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Stories About Grading Contracts, or How Do I Like Through the Violence I've Done?

by Asao B. Inoue, Arizona State University

When I thought about how to introduce this special issue on grading contracts in writing classrooms, I thought what would be most useful or interesting or surprising or unusual? What might grab your attention as a journal reader? What might help readers who haven't considered contracts listen and consider moving away from what they've been doing up to this point? What could I say here that might engage those readers who already use grading contracts? How might I also engage that audience?

What I'm trying to avoid in this introduction is rehearsing the ideas that the fine pieces in this special issue already cover in some way. So I won't give you a history of contracts. Cowan does that. I won't discuss issues that I think grading contracts tackle head-on, like fairness, which Reardon and Guardado-Menjivar approach. I won't discuss the things that contracts afford in writing classrooms, like risk taking and building confidence and agency in writers, since several pieces here do that work, such as Tinoco's, Mallette's, and Kryger's. I won't discuss the opportunity it has offered some to understand often hidden aspects of their classrooms, like participation, in nuanced ways. Gomes, Bellati, Hope, and LaFerriere do that. I've also wrestled with many of these aspects of contracts elsewhere (Inoue, 2019). I won't discuss the ways contracts might be useful in online writing courses; Stuckey, Erdem, and Waggoner do this from a programmatic standpoint. And I won't discuss in detail the ways contracts can afford critical feedback and different kinds of discussion from feedback. Wood does that work.

What's left for me is to tell a few stories from my own grading contract classrooms that the pieces in this issue make me think about, reflect upon, and perhaps reconsider. So I wish to tell a few stories about my classrooms that used grading contracts of various kinds and, in the process, ask a few questions that might help others keep thinking about the limitations and affordances of their classroom's grading ecologies.

Beginnings and the Risks of Liking

I was in the middle of my Ph.D. at Washington State University, and I got a letter from Peter Elbow. I'd recently submitted a manuscript to the journal *Assessing Writing*, and one of the blind reviewers was Peter. He didn't send the letter to me, the editors did. But Peter signed his review, said he didn't mind revealing himself as a reviewer. He put his phone number next to his name and asked me to call him.

His review of my manuscript was long and complimentary in many places. He saw the potential, saw through my early rawness as a new scholar trying to say something. The manuscript had just been accepted, in part because of Peter's review. I was excited about the publication, and equally excited that such an academic rockstar as Peter Elbow wanted to talk to me and thought my article was worth so much of his time.

His words were kind and soft, but pointed and generative for me. They didn't suggest what should be in the draft as much as what I could do when revising it. He was thinking first of me as a writer, not the draft as a piece of writing. At one point, he said to read over my draft again, pause after each paragraph, and write a few words next to them that summarize what I'm saying there. It was a process that would create for me a reverse outline of my draft. It would show me how I'd organized the original draft and likely suggest how it might change. He felt some of my sections might be moved around but didn't tell me where things should go. Instead, he focused on the work he thought I could do as a writer to figure out how to reorganize the draft in my own way. His feedback risked not telling me how to rewrite the draft, how to reorganize it, in favor of honoring my labor as a writer. He led with labor. Now, I realize that it is a similar kind of relationship between writer and reader that I have tried to create in my own classroom grading ecologies through the use of grading contracts.

Ten years earlier when I was starting graduate school for my M.A. at Oregon State, I asked my professor, Chris Anderson, who was also the director of composition, how I might prepare to be a good teacher and grad student in the program. It was the summer before I started and would be a teaching assistant teaching first year writing courses. Chris said to read Peter's book, *Writing Without Teachers* (Elbow, 1973). So that summer as I worked a graveyard shift at a Chevron gas station in downtown Corvallis, I read the book. There were long periods of sitting around and waiting in the garage. On a typical night, I served maybe a dozen cars. Often, I'd go 30 minutes or more between cars. I had time to read. So I read slowly, ruminating over each page, pausing to write often. It was a very meaningful experience. It was all I wanted to do, still is.

