

## Chapter 9. Concerns of Predictability and Clarity

If we are to grade all students fairly and equitably, then a good part of this challenge is more than flexibly using identifiable measures, and it's more than reflecting with students on the subjectivity of our measures or how we judge with them in our grading ecologies. We also must account for the emotional and affective dimensions of those measures and grades more generally. Measures make tacit arguments to students about what is important in the course. What will the teacher pay attention to in order to give a grade? Thus, associated with all measures and grades are a host of feelings and emotional attachments.

Students are accustomed to grades as markers of success and progress in classrooms. This, along with other not so productive affective associations around grades, is a central insight that Inman and Powell's study of students in grading contract ecologies reveals (31-32; 52). It is also an insight that can be read in Spidell and Thelin's study of contract grading published twelve years earlier. And these concerns can multiply for students with disabilities and neurodivergencies. In this chapter, I consider these very real concerns in LBG and how we take them into account.

### Deep Hunger to Rank

It may be obvious to many writing teachers why students have emotional attachments to grades. Students are accustomed to being told how good or bad they are by teachers through grades. The practice is ubiquitous and historical. In fact, grading and ranking may be the one thing that characterizes most students' experiences in school for at least the last hundred years. And grading ecologies that rank students create conditions that cause many students to desire such ranking in courses since grades seem to tell them "where they are at" or "how good they are" next to their peers. But as understandable as this desire is, it is bad in a number of ways.

In 1993, Peter Elbow warned us about this harmful condition in classrooms, calling it "a deep *hunger to rank*" ("Ranking" 190). The logic of making such hierarchies in people, the kind that grades make in classrooms, the kind that IQ tests and SATs make, is also a key characteristic of racist culture and White supremacist discourse in history (Elliott 70; Gould 190-191, 196-197; Goldberg 49; Inoue, *Labor-Based Grading* 27/24, 306/302). Such hierarchies made from people also participate in White supremacist culture. Tema Okun identifies fifteen different characteristics of White supremacist culture in organizations and other places, such as schools. At least four of those characteristics share in the logics of ranking people. They are "quantity over quality," "only one right way," "either/or thinking," and "progress is bigger, more" (Okun n.p.).

Cultures of ranking are always about who is “better,” who is more valuable, who is more deserving, who gets the most goodies and opportunities, and who does not. This kind of human ranking is highly individualized. It focuses on the individual deserving of the grade or rank and ignores the way that ranking groups people along other dimensions such as race, gender, socioeconomic positioning, disability, etc. Thus, ranking in classrooms also shares in a habit of Whiteness, “hyperindividualism” (Inoue, *Above the Well* 25; Okun n.p.). Ranking systems, like grading, serve desires for the individual to be on top, to be singled out as better than others, eliding the collaborative nature of all literacy learning. Grades individualize learning by associating the grade or rank with an individual performance, ignoring the others in a course who likely collaborated or helped in the learning processes that produced that performance. All this means that participating in cultures of ranking is quite dangerous in a classroom since our hunger to rank easily participates in the hyperindividualism of White supremacy culture and White language supremacy.

On top of these problems, the research on grading clearly shows that grades harm students’ abilities to learn in a number of other ways (Kohn n.p.). Alfie Kohn describes at least “three robust conclusions” from the research about the harm grades do: (1) “Grades tend to diminish students’ interest in whatever they’re learning”; (2) “Grades create a preference for the easiest possible task.”; and (3) “Grades tend to reduce the quality of students’ thinking” (Kohn n.p.; Inoue, “Do Grades Help” n.p.). None of these outcomes serve a writing course or its students. And so, when designing a grading ecology, a teacher might weigh what they know about grades and what they know about their participation in racism and White language supremacy next to students’ desires for grades.

