

Chapter 8. Considering Hidden Quality Judgements

In the previous two chapters, I argued that judgements of labor quantity used to determine the completeness of an assignment can be clearer and simpler in nature than those in other grading ecologies, such as ones that use judgements of quality. While this is accurate, the quantitative standards of labor used to make decisions about completed labor can still have judgements of quality in them. In this chapter, I consider this concern more carefully. I look closely at the passages that Carillo draws on in my LBG book when she brings up this concern. She argues that quantitative standards are ableist and neurotypical because of hidden quality judgements and suggests that I don't take this into account. My goal is to think through the hidden judgements teachers must make when deciding about labor done, as well as their implications to other grading ecologies.

To make her argument, Carillo references a passage from my book that offers a way to respond to students who do not seem to show enough learning in an assignment (Inoue, *Labor-Base Grading 202/198*; Carillo 41). She explains:

On the surface, Inoue is suggesting that the student undertake more labor, but note how that labor is connected to quality. The word quality is not used here, but if we home in on the phrase “extra time to produce the kind of material that will help you” we can infer that the students’ [sic] labor is producing low quality material that could benefit from and become higher quality with some additional labor. In other words, quality (although not called such) seems to still play a role in this assessment practice, at least as this common interaction is represented. (41)

Carillo is right to point our attention to the connection between labor and quality, and that quality “still play[s] a role” in LBG, but this is not a problem in the way she argues it is. In fact, this is a conventional way that all feedback in all grading ecologies circulates. Most feedback attempts to point out what the teacher discerns in terms of quality and offer the student direction. Just because quality “seems to still play a role” in LBG does not mean there is a hidden quality standard operating in the grading ecology that then determines completion of assignments. Remember, one thing LBG is designed to do is more clearly separate what makes a grade and what makes for formative feedback to students on their languaging. Formative feedback is still given to students in LBG. Thus, the judgements of labor that produce a decision about completion are separated from the judgements necessary for formative feedback on a student's draft. These are two different ecological parts and processes. Judgements of quality absolutely *play a role* in LBG, a role that is separated from the act of “grading” or determining completion of an assignment.

In the example discussed above, the feedback to the student's work is meant to help them with quality, to offer them ways to continue to develop as a reader and writer. This is the role I believe we all want our feedback to play. The difference here is in the role that feedback does *not* play in the act of grading. It is not used to justify a grade. It does not determine completion of this particular assignment, nor is it used to substantiate any decision about an assignment. It is also not used to articulate any future quality or labor expectations. It is used as a way to offer the teacher's experiences of the student's written work for their benefit. As I state clearly in the referenced passage (202/198), the judgement of full credit has already been given, so, when a teacher suggests extra time to the student in feedback, it's a way of offering formative feedback for next time, not an expectation, nor a justification for some determination of completeness of the present assignment. It's formative feedback to the student only.

From this example, Carillo points out two concerns about LBG: Such grading practices do "not necessarily reward[d] extra labor"; and they "can easily revert to instruments that measure quality" (41). These are important concerns for LBG and for all teachers since unevenness in laboring across our students is always present to some degree and can be an equity issue. Additionally, how we use measures of quality are always central to students' learning and experiences in our courses.

The Deeper Concerns of Equity

The concern that not all labor is rewarded with higher grades may be rooted in a misunderstanding of how LBG works and a misreading of the data I offer in the book. The data I offer shows some BIPOC students logging more labor than White students, while still receiving the same or lower final course grades (Carillo 51; Inoue, *Labor-Based Contracts* 250-251/246-247). Carillo concludes: "Students of color are supposed to benefit from these contracts, but the data Inoue provides don't bear that out as students of color are doing roughly two more hours of labor per week than their White classmates but not earning anything in return for that labor" (52-53).

This is a pretty pessimistic view of any extra labor done by students, particularly since there is no evidence offered to suggest that BIPOC students in LBG (mine or others) do not gain anything from their extra labor. Grades are not the only thing students earn or get in a course, and likely they are not even the most important things students earn. I'm guessing that most teachers will agree that those students in their courses who do more work tend to gain more experiences and more learning from the course, regardless of the grade they end up getting. More work usually means more learning. Why would my courses be any different? Carillo's primary evidence for BIPOC students "not earning anything in return for that labor" is the grade they receive. They appear not to get higher grades for their extra labor. While I resist the idea that we should think primarily about grades as the main objective and the primary thing that students earn from

their labors, I do know (as I'm sure Carillo does) that many students are oriented in this way. So this is an important concern.

