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Enabling Meaningful Labor: Narratives of Participation in a Grading Contract

by **Mathew Gomes**, Santa Clara University; **Bree Bellati**, Santa Clara University; **Mia Hope**, Santa Clara University; and **Alissa LaFerriere**, Santa Clara University

Grading contracts value labor and make it a central or sole determinant of grades. However, the labor of learning is not all the same; in writing courses, labor includes the work of producing writing, as well as the work of participation in class. This article, authored by a writing instructor and three former undergraduates, reflects on participation labor in a course that used a labor-based grading contract, Teaching Writing. We describe our attitudes and purposes going into the course, make observations about our labor during the class, and offer reflections on the impact of that labor after the class from our various subject positions: Gomes writes about assessing participation in Teaching Writing. Bellati describes how she was able to participate in a community of learners, Hope writes about developing skill around peer feedback, and LaFerriere describes how she was able to learn from peers and develop her knowledge of pedagogy. Our experiences suggest that participation labor in writing classes can be meaningful and that offering many structured options for participation can enable meaningful course engagements. Our narratives also suggest how experiences with contract grading can inform future teaching, learning, and professional activity.

Keywords: participation, meaningful, labor, grading contract, agency, SLAC

Grading contracts value labor. Labor involves the embodied and cognitive work of learning and may be “the most fundamental thing” teachers ask of students (Inoue, 2019, p. 78). Thus, one of the central features of grading contracts is that they create exchange value for labor, guaranteeing minimum grades that correspond to completion of the work of a writing course. This work often includes invention assignments, drafts, feedback, revisions, and other artifacts of writing, thereby valuing in student grades evidence of engagement in writing processes (Inoue, 2019; Litterio, 2016). And yet, the artifacts of writing processes only partially reflect the learning that happens in writing classrooms. Labor in writing classrooms is rich and involves behaviors like contributing to discussions, working with small groups of peers on activities, and providing peers with feedback. Labor in the classrooms that use grading contracts is multivalent and involves both the work associated with individual writing processes, as well as participation in a larger learning experience.

As a category of classroom labor, participation is not always well-defined or understood by instructors and students. Some instructors may imagine participation as consisting of only verbal contributions (Dirk, 2010). When writing instructors talk about participation, they often invoke ideas about assessment, community, embodiment, and technology (Banaji et al, 2019; Critel, 2012, 2019). For students, participation may be more about “making one’s presence known in approved ways” (Critel, 2012, p. 167). But what are those approved ways? Dirk (2010) indicates that even while writing classes may include a wider range of activities – group work, in-class writing, or peer feedback – students and instructors may not always view participation in the same ways, or find the same labor valuable. We discuss *participation* as the labor of sustaining engagements with course content and with peers, and which is (relatively) separate from the labor of producing writing.

Authors of this article include a writing instructor and three former undergraduate students. Our purpose is to offer narratives about the participation labor in a course that used a labor-based grading contract. Since our course, the trope of *meaningfulness* has emerged as a central quality of that labor. Meaningful labor may be an aim of some teachers using grading contracts. Inoue (2019), for example, writes that labor is meaningful when it contains elements of meaning, significance, or usefulness (p. 249). When described as a characteristic of writing assignments, meaningfulness also frequently involves dimensions of personal connection, predicated upon opportunities for engagement, transfer, and agency (Eodice et al., 2016, 2019, 2020). As a quality, meaningfulness may develop or even diminish over time as it is not a static or transcendent characteristic of experience. With these claims in mind, we each respond to the questions:

Within a writing-intensive English course that used a grading contract, what types of participation labor emerged as most meaningful and why?

In our narratives, we describe experiences with meaningful participation labor in the course, Teaching Writing. This course occurred during the Spring 2019 quarter at Santa Clara University, a small liberal arts college (SLAC). Described as an upper-division preparatory course for prospective teachers at all school levels and in all disciplines, Teaching Writing fulfilled requirements for English majors, students with minors in professional writing and urban education, as well as a core writing requirement for all undergraduates. Given this wide audience, Teaching Writing enrolled students with a range of disciplinary identities and with varying degrees of experience with grading contracts. In our narratives, we describe our attitudes and purposes going into the course, make observations about our labor during the class, and offer reflections on the impact of that labor after the class. Gomes writes about assessing participation in Teaching Writing, Bellati describes how she was able to participate in a community of learners, Hope writes about developing skill around peer feedback, and LaFerriere describes how they were able to learn from peers and develop their knowledge of pedagogy. Our narratives build upon a tradition of grading contract scholarship, in which student experience is a significant basis for understanding and validating contract pedagogies (see Inman & Powell, 2018; Inoue,

2012), and also address the need for student and instructor voices to contribute to understandings of participation in writing classrooms (Dirk, 2010).

Instructor Narrative: Labor and Participation in “Teaching Writing” (Gomes)

Mathew Gomes is an Assistant Professor of English and Director of Professional Writing at Santa Clara University and was the instructor for “Teaching Writing” in Spring 2019.

