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Editors Introduction: JWA Special Issue on Contract Grading

by Diane Kelly-Riley and Carl Whithaus

We're pleased to present this Special Issue on Contract Grading, co-edited with Asao B. Inoue of Arizona State University. In the last five years, contract grading has (re)emerged as a promising method for aligning writing classroom assessment practices with students' and institutions' stated learning outcomes. There are many approaches to contract grading, and this Special Issue of the *Journal of Writing Assessment* hopes to document many of those practices and the theories that support and explain them. Contract grading generally involves students negotiating the amount of labor they will complete to earn a course grade. It departs from more common assessment methods in which A-F grades are assigned based upon an instructor's judgments about students' learning during the course and/or on the quality of students' written products.

An archaeology of contract grading might reach back to techniques described in Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Peter Elbow's (1973) *Writing Without Teachers*. However, these ideas were not articulated as contract grading then, but rather were part of new holistic, process-based approaches to teaching writing being developed. Freire's and Elbow's approaches did have more than just a touch of advocacy for social change—they were asking for major rethinking about relationships between teachers and students, particularly in literacy education and in writing instruction. However, their pedagogical techniques were not customized for post-secondary education. It was in the early 1990s that Ira Shor (1992) and bell hooks (1994) extended Freire's and Elbow's approaches to critical pedagogy and the evaluation of students' writing into the context of higher education. Shor and hooks each advocated for approaches to teaching and learning that created spaces for students to frame and assess their own learning and their own progress.

This interest in students' ownership of their own learning in relationship to writing assessment and evaluation continued in the late 1990s. Steven Tchudi's (1997) *Alternatives to Grading Student Writing* brought together 30 writing teachers and assessment researchers to examine “the dilemma of grading . . . the arbitrariness of grades, the use of grades to coerce students into performance, and the irrelevance of grades to the sort of authentic assessment one experiences in life” (p. x). Tchudi's collection and his work as Chair of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Committee on Alternatives to Grading Student Writing continued to focus the field's attention on the social and pedagogical complexities around evaluating and responding to student writing. Interestingly when he is discussing degrees of freedom in assessment, he locates “contracts” in the middle of a sliding scale with *Research & Teacher Impulse* at one end and *Institutional Pressures* at the other end (Tchudi, 1997, Figure 1). Taken together, the contributors to Tchudi's edited collection emphasize the importance of student and teacher agency in the assessment, evaluation, response, and learning process. Grading contracts then continued to occupy an important place among the approaches to assessing and teaching writing promoted by the field's central organization, such as NCTE. However, they had much less impact within the fields of educational and psychological measurements. Grading contracts, like many of the approaches in Tchudi's collection, were seen as pedagogical techniques not more widely applicable to testing and measurement tasks.

Later Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow (2009) published their article, “A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching” in *College Composition and Communication*. This piece emphasized an approach which focused on using “grading contracts”; it explicitly addressed and responded to Ira Shor's (1992) advocacy for “learning contracts.” Unlike Shor, however, Danielewicz and Elbow concentrated on how reading, grading, and responding to the quality of student writers' work could improve learning. Shor had coupled his approach to learning contracts with a broader approach to social change, to changing the power dynamics among teachers and students, and ultimately to shifting power dynamics within society at large. Danielewicz and Elbow's (2009) grading contracts have a more modest goal—they “suggest grading contracts as a way to produce [end of semester] grades that improves learning and teaching and reduces some unfairness” (p. 244). Their technique advocates for giving all students who complete the required writing activities for a course a B and then having teachers reward particularly engaging and moving collections of student writing with an A. Their goal is for students and teachers to focus more on the writing itself—its development and the writers' development—rather than on the grade or any particular traits used in the evaluation. Danielewicz and Elbow's approach to grading contracts is both more aware of and more subservient to the power dynamics within higher education classrooms than Shor's. Their system advocated for changes around the edge of classroom grading practices rather than a radical shift in classroom power dynamics.

Asao B. Inoue's (2019) *Labor-Based Grading Contracts* broke with Danielewicz and Elbow's (2009) move to maintain the involvement of the teacher's judgment as the central mechanism in evaluating learning and writing quality. Inoue's book returned contract grading to a practice more rooted in Freirean problem-posing. *Labor-Based Grading Contracts* details the relationship between educational structures, assessment methods, and the aspirations and practices that support social justice enacted through assessment processes. His work on labor-based grading contracts eschews Danielewicz and Elbow's reliance on a teacher making a distinction between A-quality work and B-quality work. Inoue's approach to grading contracts focuses on student labor as the key evaluative element. Assessment of student writing in Inoue's theoretically robust and practically rigorous approach emphasizes student labor—the amount of work put into the writing in a course—as the key evaluative criteria. Writing assessment becomes about

documenting labor, work, rather than about a teacher judging the quality of writing. Inoue's work on labor-based grading contracts not only advocates for social change but also develops an educational praxis that promotes social change.

