Openings, Risks, and Antiracist Futures at a Hispanic-Serving Institution

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Through a series of narratives, this article highlights the experiences of six faculty who have incorporated varying approaches to labor-based contract grading in their courses at Texas A&M University-San Antonio, a Hispanic-Serving Institution. Each narrative offers a personal illustration of the faculty members' struggles, achievements, and realizations as they have adopted and adapted labor-based contract grading.

Keywords: labor-based assessment, contract grading, narrative, Hispanic-Serving Institution, writing assessment

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Introduction

Texas A&M University-San Antonio (A&M-SA) is located in south San Antonio, Texas on land traditionally belonging to the Coahuiltecans, Lipan Apache, Tonkawa, and Comanche. This land, existing as it does in proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border, bears a long history marked, in part, by militarism, colonization, and racialized violence. Many of the students attending A&M-SA carry the lived experiences of this history and its consequences. As a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) where nearly 74% of students identify as Hispanic or Latinx (Texas A&M-SA, 2018), A&M-SA and its faculty bear a responsibility to be accountable both to the land and to the students by designing and implementing culturally responsive campus and classroom experiences. Faculty teaching in the Department of Language, Literature, and Arts are striving to fulfill this responsibility by designing and implementing writing curricula, pedagogies, and assessment practices that are antiracist and decolonial. Specifically, faculty both in the department's English and First-Year Composition (FYC) programs are incorporating labor-based contract grading.

As of this writing, approximately 75% of FYC faculty and 66% of English literature faculty have incorporated labor-based grading as an assessment practice. These numbers demonstrate that our department has engaged in a fundamental transformation of its assessment ecology over the last three academic years. What, though, have those transformations looked like in our programs and classrooms? How has our evolving ecology impacted our faculty and the classroom relationships we foster with students? How has it affected what our faculty see in the writing our students produce as well as in the ways students work? How has our adoption of labor-based contract grading affected departmental values and culture? And has our adoption contributed to our department's commitments to antiracist and decolonial practice? We offer initial answers to these questions here through six faculty perspectives on their experiences incorporating labor-based contracts in their classes. We present our work through narration to illustrate the complexities, nuances, and affective experiences involved with incorporating labor-based contract grading, at the level of program and classroom. Our narratives also emphasize the importance of situating this form of assessment within our local context. As Inoue (2015) suggests, this form of assessment ecology is "inevitably personal and local" (p. 117). In this sense, our narratives are not intended just to join our discipline's conversations about contract grading, but to share our processes of navigating the complexities that take place when implementing labor-based contracts. Furthermore, as members of a department with antiracist and decolonial pedagogical commitments, we are striving to resist privileging Whiteness and Eurocentrism across our work as faculty members. We use narration to disrupt Whiteness and Eurocentrism, in part, by challenging our White co-authors neither to reaffirm nor to privilege the standards and conventions of academic discourse, or traditional rational argument, but to trouble that discourse and to interrogate and confront the ways our academic training makes us agents of White language supremacy (Inoue, 2019) regardless of our views on race or our good intentions. Lastly, narration both centers and honors the voices and experiences of those of us engaged in labor-based contract grading at A&M-SA.

In this article, we present six narratives from faculty across our department who have all implemented labor-based contract grading in their courses. Beginning with Scott Gage, our Director of FYC, who introduced labor-based contract grading to faculty in our department both as part of his ongoing interrogation and disruption of his own Whiteness and as part of the FYC program's effort to support our student population in ways less racially violent. Scott's narrative emphasizes the importance of self-interrogation, showing how changing our department's assessment ecology has involved significant critical engagement both with ourselves and with our discipline. Importantly, Scott's narrative also emphasizes the role writing program administrators (WPAs) can play in modeling vulnerability and self-interrogation as an opening tactic for disrupting White language supremacy and inviting antiracist transformations. Next, we offer narratives from Petra Baruca, Christen Barron, and Curt Meyer, who are all full-time lecturers in our FYC program. These narratives share each faculty member's experiences with their incorporation of labor-based contract grading, including the ways each have adapted their contracts for their particular classrooms as well as the ways their use of contracts have fostered new ways of being in the classroom both for themselves as teachers and for their students as writers. For example, Petra, Christen, and Curt share how labor-based contract grading has invited greater self-awareness of power and positionality in their courses, leading to more equitable and empathetic classroom environments. We follow Petra, Christen, and Curt, with Ann Bliss, an associate professor of literature and Chair of the Department of Language, Literature, and Arts. Ann's narrative offers insight both into faculty experience with labor-based contract grading in contexts beyond the FYC classroom and into the ways labor-based

contracts invite the decentering of teacher authority over the writing students produce. Lastly, we share Lizbett Tinoco's experiences. Lizbett, a tenure-track faculty member teaching rhetoric and writing courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels, cites her use of labor-based contracts as a pivotal moment of transformation in her relationship with assessment. Her narrative also suggests that fulfilling the antiracist potential of labor-based contract grading requires introducing graduate students to the practice.