Now, the difference in grades we're talking about is in three groups of students: Those who earned an A, A-, and B- course grades. Carillo argues that because most of the BIPOC students in my sample were in the bottom two groups (A- and B- groups) of Table 7.1, my "labor-based contract ecology actually seems to disadvantage students of color" (51). That is, BIPOC students seem to do more work but do not get higher grades for that work. Beyond ignoring the learning we might imply by more work done, this observation should be carefully qualified, as it misreads the data I offer.

First, even if Carillo's conclusion were true, the degree of disadvantage to BIPOC students in this sample would be measured by their relative lack of access to the highest grade of A, since she's making her conclusion about disadvantage partially based on groups of students who received an A- and B- course grade. None of these groups approached even the minimum passing grade of C- for the course. So "disadvantage" appears to be about the lack of access to the highest grade possible in the system, regardless of how much labor is done. This is surely a disadvantage if it were true. However, such a conclusion ignores the purposes for the table of data and the way students determine their own grades in our grading ecology, which I mention in the section of the book.

As my discussion in the book explains, the data that the table represents contains only 9 students from the course (250/246). I use the top, middle, and bottom three students in the course as determined by their average combined labor in their labor logs in order to understand if generally students who labor more get higher grades (250/246). They do, as the table indicates. Thus, when I say that most of the students of color are in the middle and bottom groups of my sample, I'm actually saying three of the four students of color represented in the entire table are in the bottom and middle groups. Keep in mind there are only three groups and nine total students accounted for in this sample. So, there are three White students in the same two groups. Therefore, the ratio of White to BIPOC students in these two groups is three to three. That's an even ratio.

More importantly, this sample is too small of a sample to say anything about whether BIPOC students in my courses do more labor for lower grades or not. The sample is not constructed to understand such a generalization. To conclude such a thing from these data misreads the data, ignoring the method used and purpose for that data's presentation. In fact, given what I do offer there, I think one could make a different conclusion since the lowest group, the B- group, has two White students and one Latina. The middle group (A- group) has two students of color and one White student. This LBG ecology actually seems to disadvantage White students, but I don't think there is evidence of that either. These data cannot tell us anything like that. There are not enough students in the sample.

I do say in my discussion, which Carillo cites, that "most of the students of color in my sample were in the middle and bottom groups," which they technically

were (252/248; Carillo 51). She is diligent to point out this seeming inequity since these BIPOC students recorded more labor in their labor logs than their colleagues. Again, this data set cannot tell us whether BIPOC students do more work for the same or lower grades generally. It's too small of a sample. Furthermore, Carillo neglects the footnote to the very sentence quoted by her and myself above (252/248). In the footnote, I explain that most of the White students in this sample did not complete their labor logs through the entire term (10 weeks plus finals week). They completed their labor logs up to week 9. While I cannot know for sure what the extra week or two would mean in terms of numbers, surely it would decrease the gap of labor time recorded between these two groups, which I state was "almost 2 hours" a week difference (251/247).

In full disclosure, I must admit that I made an error in those numbers. I calculated the difference between the two groups by dividing the total labor logged by the White students by 10 weeks, not 9 weeks, as I should have, in order to get their average weekly labor (up to week 9). But even this misrepresents their work, as most of the White students' logs are filled in up to week 9 and a couple are completed through week 10. Here is the best account I can make of both student groups now:

- 5 White students averaged 56.71 total hours of labor (6.3 hours/week up to week 9)
- 4 BIPOC students averaged 74.67 total hours of labor (7.5 hours/week up to week 10)

The difference is not "almost 2 hours more labor each week" as I reported it. The difference is 1.17 hours (70 minutes) per week of labor, at least up to the beginning of week 9. While my BIPOC students still did more labor, it's almost half of what I originally calculated. Carillo could not have known this, but she would have known the information in the footnote, which clearly indicates that there was significant labor unaccounted for in most of the White students' labor logs—at least a full week, more like two weeks out of a 10-week term. Ultimately, BIPOC and White student groups are actually closer in the number of labor hours spent on the course than what I can confirm from their labor logs. Given these figures, the closeness of the likely hours of labor accomplished by each group, and my method for sampling, I don't think one can make any conclusions about patterns concerning more labor for lower grades in BIPOC student populations in LBG. I think the table does illustrate the general idea I could offer: The more labor you do generally, the higher your grade is in LBG.