Before “Teaching Writing”: Promises and Problems of Student Agency in Past Courses with Grading Contracts

I have been teaching with hybrid- and labor-based grading contracts since 2009 and began when I was a teaching assistant (TA) at Fresno State. At that time, I taught in a first-year writing (FYW) program that used grading contracts programmatically (Inoue, 2009). Across the FYW program at Fresno State, instructors who taught the first of a two-semester “stretch” writing sequence used contracts. At the same time, I was also enrolled in several MA-level courses that included grading contracts. While I had never learned in courses that used grading contracts before, the combined experience of teaching and learning in environments that used grading contracts made me a convert. I adopted contracts and never looked back. In the first few years, I used a hybrid grading contract, similar to the one described by Danielwicz and Elbow (2009): When students completed basic participation and writing requirements, they received “B” grades. When I (and sometimes their peers) evaluated their writing as “exceeding expectations,” the contracts assigned higher grades. Over time, however, I have gravitated toward labor-based grading contracts, which outline the labor expectations corresponding to each grade outcome. In the few years preceding Teaching Writing, I used labor-based grading contracts exclusively, but I have used a grading contract in some form for most of my teaching career.

Like many instructors, I find grading contracts offer opportunities for students to enact meaningful agency. Other teachers who use contracts describe agency as a desired or observed characteristic of their classrooms (Consilio & Kennedy, 2019; Inoue, 2019; Medina & Walker, 2018; Shor, 2009). Opportunities for agency are most apparent around grade outcomes. Students ask: What grade should I work toward? I have also seen grading contracts encourage students to take creative risks with their writing because they knew their work would not be graded based on quality, but upon labor. For example, I have seen students produce research projects styled as videos, websites, or podcasts, and course reflections as poetry, even when alphabetic and academically conventional options were available.

Though my contracts enabled students to make choices about their writing, I struggled to enable similar choices around participation. I regularly expected successful students to exhibit the same participation behaviors as one another. My contracts often included compulsory attendance policies, and specified the maximum numbers of late, missing, or ignored assignments students could accrue for passing credit. Whether unilaterally or collaboratively generated, my classes would ultimately arrive at a set of standards for participatory labor, which were a prerequisite for passing grades.

Over time however, I found standardizing participation labor was misaligned with my purposes for using grading contracts. Generally, contracts enhanced the equity of my courses and created opportunities for agency, but participation standards contributed to neither. Stanback (2015) has observed that participatory standards of grading contracts elevate behavioral norms that create inequitable disadvantages predicated on physical and mental ability. Similarly, my participation standards communicated to students that participatory variance was exceptional and that I did not value different ways of engaging with the course. While I offered flexibility and would make exceptions for students on a case-by-case basis, I did not structure any options for students to engage with my courses in different ways. As a result, my participation policies privileged able-bodied and neurotypical students who sustained a steady level of physical health throughout the duration of a term and contributed in normative ways to my classes.

Standardizing participation also undercut opportunities for purposeful and meaningful engagements. In some cases, participation standards promoted a *perfunctory agency*. Sometimes in anonymous midterm feedback or course reflections, students shared how they felt compelled to contribute to discussions because it was required, or that they were competing with others to prove their participation was at or above course expectations. The participation standards discouraged active choices about when and how to direct participatory labor, instead promoting perfunctory engagements, some of which lacked significance and usefulness for students and for the class. In other cases, participation standards encouraged *withdrawal*. For example, my contracts which included compulsory attendance standards told students they would fail if they accrued too many absences. Inevitably some students would accrue the maximum number of absences or more, and after doing so, some would just stop working entirely. Sometimes students would formally withdraw from the course; more often, they would simply stop attending or laboring for the class, leading me to assign failing grades. Withdrawal was bad for the whole class--the class would lose out on the benefits of some students' participation labor, including the contributions they might add to future discussions about course content and the feedback they might have offered to their peers.

Teaching Writing: Assessing Participation Independently, Articulating Multiple Pathways Through the Course

Teaching Writing represents a recent milestone in ongoing efforts to revise participation assessments for my classes. For this class, I wanted students to make their participation labor meaningful and tried to communicate that I valued participation labor, even when it did not culminate in finished or polished pieces of writing. My choices were informed by Price (2011), who urges teachers to consider the potential significance of student presence for learning, writing that a “classroom’s infrastructure comprises not only its tables and chairs, its technologies, and its participants, but also the beliefs, discourses, attitudes, and interchanges that take place there” (p. 61). In general, I know student presence in my classes will contribute to class-wide discussions, deliberations about activities and assessments, small group activities, and other social exchanges. I know each class will have unique affordances based on the actual students: Someone will have experience with programming, which lets us discuss connections between writing and coding; someone else may have experience with marketing and be able to support others as they interpret quantitative survey results for research writing. The labor of sustained engagements with course content and with peers *is* the labor of learning.

To communicate the value of participation labor, I made participation an independent category in the grading contract for Teaching Writing, weighted equally with other course labors (Appendix A). This design gave students an opportunity to opt into participation credit, or opt out of participation, complete the writing assignments, and still pass the course. While instructors have occasionally expressed anxiety or worry that they will “lose” a class when students don’t attend or participate (see Shor, 1996, for an example), only several students in Teaching Writing opted out of participation, and even this did not happen immediately. This assessment structure helped communicate to students that labor was not simply the precondition for producing writing but was an independently meaningful dimension of their learning.