What complicates taking grades out of the classroom is that many of the affective dimensions activated by grades, or their absence, are magnified for many students with neurodivergencies. Kryger and Zimmerman argue persuasively that lacking conventional markers like grades of completeness or progress in a class is doubly problematic for many students who embody neurodivergency (6-7). They draw on Inman and Powell’s discussion and argue that grades are a part of “students’ earliest memories of schools”; they are attached to the “affective domain of learning, that of values and emotions,” making grades a part of students’ “experience and identity” (34). While I agree with these conclusions, the optimist in me still believes that all students have the ability to understand their progress in ways that are not grade-related. A big part of being able to do this is in how we guide students carefully through such discussions and provide habitual ways to continue thinking about their laboring in the course and not simply equate that laboring to some linear “progress” that they are supposed to show.

### Problems With “Progress”

No one is born with the desire to be graded on their languaging. Few people begin their lives with the hunger to be ranked. We acquire these desires for grades

in past educational environments, desires we can notice and shed if the right conditions exist. To shed such desires, students need to confront the fact that “progress” is not simply a linear experience. Rather it is an idea, a construct that we create and deploy for particular purposes in classroom grading ecologies and other places. The idea of progress can also be *counter-meaningful* to students’ learning and laboring if it’s the main reason they do work in the course. When I say “counter-meaningful,” I mean that when students focus on grades, most tend to ignore their learning and laboring because their attention is focused on the grade and what they think it means about their progress. The assumption is that if the grade is high, then one’s learning is maximized. But as Kohn’s summary of the research on grading shows, this is not necessarily true, and in fact, the opposite is more often true. Thus the focus on the meaning of the grade counters the meaningfulness of the learning and laboring they might focus on instead.

I know this seems counter-intuitive, perhaps confusing, that a student who focuses on progress risks not progressing, but remember, we are talking about the *affective dimensions of a student’s sense of progress*, which is usually symbolized in the grade. Yet the grade, no matter what it is, is not actual progress or learning. On top of this, that grade is shaded by a student’s emotional and affective responses to grades as linear markers of progress. These affective dimensions of grades get in the way of the very thing students are striving for, learning. Central to this problem is that the ecology has replaced constructs of learning, which are wide open, organic, and emergent, with linear and limited constructions of progress, or grades. The symbol of progress, then, is the grade.

One easy way to recognize this dynamic is to imagine (or recall) a situation of grading. Imagine you provided feedback on an essay to a student, any student. You suggested a few ways that the student might improve their essay given their purpose and goals for the draft. You then gave it a respectable B- grade. The student wanted a higher grade, and so they revised and turned in a new draft. This is your policy, so you reread the essay. The student has taken a few risks along the lines you suggested, but it didn’t work out. In fact, according to you, the essay is now more confusing and less effective. If you’re being consistent, you give the essay a C- grade, but you want the student to know that you admire those risks. In fact, you think they likely learned quite a bit about some things in the drafting and failing. They meaningfully failed.

But that lower grade, even if your policy is to always take the higher of the two grades on the two drafts, is gonna be a problem for that student. It’s not gonna feel good, and it will obscure the student’s ability to see this whole experience as the learning it is. They are gonna feel that the whole revision and grade was unfair because more work, taking risks, and following your directives in your feedback is what they are supposed to do to show their progress. But then you say they didn’t make progress according to your second grade. Your policy to use the rubric consistently is also fair, if fairness is following the guidelines you set out in the first place.

The problem in this situation is that the revision draft grade is lower than the original grade and the teacher is saying that lessons have been learned—that is, the student has developed and has perhaps progressed as a writer. But the grade is lower and the essay is worse, according to you. There’s a contradiction felt. The affective dimensions activated by the presence of grades often contradict the actual experience of learning by students. Additionally, grades cannot account for these typical moments when a student’s learning is recursive, when they seem to get worse before they get better. Grades mostly punish this recursive moment in our learning processes. And yet, students have been trained—dare I say brainwashed into believing—that grades help them understand their progress in school. That’s partly why this example may feel so unfair to the student. They know they have done all that has been asked, and taken real risks, only to be graded lower or receive the same grade. Their feeling is that no progress has been made.

