

CHAPTER 6.

WHAT CONCERNS ARE THERE OF LABOR-BASED GRADING CONTRACTS

Some may have reservations about using a labor-based system of grading in a writing or English course, or have questions about some of the details, differences, logistics, and consequences. In this chapter, I address the most popular concerns and questions that I've not directly addressed in my discussion already (although I have briefly covered some of this territory in previous chapters). Many of these questions come from several sources: a query to colleagues on the WPA-L listserv on May 03, 2017; numerous faculty members at various colleges and universities where I've given workshops and talks over the past three or four years; and a wonderful group of engaged teachers and graduate students in the CUNY Graduate Center's Composition and Rhetoric Community group.⁴⁰

I have designed this chapter as a kind of modified FAQ that mostly stands on its own. I try to address each question comprehensively from both a theoretical and practical level, so I consider this chapter an important part of theorizing labor-based grading contracts and the ecologies they help cultivate. One should keep in mind that the grading ecologies I speak of in this chapter are based on primarily my own labor-based grading contract ecologies, ones mostly situated in universities that serve primarily students of color and first-generation, working-class students (i.e., Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, California State University, Fresno, and the University of Washington Tacoma). Not all contracts are the same, not all labor-based grading ecologies are the same, nor are all teachers and students embodied in ecologies in the same ways, so some of my

40 I wish to thank the CUNY Graduate Center's Composition and Rhetoric Community group for their good questions and concerns about contracts in a lively discussion via Google Hangouts one evening on April 20, 2017. Those good graduate students and teachers are: Jason Myers, Robert Greco, Sean Molloy, Alexis Larsson, Erin Andersen, Seth Graves, Lindsey Albracht, and Anna Zeemont. Also, I am grateful to all the good folks on the WPA-L who provided me with questions to include and address in this chapter in a threaded discussion on May 03, 2017. Some of those folks are E. Shelley Reid, Abby Knoblauch, Courtney Wooten, Cynthia Baer, Dayna Goldstein, Arun Raman, Dan Sharkovitz, Clancy Ratliff, Nick Carbone, Traci Gardner, Julie Dugger, Bethany Davila, Jarron Slater, Donna Qualley, John Whicker, Dirk Remley, Misty Beck, Michael Pemberton, Maja Wilson, Matt Dowell, Janet Lively, Jacob Martens, Thomas Wright, and Jonathan Hunt. I have included many of these colleagues' questions in some form in this chapter.

responses should be understood as coming from a writing teacher of color, who also exercises male privilege in the classroom, and whose students are mostly first-generation, and often at least 50% students of color and working class. I try hard, however, to be conscious of my privilege, and humble enough to see my shortcomings so that I might learn from them.

WHY DOES YOUR LABOR-BASED GRADING CONTRACT USE A DEFAULT B-GRADE (3.1) AND NOT A C-GRADE (2.1)?

The default grade that any contract offers is up to the teacher and their sense of what works best with their students, as well as what works with the nature of the course and work involved. I have always begun with a default grade of B (3.1) in my courses. I do this because I know that I tend to ask for a lot of labor of students, so getting an “above average” grade seems appropriate to me if all the contract terms are met. The labor I’m asking of students is worth an above average grade in my opinion. I want my students to do more than an average amount of work (or my notions of an average amount). I realize that if everyone is doing what is asked of them, then the notion “above average” becomes what is average. So be it. I do not hold tightly to conceptions of things like average. I prefer to think of it as a “typical” grade. In all courses and grading systems, concepts like “average” performance are convenient reifications for grading purposes. More important, I know that Bs matter to most of my students and are worth attaining. Most students just aren’t satisfied with grades lower than B (3.1), so that’s the benchmark we hold.

This makes sense from a consequences standpoint too, which is one way to gauge the fairness of an assessment ecology. The consequences of students receiving a B (3.1) instead of an A (4.0) on their transcript in their FYW course is insignificant, while getting a C (2.1), I think, has a perceived heavier negative consequence, although still insignificant in the long run. So less harm is done to students should they not meet the contract, but meet most of its terms, or get a C (2.1). Students may not always see this, since every grade counts and every class should be taken seriously. Thus the psychological effect of working toward a default B-grade (3.1) is more satisfying than a C-grade. It feels better to work toward a B-grade than a C-grade, even though the contract attempts to help us problematize these feelings about grades. Feeling good with what you get for your labor, regardless of what that labor consists of, is part of what makes systems fair for individuals.

So there are pragmatic reasons I use a default B-grade. But, there are also deeper philosophical reasons too. Many students come into my class still assuming a point-acquisition philosophy. This philosophy says that a course grade

equates to how much you learned of the total amount offered or expected in a course. One's course grade, then, is like a gas tank gauge, registering how full the student got in the course. The more information the student learned, the higher their grade. The more points one acquires, the more one has gotten from the class, the higher that student's grade is, so goes the logic. But this logic is one engineered into most assessment ecologies by the use of points and the methods designed by teachers for students to get those points (or keep them away from some students). If there is 1,000 points possible in the quarter, and you acquire 850 of those points, you got an 85%, a B course grade because you allegedly learned 85% of the course material. But the points are artificial and arbitrary.

So this point-acquisition philosophy isn't a universal logic for all assessment ecologies, and this logic determines what course grades mean to students. When my students translate this logic to our labor-based course, they can mistakenly assume that doing all the labor means you've done everything possible in the course, so like the full tank in the point-acquisition philosophy, you should get the highest grade possible, an A-grade (4.0). Of course, this point-acquisition philosophy is not what I assume. It's not the logic of labor-based grading contracts. Labor-based contracts assume an if-then-agreement logic. If the student accomplishes the labor terms we negotiated, then they will receive the course grade we agreed upon for that labor. The grade doesn't signify how much of the total course material you've learned, or even how much you've done of the total labor possible. It means you've met the labor terms in the contract for the grade that we agreed to. A B-grade (3.1) means the student met the contract terms for a B-grade. An A-grade (4.0) means the student has met those negotiated and defined terms (more labor).

Like all contracts, the terms that define the default grade, and even the default grade itself, should be negotiated with students. I do this every quarter. Occasionally, we modify the default grade of the contract from a B (3.1) to a B+/A- (3.4). This sometimes is offered by one of the students at our midpoint renegotiation time in reflections on the contract, which would then require a discussion and anonymous vote.⁴¹ Sometimes, I offer it myself because I can see that they are too timid to ask for it. This only happens when it is clear that while most students can complete the terms of labor we agree upon, they are finding it difficult to complete any of the extra labor required to get a higher grade, yet they want to try. They feel that most of that extra labor is unrealistic for most or all of the students in the class. This makes the contract unfair, since fairness is partly defined by the amount of access to all grades that all students have in the class. This is consistent with John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness

41 For all negotiations of any contract details, either in the first week of the class or at midpoint, a super-majority (2/3) affirmative vote is required for my classes.

that I discuss in Chapter 2, in which the two general conditions of fairness in a society are (1) that all opportunities be formally open to all, and (2) “that all should have a fair chance to attain them” (43). Not so incidentally, the other main part of fairness is that all people in the ecology have as equal say as possible in the important decisions of the ecology, that is, that all get to participate in decision-making (see Inoue, “Articulating Sophistic” 41, 44), which makes the negotiation process vital to the fairness of the contract.

TO WHAT EXTENT CAN LABOR-BASED GRADING CONTRACTS ADDRESS LEARNING OR COURSE OBJECTIVES OR OUTCOMES?

If you are worried about measuring or showing evidence of students learning course outcomes, then I respectfully suggest that you rethink the assumptions that make this question possible. I’m not saying that teachers should not be concerned about learning outcomes, only that grading mechanisms have little to do with students acquiring them, or demonstrating them. We just think they do. Strictly speaking, no system that produces a course grade or that ranks individual performances in some way can assure that students are meeting or developing along course goals, objectives, or outcomes. We like to believe that giving grades helps students achieve outcomes, but really all they do is assure us that *we (teachers) think* that our students have achieved them by assigning a symbol to performances, symbols that have the appearance of precise measurement. While this may often be a necessary assumption, grades are not teaching, nor are they learning. The presence of grades does not mean the presence of learning, and only suggests that we have measured something in some precise way.

And like the SAT and other large scale tests that produce similar numbers that appear to measure students in some way, our grades cannot do this evenly or reliably. Yes, grades appear to measure outcomes—at least in one judge’s eyes—but do our grades really measure outcomes that students have learned? Numbers and rankings in our society, especially when they are elaborate, give the appearance of precision—often because of their complexity—but precision of measurement is not in the scale alone. It is in how accurate and consistent the scale can be used. Pat Belanoff’s four “myths of assessment” suggest why using any scale based on our own judgments of writing is suspect in terms of its validity to make judgments on students and their writing, and the reliability of our judgments themselves. Grades on writing and points seem precise, but we have no indication that they are or can be.

The assumption in questions like this one, which seek to understand labor-based contracts in terms of conventional grading ecologies, is flawed in that

it tries to compare labor-based contracts by a standard set by conventional grading or point acquisition systems, using conventional systems as a kind of criterion by which to establish contracts' level of validity in teaching outcomes. But I question the criterion's (i.e., grades that measure outcomes) validity itself to be a criterion. This question implies that conventional grading systems already do this, hence the use of them as a criterion by which to judge contracts, but it is a dubious assumption to say that any conventional system of grading by quality helps students learn or achieve outcomes, just as it is equally dubious to say that the same system measures students' written performances in a reliable way. Grades may measure outcomes in some way, but we do not have any guarantees that those grades are accurate, consistent, or measure what we say they are measuring, unless a department or program has elaborate, costly, and frequent norming sessions that move teachers toward such practices. And even if this is happening, which I doubt, there is still the problem of racist and White language supremacist standards that will be inevitable when a program chooses the standards by which to norm its teachers to. So it is ironically also good that we do not have reliable or internally similar standards for the same classes in a program or department.

Another way to see the problem with this question is to see grades as a reification of measurement in the same fashion that Stephen J. Gould speaks of reification in science and its measurement. Gould explains that when it came to the biological sciences, particularly those that sought to understand human variation and race, scientists made two fallacies historically: reification and ranking. The fallacy of reification, he says, is "our tendency to convert abstract concepts into entities" (24). Gould illustrates reification through IQ tests and the reification of the IQ score, which doesn't exist outside the IQ test that came out of Alfred Binet's work at the Sorbonne. One's IQ is not real. It says nothing actual about one's ability to think, or analyze, or problem solve, or get along in the world, but like grades, its presence suggests its reality. If we forget that we've made up this number for intelligence called IQ, we may forget that the idea of a unified concept of "intelligence" is also a fabrication and not real. This calls into question the validity of such numbers and grades for making decisions about people's abilities or future opportunities because grades are the same kind of reification, a fabrication we made up, a fictitious, unified symbol for an uneven, complex network of practices, and competencies.

In our case, we see that writing effectively is important for students and citizens, so we seek to characterize it and students in order to make divisions and categories. But these divisions are not universal to people or their writing. We make them up in order to grade student writing. We create the construct of "good writing" or the ideal essay, then reify it by pretending (or forgetting) that

the construct we use to grade is not real and does not exist. We then grade actual writing, and use those grades as if they are real indicators of something that exists outside of our construction of it. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Haswell explains how judgment from exemplars and prototypes work, and that in fact, we need some exemplars and prototypes to make judgments on texts. This sounds similar to reification, and it is. But the fictions we use in prototype, exemplar, and classical categorical judging, according to Haswell, are constructs that are understood *to be constructed* (hence the name), thus they might be reconstructed in other ways, for other purposes or students. We know that constructs are not real, but when we forget this fact, then they become reifications, fictions that we treat as real and that manipulate us, instead of the other way around.