I also tried to enable more meaningful participation by encouraging student choices about the modes of participation labor they took up. I structured a range of opportunities and asked students to choose and fulfill a minimum threshold of these opportunities for participation credit, providing multiple pathways toward participation credit. Before the class began, I thought hard about the many ways I valued participation labor in dialogue with my learning objectives, reflection on previous courses, as well as writing research. For example, Anderson et al. (2015) demonstrated engagement in interactive writing processes and meaning-making tasks associated with measures of learning. I imagined moments when students might either engage with peers or with course content through writing. Ultimately, the participation opportunities I offered to students in Teaching Writing included attendance, but also included things like contributions to discussions, submitting discussion questions, presenting about their learning, and attending office hours. Early versions of the participation component included 13 engagement opportunities (Appendix B), and later revisions included 19 opportunities (Appendix C), which were developed with students enrolled in the class. These options were also developed, guided by the principle that students should have as many opportunities to engage or re-engage with the course, provided we could make meaningful connections between those practices, course content, and student purposes for enrolling.

During the course, students expressed participation in many ways. Students engaged in nearly all opportunities we ultimately developed (Appendix C). Notably, attendance was not compulsory but represented one of many engagement opportunities. In Teaching Writing, several students had lower attendance, some citing exhaustion, anxiety, trauma, and other personal or professional commitments. In previous courses, these students may have been discouraged from returning to class or continuing to contribute to the course. However, providing multiple structured opportunities for engagement allowed some students to re-engage with the course, especially through labor that could take place outside the classroom. By providing options for multiple engagement pathways, students were able to seek out meaningful alternatives to attendance and were not as likely to withdraw altogether from the course.

Similarly, I saw how providing multiple forms of participation labor could contribute to the equity of courses using grading contracts. Just as the use of a single language standard can have inequitable, and often racist outcomes, I had seen how a single set of participation standards exerted a normalizing pressure that privileged able-bodied, neurotypical students (see also Stanback, 2015). Reframing participation as a set of options signaled greater equity for students who struggled with physical and mental wellness. This revision created genuine opportunities to demonstrate sustained engagement with the class, without compromising their health. At the same time, the participation assessment signaled and amplified my pedagogical stance of flexibility, communicating to students that I was open and welcomed proposals for accommodations.

Achievable Thresholds, Sustainable Practices: Lessons From Teaching Writing

While the changes I made encouraged meaningful participation labor in Teaching Writing, the assessment was not perfect. During the course, we had to revise the attendance components of the assessment (Appendix C, #6-8). While attendance was not compulsory, we found it was quite valuable, in part because students learned from attending, and in part because they learned from the attendance of others. Therefore, the first participation assessment included one attendance milestone for attending “25 of 28 classes” (Appendix B).

Over time we found this milestone only credited students for attendance when they attended a very large proportion of classes and discouraged students who were not able to attend that many classes. We thought that students may be likely to continue attending if they received some participation credit in exchange for attending a smaller number of course sessions. Needing in any case to

revise the number of total classes, the class added two attendance milestones: one for attending a smaller number of sessions (Appendix C, #6) and another for attending all sessions (Appendix C, #8). From this revision, I learned that I could invite more participation by offering many achievable thresholds than through fewer hard-to-achieve thresholds. Since Teaching Writing, I have further revised versions of participation assessments to include more achievable participation opportunities. I have seen even more students develop deep and sustained engagement with subsequent courses.

I also learned that I still need to develop ways of making participation assessments pedagogically sustainable. At the end of the quarter, I found that I was not able to give credit for one of the participation opportunities: receiving endorsed comments from me on Eli Review (Appendix C, #15). Eli Review, which is a platform for facilitating peer feedback on writing, includes an option for users with “instructor” privileges to endorse “student” user comments. However, despite my desire to do so and belief in its value, I was unable to systematically “endorse” peer feedback. Thus, nobody received credit for this opportunity. The reason is simple: I could not make the time to follow through on this item. One lesson I learned here is that, while I found participation labor in Teaching Writing was more meaningful, it was not any simpler for me as an instructor than previous grading contracts. Implementing these revisions takes time as it requires more of my labor as an instructor to document instances of participation than to document participatory deviances. While I am inclined toward maximal representations of meaningful labor, I have learned I must only include opportunities that I am capable of managing, and which are compatible with my time and expertise.

Student Narrative: Building Communities of Learners (Bellati)

Bree Bellati graduated in Spring 2020 from Santa Clara University with a major in English and a focus in Professional Writing. When she took Teaching Writing, Bellati was a junior and was a consultant at the campus writing center. Since graduating, she has been teaching online at a learning center, a position which involves facilitating learning in online classroom spaces, grading and providing feedback on written assignments, and tutoring students on assignments.

Stress and Grief: Prior Experience with Participation

The process of working with and learning from other students was a feature of my undergraduate education that I found particularly valuable to my learning. Throughout undergrad, one of my central goals was to form and engage in communities of fellow learners in such a way that their respective insights and expertise could contribute to my own learning in the classroom and vice versa. I have often found I am able to learn more from hearing another student’s perspective on a topic than I do from listening to a professor’s traditional lecture on that topic. The benefit of creating classroom communities where students engage with each other is not lost on professors, who often structure these social exchanges between students as full-class conversations. Teachers attempt to encourage these conversations by incentivizing students to speak aloud, one at a time, in class in exchange for engagement credit. Thus, in many of my college courses, classroom engagement was a unidimensional requirement which could only be met by raising one’s hand and speaking aloud in class.

Yet this engagement assessment has caused me great stress and grief as a student who is wary of speaking up in public spaces. While I am comfortable speaking in small groups with other students, it becomes increasingly difficult to form meaningful communities when the only opportunity for peer engagement requires me to speak up during full-class discussions. Some days I find just sitting in a classroom with a large group of people to be nerve wracking, and the thought of drawing attention to myself and vocalizing my ideas to 40 other students seems like an unbearably vulnerable task. While I know I am still actively engaging with the material, being present and cognizant in class, the participation assessments in some courses do not acknowledge the fact that I can aptly engage with others and the material without verbally demonstrating this in front of the entire class. The result of such a strictly full-class participation requirement is such that I often find it challenging to engage in a community of learners to the degree I would like.