Part of Elbow’s “deep hunger to rank” is students’ deep hunger to *be* ranked, not to learn. The innate human yearning for learning gets replaced, almost unknowingly, with an aching to be graded. It’s like a sleight of hand trick, a shell game where the pea of learning is hidden under one shell, but the student keeps pointing at another one, the one with a grade on it. Furthermore, when abstract ideas like “progress” or even “development” are attached to ranking systems in grading ecologies, then it is easy to misinterpret what any evaluation, verbal or numerical, can mean. Students can get stuck on not having a grade. They might call it “not knowing how well they’re doing” or not knowing their progress. Tacitly, the student and teacher expect linear progress, expect the student to go from a C-grade to a B-grade or higher. That’s progress or development. LBG does not offer this neat linear fictional narrative of progress. Instead, such moments in LBG afford the student to ask themselves: What do I really need from my teacher as a response? What do I think “progress” means in this moment and how does it compare to what the teacher thinks?

We all know that linear progress is not how most learning happens. And it is surely a very high bar for change in a person in a 10-week or 15-week course. Do we really expect that a student will alter significantly their languaging habits formed over their lifetime of languaging in a few weeks? What I’m getting at is that the affective dimensions that grades tap into are tangled up with other emotional desires and states that can easily work against crippling labor, as Kryger and Zimmerman explain in other terms. Equally important, such affective dimensions of grades don’t provide students much opportunity to crip failure (to meaningfully fail) or take risks, and they don’t actually tell a student how prepared they are for whatever is next in their lives. That answer is unknowable today. It’s only knowable after tomorrow. We surely can encourage students’ sense of confidence as languagelings, help them build critical tools for themselves, but we cannot promise future success in their languaging efforts. And yet, many students feel that grades give them some indication of their progress in the course

and preparation for tomorrow. Much of that feeling is an illusion and it obscures what they might learn today.

When affective dimensions of grades obscure what a student can take from their laboring, when grades compete with learning, students have fewer opportunities to realize the critical stances or insights that Halberstam reveals in his discussion of failure, that is, critical stances against hegemonic Capitalist systems of patriarchy, White supremacy, heteronormativity, ableism, and neurotypical norms that make up success, winning, and progress in society. As much as grades provide a certain amount of known comfort for many students, particularly students with neurodivergencies, they also produce a lot of bad stuff that counters that predictability, and that might reveal it as a lie.

I believe from my over 17 years of experience using contracts in five different state universities that any student is capable of letting go of grades, at least for a time. The vast majority of students do not need grades as markers of completion or progress in a course. In fact, most students I have taught tell me that they never really wanted to be graded in the first place. It feels awful. It limits them. It makes them anxious. They feel the deep problems that the desire for grades causes when conditions are in place that allow them to safely explore such questions.

For neurodivergent students, however, this may not be enough. Kryger and Zimmerman explain that taking away grades can create “debilitating dissonance” and “deeply problematic and anxiety-producing terrain for students who are already grappling with the need for increased labor to participate in traditional classroom structures” (7). They argue that grades are “linked to predictability and clarity; they function as recognizable measures of ‘correct’ labor, teacher expectations, and academic performance that, when absent, plunge neurodivergent students into activity systems in which they do not always have the means, time, or ability to decode” (7).

Finally, Kryger and Zimmerman conclude with the paradox: “when implementing LBGs, we must necessarily view the removal of grades as a step toward ethical improvements in our assessment practices while at the same time acknowledging how they create a culture of increased marginalization for neurodivergent students” (7). They acknowledge the paradox that removing grades creates. Their removal may exacerbate the problems many neurodivergent students already face in classrooms, yet grades are also harmful to learning and perhaps unethical, and so they need removing. I hear Kryger and Zimmerman arguing that the use of LBG is a step in the right direction if we want better educational environments for our students who experience neurodivergencies, even as the removal of conventional grades can initially cause problems for them. In this paradox, however, I hear a version of my own optimism in students’ capacities to shed their desires for grades. I also hear a call to be extra mindful of the ways we guide students in LBG ecologies so that they have the “means, time, [and] ability to decode” the structures in place.

