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Building Response into Labor-Based Grading Contracts

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Alternative approaches to assessment in education (many of which are linked to inclusive and antiracist pedagogies) are gaining in popularity across the board, from PK–12 to higher education (Esquivel, 2021; St. Amour, 2020). One such antiracist assessment strategy is using labor-based grading contracts (LBGCs), popularized by Inoue (2019; see also Syracuse University College of Arts & Sciences, n.d.). In these contracts, students and teachers together enter into an agreement in which they acknowledge that student effort and labor (i.e., the amount of time, intensity, or application students put into their writing) are the major factors that count in the outcome of an assignment.

The use of LBGCs is a chance for teachers to address student learning and feedback/response through an assessment that does not “inadvertently perpetuate achievement and opportunity gaps” (Yoshimoto-Towery & Pedro, as cited in Esquivel, 2021). Furthermore, building response into the LBGC process gives students more opportunity to engage with classroom expectations for feedback and response and to interrogate response paradigms through an antiracist lens. Teachers who are looking to build antiracist strategies into their classrooms can consider the use of LBGCs as a tool to dismantle the “whitely ways” of academia (Inoue, 2016, p. xii).

The spaces in which response happens can easily be incorporated into the parameters of the LBGC, as described in the “Procedure” section.

Context

This practice could be implemented in any classroom situation in which LBGCs are used.

Learning Outcomes/Goals

- Students will engage with teacher responses to their writing (whether oral or written) as a baseline course expectation of the LBGC.
- Students will have the opportunity to participate in further revisions and engagement with teacher response to their writing as an above-and-beyond criteria in the LBGC.

Format

This teaching practice is suitable for online, hybrid, and face-to-face instruction.

Teacher Preparation

Consider what kind(s) of response will work for you and your students/course. For example,

- Will your responses be oral, written, or a combination of modes?
- Will you complete your responses/feedback ahead of time, or will the comments be shared live with students in one-to-one meetings?
- How much feedback will you give on lower- versus higher-stakes assignments? (How much time and labor are equitable for *you*?)
- At what point(s) in the writing process will you respond to students?
- What are the expectations for students? What do you want them to *do* with your feedback? Will you require them to respond to your responses?

Additionally, make your response-related expectations clear for students (e.g., show them what a good response looks like from both a teacher and a student), and be sure to teach students *how* to effectively engage with teacher feedback (see Eckstein's teaching tip on this exact topic, this issue).

Estimated Time

This activity will last approximately 2 weeks total.

Procedure

See the Appendix for the LBGC I use in my undergraduate courses. In my particular LBGC setup, the students agree to 10 baseline expectations if they want to earn a B in the course, and if they would like to pursue a letter grade higher than that, they generate four individualized above-and-beyond criteria for personal achievement over the course of the semester. These above-and-beyond criteria are completely flexible and may change depending on students' responsibilities and their desired level of engagement in the course.

Response to writing comes into play in both the baseline expectations (i.e., students are expected to consider response in three of the course's baseline expectations, numbers 5, 6, and 7) and the above-and-beyond criteria sections of the LBGC (students have the option of including additional rounds of response to writing as one or more of these criteria). For example, to go above and beyond the baseline expectations, a student may choose to conduct an additional round of revision on a higher-stakes assignment or attend feedback session(s) in the writing center.

By incorporating response strategies and expectations into both the required baseline expectations and the optional above-and-beyond criteria, students have the opportunity to engage with feedback and response to their writing in multiple ways and with a variety of people (e.g., the teacher, in-class peers, writing center consultants).

A suggested outline for introducing the LBGC is as follows:

1. On the first day of class, introduce the LBGC process when sharing the rest of the course policies on the syllabus.
2. Have students read the full LBGC template for homework. They should come to class the next session with (a) any questions or concerns about the contract and (b) an initial list of brainstormed ideas of what might count as above-and-beyond criteria.
3. Create an individualized, personalized contract for each student (I did this all in a shared Google Docs folder). Also create a Google Doc that will be used in the in-class LBGC discussion/brainstorming session.
4. During the next class session, discuss the LBGC, noting the purposes of this form of assessment and leaving space for any questions/concerns students may have. Focus on the baseline expectations first so that students know what the relatively nonnegotiable elements are in terms of expectations and performance. Many students may be unfamiliar with this nontraditional assessment approach, so questions will likely be common.
5. Break students into pairs or small groups to generate short lists of possible above-and-beyond criteria. Then reconvene and create one large list together as a full class. You may want to have some of your own ideas ready and/or be prepared to interrogate student ideas for quality and focus, if needed.
6. Give the students until the next class period (or until a one-to-one meeting with you) to articulate their four above-and-beyond criteria. In my own classes, we review proposed criteria in one-to-one meetings, typically before the end of the 2nd week of class. (These meetings are when (a) I am able to check if students' criteria need to be more specifically articulated, if their original ideas seem too ambitious, etc., and (b) students can ask me individualized questions.) At the end of each meeting, the student and I both sign and date the LBGC.

Caveats and Alternatives

- The LBGC presented in this teaching tip can certainly be edited and altered in myriad ways, depending on your particular course or discipline and in light of the distinct baseline expectations you wish to engage in with students. The number and scope of above-and-beyond criteria can also be changed. Context and negotiation are key.
- Recent compelling research has critiqued Inoue's (2019) version of LBGCs through the lens of disability studies, particularly when considering neurodivergent students (Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020) and students who identify as disabled and/or multiply marginalized (Carillo, 2021). I recommend considering one's unique roster of students when making decisions about assessment and responding by creating "assessments that recognize students' intersectional identities" (Carillo, 2021, p. 8). Both cited texts offer more specific suggestions.
- Based on the research cited in the previous bullet point, I have since substantially updated the LBGC discussed in this teaching tip to be an *engagement*-based grading contract (EBGC) that is being piloted in the spring 2022 semester. As Carillo (2021) states, "replacing labor with engagement . . . would allow for the decoupling of willingness and ability because a student's chosen form of engagement is not bound to normative conceptions of time." Based on feedback from students who have utilized the LBGC, my revised EBGC, among other changes, asks students to propose only three above-and-beyond criteria, rather than the original four.

