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Focused on Freedom: Exploring the Potential of Grading Contracts to Support Writers in the Secondary English Language Arts Classroom

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**FOCUSED ON FREEDOM: EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF GRADING
CONTRACTS TO SUPPORT WRITERS IN THE SECONDARY ENGLISH
LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM**

by

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B.A. December 2020, Old Dominion University

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ABSTRACT

FOCUSED ON FREEDOM: EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF GRADING CONTRACTS TO SUPPORT WRITERS IN THE SECONDARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

Margaret McGregor Fluharty
Old Dominion University, 2023
Director: Dr. Michelle Fowler-Amato

Drawing on qualitative methods, I engaged in a practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) to investigate the use of contract grading to promote educational freedom (hooks, 2009; Love, 2020) in the post-secondary writing classroom. In addition, I explored the potential of this practice in the secondary English language arts setting.

To better understand the perspectives of both post-secondary writing instructors and secondary English teachers on the use of grading contracts, I conducted focus groups and engaged in artifact analysis (Billups, 2019). Results showed that post-secondary instructors who utilized grading contracts in their classroom saw changes primarily in their students' engagement and communication compared to what they experienced when engaging in traditional grading practices. While secondary teachers appreciated the transparency that grading contracts promoted, they believed that any changes to their current grading practices would not deter their students from seeking motivation from grades, but rather would leave them feeling uneasy in their attempts to navigate a new system. Using the data derived from these results, I provided commentary on the necessity of professional learning within this conversation, as well as a discussion of future research that is necessary to better understand the potential of ungrading in the secondary English language arts class.

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This thesis is dedicated to my past, present, and future students.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During the second to last semester of my undergraduate program, I observed in an eighth-grade English classroom. Over half of this middle school's demographic was made up of Black students (66%), not so closely followed by White students (22%), then Hispanic students, and students who are two or more races. The same went for the English classroom that I was invited to learn in during my internship prior to graduating from the English teacher licensure program in which I participated. Being a White woman from a primarily upper-middle class area, I hadn't personally experienced the marginalization that some of my students seemed to experience in their school communities, and this was not something I had not given much thought to until I engaged in a conversation with my coordinating teacher one day after class had finished.

I had commented on how receptive and quick the students were to pick up on new content, and she informed me that many of the students, up until that year, had been in the honors English classes. However, the majority of them had not been placed in honors courses that year. Upon further investigation, I discovered that the significant drop of grades was often not due to a lack of knowledge, but sometimes a resistance to participating in a space in which they felt that their voices and experiences were not valued. I felt—and still feel—that no student should ever believe that they are unwelcome in any classroom, at any school.

In "A Snapshot of Writing Instruction in Middle Schools and High Schools," Applebee & Langer (2011) discuss the most recent large-scale study on writing instruction in secondary schools. In doing so, they explain that much of what was being taught was in direct relation to "what counts" on the exams, stating that "for better or for worse, external examinations are driving many aspects of curriculum and instruction" (Applebee & Langer, 2011, p. 20).

Applebee and Langer concluded that much of the writing typically executed in a secondary writing class is led by the teacher and is highly structured, leaving little room for students to exercise their voices in the classroom (Applebee & Langer, 2011). I believe that this is what I was seeing during undergraduate observation.

Hoping to discover ways I could combat this issue and promote student-centered learning so students felt seen and heard in my future classroom, when I graduated from my English teacher licensure program, I continued my education, pursuing a masters degree in English education. This is where I was first introduced to the concept of ungrading and the use of grading contracts as an alternative form of assessment to support writers. I was instantly captivated by the idea of a grading contract because it appeared to address many of the issues I was seeing in the secondary classroom. Allowing for ongoing negotiation between teachers and students, students contribute to the expectations of the class, which supports teachers in creating a classroom environment that is more inclusive. Depending on the way that the contract is created, there is also a chance for instructors to recognize and minimize the biases that come with traditional assessment, taking the pressure off of students and encouraging them to engage in decision-making, which is an important part of becoming a writer. As I read about the use of grading contracts, I began to question whether or not grading contracts could be used to foster educational freedom in the writing class. "Educational freedom" is a term that I have drawn from bell hook's (1994), and can be defined as the acknowledgement of students as whole human beings, providing them with room to exercise their individual voices, as well as opportunities to take control of their own learning.

