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Article

Contract Grading in an Indigenous-Specific Section of Academic Reading and Writing

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Abstract

This essay outlines the experience of introducing a labour-based grading contract in a section of the University of Victoria's standard introduction to academic reading and writing that was only open to students who self-identified as Indigenous. Grading contracts offer an alternative approach to conventional grading, in which a student's grade is determined a contract set out between the student and the instructor. By emphasizing learning over grades, this approach to grading works towards decentering normalized whiteness in academic writing pedagogy. In this essay, I describe our grading contract, I explain how our class negotiated the contract, and I share some reflections on what went well and what I would do differently next time.

In the fall of 2021 at the University of Victoria (UVic), I taught an academic writing course that was only open to students who self-identified as Indigenous. This course was a specific section of an Academic Reading and Writing course that fulfills UVic's academic writing requirement (ATWP 135), and it was the first time that UVic had offered such a course. This course was a pilot, a kind of soft-rollout for a larger cohort-program for Indigenous students that is still in the works. The course was held in the First Peoples House, a social, cultural and academic centre for Indigenous students at UVic. There were 13 students in the class; these were mostly first-year students from across disciplines. I anticipated some of the challenges I might face in the classroom (such as hybrid teaching during a pandemic), and I was pleasantly surprised by some unexpected victories (like when a visit from the LE,NOŊET Student Engagement and Support Coordinator resulted in an impromptu bursary-writing party). However, the most significant challenge I faced while teaching was grappling with the white language supremacy and colonization embedded in conventional grading.

I use the term "white language supremacy" here deliberately. Although this term has been met with resistance by some white scholars (Cedillo, 2020), anti-racist rhetoric, writing, and composition scholars use this term to make explicit that upholding Standard Written English and assessing students' work according to these standards contributes to white supremacy culture (Inoue, 2019; Cedillo, 2020). In this context, white language supremacy culture does not (only) refer to extremists such as the Proud Boys or other hate groups; rather, white language supremacy names the institutionalization and systematic ways that normalized whiteness in academia and beyond holds up white habits of language as superior to other forms of language use. As Asao B. Inoue explains, "Normalized whiteness contributes to white supremacy in language practices in the academy and society and produces racism. It colonizes. And of course, normalized whiteness is not referring to the skin color of teachers or students. As the literature on whiteness explains in a variety of ways, whiteness in this context refers to a set of structures in our reading and judging practices" (2019, p. 374). As I show in this paper, one of the greatest rewards of teaching this particular section of ATWP 135 was being forced to interrogate my own participation in white language supremacy as a writing instructor.

Although this section had been created with the overall goal of decolonization and Indigenization in the university, I was concerned that my role as a non-Indigenous instructor teaching Indigenous students about academic writing was structurally colonial. I was also concerned that my role might be misunderstood—that students might think I was trained in something I wasn't, like Indigenous Methodologies. Therefore, I included a self-location statement that foregrounded my identity and my perceived role in the class. As part of this statement I wrote, "As a non-Indigenous woman, I want to emphasize that I don't see my role here as teaching you about Indigenous or Traditional Knowledges. My role, and the set of skills that I bring to this classroom, is to work with you and introduce you to the knowledge-making practices of academic communities" (Gaudet, 2020). I emphasized that my goal was help students build skills, confidence, and experience as academic writers. My initial concerns with the course were valid, but by being open about my concerns with my students, we were able to speak openly about the structural challenges of the class throughout the term.

One of the most significant conversations I had with students was about the power dynamics of conventional grading. For instance, after handing back the first assignment, marked according to the university and departmental grading standards of the university, a student raised an important issue: although my lectures had emphasized that there is no one right way to write, I had assessed the students' writing using a grading scale that actualizes a range of writing from excellent to poor. This

student raised an important issue, and she was right. Despite my best intentions, I, a white instructor, was assessing Indigenous-student writing using grading scale that equates excellence with "a thorough grasp of standard English conventions," language that is "precise, interesting, powerful, and engaging," and ideas that "flow logically and fluently" (University of Victoria, 2020). These standards reinforce "normalized whiteness" (Inoue, 2019, p. 373) without interrogating the disparate positionality, privilege, or perspective of students and instructors. This valuable encounter with a student made the white language supremacy in conventional grading too obvious to ignore.

I brought this issue to the ATWP 135 Course Coordinator[1], Sara Humphreys, who suggested I consider adapting a grading contract for this particular section of ATWP 135. With support from the Course Coordinator and the ATWP Program Director, I facilitated the transition from a conventional grading model to a grading contract. That we pivoted to this contract midway through the semester was not ideal, but it was necessary. In the rest of this essay, I describe our labour-based contract, I explain how our class negotiated the contract, and I share some reflections on what went well and what I would do differently next time.