As I've mentioned in Chapter 4, and as I'll discuss below in the question on grades and motivation ("Don't some students want or need grades . . ."), Daniel Kahneman shows through numerous studies conducted over several decades how our brains make judgments through two systems, one fast and one slow. Among the heuristics of the fast system, which is the more problematic one, are ones that need reifications, or categories that help us make quick decisions about things and people. Thus we all can and often do fall into the mind-trap of reification. It's how our brains make important quick judgments, whether we think of that process as using exemplars, prototypes, or categories of dimensions, all these processes of judgment work from constructs that often become reifications out of necessity that we must be mindful of, and continue to question. Labor-based grading contract ecologies avoids grades as reifications of some kind of measurement of an outcome or of "good writing," and allows students and teacher to use our necessary systems of judgment without letting them harm students through the application of grades as reifications.

Furthermore, Gould explains that reification goes hand and hand with the second fallacy. The fallacy of ranking, which is "our propensity for ordering complex variation as a gradual ascending scale" (24). Thus if grades are reifications that rank writing, but those grades are just constructions, then what are we ranking? Why is any particular order a good order? Why not some other order if there is nothing essential about what "good discourse" means or is? More importantly, as Gould illustrates in his discussion and David Goldberg argues about racist discourse in Western traditions, ranking is a part of a much longer racist, and White supremacist, tradition in Western intellectual history. The impulse to rank is too often naturalized itself.

Aristotle based a career on categorizing and ranking plants and animals, then on rhetoric. Later on, the West generally ranked people in terms of race (Hannaford; Goldberg; Gould). Ranking has been deeply embedded in racist thinking, discourses, and logics, mainly because it has been deployed as a way

to justify a number of racist, empirical, and colonial projects over the last four hundred years. Education at all levels has been and still is a part of these racist projects because it is deeply enmeshed in the hegemonic structures that keep our societies and cultures going, even though there is always the counter hegemonic in the hegemonic.

In schools and universities, the fallacy of ranking is wrapped so tightly into the reifications of grades, it is difficult to separate them. We must be extra cautious when our purposes for grading are to measure things like outcomes in students, particularly diverse students. Outcomes are predetermined constructs themselves, and we could end up treating them as reifications (unquestioned, naturalized constructions), then rank people based on those reifications without considering seriously who we are ranking and what literacies they bring with them, or the legitimacy, usefulness, or consequences of the outcomes themselves that we promote. It may be better, as Chris Gallagher has argued, to think in terms of consequences, not outcomes. Consequences are open-ended, so can embrace and encourage a multitude of unexpected outcomes in students' labors. Labor-based grading contracts provide an ecology easily amenable to noticing, understanding, analyzing, and exploring the unexpected consequences of students' reading and writing labors, without forcing a particular standard.

No one in any school or university is immune to the fallacies of reification or ranking. As Edwardo Bonilla-Silva reveals about how White people talk about race in the US, we may be perpetuating racism without being racist ourselves. We're just judging good writing, which may be a reification, but which ends up excluding and oppressing some students because of who they are or where they grew up. Our reifications of measurement that we enact through grades on writing cannot help but be reflections of the White middle-class *habitus* that all teachers to some degree embody. In short, my first answer to this question is that addressing writing course outcomes may not be the best ecological purpose for any grading ecology because of the way grades tend to be dubious reifications of measurement and rank students unfairly by privileging a White middle-class *habitus*.

Now, let's assume that the constructs we wish to measure in students is appropriate, that we—teachers, students, and other stakeholders—have agreed in a particular site or school that we value a writing construct and it is not a real thing, but one we've consciously chosen and will present that way to students. This construct is articulated in our outcomes for a writing course. Let's call our construct "using evidence appropriately to prove a thesis for an academic audience." Now, how do labor-based contracts address these kinds of outcomes, ones perhaps more critically maintained in a classroom and writing program? Because we do not need to rank performances in a labor-based grading contracted course, any deviations

from what might be expected, from a standard that the teacher holds and promotes, can be more educative for students because they set up learning questions that pose problems about the nature of judgment and the politics of language: Why is *that way* of using evidence better than this way for academic audiences? Where did that academic audience get these ideas? Why do some of us already do this in our writing, while others use evidence differently to back up a thesis? Why is this kind of information called evidence for this claim and this other kind not? Who made those rules up? Who do those rules benefit in our classroom?

The point in feedback cycles and discussions of revisions is not to adhere to one way of doing language, although most students may be trying to emulate the standard, but equally to understand where the standard comes from, who automatically benefits from it, why that group benefits, and what other reasonable possibilities there are to achieve the same rhetorical practices and goals, even though many academic readers, who embody White racial *habitus* do not accept those ways with words. Furthermore, this grading ecology honors the actual learning happening, the laboring, the working, that students do, regardless of what they can produce at that moment. The ecology has addressed the outcome in a more critical way, and not harmed students who do not already come embodying a White racial *habitus* in the process.

Having said that no grading system can guarantee that students will learn or develop literacy competencies, I do think that labor-based grading contracts offer conditions that help students learn and develop along explicitly stated course goals better than conventional grading ecologies. I need to note my vocabulary here. I have ethical problems with course outcomes. They are too narrowing and White supremacist. I prefer to frame all my courses and programs around course *goals*, which are broader and can accommodate a wide and diverse range of discourses, logics, and practices. Goals are what Chris Gallagher calls “aims” (or consequences) in his good critique of outcomes. Gallagher explains that outcomes tend to articulate the end point of learning. In deductive fashion, “outcomes are determined before the educational experience commences, even as they describe its end” (44). Outcomes ignore the students in front of us in favor of an idea of them and an idea of what that fictional group should learn, which of course may be based on teachers’ senses of their past students. Thus, outcomes are a reification of learning that are created in part from a reification of future students. Furthermore, outcomes depend on those who create them to use another reification, one about what their fictitious future students need to learn from their writing classroom in order to succeed in their fictitious futures, all of which no one can really know. What ends or outcomes do we tend to articulate in writing programs? Dominant academic English that is informed mostly by White, middle-class *habitus*, which ends up privileging students who come

embodying White racial *habitus*. This is deeply unfair to the students I've taught at SIUE, Fresno State (an HHSI), and UW Tacoma, where most of my students have been working, first generation, multilingual, and students of color. Thus the use of outcomes to grade in writing courses is typically unfair for many students, and usually White supremacist.

Gallagher promotes "consequences" or "aims," because they "are always emergent within educational experiences; they cannot be fixed beyond or outside those experiences" (47). Labor-based grading contracts work very well with course aims or what I call goals, which are broader and open to what we end up getting through our labors. Goals are articulated usually as labor or practices themselves, and seek the emergent, defining the consequences of labor as learning, making anything produced by students potential learning. Thus the students' and my job as teacher is to understand what learning is happening in the labors of the course and make order out of it, make meaning from practices. This is why there are lots of recursive ongoing reflective activities in my classrooms and an attention to mindfulness through labor logs, journals, and labor tweeting. Thus a course goal may sound like: "practice multiple, meaningful and self-conscious ways of reading texts for various purposes." The labors that make up the terms of the contract would need to make sure that students practice multiple ways to read for different purposes.

Notice that the goal is to practice something purposefully, and it doesn't define in any fine way what the outcome or product of those practices will be. It doesn't even define what the practice will look like or be experienced as. These things are too difficult to determine beforehand. In many ways, having to delineate carefully the labor processes in each set of labor instructions (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4; also see Appendix D for example labor instructions) helps me as the teacher make sure that students meet such course goals, which are always reiterated in each set of instructions.

The ethical point in using labor-based grading to meet course goals instead of outcomes, however, is more than avoiding White language supremacy. Using labor as the way to calculate course grades is also ethical on the grounds of fairness in what is graded, or what counts toward grades, and so what counts as course goals. What we can ask from students and what we can expect from everyone in the room regardless of where they come from or what *habitus* they embody should be the same or commensurate. And yet we know we cannot expect the same ecological products from every student. We never get the same things from students, even when the instructions or prompts are the same. This is common knowledge, yet this is often what we assume in conventional point-based systems because we typically only grade the end products of student labors. And yet still, we don't really want to read the same essay twenty-five times. We want

variety, surprises, difference. We inherently value diversity. So we like the fact that literacy is varied and inherently chaotic, that our students never produce the same things in the same assignments. But our grading systems' assumptions don't match these literacy values. Our assumptions about literacy production and how grades are calculated should match. When they do, the ecology better addresses course goals and is fairer to all.

Thus, labor-based grading contract ecologies directly address course goals, because course goals are labor-based (about practices), not product- or outcome-based. This means that course grades directly reflect how well students meet course goals. But no system of grading can reliably or fairly address narrow, pre-determined course outcomes, unless you have a perfectly homogenous student population that matches your teachers' *habitus*.

HOW DOES A TEACHER DETERMINE WHEN A STUDENT HAS DONE ENOUGH LABOR TO GET CREDIT FOR ANY GIVEN LABOR/ASSIGNMENT?

One might also ask what is the absolute minimum effort expected in order for an assignment of labor to be okay or count? In Chapter 2, I discussed Mandel's classroom in which he accepts pretty much whatever students turn in, even if it is rushed and slap-dashed. He explains that some students may not be ready to learn and that he encourages his students to turn in "self-discipline and self-respecting work" (629). I tend to use this default position when checking students' labor. In my classes, there is always some product that their labor results in or produces, even reading a chapter for the next class session. These products may be a short piece of writing posted on our CMS or a brainstorming document. Additionally, I incorporate a labor tweet/Slack⁴² in most labor instructions. This typically means checking labor is a fairly quick job, unless my job is to respond in some way. I don't work very hard at making distinctions in labor products between good or bad labor, or whether enough time was spent. Instead, I use a simple rubric to make my determination of whether a particular product of labor is done adequately and reflects the expectations of labor in the activity. Each labor assignment is complete and counts if it meets in the affirmative the following questions:

- Is the labor product(s) posted on time and in the correct place?
- Does the labor product(s) include everything I asked for and meet the minimum word count?
- Is there a labor tweet/Slack(s) posted as instructed (if applicable)?

⁴² As mentioned earlier, I have moved recently to a closed message system (Slack) that only students in the course see, but is similar in use as Twitter.

This is easy and fast to do. If all three criteria above are a “yes,” then I don’t record anything in my gradebook. I only record something in my gradebook when they don’t meet the labor requirements. Usually, I record late/incomplete assignments or when a student does not participate in class. For a number of reasons, I assume that if a student is present, then they are participating. Some may have concerns about “on time” labor, or exact due dates that seem inflexible; however, part of what we negotiate in our contract is the number of late (assignments turned in within forty-eight hours of the due date and time) and missed assignments (those turned in after the forty-eight hour rule). So I feel students have at least two opportunities (week one and midpoint renegotiation) to set the rules of the grading ecology such that they all can be successful. And of course, I’m paying attention as well.

Perhaps the most contentious item above is the second one. It technically may appear to be judging quality, and as I’ve said already, the labor-based grading contract prohibits using quality judgments as a basis for grades. I try to keep “everything I ask for” in any given assignment to quantifiable items, such as having a response for two questions I might provide. However, there is a big difference in using quality to determine a grade on a performance and using minimum notions of quality (i.e., did the student respond to all three questions, and thus what do I consider to be a response to each question?) to determine labor done, which is not a grade. The second way of judging is more generous and does not use distinctions of quality, except for bare minimum notions of quality or of content to determine the presence of what is asked for in the labor, and most important, it does not rank performances by quality. Is there the presence of language that addresses in some way the question I asked students to respond to?