Collectively, our narratives show how labor-based grading has started to transform our department's assessment ecology both by inviting faculty to interrogate the ways our assessment practices can lead to harmful effects on students and by encouraging faculty to develop new orientations toward students and assessment at an HSI. Over the last three years, we have noticed a more empathetic and compassionate orientation toward our students, including a greater respect for, and inclusion of, students' cultural and linguistic knowledges. In fact, this orientation has contributed to the development of our department's antiracist and decolonial commitments; our department's commitments have emerged from our increased sense of empathy and compassion. We have also observed in both programmatic- and department-level meetings increased recognition and explicit discussion of the ways assessment is a fraught, political practice that can reaffirm White language supremacy and inflict racialized violence on students. Lastly, our use of labor-based contract grading has fostered an assessment ecology in which faculty seem both conscious of and committed to decentering the hierarchical relationships and power structures traditional forms of assessment often create between teacher and student.

Labor-Based Contract Grading at an HSI: Our Experience in Six Narratives

Scott Gage

I took a lot for granted when I started my first position as an assistant professor in Fall 2011. One example: I never felt it necessary to interrogate either the meaning or the visceral impact of my embodied presence as a White, heterosexual, cisgendered male among the classrooms, hallways, and campus spaces of a HSI. This was a glaring indication of my Whiteness, to be sure. But it was also a glaring indication of my complicity in a racist social structure that strives moment after moment to position people who look like me as the center, the norm, the invisible standard. Another example: I questioned neither our discipline's "best practices" nor the Eurocentrism those practices often privilege and reaffirm. Rather, I applied those practices innocently, naively, as though they were racially neutral and could support students equally no matter institutional geography or context. I had put too much trust in the discipline I was entering, assuming what I had learned and experienced of it had equipped me with all I needed to be an effective faculty member, and I had abdicated responsibility for my pedagogical choices as a result. Yet another example: I presumed my own benevolence, never once considering the possibility that I could be inflicting harm on students as I designed my courses, as I engaged with students in the classroom, and, most importantly, as I assessed student writing. I had cocooned myself inside a false certainty that my good intentions were enough. In doing so, I had sheltered myself from recognition that, with every rubric demanding student assimilation to the standards of academic discourse, with every comment privileging Eurocentric grammars over and above students' own languages, with every letter grade assigned to a student based on their ability to approximate Whiteness through their writing, I was an unwitting agent of racialized violence.

I was only starting to interrogate my professional identity and practices, and the unacknowledged Whiteness/assumptions underlying both, as I joined the faculty at A&M-SA in Fall 2016. Prior to the 2016-2017 academic year, A&M-SA had only offered upper-division courses for transfer students and Masters-level courses for graduate students from a limited number of disciplines. Beginning in 2016-2017, the university also started offering lower-division courses, including courses in composition. I was hired to serve as the first Director of FYC. Designing and implementing the FYC program was my primary responsibility. Because I was new to the university—and to San Antonio—I wanted to learn before beginning the work of program development. Specifically, I wanted an opportunity to meet and learn from our students, to walk on the university's land and to gain a sense of its history, to develop felt knowledge of the institution and its surrounding community. Unfortunately, my transition from Colorado to Texas in the summer of 2016 was hurried, so I relied on what I was familiar with—on what my Whiteness was comfortable with—and, in collaboration with my new colleagues, I designed a genre-focused curriculum informed by the WPA Outcomes Statement 3.0. The unintended, though perhaps inevitable, result: a composition program violent in its neglect of San Antonio's colonial history; in its denial of student culture, community, and experience; and in its promulgation of assessment practices reaffirming the assumed supremacy of Eurocentric rhetorics, grammars, and epistemologies. If the FYC program were to be both responsive to institutional context and accountable to students, and if the program were to offer a curricular environment in which racialized violence would be less likely to occur, it needed to identify and adopt practices designed to disrupt White supremacy and the forms of linguistic violence perpetuating it.

As part of my personal professional development in Fall 2016, I started to engage with the work of Asao B. Inoue. I felt moved and compelled by what I understood to be his central message: Compositionists frequently affirm White language supremacy and perform its attendant violence—both its denial of linguistic diversity and its punishment of students whose communication does not conform to Eurocentric standards—through our assessment of student writing. I invited faculty in our FYC program to grapple with this message in Spring 2017, when we read Inoue's (2015) *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies* as part of our Coffee and Composition professional development series. The theme for that semester's series, antiracist grading practices, emerged not only from my ongoing self-interrogation into my own Whiteness but also from the concerns FYC faculty shared with me about our

program's lack of intentional responsiveness both to our institution and to our students. Addressing the theme challenged our practices and identities as composition instructors. I remember entire meetings spent struggling through discussions about the potential racism of grading rubrics. I also remember extensive conversations about the potential that, despite our best intentions, our work in the classroom--work we had been trained to accept as given--risked perpetuating White supremacy. The discussions were challenging; they required vulnerability, honesty, and a willingness to take stock of our pedagogical practices and assumptions. The discussions were also productive; they led directly to the adoption of labor-based contract grading by many of our faculty.

