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Charting Their Own Course: Individualized Contract Grading as a Practice of Freedom

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Charting Their Own Course: Individualized Contract Grading as a Practice of Freedom

Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to my COM 411: Gender and Communication students for your creativity and enthusiasm for learning, and for your feedback on this approach.

Charting their own course: Individualized contract grading as a practice of freedom

Introduction

Students should be invited to engage the classroom environment as “whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge” (hooks, 1994, p. 15). Feminist pedagogy has long recognized that part of inviting students to engage in this way requires embracing their diverse experiences and learning styles (Dever, 1999). Unfortunately, grading requirements can conflict with this goal. Some scholars see grades as dehumanizing (Blum, 2020) and counterproductive for student growth (Kohn, 1999), yet others contend that grades provide familiar “guideposts,” especially for “learners from less-privileged backgrounds” to aid movement through college classes (Talbert, 2022). To account for this, many instructors have experimented with grading contracts as a means of power sharing between students and faculty, and emphasizing learning over letter grades (Elbow, 2008). I propose an individualized grading contract as a feminist pedagogical tool that emphasizes agency and wellbeing in cultivating a class community where everyone is empowered to think critically about concepts that affect their daily lives. I have primarily used this strategy in an interdisciplinary course on gender and communication due to the diversity of perspectives and experiences students bring to the course. Some students enter the course after wrestling with the subject extensively while others have been actively discouraged from exploring concepts related to gender. Individualized grading contracts offer each student the opportunity to acknowledge where they begin and how they can grow as they navigate the semester.

Rationale

The most common approach to contract grading emphasizes labor over performance (Inoue, 2019; Blinne, 2021; Elbow, 2008). In this model, students are guaranteed a minimum grade for the course as long as they engage in activities for which the instructor provides extensive feedback. Some instructors predetermine the standards (Elbow), while others negotiate with the class or empower the class to set the standards (Shor, 2009; Moreno-Lopez, 2005; Blinne, 2021).

In my experience, the labor-based approach poses at least two significant challenges. First, many students are conditioned to assume that more work will

result in more learning/earning when that may be counterproductive.¹ These students may need encouragement to decrease their workload so that they can focus their efforts on tasks that are more meaningful for their own development. Second, students bring a wide range of subject awareness and lived experiences, making it difficult to agree on standards that benefit and motivate everyone.

The individualized contract emphasizes agency over labor to foster an environment “where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute” (hooks 1994, p.39). Allowing each student to shape their own contract prompts them to determine their own learning goals while also considering how different ways of moving through the course may enable them to fulfill collective course learning objectives. Agency is a core concept in critical communication pedagogy (CCP). CCP emphasizes that students need to be presumed competent by their instructors and “receive the message that they are ‘worthy of being heard’” (Brenneise & Congdon, 2021, pp. 65-66). bell hooks argues that a sense of shared responsibility is a “central goal of transformative pedagogy” because it fosters community as a response to concerns students have about safety in the classroom (p. 39). Although her comments were made over 25 years ago, the need for community in the face of ever-growing fear of being uncomfortable or unsafe in classroom contexts seems more salient than ever.

Some scholars have argued for “ungrading” which can include the elimination of grades altogether (Leslie, 2022; Kohn, 1999 & 2011). However, I have found that modifying students’ familiar systems provides a sense of safety which enables them to take risks, either with the mode or content of learning. This is consistent with Alfie Kohn’s (1999) finding that some extrinsic motivators are necessary even in the pursuit of students’ intrinsic motivation to learn because humans resist change. Consulting students on the design of the changes helps “establish the conditions that facilitate motivation,” and helps them rethink the rewards the existing system conditions them to expect (Kohn p.199). Particularly for a student population conditioned to expect assignment outlines, sample papers, and grading rubrics, the contract provides that familiarity, while inviting them to decide what role these tools will play and how to diverge from the typical path so they can grow.² One key element that is shared between advocates of ungrading and contract grading is “the opportunity for students to help design the assessment and reflect on its purposes—individually and as a class” (Kohn 2011). Including students in the evaluation process helps them to succeed by their own standards.

¹ For more on the role of labor in contract grading, see for example Shor 2009 and Inoue 2019.

² Psychologists, building on Maslow’s hierarchy and Bandura’s social cognitive theory, have demonstrated how people move from security to agency and communion, and then build on those foundations to foster their own growth and, eventually, human flourishing (Bateman 2020).

