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Book Review: Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Writing Classroom by Asao B. Inoue

by Shane A. Wood, University of Southern Mississippi

Grading writing, or judging language, can be difficult. Asao B. Inoue's *Labor-Based Grading Contracts* problematizes traditional assessment practices that assess writing "quality." Inoue explains how this type of practice operates to reproduce White supremacy because language standards are tied to historical White racial formations. He suggests an alternative assessment method (e.g., grading contracts) that is based on labor and compassion. If you find yourself dissatisfied with classroom grading practices or wanting to understand how writing assessment can be constructed to do social justice work, then Inoue's *Labor-Based Grading Contracts* is a great read.

Keywords: grading contracts, race, writing assessment, labor

In a 1974 article in the *Journal of Financial Education*, Elmer G. Dickson describes "contract grading" as an alternative assessment method that emphasizes negotiation between teachers and students, allowing students to choose what grade they want to pursue, and encouraging students to "explore topics of interest to them" (p. 21). He argues contracts should emphasize "learning" as opposed to grading and should be "fair." Contract grading countered traditional evaluation norms where teachers produced and distributed grades to student writing based on form, grammar, and standards associated with quality. Grading contracts were designed, in part, to recognize "differences among individual students" (Dickson, 1974, p. 21) and differences in learning styles and abilities. In the mid-1990s, grading contracts emerged in composition studies through critical pedagogies as an alternative to traditional writing assessment practices. Ira Shor (1996) championed grading contracts as an assessment method dedicated to democratizing learning and knowledge. Grading contracts, according to Shor, were a more dialogic and community-based practice. Instead of being consumers of grades, students would be active participants in developing how they were being assessed. In a chapter of *Alternatives to Grading Student Writing*, Lynda S. Radican (1997) adds, "Contract grades essentially transform the grading process from teacher-developed criteria into an agreement between teacher and student, with considerable freedom for students to propose and assess work on their own initiative" (p. 285). Grading contracts take different forms (Bauman, 1997; Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Knapp, 1976; Mandel, 1973; Moreno-Lopez, 2005; Shor, 1996; Thelin, 2005), but most, if not all, confront the subjectivity of grading and focus on making grading clearer.

Grading contracts gained even more attention in the late-2000s due to Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow's (2009) article, "A Unilateral Grading Contract." Danielewicz and Elbow's "hybrid grading contract" focused on students meeting behavioral requirements for a B letter-grade, such as attendance, due dates, and participation. Hybrid grading contracts assess both labor and writing quality; the B letter-grade is about meeting behaviors while the A letter-grade is reserved for judgments on quality. Danielewicz and Elbow were committed to demystifying the grading process, but they didn't rely on negotiation like Shor. They gave up power, but they also kept power in creating requirements and maintaining a standard for writing quality. Since Danielewicz and Elbow's article, grading contracts have become increasingly more visible in writing assessment research (Inman & Powell, 2018; Inoue, 2012; Litterio, 2016; Medina & Walker, 2018). In *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Writing Classroom*, Asao B. Inoue (2019) problematizes grading and evaluating student writing and offers a grading contract based entirely on labor and compassion as opposed to quality.

Labor-Based Grading Contracts builds on Inoue's previous award-winning books on race and writing assessment (see Inoue, 2015; Inoue & Poe, 2012). Over the past 40 years, a thread in research on writing assessment shows moves toward aligning assessment practices with program and pedagogical values (Wood & Elliot, 2019). Using taxonomies of fairness has also emerged as important to investigating and understanding how and what assessment does (Poe & Elliot, in press), and whom practices privilege and benefit. In the last decade, writing assessment research has grown through conversations on race, ethics, and social justice (Poe, Inoue, & Elliot, 2018). These dialogues are important to Inoue's theories on labor and compassion, and especially significant to the ways he talks about race and racism as socially and structurally situated. He proposes labor-based grading contracts as an alternative assessment model that works against the White dominant discourse in the classroom.

In *Labor-Based Grading Contracts*, he critiques the institutional, existential, and structural problems that exist through grading by associating traditional writing assessment practices, or judging language, to *white supremacy* and *racism*. Inoue (2019) synthesizes, retrofits, and reflects on his earlier grading contract work (Inoue, 2015) by describing writing assessment as part of a larger complex system better described as an "ecology." Through this ecological framework, he challenges writing teachers to be mindful of their assessment practices, including different elements that construct a classroom assessment ecology, and he encourages teachers to understand writing assessment as "antiracist projects." He argues that traditional grading standards are focused on "quality" which is rooted in White language supremacy. That is, language standards are tied to Whiteness, and they produce "political, cultural, linguistic, and economic dominance for White people" (Inoue, 2019, p. 8). Inoue situates the writing class through the White racial *habitus*, the system in which our dispositions to language originate, and he connects the "judgment of language" to White discourse. *Labor-Based Grading Contracts* can be perceived as an attempt to address exclusive and inequitable practices while hoping to

promote inclusive and equitable habits. Inoue (2019) encourages a classroom culture of compassion and argues that labor-based grading contracts help foster a class based on equity: "Trying not to be unfair is the only way one can ensure equitable and inclusive practices in inherently unfair systems" (p. 11). He offers labor-based grading contracts as an anti-racist, compassionate alternative to traditional standards for judging language.

