Implementing Labor-Based and Anti-Racist Writing Assessment Principles

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Who am I? How Did I Get Here?

- Assistant Professor of English, Co-director of the new Writing, Editing, and Publishing major
- Research interests: postmodern ethics, digital technology, (post)pedagogy
- In the fall of 2017 when I taught our department's graduate Writing Practicum for incoming TAs.
- Asao B. Inoue's (2015) *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future*
- Asao B. Inoue's (2019) *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*

Today's Plan

- Outline two inter-related problems: structurally racist achievement gaps *and* critiques of traditional "achievement-based" approaches to assessment (grades are bad)
- Stommel's work on "Ungrading"
- Why I Implement Labor-Based Grading
    - Separate Feedback from Grades
    - Reward Effort rather than Attempt to Measure Achievement
- How I Implement Labor-Based Grading
    - Developing a Syllabus
    - Fighting Against Canvas
- Rethinking Rubrics
    - How to Revise Them
    - How to Incorporate Them into Your Classroom
- Let Me Ask You a Question
- Reviewing Fundamental Anti-Racist Assessmen Principles

Foundations of Inoue's Project: Unequal Outcomes from Inequitable Contexts

While Inoue's book was published in 2015, the foundations of his project stretch back to a qualitative assessment conducted at Fresno state from 2005 to 2012.

TABLE 1. **Data on Course Failure in Fresno State's First-Year Writing Program (English 1 and English 5B)**

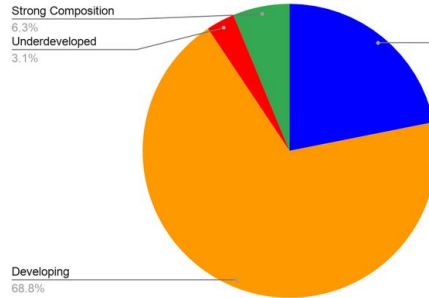| Academic Year	African American			Asian American (Hmong)			Latino/Latina			White		
	N	No. FAILED	% FAILED	N	No. FAILED	% FAILED	N	No. FAILED	% FAILED	N	No. FAILED	% FAILED
2005–06 (ENGL 1)	198	45	22.7%	454	90	19.8%	843	188	22.3%	788	121	15.4%
2009–10 (ENGL 5B)	130	25	19.2%	158	16	10.1%	682	75	11.0%	292	21	7.2%
2010–11 (ENGL 5B)	109	18	16.5%	195	19	9.7%	685	65	9.5%	273	23	8.4%
2011–12 (ENGL 5B)	66	11	16.7%	160	16	10.0%	553	78	14.1%	158	10	6.3%

2020-21 Assessment of ENG 123

0% of non-white students scored a strong composition, compared to 6.3% of white students.
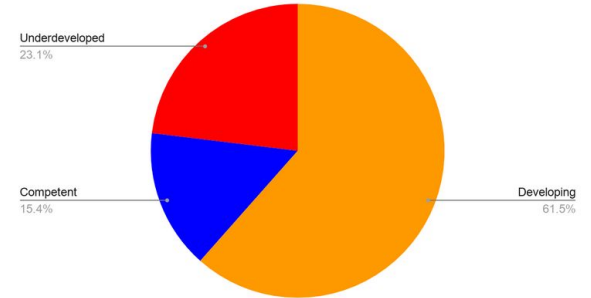
23.1% of non-white students scored an underdeveloped, compared to only 3.1% of white students.

Race: General Impression Comparison

General Impression (WH)

Strong Composition
6.3%
Underdeveloped
3.1%

Competent
21.9%

Developing
68.8%

General Impression (Non-WH)

Underdeveloped
23.1%

Competent
15.4%

Developing
61.5%

Our Obligations to Produce More Equitable Assessments

"No one is trying to be racist, but it is happening systemically and consistently, or structurally through the various classroom writing assessment ecologies. What should be clear is that racism isn't something that is always a "conscious aiming at ends," rather it is often a product of overlapping racial structures in writing assessments that are subjective and projective ... Conversely, antiracist projects must be consciously engaged in producing structures that themselves produce fair results for all racial formations involved"

(2015, p. 53).

Grades Are Bad for Everyone

- For a short review of this material, see Kohn "The Case Against Grades"
    - Inoue intensifies Kohn's critique of rubrics and "standards" which often serve to simply codify expectations for [white] Standardized Edited American English and are often more opaque to non-white students

- Kohn summarizes how grades undermine the desire to learn (replacing it with a desire to score), discourage students from taking intellectual risks (since those can hurt their score), and therefore penalize the disequilibrium, struggle, and/or productive failure requisite to learning and growth ("Against Grades," 144-145).