Learning Objectives

Criticisms of grading are intertwined with criticisms of the learning outcomes assessment (LOA) model widely employed for accreditation. Similar to the ways an individualized contract bridges traditional grading and ungrading, it can bridge LOA with students' aspirations for learning. While contract grading is a step away from the universalizing regulatory system of LOA (Blinne p. 11), the instructor can rely on course learning outcomes to help students find flexible ways of demonstrating their learning that also create tangible evidence for institutional assessment. The approach outlined in this essay emphasizes the following learning outcomes:

1. Identify and address knowledge/experience gaps with regard to gender and communication.
2. Analyze individual goals for the semester (inside and outside of class) and design a plan that attends to student goals while meeting course learning outcomes.

Explanation

On the first day of class, I provide students with a syllabus, which maps the contract grading approach and indicates their contract should be finalized by the third week of the semester. I advise students to allow time for careful consideration and negotiation between initial submission of their contract and the approval deadline. Over the next few class periods, I reserve 10-15 minutes for collective questions related to the grading contracts and/or the assignment descriptions and rubrics mentioned in the contract (Appendix A).

In class, we go over the assignment types. There are three required assignments: (1) active engagement in shared class activities and discussions, which is vital to building community and shared responsibility for the class; (2) a presentation, which addresses the course learning outcome that students will "Develop and deliver messages concerning gender that foster understanding across differences and contexts;" and (3) a final exam. There is no minimum grade for the presentation so that students with communication apprehension can decrease their stress while still attempting the task. There is a maximum because some communication majors are so confident in their speaking skills they would weigh the assignment too heavily at the expense of other learning opportunities. I continue to experiment with different weights for the final exam because I am not convinced I have found the right balance between encouraging students to take it seriously enough to study and help me see what they have learned across the

broad scope of the class without weighing it so heavily that it creates unnecessary anxiety.

The remaining elements of the contract are optional. If students are comfortable with exams, or feel safer practicing with the exam format before the final, they may choose to take the midterm. If the predetermined midterm date doesn't work for them, or if they dread exams, they can skip the midterm. They are still welcome in the midterm study session, and are encouraged to participate in the class debrief after the exam. I recommend the book review to students considering graduate school because I require them to submit it to a journal. Before submission, we engage in an editing process. I recommend the mini autoethnography to students who want to explore some aspect of their own gender identity. If a student is looking for more flexibility or advanced research, I recommend the semester project.

Students who learn best by moving through a progressive project that culminates later in the semester can choose something from the list of suggestions on the contract (teaching, TED Talk, research project, etc.) or pitch something new. They can pick a due date that works best for their schedule. I explain that teaching can be the hardest, but most rewarding, project because they have to be expert enough to teach the subject to others. Similarly, the TED Talk requires a well-researched, memorized, and polished performance, which makes it even more exciting for some and terrifying for others. Any student choosing to teach or offer a TED Talk can count that as their required presentation. Other students will present on some assignment they have chosen elsewhere in the contract—book review, autoethnography, research project, etc. Students who prefer the research project must choose a method they feel confident in carrying out. I make detailed rubrics available as they consider their assignments. They are welcome to suggest potential changes to the rubric in advance, if they wish, to better align the assignment with their goals. However, many choose not to engage in that additional labor.

I encourage students to make an office hour appointment to negotiate the best strategy for achieving their individual goals. I strongly encourage everyone to include at least one element in their contract that is solidly in their comfort zone and at least one element that is a stretch. If the topic they want to consider throughout the semester is a stretch because it is new or uncomfortable for them, I guide them toward familiar assignment formats. If all of the course topics are fairly comfortable, I encourage them to take on the challenge of an unfamiliar assignment format. In almost every case, the student has the option to weigh the comfortable more heavily than the scary.

Alongside assignment considerations, I prompt students to think about their goals for the semester—do they need an A for graduate school applications? If so, their contract may look different from someone who needs more flexibility

to address other priorities. For some students, this is the first time an instructor has encouraged them to openly acknowledge class is not their only priority! For others, it's eye opening to realize their outside priorities may be at odds with the grade they believe they should earn. Embedded in this conversation is a discussion of time, which is a significant yet unseen influence on wellbeing for instructors and students. At the beginning of the semester, it is tempting to look at deadlines on the calendar and miss all of the effort it takes to move successfully from one to the next. Students need prompting to consider the time it will take to complete an assignment and I need to consider how long it will take me to offer high quality feedback on their submission. I include predetermined due dates on every assignment in the contract other than the final project. Clear due dates help provide predictability for everyone as we move through the semester together, and I encourage students to consider due dates when mapping their contract. If they have many large end-of-semester projects in other classes, they may want to complete the majority of the work for this class earlier in the semester. If they are an athlete or performer, they may not want assignments with due dates overlapping events. Due dates also help me plan my semester and allocate appropriate time to provide high quality feedback. The diversity of assignment choices means it is rare for the whole class to turn in the same assignment, and then I am only ever giving feedback to a smaller group of them at a time. This is more manageable for me and results in better feedback for the students.