I've been very fortunate in my life to have several pure writing experiences, ones where the ends and means were the same, where the thing I was writing was not the goal, instead the act of writing was. This was the first one. I read and wrote because I was trying

to read and write--that's it. I can remember feeling engaged, excited, and confident, willing to risk things, needing to say things in my writing. I remember feeling for the first time like a real writer in between pumping gas and wiping windshields. I imagined this must be what writers feel like when they write. I've always wanted to give this kind of experience to my students. Writing for writing's sake, languaging in the middle of your life, all the while producing writing and confidence and engagement and joy. These are the real things that last after a class is over, after grades and paper topics are forgotten, the ironic leftovers of classroom labors. What are the teachable feelings of goodness and badness that linger or stay with a person, I wonder? How do we make more of those in our writing classrooms?

When Peter asked me at the end of his review of my article to call him, I was eager. I couldn't wait. On the phone, he told me that he had an idea for me, felt it agreed well with what I was proposing in the article, which ended up being, "Community-Based Assessment Pedagogy" (Inoue, 2005). The article's idea was that, in writing classrooms, we can design the learning environment around cycles of student-driven rubric creation, assessment, and reflection activities on the rubric and assessments that students do on each other's drafts. Teaching assessment, I argued, teaches writing. I used Guba and Lincoln's (1989) "fourth generation evaluation" model that was getting some traction elsewhere by folks like Bob Broad (2003) in his dynamic criteria mapping process.

I thought finding ways to design pedagogy as assessment, to help students learn how to assess, was good writing pedagogy. I was taking my cues from Brian Huot's (2002) recent work *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment*, in which he argues that students must learn to self-assess in the exchanges of evaluation that happen between student and teacher. I agreed. I still think this is a good idea, but very difficult to do well if you're grading students' performances, grading drafts, revisions, feedback, and reflections. It's difficult to learn how to judge when you are being judged and ranked by your judging, and what you think about that judging. How can you have an honest dialogue with a student about how they are judging a draft if you hold the keys to judgement through your grading? I see this so clearly now.

In the phone call, Peter suggested I use a grading contract. He was a few years away from publishing more formally his hybrid grading contract with Jane Danielewicz, one that contracted for a default grade of B in a course if a student met minimum thresholds of behavior in a classroom, regardless of what the teacher thought of that student's work (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009). Higher grades depended on quality judgements determined by the teacher. Peter had actually suggested similar kinds of grading contracts several years earlier (Elbow, 1993, 1997), so he'd been using and thinking about grading contracts for some time.

"If it's okay," Peter said in his light and delicate voice, "I'll send you a copy of my contract. I think you'll find that it could work really well with your pedagogy."

Of course, I knew about contracts, knew of Peter's past articles that mention them. I had loved his article on "liking" students' writing that mentioned contracts (Elbow, 1993), but I didn't see the importance of that part of the article yet. I didn't understand what contracts do to everything in a classroom, especially the relationship between student and teacher, and between students and their own writing (both the practices and the products). I remember reading right past the small section on contracts in the article (Elbow, 1993, pp. 195-196). In my article (the one Peter reviewed), I say explicitly that I'm not promoting a grading contract, even though I eliminate grades on drafts (Inoue, 2005, pp. 210-211). What was I so afraid of?

In the liking article, Peter brings up contracts at their midpoint, and it ends his argument for less ranking and grading and more evaluation in writing classrooms. Like most writing teachers, I agreed and hated grading. I knew it was not good for students, knew as Peter says in the article, that it tends to make students just follow and obey our evaluations of their writing for a better grade (Elbow, 1993, p. 196). That's not learning how to enact literacy in agentive and critical ways. In my own article, I also make a short argument against grades (Inoue, 2005, pp. 208-213). It's probably why Peter was interested in talking to me. He knew if I just gave contracts a chance, they may work as well or better than my method.

Why was I not ready to take the real risks that Peter was offering? Perhaps it was steps. We all start somewhere. We have to take our journeys as teachers, as judges, as readers. My journey toward labor-based grading contracts required that I first think about liking as a risky reading and language act.

Peter's whole liking article is wise and brilliant, but it's his offering of contracts that I see now as the real gold for a teacher looking to do the things that Peter and so many writing teachers look to do. We want to help students with their languaging, build environments with them that grow their own loving of and confidence in their writing and themselves. We want to do the heavy work of evaluating writing with students, not to them. We want to help them figure out how to judge their own words in critical and self-compassionate ways. We want them to see the way language works on us and how we work on it simultaneously. We also know that liking ourselves and our languaging is vital to our literacy journeys.

