

Good morning! My name is Dr. Rachel McShane, and today I'm going to be presenting on the concept of "Labor-Based Grading," showing its benefits for both the students being assessed and the teacher performing the assessment. Labor-based is not a new concept, as you will see, and many scholars have explained *what* labor-based grading is, argued *why* it is so beneficial, and have proposed all sorts of perspectives and ideas on *how* to do it. Today, while I will go over some of those scholars and their ideas, please know that I'm only providing a small bit of scholarship mixed in with my personal experience. There is so much out there about this topic, and as writing teachers I highly recommend you explore, research, and experiment with the discussions and ideas currently going on in the discipline of composition and rhetoric concerning assessment practices.

When I proposed this topic, which is something I'm very passionate about, I was thrilled and honored to receive an email from one of the co-chairs of the conference that said, "Due to anticipated interest in your topic, you have the opportunity to expand your presentation into a 45-minute session, should you desire to do so." In my excitement, I quickly responded with "Thank you SO much. I'd be happy to extend the presentation!" But as the conference drew closer and closer, I began to realize just how *long* 45 minutes really is for a presentation, and thought *What have I gotten myself into?!*

Then the thought occurred to me: just do what you do best. Teaching is one of my greatest passions. I tell people all the time, when I'm in the classroom, I'm "in my element." I realized that a conference presentation is really just *teaching* other *teachers* about my own pedagogical practices. So I've structured this presentation similar to how I run my classrooms—using group work, discussion questions, and creating what I hope will be a collaborative environment. Doing this will help you—the audience—not only *hear* but get the opportunity to contemplate, discuss, and even practice in real time some of the concepts I'll be discussing. And, let's be honest: it will be less boring for you AND me. As I tell my students on day one of class: I'm not a "big lecture girlie." So let's work together, and make this fun!

For our activity, I would like everyone who can, please scan the QR code on the screen and read the following sample paper. It's fairly short—a 750 word essay on the play *Hamlet*—written by an undergrad student. After reading it, come up with a grade. You may do this however you'd like, I just ask that you assess this sample paper however you would assess any

other student's paper: consider whatever things you would typically consider, pay attention to the details you'd usually focus on, and assign it an overall grade using either a traditional letter or number grade. I'll keep an eye on the room and check in every few minutes to see where everyone is at, then we will move onto the next stage of this activity.

**Note: Give around 10-15 minutes, checking in with everyone around the 5 minute, 7 minute, and 10 minute mark.*

Now we'll move onto the section of the class that I like to call "Think, Pair, Share." Get in small groups, ideally about 3 or 4 people, or pairs if necessary. Among yourselves, I'd like you to discuss the grade you assigned and answer the following questions. I'll give you around 5 minutes to do so, and will give you a heads up as the time approaches near the end.

Discussion questions (on slide):

- Did you give this paper an A+, A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, or C-, and so on...*
- What made this an A/B/C/D/F paper? What things did you take into account?*
- As a group, come up with a consensus on what grade this paper should receive.*

Okay, let's regroup and see what you came up with! Show of hands, how many of you felt this paper was an "A-paper"? A "B-paper"? A "C-paper," "D-Paper," or failing paper? Why did you give it the assessment that you did?

**Note: Take 5ish minutes to hear responses and answers.*

This activity was mentioned in Gavin P. Johnson's article "Grades as Technology of Surveillance." He describes his experience doing this exact activity in a class of graduate students preparing to teach first-year writing courses. Johnson wrote that the class produced "A range of grades on a single paper from a group of teachers a week away from teaching the same curriculum." He goes on to describe: "The room erupted in panic: 'Am I doing something wrong?' 'Am I being too harsh?' 'I refuse to give up my rigor!' 'I know what an A paper looks like!'" ("Grades as Technology of Surveillance 54).

The point of this activity is not to critique types of grading practices, or show one person they are "too hard" or "too soft." Rather is meant to demonstrate a general fact about grades that we all probably know in the back of our heads: grades are entirely subjective. What one person

might consider an “A+ paper” might be a “B- paper” to another. What one person might count as a passing assignment, another might fail.