Assessment

Kohn (1999) explains rewards/grades “are less effective than intrinsic motivation for promoting effective learning” (p.144). The individualized contract aims to discover what or how a student is intrinsically motivated to learn, and leverage that to advance their understanding of gender and communication. In the years that I have been using this strategy, more than 95% of students have achieved the learning outcomes for the course. On end-of-semester course evaluations, students regularly praise the contract grading approach. For example, one student wrote, “I really liked [the] contract syllabus style. Made me responsible for my own success by making me commit to assignments that I knew I could do rather than a predetermined list.” In addition to student feedback, these projects tend to be the best evidence that individualized contracts foster growth.

Perhaps the best example of student growth is a project I almost did not approve because it was so far outside of my own comfort zone—a painting. I was unsure how I could evaluate the project and did not want to guarantee a particular grade simply for completion. Research suggests guaranteed rewards can stifle creativity. For example, Hennessy (2000) describes multiple experiments designed to measure the effect of expected rewards on “task motivation and

creativity of performance.” She concludes, “There are few social conditions more damaging to intrinsic interest than situations in which rewards have been promised for task completion” (Hennessy, p.58). At the same time, the more creative a student wants to be, the more negotiation may be required to ensure that we have shared expectations for the final project. In this case, a student proposed painting as the means of demonstrating her learning. She wanted to understand the nuances of gender and identity better in order to deepen relationships with her peers raised with different values. Painting was a safer medium for her than writing, and she knew it would enable her to process complicated thoughts and emotions.

We had to work together to agree on expectations and the grading standards I would use to evaluate the final submission. We agreed that she would submit an extended gallery label for the piece that explained every detail. She also agreed to include sources that influenced her interpretation. At the end of the semester, she presented her painting and explained that her grandfather constructed the canvas for her grandmother before she was born. Her grandmother taught her to paint and eventually gave her the canvas. She said the original painting on the canvas depicted her view of gender before the class, “it was strict, hard lines that didn't blend. The colors were dictated by their gender roles and the message was simplistic.” She went on to explain how she used Gesso, “a medium that serves as a do over” to wipe away the hard lines and . . . create a new understanding.” She titled the work “Unfinished” and explained:

The form is a work in progress. Each color that makes up the form is intertwined with the thoughts and feelings I've had throughout the semester. I've felt a struggle for understanding, sorrow throughout the topic of sexual harassment, detachment from others' experiences, admiration for others' strength through oppression, empowerment through feminism, being judged by society, and hope for the future. This form is unfinished; emotions and feelings constantly shift and take on new meaning. I designed it so that the form could identify as many identities as it is looked at from one perspective to another.

She went on to unpack a detailed glossary of the many colors and their placements. This student, who regularly expressed her self-consciousness when it came to traditional academic assignments, went on to dazzle the class with her painting as well as her vulnerability about the learning process and the depth of research she had engaged.

The grading contract provides what some students need to succeed, and it provides safety for students to stumble. One student picked the teaching assignment with an overinflated sense of familiarity with their topic. They ended up presenting a series of unsubstantiated assumptions to the class. The class

offered encouragement, but also asked tough questions. By struggling through the process, the student learned the importance of checking assumptions with research and finding ways to relate across differences.

Each semester brings a new group of students and an excitement around what they will create. Students have conducted original research, launched podcasts exploring divergent scholarly perspectives, developed Instagram accounts to share what they learned, written and recorded original songs, and more. Generally, students far exceed my expectations for achieving course learning outcomes and are excited to share what they have learned.

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Appendix A: Sample Grading Contract

I _____ hereby select the following assignments and weights to comprise my final grade in COM 411 for [semester]. My signature below indicates that I plan to complete the following assignments according to the requirements outlined in the syllabus and supplemental material on [LMS]. I understand that I will be held to all established deadlines, grading standards, and penalties for work that does not meet these standards. I agree to move through these assignments on schedule for my own learning goals and to respect the pace at which others will be moving so that we can learn together. I understand that changes to this contract will not be permitted.

Assignment:	Weight	Running Total
Class Engagement (10%) - <i>required</i>	10%	10%
Presentation (20% max) Due 12/14 <i>required*</i>		
Final Exam (20% min) Due 12/9 <i>required</i>		
Midterm Exam (10% min; 40% max) Due 10/14		
Book Review (25% max) Due 11/11		
Mini Autoethnography (25% max) Due 11/22		
Semester Project (40% min) Due _____ Circle one: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research paper • Rhetorical criticism • Creative media • Teach a class* • TED Talk* Due 12/14 		
TOTAL	100%	

*Students choosing the teaching or TED Talk semester project option do not need to give an additional presentation.

Student Signature: _____

Instructor Signature: _____