Let me show you how this typically looks. Let’s say the labor assignment was to read a chapter from a book, tweet/Slack an annotated page about something interesting the student read, and write a 150-word paragraph that reflects upon that interesting idea found in the chapter so that we can discuss them in class the following day. And let’s also say that in those labor instructions, I asked students to spend between forty-five to sixty minutes reading and annotating, then ten minutes brainstorming the idea found in the text, and a final fifteen minutes writing the paragraph, which amounts to a total labor time of around seventy to eighty-five minutes. So the expectations of labor are about seventy to eighty-five minutes of reading and writing, a tweet, and a 150-word paragraph. After the appropriate due time, I check the posts and tweets. A student, let’s call him Liang, tweets and posts a paragraph that is exactly 150 words but doesn’t include the one thing I asked for in the paragraph, a discussion of the interesting idea from his annotated page. This labor is therefore incomplete. So I don’t count it,

but I don't ask him to do it again. Now, if he doesn't post his paragraph, then I do ask that he complete that.

In the drafting step of the labor instructions, I usually put a bullet list of the elements I ask them to include, making clear that they are not an outline, unless I want them to use it as such. For labor like this, I might say: "Be sure to include in some way in your paragraph of at least 150 words the following elements," then offer a list, such as:

- A short one to two sentence summary of the chapter section that you are responding to;
- A quote from the section that helps us understand the words and ideas you wish to talk specifically about; and
- Your discussion of or response to the idea or quote that helps us think about it more deeply.

As you can see, I'm doing a number of things in these instructions. I'm implicitly leading them through a rhetorical set of moves that many academic texts do. I'm making sure that they talk about something in the text specifically. And I'm preparing them for our class discussion on the text. I'm not concerned about what exactly they say, or that they get everything accurate to my standards. Those details are for our discussion in class, or for a response I may make to them, but they are not a part of my deciding if their labor is adequate. As long as they have these three parts in the paragraph in some form, the paragraph is complete labor done.

Now, let's say Liang's paragraph was 150 words, had all three elements above, but seemed slapped together, hasty, and just repeated the same idea in the quote over and over. So it isn't very deep, and I can see it won't help him much. I might even say that he isn't trying very hard. 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? Were you confused by the instructions or the chapter? Can you try harder next time or use the labor more mindfully to meet the goals of the course? I would point him to the third bullet, and ask him how his discussion helps us think more deeply about the quoted idea. Depending on the activity and the product, I might even suggest alternative timings for such labor steps or other practices. Often I'm telling students something like, "if the instructions say that you should spend twenty-five to thirty minutes, factor a bit more time for yourself, maybe forty-five minutes. It appears you may need some extra time to produce the kind of material that will help you in the class." Most important, I leave Liang's learning up to him, and so I must leave much of his labor to him.

Now, some might say, well, you're leaving the time spent on labor a mystery. You may ask for a certain amount, but you don't know how much actual time is spent. Correct. This is not something I can measure with any accuracy or consistency across students, even if all students dutifully record everything in their labor logs. Many students tell me during each quarter that they don't log everything, small bits of labor here and there, which may amount to significant differences in actual labor time over a quarter. This is the nature of time and trying to keep track of it. It's elusive. But putting aside these problems of accuracy and consistency, if I used the labor logs to account for the time spent on the assignment, I believe it would be too enticing for students to fudge those numbers. That is, it is too tempting for even good students in the heat of the quarter, when much is happening and lots of unexpected things press them for time, to simply input more time in their labor logs, which makes the logs inaccurate, useless in our reflective activities on them because they are not actual representations of their labor practices, and now busywork. I tell my students this, because they may think that I'm going to use them to keep track of their labor for their grades. I do not. I want the logs to be true mindful and reflective devices that help them pay attention to their labor as practice and understand their material conditions in the quarter, which may help them do things differently. In the end, much of what I count as complete labor is done by trusting my students and done in as quantifiable way as possible, always trying to give the student the benefit of any doubts I may have, even if I may still ask that student about their labor if it seems to be less productive than I hoped for.

HOW CAN A TEACHER RESPOND TO STUDENTS WHO PUT IN MINIMAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE LABOR, OR TRY TO GAME THE SYSTEM?

Other ways of voicing this line of questioning are: Do labor-based grading contracts allow teachers to avoid engaging with the quality of students' writing, or the substance of it? What do you do about writing that is poor or substandard? If we grade what we value, does grading on labor suggest that we do not value quality? If we grade what we teach, and we grade on labor, are we valuing labor at the exclusion of writing quality? I've suggested responses to several of these questions in the above discussions already, so I'll address the gaps mostly in this section.

Conventional quality-based grading ecologies often teach students to game the system because the object is to get the highest grade in the most efficient way possible. And products are all that matter when it comes to acquiring those grades. In those ecologies, since labor is hidden and not rewarded—in fact, more labor on an assignment may often feel like it is punished (and certainly not re-

warded)—many students' responses will be to find ways to game the system, to do the least amount of work while getting the best grade possible. There are also some students who, no matter what, simply are not motivated to be in college or in the course. They don't see the value of learning to write in the ways the course is designed to offer. While these are two different groups of students, I believe labor-based ecology's priorities help both groups and address this question.

And yet, no system can stop a student from plagiarizing or doing the minimum work, or just inching by with just enough labor to meet the contracted terms. But many systems can punish students even more. As can be taken from my example above of the fictitious student Liang, I do not try to stop students from doing the minimum, but I do let students know when I see signs of it, and encourage them to do more. Each student has the right to do what they wish and accept the consequences of those decisions. Conversely, I do not have the right to force them to do otherwise. I try to be compassionate and honest with all my students, without beating around the bush or being permissive. If I think a student is doing the bare minimum and could work harder or longer on their labor, I tell them. If I see signs that a student is uninterested in the course's labors, I ask them about it. But I try to get them to articulate the problem first, usually in the labor journal entries or reflective work we do each week in and out of class. Often it's an email or two, or a conversation after class privately.

I don't think it's a good idea to coerce students into doing more work than they are willing or able to do simply because I feel they should. There are consequences for a student not meeting the terms of labor delineated in the contract, so I let them know this, but I don't force more labor on a student who isn't willing to initiate that labor, and I don't think badly of students who for whatever reason are not ready to do the work we ask of everyone in the class. Even if I'm right about how much more labor they should be doing, making a student do more work or redo work they've done because it was shoddy or hasty, likely will result in the student grudging me and feeling negative toward the class or the work. I'm not convinced this leads to effective, long-lasting learning. I'm more convinced it leads to students not liking the class and the work we do together. Many times, I've come to find out that I'd read the signs wrong. They were engaged in the class, and other things were happening in their life. Usually, just me asking if they are okay and showing them that I noticed their lack of labor or engagement in the class helps them. Some of the time, they thank me for noticing.

Developing quality and learning are labors that the people in the ecology must be responsible for on their own, not made accounted by the grading system in the ecology. Labor-based grading contract ecologies separate grades from two competing elements in any assessment ecology: (1) the labor and work that students do, or the ecological processes; and (2) the quality of writing judged by someone

and the learning through dialogues and reflections on languaging, or the ecological parts (such as, feedback, responses, assessments, etc.), learning products, and people. Grades are then applied to the first and not the second. Figure 6.1 shows graphically how one might represent these elements of the ecology.

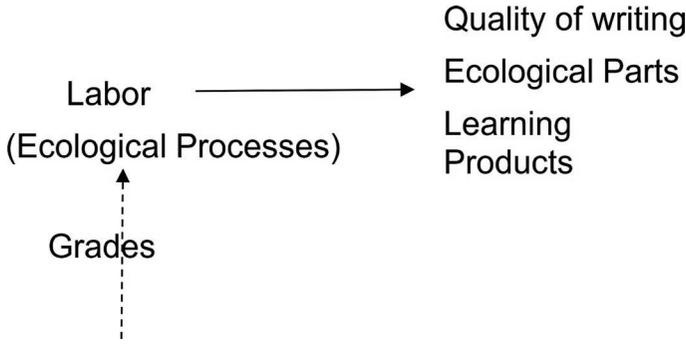


Figure 6.1. Grades are applied to labor, not to so-called quality or judgments of learning.

Normally, grades would be on the other side of the figure, applied to the learning products, thus completely ignoring the labor that produced those products. While this system does leave room for students to game it by not doing the expected labor or doing the minimum, this is no different than any other system of grading. All grading systems can be gamed. The game in conventional systems is simply different.

There are five philosophical assumptions that inform my labor-based assessment ecologies, and explain why I don't force students to do more labor than they are willing, even if that labor is technically asked of them by the contract.

Philosophical assumption #1: *Every student can learn exactly what they can at that moment, and no more, no less.* This sounds circular, but it's really a way for me to express the simple idea that all of us have our own lives and learning journeys, that people do not always neatly fit into the same educational boxes, that our learning is always deeply contextual and contingent—that is, we learn in our complex lives that are always in process. Sometimes we are not ready for a course or lesson or idea, and it doesn't mean we are incapable or dumb or lack ability. It means that at that moment in our lives, other things take up our time, mental space, and attention. We are not ready. It is not our time for that idea, lesson, or course. Because of this, I try hard to never make moral or value judgments on what I see my students doing (or not doing), because I am only seeing what I can, not all there is (this how I try to avoid the WYSIATI heuristic explained in the next question, "Don't some students need . . ."). Sometimes I

ask them: “I notice that you haven’t been spending a lot of time on the course’s labors. Do you think you are ready to do this work with us at this moment in your life? Would you like to talk about what has been keeping you from doing the labors?” I don’t try to solve problems for them, only be a compassionate listener who reflects back to them what I hear them saying, and help them hear what that means for their progress and learning in our course. If they ask, I offer practices and ideas. This, I feel, is a responsible way to acknowledge and respect each student’s unique learning moment on their terms, while still keeping my promises around administering the contract.

Philosophical assumption #2: *Learning literacy practices is better done in non-coercive ecologies of compassion, encouragement, and risk taking.* Too often we try to coerce our students, or force them to do what we know is good for them. We are the experts. We know. But we are not simply teaching subjects (as in ideas and topics) to students. We teach *with* students about themselves and others *as subjects*, helping them get all they can at that moment.⁴³ The first assumption above explains part of the reason for this assumption. Being non-coercive means I accept where my students are as they come to me, which may be uncomfortable for me initially. To teach in this way, I must consider the learning place we make together, the ecology. Doing this means the class as a whole must try hard to be compassionate to each other.

Learning the very private yet social labors of languaging requires trust and care. Writers must trust readers, particularly ones who will make judgments of their literacy practices. And everyone must engage in practices that reveal their ways of caring for the wellbeing and learning of others. We must labor for others first, then we learn. While it seems a cliché, I believe when we give, we receive, but we do not receive just to get. It is a kind of paradox in learning and compassion. In fact, I think we learn the most important things in community with others, giving and tending to others. Learning is not meant for the individual alone, but is meant for the individual among others. We often learn for the sake of others. Cultivating this principle in the ecology creates a kind of space that encourages students to take risks, to fail, to do more, to want to learn because learning becomes something more than a selfish activity of achievement. The labors of learning become compassionate communal activities that are larger than oneself. And I think, this philosophy helps convince more students to not simply do the minimum labor possible, but more.

Philosophical assumption #3: *One is all and all is one.* This principle sounds quite abstract but it really is not. I mean it quite literally, and it is associated with the previous principle. When one of us needs help, we all need help. When one

43 I am thankful to my former colleague, Rick Hansen, at Fresno State, for this articulation. Rick used to say that we teach students not writing.

of us fails, we all do. When our colleague next to us is struggling, we all struggle. Everyone's learning in our ecology is connected. If José is having trouble with a reading we are doing, and Kayla sees José but does not help him, then both José and Kayla end up being hurt. José may not be able to discuss very well the text in the group activity later, or offer much feedback on Kayla's or their other colleagues' papers. All students in the ecology are interconnected, and this is especially true in learning environments that involve developing literacies.