Much like Johnson, I also learned about the subjectivity of grades and grading systems as a graduate student. Being a student for so long, I always *knew* some teachers were just “hard-graders,” and others were easier. I knew they could vary. But when I was learning and determining how *I* wanted to run a classroom, I felt like Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* when she pulls back the curtain and realizes that the great and powerful Oz is really just an old man with a hot air balloon. Grades weren’t just slightly different from teacher to teacher. They were entirely *made up*.

This revelation rocked my world. Grades were all I knew! All my life, I had taken great pride in the fact that school came naturally to me, because without putting in a lot of effort, I just *made good grades*. I was so proud of that, it became almost a part my identity. So if grades weren’t even real, what did that say about me as a student? And how could I determine anything as a teacher if I didn’t use grades? How could I separate a “good student” from a “bad student”? What would I do? Who even *was* I?

I guess you could say this revelation about grading sent me into a bit of a tailspin—a mini-existential crisis, if you will. I felt sort of like this.

**Note: Play clip of “David After Dentist”*

Maybe you haven’t experienced this crisis of grades and grading, or maybe you have. I hope that today, you aren’t left simply asking, “Is this real life? Why is this happening to me?” and feeling like you want to scream, but rather, will leave with a better understanding of how we as instructors can create equitable classroom environments that foster creativity while simultaneously challenging students to produce their best work.

Note that I said *their* best work. Not my best work or your best work, or the institution you work at’s best work. *Their* best work.

Herein lies the first issue with grades: grading creates a setting in which students are categorized and labeled based on what someone else determines is “the best” or “the ideal”

student. In his book *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Classroom*, Asao Inoue writes:

“Grading is almost always employed in order to control students (and sometimes their teachers), force students to be accountable (and sometimes their teachers), and measure or rank students (and sometimes their teachers), either against each other or against a single standard. Each of these purposes for grading in writing classrooms is detrimental to learning” (*Labor-Based Grading* 5).

This leads us to the second question, which is what I’ve realized is the biggest issue with grades: who determines *what* is the “best” or the “ideal”? What standards are we using, and where are those standards coming from?

Inoue is adamant: “Grading, because it requires a single, dominant standard, is a racist and white supremacist practice” (*Labor-Based Grading* 5). For some teachers, especially us white teachers, this might feel particularly uncomfortable. We might jump to, “Excuse me? *I’m* not a racist!” Which inevitably leads to listening defensively. And let’s be honest, we all know when someone is listening defensively, they’re not actually listening.

If you feel yourself bristling at the mention of white supremacy in the classroom, I ask you to take a moment to pause. First, please hear that I’m not accusing or suggesting anything about a person’s character, but rather, to think about how we as teacher might inadvertently support racist ideologies. Inoue addresses this as well, even showing how he—who is *not white*—has done that exact thing. He writes, “Most of us likely never realize that we orient ourselves and our language teaching projects as antiblack [and racist]” (*Labor-Based Grading* xiv). So you can take a breath, and let your guard down, because we are all in this together.

What I am inviting us to partake in is a practice described by Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E Kirsch call “Critical Imagination”: “seeing the noticed and the unnoticed, rethinking what is there and not there, and speculating what could be there instead” (18). This then leads into “Strategic Contemplation,” a pause, meditation, and silent observation to bear witness and “render meaningfully, respectfully, honorably the words” that we hear (22). Krista Ratcliffe writes extensively on a similar idea, “rhetorical listening,” which she defines as “when listeners invoke both their capacity and willingness to promote an understanding of self and others” (205).

Today I'd like us to rhetorically listen and strategically contemplate *together* how we might be *contributing* to systemic issues in the classroom, and consider what we can do to create more affirming, accepting, and compassionate spaces. At times, embarking on that journey and facing how we have inadvertently contributed to white supremacist spaces can feel uncomfortable. But I'm a firm believer that growth only comes in discomfort. If we're not stretching and feeling a bit of discomfort, we're not growing.