Labor-Based Grading Contracts is an important theoretical contribution to scholarship on assessment and is useful to writing teachers wishing to implement an alternative classroom assessment model and/or be challenged to see how grading is tied to dominant standards of language that privilege some student identities over others. This work is needed, and I admire it. I found myself wondering, though, how labor-based grading contracts might advantage some classroom ecologies, or contexts, over others. Readers might notice that this book seems focused on the college writing classroom, which limits its potential use in K-12 contexts; because of this, it lacks attention to realities of secondary teaching (e.g., time/schedules/teaching loads, state mandated curriculum and testing, class sizes) and lacks engagement with secondary scholarship. It would be nice to see future grading contract research embrace ideas and questions about the differences between secondary and post-secondary classrooms, and how labor-based grading contracts might be used in secondary contexts. Do labor-based contracts privilege university teachers and classrooms, specifically teachers teaching one or two courses with about 15 students in each? There are opportunities for future grading contract research to address other local contexts and extend what Inoue (2019) is doing in this book, which is inspiring teachers to consider how inclusivity can work through writing assessment in the writing classroom.

Labor-Based Grading Contracts feels like Inoue (2019) entered a different stage in his writing compared to his previous works. There's more personal narrative and code switching (e.g., "Ain't Making Docile Students No More," p. 50), storytelling, and pop culture references (e.g., Dead Prez). There are times when this book reads like a memoir, and other times it reads like a philosophical treatise. This blended style is reflected best when he connects Dead Prez to Foucault. These moves are important in helping establish credibility in challenging and critiquing what is and is not accepted when it comes to judging language. This juxtaposition between the personal, like when Inoue (2019) shares how "[he] ain't proud of leaving the language of [his] nurture behind" (p. 15) and the philosophical and theoretical (see his discussions on Marxian theory in Chapter 3), perhaps makes the reader subconsciously evaluate their own preferences when it comes to judging language and writing. I found his writing style to be genuine and invitational, which coincides with one of the main themes in this book—to help teachers understand the importance of compassion and bring awareness to how teachers can adopt more mindful assessment practices, or at the very least motivate teachers to consider how compassion can become a more central part on their judgements of language.

Chapter 1 begins by problematizing grading. Inoue (2019) uses Paulo Freire's problem-posing approach, which invites individuals in education to listen to voices outside the classroom in hopes of understanding and identifying issues that exist within communities. One goal in this practice is to understand and critique social structures and systems, to see individuals' relationships within those systems, and to uncover cultural ideologies. This approach allows Inoue (2019) to problematize standards about language and see assessment functioning through a "White racial *habitus*" (p. 25). No writing teacher, according to Inoue, has escaped the White racial habitus because it is inherited within institutional systems. Traditional language and literacy practices and standards assigned to grading "seek to exclude, not include, by their nature and function, by default, regardless of how we justify them or who uses them" (Inoue, 2019, p. 11). Standards associated with clarity and correctness connected to judgments about writing are quality-based White standards and habits. Therefore, in order to resist these principles, writing teachers must practice "designing assessment ecologies by *trying not to be unfair*" (Inoue, 2019, p. 46). In this chapter, Inoue uses Black history and Black culture, referencing the Black male and the Black body, to further critique the White habitus accepted by cultural systems and educational systems. The White system works against and denies the Black body freedom and agency.

After problematizing assessment through the White habitus, Inoue (2019) reflects on his journey from traditional grading practices to grading contracts in Chapter 2. This narration is significant to assessment because it reminds writing teachers to see assessment practices as evolving and in flux. Inoue adopts contract grading because contracts threaten traditional assessment biases, deconstruct who holds power in grading, and attempt to demystify letter-grades by providing a clear model based on meeting behavioral requirements. He detaches himself from hybrid grading contracts, though. Inoue (2019) explains how hybrid contracts, those contracts offered by Danielewicz and Elbow (2009), still rely on the White habitus, and therefore are "subtly racist and White supremacist" (p. 60). He shares how he adopted hybrid contracts but struggled with what they were communicating to students about language and judging writing: "All students had a right to their own languages, just not a right to an A, not a right to have their languages valued most highly, unless that language matched a White racial *habitus*" (Inoue, 2019, p. 62). Hybrid contracts are "fundamentally unfair" to students of color, Inoue argues. Through this explanation, the reader can begin to see a binary between labor and quality, and how quality is equated with Whiteness. According to Inoue, judgments based on quality protect White students, making hybrid contracts problematic because they disadvantage many students of color. The reader might notice what's important here is how Inoue connects learning and languaging to *laboring* as opposed to *quality*.