The historical practice of grading has fooled us into believing that learning in school is an individual endeavor because grades are doled out to individuals. Your grade is yours. You earned it. We then forget that grades are not learning. They symbolize it incompletely. We forget that we learn in communities with others. We learn through dialogue, through exchange, through interaction, through sharing, through doing with others—and this is most true for learning language. Language only exists through acts of exchange and sharing with others. To extend the cliché I opened with in the last point, *we not only give to receive but receive in proportion that we give*. Thus the vast majority of anyone's learning amounts to a series of gifts that others have given, that we each humbly accept in cycles of giving and receiving. I know this sounds pie-in-the-sky and hokey to some, but I'm convinced that if a class believes it and acts on it, it always changes that ecology for the better. It allows us to trust that what someone is doing is all they can at that moment, even as we encourage and push them to do more in the next moment.

Philosophical assumption #4: *It's better to design grading ecologies that encourage learning, since teachers cannot actually teach anything*. Of course, we know that teaching isn't the same thing as learning. But I think one possible outcome of this premise is that one cannot consciously teach anyone anything, if teaching means that we distribute or bank (to use Freire's metaphor) information or practices in students. What we do is create conditions, ecologies, that encourage learning, stunt it, or do some combination of the two. Understanding the nature of learning in a particular group of students can be the focus of the assessment ecology, and one can do this by paying attention to the labors that embody learning and practices.

In some form, I am often asking my students, "what did you learn?" or "how did you learn that?" This isn't just creating a process and condition for them to pay attention in a mindful way to the fact that they are learning something, or even how they did it. It is also a way for me to gather important information on this particular class and what elements in the ecology they respond to the best. In some classes, it has been the group responses and assessments to each other's work that has engaged and energized my students the most. In other classes, it has been the particular ways I ask them to read and think about the ideas as they read. In still other courses, students seemed most moved to learning by the way we frame all activities as compassionate activities, ones that help their colleagues

first before themselves. Using the multiple kinds of labor data produced in my classes to investigate how learning is happening helps me understand each ecology as a unique one, learning about it as we go. What I often find is that the best responses as a teacher are to step aside while still tending the ecology at the macro level, and let learning happen in the ecology without feeling the Whately impulse to step in, take over, and be the benevolent savior in charge (see Chapter 1's discussion on Whiteness as a set of habits).

Philosophical assumption #5: *Good assessment assumes that students want to learn, and does not stop those who will try to game the system.* I prefer to think the best of my students. I believe that people generally will respond in kind to ecologies that not only encourage them but think highly of them. We often live up or down to the expectations of us by others. How much would you do for someone you know really, deeply respects you and trusts you with important things? When a writing assessment ecology sets lots of boundaries and gate-keeping mechanisms, when it doesn't trust students to be responsible on their own for their own learning and the course, when it tries at most turns to make students accountable for assignments and other work of the course, it sends messages to students that say, "you are not to be trusted," "you must be held accountable or you'll get away with doing nothing." These kinds of ecologies tell students that they have little goodwill and are not mature enough to want to learn. I don't believe this.

Time and again, my students respond in responsible ways. They show me how dedicated they are to learning; how much labor they will do even though they work and have family obligations; how wonderfully generous and optimistic they are about what our class offers them, what knowing about language might give to them. Most do not try to game the system. Some likely have and do. I won't design an assessment ecology around the few who wish to game the system. That is a futile cause. I will admit that I prefer to see most things half full, rather than half empty, but I'm okay with that, and okay with some gaming the system, knowing that they still got from the ecology exactly what they could. Me forcing them to do more would not have changed that. And the cost-to-benefit ratio of further eroding our relationship and souring the student's attitude toward writing and school by forcing their feet to the labor fire of our course is too out of balance. The ways that the ecology must change would harm everyone else. It is the TSA mentality. Because there is one shoe-bomber on one flight, everyone is now suspect and must take their shoes off to be checked. I'd rather spend my time engaging those who are willing to engage, while encouraging those who don't initially. I'd rather the student leave the course and quarter thinking about what they were willing to get and didn't get, and why, instead of what I made them do against their will.

DON'T SOME STUDENTS WANT OR NEED GRADES SO THAT THEY KNOW HOW WELL THEY ARE DOING OR SO THEY CAN BE MOTIVATED TO DO THE WORK?

This question is really about how rewards and motivation work in classrooms. Often when teachers try to address this problem in writing classrooms, we neglect the nature of the grade-reward and how that kind of reward is situated and circulates in our assessment ecologies. Sometimes, this question stems from our own feelings that most students who fail to meet our standards in our classrooms do so because those students are lazy or simply don't apply themselves. Sometimes it stems from our sense that grading by so-called quality of writing helps students see their progress—that grades can show progress of learning to write on a linear scale, which can appear helpful to students. But these senses of the benefits of grades come mostly from our own unique histories of learning and subject positions in our own writing or English classrooms that we took as students. They come from our own histories with grades on writing, which usually are not the norm for students in the classrooms we teach.

In most cases, grades simply cannot motivate students to learn or help them know how they're doing in the course, even though they may appear to do so. The scholarship on grading writing supports this conclusion. In fact, it is unanimous about the unreliability or inconsistency and the idiosyncratic nature of grades (Bowman; Charnley; Diederich; Dulek and Shelby; Elbow; Starch and Elliott; Tchudi). Just as much research shows how grades and other kinds of rewards and punishments actually de-motivate and harm students and their abilities to learn anything (Elbow, "Ranking"; Kohn; Pulfrey, Butera, and Buchs). Furthermore, when grades are generated by comparing students' writing to a single standard, then language diversity and difference in *habitus* is squelched, and a dominant, White racial *habitus* is reinforced as the norm for discourse. This doubly harms many students of color and other students who come to our classrooms with non-White and non-middle-class *habitus*.

Of course, there's also the pedagogical argument that most of us know against grades as helpful feedback. In Stephen Tchudi's hierarchy of assessment practices, grading is on the opposite end from feedback (xii-xiii). Grading is closed, summative,⁴⁴ has a high degree of institutional pressure on it, and is very limited in what it can say to a student about their draft. It is not very helpful

44 In the literature on response and classroom assessment, there is often a distinction between summative and formative feedback on writing. Summative feedback typically happens at the end of a cycle of drafting and explains what is present in the draft, usually in evaluative terms, answering questions like: how good is the draft or how does it compare to a standard? Formative assessment is future directed and attempts to offer ways to improve or revise the draft, asking questions like: What potential is in this draft and what might be done next?

in showing a student anything about what they've done or what they should work on in their writing. The second practice, feedback, is open and formative in nature (Elbow, "Ranking" 188), and has little institutional pressure placed on it to say or do anything in particular. Unlike feedback, grading mostly punishes those who do not meet an idiosyncratic judge's notion of what counts, which is no better illustrated than in the way we read error (Williams, "Phenomenology"; Anson), as discussed in the fourth statement in Chapter 4 about grading being an inherently racist and White supremacist act. If there is no pedagogical value to grading, then the only function it has left is to uphold linguistic hierarchies in student formations. In fact, grading is one primary way that teachers and schools maintain what Lippi-Green reminds us is "Standard Language Ideology" (SLI), a set of beliefs about a dominant English that James and Leslie Milroy first articulated. Lippi-Green defines SLI as:

a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the [White] upper middle class. (67)

I've added a racial qualifier to Lippi-Green's statement, but given the rest of her discussion in the book, it's easy to see why this is appropriate. Even if you don't agree, then I offer my own arguments about the dominant White racial *habitus* in writing standards here and in other places (*Antiracist*; "Classroom Writing Assessment"; "Friday Plenary Address"), or perhaps philosophical arguments (Goldberg) or those from writing center work (Greenfield; Grimm) provide more evidence for referring to SLI in racialized terms. I tend to refer to SLI as White language supremacy or White language privilege.⁴⁵ So on multiple fronts, grades on writing only appear to help students know how well they are doing, and in fact, do other more harmful things.

Our own brains and idiosyncratic histories work against us when understanding grades' function in classrooms. If you've always been rewarded by the system of conventional grades, it is difficult to really understand how grades hurt most students in most writing courses, how they can be an inhibiting factor to learning. You may be able to sympathize with this concern, but if you're still putting quality-based grades on writing, then you likely cannot empathize.

⁴⁵ The distinction I make between White language supremacy and privilege is in the focus of my statement. White language supremacy highlights the systemic, the way in which systems and structures make White *habitus* central in language assessment ecologies, while White language privilege focuses attention on the preferred habits that give benefits to racially White individuals or groups.

This is typical for most writing and English teachers, and the research on judgment suggests answers. As I've discussed briefly in several places already, Daniel Kahneman explains a heuristic that our brains use to make judgments, in this case about what our students need to be motivated and to do well in our classes, which may not be the same as what *we* needed or were motivated by in *our* pasts as students, which often is our models for good pedagogy and assessment practice. The heuristic is called, "what you see is all there is" or WYSIATI. He says about the heuristic:

It explains why we can think fast, and how we are able to make sense of partial information in a complex world. Much of the time, the coherent story we put together is close enough to reality to support reasonable action . . . [but] neither the quantity nor the quality of the evidence counts for much in subjective confidence. The confidence that individuals have in their beliefs depends mostly on the quality of the story they can tell about what they see, even if they see little. We often fail to allow for the possibility that evidence that should be critical to our judgment is missing—what we see is all there is. Furthermore, our associative system tends to settle on a coherent pattern of activation and suppresses doubt and ambiguity. (87-88)

This means that if we aren't slowing our thinking down; gathering enough data about our real students in front of us; looking carefully at that data; posing rival hypotheses from those we start with; being more self-conscious and mindful about how we decide to construct our classroom grading ecologies; asking questions to students about what the effects of grades and particular kinds of failure are on them in our classrooms, particularly students who are *not like us*; we will use only the information that is most apparent to us and suppress doubt and ambiguity that may arise from those data alone.

What are those data? When it comes to the usefulness of grades, it's often our own experiences with grades. Were you explicitly trained in graduate school on the history, philosophies, psychology, study, or effects of grades? Were you ever shown alternative ways to grade or produce grades in classrooms in grad school? If not, and I'm guessing most readers of this book were not, then you rely on what you inherited from your own educational past. If your own narrative of success in writing happens to have in it grades, and grades helped, rewarded, and motivated you in school, then they may appear to be helpful, rewarding, and motivating in your own classrooms. That is all the data we see about what motivates students in writing classrooms, and our brains suppress any doubts or

ambiguity about this conclusion. So, how do you really know that your grading of writing helps students know how well they are doing, or motivates them to write? What data or evidence do you actually have for your answer? The brain's WYSIATI heuristic suggests that you need very little to be confident in whatever answer you have.

Another brain heuristic, the availability heuristic, also works against us in these matters. This heuristic explains the “process of judging frequency by ‘the ease with which instances come to mind’” (Kahneman 129). This heuristic typically substitutes one question or problem for another. For instance, we might ask ourselves are there more instances of crime in the US today than twenty-five years ago? The answer is no. Statistically, violent or property crimes per thousand citizens has fallen since the early 1990s, according to a recent Pew Research study (Gramlich). But ask the casual person on the street, and you'll find, as the Pew study found, most U.S. citizens feel there is more crime today than in the past. This answer comes from a substitution of the question asked with a different question, one that might be worded as, “have I seen more instances of crime recently?” Because it is easy to call to mind many instances of crime in our communities, given the kinds of stories that news media focus on, these limited data distort our sense of the actual data on crime, and we neglect data that counter the conclusion that there is less crime today. If the data we have available to us is what we use to make decisions, like how our students will or should react to grading, or how they feel about it, or do grades tend to motivate students, then depending on who we are and what experiences are available to us, we may often find that we have substituted a different question for the one we were trying to answer. We may only be asking, “have I *seen* grades motivate students and help them understand their progress?” This is not the same question as, “do grades motivate and help understand progress?” or even, “are grades the *best way* to motivate students in writing and English courses?”