Now, perhaps I should have offered the fuller distribution of students in each of these categories, if I were to anticipate such readings as Carillo's. From that class, the top group (A) consisted of seven students in the course, four of whom were BIPOC. The middle group (A-) had four students in it, with two of those being BIPOC. The lowest group (B-) had three students in it, with only one BIPOC student. This accounts for seven of the nine total BIPOC students in this course,

and six of those students received the higher grades in the course. So, if we want to know if this particular LBG ecology rewards BIPOC students for more labor with higher grades, then according to the actual composition of these groups in this course, I think there is an argument for it. My LBG ecology does in fact reward BIPOC students for the more labor they do. In this course, they tended to get higher grades. Most BIPOC students make up most of the top two groups in the class (7 of 9 students), even as they make up just less than half of the total students in the course (9 of 20 students).

It should be noted that in my past LBG ecologies in order for any student to get an A- instead of a B- (the default contracted course grade for everyone), they had to explicitly tell me they were doing one or more of the extra labor options listed in the contract. They can choose not to. It is clear that the students in the B-group chose not to do more labor for a higher grade, yet several of them still were willing to do more labor than others for the default contract grade. Most importantly, they control that choice, not me, a choice about labor they negotiated first, then renegotiated at midpoint in the term. While their grades were a product of their choices to do extra labor items or not, I'm now seeing good reason that the highest grades should not be based on students' *choices* to do extra labor. The highest grade possible should simply be the default grade in the contract.

I have moved to this new practice that addresses this concern. In my current courses, the highest grade possible is the default grade, making that grade more accessible to more people. Thus, the highest grade is not dependent on a choice to do more work. This helps acknowledge and reward the natural unevenness in access to labor that happens in all courses. Some unevenness in labor is natural, expected, and so cannot be avoided in any course. This doesn't mean that any kind of unevenness in labor is okay. As I show in Chapter 7, there are better ways to understand the natural unevenness in labor by students than just labor total comparisons, such as considering the standard deviation from the mean, or the variance in those totals.

Because I don't have access to all the labor logs of the entire course any longer, I cannot calculate a course mean or SD for the course in question. This would tell me, at least for this course, one kind of answer to the concerns about BIPOC students doing more labor for less reward. But I can calculate a SD for this sample of nine students, as limited as it is. The sample's mean total labor turns out to be 3,881.56 minutes. The SD calculated by Google Sheets using its STDEVA function (since this is a sample) is 1,536.75. This makes one SD from the mean of this sample to be any labor amount between 2,344.80 to 5,418.31 minutes. Where do the students fall?

Figure 2 shows all nine students in the original sample, with circles representing White students and triangles representing BIPOC students. Moving from left to right, the first three data points (3,915; 5,560; and 5,290) are the labor totals for students in the A group. The next three points are the A- group, and the last three are the B- group.

