

Dismantling the “Single Story” Narrative: Re-examining Grading Practices with Students in Mind

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One key component of contract grading is that “As students understand the goal is labor, not product, they try new and unfamiliar things without fear of losing points (Mingjung 194).

As educators we need to reexamine our current grading approach and shift the narrative of education to encourage more equitable practices and validate diverse languages of our students to dismantle inequities within the educational system.

What is Contract Grading?

•An alternative to the traditional “white” pedagogical system of attributing point values. Students must complete items on the contract: satisfactory standards and students are guaranteed a B in the course. If they do additional activities/assignments beyond the contract or do exceptional work on contract items; they will receive an A, if they do less than the contract, they will receive a C or lower.



Contract Grading Emphasizes:

- revising,
- editing,
- writing multiple drafts,
- Peer-reviewing
- Other process-based writing values.

By shifting the focus to the process and away from points, students have more cognitive gains and exercise more creative processes.

Sample Contract Language

1. attend class regularly;
2. meet due dates and writing criteria for all major assignments;
3. participate in all in-class exercises and activities; complete all low stakes writing assignments, provide thoughtful peer feedback during workshops and engage in other collaborative tasks
4. sustain effort on each draft of all papers;
5. make substantive revisions to writing assignments
6. attend conferences with the teacher to discuss drafts;
7. submit your midterm and final portfolio (Elbow 2).



Why It Is More Equitable

When we shift students' focus away from points and instead onto their writing, we provide them with the tools to create "multi-dimensional pieces of writing" (Elbow 5).

Elbow stresses that incorporating contracts allows educators to "acknowledge our institutional power... and to use that power productively by focusing students' attention on writing, not grading" (17).

Reducing institutional power amplifies student voices and experiences; doing so allows them to engage and be active participants in their learning.

Areas of Future Research

Contract grading is met with resistance, both from educators and students (Spidell and Thelin 40) related to:

- Fairness
- Increased workload
- Discomfort of the unknown

Through further research, we can continue to explore factors to resistance as well as best practices to successfully use and develop contracts in our courses.

To open the space for more diverse stories in academia, we need to reconsider our grading practices and embrace ones that elevate and provide space for multiple narratives.

Works Cited

- Elbow, Peter. "A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching [co-written with Jane Danielewicz]" (2008). *College Composition and Communication*. 3. Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/eng_faculty_pubs/3
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