To support faculty interested in adopting, and adapting, labor-based contract grading, I delivered a workshop on the practice for all colleagues in the English program in Fall 2017. I designed the workshop into two parts with the first part focusing on the theory underlying labor-based contract grading and the second part focusing on how faculty can design their courses to incorporate this form of assessment. We never got to the second part. Instead, we spent our time together that afternoon grappling with what we saw as the implications of theory: *How can we make sure students are prepared for their upper-division courses, and their careers, if we're not grading them on the quality of their writing? What are our responsibilities to colleagues in other disciplines who expect students to learn grammar in our courses? Are we really being racist if we deduct a student's grade because of grammatical errors?* Much of our discussion returned again and again to concerns about racism. Understandably, my colleagues seemed unsure of what labor-based contract grading suggests about their relationship to White supremacy, seemed uncomfortable with the potential of their complicity in something they find abhorrent. I attempted to make myself vulnerable, to acknowledge my own discomforts and uncertainties, and to share my ongoing experiences with my efforts to interrogate and disrupt my Whiteness. I also attempted to emphasize what I have come to believe is a principle central to the incorporation of labor-based contracts: Although faculty bear responsibility for our approaches to assessment, most of us have been taught and trained to assess student writing in no other way than on how well students mimic Eurocentric standards. In other words, I attempted not to negate our individual responsibility as faculty but to stress the systemic dimensions of racialized violence in assessment.

Given faculty uncertainty about labor-based contract grading, I decided to model a gradual approach to the practice's full adoption. For example, I initially shared a partial contract (see Appendix 1) some FYC faculty chose to draw from as they adapted labor-based contracts for their classes in Fall 2017. This contract provided only a brief rationale for the form of assessment, and it defined student labor largely in quantitative terms, focusing on the number of student absences as well as the number of students' late, missed, or ignored assignments. I shared this contract with everyone who attended the workshop I delivered to encourage its adoption in Spring 2018. I, then, offered an expanded contract (see Appendix 2) in the 2018-2019 academic year. Although this version of the contract remained largely quantitative in its assessment of labor, it provided more insight into the reasoning behind the contract, namely its intention to affirm linguistic diversity among students and to invite student risk and exploration. The second contract also defined terms such as "absences" and "incomplete assignments" and explained how I would use the chart to determine final grades. More recently, I have offered a fully-developed contract (see Appendix 3) modeled after the contract Asao B. Inoue shared with our faculty during a workshop he presented in Spring 2018. This contract uses a default grade of "B" and specifically defines the labor students agree to complete to earn the default, to earn higher than the default, or to earn below the default. The contract also incorporates expectations for care and compassion and offers a complete articulation of the reasoning behind the choice to use labor-based contract grading. I see these contracts not only as a method for supporting faculty in their intentional adoption and adaptation of labor-based contracts but also as a record of my own journey toward a greater awareness of how my Whiteness shapes and impinges on who I am inside and outside of the university, toward a greater commitment to taking actions that challenge and disrupt my Whiteness (acknowledging all the while that I can never fully escape my embodied positionality and the privileges that come with it). As my colleagues' experiences attest, our use of labor-based contract grading has transformed our department's assessment ecology into one more informed by antiracism as well as one more committed to socially just assessments of student writing. I hope our use of labor-based contracts and their ongoing adaptation to our context can also transform something more fundamental: ourselves.

Petra Baruca

I have been teaching First Year English composition courses, mainly Composition I and II, as a full time lecturer for almost five years now. About two years ago, when we read and discussed Inoue's *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies* as part of our FYC program's professional development, our program started entertaining the idea that our ways of teaching and assessing writing might be potentially violent and problematic for our student population. That made me reflect back on my graduate writing experience when I, as an English non-dominant speaker, started to write for English dominant audiences for the very first time. Being self-conscious about my English language skills, I expected my papers to bleed red when returned by my American professors. However, I was pleasantly surprised to see minimal markings on the language use and grammar, and that those professors prioritized the content of my writing instead. Even though I might have not understood it at that point, looking back, I can definitely say that the way my writing was assessed had a positive impact on my own self-esteem as a student and as a writer. This personal experience where content was prioritized over the use of "proper" grammar, helped me understand how labor-based contract grading could be similarly beneficial for my students. After all, under a contract that does not prioritize the quality of writing, the students are supposed to write more freely, take more creative risks, feel less pressured, and in general, learn to enjoy writing more.

Switching from conventional grading to labor-based contract grading was not easy for me nor was it for the students. At first, I adopted a labor-based contract that was presented to us by our Director of FYC without any major modifications. This contract graded students based on the number of absences and the number of late, missed, and ignored assignments. During the first semester of using labor-based contract grading, it was quite challenging for me to explain to the students what it is, what benefits it brings into the classroom, and how the students are graded. My major concern was that students will perceive labor-based contract grading as a system that allows mediocre work, but still awards high marks. Fortunately, that was not the case. Even though it was quite difficult for the students to grasp the idea of labor-based contracts, I was pleased to realize that the students were putting the same amount of effort into completing the assignments as they had during my previous semesters.

After the initial uncertainty, I realized that labor-based contract grading is not a uniformed approach that everybody needs to follow strictly. Therefore, I was determined to revise the contract and develop a system that was easy for me to use, clear enough for the students to understand, and above all, took into account our students' needs and characteristics.