Continuing on in my graduate studies, it became clear to me that these conversations about grading contracts and other forms of ungrading were happening more often at the post-

secondary level. I wondered why secondary teachers weren't often considering the potential of ungrading in their classrooms and what could be learned from post-secondary writing instructors who were implementing grading contracts in an effort to better support writers. These thoughts led to the design of this study in which I asked three questions:

- What have post-secondary writing instructors learned through the implementation of contract grading?
- How do secondary writing teachers respond to the possibility of implementing contract grading?
- What might it look like to design a grading contract that works toward educational freedom in the secondary English class?

Theoretical Framework

In her 1994 book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks, a Black, American author, educator, and social activist, argues that education is meant to be a liberatory practice. hooks claims that, in order to promote education as a practice of freedom, educators must transgress the boundaries that have been established. Aligning herself with other educators and authors, such as Paulo Freire, hooks uses critical and feminist theory, as well as her own experiences, to encourage her readers to see beyond the White, hegemonic walls that have historically been positioned as the “standard” of the classroom. Educational freedom, at its core, is about the construction of a community where all students feel safe enough to learn through expression of their individuality. The following sections will explain the role of compassion, multiculturalism, self-actualization, and anti-racism in the classroom, and how these elements can help the creation of a safe classroom community.

Compassion

In chapter one of her book, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks (1994) explains how the teachings of spiritual leader and activist Thich Nhat Hanh opened her eyes to the meaning of wholeness in the classroom:

“His focus on a holistic approach to learning and spiritual practice enabled me to overcome years of socialization that had taught me to believe a classroom was diminished if students and professors regarded one another as ‘whole’ human beings, striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world” (hooks, 1994, pp. 14-15).

To treat each other as complete individuals — “to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students” (hooks, 1994, p. 13)... — is to understand that the lives of our students stretch beyond the walls of the institution. In order to do this, it is important that instructors work to empower student voices. “As a classroom community,” states hooks (1994), “our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence” (p. 8). Recognizing and making space for student voices is just as vital in its ability to cultivate trust as it is in its ability to promote educational freedom by subverting the institutional dynamic of teacher-and-student. This dynamic enforces the domination of the instructor, and does not allow room for students to be heard, which does not create an environment where students feel it is safe to take risks. Only when instructors are vulnerable, show respect for their students, and see them as more than “receptacles to be filled” (Freire, 1993, p. 72), can this community be created. In the creation of a community rooted in compassion and vulnerability, the teacher can promote a space where both students and instructors are seeing each other as full human beings, lessening the power imbalance.

Multiculturalism

In a system that was originally created to cater to the White, male experience, people whose race, gender, sexuality, and culture do not relate to that experience suffer. hooks (1994) recalls her time at the predominantly White colleges in which she worked, where the focus for students of color was not on learning, but on proving that they were “the equal of Whites” (p. 5). “We were there to prove this by showing how well we could become clones of our peers. As we constantly confronted biases, an undercurrent of stress diminished our learning experience” (hooks, 1994, p. 5). To promote nonconformity and combat this hegemonic, White structure in the classroom, hooks discusses multiculturalism. Multiculturalism in the classroom is the intentional acknowledgement, understanding, and inclusion of experiences outside that of the standard, White, male, and hooks (1994) believes that there has often been an unwillingness to teach with such criticality because of the fear “that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained” (p. 39). However, hooks (1994) explains that it is the experience of some educators that institutionally vulnerable students do not feel comfortable in what she describes as a “neutral setting” (p. 39). “It is the absence of a feeling of safety that often promotes prolonged silence or lack of student engagement” (hooks, 1994, p. 39). Since the publication of hook’s book, discussions about multiculturalism in the classroom have continued. In 2012, Django Paris published his article “Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice,” which advocates for the use of culturally sustaining pedagogy as a way to promote multiculturalism and multilingualism in educational practices. Within a pluralistic society— which includes both in-group cultural practices and across-group cultural practices—culturally sustaining pedagogy requires that instructors “support young

people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (Paris, 2012, p. 95).

Self-actualization

hooks (1994) explains how the biased tradition of the university to uphold White supremacy has stunted educational freedom (p. 20), this inhibition trickling all the way down through K-12 education as well. In her book *We Want to Do More Than Just Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, Bettina Love (2020) provides examples of what these judgements look like in the secondary classroom, recalling how she has “personally witnessed educators lower their expectations for students of color while insisting they were doing what was best for their students” (p. 20). Through all of this, hooks reveals that much of her personal success is intertwined with self-actualization (hooks, 1994, p. 18). Self-actualization — looking inward and studying oneself — includes the understanding of biases, even unconscious bias. In the case of an instructor, bias can affect their curriculum and instruction and, in turn, students' experience (hooks, 1994). Of course the first step of self-actualization is to recognize these biases, but recognition of bias is not the only crucial part. Revision of instruction in a way that recognizes bias and works to combat it can help both the instructor and the students, promoting the value of student voices and working hand-in-hand with an instructor's compassion for their students.