- My biggest problem: Grades create an adversarial relationship between teacher and students, and they change the phenomenological context within which students receive feedback

Stommel's Four Questions About Grading

For a smart and concise overview of different approaches to "ungrading," see Stommel "How to Ungrade." Stommel's theory of upgrading is caught up in four key questions:

- Why do we grade? How does it feel to be graded? What do we want grading to do (or not do) in our classes (for students or teachers?)

- What do letter grades mean? Do they have any intrinsic meaning, or is their value purely extrinsic? Does assessment mean differently when it is formative rather than summative?

- How does feedback function in relation to grades? To what extent should teachers be readers of student work (as opposed to evaluators)?

- What would happen if we didn't grade? What would be the benefits? What issues would this raise for students and/or teachers? How would institutions be forced to rethink their systems for evaluation?

Upgrading Can Mean a Lot of Different Things

- Grade Free Zones (no grades in the first 4 weeks of a semester).

- Self-Assessment (ask students to grade themselves via reflective work)

- Process Letters (ask students to write reflective letters that articulate their learning)

- Minimal Grading (all assignments receive either an A, B, or C)

- Peer/Class Assessment

- Portfolios

- Student Constructed Rubrics

- Contract Grading

- Labor-Based Grading

So What Is Labor-Based Grading?

Put succinctly, labor-based grading is a movement to reduce (or eliminate) subjective judgement from assessment. If, as so much research tells us, learning is a product of student labor, then labor-based grading is an attempt to both reward them for their work and encourage them to do more work.

Before I implemented the labor-based system I introduce today, I experimented with two alternative approaches:

- Try making all process and minor assignments in a course worth a collective 75% of the course grade, and major projects only 25%
- Try a hybrid grading contract, in which students earn an automatic 85% for completing all assignments. Grades above a B are awarded via rubrics or "instructor judgement" (which are really the same thing)

How Do I Implement Labor-Based Grading?

Let's look at a course syllabus. [Here's the syllabus for my ENG 301 Writing as a Job](#) course–a course required for all English majors (whether Literature or Writing, Editing, and Publishing) and all Writing minors.

- Time dependent: Video (About 2:30 to 4:23)

Let's take a look in Canvas.

Let's talk about why Canvas isn't great at this (and how I work around it).

Why I Value Labor-Based Grading

- I don't have data on whether these changes reducing racist assessment outcomes in my classes.
- I can see how they affect my relationship with my students, and the way they respond to my feedback.
- Not everything works. They still don't come to Office Hours or Student Hours or Marc's Super Happy Friday Afternoon Fun Time

Revising Rubrics: Three(ish) Principles

- Move away from subjective observation of quality/mastery and toward objective observation of effort at applying class lessons and principles
- Revise syllabi prompts for yes/no observation/evaluation
- Develop more specific and accessible "plain language" descriptions. Make rubric criteria clear and instructive.

Let's look at two rubrics:

- ENG 301 Writing as a Job, Job Advertisements Report Rubric
- ENG 225 Rhetoric and Gaming, Sicart Analysis Paper

Demystify Rubrics by Making Assessment a Classroom Practice

Inoue (2015) argues that instructors can help demystify such ambiguous terms by frequently assessing student work with students in class—I see this as transforming the traditional "peer review" into something more akin to "grade norming." Assessment should be a form of our pedagogy.

Bottom Line: Don't use a rubric *on* students unless you use it *with* them.

Here's how I do this in class.

Only Assess What You Teach

Our grades in a writing class should be a reflection of what students have encountered, learned, and practiced *in our classes*. If you want to promote more equitable grades and outcomes, if you want to close racial disparities, then you can make a major move to level the playing field by not rewarding students for past accomplishments or penalizing them for "deficient" preparation.

Whether traditional or labor-based, a class grade should reflect the work and experiences a student had *in that course.*

Let Me Ask You Some Questions

What today resonated with you the most?

What do you think you can incorporate into your class this semester, or next semester?

What struggles/problems/resistances do you anticipate?

Review Foundational Antiracist Principles

- *Reward* Labor rather than Evaluating Achievement
- *Separate* Feedback and Grading
- *Revise* Rubrics to reduce/eliminate subjective judgement
- *Demystify* Rubrics by Making Assessment a Classroom Practice
- *Assess* Only What You Teach

Questions? Want copies of materials?

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