Perhaps the most important adaptation came from the realization that for our Hispanic, first-generation students, in whose culture family dedication and support are often valued above school achievements, a deadline-driven grading approach may not be the most effective one. I was convinced that modifying the grading system so that it takes into consideration the cultural aspects of these students' lives was necessary. The revised contract awards students labor points based on attendance and participation, the amount of work they have completed and the effort they put into developing their writing. The more classes the student attends and the more work they submit, the more points they accumulate throughout the semester and the higher their final grade is. This revised grading system, which prioritizes the amount of work students complete, allowed me to accept the majority of work that would otherwise be considered late (or missed or ignored). In the past, it was not rare that my students had expressed concerns that they struggled to complete the assignments in time, when they had to take care of their younger siblings, when they had to go to work to provide for their families, or when they were able to only work on the assignments at school because they had no internet connection or even a laptop at home. The grading system where work was not graded based on meeting the deadlines seems to be especially beneficial for students who struggled more with managing school work and their family expectations, and would otherwise quickly fall behind.

Using labor-based contract grading also allowed me to make the learning process more autonomous for my students by letting them work on and earn extra labor points for an array of activities designed either by me or initiated by the students themselves. These extra credit opportunities ranged from reading additional articles to producing extra revisions to visiting the writing center, to name just a few. Any activity that was seen as having a potential benefit towards improving the student writing was accepted and rewarded with extra labor points. The students were able to engage in these to substitute a missed assignment or just to improve their overall course grade. To my surprise, the students have shown a great interest in these extra labor assignments, and as a result, their labor put towards completing each project increased. This newly revised contract allowed especially my previously marginalized students, who under the conventional grading system were not able to keep up with all the assignments, to work at their own pace but, at the same time, helped them to better meet the goals and requirements of the course.

The more experience I have with using a labor-based contract grading system in my courses, the more convinced I am that adopting the approach has been the proper decision for our program. As the instructor, I am satisfied to see that using labor-based contract grading started to encourage especially my less privileged students to be more productive, to enjoy writing more, and not to be afraid of writing in their own language. I could see that my students have started to put more effort into completing the assignments, are willing to revise the same drafts more often, and are even asking to complete some extra work to earn a higher grade. In their final reflections they wrote for my classes, I could read that many of them started to fear writing less or sometimes even enjoy writing more, started to think of themselves as more confident writers, and started to understand that more effort usually leads to more effective writing.

Christen Barron

I've taught college-level writing for nearly five years. At my current institution, I'm a full-time lecturer who teaches primarily Technical Writing and Composition II. Because these courses are required for a wide range of majors, I tend to get a mix of all types of students—from adult learners to first-generation students and military veterans. I always expect many of them to hate writing. It's part of the territory of teaching a required writing class. For these students, I assumed, taking a writing course was a necessary and unpleasant inconvenience standing between them and a degree.

My assumptions about students and teaching writing began to change two years ago when I announced to my students that I would be grading them on their labor instead of the quality of their work. The contract outlined in my syllabus was simple. The final letter grade students received in the course would be based on how much work they completed toward each major writing assignment and their frequency of class attendance and participation. The more work they completed, and the more they participated in class, the higher their final course grade. Across all my course sections, students lined up to talk to me after class. Their stories poured in:

English isn't my first language

I haven't taken an English class in 10 years

My high school English teacher ripped my paper to shreds with a red pen

I failed English 1301 twice already.

These stories were fraught with failure and shame. Many students shared that they were anxious about taking a writing class, but that this "new grading thing" made writing seem less scary. For these students, a writing class wasn't an "unpleasant inconvenience," but a great source of anxiety.

When our Director of FYC suggested that I try labor-based contract grading in my composition and technical writing courses, I didn't anticipate how much it would change the way I teach and evaluate writing. If anything, I figured the contract would motivate students to "slack off" in writing classes they were already determined to hate. Some of the students remained unmotivated, but many students thrived under this new contract. If a student turned in an assignment that still needed work, the labor-based agreement enabled me to give extensive feedback and invite them to revise and resubmit. If they chose to revise, their course grade would be higher. Unlike in a conventionally graded course, labor-based contract grading allowed me to reward students for developing their writing skills instead of punishing or shaming them for the writing skills they might lack. I watched as several students who were terrified to misspell a word on the first day gained the confidence they needed to develop as writers. I don't think labor-based contract grading is the remedy to every bad academic writing experience, nor will it make students magically fall in love with writing, but I do think it helped many of my students begin to rewrite the crippling narrative of failure surrounding their academic writing experiences.

Labor-based contract grading also made me consider how conventionally-graded writing classes might have hindered me as both a student and an instructor. Initially, the idea of labor-based contract grading made me uncomfortable because I'm the kind of person who thrives on rules and routines. In my undergraduate studies, I was a student who excelled in writing classes because I had a knack for writing to an instructor's taste. I felt safe—guaranteed an "A"—in any writing situation if I had a set of rules to follow. As a result, I churned out stale, calculated writing out of fear of deviating from the script—fear of the failure that might come if I did.