“If the effort to respect and honor the social reality and experiences of groups in this society who are nonwhite is to be reflected in a pedagogical process, then as teachers—on all levels, from elementary to university settings—we must acknowledge that our styles of teaching may need to change” (hooks, 1994, p. 35).

With the practice of self-actualization, instructors are able to craft a curriculum that reaches more of their students and can create a more welcoming environment for everyone.

Anti-Racism

While there is reference to anti-racism within hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), Bettina Love's book (2020) indicates more explicit connections between antiracism in the classroom and the elements of educational freedom that hooks had outlined. Using hooks' (1994) text, Love (2020) reflects upon her own experiences as a Black woman in the institution of education, providing examples of injustice such as White educators, despite their good intentions, posting racist content online "loosely masked in the language of low expectations, of judging low-income parents and dark children's behavior" (p. 50). To engage in antiracism in the classroom, educators must first acknowledge the existence of racism in spaces of teaching and learning, and the privilege that is inherently bestowed upon certain students by the way that the standards of education have been constructed (Love, 2020). Standards such as those that fail students who speak English as a second language because their "language is deemed inferior" (Love, 2020, p. 19). However, like hooks' (1994) discussion of self-actualization, Love (2020) understands that anti-racism is only beneficial when the instructor takes action and applies it to their pedagogy. "Anti-racist teaching is not just about acknowledging that racism exists but about consciously committing to the struggle fighting for racial justice, and it is fundamental to the abolitionist experience" (Love, 2020, p. 54). This commitment of working toward racial justice supports the struggle towards education freedom, for without antiracism, the writing classroom is not a safe space for all students.

Overview of Thesis

In this chapter, I shared how I came to recognize the problem I aimed to better understand through the design of my study, and how my interest in ungrading developed through my studies in English education. I also drew on hooks (2009), Paris (2012), and Love (2020) to highlight what it might look like to create a culture of educational freedom in the classroom.

In chapter two I will share a literature review, where I will be exploring the history of traditional grading and the impact of these practices on student learning. From there, I will introduce ungrading and grading contracts, and conclude by looking at some of the research that has been conducted in the classroom using grading contracts.

In chapter three, I will describe the methodology of this study, drawing on Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) and their discussion of practitioner research. I will then provide context for the study, including the steps and methods of data collection, and process of recruitment, before moving into the cycles of coding that I went through with my data. I will then conclude chapter three by discussing my positionality and the limitations of this study.

In chapters four and five I present the findings of the study. In chapter four, I explore the post-secondary writing instructors' experiences with contract grading as well as the artifacts they shared to demonstrate their use of a grading contract, while in chapter five I will focus on the perspectives of secondary teachers as well as their responses to the artifacts shared by the post-secondary writing instructors. I have organized each chapter in order to emphasize the themes that emerged throughout the data analysis.

Chapter six will discuss the findings of the study and specify how this study contributes to the larger conversations being had about ungrading. In chapter six, I use examples from the findings in order to respond to my research questions, then explore the implication of these

responses. This includes what this study means for the future of grading contracts in the secondary classroom, and future research on this topic.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I discuss the history of grading and its evolution through decades of education, before moving on to the complications of traditional grading that many authors have identified in their literature, in turn transitioning into the topic of alternative grading methods. Of these methods, I will dive most deeply into contract grading and its intended usage and history. In the final section, I will explore empirical studies, specifically, conducted in order to understand how to implement a grading contract most effectively.

Grading and Assessing Students

In her 2004 book titled *Grading*, Susan Bookhart provides instructors with both tactics for mindful grading, and an honest view of grading's demands on both instructor and student. "This book will try to stand the middle ground," Bookhart (2004) states in the introduction of her text. "Grades are not going to disappear from schools anytime soon. Therefore, teachers need to base their grading practices on sound instructional and assessment principles" (p. 4). While Bookhart does touch briefly upon the use of alternate forms of grading, the majority of this text speaks on the particulars of traditional grading methods, including their function in education. Bookhart informs readers that the purpose of grades is to concisely provide feedback to students and parents (particularly in the K-12 context) on how the student is performing in school and what they are achieving. Not only that, but Bookhart (2004) argues that grading students also gives instructors a calculated view of what topics require more attention when designing curriculum. This feedback can come in the form of report cards, progress reports, comments on assignments, and are all designed to help communicate progress, set future goals, and assist instructors in lesson planning (Bookhart, 2004).