During my time at SCU, I was in several courses that used hybrid- and labor-based grading contracts including one with Gomes. Classes that used grading contracts had different approaches to participation. In my previous courses with Gomes, I worried the contract might engender the same problems I had experienced with previous classes. I worried that the contract would require more labor to get an “A” and would force me to talk in every class or participate frequently in ways I wasn’t comfortable with. I heard this concern initially echoed by students around me in Teaching Writing. However, having completed a previous course with Gomes, I found the explicit focus on participation in his grading contract gave me more opportunities to engage in a variety of ways. Therefore, going into Teaching Writing, I felt comfortable about how I would participate in a community of learners.

Engaging with Others Through Feedback and Reading

Unlike previous experiences with participation assessment, the labor-based grading contract in Teaching Writing allowed me to engage meaningfully in the course in a variety of ways, making course engagement less anxiety-provoking and more enjoyable. For example, peer feedback in particular was a favored engagement activity for me, as it allowed me to directly engage with my fellow students and their work and receive credit for collaborating with others. Outside of my classes, I have been working as a writing consultant at our university’s writing center since Fall 2018. Because of this, I was particularly comfortable working with other

students one-on-one and was familiar with the process of reading others' writing and providing suggestions for revision. In turn, I felt confident that I could contribute helpful feedback to my classmates by drawing upon my tutoring experiences.

Throughout Teaching Writing, I consistently provided my peers with a higher-than-average volume of peer feedback. My peers also said my feedback was helpful, and several indicated they used my revision suggestions and expanded upon these recommendations with their own ideas to revise their writing. Due to my sense of expertise in this area, peer review was an avenue through which I could collaborate with classmates while also refining skills I had established before this class and have continued to use after. This important "opportunity to synthesize or analyze prior ... experience" (Eodice et al., 2016, p. 88) allowed me to know that the work I was doing in class was drawing and building upon my expertise gained from my tutoring job prior to and outside of this class. Thus, peer feedback was a key mode of participation that allowed me to comfortably form a sense of community with my peers through interpersonal engagement with them and their writing.

Online reading responses were another meaningful activity for me as they allowed me to see my classmates' responses to the texts that we were reading and to gain new insights about a given text which I could not have reached on my own. Reading another student's reflection allowed me to return to a text and engage with it in new ways, often by reading it in a different light. For example, one reading response topic focused on Peter Elbow's (1981) cut-and-paste revision strategy for writing, described in his book, *Writing with Power*. This writing strategy suggests (a) printing out your writing, (b) cutting your physical paper into various pieces, and then (c) moving these pieces around to see the organization of the writing in various ways. My reading response revealed my initial hesitation, and I wrote, "When I read Elbow's article on it, I thought it was an interesting idea, but wasn't sure how practical or helpful it would be in reality." When other students' online responses to the cut-and-paste strategy were projected in class, I was able to see their thoughts surrounding this tactic as well. Some students appreciated the physicality of the task, which required them to move around the pieces of paper with their hands. One student who preferred to learn visually said it was helpful to see the different pieces of their paper on the table in front of them, and to be able to reorganize them visually, rather than just mentally conceptualizing the reorganization of their writing. Before reading this response, it did not occur to me how helpful this revision strategy would be for those who appreciate visual and physical activities in their writing processes. Working as a tutor at our university's writing center, I immediately thought of how I could apply this revision strategy to help writing clients who preferred a visual element to their learning.

Eodice et al. (2016) show that, for students, "meaningful writing projects provid[e] an opportunity to engage with instructors, peers, and community members, as well as with the content and processes of [students'] writing and learning" (p. 56). Similarly, I found the activity of engaging with my peers and their writing meaningful, no matter what the specific writing assignment was. In my experience, the ability to write responses that were shared with my peers, along with the opportunity to read and learn from the writing of my peers, was deeply rewarding because I was able to gain new insights from interacting with my peers, and to realize how such insights would transfer to my work after and outside of this class.

Since Teaching Writing: Amplifying Digital Contributions

Overall, the engagement component of the labor-based grading contract in Teaching Writing has shaped how I structure engagement assessment in my own classes. As a current educator, I attempt to implement a variety of options for student engagement, in order to create opportunities for students to participate in a community of learners themselves, and in ways that most fully benefit them.

Since Teaching Writing, I have facilitated online learning classes. While these environments have had set expectations for how learners can participate, I have tried to highlight multiple opportunities for them to engage. For example, some primary-aged learners are hesitant or reluctant to speak up in my online classes. I encourage these learners to use the chat to share their thoughts, and then make it a point to read their responses aloud in class myself. In my own case, I know that my learning from other students and contributing to their learning was strengthened by engagement opportunities that encouraged me to share my thoughts despite my fear of public speaking. By inviting learners to participate in the chat and reading their responses out loud, I am able to help these participants' have their good ideas heard even when they don't necessarily want to say them out loud. Given my own experience and the ways in which I felt free to engage in Teaching Writing, it seems there is an importance in broadening the parameters of what counts as student engagement beyond just traditional in-class conversation, especially in an age when digital resources allow us such opportunity to do so.