We cannot know if our grading ecologies really help students without systematically gathering data to find out, and this starts with asking students about it first. Perhaps, we might ask this question to our own students differently to get more helpful information: What would be the best motivation for you to do the labors of the course? What would it take for you to be self-motivated to achieve the goals of our course, to work more than you are asked to? Our own educational biases as writing teachers cloud our judgment much of the time on such questions. Mine certainly has. My biases are partly why I turned to labor-based grading contracts, but they are not why I stayed with them. I gather data every quarter through labor logs, weekly reflections on our labor and the class, and my own data collection, and discuss much of it with my students. I comb through it every year. This is why I continue the practice. I see empirically and through my

students' words that students prefer not to have grades, prefer to find motivation on their own, and can understand their progress in writing through words alone. Grades actually muddy these waters.

Most of us who teach writing have always loved language, loved reading, and done well enough in school to get degrees and certifications to become teachers of English and writing. We don't usually understand completely how the psychology of grades work on most of our students, students who are not like us. We often are people who were so moved by language that we wanted to teach it to others. We typically are the ones who did well in English and writing classes. Perhaps so well that we didn't have to take the kinds of writing classes we now teach. As for me, I was required to take the kinds of courses I teach, first-year writing. I barely made it through my first-year writing course at Clackamas Community College, didn't finish the same course at Linn Benton Community College the first time around. High school English wasn't much better for me. Moving within White language supremacist systems of judgment was difficult for me for a long time, even with teachers who cared and meant well. Grades always contradicted the messages I read in teachers' feedback. I persevered despite the system, not because it.

Did grades motivate me? Only to the extent that I was averse to the bad ones. I did what I needed to in order to not get a bad grade. But that is not learning, it is what educational psychologists call "performance-avoidance" and it's not the preferred stance for learners who grow. The best stance is "performance-approach," or a "focus on attaining normative competence" (Pulfrey et al. 683). Pulfrey, Butera, and Buchs show in their studies that grades cause performance-avoidance and harm students' learning. So grades may motivate some by fear, but that motivation doesn't go very far. Grades do not motivate to learn or take risks. And to be honest, grades only help students when they are perceived as rewards and praise, but real praise doesn't come with the tacit threat of punishment, which all grades do. I doubt any of my teachers meant to be malicious, but they certainly instilled fear in me, a fear of failing. Fear doesn't build intrinsic love of learning and knowledge, love of language and writing. Fear doesn't move someone to help another with a learning-problem in a course. Fear doesn't urge students to spend more time on a project because it is the right thing to do for learning something new. Fear keeps us from being hurt or punished.

Because of these dynamics, it may be useful for a teacher to ask how grades might implicitly or latently function to produce fear of failing in their classrooms. In what ways are their tacit threats that are made by the possibility of low grades? How might the assessment ecology be coercing students by fear? How might it really motivate students, not coerce them? Real motivation comes from an engaging and encouraging ecology that allows the people who are a part of it

to open up, expand, help those around them, make mistakes, see their language and world as larger and larger, as endlessly possible, as always becoming (in both senses of the word). So do students need grades in a writing course to know their progress and to motivate them? No.

HOW CAN A TEACHER MAINTAIN HIGH STANDARDS WHILE USING GRADING CONTRACTS?

Another way to ask this question is: Can labor-based grading contracts make distinctions for how well students meet the objectives of particular assignments? Can they make distinctions for students' varying levels of writing skill or craft? To what extent does the quality of the labor's ultimate product factor into the assessment?

Standards, often in lists of expectations and rubrics, are reifications. We should be very cautious with how we think about and use any standard of literacy in our classrooms and schools. What are the evidence-based consequences of the use of any standard? Are they harming some students or privileging others? Is it the source of any unfairness? As I explain in Chapter 3, Lippi-Green makes a good argument for why it is nearly impossible to have standards, and as the CCCC Statement on Students Right to Their Own Language affirms, using standards of language against students amounts to one social group attempting to oppress or dominate another through judgments of language (Committee on CCCC 2-3). I make a more thorough argument about this in another place (*Antiracist* 25-75), so I won't get into those details here. But I will ask an important question to any teacher who believes in what the CCCC statement says yet feels a need to hold students to some dominant standard: What exactly do you think it means that a student has a right to the language of their nurture? What constitutes a right to one's own language in a writing classroom? Might the heart of the statement be demanding, because of the nature and consequences of grades, that students have the right to not be graded by someone else's version of language, even when those students may be attempting to gain fluency in that same version of language in that same classroom?

In one sense, standards held against students and used to dole out rewards and opportunities is a dangerously unethical thing to do. Standards-based grades are how our world and schools have become unjust. If, as most of the literature on literacy tells us, learning a dominant English means that many students of color, working-class White students, and multilingual students must reject or change their identities (Villanueva, *Boostraps*), then holding students to some standard goes against the philosophy of labor-based grading contracts as a socially justice classroom project.

What this question often really means is: How can I as the teacher hold my students to a dominant White middle-class *habitus* as the standard of discourse in a labor-based grading contract ecology? Or how can I have my White language supremacist cake and eat it too? You cannot do this. When it comes to students meeting standards, it's not really up to the teacher. A teacher cannot hold a student to any standard by using it to grade writing. This is confusing measurement with learning (or with teaching). Often the assumption is that if we measure to a standard, we are holding students to that standard, or a particular dominant *habitus*, because it is the guide by which we say any student passes or fails the course. We think that this use of the standard makes students have to write to it. While many students may use our rubrics and other heuristics to help them write to the standard we've placed in front of them, this kind of assessment ecology mostly helps those students in striking distance to the standards. It rewards the rewarded. It only allows those who already have the closest relation to the White, middle-class *habitus* of the standard to be rewarded, and gives them the biggest share of those rewards, which starts with grades. Sarah Amed calls this aspect of the phenomenology of Whiteness "proximity," and proximities are inherited (155).

The idea of maintaining standards in this way in a classroom is an illusion. We think we are supposed to be preparing students for their futures, but we are mostly helping to maintain larger systems of oppression by maintaining a dominant, White *habitus*, that is, maintaining White language supremacy. I'm not saying we shouldn't use the biases and ways with words that we know and have been trained to use in order to respond to students' writing. I'm saying don't use *your language* as a single standard to grade students' languages because of what those grades mean outside of our classrooms, and because if we really want diverse students to succeed, then what we are saying we want is students with a wide range of proximities to our own *habitus*. Thinking in terms of standards as high and low, and as keeping them, amounts to unfair and unethical assessment practices, and usually White language supremacist ones. It limits many students' future opportunities based on language practices that they had very little choice in acquiring and that is very difficult to change in a semester or quarter.

If we believe what the linguists say, that all languages and dialects are equal in communicative value, then holding one up as the standard for communicating, because that's the way things are, or that's the version our students will need in the marketplace or their next class, reinforces a White supremacist system of raciolinguistic oppression that is similar in function to the way sympathetic Whites in the south turned a blind eye to the evils of slavery. The truth is, similar to sympathetic Whites in the old south, we teachers benefit from the status quo, some of us more than others, even though we may be critical of the way those

benefits are distributed. We have very little to gain by changing the way we think about White language supremacy unless we stop thinking about standards in terms of individuals' profit or loss, and instead see them as communal or structural, as a part of our social justice obligations.

From a pedagogical standpoint, perhaps a more communal and interconnected way of thinking about “maintaining standards” is to reframe the idea in a more critical and linguistically inclusive way. What if instead of thinking about how we should *maintain a standard*, we saw our job as *engaging students with various standards*, or understanding a dominant standard from various, equally valid perspectives in order to critique it and know its politics, understand and fight the power dynamics that it produces as a standard in other rhetorical places? These purposes allow our classrooms to offer various readings and judgments of our students' literacy performances in order to engage in dialogues about that judging, not to find the correct one, but to understand the various standards of language and communication we have in the room. This assessment work is done by deconstructing a single dominant standard as associated closely to a White racial *habitus*, not simply to mimic it, but to see it as historically created, made up of assumptions and values that are not fixed, natural, or inherently better than any other, and attached to intersectional racial formations in society. Thus, the idea that a teacher must maintain some standard of writing is counter to larger critical projects most of us promote in writing courses, and it amounts to enforcing the status quo of White language supremacy.

DO LABOR-BASED GRADING CONTRACTS MAKE STUDENTS MORE ANXIOUS OR STRESSED OUT THAN CONVENTIONALLY GRADED COURSES?

Over the years, I've had some complaints about labor-based grading contracts creating some stress or anxiety over “staying on top” of the contract or the pace of our weekly labor. Some students worry about whether they've turned everything in each week, but by the midpoint, most if not all these anxieties go away. Much of this anxiety, I'm sure, is built by years of courses that were looser about deadlines and late assignments, or they are anxious because the idea of acquiring points seems safer, more knowable, to them. They know how to behave in conventional grading systems, even if those systems create performance-avoidance and a lack of risk taking. They are so used to educational settings that put them into a performance-avoidance stance that any other stance makes them more anxious and uncomfortable. The historical weight of twelve or more years of being graded in the same ways makes for some anxiety over la-

bor-based systems, particularly with students who have historically performed well in quality-based grading systems, who usually fit a middle-class White racial *habitus*. These students are more uncomfortable with the amount of labor they are now required to do, since in the past it often took less time and effort to get the grade they wanted. They were rewarded for being themselves, so writing was a comfortable affair, always validating, never too demanding—to invoke Amed's analysis, good grades were an inherited, racial proximity. In a labor-based grading ecology, these students may for the first time experience discomfort, have to do more work, and provide more effort in between class sessions. They may feel like they are being asked to do busy work, or that their grade is worth less because the higher grades are now accessible to more students in the class.

The best way I've found to address such concerns when they arise is to ask students about them, and let them reflect in writing, then talk it out with each other. But I also prompt them to be self-critical of their first responses. Why do you feel, I might ask, that the amount of labor I'm asking of you is too much? I'm not asking anyone in the class to do more labor than anyone else, so why are you so special? Why should you be exempt from the labor we all agreed everyone should do? Yes, this kind of question is meant to be uncomfortable, not rude or accusatory. I remind them that I ask this question compassionately, and that when we feel uncomfortable we are likely about to learn things. I also prompt them to consider our charter for compassion, that we are all in this learning-work together. So we must try to stop thinking selfishly about our own grades and our own work, but think of how that work and our grades are connected to everyone else's in the classroom. It's hard, and doesn't always work, but most at least try to understand this very difficult concept.

Most of the time, my reassurance that they are doing fine in the class and giving them updates on what I have marked for their contracts helps with the anxiety. I make a point to tend the contract each week in class, making references to it, asking if students have questions about it. The short discussions we have on our weekly labor journal freewriting in class also helps relieve some anxieties. It's often a moment when students can commiserate with one another, and realize that many are in similar situations, that the reading that week was hard for most everyone, that having little time to spend with one's family is a common concern, that juggling one's work schedule and a full course load is something everyone struggles with each week. Sometimes, I offer changes to upcoming due dates or slight alterations in the labor of the course to accommodate pervasive issues I hear. I've found that just allowing students to voice their anxieties with each other in class for five to ten minutes a week, and only responding to those issues that really need some structural changes, works the best.