## Something that Replaces Grades

It may be tempting to assume that Kryger and Zimmerman imagine a LBG ecology that does not replace grades on assignments with anything else except perhaps more robust teacher feedback, but their acknowledgement of the paradox suggests otherwise. If you just take out grades, there is something missing in the grading ecology that was previously used to let the student know how they were doing and if they were on track. This is the problem that Kryger and Zimmerman highlight, the greater need for predictability and clarity.

And yet, most writing teachers have been removing grades since the 1980s. I'm thinking of the use of minimal grading on low and high stakes writing (Elbow, "Grading" 128, 130) and "evaluation-free zones" (Elbow, "Ranking" 197). There are also the more established practices of incorporating portfolios into a course, particularly by leaning into the key characteristic of delaying grades and other evaluations until the end of the semester (Hamp-Lyons and Condon 34). Thus if a teacher practices any of these approaches to reducing or eliminating grades in classrooms, even if they may not be doing LBG, then they too risk plunging their neurodivergent students into "debilitating dissonance" and "deeply problematic and anxiety-producing terrain."

However, I think most writing teachers would agree with Kyger and Zimmerman that the tradeoffs for reducing the circulation of grades in such ungrading practices is worth it. In the end, it helps all students, but they remind us that we must pay better attention to the differential effects ungrading may have on students with neurodivergencies. Additionally, such long standing ungrading practices may also suggest that maybe grades do not have to be the key to predictability and clarity for students. They are not the only ways to create such important cues.

As I've discussed already, one very important part of LBG is the inclusion of something else that replaces grades as a way to understand progress and completion of labor. This replacement part is meant to orient students and help them know how they are doing—that is, provide predictability and clarity. I'm talking about students' own observations and reflections on their labor each week and in every assignment. I discussed this practice in Chapter 3 of the LBG book as three-dimensional labor. Will this solve the concern that Kryger and Zimmerman raise? Will it provide students with neurodivergencies with predictability and clarity, or "recognizable measures of 'correct' labor, teacher expectations, and academic performance"? I think it can, and I think it can be better than a teacher giving grades as a way to offer such predictability and clarity, which can actually be a false sense of predictability and clarity. Students do not always read our grades and evaluations in the ways we intend them to be read. They can get the wrong messages, or at least different messages than what teachers intend.

Three-dimensional laboring can be encouraged by mindful and reflective work that discusses labor and its conditions: labor logs, labor tracking documents,

labor journals, Tweeting/Slacking, and labor planning documents. All of these reflective assignments can be designed into the ecology as part of the laboring, part of the assignments.<sup>11</sup> So their labor is accounted for in labor estimates, meaning they are a part of the learning processes in the course and do not make for “extra” labor on top of the “real labor” of the course.

While such practices are not as simple and familiar—and dangerous—as grades are to help students find predictability and clarity, they are better. They take the job of predicting and being clear about one’s work and progress away from the teacher, and assign it to the student, where it is more educative and flexible. In fact, I argue this is the job of all learners: To know where they are at in their learning, to predict and make clear their development and learning. But, they need safe and helpful ecologies, ones that guide them when needed. Instead of the student receiving from a teacher through grades some sense of predictability and clarity on their progress in a course, the student makes these understandings consciously through their own reflective work on their laboring. They become more self-reliant while also depending on their peers around them to help them understand their laboring, say, through responses to their journals. This affords students the opportunity to create their own predictability and clarity in their own educational journeys.

## A Concern about More Marginalization

Because it can apply to all grading ecologies, I would like to be more skeptical about one claim inside of Kryger and Zimmerman’s discussion. They claim that LBG by definition “*increases* marginalization” for students who embody neurodivergency, but this is unproven. I’m not saying LBG doesn’t create such marginalization around labor expectations if care is not taken in their design and implementation. I’m questioning the assumption that LBG by default creates *more* marginalization for students with neurodivergencies than other grading ecologies. Perhaps they do not mean this, but it could be read in their article, and there is no direct evidence offered that shows this increase. Remember, most writing teachers have been practicing versions of ungrading for several decades now, at least three. One could argue that such marginalization, because of the lack of grades, has always been with us. We just haven’t been looking for it, measuring it.