Student Narrative: Agency and the Development of Expertise in Providing Feedback (Hope)

Mia Hope graduated in Winter 2020 from Santa Clara University and was a junior in the English Department on the Professional Writing track and writing center consultant. Since graduating, she has been working as a New Product Development Coordinator. This role involves creating in-depth pitches for new products, giving feedback on other pitches, and applying feedback to create the best products possible.

Expertise in Professional Writing

As an English major with a focus in professional writing, I took a variety of courses with a focus in writing studies and pedagogy before I enrolled in Teaching Writing. In those courses, I had honed reading strategies for academic texts and was already familiar with many disciplinary concepts. In some courses, I had even read and analyzed some of the same articles as we did in Teaching Writing. My knowledge of peer feedback from previous English courses and my background as a tutor at the on-campus writing center is a perfect example of my familiarity with discourses of writing pedagogy. Early in the class, when Gomes asked which of the students were familiar with peer review, only English majors raised their hands. Like previous English courses, Teaching Writing consisted of some English majors, but most students had backgrounds in other disciplines.

My experiences and skills as an English major gave me a definite advantage in approaching course content. In completing peer review assignments for example, I didn't need to figure out what a good peer review was. Despite the familiarity, I appreciate how the participation assessment required me to put time and effort into many assignments, even though in some classes my abilities as an English major might otherwise allow me to succeed with less work. The participation assessment encouraged me to think critically about teaching writing from angles I want to approach and tapped into my own agency as a student. Moreover, the engagement model allowed me to make decisions in what I focused my attention on, which has allowed me to form critical connections between the class and the world.

Peer Feedback and New Genres

In Teaching Writing, I focused my participation labor on peer feedback. My ability and willingness to write in-depth feedback for peers stemmed from my familiarity with peer review and from my passion for helping others with their writing. My previously developed expertise in peer review allowed it to become an area in which I helped my classmates who were not as familiar with the skill to excel. Peer review was an area that I could help others while also helping myself: By leaving in-depth feedback for my peers, I further developed my own skills in giving feedback. Moreover, I found the act of helping others through peer review to be personally empowering, making this pertinent to my life outside of academics as well. This mindset is reflected in my peer reviews. On each peer review, I left lengthy and detailed feedback that targeted areas I felt had room for improvement, but I was careful to maintain a positive attitude to affirm each writer's skill and make them confident in their own work. Peer feedback was meaningful for me because it built upon my past expertise from English major coursework and from my role as a writing tutor.

I also found peer feedback meaningful because it allowed me to encounter new genres of writing. Prior to Teaching Writing, the majority of my peer review experience involved traditional research essays, and I was rarely exposed to other genres of writing as a writing tutor. However, Teaching Writing introduced me to new genres of writing, including a pedagogical intervention proposal and a teaching philosophy statement. Eodice et al. (2016) write that "newness" is a general quality of writing assignments students found meaningful, and can include new subjects, genres, forms of engagement, or opportunities to connect (p. 83). In Teaching Writing, encountering new genres during peer review challenged my skills. I also appreciated giving feedback on different responses to assignments. Though every peer feedback stemmed from the same assignment prompt, every student wrote on their own unique topic, making each peer feedback assignment new for me as their reviewer.

My choice to focus on peer review in this course has been applicable to my career in new product development after college. My current role involves creating and pitching well-developed product proposals, and then collaborating with the rest of my team's ideas to decide which ideas to keep. Additionally, we constantly keep a careful eye on current products to find areas of improvement. So, it is crucial to give carefully crafted, clear, and effective feedback. However, as a new product developer, I don't give feedback on essays. Teaching Writing offered an experience giving feedback to new genres and to proposals that transferred to my professional roles.

Choices and Fairness

Participation in Teaching Writing also felt fair to me. My choice to focus on peer review during this class reflected my non-academic goals, and my classmates had the opportunity to make a similar choice, making the engagement model fair and applicable to all. The participation assessment was also meaningful because it made the course fairer and more interesting to me: I benefited from this system because it allowed me to focus my participation in the class on peer feedback. I chose to focus my time here because it was an area I was good at and one that was personally applicable to my other studies and non-academic life. If I had been required to find meaning and devote time in an area that was neither of those things, I would not have found the participation assessment fair. For instance, I decided not to fulfill an engagement opportunity that required me to submit a certain number of discussion questions per reading. I did not find this activity meaningful, as it did not align with my academic and future professional interests. However, I was still able to succeed in the class because I focused my attention on peer review. Because of my ability to choose areas in the course to engage, I find the model to be fairer: It allows each student to devote their time and apply expertise in areas of their choice.

Though peer feedback was meaningful for me, it may have been a challenge for others. Instead of unfairly punishing students' grades for their lack of outside knowledge on peer feedback, students had the opportunity to shine elsewhere. This ability to take agency and choose areas to engage took detrimental stress away from other assignments, thereby allowing the goal of critical thinking to be at the forefront.

Student Narrative: Choosing to Attend and Developing Knowledge About Teaching (LaFerriere)

Alissa LaFerriere is a senior at Santa Clara University studying mathematics, with minors in urban education and computer science. At the time of the course, LaFerriere was a sophomore who had taken previous classes about teaching. She has worked as a grader for the math department, and since Teaching Writing has taught STEAM to 6-8th grade students in both online and in-person formats. LaFerriere plans to pursue a master's degree in education and a teaching credential to teach high-school math.