In Chapter 3, Inoue (2019) equates assessment ecologies (developed in *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies* [Inoue, 2015]) to assessment economies to further emphasize labor. He defines labor through Marxian theory and Hannah Arendt's (1998) theories on labor and mindfulness. Inoue pays close attention to labor to help establish its value to learning and languaging, which further

develops his case for a labor-based assessment. He uses Marx (1867) to critique the capitalistic nature of traditional grading and to emphasize valuing “labor power” in the writing classroom. According to Inoue (2019), labor power is the most desirable commodity in the labor-based assessment ecology because “value is produced through student labor and exchanged through labor power in labor-based assessment economies” (p. 86). He also takes up Arendt’s theory of labor, work, and action (though he critiques her hierarchical framing) and uses those concepts as “useful ways to flesh out three-dimensional labor” (Inoue, 2019, p. 110) to help students identify stages of their labor, and thus become more mindful in laboring. He draws on Marxian and Arendt theories to help situate his own three-dimensional framework for labor-based grading contracts: how students labor, that students labor, and what the labor means (Inoue, 2019, p. 107).

I was surprised to see an omission of time in his use of Marxian economics because time is crucial in understanding Marxian economics and labor theory of value (LVT). Labor cannot be separated from time. With that being said, I would like to offer a critique of the quantification of labor and time that seems central to labor-based grading contracts. In Inoue’s (2019) labor-based grading contract, the B letter-grade is dependent on behavior and labor, while the A letter-grade is based on “*more labor that helps the class*” (p. 333). I believe future grading contract research would benefit from exploring how measuring more labor—with a proper understanding that more labor takes more time—could create problems for some student populations: Who is privileged by the ability to perform labor (or produce more labor)? I offer this to invite research to carefully investigate whether labor-based grading contracts are a fairer model that benefit all students who are traditionally disadvantaged by institutional and classroom systems. In a labor-based grading contract, we see how “all labor is quantified in words read or written, and in estimated time a student is expected to spend on the activity, which is also broken up into steps with duration per step also listed” (Inoue, 2019, p. 130). This quantification of labor might be problematic because students labor differently, and some students don’t have the same affordances to labor. I would argue that the idea of laboring more operates from a premise that students have the same abilities and opportunities to spend more time laboring. What does a labor-based model say to students with disabilities, and what does it say about their time? I would argue that the ability to perform more labor is a privilege and that a labor-based economy might not necessarily be fairer to all students who are marginalized by traditional classroom frameworks and systems. Therefore, I could imagine someone researching how the production of *more labor* might work against students with disabilities or non-traditional students who don’t have the same privilege to labor more, and the same relationship to time. In Chapter 6, Inoue (2019) briefly explains how labor-based contracts make time visible and argues that traditional grading decreases visibility, but more work could be done here to answer whom laboring and time privilege.

In Chapter 4, Inoue (2019) provides clarity to his labor-based grading contract, describes the negotiation and re-negotiation process with students at the beginning and during the middle of the academic term, and argues that labor-based grading contracts are a “set of social agreements with the entire class about how final course grades will be determined for everyone” (p. 130). Chapter 4 is the most practical chapter for understanding labor-based grading contracts and how to use them in the classroom. Chapter 5 continues that practicality by discussing the nature of labor-based grading contracts by isolating one of the most important elements in the ecology—compassion. Cultivating compassion is key to building a classroom that values labor and participation. In Chapter 5, Inoue explains his “Charter for Compassion” which is a set of principles meant to guide students’ understanding of how to act and behave in a classroom that values and encourages listening and responding in an ethical manner. The “Charter” is a source for conversations about compassionate practices and the overall classroom’s commitment to compassion which is key to respecting labor and laboring together: “There is no bad ways to labor if laboring is done in a compassionate spirit and with an attempt to learn and help others learn” (Inoue, 2019, p. 127).