So let's dive into the discomfort together and return to the question: *How exactly* is grading rooted in racism and white supremacy? And the answer (although complex in history), is fairly simpler than you might think: We've all been taught (and trained *to teach*) "standard academic English." But as the roots of standard academic English are (and let's all admit this)...WHITE.

Many scholars have discussed the racism hidden in how teachers assess writing for decades. The Conference on College Composition and Communication (or CCCC's) Committee on Language Policy came out with a statement "Students' Right to Their Own Language" in 1972, which stated:

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language [...]
Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and *immoral* advice for humans. (CCCC's , 19, emphasis added)

In other words, there is no official "standard English"; such a claim is rooted in ideas of superiority and elitism. We have long been taught to teach students, "You need to speak, write, and communicate at this specific level and in this specific way," but the sinister message behind that is, "You need to do this in order to be viewed as intelligent, capable, and valid." And it all comes back to power: the ones who decide the "levels" and the "ways" of communication are the dominant groups in power (CCCC's 25). And again, let's be real: in our American culture, that's always been white people.

Inoue, as a scholar, tends to focus much of his research and writings on race and ethnicity. "Students' Right to Their Own Language" is also often applied in conversations on

race and ethnicity. However, reconsidering how we assess writing isn't only about addressing racism, because grades aren't *only* racist. They are exclusionary by nature. Johnson states, "Grades and related punitive assessment models enshrine racist, sexist, classist, ableist, colonial, cis-heteronormative gatekeeping practices. Full stop" ("Assessment's Affective Attachments" 160). In other words, *** traditional grading systems don't just impact students of color—they also harm students from lower-income backgrounds, disabled students, ESL students, and anyone who doesn't fit an idealized "norm."

What I think is perhaps the most damning aspect of traditional grading systems, though, is the way these exclusions lead students to view *themselves*. *** Gavin Johnson writes in multiple articles about the ways grades lead students to feel shame and humiliation; Ellen C. Carillo devotes an entire chapter in her book to how grades impact students' mental health. Often, a student doesn't just see a bad grade and think, "Aw, bummer, I'll do better next time." They often see a bad grade and think it says something about *them*. Johnson states***,

"The process follows this path: grades label a student (this is an A student, that student is at risk of failure), students perform identities based on those labels ("I'm smart" or "I'm stupid"), and students operate within material and cultural structures of power as determined by [those] identities (business executives, middle-class workers, and lower-class laborers)" ("Grades as Technology of Surveillance" 59).

But grading policies don't only impact the students—they impact the teacher as well. Johnson explains that often, grades are used to not only make sure the students are "doing well," but also to assess and evaluate the teacher and make determinations about their efficiency***. "For teachers," he writes, "the anxiety of reaching grade-distribution expectations (even if unstated) deeply affects effectiveness" ("Grades as Surveillance" 64). Remember when he described doing the activity that we all just did? He expressed wondering, "Is there something wrong with *me*?"

I recall my first semester teaching as a graduate student, and tallying up final grades at the end. I was still using the good ol' 100-point per assignment system, and I noticed I had a lot of students passing my course with flying colors, and instead of being proud, I worried that meant I might be "too easy." *Oh no*, I remember thinking. *My bosses might think I'm too easy of a teacher*. The following semester, our university experienced a shooting on the college campus,

and shortly after that, attendance and participation drastically dropped. At the end of the semester, I had almost the opposite results: many students failed the course. And again, I thought *Oh no. My bosses might think I'm a bad teacher*, despite the outcome being due to tragic circumstances out of my control. But that didn't matter: I thought the sign of being a good teacher was having a solid bell curve of final grades—some students with A's, most with B's and C's, and just a few failing. Even though I was the teacher, and I was the grader rather than the graded, I still felt they said everything about *me*.