HOW CAN LABOR-BASED GRADING CONTRACTS ACCOUNT FOR OTHER KINDS OF LABOR, LIKE EMOTIONAL LABOR, THAT SOME STUDENTS EXPERIENCE OFTEN IN SCHOOL, SUCH AS STUDENTS OF COLOR, TRANS, AND EVEN FUNDAMENTAL CHRISTIAN STUDENTS WHO LEARN IN LIBERAL CONTEXTS?

This question could be read as asking how does a contract incorporate emotional labor into the grading mechanisms of a course. I've not found ways to do this, and I'm not sure how any system can, so I'll answer it as a question about how labor-based grading contracts can facilitate an acknowledgment and discussions on the emotional aspects of learning. A group of CUNY teachers and graduate students recounted this story to me (anonymously) in a Google doc that prepared us for our online conversation, so I offer it as a way to flesh out this really good question, one that is always difficult to consider in any writing pedagogy and assessment ecology:

A friend of mine who works at an art school (which is a PWI [predominantly White institution]) told a story the other day about a teacher whose one Black, trans student would never show up for class on the days when he knew that the conversation was going to be about race or gender. The teacher asked the student about his absences, and he explained that he didn't want to (yet again) be in the position to explain his own self-worth and life experience to a room full of (mostly) White and (mostly) cis folks—that this kind of labor was exhausting, uncompensated, and beyond the pale. I'm wondering how contracts might account for other kinds of labor: let's say, for example, the emotional labor that it can take for this student to, like, be in this school, or the kind of labor that it takes a first-gen college student to navigate new structures without the benefit of a support network that understands higher ed, or the labor involved in translanguaging. Are these things that can be “explicitly” accounted for? How so, if so?

The emotional and psychological strain and effects that the labors in writing courses asked of students, particularly ones that focus their assessment ecologies on antiracist and other social justice projects, as my contracts do, can be hard on some students. Who those students are will depend on the context, school, course, and who is in the course. But we should be mindful of who we are generally talking about. It's not usually White, middle-class students, or culturally

and linguistically dominant students. The anxiety that these students may feel in certain discussions is not the same anxiety because that anxiety is abnormal for cisgender, middle-class Whites, and almost always short lived. Once the class or discussion is over, the anxiety likely goes away. This is due to their typical material existence in society and school. They are the status quo. They are not confronted daily with their Whiteness, or maleness, or cis-ness, or able-bodiedness. These subjectivities are the norm, so calling attention to them as sources of privilege and unearned power and opportunities can create feelings of defensiveness or guilt, but it is important work that needs to be done compassionately if social justice and social change is the goal. It's also important in writing classrooms, because these are the *habitus* that most literacy performances are judged against. They form in large part the standard.

For students who embody dominant *habitus*, feeling some anxiety and discomfort is good for them. It is a signal that something has gone unspoken but is now spoken, once silent and now heard. The periodic but brief moments of anxiety help Whites and other dominant subjectivities grow and become more self-aware, as long as they and everyone around them firmly understand that the classroom is a place of compassion, that the discussion isn't looking to harm anyone, but help confront the structural things that do harmed already. Part of this culture of compassion is the lack of grades and the reassurance that what the ecology expects is their labor.

Sometimes I find it helpful to frame discussions about various social justice issues as ones that produce anxiety and discomfort in a particular direction, depending on the topic and subjectivities involved. The anxiety was already there, only moving in a different direction. For instance, when we talk about ideal writing and standards as that writing that is inherently and essentially good, clear, logical, etc., many students of color and multilingual students in the room may feel anxious because they know they have been judged as failing at language in those ways in the past. This is an anxiety that often feels like self-blame and it is directed at them. But the anxiety is not purely self-imposed. It stems from the standards in the ecology and moves toward students of color. But once those standards have been identified as coming from a dominant set of arbitrary beliefs, reifications about language that might be changed, or at least understood as associated with a White racial *habitus* that confers privileges to those lucky enough to already embody it, then the anxiety changes direction. When Whites are uncomfortable in conversations about White privilege, it is good to recognize this and discuss how in the rest of our walking lives in society and other classrooms, the places you feel comfortable in, likely they do so at the expense of people of color. The anxiety is still there. It's just not directed at them, at White people.

Most of my undergraduate writing courses have consisted of mostly students of color. When you are only one of two White students in the classroom, you may feel attacked, demonized, or guilty during such discussions that are led by a teacher of color. What that scenario should reveal, I think, to the student (and perhaps the class if the student is willing to share such emotional strain) is the common emotional strain that most students of color feel in situations where the demographics are switched, which is the status quo in most other spaces in our society, and the status quo in upper division courses where White students have been the majority. It can be a compassionate moment of empathy, but one that should be recognized as unique in U.S. society and transient for the White body. Yet it is not unique, nor transient for most Black, Asian, Native American, or Latinx students. It is not transient for trans students, or disabled students.

I work hard to keep the “us versus them” language out of the classroom when discussing issues of race and racism. We also have our charter for compassion, and I remind students of the compassionate behaviors that we came up with to help us through our labors. I remind them that being uncomfortable is okay and that it means you are learning, changing, growing. That we can choose to be “brave” in moments of discomfort. However, I try to remind myself that I’m a middle-aged man, who usually has more years under his belt than most of his students, that I spent much of my life working through these issues intellectually, emotionally, and practically in my life. I try to remember that I didn’t always respond to these discussions as I do today, and that I too have more to learn always, that I often only see what has been placed in front of me (WYSIATI), not everything, but more than my students (because I’ve had more time to see differently), that as Krista Ratcliffe reminds us, I should always be working to hear my students’ ideas and concerns, even when I may feel they are immature and less thought out than my own, that they have a right to have those feelings and ideas at this moment in their lives, a right to work through them at their own paces, just as I had the right to do so at my pace. Thus my students have the right to their emotional responses to the work we do. But what no student has a right to is to harm another student, and this is the muddy, middle ground. What constitutes emotional harm? I cannot answer this question definitively.

What complicates all this is that the effects of any ecology can be uneven. The example above of the Black trans student in a predominantly White institution is not an easy situation. There’s no simple solution, and many teachers may feel, rightly so, that they are unequipped to handle the conversation that is recounted. I know I still do. Having an open and humble mind about such encounters helps tremendously. Reminding myself that I need not be the savior (a habit of Whiteness) in such situations is helpful. A willingness to let go of my own goals or needs for the student in question can help me listen and ask better

questions to the student. It is their education that is being negotiated, not mine. I'm not saying that we should not have expectations for our students, only that we do not need to hold on to them too tightly in moments like these. A teacher's expectation that somehow the class would benefit from the Black trans student's presence and contributions in a particular discussion or activity may be true, but it is no more important than that student's need to feel emotionally well and not overly strained by the conversation or class because they feel they get no break in their daily lives from such discussions. You, as the teacher, cannot know whether the emotional strain is simply discomfort or something more, only the student can. The teacher can ask, but only ask and wait for the student's answer. And we must do the asking very carefully, since a question from an authority figure may come off like a command.

It is comforting for me to remember that while we can prepare for many possibilities in our classrooms, we cannot prepare for all of them, and while we can want to address issues around emotional labor and strain in our classrooms, issues we know exist, we may not always be able to know beforehand if those issues will arise in this particular class with these particular students. Labor-based grading contracts that include explicit discussions about how the class will try to define their labor and engage in it mindfully and compassionately, set up conditions that are more favorable and generous in such situations as the above one. There is no clear and easy answer to this question, only a kind of wait-and-see then be-compassionate-and-let-go answer.

DOES A LABOR-BASED GRADING SYSTEM UNFAIRLY DISADVANTAGE SOME STUDENTS BECAUSE OF ITS EMPHASIS ON LABOR?

This question is similar to ones about the structural and systemic nature of privilege in contemporary society and whether using labor in grading has the ability to alleviate such injustices in the classroom. Or are we dealing with one set of systemic privileges at the expense of accentuating another set? Are the criteria by which a teacher judges labor just as embedded in systematic racism, for instance, as the criteria that have been used to assess writing quality? As many conscientious teachers understand today, many students have complex lives. My students at UW Tacoma, surely do, as did those at Fresno State. Often they work and go to school. They have other obligations, such as taking care of family. All these things take up and fragment their time during the quarter. It's unfair to ask students to quit their jobs or neglect their families to take our courses, particularly when those jobs and families may be helping them get through school. These conditions, which are becoming more typical across the US than most of us may

like, create some challenges for labor-based grading contract ecologies, as they do for conventional grading systems.

As can be seen in the contract details, my labor-based contract asks students, first and foremost, to spend time doing the labor of the course. This is how you get the grade. This would seem to create some disadvantage for those students who have these other demands on their time, demands they do not fully control. It would seem to privilege a similar group of students that I've been saying traditional graded ecologies already privilege.

The problem of how much time any student can or should put into a course still exists in a conventionally graded classroom. The conditions that create such time constraints for many students come from larger structural forces in society, the rising costs of higher education, the reduction of Pell grants and other support for college, changing admission standards, increasing wealth gaps between the very rich and everyone else, the need for more students to work while going to school, among other factors. Labor-based grading contract ecologies do not create the disadvantages of limited time that many students face, but they do make this larger societal problem more present and obvious, which may fool some into believing it creates the problem. But asking for labor and using it to grade students does not cause the structural inequalities of time that students live with.

No matter the grading ecology used in a writing classroom, the same students will still face the challenges of limited time for school work. The ecology does not control the outside forces that limit students' time. At least in a labor-based grading contract ecology, we can pay better attention and account for the labor and time we are asking of students, and not hide behind standards and claims that we "don't grade based on effort." In standards-based, conventionally graded ecologies, the time required to meet some standard usually remains invisible because it isn't technically what the teacher is asking for. They are asking for quality, but what that means in reality for many students of color and multilingual students is more time than their White, middle-class peers. Privilege moves in typical directions.

It can be argued that labor-based grading contracts actually address these time issues better than conventional grading systems. In a conventional classroom where writing is graded by a standard, where one succeeds by satisfying the quality demands of a teacher, the only difference in time demands on students is how explicit those demands are to students. Usually, there is no mention of how much time some assignment will take. In fact, time on task is not a factor in the grading at all. Quality is. And this can mean that students who do not embody a White racial *habitus* in their languaging will need even more time to complete or to do well on writing assignments, but this more time spent is hidden in the curriculum, and hidden in the assessment ecology because it is unspoken and tacit. Furthermore, more time on a task does not guarantee anyone a higher grade. In the words

of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, this kind of assessment ecology produces racism without a racist teacher.

In a labor-based grading ecology time is more obvious—and I'd add: it is more honestly used in the ecology because it is explicit and negotiated, which makes it fairer and more ethical. In conventional graded ecologies, the amount of time required to get the grade you want is always unknown, but still required through its proxy in the ecology, a single judge's sense of quality. All the ecology has done is not *technically* required time on tasks to get a grade, but time in writing and reading are always required if quality of writing is used to produce grades, and likely more time is required in quality-based grading systems for many students, particularly for those students who come to the course with *habitus* other than the White, middle-class, dominant ones that are demanded in the ecology.

Hiding labor in the way conventional graded ecologies do accentuates the unfairness of the system. Meanwhile, everyone else does more labor for lower grades, and is told they just need to work harder, work like those students over there. Be like them. It is unfair. Labor-based grading contract ecologies create a clear formula for how much time is required in order to get the specific grade a student wants. If two criteria for fairness are explicitness in the pathways to the grades students seek and universal or open access to those pathways for all students in the ecology, then a labor-based grading contract ecology is fairer than standards-based grading systems, especially for students who have lots of demands on their time outside of school. In fact, by these criteria, conventional grading systems are unfair and socially unjust because they ignore the unequal amounts of time required by various students in the classroom and create pathways to course grades that are not open and accessible to everyone.