And so in my first reading, I gravitated to the second half of the article. There Peter talks elegantly about liking students' writing first. Near the end, he sums up five hypotheses that I still find revolutionary if we really could do them in our classes:

- It's not improvement that leads to liking, but rather liking that leads to improvement.
- It's the mark of good writers to like their writing.
- Liking is not the same as evaluating. We can often criticize something better when we like it.
- We learn to like our writing when we have a respected reader who likes it.
- Therefore, it's the mark of good teachers to like students and their writing. (Elbow, 1993, p. 201)

What makes these ideas about liking students' writing revolutionary for me today is that they should lead us to not just acknowledging things like "students' rights to their own languages," or multilingual expressions, or valuing code-meshed Black Englishes in classrooms, but building assessment structures--structures of judgement--that let such languaging exist and be valued in our classrooms, for real. How is a language or expression valued really? Through the ways judgements circulate around it. Grading dictates much of that circulation and the nature of those judgments.

What Peter was trying to show me in his own way was that contracts can cultivate assessment ecologies that both value and not punish such languaging by our students. And we, writing teachers, who are usually steeped in White habits of language, have to find ways to actually LIKE Black English, and all the multilingual languaging in our classrooms. I mean, *really like it (them?) first*--meaning we gotta not want a change it but feel its worth with our students--then we'll see why we actually need Black English in the academy, need it in our classrooms, need it in our world, need it in order to be critical at all. In fact, I want to say that if we cannot see the need our students have for something like Black English, then we are not understanding fully why or how Black Lives Matter. Aren't our lives and languages connected?

Don't grading contracts provide a way to acknowledge and do the act of Black Lives Matter? I want to say that labor-based grading contracts help me understand how and acknowledge that Black Languages Matter.

Maybe I needed someone like Peter to show me contracts as a teacher. That is, I'm not sure I was able to read it and get it as a reader on my own. That's the power of a voice and body, of ethos, of a trusted other, of trusting others. I think my teacher journey required me to hear a real voice saying, "Would you try this? Does it seem like something you can do?" I was ready to do this after our talk on the phone. I just needed a little push, or maybe a shove by a compassionate reader who liked my words and teaching already. As that early article reveals, I'd already been dissatisfied with grading in my writing courses. I was trying out various practices that delayed grades, reduced the number and frequency of them, and reduced the kinds of grades possible on assignments. I even experimented with collaborative grading with students. Nothing quite worked the way I'd hoped it would. Grades based on quality judgements, which meant White habits of language as a standard, were still present in the ecology. So grading contracts seemed a good next step.

It was around this moment as a teacher that I was able to articulate an important question about my grading practices. What exactly did I understand grades doing in a writing classroom? Elbow talks about them as affecting the psychology of students as writers. I agreed. But what happens when grades disappear completely from a grading ecology? What happens when grades and progress are not about my judgements of quality, and students have real assurances of this fact? What did I hope my judgements would then do? What did I think students were really writing for?

Later I'd ask about how grades motivate, coerce, and colonize students. I'd wonder about the uneven coercion in a classroom. To coerce a middle class, White student who comes to me using a version of Standardized English already is not remotely the same as coercing a Black or Latine or multilingual Asian student. Our lives and languaging are connected. Black Lives and Languages Matter. Multilingual Languages Matter. And they matter on their own terms, not mine, or yours, or your rubric's, or some department's standards. I was coming to understand these things, but I'd need more time in grading contract ecologies.

The Violence We Don't Always Hear in Our Grading Ecologies

At Fresno State University, I taught an upper division writing course, a W-course. It was interdisciplinary and attracted a wide variety of students from across the university. One semester, I had Kevin--well, that may not be his name. Kevin was about 22, had a young son, a toddler, and played basketball for the university. He was a senior, barely making it, but really wanted the degree. He was a semester away from graduating. While he was a good basketball player, he knew that he was not likely going to the NBA. He wanted to start a business. He had an older brother who'd gotten his degree and was doing well. He figured a degree will help him too. He was Black and had come from Florida. He had family who lived in the Caribbean. He was likeable and charismatic, spoke and wrote a code-meshed version of Black English. He offered ideas in class and came several times to my office to discuss his papers. Sometimes he had trouble coming to class because of his basketball schedule, and when he was in class, often he'd fall asleep. The mandatory study halls and basketball practices meant his days were long and filled with lots of other work. By our mid-afternoon class, he'd already clocked in a long day. And so, he also had trouble finding enough time to do the work of the class, but he always turned in something.