Each semester, I have a handful of students like me—students who thrive on the rules and routines of traditionally-graded academic writing. The semester I first announced that I would be using labor-based contract grading was no different. The rule-loving students were visibly ruffled as they skimmed through the contract outlined in the syllabus. Before I could even finish explaining the contract, hands shot up:

What do you mean, you won't give us a grade for each assignment?!

How will I know if my essay is good if I don't get an "A"?

What about rubrics?

It took some time (like half a semester if we're honest), but once these students realized their "As" were no longer on the line, their writing and their response to the contract started to change. I saw the changes in both my technical writing courses and my comoposition courses. In my technical writing course, I asked for volunteers to share their rough draft business memos with the entire class. A confident education major volunteered, so I put his memo draft on the Smartboard for the whole class to discuss. As I scrolled through the document, I saw that it wasn't at all what I'd asked students to complete for the project. It was a report in impeccable APA style.

Within a few minutes of our discussion, the education major realized his mistake. After class, he told me that he'd been so used to going through the motions of academic writing, he'd just assumed that I'd wanted an APA style report and had barely glanced at the assignment sheet. He confided that if I hadn't been grading on labor, he would have never shared his work with the class. But he was glad he did because now he had some revision ideas. This same student had scoffed at the labor-based contract on the first day of class!

When I assigned an argumentative essay in my composition class, a student wrote a fabulously satirical essay about a Taco Bell Netflix machine in response. To this day, it is one of the most memorable essays I've ever received. The student told me that he would have never tried something "weird" like that in a conventionally-graded course.

Labor-based contract grading didn't just impact my students' writing; it also impacted my approach to teaching. It showed me that

many of my assignments and classroom practices had been motivated by the same fear of failure I'd had as an undergraduate writer. As I continue to use labor-based contracts in my classes, I now feel empowered to develop challenging and innovative assignments without the fear that I'll set myself or my students up for failure.

Ultimately, labor-based contract grading has helped me create a more equitable and empathetic writing classroom. In this environment, students have more autonomy and opportunities to experiment with their writing. Both skilled and unskilled writers who tirelessly practice the craft of writing can receive a grade that reflects their hard work. In many cases, this hard work results in more developed, fearless, and authentic writing.

Curt Meyer

When I began teaching college writing two decades ago, although course models like communities of discourse were very much in vogue, traditional wisdom still dictated that, in the words of my first university-level pedagogy instructor, "If you can teach a college freshman anything, teach them to write in the active voice." As such, my approach for my first few years in the classroom was very much as a grammarian, peppered with approaches to exploring personal identity and empowerment that still inform my teaching and are better facilitated by labor-based contract grading. I'm getting ahead of myself. After about a decade of teaching at various institutions, with a variety of student populations, I began to see the value in low stakes assignments balanced with conventional assessment. For around five or six years, I used the model of a 1,000-point grading scale, half of which would be completion grades, for example peer review, invention exercises, and initial drafts. The other half would be final drafts wedded to conventional rubrics. Students responded well to this type of assessment because it provided them with some degree of a cushion in terms of what conventional assessment models might see as initial missteps or mistakes and their final grades.

I was fairly satisfied with this model until being exposed to the philosophy underpinning labor-based contract grading. I began to see that providing students with a cushion wasn't enough. The students' grades were still dependent upon a numerical point scale, and even more so on an increasingly arbitrary set of rubrics. Students still felt like they were either writing for the instructor or in competition with one another. Neither one of these dynamics is necessarily conducive to really taking charge of one's writing. So with tremendous encouragement from my program director and colleagues, I adapted my teaching to labor-based contract grading two years ago.

Really what appeals to me most about labor-based contract grading is that it pairs well with the metaphor of language as play, or in this case labor as play. I have always tried to encourage students to think of language as potentially fun, exciting, exhilarating. It doesn't always work. I don't even know if it works 25% of the time, but when a student is liberated from performing to a rubric for the sake of a grade, they are far more likely to take risks, to try something new, or to investigate something that they really don't understand. I know that as an instructor, and this may sound narcissistic or self-serving, but I am the most satisfied personally when my students teach me something. This is far more likely to happen when the structure of the course itself gives the student permission to completely embrace their curiosity. And, let's face it, without curiosity, there is no real academia. Comparatively, our dismissal of conventional grading is akin to our K-12 brethren being hypothetically unburdened from teaching to standardized tests.

With the embrace of freedom comes personal responsibility. Essential to my application of labor-based contract grading is self-advocacy through reflection. The positive feedback that's struck me the most since beginning labor-based contract grading has been how much students have appreciated peer review. Prior to my use of labor-based contracts, most students' descriptions would've been dreadful. Key to the way I've implemented labor-based peer revision is that I offer students guided questions tailored to each draft but only ask the students to submit their reflections on the process to me directly. What this does is give students a variety of means by which they can handle the peer revision process, such as electronically through email or cloud, face-to-face in class, through a writing center encounter, and so forth. They then articulate the process and the significance thereof through the reflection. This pattern basically follows for all of my students' assignments: invent, reflect, write, reflect, revise, reflect. Students are making the argument for, or telling the story of, the quality of their labor.