And yet, it is still possible to ask too much time of our students without considering their real-life demands on their time. I find this equally unfair. Because the amount of labor (usually defined by time on tasks and word count only) is explicit, students and teacher can mitigate the disadvantage of limited time by measuring and tending it during the semester or quarter. And because labor-based grading contracts calculate course grades by amount of labor, this justifies keeping track of and paying close attention to our labor during the quarter. One way my courses attempt to address this issue is to use our labor logs and labor journals as ways to pay attention to time on tasks and have discussions in class together about how much time we are spending on our labors, when, where, and to what effect. I always make a point to ask students frequently how well they are able to keep up with the class's pace and workload. I try hard to listen carefully to their concerns, and not suppress my own hearing of criticisms and doubt of the fairness and effectiveness of our ecology. I don't always adjust the workload, but occasionally we do. We make it a communal discussion and decision.

I also look carefully at when students are doing the labor of the class, and how they labor in their tasks. In most of the labor instructions, I include at least one step in which they must, pause in their work, and Slack something to the class.⁴⁶ I call these labor Slacks, and they give me some indications of the flow of labor in the course. If most of my students are doing their labor at the last minute, then we likely need to talk about what is causing this dynamic. Labor slacks and the reflections on their labor logs in their labor journals allows us to pay attention to how much labor we are actually doing, and address any concerns on the fly.

In the end, by being mindful of our labor, keeping track of it, measuring and tending to it in these explicit ways, we learn to appreciate what we can do in the fuller context of our lives, which means we can and sometimes do take those contexts into consideration as we move through the course and adjust how much we expect of each other. Doing all this automatically allows us to pay close attention to ways the ecology may be harming some students with time limitations on their lives outside of class and address those problems as they happen.

HOW MUCH LABOR-TIME DO YOU TYPICALLY REQUIRE IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING COURSE?

Because I have asked students to keep labor logs and because I try hard to keep track of my own practices as a teacher, I can answer this question pretty definitively. In FYW courses at UW Tacoma, where most of my students work twenty or more hours a week and go to school, my students tend to log about seven to nine hours per week of labor outside of class in a ten-week quarter. I usually assign an estimated ten to twelve hours per week of total labor. The FYW course that I discuss in Chapter 4 (seen in Table 4.2) is a typical course for me. From Table 4.2, the average total minutes of labor is 4,709.6 minutes, which comes to 7.89 hours per week of labor in a ten week period.⁴⁷ This is pretty average in any group of students over the last three years. Likely, we can adjust this figure up by about one hour, since several students do not fully complete their labor logs during the tenth week of class, nor do they include the labor put in between the tenth week and finals week, when they prepare for our final one-on-one conferences. This is likely due to the fact that once they've done the final reflective

46 As mentioned earlier, I use private communication tools, such as Slack, which function like Twitter.

47 In a more recent FYW course, the second course in our stretch sequence, the class average was 9.4 hours of labor per week (the highest was 12.35 hours/week, and the lowest was 5.68 hours/week). As of the end of week 6, my current FYW students average 8.75 hours/week of labor, while I've on average I have assigned 11.6 hours of labor.

assignment that uses the information in their labor logs, many may feel no need to continue doing the logs, or the increased stress and rush to finish the quarter pulls them away from their logs. However, these numbers are consistent with the labor logs of the class in question, and previous FYW classes. On a campus where most students work and go to school, this amount of labor each week strains them, but is doable.

Each campus will be different, and working in a semester system will affect this. For instance, at Fresno State, a semester system where few of my students worked as much as my Tacoma students, although a good portion of them were working students, the average labor I expected per week was about nine to eleven hours a week. Typically, I will tell my classes that I tend to favor the old metric of three hours of labor for every one unit of the class per week. At Fresno State, our FYW courses were four unit courses, meaning I should have expected about twelve hours of labor per week outside of class. At UW Tacoma, our courses are five units, so I should expect fifteen hours of work per week. It was more reasonable at Fresno State to get close to that number than it is at UW Tacoma because of the working conditions students tend to have. I try hard to account for these conditions, and ask explicitly about them each quarter. I'm often surprised at what students' assumptions are about how much labor for our class they expect to do or feel is most beneficial. Discussions about this topic can lead to really interesting discussions about what students assume it takes to succeed and persist in school.

One might begin such discussions by looking at a few resources on study time for college students. There are lots of such articles and resources available online, most are written for teachers. However, I don't find this a problem for students. For example, Rice University's Center for Teaching Excellence offers a detailed page about estimating appropriate time requirements for reading and writing tasks in courses. The website Statista offers statistics of average college student study time by major. Regardless of the resources you offer your students up front, my point is to begin with some evidence-based way to understand appropriate labor time requirements, and have students consider as many factors as possible, like do all courses require the same amount of time to succeed in, and what other factors in your life require your time? The answers to these questions can help you talk in more informed ways about exactly how many hours a week the labor of the class will ask of everyone.

Finally, it should be noted that labor expectations may be determined or understood in a number of ways. There is (1) the ideal labor time required for most students to succeed in a class, expressed by both the teacher and the student; (2) the actual time for individual students to do succeed in the class; (3) the estimated labor time for all work calculated and provided by the teacher; and (4) the

time each student feels they have available to spend on this class in order to get what they want out of it, which may fluctuate week by week. Thus, I think, discussions about how much labor we can ask of each other on a weekly basis can be negotiated and should consider our own ideal estimations of time needed to accomplish our course goals (as a class and individually), how much time realistically each student can commit to the class, and what that will mean in terms of meeting learning goals and the minimum requirements of the grading contract.

HOW WELL DO LABOR-BASED GRADING CONTRACTS KEEP STUDENT RECORDS (GRADES) PRIVATE?

Typically, what FERPA tends to assume about students' grade information is that it is individual grades or points received for assignments turned in, and this information is confidential. No one else except the student may know about that student's personal information, unless the teacher has received from the student written permission to share the student's information with others. So a teacher would be in violation of FERPA guidelines if they posted exam or essay scores outside their office door, or called out essay grades in the class. But when there are no grades on performances, things like extra labor for A-grades are more obvious to everyone in the class. In my labor-based grading contracts, extra labor on a class presentation or doing more assessment letters for those outside one's writing group for others in the class offers ways to raise their grade, and is more obvious to everyone else in the class. This might appear to violate FERPA, since other students know that the student is doing the extra labor. But there are no grades or points for such extra work revealed to anyone. And other students do not actually know if the student in question received credit for the extra labor. To let students know their progress, or what I've got recorded in my gradebook, I either hold individual conferences periodically and tell them, or I send them an email to their university email.

Furthermore, I do not assume that knowing *that* a student is attempting extra labor is the same as knowing what credit they got for that work, or that anyone who knows this information will know if the student has met all the other labor requirements of our contract. Just because you know that a colleague in class is doing extra labor doesn't mean you know where they are at in terms of meeting our contract. There are many aspects of all classes in which students' progress and work is common knowledge or shared information in the class. And it should be this way. The assumption that other students shouldn't or cannot know the general progress of their colleagues rubs me a bit wrong. I don't mean that everyone should be in everyone else's business, or that everyone's grades are public information. I mean, knowing that a few of your colleagues are

doing presentations for the class's benefit in order to raise their course grades is a good thing. It can be motivating or be a way to demonstrate good citizenship in the class.

WHAT ARE A TEACHER'S RESPONSIBILITIES TO HELP STUDENTS PREPARE FOR THE TRANSITION FROM A LABOR-BASED GRADING ECOLOGY TO THE MORE CONVENTIONAL ONES THAT ARE LIKELY IN THEIR FUTURES?

I feel very confident that labor-based grading ecologies can prepare well students for future assessment ecologies that use grades and points, ones that grade their writing. In order to prepare a student for a conventionally graded assessment ecology in the future, you do not have to grade them now. One assumption in this logic is that the main way a student will learn how to react to such grading on their literacy performances is to grade them now, to show them what kinds of grades they can expect with the level of effort they currently are putting forth in the writing. But as I argue above (“Don’t some students want or need grades . . .”), grades are highly unreliable markers, especially across disciplines. So expecting a writing teacher’s grading to be an accurate indicator of what that same student will get in college next year, or in sociology next semester, or biology next quarter on their writing for those very different graders, on very different writing, is unrealistic. Additionally, since grades themselves also are poor motivators and harmful to learning in a number of ways, they seem doubly bad as a method for preparing students for their future readers, even ones who will grade their writing. So the logic that preparing students for their future is to grade their writing now doesn’t hold up. We should not assume that the only preparation, or even the best preparation, for students’ success in future graded courses is grading their writing now.

Better preparation for future rhetorical situations, regardless of how writing is assessed in those future situations, is to offer a variety of tools for students to understand those rhetorical situations as such. One of these kinds of rhetorical tools is knowledge and experience with understanding the nature of judgment, that is, how language is judged and what the politics of that judgment is. Labor-based grading ecologies can be great preparation in this kind of criticality since they offer critical insight by working in a different ecology that conventional ones. Experiencing an alternative is the best way to gain critical insight into systems that have become naturalized and normal. One can begin to see all the things about those systems that one took for granted as natural, such as the arbitrariness of standards and the unreliability of grading as a measure of any-

thing about writing. My ecology's focus on antiracist writing assessment, which pays close attention to the habits of Whiteness in judging language (discussed in Inoue, *Antiracist*; "Classroom Writing Assessment"), I believe, is an important tool in this kind of preparation for students.

We should keep in mind that no assessment ecology can, by itself, prepare students for the future ecologies they will be in. Partly, we don't know what those ecologies will be. Partly, we aren't those readers and graders ourselves. Partly, we aren't asking them to write in those disciplines and contexts, nor are we usually a member of those discourse communities. And partly, preparation for future assessment ecologies is not the function of assessment ecologies. It's not what they are designed to do in most cases. They are designed to measure and rank students. That's it. Measuring and ranking do not prepare students for anything. They may get students used to being ranked, but that isn't the same as being prepared to succeed in a new writing assessment ecology. So even in a labor-based writing assessment ecology, students must engage in practices that help them think through the ways that those future ecologies function. One really good way is to compare those ecologies' features and elements to the present, labor-based one. My students do this work in our discussions of dimension-based rubrics, the negotiation and renegotiation of our grading contract, our weekly labor journals, and through our problem-posing letter activities. These periodic reflective activities become more potent as preparation tools when situated in a gradeless context because that context makes students' ideas, judgments, and thinking more open to risk taking and disagreement.

HOW MIGHT LABOR-BASED CONTRACT GRADING FIT WITH THE IDEAS OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN?

This has been a growing concern of mine in my courses. I'm not sure if more students with registered or identified learning and other disabilities are more willing to be identified or ask for accommodations today than fifteen or twenty years ago, or if there is a higher frequency of college students with such disabilities, but I notice more students with disabilities today. This could also be a product of my own growing awareness of disability. A good assessment ecology, one that is socially just in every way, should be self-consciously designed to meet the principles of universal design. According to the National Center on Universal Design for Learning, universal design for learning (UDL) is defined in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA) as:

a scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practice that:

(A) provides flexibility in the ways information is presented, in the ways students respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways students are engaged; and

(B) reduces barriers in instruction, provides appropriate accommodations, supports, and challenges, and maintains high achievement expectations for all students, including students with disabilities and students who are limited English proficient.

The three key principles that help define UDL are: (1) “provide multiple means of representation,” or offer information and learning to students in a variety of ways; (2) “provide multiple means of action and expression,” or offer a variety of ways to do the learning; and (3) “provide multiple means of engagement,” or offer a variety of reasons why students should do or engage with the learning asked of them (National Center for Universal Design). I’ll avoid my own personal uneasiness with placing “limited English proficient” students with students with disabilities, since this isn’t the place to discuss those issues. However, I do feel that the core assumptions of UDL are safe assumptions, that designing curricula for those on the margins and borderlands also meets the needs of those who dwell in the middle of the ecology.