Is it reasonable though to assume that most students who embody neurodivergencies will experience an “increase” in marginalization because they are students in a LBG ecology? How would we know of any degree of increased marginalization? First, we’d need to know what marginalization looks like or how to recognize it, then we’d need to know how to measure that marginalization in conventional grading ecologies, and finally measure and compare it to similar

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11. I should note that I don’t use labor logs and tracking documents in the same ecology. I use either one or the other since they serve the same purposes.

measures from LBG ecologies. That kind of work has not been done. What I think we can more safely say is this: If marginalization means higher barriers to final grades and learning because of a lack of predictability and clarity associated with the absence of grades for students with neurodivergencies, then any grading ecology can marginalize such students when grades are taken out or delayed and nothing replaces them to offer sufficient predictability and clarity.

Of course, I'm not arguing that we not address the problem that Kryger and Zimmerman identify. I'm not even saying that my attempts at offering predictability and clarity are the best alternatives. But there is a suggestion that such evidence of more marginalization may be found in Inman and Powell's study, for example. That study might offer evidence if it used LBG contracts, but it does not. Like the instructors in Spidell and Thelin's 2006 study (58-63) on student responses to contracts, the instructors in Inman and Powell's study used hybrid contracts, which still have judgements of quality that produce grades circulating in their ecologies (33, note 4 on 53). In Chapter 2 of my LBG book, I explain the very real difference that having even a few judgements of quality (only those that determine A grades) have in hybrid grading contract ecologies (67-68/64-65). This makes hybrid contract grading ecologies different from LBG ecologies in a very important way.

Circulating both quality-based and labor-based decisions to determine grades in a grading ecology creates an unfair contradiction in my experience. Students will feel and experience this contradiction as unfairness because it separates students by who can get the quality judgements that equate to an A-grade and who cannot. This contradiction is created by unresolved conflicts around how teachers' judgements, which are informed by habits of White language (HOWL), are used centrally toward the grading ecology's goals of social and linguistic justice, or fairness. Judgements of quality are not used to determine grades, until you want the highest ones, then the teacher deploys their languaging habits to make decisions about quality.

This aspect of hybrid contract grading ecologies can sound like fine print to many students, or rugs being pulled at the last minute, or worse "separate but equal" framing around grades. The quality judgements that make A-grades call into question the rest of the ecology and its grades. The grading ecology, then, engenders uncertainty and anxiety over the highest grades by maintaining student anxiety over teachers' judgements for them (a need to please the teacher, or an uncertainty as to how well their doing), as demonstrated in both Spidell and Thelin's, and Inman and Powell's studies, leaving many students still wondering about their grade or feeling a bit unsure or betrayed.

So as I see it, the problems that Kyger and Zimmerman identify have a source: Many students' with neurodivergencies reliance on grades as a measure of predictability and clarity. LBG can offer sufficient predictability and clarity by providing consistent quantitative measures of labor, asking students to pay attention to their own labor, reflecting on it, and understanding it. Predictability and clarity



can also be directly addressed in contract negotiations with students. A course might inquire together: How shall we offer each other predictability and clarity in labor expectations and how those labors are judged as complete?

Such methods for offering predictability and clarity are more authentic to the kind of learning experiences that language and literacy courses center on. Further, and perhaps most importantly, unlike grades, the reflective ways we construct predictability and clarity do not hierarchize language performances and the people who offer them. Students have to reorient themselves in the ecology, but this is no different from any other classroom that uses a different grading scheme from previous courses that any student has just been in.

But the ableist and neurotypical problems with using quantitative measures don't go away because there is more clarity and predictability in the ecology. A student can be clear about labor expectations in a course and also know that they cannot achieve them in the given time frame. Or can they? I believe few students can know for sure what they can do and when without sufficient information on their own laboring and on how much labor is expected of them in the present assignment. Providing such information in a grading ecology, and then using it to build labor plans—that is, plans each student makes about their work in the semester—is another way LBG can cripp labor, if crippling labor means, in part, making labor expectations predictable and clear through planning, keeping labor data, and reflecting on that information in order to flexibly work from such planning.