Labor-based contract grading also frees up my creativity. For one, I've experimented with my method of feedback. I've implemented two mandatory face-to-face conferences per semester to supplement any written feedback. Students' responses to this have been mixed, but the vast majority seem to appreciate it. I've also emphasized continuous crafting of a digital portfolio as the means for students to curate their work and, as such, to advocate for the quality of their labor.

Of course, we can't undo 12 years of indoctrination to conventional grading in one or two semesters. One of the most significant hurdles I've encountered each semester is communicating to students that point values don't matter. I still use a course delivery system for the submission of materials and for students and myself to track what's been turned in, as well as to timestamp materials. I indicate that an assignment is complete by assigning a 5, 4 is incomplete and late, 3 is incomplete, 2 is late, 1 is more than 48 hours late. This is by no means fool proof, but it does allow me and students to keep better track of the course.

The act of preparing this piece in itself is labor-based. Tasked with composing a 900-word narrative on labor-based contract

grading, I spent about 90 minutes composing the initial draft, and I am well into revising it as I type. My hope is that the reader finds some value in the quality of this labor.

Ann Bliss

I have long been frustrated with how conventional grading inadequately reflects the effort students devote to their written work. Now an associate professor, primarily teaching upper-division literature classes, and the department chair, I have been teaching for just over 20 years. I share many of the experiences of our students: I was a non-traditional, first-generation, immigrant student, and although I neither look nor sound like our students, I fully appreciate the obstacles they face. Despite primarily teaching literature classes, I employ many of the techniques used in teaching composition as, even at the more advanced level, our students struggle to express their often insightful ideas in writing. My frustrations with the limitations of conventional grading have multiplied in the 20 years I have been teaching, and I was excited to learn about opportunities to address them through labor-based contract grading. Fueled by what I learned in Scott's workshop and by the ways in which students in my senior seminar worked on their research projects, I decided to see if labor-based contract grading would enable my students to stop writing for me and to start writing for themselves.

Our recently revised senior seminar requires students to engage in lengthy revisions and development of a previous piece of work. I taught the first iteration of this course. Initially, students struggled to figure out how to approach the task, but they ended up fully invested in both the process and the product. I have rarely seen such dedication to scholarly work—at either the graduate or undergraduate level—as I witnessed in that class. However, conventional grading that evaluates the quality of each component element failed to recognize the efforts of the students or the process of writing. This observation, combined with my new knowledge of labor-based contract grading, compelled me to make the switch for the next semester's section of the senior seminar.

As someone entirely new to using labor-based contract grading, I leaned heavily on the material Scott had generously provided. Each element of the course was considered complete or incomplete depending on whether the submitted assignment met the labor expectations for the specific assignment; these expectations included such criteria as meeting the minimum word count and participating in peer review. Any incomplete work could be revised—as often as necessary—to meet the expected labor standards. The students were certainly perplexed at first as they had only experienced conventional grading, and it took a while for them to wrap their heads around a very different kind of grading. The explanation of the grading system generated discussion about complete versus incomplete assignments, and it became clear that they were going to have difficulty letting go of receiving grades. I asked them to work in groups to determine what should count as an assignment. One asked what would improve her grade, and I had to explain that her grade was dependent on her labor. Another student answered by saying "there are no grades!" The first student couldn't understand why we'd want to consider workshops, and giving feedback in particular, as labor, asking again if her feedback would be graded. As the semester progressed, the students understood how the grading system reflected the effort they were willing to expend. However, they still struggled to fully leave behind conventional grading, often reacting to the designation of complete for an assignment as if it were an "A" grade.

Encouraged by the impact of labor-based contract grading in the senior seminar, I decided to employ it in the general education course, Introduction to Fiction. The class of 36 students consisted of roughly half English majors, with the remaining students pursuing degrees in other disciplines. As with the senior seminar, students' work was designated complete or incomplete, again with the option to revise an incomplete as many times as necessary in order to earn a complete.

The effect of labor-based contract grading for this class was even more positive than for the senior seminar. While a few students were familiar with the system from their FYC classes, most had not experienced it before. However, unlike the more advanced students, these students embraced this approach to grading. Significantly, after submitting a couple of papers, students began to take risks with their writing, an opportunity they vocally welcomed. For example, one student asked which stories would work well for an analysis of setting, prompting a class discussion on the various readings. When they considered "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson, many students commented that the generic nature of the setting might provide difficulties for analysis. However, at least two students voiced their intention of examining the setting of this story primarily *because* of these challenges. I began to see that students were indeed moving away from trying to please me with their writing and instead were challenging themselves in their intellectual development. One student made clear that labor-based contract grading specifically freed him to experiment in ways he would not consider under conventional grading. A couple of comments in the student evaluations reinforce the appreciation students have for this way of grading. One student wrote, "I liked the grading scale during this class. It really was about the work and improving." Another wrote, "I do not think learning should be about a grade. It should be about your effort and what you took from the class."