For this Special Issue of *JWA*, we invited Asao B. Inoue to serve as guest editor with the *JWA* editorial team. Not only has his book *Labor-Based Grading Contracts* (Inoue, 2019) been influential in recent discussions of grading contracts, his earlier discussion of contract grading in "Community-Based Assessment Pedagogy" (Inoue, 2005) in *Assessing Writing* describes how contract grading can allow students an active role to express their intentions and desires out of writing assignments and how those assessment criteria support them. While Inoue's advocacy of labor-based grading contracts challenges the status quo, other approaches to grading contracts have been developed by writing teachers. For this Special Issue, we invited the submission of reflective narratives that detailed faculty and students' experiences with contract grading as well as more traditional research articles. The reflective narratives explore the circumstances in which contract grading is enacted. We have interspersed the reflective narrative pieces in between the regular articles; they are noted in the title as "Reflective Narrative."

When considering submissions, we were open to a wide range of possible approaches that included but were not limited to labor-based approaches to contract grading. The contributors to this Special Issue took up the challenge of teasing out the implications of these various approaches to contract grading. Their work brings together the perspectives of practicing teachers, writing assessment researchers, and experts in teaching and learning. They extend our understanding of how grading contracts developed and how they are being used in a variety of educational contexts. They champion the possibilities that grading contracts open up for teaching, learning, and assessment practices, but they also examine tensions, limitations, and problems that arise when grading contracts are used in postsecondary contexts.

In his introduction to this Special Issue, "Stories About Grading Contracts, or How Do I Like Through the Violence I've Done?," Inoue recounts his personal experience as a PhD student in the development of his theories and practices of grading contracts. He begins with a piece he published in 2005 and reflects on how vital it is to continue to develop assessment practices that support social justice and equity in our classrooms. His introduction to this Special Issue is itself a reflective piece that underscores how writers develop over time and how they appreciate dialogic feedback as they work to shape ideas in their writing.

Next, Michelle Cowan details the rich history of contract grading which reaches back a century in "A Legacy of Grading Contracts for Composition." Cowan provides an important overview of both the individual and large-scale ways that grading contracts have been used within writing studies. Cowan's appendix, which provides an overview of scholarship regarding contract grading by themes, will be a valuable companion to anyone interested in getting a broad perspective of the many ways in which contract grading is enacted.

Our first two reflective narratives describe the experiences of several people in common settings. In the first reflective narrative, "Openings, Risks, and Antiracist Futures at a Hispanic-Serving Institution," Lizbett Tinoco, Scott Gage, Ann Bliss, Petra Baruca, Christen Barron, and Curt Meyer highlight their experiences as six faculty who have adapted various approaches to labor-based contract grading in their courses at Texas A&M University-San Antonio, a Hispanic-Serving Institution. They describe their challenges, opportunities, and insights as they use these practices in their classrooms. Their piece is part of an emerging line of research in writing assessment that considers the ways in which assessment practices are shaped by unique circumstances at institutional sites with diverse student populations. Often, research is published with an unstated application for research intensive institutions.

In the next narrative, Mathew Gomes, Bree Bellati, Mia Hope, and Alissa LaFerriere reflect upon their experiences as a writing instructor and three undergraduate students in a course on teaching writing at Santa Clara University. In "Enabling Meaningful Labor: Narratives of Participation in a Grading Contract," Gomes et al. explore the ways in which contract grading can foster meaningful engagement and serve as a way to promote continued learning and professional development.

The next article, "Neurodivergence and Intersectionality in Labor-Based Grading Contracts," Kathleen Kryger and Griffin X. Zimmerman explore how labor-based grading contracts impact students with varying neurological abilities. They outline definitions for neurodivergence and potential access issues involved with the use of grading contracts for students who are neurologically diverse. They provide an ethnographic example of how labor-based contract grading might be used to support consideration of the neurodivergent student experience.

The next two reflective narratives focus on the experiences between a faculty member and a student in two different contexts. In "Perceptions of Fairness in Summer Bridge Classrooms with Contract Grades," faculty member Kristina Reardon and former undergraduate student, Vanessa Guardado-Menjivar describe their use of contract grading in a summer bridge program and the potential benefits and pitfalls to mentoring students into postsecondary settings. Jennifer Mallette and Amanda Hawks, another faculty and undergraduate student pair, explore the implications and possibilities to enact feminist principles and social justice-oriented work in "Building Student Agency through Contract Grading in Technical Communication." They describe the application of contract grading supporting these goals within a technical communication classroom.

In the next article, “Engaging in Resistant Genres as Antiracist Teacher Response,” Shane Wood provides a framework to explore teacher response in antiracist writing assessment ecologies using rhetorical genre studies. His work is, in part, about the challenges and problems encountered when responding to student writing. Wood explores monolingual English biases and habits of White language in teacher practice. This thoughtful and action-oriented approach helps us investigate the feedback we give as teachers and change how we respond to student writing so we may further develop antiracist practices. His critical reading and attention to response is a nuanced and complicated perspective that may help promote a wider use of antiracist practices in the writing classroom.

This special issue concludes with Michelle A. Stuckey, Ebru Erdem, and Achary Waggoner’s implementation of contract grading in a large-scale online course in “Rebuilding Habits: Assessing the Impact of a Hybrid Learning Contract in Online First-Year Composition Courses.” In a pilot study, Stuckey et al. examine the effects of learning contracts on student retention and transfer of writing ability across contexts. They conclude that there is great possibility in using contract grading in improving faculty and student experiences in large-scale online courses.

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Editors' Note: On December 4, 2020, this was updated to include reviewers who had been inadvertently left off of the acknowledgement list. Our sincerest regrets for this omission.

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