Chapter 6 is an FAQ that addresses concerns about labor-based grading contracts. These concerns were brought up by colleagues on the WPA-L listserv and through faculty members and graduate students at various colleges and universities. Questions range from how labor-based grading contracts can support course learning outcomes and goals, to addressing student attitudes about grades and motivations, to better understanding how contracts view writing quality and maintaining high standards, to the relationship between labor-based grading contracts and Universal Design. The FAQ format moves the conversation toward the effectiveness of labor-based grading contracts. In Chapter 7, Inoue (2019) motivates writing teachers and programs to collect evidence about their ecology’s effectiveness, including the effectiveness of their labor-based assessment ecologies. This is done, in part, by analyzing a course’s learning goals. This local investigation allows teachers to better understand whom the course is working for and how learning goals, and therefore the course, might be working with the dominant White habitus to reinforce White language supremacy. One of his purposes in this chapter is to change how writing studies defines “effectiveness” to fit labor, which also builds on his previous work (see Inoue, 2012). He suggests that knowing the direction students are heading is key in knowing the effectiveness of a labor-based assessment ecology. Inoue (2019) offers his own course’s purpose and goals to the reader:

The purpose of this writing course is to encourage students to engage in a willingness to labor in mindful and meaningful reading and writing practices that lead them toward an awareness of language (and perhaps its politics) in a compassionate and safe environment that makes the course’s opportunities for learning and all grades attainable by all students, no matter where they come from or the version of English they use. (p. 244)

His overarching emphasis on compassion is important because of its connection to inclusivity. Additionally, Chapter 7 introduces

another key focus in his labor-based assessment ecology, which is valuing noncognitive competencies over cognitive abilities. Noncognitive skills are known to better position students for success inside and outside education (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Farkas, 2003; Heckman, Stixrud, & Urzua, 2006). While traditional judgments of writing are driven by a students' ability to meet language and product-based standards, Inoue's labor-based grading contract is meant to encourage students to develop noncognitive competencies, such as engagement and resilience, which Inoue (2019) classifies as a "*willingness to labor*" (p. 247). Inoue maps five larger goals and provides a rationale to help define how he has determined the effectiveness of his labor-based ecology.

As a reader, I found the analysis of the effectiveness of his goals (Goals 1-3) through the labor-based ecology underwhelming and underdeveloped, which he acknowledges as a "quick and surely incomplete example" (Inoue, 2019, p. 250). Inoue (2019) draws on data from nine students out of a class of 14. I was surprised, perhaps due to *Labor-Based Grading Contracts* arguing against the normalized White habitus, that five of the nine students were White (and that two of the three students in the top tier were White). Inoue uses a three-tier system—top, middle, bottom—based on student labor to represent the effectiveness of his labor-based ecology. In this analysis, I would like to have seen a clearer breakdown on how marginalized, or traditionally disadvantaged students in the White habitus, fared in a labor-based ecology [1]. Inoue notes how students of color produced an average of two more hours of labor than their White peers. From the data set, we see three of four students of color in the middle to bottom tiers which creates some problems for me mainly because throughout this book "labor" has been associated as an equitable measure for traditionally disadvantaged student populations (or at least a fairer measurement than quality). Labor has been constructed as being good. But, if students of color work two more hours than their White peers to get approximately the same classroom grade, then should we consider labor to be a more equitable measure? I would like to see future studies inquire and validate/invalidate labor being a fairer measurement for all students. I also have concerns about the traditional psychometric categories of validity and reliability. There isn't a lot of evidence that shows labor-based grading contracts work the ways we say, think, and hope they do. And really, I wonder whether valuing and requiring students to produce more labor is the direction we want to take in our efforts at confronting unfairness in assessment practices.

Inoue (2019) concludes *Labor-Based Grading Contracts* with an invitation and thoughtful reflection: "How do we judge language so people stop killing each other?" (p. 307). Racism is an existential, cultural, structural, and institutional problem, and this book moves us along in understanding how writing assessment might intervene. Creating a classroom based on compassion complemented by an assessment ecology focused on problematizing traditional, quality-based language standards and implementing a labor-based grading contract might move teachers to be more compassionate and share in learning and suffering. This is good work that allows us to think about institutional, program, and classroom values and aligning those values with assessment practices. *Labor-Based Grading Contracts* will be remembered alongside Inoue's other award-winning contributions to teaching and assessing writing, and rightfully so. All writing teachers should attempt to better understand how their assessment practices have biases that work for and against specific student populations—and all writing teachers can grow in mindfulness and compassion. I take with me two thoughts: (a) grading is problematic (Bauman, 1997; Bear, Slaughter, Mantz, & Farley-Ripple, 2017; Belanoff, 1991; Bleich, 1997; Charnley, 1978; Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Elbow, 1993; Kohn, 2011), and because grading is problematic (b) we must find, test, and use assessment practices that are fairer that help create more sustainable classrooms and communities.

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[1]Inoue (2012) explores the effectiveness of contract grading across different racial populations in “Grading Contracts: Assessing Their Effectiveness on Different Racial Formations,” but this study isn’t explicitly connected to “labor-based grading contracts.”

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