The main idea behind contract grading is that the grade is determined by the terms of the contract (usually the amount of labour or number of assignments). In the contract I adapted, if the student fulfills all the expectations that constitute full participation in the course—that is, they submit all the assignments—they get a "B" (75%). If a student does less work, they get a lower grade, and if they do more work, they get a higher grade. With this approach, students are able to take risks, make mistakes, and focus on learning without the anxiety of needing to secure a particular grade for any given assignment. If they complete all of the assignments (and what counts as "completion" is something that can be negotiated with students and included in the contract), then they get a "B."

In drafting our class's grading contract, I relied heavily on American Writing Studies scholar Asao Inoue's "Social Justice Framework for Anti-Racist Writing Assessment" (n.d.). However, as many Canadian Writing Studies scholars are beginning to acknowledge, Canada has a history of racism and colonization unique from the United States, and anti-racist and decolonial resources must consider these contexts. As such, I adapted Inoue's labour-based grading contract for our specific classroom context, foregrounding Canada's onging history of cultural genocide and the ways that grading can reproduce the power-imbalances of white supremacy and colonialism (see the attached Appendix for a copy of the labour-based grading contract). I wrote a draft of a labour-based contract for our class, and then shared this contract with students via google docs. I gave the class five days (including one scheduled class session) to negotiate the details of the contract.

This negotiation included in-class discussions of what we felt was necessary for a piece of writing to be considered "complete," what we felt constituted "required labour" in order to earn a "B," and what we felt an "A" comprised. We agreed that in order for a piece of writing to be considered complete, it needed to fulfill the expected learning outcomes of the assignment and it needed to be copy-edited. Submissions that did not meet the learning outcomes would need to be revised and resubmitted. We wrote into the contract that although I might misunderstand or disagree with a student's writing, that would not matter; what mattered was the labour put into the assignment. We also decided that in order to complete the course with a "B," students needed to complete all of the major assignments in the course (a summary, a rhetorical analysis, a research consultation and proposal, a draft, a final research paper, and a reflective portfolio; under the conventional grading scheme, all of these major assignments must be completed in order to pass the course). Students also needed to complete five "mini-assignments"—low-stakes writing assignments including freewriting, reflections, and practice assignments—that were assigned throughout the term. In order to earn an "A," students had to complete all the "mini-assignments" over the term, as well as two "additional assignments." These additional assignments could be submitted at any point in the term. These additional assignments needed to be initiated and proposed by the student and approved by me. In the contract, we listed some possible assignments ideas including a five-minute research presentation, a longer research paper, or a creative project, but as I will discuss later, the kinds of additional assignments that students proposed were varied and quite personal.

One of the biggest changes that we made to Inoue's template was the criteria for receiving a "B" grade. My initial draft of our labour-based grading contract included attendance, punctuality, and in-person participation as part of the required labour. Inoue's contract, for example, requires students be physically present and on time, whereas missed classes and tardiness result in a lower grade (pp. 2-3, 2017). One of my students pointed out that this requirement of labour disciplined her body in a way that penalized her disability; while she had strategized other ways of participating and engaging with course materials (such as watching recorded lectures, participating in online discussion forums, and using virtual office hours), the contract's conflation of labour with physical presence made it difficult to succeed. We rewrote the contract to allow for flexibility in participation and attendance, and based our contract on the submission of writing assignments. One of the strengths of contract grading is that it can be responsive to the needs of individual students in the class; different groups of students may highlight different priorities and values while determining criteria for a "B" grade.

When we had agreed on a contract that everyone felt was fair, we posted it to our class's online learning site. I also asked that each student email me and inform me in writing which grading approach they would like to adopt for the rest of the term: conventional grading or contract grading. Each of the 13 students in this section opted to switch to the grading contract. Three students asked if in my feedback I could also provide a sense of where their writing fell on a conventional grading scale; for these students I included this assessment in my written feedback.

My experience of providing feedback under a grading contract was very positive. I provided extensive formative feedback as in-text and summative comments, just as I would with conventional grading[2]. However, with conventional grading, I often find myself trying to communicate to a student why their paper received the grade it did, and the comments become as much about defending or justifying a grade as they do about coaching a student. When providing feedback without attaching a grade, my comments were much more dedicated to coaching, suggesting ways that students could practice generic conventions of academic writing, and explaining my experience as a reader. Providing feedback without needing to explain a grade resulted in feedback that was more akin to reviewing a peer's paper. I found reading student assignments much more enjoyable, as I was able to separate my reading experience from justifying a grade.