Another negative impact of traditional grades, as we also saw in our activity, leads to a what I would call a “flattening” of students.*** Instead of humans, with complex identities, backgrounds, experiences, beliefs, values, and all the other things that make us unique, we boil them down to labels: Suzy is an A student, while Jimmy is an average C and Avery is failing. But often, we don't pause to ask *why*? What might be going on in their lives, or have gone on in their upbringings or backgrounds, that are impacting their class performance? Or what are this student's strengths, and how can I incorporate them in assignments and assessments? If we truly care about our students, shouldn't we as instructors consider those things as well when assessing them?

This is where a concept like labor-based grading comes into play and proves an invaluable tool for teachers. Inoue explains that the heart of labor-based grading is to evaluate writing “purely by the labor students complete, not by any judgments of the quality of their writing” (*Labor Based Grading Contracts*, 3). However, this does *not* equate to a “free-for-all” or “participation trophy” for attending class. Inoue goes on to explain, “While the qualities of student writing is still at the center of the classroom and feedback, it has no bearing on the course grade” (3).

Labor-based grading often incorporates the constant cycle that writing truly is: writing, reviewing, revising, and writing some more, reviewing again, more revisions, and so on and so on. Inoue writes***, “One doesn't learn to write by turning in a finished paper. One learns *in the labors* of researching, drafting, and revising—in the doing—and learns best if one pays attention to how one is doing those labors” (*Labor-Based Grading Contracts* 106).

So what does labor-based grading look like? And how do we teachers do this when the institutions we work at require us to submit a grade at the end of each semester? Scholars have

several different strategies and styles of labor-based grading; I'm going to present three that I have encountered—one that is very popular and employed by Asao Inoue, and two that I encountered myself in my education. But please know these are far from the “only” ways. If the concept of labor-based grading is exciting to you, but these styles aren't, keep digging until you find the right one for you.

The first style is a “Labor-Based Grading Contract,” which is what Asao Inoue writes extensively about***. If you read his book *Labor-Based Grading Contracts*, you will see several different ways and styles of grading contracts. Some are predetermined by the teacher, others involve collaborating with students to determine together what grade the student would like at the end of the semester, and what needs to be done in order to receive that. Here is an example of a breakdown of Inoue's grading contract.

**Note: Show graph on slide, and explain the categories*

This style is still structured and clear, but allows for students to simply focus on the labor itself rather than “getting things right.” Inoue also explains that “all assignments are labor, so they are all treated equally when calculating grades. A late formal essay draft or a late informal reflection of a paragraph each count as one late assignment” (127).

Another style of labor-based grading is one I encountered while taking classes with Dr. Ashanka Kumari in graduate school. Dr. Kumari had such a significant impact on my personal education journey and teaching career—she was at one point my teacher, at another the Writing Program Director (aka, my boss), she became my advisor and dissertation committee chair, and continues to have an active role and impact in who I am today as a teacher and a scholar. But this profound and lasting impact began when, in 2020, I took a course with her and she reviewed her grading policy.

It was described in her syllabus as “grade agreement” (similar to Inoue's term “grade contract,” but felt much less intimidating—I think if she had called it a “contract,” I might have felt incredibly unsure of what that meant, and possibly wonder if I needed a lawyer present). Her grad agreement also had a somewhat less structured set-up than Inoue's, but was still clear and direct***. Instead of numbers on a graph, Dr. Kumari used what she referred to as a “feedback-labor model.” Each assignment received one of the following styles of feedback:

**Note: Show excerpt from Ashanka's syllabus, and read through it*

At the end of her assessment “blurb” in her syllabus, Dr. Kumari wrote that the course itself was not “gradeless” because, as she put it, “I begrudgingly have to enter a final course grade at the end of the term.” But she explained that the final course grade would come from a holistic assessment of each student’s “attempts to compose something of quality and [their] general fortitude” using the grade agreement.