So what was the end result of using labor-based contract grading in these classes? One common concern is that grades will skew towards the high end—everyone will end up with an A or B. However, the range of grades reflected the ways in which students engaged in course work: Those who worked the hardest earned the higher grades and, not surprisingly, produced the most interesting work. Yet I still feel that I have a long way to go in fully embracing all aspects of labor-based contract grading. Erasing 20 years' familiarity with the power dynamics embedded in conventional grading will not happen quickly; for example, I still hesitate to

involve students in writing the grading contract and in deciding how to determine the criteria for a complete assignment. But this is work that is worth doing. For me, the most significant reason to use labor-based contract grading is not connected to grade distribution—or grades at all; it is the way in which this grading frees students from concerns of doing something right rather than experimenting with and exploring ideas.

Lizbett Tinoco

As a Latina professor who teaches writing, grading has always been a contentious issue for me—how could I, someone who is an emergent bilingual and was in basic writing courses in college, assess student writing? Much of my anguish with writing, like for many of the students in my writing courses, comes from the years of negative comments, such as "too many second language errors," "visit the writing center," or "incomprehensible." I never realized the trauma and the linguistic violence that could be inflicted by comments expressing all of the deficit issues with my writing.

I started teaching basic writing at a community college even though I did not have much training on writing pedagogy as a graduate student. When it came to assessing student writing, I modified rubrics shared by some of my colleagues, all of which required students to write in academic English. I never felt comfortable assessing whether students performed academic English, but there was a fear of not straying too far from how my colleagues were assessing student writing if I wanted to keep my job as an adjunct instructor. Then, when I joined my graduate program, all FYC students enrolled in the second semester course were assigned the same assignments with set due dates for all sections. On dates when assignments were due, students would upload their drafts to a website that would then randomly distribute submissions to all instructors teaching the course. Instructors and graduate students teaching the course would comment and evaluate student submissions anonymously using rubrics designed by the FYC program. I didn't get to assess my own student's final drafts, but more importantly, I felt conflicted about this assessment practice at a HSI where the majority of students were Latinx, first-generation, English language learners, and bilingual. I constantly questioned how this form of assessment was culturally, contextually, and socially responsive to this student population. In hindsight, it wasn't.

When I started a tenure-track position at A&M-SA, I learned many faculty members in the FYC program, including the director, used labor-based contract grading. I was shocked that an entire program was supportive of this method of assessment because, oftentimes, I heard colleagues at conferences state there was no way their department would allow them to turn to this form of grading. I must admit that I did not use labor-based contract grading during my first year as a new tenure-track faculty member due to fear—fear of experimenting with a new form of assessment and fear of student responses to this unfamiliar assessment which could potentially have a negative impact on my faculty evaluations. However, I am grateful for a supportive department chair, director of FYC, and colleagues who were always willing to have difficult, but productive, conversations about antiracist and culturally responsive pedagogies to better serve our students. This environment provided the space to learn more about labor-based contract grading, but most importantly, discuss ways in which we could resist pedagogical practices deeply rooted in Eurocentric epistemologies that perpetuate White racial ideologies, through reading groups and professional development workshops. Our program invited Asao B. Inoue to lead a workshop on labor-based contract grading, where he shared more about the ways in which assessment works to affirm White language supremacy and the contract he uses in his courses. It was not until going through all this professional development that I felt prepared to start incorporating labor-based contract grading in my courses.

At the time the first draft of this article was submitted, I had just introduced labor-based contracts in all of the courses I was teaching during the 2019-2020 academic year. I can say that making the transition to this form of assessment has allowed me to transform my teaching altogether and learn ways to intentionally create a more antiracist and socially just environment for students. The use of labor journals, either in writing or videos, have really given me a completely different understanding of the labor students do in the classroom. Unlike the labor logs presented to us by Asao B. Inoue in the form of a table that quantifies the number of hours students spend on class work, I wanted to know more about students' labor and ask students to document in detail the variety of things that have an effect on their writing on a daily basis. In my first semester of implementing labor-based contract grading, many English language learners expressed they would much rather create videos than write a journal entry. I now give all students this option, and the labor journals, in writing or video form, have been insightful for me as an instructor. Students do much more than tell me the number of hours they spend on their assignments. They describe and share a lot of the invisible forms of labor we don't often see when we provide feedback on students' drafts. I have come to understand that forms of invisible labor, such as how interactions in their jobs and with family and community, affect how students perform labor that ultimately influence their writing practices and writing. Furthermore, labor-based contract grading opens up a space in the classroom for students to develop a critical understanding of how assessment plays a role in linguistic racism and has forced them to perpetuate White, Eurocentric linguistic norms as we constantly discuss assessment and the labor contracts throughout the semester. What students have shared in final reflections is that they feel more empowered and more willing to advocate for themselves in other courses instead of remaining silent and complacent with grades given to them. Students learn to reframe their linguistic and cultural knowledge and labor as a rich resource to draw from and move away from the deficit rhetoric that conventional forms of grading have inflicted on them over the years.