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Appendix

Grading Contract

[Course Number] [Course Title] [Semester]

This contract¹ is informed by the publications that appear in the reference list at the end of this document. It must be agreed upon and signed by both you and Dr. O by [date].

To quote writing studies scholar Dr. A. B. Inoue, **“If learning is what we are here for, then grades just get in the way since they are the wrong goals to strive for”** (2019, p. 144).

Inoue continues,

Consider two issues around grades. First, using conventional classroom grading of essays and other work to compute course grades often leads students to think more about acquiring grades than about their writing or learning; to worry more about pleasing a teacher or fooling one than about figuring out what they really want to learn, or how they want to communicate something to someone for some purpose. Lots of research in education, writing studies, and psychology over the last 30 or so years have shown overwhelmingly how the presence of grades in classrooms negatively affect the learning and motivation of students. . . .

Second, conventional grading may cause you to be reluctant to take risks with your writing or ideas. It doesn't allow you to fail at writing, which many suggest is a primary way in which people learn from their practices. Sometimes grades even lead to the feeling that you are working against your teacher, or that you cannot make a mistake, or that you have to hide part of yourself from your teacher and peers. The bottom line is, failure at writing is vital to learning how to write better. And we have to embrace our failures, because they show us the places we can improve, learn, get better—and these are the reasons we are in college! Grades on our

1 The author thanks friends and colleagues Dr. Kayla A. Bruce (Olivet Nazarene University), Dr. Virginia Schwarz (San Francisco State University), and Dr. Jennifer Eidum (Elon University) for their generous and sustained conversations about LBGC use in the college writing classroom.

work and writing do not allow us to productively fail. They create conditions that mostly punish failure, not reward it for the learning opportunity it can and should be. (2019, pp. 143–144)

To put it more succinctly: “Because grades are so destructive to student learning in writing classrooms . . . grading contracts are the best antiracist solution I’ve found” (Inoue, 2015, p. 178).

Therefore, instead of traditional grades in this course, we will instead be working through the semester using a **labor-based grading contract**. By definition, *contract grading* is an agreement that students enter into with the professor (Elbow, 2008). Labor-based contract grading is based on the idea that student effort (i.e., the amount of labor, time, intensity, and application you put into your writing) is the major factor in the outcome of an assignment. This means that instead of focusing on individual grades/points on assignments, I will focus on your progress throughout the arc of the entire semester.

I hope that this kind of grading style helps you feel less anxiety about “getting it right” and allows you to feel free to take risks, make mistakes, collaborate with classmates, and be more creative with your writing in this [Course Number] course!

[Course Number] [Semester] has a B default grade. If you complete all of the work asked of you in the spirit it is asked, and if you demonstrate sustained effort through the processes that we establish as a class, then you will earn a B in the course. To earn an A, you must go above and beyond the list of baseline course expectations below; we will discuss and brainstorm what this might mean to you and your classmates in the first 2 weeks of class.

Baseline Course Expectations

In order to earn at least a B in the course, students must agree to the following:

1. Not miss more than 2 weeks' worth of class/assignments (i.e., six total absences).
2. Meet due dates and writing criteria for all assignments, including daily work in-class/online, minor invention work, major rough and final drafts, and peer review/writing workshop days.
3. Complete all class readings before the scheduled discussion date and come prepared to each class meeting.
4. Demonstrate authentic and regular participation in online collaborative activities on Google Classroom and Google Drive, both in class and out of class.
5. Give thoughtful peer feedback and respond to classmates' writing faithfully on collaborative tasks (e.g., peer review, writing workshops).
6. Sustain effort and investment on each draft of all writing assignments, including engaging with Dr. O's response to your writing (i.e., her feedback, whether written or oral).
7. Make substantive revisions based on feedback/response to your writing when the expectation is to revise—not just copy-edit or touch up.
8. Polish all final revisions of major assignments to produce edited, college-level academic work that responds to a specific rhetorical situation (e.g., purpose, audience expectations).
9. Attend all scheduled conferences with the professor.
10. Submit a midterm memo and a final reflective memo.

Failure to consistently meet these baseline expectations will result in a grade lower than a B:

- One missed expectation will result in a BC² in the course.
- Two missed expectations will result in a C in the course.
- Three missed expectations will result in a CD in the course.
- Four or more missed expectations will result in a D or a failing grade.

² To clarify, the institution at which I am employed uses an atypical grading scale with no +/- grades. Instead, the grade range is as follows: A, AB, B, BC, C, CD, D, F.

To earn an A in the course, the undersigned agree to achieving the following four elements that go above and beyond the baseline course expectations. (Agreeing to three of these “above-and-beyond criteria” results in a grade of AB.)

We will discuss extensively in class what above-and-beyond criteria could be. Stay tuned!

	Student description	Dr. O’s notes/clarification
Above-and-beyond criteria 1:		
Above-and-beyond criteria 2:		
Above-and-beyond criteria 3:		
Above-and-beyond criteria 4:		

Signature Agreement

I agree to the terms and conditions of the grading contract for [Course Number], [Semester].

[delete this text and type here]
 Student Signature & Date

[delete this text and type here]
 Professor Signature & Date

References

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