Contract Grading for Fairness and Learning

A presentation by
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Think-pair-share

- Think of something you learned to do recently (a yoga pose, a recipe, listening better).
- What helped you learn it?
"The Case Against Grades"

Grades

- Decrease intrinsic motivation for learning
- Create a preference for the easiest possible task
- Encourage cheating
- Reduce the quality of students’ thinking
- Breed fear of failure
- Focus students on how well they are doing not on what they are doing
- Cause us to obsess over measurable outcomes to the detriment of other, equally important learning

“Grading for learning is like bombing for peace.”
- Alfie Kohn
Enter contract grading

- Clarifies the work required for each final grade so students can self-select the work they want to put into the course
  - May involve negotiating with students over what’s required
- Minimizes or eliminates letter grades on individual assignments
  - May involve student-generated rubrics and peer- and self-assessment as part of determining grades
Peter Elbow and Jane Danielewicz’s philosophy

- Focus students on learning
- Devote classroom time and attention to writing
- Make teaching more enjoyable and easier
- Use contracts “to resist the culture of grading and assessment” which is inherently biased, flawed, and one-dimensional

“Our main goal is a system that can help teachers and students of all ideological stripes who want grading to be easier and fairer—who want to think more about writing and less about grades.”
Peter Elbow and Jane Danielewicz’s contract

- Students earn a course grade of B based solely on their completion of the specified activities.
- A’s are awarded to students who produce exemplary work.
- Students receive lots of evaluative feedback on their writing but receive a B if they do all the required activities—no matter what the feedback says.

“We want to encourage and reward behaviors that improve writing while at the same time maintain some standard related to writing quality.”
Alison’s Contract

- No points or letter grades on individual assignments
  - Work marked as “complete” or “incomplete”
  - Essays that are not up to standards must be revised—except for one
- Default final grade is a B
  - “A” grade requires excellent work
  - Specifies allowable number of
    - Absences
    - Missing posts
    - Essays not meeting standards
Jennifer’s Contract

• Early semester check-in

Students write a letter to the teacher assessing their work in the class (effort, annotations of readings, completion of assignments, essay writing, and participation) and any struggles—teacher writes back

• Final Assessment

Students make a case for their grade using concrete evidence and criteria in syllabus
Contract grading and equity
Asao Inoue

- Argues that traditional writing assessment is grounded in whiteness and privileges a "white racial habitus"
- Uses peer-assessment to build students' awareness of dominant discourse and how it might conflict with their writing—without forcing them to assimilate to dominant discourse
- Completely decouples evaluative feedback from grades
- Grades based on amount of work students choose to do
Whiteness is the invisible norm

• “Coded discourse of race” that “seems invisible, objective, neutral” and nonpolitical
• Presents itself as “unraced individuality”
• “Not tied essentially to skin color,” but “related in complex and powerful ways to the perceived phenomenon of race”
• Maintains power by defining (and denying) difference “on its own terms and to its own advantage” (Barnett, 2000, p. 10)
Dominant discourse favors a “white racial habitus”

- Individualism, self-determination, autonomy, self-reliance, self-control
- The person is thought of as a purely individual, rational, and self-conscious being (the Cartesian “I” or cogito ergo sum)
- Failure comes from individual weakness, not larger structures
- Cognitive capacity is the ability to think rationally, logically, and objectively, with rigor, clarity and consistency valued most (Myser, 2002, pp. 67)
Dimension-based rubrics allow other discourses to emerge

- **Standard**: Evidence and reasoning are adequate to support claims and incorporate appropriate academic sources.

- **Dimension**: What evidence and reasoning do you see/hear? What does evidence and reasoning look like? How do that evidence and reasoning support claims?
Erik’s Contract

- For each final grade, specifies:
  - Percentage of points needed
  - Number of allowed absences
  - Number of learning outcomes requiring mastery/exceeding mastery

- Assignments assessed on learning outcomes mastery:
  - Exceeding mastery
  - Mastery
  - Not meeting mastery
Leslie’s Contract

- Course policies and expectations co-created and/or negotiated with students
- Final grades determined by
  - Number of late/missing assignments and non-participatory days
  - Satisfactory completion of all major writing projects (i.e., they’ve met 80% or more of the criteria for the assignment)
- Students can make up for absences/late assignments with additional work
- No penalties for non-standard language use
- Course presentation required for an A
What fears and challenges did we have in moving to contract grading?

Can you guess?
Our fears

Students would be confused resistant unmotivated

Standards would drop
What we found

Most students love it

Focus on learning has risen
In the words of Alison’s students . . .

**Positives**
- Less pressure to do everything perfectly
- Less stressful
- Not getting a grade doesn’t discourage me from trying harder on the next paper
- There are criteria to get an A

**Negatives**
- Not knowing where I stand in the class
- I don’t know if I’m going to pass or not
- I like to see scores and percentages to see what I’m doing well and what I’m not
“Even though English is my favorite subject, depending on what’s going on in my personal life I may bumble the ball and get a grade that does not properly showcase my writing ability. Your grading policy put this fear at ease. Not having to actually see a letter grade took a lot of pressure off me. It allowed me to just be free. It allowed me to respond in ways I really felt, opposed to responding in a way I think you would like to hear.”
Challenges and solutions

- Rewarding effort vs. quality of work; Communicating need for improvement and revision (Alison)
- Ensuring that course policies balance accountability and fairness (Leslie)
Quiz

• Why might someone switch to contract grading?
• Based on what we’ve shared, are teachers’ fears of contract grading confirmed by their actual experiences once they make the shift?
• What’s difficult or challenging about contract grading?
Applying the concepts

What steps can you take toward:

• Taking the focus off grades and onto learning
• Letting students know what work is required for each grade so they can self-select their goal
• Making your course policies more transparent and/or involving students in determining course policies

- Arguments against grading and restricting students to standardized English
- Asao Inoue’s work on race and writing assessment, his blog on standards-based, single-point, and dimension-based rubrics
- Blogs and articles documenting teachers’ experiences with different kinds of contract grading
- Our grading contracts
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