As a Latina professor teaching at an HSI, it's important for me that antiracist pedagogies aren't just contained within the classroom but that students find ways in which to take this knowledge into their communities. For example, in the Spring of 2020, I taught a

rhetoric and writing graduate course on writing assessment where the majority of students in the course were high school teachers or planned to go into education. A large focus of the course was on antiracist writing assessment and using assessment to perform social justice. Through many conversations, we discussed how linguistically and racially diverse students have been socialized into White linguistic norms and traumatized by the internalized racism when they don't adhere to these norms. Many of the teachers in the course planned to use labor-based contract grading in their courses, and for final projects, some even developed professional workshops to share with their colleagues. Engaging in antiracist work in academia is not easy, but if I can plant the seed for current and future educators to be committed to challenging racism in education through labor-based contract grading and other antiracist pedagogies, then I am hopeful we can gradually begin to create some much needed change.

Looking Back, Looking Forward: A Reflection on Labor-Based Contract Grading

Our narratives share our experiences adopting and adapting labor-based contract grading across our programs and courses. Incorporating labor-based contracts has not only initiated important transformations in our assessment ecology but has also offered important realizations about this form of assessment. First, labor-based contract grading can facilitate interrogation of our assumptions and biases and invite us to participate in difficult pedagogical conversations that reveal and challenge both what we believe and what we take for granted as teacher-scholars, especially our underlying assumptions about assessment. Our use of labor-based contract grading has, specifically, fostered conversations about the ways our unexamined practices in the classroom can enact pedagogical violence. We recognize now that many other aspects of our work with students--from the programmatic level to the level of the classroom--require honest and ongoing scrutiny.

We have also learned that labor-based contract grading can present significant challenges for students as they transition into a form of assessment that challenges their indoctrination to conventional forms of assessment. However, we also see that facing these challenges is worth the effort because of the antiracist potential of labor-based contract grading. Labor-based contract grading provides an opportunity for students to have agency over their own labor rather than having their labor in the class subsumed by the imposed authority conventional forms of assessment award to writing instructors, an authority frequently called upon to enforce Eurocentric standards. Additionally, labor-based contract grading frees students from performing to certain genre expectations and, instead, gives them the opportunity to embrace failure more so than conventional forms of assessment. For many students, this is the first time they are liberated from a racist model of assessment that sets a White, Eurocentric standard and demands they produce writing to meet that standard. Systems of assessment that constrict the paths of students as writers "hinders their pursuit of self affirmation" and "interferes with [their] ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human" (Freire, 1968/2014, p. 55), but we see labor-based contract grading as opening paths for students, meeting them where they are and creating multiple pathways for success and self-actualization. Furthermore, we have also learned labor-based contract grading helps students mediate many of the deficit ideologies they have internalized about their writing. Because labor-based contract grading does not assess whether students meet Eurocentric standards of writing, labor-based contract grading allows students to leverage their linguistic diversity as an asset.

While our experiences teach us valuable lessons about the use of labor-based contract grading in our particular context, we have much more to learn about this form of assessment and its impact on students and faculty alike. For example, our narratives show our perceptions of what we believe labor-based contract grading does for students, but we need to engage in research to draw from students' experiences. Since not all faculty in our program use labor-based contracts, we also have an opportunity to research differences between students' experiences in classes where labor-based contract grading is used and in those where it is not used. Furthermore, this gives our program an opportunity to conduct research on faculty who use labor-based contract grading in their courses. How, for example, is labor-based contract grading impacting other facets of faculty work? And what role does labor-based contract grading specifically play in fostering antiracist and equitable classroom practices? Moreover, to what extent does labor-based contract grading invite faculty to confront either their own Whiteness and Eurocentrism or their investment in both? We also recognize now a need to examine whether the form of the grading contract itself is a racist or colonial practice given the historical usage of contracts and treaties to divest Indigenous populations of their rights to land, such as the land on which we teach. If we intend to use labor-based contract grading as an antiracist practice, research, assessment, and evaluation need to be on-going practices that we constantly perform.

In addition to learning more about labor-based contract grading and its impact on our department, we have come to realize that fulfilling labor-based contract grading's antiracist potential entails sharing and promoting this form of assessment across and beyond our institution. Our department is in a unique position to influence our university's assessment ecology since we are responsible for three programs with university-wide reach: FYC, the writing center, and the writing across the curriculum (WAC) program. Our WAC program, in particular, is positioned to invite faculty from other disciplines both to learn about and to start incorporating labor-based contract grading in their writing-intentional courses. At minimum, our WAC program can invite faculty from other departments and colleges to interrogate their assessment practices and to take steps toward adopting assessments that foster greater equity for students, especially the students we serve at A&M-SA. Similarly, our department is positioned to extend the work and impact of labor-based contract grading beyond our institution through graduate instruction. Many of our graduate students are either preparing for careers in education or are already full-time secondary teachers, and incorporating labor-based grading as a topic in our pedagogy courses introduces our students to assessment practices that invite greater racial and social justice in the classroom. Insofar as graduate students transform their assessment practices and invite present and future colleagues to do the same, they are

contributing to a potential transformation of how teachers respond to and assess students at multiple levels of education. The use of labor-based contract grading across levels of education, we have learned, has the potential to foster small, but significant changes in assessment practices that can lead to larger and enduring systemic changes to the covert racism and violence currently structuring students' experiences with writing and assessment.

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