In terms of the scholarship and impressive work being done around UDL and disability studies, I am still learning and perhaps most excited about ways it may help improve labor-based grading contracts. I feel I have a lot to learn and perhaps to alter in my own practices. As of now, I understand labor-based grading contract ecologies agreeing well with UDL principles. In fact, I think, in some ways, it encourages teachers and students to collaboratively interrogate and discuss such questions. For instance, the contract negotiations at the opening and midpoint of the course can be explicitly framed to engage students with the three principles of UDL, asking them: What means of representation of materials will they be able to use most effectively? What ways of learning writing and reading practices will they find most effective or engaging? What kinds of reasons for learning and doing the labor of the course will they find most engaging? What kinds of reasonable accommodations can the course make for those who feel they will have trouble meeting the labor demands of the class while still maintaining the expectations of the course? These discussions can lead to a conscious designing of course materials and methods that draw on the ideas revealed in the negotiation, even including them in the contract itself.

Students may not immediately know their answers to these questions, or may have limited answers in the first week of the course, so it is a good idea to ask again at the midpoint renegotiation. A teacher should be careful to be sen-

sitive to students' privacy and unease with sharing potentially personal information with the class as a whole. I find it best to begin such discussions about revising our contract or making labor instructions and class lessons more accessible and engaging by asking for responses in writing and in private. This allows me to see if there are any potentially embarrassing or private information that students may feel uncomfortable sharing or that may compromise them in class. If so, I compile lists of ideas from the entire class for discussion, instead of attributing specific ideas or comments to individual students. We use these ideas to form our revisions or decide on the most universal ways to do our work together.

Weekly labor log or journal entries might also be used to periodically prompt discussion around UDL principles by asking students to reflect upon their labor practices from personal, experiential ways. Taking stock in the best and worst ways their learning practices have been working each week. For instance, weekly labor log entries, or periodic informal reflections, might ask students: what means of representation of materials have they been able to use most and least effectively that week? What ways of learning writing and reading practices have they found most and least effective or engaging that week? What kinds of reasons for learning and doing the labor of the course have they found most and least engaging? Having a brief discussion with them in class about such quick prompts can offer the teacher lots of information to alter the course on the fly, which is how I have framed such discussions in my classrooms.

One common UDL concern about labor-based contracts is their attention to weekly, and almost daily, labor activities, all of which must be turned in on time and in the fashion asked. Some have suggested that strict schedules like those often found in my assessment ecologies can disenfranchise students who have difficulties with executive function. Executive function is a set of competencies that are associated with the prefrontal cortex and deal with long-term planning, impulse control, managing time, setting long term goals, monitoring success, and modifying strategies. Joyce Cooper-Kahn and Laurie Dietzel define the cognitive concept as: "a set of processes that all have to do with managing oneself and one's resources in order to achieve a goal. It is an umbrella term for the neurologically-based skills involving mental control and self-regulation" (Cooper-Kahn and Dietzel).

A strength I feel that labor-based grading contracts have is to negotiate with students labor needs that are flexible enough to provide appropriate affordances for a range of learners, even those with difficulties around executive function. Beyond reflecting on such difficulties and helping students look for ways each can work with their own unique challenges with the labor expectations of the course, one might use the list of executive functions by the psychological re-

searchers Gerard A. Gioia, Peter K. Isquith, Steven C. Guy, and Lauren Kenworthy as a heuristic for testing and designing one's curriculum and contract expectations. These researchers offer a list of eight executive functions, which I quote below from Cooper-Kahn and Deitzel. Teachers and their students, if time permits, can use this list to consider how a course's assessment ecology, even if it is not a labor-based grading contract ecology, accounts for students with executive function issues, and is universally designed. For instance, one might ask: how does the ecology (the grading contract, for instance) provide guidance and multiple methods for helping students who may need it along each of these executive functions as they pertain to the labors of the course?

- **Inhibition** – The ability to stop one's own behavior at the appropriate time, including stopping actions and thoughts. The flip side of inhibition is impulsivity . . .
- **Shift** – The ability to move freely from one situation to another and to think flexibly in order to respond appropriately to the situation . . .
- **Emotional Control** – The ability to modulate emotional responses by bringing rational thought to bear on feelings . . .
- **Initiation** – The ability to begin a task or activity and to independently generate ideas, responses, or problem-solving strategies . . .
- **Working memory** – The capacity to hold information in mind for the purpose of completing a task . . .
- **Planning/Organization** – The ability to manage current and future-oriented task demands . . .
- **Organization of Materials** – The ability to impose order on work, play, and storage spaces . . .
- **Self-Monitoring** – The ability to monitor one's own performance and to measure it against some standard of what is needed or expected . . .

The National Center for Learning Disabilities offers this list of common activities that require executive functioning:

- make plans
- keep track of time
- keep track of more than one thing at once
- meaningfully include past knowledge in discussions
- engage in group dynamics
- evaluate ideas
- reflect on our work
- change our minds and make mid-course and corrections while thinking, reading and writing

- finish work on time
- ask for help
- wait to speak until we're called on
- seek more information when we need it

The more I think about executive function and my experiences in my classrooms, the more I'm convinced that there is a bigger problem with this particular cognitive function in many students. Or perhaps, today's issue is that Millennials may do these kinds of cognitive tasks in a different way than generations before them, like mine. Thus one way my own labor-based grading ecology has adapted to helping students with the executive functioning demands of our classroom is to use labor instructions, not assignment sheets that are essentially a prompt or description of the assignment and its expectations, and provide such instructions as early as possible.

Labor instructions are step-by-step process instructions that focus on minimum time spent on each step, what a student should do, and what is produced. Focusing on labor, on the steps it takes to complete a labor task, on the time each step requires, and what the outputs should be, are ways to help guide students in executive functioning. To aid in time-management, I provide an overall estimated time a student will spend on the labor activity. Every week I also give students all the labor instructions, due dates, and estimated times for each labor in a list on our course website for the upcoming week. This helps them see what is ahead for the next fourteen days and the time expected of them for the labors of the course. Labor Slacks in most instructions also offer practice at self-monitoring by consciously paying attention to their labor practices and feelings.

Finally, I think it is important to note that my own emphasis on mindfulness and contemplative practices in my classroom and in all labor instructions is not inconsequential here. One thing I read into UDL's principles is its concern for how explicit classrooms are concerning the nature of the learning, how that learning happens in the labors and actions of students, and why students are engaged or not. Labor-based grading contracts offer an easy way to make such elements of one's assessment ecology explicit and a topic of discussion and negotiation. And my own response as a teacher with grading contracts has been to consciously incorporate methods that guide students along UDL's three principles, often unknowingly, testing the waters along the way and adapting as we go along in the quarter or semester. The above list of tasks that require executive function also offers a kind of heuristic that can prompt teachers and students to inquire, discuss, and change on the fly the ecology so that more students have fair and equitable access. There are no guarantees, but the use of a labor-based grading contract seems to offer an exigence for such discussions with students.

HOW ETHICAL IS IT TO ADVOCATE FOR LABOR-BASED GRADING CONTRACTS WHEN MANY FACULTY MEMBERS WHO TEACH WRITING ARE IN VULNERABLE POSITIONS?

This is a tough one, in part because it requires a lot of local and private knowledge that I cannot have if my response is going to be applicable to any given reader. But I'm often asked about this issue. What I can say is that each teacher must decide this question considering the real issues they face around tenure, promotion, job security, concerns and perceptions of grade inflation in their department or school, and student evaluations. Is using labor-based grading contracts a risk to a vulnerable teacher? Maybe, but less so than one would think; then again, who you are and what institutional position you hold matters in this. I have male privilege, but I'm also a person of color. I've worked mostly at four-year, teaching-intensive universities with relatively lighter teaching loads than many others.

The one thing that I know for sure is that my relationships with my students dramatically improved and deepened when I moved from conventional grading to a hybrid contract, and all the questions and concerns about the contract evaporated when I moved to a labor-based grading contract. My student evaluations improved also, now being quite high. While I do not want to make this as a promise to other teachers, I can say that since I have used grading contracts, which began in 2004, I have had no grade complaints or students coming to me or my department to complain or inquire about their course grades, during or after the semester or quarter was over. Most of those courses and students were located in schools that served primarily working-class, students of color: Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville; California State University, Fresno; and University of Washington Tacoma. In short, grading contracts have benefited me as a teacher, not hurt me. No chair, or dean, or provost has come to me accusing me of bad teaching. I have been tenured and promoted, all the while being quite vocal about my use of grading contracts.

At a philosophical level, a teacher might also consider the ethical threshold as a teacher of literacy that they will not cross. Grading diverse students' literacy performances is my threshold. It is simply unethical of me to do so, knowing what I know and have experienced as a student and teacher. Knowing the research on the harm that grades inflict on all students and their motivation to learn, knowing about grades' unreliability, knowing about the heuristics of judgment that cause us to make bad fast decisions, knowing of the almost universal racial implicit bias that is seemingly hardwired into our brains, knowing about the structural racism and White language supremacy connected to standards, knowing about the linguistics scholarship that shows the equality of all languag-

es and dialects in terms of communicative effectiveness and their abilities to allow their users to think critically and creatively, and knowing the clear statements by our national professional organizations, such as the CCCC statement on Students Right to Their Own Languages and the NCTE's Conference on English Education's position statement on Beliefs about Social Justice in English Education, I as a writing teacher and conscientious citizen who cares about his students as people and language users, cannot grade their written performances based on so-called quality, knowing all that that means when situated in any school context. In short, to me, it is quite clear, but this clarity has come over time and with much concentrated study. It has also come from my own experiences in school. My job is not worth having if it means that I teach it unethically and do more harm than good. Grading by a standard, in my estimation, does more harm than good in writing courses.

I do not pretend to think that this position or judgment of the situation is universal. I also do not pretend to know the various economic and social pressures that many teachers face. Perhaps many writing teachers, such as adjuncts in colleges and teachers in public schools, feel this is a Sophie's choice. You are damned if you do and damned if you don't. Your teaching hands are forced to do things you don't want to do, that you know does harm. This may be, and it likely is a hard choice to make for anyone. But this question isn't about how do we assess student writing in order to keep our jobs, or feel good about what we do, or even to forgive ourselves for doing what we do. The question is about what is the ethical thing to do.

While I cannot answer it here definitely, only you can answer this for yourself in your context, I can offer the ethical paradox as clearly as possible, which may mean it makes us uncomfortable with what we have as our choices—this uncomfortability can push us to make unexpected changes in the systems we work within. The question, I think, assumes a false binary, but one that is often enough a part of the decision to use or not use grading contracts. What I mean is that this question assumes that we have an either-or choice to make. Either we protect the vulnerable teacher by using conventional grading systems, or we protect the vulnerable students by using contracts. Putting aside the fact that in any given situation, one would need to determine in some reasonable way how vulnerable the teacher and students really are (who stands to lose more and how is “more” decided?), we might also see this as a false-real binary. It is a real binary in the sense that this may be the choice that some teachers have, but it is also false in that the society and educational systems we work in have created it because they assume things like standards. Our educational systems make such things falsely binary. They give us only this either-or choice. Why cannot we protect both the vulnerable teacher and the vulnerable students? Why

cannot our assessment ecologies do both things? And why aren't methods that protect our vulnerable students also seen as ones that protect vulnerable teachers in predatory educational systems that take advantage of them? I think, even if one starts very small, we can together change such systems, little by little. Those changes may start by seeing the false-real binary many of us have in front of us.