and with an attempt to learn and help others learn. We can only labor at the paces we can, the only pace anyone can learn, which always takes time, time not so ironically we should pay attention to itself . . . Mindful laboring allows for such praxis, and connects it to the grading of a course, which makes grading not a method to measure students’ writing competencies or development but a process of paying attention on purpose, a process of learning about one’s whole self and the structures of language and judgment that make up and affect each of us. (127/124)

In her critique, Carillo does not account for the three-dimensional labor I take great pains to explain, nor the way I offer Adam’s concept of timescapes to help reflect upon labor time. This discussion demonstrates, I believe, that quantified measures of time in LBG are not used as neutral or objective measures, rather they are subjective dimensions that must be kept track of and investigated in learning/laboring processes.

Perhaps one reason for her reading of LBG is that Carillo speaks primarily of labor as defined by exchange-value, what a quantified amount of labor can be traded for in the ecology, namely a grade. While this exchange value is absolutely a problem, the fact is this is only one way labor measures circulate in LBG. Whether such measures circulate as normative, ableist, or neurotypical is more complicated than simply saying that students who do a predefined amount of labor get a particular grade, as I’ll explain in later chapters by considering the Disability theory I’ve discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Still, my accounting of students’ labor is the way I determine completion of assignments and make final grades, and I welcome Carillo’s criticisms of this aspect of LBG as a place in the ecology that can create ableist and neurotypical standards of labor that are unfair to some students. But to understand how such a practice may not simply enforce a normative, ableist, and neurotypical standard of labor, it’s important to look more closely at the larger grading ecology, which I’ll do in the following chapters.

All Grading Ecologies Are Normative by Nature

While by no means a reason not to actively pursue non-normative, anti-ableist, and neurodivergent grading practices, all grading is in some way normative by its nature. Quantitative labor measures provide more explicit cues to students, which allow them to better plan labors on their own terms. But do such numerical measures become normative when they are so explicit? Yes. But this is no different from any other conventional grading ecology in any other writing course. How did you assign the last writing assignment you gave to your students? Did you say: “Make something of any length or duration and give it to me at any time”? No, not likely. You probably gave a word or page count. You likely even gave it a due date and time or a window to submit for feedback or other uses. You probably even gave some kind of instructions that guided the work you imagined students would do to accomplish the learning. If you are conscientious, you gave students some clear indication of how you will grade the assignment, maybe a rubric. Even if you gave them an array of choices like videos, blogs, and audio recordings, as I hear in Carillo’s engagement-based contract example, each choice still has labor expectations associated with it, likely expectations that you consider commensurate with the other choices.

We all provide guides to help students understand what work we want them to do and when we need it to move to the next step in the processes of learning we’ve designed. Providing guidance is what we do as writing teachers. From one perspective, then, any assignment guidelines or criteria for completion, no matter their substance, are normative by nature. By definition, all guidelines for any assignment are normative. But is being normative also being ableist and neurotypical? I don’t think so, and I don’t think Carillo, Kafer, Kryger, or Zimmerman think so either. To label a grading practice as “normative” is simply staying the definition of guidelines, even if some are more abstract or less specific. This is not a copout or a way to avoid doing the work it takes to design and enact equitable grading ecologies. I’m simply reminding us that such a criticism is something we all face in our grading practices, not just LBG.

In order for a quantitative measure of labor to be ableist and neurotypical in LBG, we assume that such labor measures, when they become standards, are less accessible or less attainable by some students who experience disabilities or neurodivergency. This accessibility issue is created through the way such measures circulate in the ecology as much as through the natures of the measures themselves. I’ll discuss these things in detail in Chapter 6.

Most guidelines and criteria will be vulnerable to the criticism of promoting a normative, ableist, and neurotypical standard, particularly if those designing the grading ecology are oriented as able-bodied and neurotypical. Most guidelines will also be vulnerable to such criticisms if those guidelines are specific. In other words, the clearer and more explicit we are about what we want and how we want it, the more ableist and neurotypical the assignment could be. This is a

paradox that we all must take up with students because it is a part of the nature of assigning and “assessing work in classrooms. It is also a key criterion for clarity, and perhaps predictability for many students in classrooms, two concerns I’ll take up in Chapter 8.

I don’t know how to completely get around this paradox, and I’m not yet convinced we fully can. I do think we need to address it meaningfully with students and be responsive to their needs and situations. I also think I should be as clear and unambiguous as I can about what students are expected to do in my courses, and how I’ll determine if they’ve completed work. Finally, I believe that such guidelines for labor or assignments should be flexible enough to avoid the very real equity problems of being normative, ableist, and neurotypical.