Opening the Gates

Challenging the Gate-Keeping of Traditional Grading Models through Contract Grading

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Link to Google folder with materials: https://tinyurl.com/y2uy4mbv
Workshop Goals

► Develop a deeper understanding of Contract Grading theory and praxis
► Create space and time for discussion and reflection
► Leave with a working draft of a grading contract
Our Journey

- Read and researched work by several writers, including Inoue, Elbow, Danielewicz, Adler-Kassner, Wardle
- Attended multiple conference presentations
- Google research via blogs and other texts written by professors who use contract grading
- Participated in our division AB-705 working group and equity research
What do I know about contract grading, and what do I want to learn?

Please take some time on your worksheet (first page) to write about what you currently know, or think you know, about contract grading, and what you want to learn/explore. Be sure to include any relevant books, articles, workshops, or professional development you have done that inform this knowledge, as well as concerns or questions you have.

If contract grading is very new to you, then please write about why you chose this session, and what your interest in contract grading is.
What is contract grading?

- Contract grading is a system of grading that requires cooperation from both the professor and students.
- A contracted number of assignments completed to a specified quality.
- Room for student choice, as they choose what to complete.
- Focus on process over product.
- No points or grades except for the final grade assigned at the end of the course based on contract fulfilment - everything is complete or incomplete.
Inoue: “Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies work explicitly from the assumption that assessment is hegemonic and unfair” (handout).

Elbow and Danielewicz: “Contract grading doesn’t get rid of evaluation. It does, however, help to decouple evaluation from grade.”

Davis (shameless self-promotion): “We use contract grading as a way of acknowledging students’ engagement in a process, and in turn, we craft a process that guarantees transformation. The difficulty is in creating a process that—once undertaken and completed—will necessarily be a priori proof of intellectual growth and/or skill development” (6).

AB 705: “Numerous reputable studies suggest that community colleges are placing too many students into remediation and that many more students would complete transfer requirements in math and English if allowed to bypass remedial prerequisite courses and enroll directly in transfer-level English and math courses.”

Threshold Concepts: “Teachers and supervisors alike should remember that automaticity takes time, perhaps at a temporary cost to other skills,” (74).

Threshold Concepts: “For those of us who teach writing, the objective is not just to have our students produce effective writing...we also want our students to demonstrate consciousness of process that will enable them to reproduce success,” (75).
Advantages of contract grading

- Promotes student choice and ownership of their work in the class
- Students “can’t hide” as they must complete the work of the class and engage in the process
- Shifts attention away from grades (product) to learning and development (process)
- Focuses on habits necessary for learning and growth
- Students are not discouraged by (possible) setbacks - Jennifer Crocker, PhD, a psychologist at the University of Michigan’s Institute of Social Research, conducted a research study on college freshman and found:
  1. More than 80% of college freshman base their self-worth on academic performance
  2. Students who based their self-worth on academic outcomes also were more likely to report conflicts with professors and greater stress.
  3. Crocker reports that "They [students] feel motivated to do well in academics, but having their self-worth on the line doesn't help their performance."
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**Final Grade:** 80.5

**Final Grade:** 88.55
Our Contracts

What we have in common:

➢ Starts with a B as the baseline
➢ Experiential learning assignments
➢ Metacognitive revisions
➢ Choice
➢ Mandatory conferences

John Davis

➢ Unilateral contract

What we learned not to do:

➢ Reinvent traditional grading in the contract
➢ Too much content
➢ Make assumptions about what students can or can’t do
➢ Center ourselves in our classes
➢ Design to protect “what if” scenarios

Trisha Herrera

➢ Portfolio component
➢ Some negotiation
What do our students say about contract grading?

“I am excited about the opportunity to improve my writing and thinking skills, as well as getting to know other people in the class. I have struggled with writing in the past so I welcome the opportunity to get better. I am nervous about the essays and the papers because of the challenge that they pose. I like the way that the class is going to be graded. This class sounds like it’s going to be a lot of work, and it also sounds like it will improve my skills.”

“The grading system interests me as it does take pressure off of students, helping us focus on practicing and displaying our skills rather than have to worry about a number.”

“I’m excited to this style of grading in a class since I’ve never seen it before. I never thought of a grading system like this. I think it is a good way to encourage students to do their own work and actually try instead of worrying about receiving the highest points possible.”

“I’m excited for this not percentage system of grading. I think it’s very interesting to have a different setting for motivation in this English class. The motivation I mean is that we are focused on completing the task instead of worry about how I will be "judged" on my work. I think this will bring out more honesty from the writer instead of the writer focusing on writing something the professor will like.”
“One thing that really interested me is the new system to grade and define homework. I think it’s really a great idea to keep students on track during their schoolwork. And in the end of the semester, we could really find out how we improved by doing the final project.”

“I’m excited to learn a lot of new things and do new things in this class. I’m not nervous but more excited to start and accomplish an A in this class. I’m just ready to get started already. I’m willing to do whatever it takes to be successful and be satisfied with how I’m doing in the class.”

“I appreciate the intent behind the changes in the grading system and how it works in this class because I do believe that a lot of students feel pressured to maintain a certain score rather than to actually learn and analyze things. I like the purpose of the informal assignments due to the fact that I believe experimentation and exploration should be encouraged more in education overall.”

“There is no pleading ignorance”
Now that we have gone over the theory behind contract grading, please take 10 minutes to think about and answer the questions on your worksheet (page 2), then reflect on your answers.
Let’s Work: Part I (10 minutes)

Option A: Draft Your Contract

While you may need more time in general to think, research, and explore contract grading, part of the process is developing the contract. Like in writing, you don’t have to fully understand your concept of contract grading to start writing a contract, as the act of writing will help you build knowledge. With this in mind, please complete the contract grading organizer on your worksheet (page 3).

Option B: Read and Explore

If you are at a stage in your learning where you think more research, reading, and examples would be helpful, please select one of the articles or artifacts, such as sample contracts and rubrics, in our Google folder to read and take notes on. Please use the note-taker we have prepared for you.

Please use the QR code to access the Google folder.
Let’s Work: Part II (10-15 minutes)

Option A
If you chose A for the last activity, please move to the next part of the worksheet (page 4): Creating a draft of a contract.

Option B
If you chose option B for the last activity, please find a partner or small group to share your thoughts, ideas, and questions with.
What do you still want to learn about contract grading?

We acknowledge that attending one 80 minute workshop is not sufficient time to engage with the academic work that is necessary to fully understand contract grading. What do you still want to learn about contract grading, and what resources are you interested in exploring to help with this?

Please take a few minutes to reflect on this individually, or with a small group.
De-Brief

What did you learn?
What do you still want to learn?
What lingering questions, ideas, thought, etc. do you have?