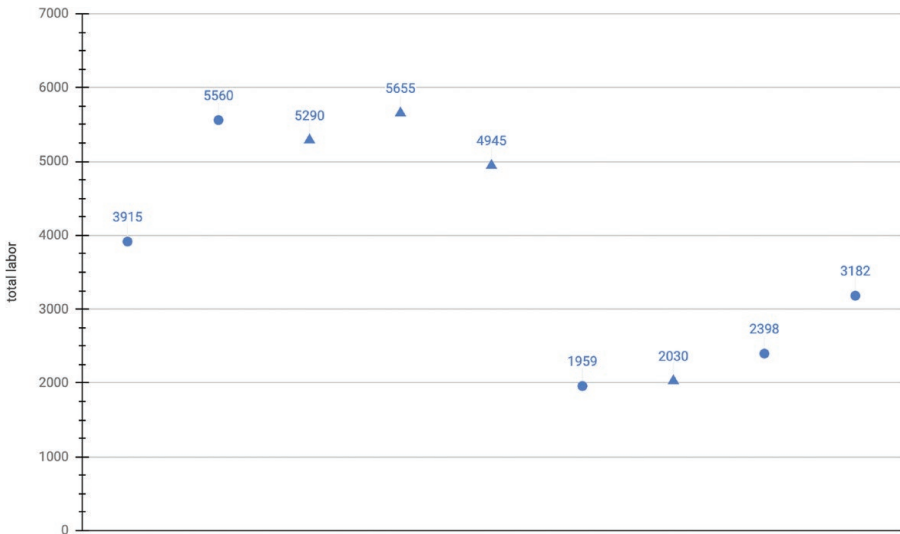


Figure 2. Total labor logged by students in the sample from Table 7.1, with White students represented by circles and BIPOC as triangles (Inoue, Labor-Based Grading 250/246)

Two BIPOC students are within one SD from the mean, one in the A group (5,290) and one in the A- group (4,945). The other two BIPOC students are two SD from the mean. One is just over one SD (in the A- group with 5,655) and the other is under one SD (in the B- group with 2,030). Similar distribution occurs in the five White students in the sample. Three are within one SD of the mean, while one is slightly over (in the A group with 5,560) and one is under (in the A- group with 1,959). Taking the middle value of each set of three, which is the median, those who did more labor got higher grades. Ultimately, the two groups (BIPOC and White students) have similar variance in their total labor logged. Given the fact that I purposefully choose students who logged the most, the average, and the least amounts of labor in the top, middle, and lower thirds of the course's labor logs, this dispersion is quite good, and I think, accurate for the course. Given my method, the others will fall inside these numbers.

Considering these data, are such amounts of total labor by BIPOC students within reasonable distance from the mean student in this sample, and do BIPOC students vary in their labor in similar ways as the White students in the sample? The answers seem to be yes, and yes. Both groups perform similarly. Variance in labor happens in all writing courses, so variance is not evidence of inequity in any grading ecology without other evidence that helps inform those numbers. Finally, there is yet another way to read these data if we consider who those students are and what their histories in school have likely been, which I also mention in my discussion in the book (252/248).

When I see BIPOC students in my courses doing more labor in order to accomplish the work, a different set of narratives comes to my mind. As a former BIPOC student in almost all White classrooms, a student who did not get rewarded for his languaging nor identify with any of his White teachers, a student who did not have a BIPOC teacher until he was 31 years old in graduate school the second time around, I hear in such labor data that perhaps my BIPOC students are willing to labor more for me and my course because they trust me and my grading system, because they know I will not let them down, because perhaps they have some affinity with a BIPOC teacher who has struggled in school like many of them. It tells me that they may have shed some of the false narratives about the value of grades and what they mean to the student, and so have given up on pursuing grades at all costs in favor of pursuing their learning through laboring. It suggests that they may have found a kind of BIPOC teacher they trust because we've created together a grading ecology in which their engagement is outside of the grades they expect to get.

I hear a similar dynamic recorded in Heather Falconer's longitudinal study of mostly BIPOC women in STEM majors, where she links this dynamic of finding mentors of color to "narrative identity work" that helps such students persist and succeed in college (50). As I see it, more labor on the part of my BIPOC students can mean more reward and more engagement, more interest, more willingness to labor, quite the opposite of what Carillo reads in these data. My different reading may be because Carillo and I have very different subject positions, perhaps different educational histories, and surely different relations to our BIPOC students.

Measuring Labor and Measuring Quality

The second concern, that LBG "can easily revert to instruments that measure quality" (Carillo 41) references an example of feedback I offer but takes some of my words out of context, missing aspects of the larger ecology I try to explain. The example from my book that Carillo responds to is not one in which I make this student, whom I call "Liang," do more work to get credit for the assignment because I've tacitly judged their labor by quality. He's already gotten full credit for the labor. While this is a misreading, or misunderstanding, of the example I offer in the book, it can be a problem in LBG ecologies. That is, as Carillo suggests, those quality judgements can creep into a teacher's decisions about labor. Often, this occurrence can hinge on the teacher's feedback, since feedback has been the primary way teachers justify past quality-based grades. I think we can still have this harmful orientation when making judgements about labor done or when creating our measures of labor. It's hard to get out of this mindset, especially when we feel our feedback should help instruct students in their languaging practices, when we still believe that grades on individual performances should (or could) motivate students to do work differently.