Excitement and Fears Going into the Class

I chose to enroll in Teaching Writing because it fulfilled a requirement for my education minor and because I wanted to learn about different pedagogical theories mentioned in the course description. I had taken other education courses in the past, but those courses focused on the psychological and sociological aspects of teaching rather than different theories of teaching. I wanted to learn about these different theories to apply them to math pedagogy as I plan to be a math teacher in the future. I also thought this class would be beneficial to learn from others with diverse backgrounds and experiences as I hoped my peers would contribute to my ideas about teaching and learning.

However, in addition to my excitement going into the class, I also came in with a lot of concerns. This was my first upper division English course, so I was worried that the students in the class would be English majors or similar majors with significant writing experience. This concerned me because, as a math major, I had not had much experience writing lengthy papers or projects for college classes. I feared I was going into the class at a disadvantage, and I worried about how that would affect my grade and my overall experience of the class. This was my first class with a labor-based grading contract, so I did not know what to expect.

Less Anxiety Around Writing

Once Gomes explained how the course grading contract worked in our first class session, the fears I had going into the class were alleviated. I felt like I had much more control over my grade and no longer felt at a disadvantage.

The labor-based grading model took away the pressure I was feeling and allowed me to enjoy the writing process without fear of a bad grade looming over my head. I had worried that the quality of my writing would not meet an English instructor's expectations. However, I was able to focus on the feedback I was given to better myself as a writer instead of thinking it was too late and my grade was set. I was also able to write what I wanted, not what I thought would earn me the best grade based on the professor's opinion. For example, I was able to write about something I am passionate about, the best ways to provide math students with feedback to help them learn. It was very useful to have the opportunity to develop my ideas about math pedagogy and connect the concepts from the class to my future career in teaching math. The labor-based grading model allowed me to feel invested and comfortable with the grading process since I felt my goals and needs were being valued.

Participation Choices During the Class

Within the labor-based grading model, the participation component also provided opportunities for choices. This is one of the few classes I have taken where in-class attendance and speaking in class are not the only way to show participation. We were able to engage with the course through opportunities for participation both inside and outside of the walls of the classroom. This element helped students participate in the ways they find the most meaningful. I was able to test out both options and chose the opportunities I found the most interesting and valuable. In other classes, when I have had a difficult time seeing the value in a task, I have struggled to complete it and didn't take away much from the experience. In this class, I was able to pursue my own notion of success by working toward practices and end products that were meaningful to me and that I thought would benefit me the most on my path to becoming a teacher. Thus, I got more out of participation experiences in Teaching Writing than some other courses. By choosing ways of engaging with the class, I was able to play a more active role in my education and feel more engaged with the class material.

I found value in participating both inside and outside of class. Having the opportunity to participate outside the walls of the class took away the stress of always needing to be in class no matter my current health situation. Whether it be mental health or physical health, I didn't feel the requirement to come to class sick that I feel in other classes that base your participation grade solely on actions taken in the classroom. In addition, while I feel comfortable talking a lot in class, I learned many of my classmates don't feel the same way. In a discussion, I heard about my classmates' anxiety of talking in class and stress that they weren't talking enough to show they were engaged. They preferred to think about their response to a question and post it in a discussion board that evening.

This was a more meaningful and comfortable mode of engagement as they felt they had more to add after this deliberation. I learned a lot from that discussion that will help me be a better teacher. I also gained more appreciation for the labor-based model in Teaching Writing that gave students opportunities for multiple forms of engagement.

As someone who is very comfortable with speaking in class and who lives on campus, I found both convenience and value in communicating with peers in person rather than over email or similar forms of communication. I found it easier to communicate effectively face to face and a more engaging way to learn from others. When class discussions take place over email or discussion board, I am not able to gauge peers' reactions or ask all the questions I want to. I am less able to see their emotional responses to my questions, hear their tone of voice, or experience other cues that help me understand their perspective and follow up in the moment. Thus, the main way I fulfilled the participation requirement was through class discussions.

I found discussions meaningful because I was able to transfer in past knowledge from other classes as well as learn from what my classmates brought to discussions. Students in Eodice et al. (2016) found writing meaningful when they could make personal connections through transfer of previous experiences. Similarly, I found discussions about pedagogy meaningful. In class we discussed the articles we read about pedagogy. Since I had taken multiple other classes on teaching, I felt as though I had something meaningful to add to class discussions. I was able to transfer in my knowledge on the subject, and that personal connection made the discussions very enjoyable. I also appreciated discussions because I was able to hear about others' experiences in school that could help me become a better teacher in the future, which was one of my reasons for taking the class. For example, one of my favorite readings for class was a chapter of *Mad at School* by Margaret Price (2011). The chapter discusses the importance of making sure the classroom is an accessible place for all students. In our discussion on the chapter, my classmates talked about times where their teachers made the classroom accessible and what their teachers could have done to increase accessibility. This is when I learned some classmates had anxiety surrounding talking in class. Their emotional responses, tone of voice, and other cues helped me understand the reasons why they struggle to contribute to class discussions involving the entire class. The discussion of Price's chapter allowed me to recognize the agency and accessibility the participation model supported in Teaching Writing.

How I Approach New Classes and Teaching Opportunities

The labor-based model of this class has changed how I approach new classes I am enrolled in and teaching opportunities. Having the opportunity to explore different ways of engaging with the class has allowed me to discover what I find meaningful. It is so easy to just fall into the routine of just doing what a class requires of you. This is not active learning. Teaching Writing made me make choices about how I participated, which helped me find what motivates me as a student. For example, Teaching Writing made me realize that I value in-class discussions and encouraged me to really engage with others in class when we have opportunities for discussion. I can bring this insight into future classes and make sure I am getting the most out of my education.