The grading contract also facilitated student agency by providing students with the opportunity to produce their own authentic[3] writing assignments. Under the grading contract, students need to initiate and propose their own additional assignments in order to receive an "A." Because students were initiating and proposing these additional assignments, the writing often directly related to their own needs and experiences. For example, one of the students wrote a territorial acknowledgement for her hometown, and then produced a one-page reflection on the process of writing this acknowledgement and linking this acknowledgement to genre theory. Another student, who had experience working in graphic design, translated her research paper on the decriminalization of sex work into an infographic. Another student created a book of paintings and wrote a reflection of how these paintings related to her research paper on critiques of post-feminism. Each of these assignments emerged out of the student's interests, skills, and agency; students created assignments that mattered to them.

The grading contract was well-received by most of the students, as was exemplified by the end of term "Course Experience Survey." For example, one student wrote the following: "I really liked how she pointed out that conventional grading is colonial and introduced labour–based grading with the option to choose." Another simply wrote "the labour-based grading was GREAT." Not all responses

were positive: one student noted that a mid-semester change in grading was disruptive. I completely agree. Under the circumstances, I think changing the grading structure when we did was the best way forward for this particular section given the structural power dynamics embedded in the course.

I plan to pilot another course with contract grading in Fall of 2022. There are two key things that I will do differently based on my recent experience with contract grading. First, I will offer labour-based grading contract as the default choice, and present conventional grading as something that students may opt into. Introducing contract grading as a norm challenges the default assumption that conventional grading is the "right" way to do things; moreover, it requires that we have a discussion as a class at the beginning about the power and politics of language and education. If a student wants to continue with conventional grading, they may, but they must actively decide to adopt that grading scheme. Second, I will make more explicit what an "A" means. Under UVic's grading scale, an "A" encompasses grades between 85 and 89. After I submitted the semester's grades, I had a message from a student explaining that she was surprised by her grade. She had assumed that an "A" corresponded to an 89%, and I had assumed that an "A" corresponded to an 85%. When I looked over our contract, we had not specified the numerical value of an "A." So, the student and I discussed and negotiated a number that she and I were both comfortable with and I submitted a change-grade form. In future classes, I will be sure to write in specifics about what will appear on a student's transcripts.

I turned to contract grading because I found myself faced with a pedagogical situation that made the white language supremacy embedded in conventional grading schemes extremely visible (and unacceptable) to me and my students. Because I was a non-Indigenous instructor teaching only Indigenous students, the racialized and colonial power dynamics of grading became impossible not to see. However, the lessons I learned in this section are relevant for writing pedagogy more broadly, especially in situations where the power dynamics are not so hyper-visible. Writing teachers need to reflect on and acknowledge the ways that power, white language supremacy, and grading, to say the least, contribute to the ongoing oppression of marginalized, non-white, EAL, and other "othered" students. And then, we need to actively work to challenge these systems in whatever ways we can. As Inoue (2015) emphasizes, "it is not fairness that we need in antiracist writing assessment...it is revolutionary change, radically different methods, structures, and assumptions about the way things are now and how to distribute privileges" (56).

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Endnotes

1. The Academic and Technical Writing Program (ATWP) offers multiple sections of ATWP 135, and the Course Coordinator oversees the continuity across sections as well as supports instructors.
2. Contract grading may seem daunting because of the spectre of additional work, I did not find that my labour increased. Rather, it changed. I had to count assignments at the end of the term to determine final grades (instead of calculate based on a percentage), but other than that, my labour stayed largely the same.
3. The term "authentic" is often used to describe writing assignments that combine academic goals with real-world connections. As Katalin Wargo (2020) explains, one of the strengths of authentic writing assignments is that they facilitate student agency.

Appendix A: ATWP 135 A41 Labour-Based Contract Grading

At UVic, conventional forms of grading are university policy. That is, the university has an institution-wide grading system for undergraduates, and instructors are expected to evaluate student work according to this grading system. However, there are many issues with conventional grading:

1. Specifically in Canada, grading reproduces the power-imbalances of white supremacy and colonialism. How do we practice decolonization in the classroom if many instructors are judging writing through a dominant, white, middle class discourse?
2. Conventional grading often leads students to focus more on grades than writing or learning. To put it simply: when it comes to learning, grades can get in the way. How can we adjust our grading to make sure that our goals are about learning and practicing to write and not about grades?
3. Conventional grading can cause students anxiety and make them reluctant to take risks with writing or ideas. A typical grading system doesn't allow for failure, because it seems there's too much at stake. However, a writing "failure" is an important stage as a student learns how to do

> better! Grades do not allow us to take risks or fail in a productive way. How can we create a context where students feel safe to take risks in their writing?

As the first ever Indigenous-specific section of ATWP 135 (UVic's primary academic writing requirement), we have an opportunity to pilot a different kind of grading assessment, one that challenges eurocentrism and provides students the opportunity to use their own language.