But first, let's understand what LBG is supposed to do from the example. My discussion is about my feedback on Liang's labor product and that is about quality, at least as I read it in his assignment. Carillo quotes an example comment of mine that is meant to be supported by a much thicker example that comes right before it, which she doesn't mention. I explain: "His labor is still complete and counted, but I would reply to him privately and tell him what I'm confused about in his paragraph and labor, how I don't think this kind of work will help him in meeting our goals. What happened? How are you finding the quote and how are you trying to think about it?" (202/198). In my feedback, I'm trying to connect how he labors to the quality I think he is shooting for next to the quality that I experience in his text. Another way to hear my feedback is to hear it as the labor-based way I'm trying to help him develop as a reader and writer.

Right after the sentence that Carillo "home[s] in on," I explain: "Most important, I leave Liang's learning up to him, and so I must leave much of his labor to him" (202/199). Take a look at the passage on page 202/198, the discussion is not how to account, grade-wise, for such labor in a LBG ecology, it is about how to respond to a student who may need more labor to meet their course goals. It is not suggesting that a teacher make a student do more labor for full credit on the assignment. I have not imposed my standards of quality onto the student by either giving him a lower grade or requiring him to comply with my sense of quality. I am providing him feedback on quality that is couched in labor terms, feedback he is expecting and should get, feedback which also has its own pressures on him for sure. I have, like we all do, imposed my language habits and biases on him by offering my experience of his text and asking questions about it—that's most of my discussion in this passage, questions to him. But I am not using my language habits and judgements about his languaging to determine the completeness of his work. That has already been determined by word count, and he knows it.

Having said all this, quality judgements do play a role in all grading ecologies, even mine. They have to. We never escape judging from our biases when we judge language, even for simple criteria like, "quote and discuss at least two ideas from the text." In LBG, if we must consider the substance of what a student writes to determine completion, even if it is a simple kind of decision, such as, "did the student include two quotations and say something about each," then there are quality decisions made. Carillo is right to point us to such decisions. I would argue, however, that such a decision is simpler and less dangerous than others we make in other kinds of grading ecologies to determine completion of assignments or grades. The difference is in the nature and function of those quality judgements. I think of some of these differences in terms of stasis questions.

In LBG, the simple quality judgements that can be present are about questions of fact: "Are there 200 words and two quotations, and does the student say something about each quotation?" To determine completion of an assignment, I've only asked stasis questions of fact that have a yes or no answer, even if I'm offering

feedback that is more than this, feedback that approaches questions of value or policy in order to help the student develop as a writer and reader.

This is quite different from conventional grading ecologies. In a grading ecology that uses quality judgements and quality standards to determine completion of anything, the teacher must use stasis questions of value to make a judgement or decision about completion or grades on that same assignment. How well did this student select three quotations and how good is their discussion of the quoted material? This is a very different kind of question to answer, tapping more deeply into the teacher's biases and habits of language, mixing stases that can easily confuse the student. Of course, it imposes more of the teacher's language habits and biases onto the student by using those language habits to grade, judging that student's labors and learning against the habits of language the teacher embodies and selects for this occasion to make a grading decision.

While questions of fact surely tap into our habits of language, we don't have to go further than the biases that make our "facts" when determining assignment completion. Our job in contract negotiations and labor instructions is to agree upon the markers that the teacher will use to answer these questions of fact for determining the completion of any assignment. Those agreements, when they focus on questions of fact about labor measures, are easier to make with students, less ambiguous, and can be more consistently made than questions of value or policy. As my grading measures heuristic illustrates from Chapter 7, such discussions about our questions of fact that determine a teacher's judgements of complete labor can be engaged in with students, or at least made clear as questions of fact that assume particular biases in measures. Because both the measures of labor and how judgements are made and used in LBG hinge on questions of fact, it can make for much closer agreement with students. And this means a grading ecology in which students experience a high degree of fairness.

What this also amounts to is that LBG does not hide judgements of value or quality, at least as I promote the practice. It separates particular kinds of judgements from the processes that make grades or determine completion of assignments. It keeps quality judgements for formative purposes, feedback to students. It also makes more obvious the kinds of judgements necessary to determine completion of labor and can open discussions with students about the biases that accumulate around the measures used to make those judgements. In my view, this kind of grading ecology is well equipped to be equitable, fair, educative, and sustainable.