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## Review of The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading, by Ellen C. Carillo, *Current Arguments in Composition*, 2021

Amanda Sladek  
*University of Nebraska-Kearney*

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# RW

JOURNAL OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

## Review of *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading*, by Ellen C. Carillo, Utah State University Press, 2021

**Amanda Sladek**

*University of Nebraska-Kearney*

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Labor-based contract grading has risen in popularity in recent years as writing instructors work toward building assessment measures that are more transparent, equitable, and adaptive to students' needs. Defined as a system that "calculates final course grades purely by the labor students complete, not by any judgments of the quality of their writing" (Inoue, 2019, p. 3), labor-based contract grading is in many ways a fairer and more flexible assessment method than grading based on the writing and language standards that contribute to White supremacy. However, Carillo (2021) persuasively argues in *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading* that this practice can disadvantage students with disabilities and intersectional identities. In her short book, which she frames as an "extended essay," Carillo presents a concise, easily digestible exploration of "the nonracially motivated standards and biases that are exposed when we take a closer look at labor-based grading contracts" (pp. 6–7), examining the practice through a disability-studies lens.

Carillo's entry point is Inoue's (2019) call for increased attention to the implications of applying Universal Design for Learning to contract grading. In doing so, she acknowledges the important work done by Inoue

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and other innovators in labor-based contract grading, emphasizing that her goal is to build on this work rather than discard it entirely. Carillo begins by unpacking some of the central assumptions of labor-based contract grading, starting with the idea that labor is a neutral measure (or at least a more neutral measure than quality) for determining students' grades. She takes particular issue with models that provide estimates of how long a task "should" take and then ask students to track the amount of time spent on the task. She argues that this assumption relies on a "normative, ableist, and neurotypical conception of labor" (p. 11), noting that disabled and neurodiverse students may have to complete more labor to achieve the same result as the able-bodied hypothetical student, whom she argues is at the center of most labor-based contracts. Carillo also contradicts Inoue's assertion that the only thing students need to succeed under labor-based contract grading is a "willingness to labor," explaining again that this assertion is often untrue for disabled and neurodiverse students. She draws on Inoue's own acknowledgement that forces outside a student's control (e.g., forces tied to socioeconomic status as well as other systems of oppression) can impede the student's ability to labor in a course, arguing that instructors need to account for these factors in our assessments even if the assessments themselves did not create the unequal conditions. Drawing on disability scholars such as Jay Dolmage, Hannah J. Rule, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Carillo demonstrates that labor-based grading contracts as currently conceived "substitute one standard [i.e., quality] for another [i.e., labor]" (p. 18), rewarding students who possess bodies and brains closest to the normative "ideal."

Carillo additionally contends that labor-based contract grading harms the very students it is most intended to help. While Inoue (2019) explains that labor-based contracts can be adapted for emergencies and students who need accommodations, Carillo notes that students of color and first-generation college students are less likely to disclose and seek accommodations for disabilities and mental health struggles. Moreover, the tests required to receive disability diagnoses (and formal accommodations)

may cost money and are often racially biased. Thus, instructors need to anticipate the presence of disabled and neurodiverse students and build accessibility into our syllabi from the start. Carillo quotes disability-justice advocate Mia Mingus, arguing that grading contracts that only provide accommodations and flexibility when requested create a situation of “‘forced intimacy’ in which ‘disabled bodies must disclose their disability to able-bodied people in order to gain access to what is already accessible to normative bodies’” (p. 31). Thus, Carillo argues that labor-based grading contracts “[overestimate] the equalizing power of labor and [underestimate] the importance of intersectionality” (p. 53).

In her final chapter, Carillo presents an “engagement-based grading contract” that removes the focus on labor altogether, allowing students to choose the form of course engagement (such as discussion-board posts, oral participation, and note-taking) that works for them. This contract also utilizes the concept of “crip time,” a framework from disability studies that “recognizes that people move, engage, and process information at different rates and speeds” (p. 59). Crip time maximizes flexibility (especially regarding timelines) and lowers assignment stakes whenever possible, allowing students to progress through the course according to the timelines that work for them. Another model Carillo suggests, inspired by arguments from translingual scholarship, involves individualizing grading contracts for each student. It is unclear whether Carillo has utilized either contract model herself and, if so, what she observed. I am interested to see where she and other scholars take these ideas in future research, particularly after using these types of contracts in their own classrooms.

As previously mentioned, this is a slim volume—65 pages, not including references—and the book itself is roughly the size of my hand. This unique format provides many affordances. It is likely that the reduced length facilitated a quicker publication timeline, allowing Carillo to situate her discussion in recent events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter, movement in ways academic volumes often

cannot. This adds urgency and immediate relevance to her argument. Additionally, the fact that this text can be read fairly quickly means that instructors can consider her ideas and implement them in their own classrooms more easily than would be possible with a longer text. Given the importance of Carillo's argument, I appreciate how the book's format and her accessible writing style might help it attain a wider audience; it has the potential to even reach instructors outside writing studies. However, the length constraint also leaves some potentially relevant avenues unexplored, several of which Carillo herself acknowledges: the implications of her argument for neurodivergent and disabled instructors and, perhaps more importantly, the inclusion of case studies and student voices, which she admits are "paramount in scholarship within disability studies" (p. 25). Additionally, though the book is clearly well researched and presents a compelling history of contract grading in its introduction, nearly all of Carillo's arguments against the principles of labor-based contract grading are framed in opposition to Inoue's (2019) *Labor-Based Grading Contracts*. While Carillo is careful to acknowledge that Inoue's approach to labor-based grading contracts is not the only one, drawing on a wider range of scholars (e.g., Lisa M. Litterio, Joyce Olewski Inman, and Rebecca A. Powell) as springboards for her arguments (as opposed to just providers of background information) would highlight how important and applicable her perspective is across a vibrant and ever-growing conversation. Indeed, while labor-based contract grading in many ways represents a huge step forward in equitable, antiracist pedagogy, Carillo's extended essay provides a compelling, much-needed reminder that writing instructors must be purposeful, reflective, and responsive to *all* students when adopting new pedagogical practices.

## References

- Carillo, E. C. (2021). *The hidden inequities in labor-based contract grading*. Utah State University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv20zbnkwn>
- Inoue, A. B. (2019). *Labor-based grading contracts: Building equity and inclusion in the compassionate writing classroom*. WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2019.0216.0>