In part, Kevin was a big reason I let go of hybrid grading contracts. While it would take several years for me to work through an articulation of why, I'm grateful for Kevin. He and other students like him helped me see this problem. In the class, everyone had to research and write two projects, which usually ended in a research paper. They could choose anything they liked, and I suggested that they choose topics that were connected to their majors. One of Kevin's projects was on writer's block. Kevin was a Communications major, so this made sense.

At the time in that class, I was coming to realize that hybrid contracts, which still have some part that demands my judgements of quality to determine higher grades (those above a B), was flawed and contradictory. I was moving clearly to a purely labor-based grading contract system. In this class, I knew Kevin could not achieve an A-grade, and I thought I knew why then, but I don't think I really did, not fully. I was still holding on to a little part of the idea that the highest grades in the class were meant only for those students who exhibit, in my estimation, standardized edited American English--that is, White habits of language. I didn't know how to ask myself important questions about what that choice in my class, in my grading system, was doing. How was it upholding White language supremacy? How was it also hiding labor that I asked for, further disadvantaging some students in my classrooms, like Kevin?

At the time, I read Kevin's project as lacking in a lot of things, mostly in him doing research and spending more time on his words. What did he learn from the library about writer's block, I asked him. He was smart enough to make a great paper, but he needed time, and he needed a way to feel good about the time he could spend on his work. But he clearly didn't have it. I can see that now. It was difficult for me then.

Now, when I look at my comments on his project, which I have, I'm embarrassed at the tone. Most of my comments don't read to me as a teacher "liking" much of anything. I didn't make mean comments, but I also didn't acknowledge the difficulties he surely faced, nor did I show him how I was experiencing his words as a different kind of reader. I was trying to do what Peter had done for me in that review letter years before. I remember several of our one-on-one conferences where Kevin and I talked about his life-struggles, and I remember feeling compassion towards him. I recall realizing that he was doing something pretty monumental, raising a son on his own, going to college, playing basketball. He was taking care of his shit. And of course, he was doing all this while being Black in America. Monumental.

Now, I hear in his project's words a struggle that was invisible to me then as a teacher--and I was trying to listen. But the fact that there were two kinds of judgements circulating at the same time in our grading ecology hobbled me as a reader. Just the presence of my own White habits of language, cocked and ready to be used to award the A-grade, kept me from liking Kevin's languaging on its own terms, even though I was trying to do this. Because I had so much hope for him, because I wanted the best for him, I thought that meant I could help him write with White habits of language. Those were the language moves that would get him an A, and not a B or a C. Despite my own ideas that contradicted this, my own hybrid contract grading ecology tacitly directed me toward judging his languaging as substandard, as needing to change. I said I valued and respected his words, but I don't read like I did.

I cannot show you his words, even though I have them in my files. I am not able to find him to ask permission. I'll summarize as best I can. In his project's culminating draft, he describes several school experiences where he had writer's block. The first was in the second grade. He had to write a short book report on a library book he'd checked out. He couldn't do it, trying all night. The teacher didn't believe him, thought he was being lazy, thought he didn't try. She said he was lying to her. He pleaded with her. He did try. Words just didn't come to him. He was being punished for being truthful. Harsh words from a teacher because he didn't give her words she demanded. Was I doing that same thing to him, only without explicitly calling him a liar? Was I just telling him to work more, work harder, do more, with no clear evidence that he had more time to do more labor? Write like me, I was saying, so that you, Kevin, can get the A I want you to have. Did he want that A? I don't remember.

The second occasion he wrote about was in middle school. He was being bullied by a peer in P.E. Kevin gets tired of the daily bullying, and fights back. He gets into trouble. His punishment is to write a four-page essay on violence--a four-page essay on violence. It's astonishing to me now. Kevin, a young Black man, explains that he couldn't write about violence--that's what he says. I could not write an essay on violence. The principal says he will be in "In School Suspension" until he finishes the essay, and he can only work on it in school. No writing at home. He's in suspension for a week and a half because of his writer's block. It's writing as punishment. It's writing as violence about violence. No wonder Kevin had writer's block so frequently. How did I not see this then? Was I too busy trying to get him to write like White people that I couldn't imagine I might be implicated in the violence done to him? Writing as violence. Did this keep me from seeing his Black humanity? Today, I think, no wonder he wants to figure out writer's block. It has been his way of dealing with the violence done upon him in school, perhaps in life. Writing as violence. Black Language Matters, even when it's absent.