When I took my first class with Dr. Ashanka Kumari in 2020, I was just starting off my PhD program—in fact, her class was my first as a PhD student. However, I had done my Master’s degree at the same university, and had already been teaching as a graduate assistant teacher (or GAT) for a while. When I saw her assessment policy, I thought, ...*what is this?* I felt like David after the dentist, trying to figure out if this was real life. It made no sense to me, and initially brought great anxiety. *If there’s no scale, what do I do? How do I know I got it right?*

Within one assignment, I figured it out. I submitted a short reflection on a reading, and Dr. Kumari provided *extensive* feedback, pointing out my strengths, as well as some things she’d like me to work on as we moved forward. I received “full credit” for meeting the assignment requirements and submitting on time. And eventually, in her course, I “messed up.” I misunderstood an assignment, and turned in something that wasn’t “right.” But instead of punishing me, she explained in detail what my mistakes were, and requested I revise and resubmit, which I did, and received full credit on the second attempt.

As a nervous, brand-new PhD student, Ashanka gave me confidence while simultaneously challenging me to be a better student. Reflecting on her labor-based grading policy, I realized it not only gave me confidence, but also the ability (and, in a way, permission) to experiment and try new things; but most of all, it gave me so much peace of mind. As long as I gave it my honest, best effort, and tried, I knew would get the credit for my work, even if it meant I had to revise it or give it another go. I decided I wanted to incorporate that in my own classrooms.

Very quickly, I adopted Dr. Kumari’s “Full Credit, half credit, no credit” policy wholesale (with her permission of course). But as I used it, I realized it still caused students (and even myself) to think in terms of numbers or percentages. Full credit meant 100. Half credit meant 50.

No credit meant 0. And this gave students some anxiety even MORE than a traditional grading scale. It led them to feel like one mistake meant a failing grade. So, much like an assignment I needed to revisit, I decided to “revise and resubmit” my grading policy.

By that point, at my university, we had a new writing program director, Dr. Gavin Johnson. (Yes, the same Gavin Johnson I’ve referenced about a hundred times in this presentation.) Although by the time Dr. Johnson got to my university, I was already ABD and didn’t get the chance to be his student, I worked closely with him as a GAT under his supervision. He became more than just a Writing Program Director or a colleague—he became a sort of mentor, and now I’m privileged to call him a friend.

I would spend lots of time in Gavin’s office, talking about pedagogy and theories and assignments, bouncing ideas off him left and right. When I brought up how I loved the concept of labor-based grading, but constantly fought the student fear of getting a “50” versus seeing “half credit” as an opportunity to revise, he shared with me his grading policy. He used two labels: “Accept” or “Revise.” It was the exact same concept—encourage students to revise their work—just in a simpler, more direct way.

I ended up taking both Gavin and Ashanka’s policies and creating my own style that was a mesh of the two. Here is the grading policy in my syllabus:

**Note: Show policy, talk through it.*

Currently, this is working well for me, although I have thought more than once while doing my research for this of reevaluating and “revamping” it. But isn’t that what writing—whether it’s an essay, an academic article, or a grading policy in a syllabus—all about? Growing, shifting, evolving, adjusting. It’s all a part of the process.

I have been using labor-based grading in my college courses for almost five years now. And I have had some of the most amazing successes in terms of student growth. Every semester, I ask students to write a brief, informal reflection, detailing things like their favorite lesson or assignment, a moment they felt challenged and why, something they would change or adjust about the course, and how they have grown as a student.

I cannot tell you *how* many students have written specifically about how the labor-based grading practices positively impacted their learning experiences. They express feeling less anxiety when submitting assignments, knowing that if they didn't "get it right," they'd get the chance to try again. I've had countless students say they learned they were *actually* better writers than they thought, because they got the opportunity to truly learn and practice the art of composing solid writing. I've read reflections where students shared feeling like they could really experiment and try new things without fear of being punished or "getting it wrong." And, what are perhaps my personal favorite responses, they often say that they felt validated, cared for, and seen because of the attention, care, and compassion they receive as they learn and grow.

There's tons of research with data and graphs and studies of all kinds, proving that labor-based grading is effective. But for me, seeing the results firsthand—as a student writing papers, and as a teacher assessing them—is all the proof I need.

**Note: Open the floor for discussion/questions.*

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