Asao Inoue's "Social Justice Framework for Anti-Racist Writing Assessment" provides a framework and template for a labour-based grading contract. I have adapted this template for our course-specific context, and I propose we translate our assessment system to a labour-based grading contract.

A labour-based grading contract means grades are determined based on the amount of labour done by students. You will continue to get lots of feedback on your writing and other work during the rest of the semester. That is, I will still comment on your work and help you to develop skills and tools in research and academic writing. But, you will have the chance to write bravely, riskily, and enthusiastically, to experience different kinds of successes and failures, and revise writing based on the feedback of myself and your peers.

Under this grading contract, the default grade for the course is a "B" (75%). Basically, if you do all that is asked of you in good faith and do all the required labour, then you'll get a "B" course grade. What I think of your writing will not matter; what will matter is that you listen to the feedback of your peers and myself and strive to understand and consider this feedback. We might disagree or misunderstand your writing, but if you put in the labour, you are guaranteed a "B." If you do less labour than is expected, or do not complete all of the assignments and activities, you will get a lower grade as a course grade. If you do more than the basic expectations, you will get a higher grade. This system is better than regular grading for giving you a clear idea of what your final grade looks like at any moment. To be clear: If you are doing everything as directed (no matter what anyone says), you're getting a B.

This contract is open for comments via google doc between October 25 and 29. We will finalize the course contract on the 29th and post it to Brightspace. Please let me know via email by end of day Oct 29th if you would like to be graded "conventionally" (that is, according to the current syllabus with grades assigned per assignment) or if you would like to be graded according to the "labour based grading contract."

Labour-Based Grading Contract

Overview of Grade Breakdowns

I have categorized the assignments in this class in three ways: **required; optional; and additional**. See below for detailed descriptions and examples.

- **Required** assignments are those assignments listed in the syllabus that currently comprise a large portion of the grade breakdown. These are essential assignments in terms of the learning outcomes of the course.
- **Optional** are mini-assignments, low-stakes assignments, and other assignments designed to encourage participation, reflection, and practice. These will be assigned in class
- **Additional** assignments are assignments that require initiative and go beyond the required and optional assignments. I have suggested some below, but I am also open to suggestions! You just need to run it by me first. The additional assignments do not have specific due dates and can be completed any time over the term.

Proposed Grade Breakdown

	Number of **Required** Assignments	Number of **Optional** Assignments	Number of **Additional** Assignments
A	6	7	2
B	6	5	0
C	5	4	0
D	5	3	0
F	4 or less	3 or less	0

<u>Required (Please see syllabus for details of these assignments)</u>

Academic Summary

Persuading Skeptics

Research Consultation

Final Research Essay

Peer Review and Introduction

Portfolio

<u>Optional</u>

Self-Location Assignment (September)

Self-locations are a common practice in Indigenous-related research. This short assignment (250 words or so) asks you to write a self-reflective story of how you came to be at UVic.

Citation Worksheet (October)

A short exercise that asks you to practice MLA and APA style

Practice Rhetorical Analysis (October)

A paragraph that asks you to practice rhetorical analysis in preparation for your research essay

Freewriting (October, November)

A timed writing exercise that asks you generate ideas by writing without stopping

Participation Reflection (November)

A 1-page reflection on your participation to date

Weekly Discussion Posts on Brightspace (October – December)

A weekly discussion post in response to the week's materials (4 posts between Nov 1 and Dec 6 to be considered an "item")

Any additional "optional" assignments to be assigned over the term

Additional

5-minute presentation (in-class) or video (posted to brightspace) on your research

Creative output (story, art, etc)

A longer research paper (7-8 pages with 4-6 sources instead of 4-5 pages with 3-4 sources)

Another project/idea proposed by you and approved by me

All Work/Labor and writing needs to meet the following conditions:

Complete. You agree to turn in in the appropriate manner complete essays, writing, or other labor assigned that meet all of our agreed upon expectations. This means you'll be honest about completing labor that asks particular time commitments of you (for example, "write for 20 minutes," etc.).

Revisions. When the job is to revise your thinking and work, you will reshape, extend, complicate, or substantially clarify your ideas – or relate your ideas to new things. You won't just correct or touch up. Revisions must somehow respond to or consider seriously your colleagues' assessments in order to be revisions.

Copy Editing. When the job is for the final publication of a draft, your work must be well copy edited – that is, you must spend significant time in your labor process to look just at spelling and grammar.

Remember that there are resources on campus to assist you with these conditions. The Centre for Academic Communication provides ethical tutoring, and I strongly encourage you to work with the tutors throughout the semester.

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