In *The Violence of Literacy*, J. Elspeth Stuckey (1994) argues the use of such standards in classrooms does violence. She explains, "The violence of literacy is the violence of the milieu it comes from, promises, recapitulates. It is attached inextricably to the world of food, shelter, and human equality" (Stuckey, 1994, p. 94). The violence done through literacy was attached to Kevin's life-conditions, to his son as he took my class, to his basketball practices before and after our class. Building on Stuckey's argument,

Tom Fox (1999) explains that the promise that a dominant literacy for Black students like Kevin will give them access to society's rewards and opportunities is violent. That promise is violent. Fox (1999) continues, "If we are serious about increasing access to higher education for people of color in this country, then we first have to abandon the notion that skills alone provide access" (p. 17).

The third experience Kevin writes about in his project is in high school. He has a 15-page paper to write in English class on his favorite sport, basketball. He thinks, great. This will be easy. It's not. Too many pages to write. Too much pressure. Too much past violence with writing. Words stop coming to him. Perhaps words become the violent act, words demanded from a White authority.

Kevin ends this section of his paper by describing writer's block as a headache, as pain. It slowly comes upon you, makes you close your eyes, he says, lay down, and sleep. The result is sleep, getting away, doing nothing. I hear him saying that you don't control writer's block. You do what you can. You sleep. You escape the pain. If words cause violence upon you, then you stop giving people words. Just sleep.

My marginal comments on his draft ask him to make more sense of each experience, to say more, to reveal his thinking more about the experiences he's offering. After the second grade book report, I say: "Before you move on, make some sense out of this first experience. What does it tell you about what writers block is and how it is caused? What new information do you see in the experience that you have not covered yet? Then make this new experience a new paragraph." It's not that I think the advice is bad, but I can see now that I'm missing things, and part of the reason is that our hybrid grading contract set me up to miss them.

What I don't identify is that I'm asking him to take on White habits of language without labelling them as such, without first slowing down and offering him my experience of his text and why I have that experience, where I got those ideas from. But I was too busy seeing all the potential in his writing, in him, thinking in some paternalistic way that I was gonna help him be a better communicator, as if he was not already handling his shit well under very difficult circumstances. What I didn't see was that perhaps words like the ones I was asking of him could be violence.

My good intentions were not enough to overcome the flaws in my grading ecology, in the hybrid grading contract system, in the racism of systems of judgement that rank, even if only in binary ways: meets expectations, exceeds expectations. And to Kevin's credit, he was patient and listened, and I know he tried to do what I said, even though he probably knew that what I asked of him was not gonna help him get that business loan he wanted after he graduated the next semester.

It wasn't just that I was being unfair to Kevin in my grading and feedback, that he wasn't getting to hear words of encouragement, words he deserved. It was also that I didn't, as Elbow asked us to, express the ways I liked his writing and draft on its terms. And my grading ecology kept me from that kind of liking. What did I like? Well, Kevin offers experiences that reveal to me today a dance between White authorities, teachers and principals--just like me then right there on his draft--who judged him and his languaging in ways that didn't seem to acknowledge his efforts, his honesty, his willingness to try at an activity that he knew he'd likely fail at. I told him this in my final assessment letter at the end of the course, and that I learned from him some valuable lessons about my own limitations as a teacher. What I didn't do was apologize for the violence I had enacted through my feedback, or my expectations of him, or through the ways I considered only my own good intentions for his work and not his.

I can see now that it was inevitable. My hybrid grading contract just wouldn't work much longer. It didn't take long after that class for me to realize that, if my grading contract can't work for students like Kevin, it can't work for anyone. That is, if it still harms, does violence to, those who are seen as having the least power linguistically or socially, then it does not work at all. It doesn't do what I think it should.

How do we hear the violence in our grading practices, if we don't frequently pause, like the most unlikeable writing in our midst, and get past our own good intentions for our students? How do we enact in our grading practices the fact that Black Languages-Lives Matter?

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