My experiences with labor-based grading contracts can also provide a basis for connections to future classes about teaching. I have already found some connections. Right after taking Teaching Writing, I took a class called Psychology of Education. In this class we discussed cognitive, social, and affective factors that influence how students learn. So many of the ideas we discussed in that class were implemented in this labor-based grading model. For example, one idea we talked about in class discussions was giving students a choice (Kohn, 1993). If students get to choose what activities they do, they feel like they have more of a say in their education and their opinions matter. Thus, they are more likely to choose what motivates them and engage more with the material. This was my experience with the labor-based grading contract in Teaching Writing, and the course helped me better understand why I enjoyed the model so much.

The idea of choice has already affected how I teach. I recently tried to motivate 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students enrolled in a problem-based Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math (STEAM) program by giving them choices about how to engage with activities. All the lessons took place over Zoom due to the pandemic, and the program had no grades. Given these obstacles, I knew it would be difficult to keep my students motivated. Thus, I used aspects from the labor-based grading model in Teaching Writing to keep them engaged. For example, I made sure every assignment included choice. They got to choose how to complete a challenge and how to share the work with the class. I wanted these choices to help students be active participants in their learning and keep them motivated, so they wouldn't feel as forced into activities and could participate in ways they felt comfortable. Some students chose to present their work in class, others had me look at what they had done, while others discussed their work in the chat. I adapted what I learned about the importance of creating different ways for students to participate however they were most comfortable. I did this by allowing students to keep their camera off and participate in the chat instead of speaking if they wished. This gave students the opportunity to share their thoughts that we otherwise would not have heard. In future teaching, I hope to continue to explore how the choice and motivation that I experienced with the labor-based grading contract in Teaching Writing can help me to become a better teacher.

Conclusion

While our experiences with grading contracts are certainly not universal, they do reflect one principle of labor-based grading

contracts: that labor powers learning. Learning in our course was not confined to the writing processes of course assignments, but also involved participation in the course and engagement with its content. Underscoring the central importance of labor in courses with labor-based grading contracts, we conclude with several modest assertions that instructors using grading contracts might consider, especially as they design participation opportunities.

Participation Labor Can Be Meaningful

In our course with a labor-based grading contract, participation labor was itself meaningful, independent of the writing that happened for the course. Bellati, Hope, and LaFerriere found participation labor meaningful for a range of reasons. Both Bellati and LaFerriere identified engaging with peers as a major objective of their college education and found participation labor provided opportunities to engage with their peers. Hope found her participation labor meaningful because she was able to build upon expertise in professional writing and peer feedback, while encountering new genres and types of writing. LaFerriere was able to reflect upon why certain types of participation worked well for her. As the instructor of Teaching Writing, Gomes also found participation labor meaningful because it supported learning, especially learning not apparent directly through writing assignments. Thus, we think classes using grading contracts might reflect closely on the nature of participatory labor, the varieties of available activity, because these practices may contribute to meaningful learning at least as much as the writing students do in courses using grading contracts.

Structured Options for Participation Labor Can Enable Meaningful Agency

Just as grading contracts may offer opportunity for writerly agency by focusing on labor of writing rather than qualities of writing, they may also offer opportunities for participatory agency. In Teaching Writing, the labor-based grading contract structured an environment that enabled students to make meaningful choices about participation, rather than meet a common behavioral standard. Bellati, Hope, and LaFerriere all found this dimension of choice meaningful, but for different reasons. Some, such as LaFerriere, tried out different modes of participation, both in class and out of class. Some, such as Bellati, found having participation options alleviated the stress associated with performing participation in front of the whole class. As instructor, Gomes found participation options led to less perfunctory agency and withdrawal and, instead, invited not only choices about labor, but also options to re-engage with the course. We encourage instructors using grading contracts to consider how they might enable participatory agency by offering larger numbers of achievable thresholds, rather than fewer numbers of rigorous thresholds.

Experiences With Grading Contracts Can Inform Future Teaching and Learning

One latent theme of our narratives is that, for some of us, experiences with grading contracts as students informed later pedagogical decisions we made as instructors. Gomes notes how their early experiences using grading contracts as a teacher in a FYW program and as a graduate student has contributed to more than a decade of future contract use. For Bellati and LaFerriere, experiences with contracts contributed to their development of engagement options for learners participating in online courses. In short, our experiences with grading contracts have informed how we teach others and, especially, how we imagine alternative modes of engagement. Grading contracts have affected our pedagogical imaginations, which has been especially important as the COVID-19 pandemic has asked us to confront how to invite engagement in online learning. We therefore encourage all instructors using contracts to invite students to reflect on the labor of their learning, using assessment artifacts like the participation assessment described in this article (Appendix C) or like “labor logs” (Inoue, 2019), and suggest that such reflection may be especially valuable and informative for future teachers as they develop participation opportunities.

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Appendix A Graded Activities and Labor-Based Grading Contract

Graded Activities

There are eight (8) activities which will contribute to your course grade.

1. Engage meaningfully in the course, with shared responsibility for the learning environment of the course (See Engagement Opportunities and Policies)
2. Complete 5 of 8 reading responses, in which you will write to learn more about the readings, posted on-time (11:59pm on Sundays)
3. Complete 5 of 6 peer feedback activities, by responding to 2 other students, posted on time (by 11:59pm on Tuesdays).
4. Submit 7 of 9 drafts of formal writing projects submitted on time, by 11:59pm on Fridays at 11:59pm
 - Pedagogical Issue: Locate, Propose, Draft, Draft 2,
 - Pedagogical Resource: Proposal, Draft, Revision
5. Compose and revise (in response to feedback) a synthesis of research pertaining to teaching writing, submitted by 11:59pm on Friday, June 7.
6. Compose and revise (in response to feedback) a resource to support the locally-adaptation of teaching writing, submitted by 11:59pm on Friday, June 7.
7. Compose and revise (in response to feedback) a philosophy of just teaching and learning, based upon your engagement with scholarship and with a sustained inquiry.
8. Participate in two (2) writing panels

Labor-Based Grading Contract

This course will be graded according to a labor-based grading contract. You will receive full credit for the above activities when you completely address and make a genuine effort to fulfill evaluative criteria. Therefore, your grade will correspond to the following scheme:

Final Grade	Labor Requirement
A	Completely fulfill all 8 graded activities
A-	Fulfill the equivalent of 7 graded activities, at least 6 completely fulfilled
B+	Fulfill the equivalent of 6 graded activities, at least 5 completely fulfilled
B	Fulfill the equivalent of 5 graded activities, at least 4 completely fulfilled
B-	Fulfill the equivalent of 4 graded activities, at least 3 completely fulfilled

C+	Fulfill the equivalent of 3 graded activities, at least 2 completely fulfilled
C	Fulfill the equivalent of 2 graded activities, at least 1 completely fulfilled
C-	Completely fulfill 1 graded activity

Lower grades will result from failure to completely fulfill any graded activities. I will contact you individually if you are on track for a grade lower than a C-.

Appendix B Participation (“Engagement”) Behaviors, Week 1

You will receive credit for engagement when you submit all revised work no later than 11:59pm on Friday, June 7, and complete 8 of the following 13 engagement opportunities. More engagement opportunities will become available as the quarter progresses.

1. Submit and revise if necessary three (3) discussion questions on eight (8) occasions in preparation for class. Questions are due by 11:59pm on the Sunday, Tuesday, or Thursday immediately prior to class meeting.
2. Attend 25 of 28 class sessions, arriving on time and missing no more than 3 classes.
3. Offer peers a substantial quantity of peer feedback, as measured relative to average comment length (Eli).
4. Offer peers a substantial quantity of peer feedback, as measured relative to average word count (Eli).
5. Offer peers high quality feedback, by maintaining a Helpfulness rating above 4.0 on Eli.
6. Offer peers high quality feedback, by receiving some instructor-endorsed comments on Eli.
7. Contribute to class discussions regularly (in at least 20 class sessions).
8. Read all assigned texts before arriving in class.
9. Attend appointments during my office hours on at least 2 occasions.
10. Attend an appointment at the HUB for select graded activities (#4-7) and submit a follow-up memo about the session’s contributions to your writing process.
11. Complete revision plan assignments on Eli.
12. Present your pedagogical resource to support the locally-adaptation of teaching writing during Week 8 and Week 9.
13. Identify and propose uses for cultural artifacts, texts, or phenomena, which pertain to our course. Send your proposals to me via email.

Appendix C Participation (“Engagement”) Behaviors, Week 10

You will receive credit for engagement when you submit all revised work no later than 11:59pm on Friday, June 7, and complete 8 of the following 15 engagement opportunities. More engagement opportunities will become available as the quarter progresses.

Reading and Discussion Questions

1. Submit and revise if necessary three (3) discussion questions on five (5) occasions in preparation for class. Questions are due by 11:59pm on the Sunday, Tuesday, or Thursday immediately prior to class meeting.
2. Submit and revise if necessary three (3) discussion questions on eight (8) occasions in preparation for class. Questions are due by 11:59pm on the Sunday, Tuesday, or Thursday immediately prior to class meeting.
3. Read all assigned texts before arriving in class.
4. Participate in an additional (beyond 1) Good Idea About Writing panel.
5. Complete more than 5 Reading Response assignments (one milestone for each additional reading response submission).

Attendance and In-Class Participation

1. Attend **10** of 25 class sessions, arriving on time.
2. Attend **20** of 25 class sessions, arriving on time.
3. Attend **25** of 25 class sessions, arriving on time and missing no classes.

4. Contribute to class discussions regularly (in at least 20 class sessions).
5. Present your pedagogical resource to support the locally-adaptation of teaching writing during Week 8 and Week 9.

Peer Feedback

1. Offer peers a substantial quantity of peer feedback, as measured relative to average final comment length (Eli).
2. Offer peers a substantial quantity of peer feedback, as measured relative to average total word count (Eli).
3. Offers peers a substantial quantity of peer feedback, as measured by ratio of comments given to comments received (Eli).
4. Offer peers high quality feedback, by maintaining a Helpfulness rating above 4.0 on Eli.
5. Offer peers high quality feedback, by receiving some instructor-endorsed comments on Eli.

Out of Class Engagement

1. Attend appointments during my office hours on at least 2 occasions.
2. Attend an appointment at the HUB for select graded activities (#4-7) and submit a follow-up memo about the session's contributions to your writing process.
3. Complete revision plan assignments on Eli.
4. Identify and propose uses for cultural artifacts, texts, or phenomena, which pertain to our course. Send your proposals to me via email.

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