A History of Grading

The origin of grades leads all the way back to the first universities, which were founded in the mid-seventeenth century. Examinations were originally conducted by faculty, whose employment was strongly based upon their involvement in religion versus their scholarly expertise (Graff, 1987), and were “used in early university life to test student ability, to measure the quantity of information (usually facts) that students had learned, and to award positions of honor, especially rank as commencement” (Brookhart, 2004, p 16). In 1785, students were ranked according to a set of categories, but later, in 1813, these changed to the scale of 4, which we know today as the modern grade point average scale (Brookhart, 2004; Vatterott, 2015). Around the same time, ranking systems that emulated that of the university filtered down to the secondary schools, and similarly, these rankings began to evolve to percentages. Soon enough, though, colleges returned to their categorical system using letters (Brookhart, 2004; Vatterott, 2015). “Fewer categories seemed more ‘fair’” (Vatterott, 2015, p. 9). Though, with such rapid modification, it is not surprising that educators began to grow wary of the reliability of grading.

As Brookhart (2004) explains, in the early twentieth century concerns about the validity of grading began to surface, so from 1910 to 1920 there were studies conducted that questioned the reliability of grading practices. Inevitably spurred by these studies, which presented inconsistent marks for students depending on the subject and instructor, focus began to move towards “standardized testing, ‘scientific’ measurement, and normal-curve theory,” stirring excitement around the multiple-choice testing in both the post-secondary and secondary classroom (Brookhart, 2004; Shavelson, 2007). The fruits of this interest in standardization are still seen today, not only in the form of testing, but tracking and ability grouping as well, despite research that has shown its dangers (Brookhart, 2004).

Between the 1930's and 1960's, instructors began to identify problems with testing, and began voicing concern over the intellectual, social, physical, and emotional effects of testing on a student's development (Brookhart, 2004). During this time, a push towards progressive education began. Books and journals centered around progressive practices, such as the journal called *Educational Leadership*, and its eleventh volume in 1953, which published Carleton Washburne's article "Adjusting the Program to the Child." In this article, Washburne (1953) addressed how students learn at a variety of paces, and how instructors should adapt curriculum and group students to suit this variety. Many issues around grades that are still relevant today were being discussed at this time, such as the necessity of meaningful feedback, and how to assess students (Brookhart, 2004; NCTE, 2014).

The 1960's and 1970's were decades of critique and action upon the grading system, both in secondary and higher education, including the publication of many texts that questioned the effectiveness of traditional grading systems. This included James Bellanca's book *Grading* (1977), which shone a light on issues created by traditional grading and provided alternatives, and Howard Kirschenbaum, Rodney Napier, and Sidney Simon's *Wad-Ja-Get? The Grading Game in American Education* (1971), which offered a research-driven proposal for an alternate system of grading. This action towards educational progression led to a push for more holistic university testing that touched upon more universal competencies, "such as the ability to communicate, think analytically, and solve problems" (Shavelson, 2007, p. 10). Moving into the 1980's, instructors were being questioned on their ability to grade students accurately, concerns rising over competency of teachers and what training and professional development they were receiving. These concerns over instructor competency lived into the 2000's and progressed to include recognition of teacher biases in response to students' identities, such as their race,

ethnicity, class, language etc. (Brookhart, 2004). However, these concerns manifested themselves quite differently in universities than they did in secondary education.

In 2002, George W. Bush enacted the No Child Left Behind act (NCLB), which was created to close the “achievement gap”¹ by requiring states to create a regiment of high-standards testing for all middle and high school students within that state (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Instead of meeting its goal of closing the achievement gap, however, “A review of a decade of evidence demonstrates that NCLB had failed badly both in terms of its own personal goals and more broadly” (Guisbond et al., 2012, p. 7). Lisa Guisbond and her colleagues (2012) believe that with the implementation of NCLB, “Many schools, particularly those serving low-income students, have basically become little more than test-preparation programs” (p. 7). And, with the conclusion of NCLB in 2015, the act being replaced by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the effects of traditional grading and high-stakes testing continue to be studied and critiqued. Many educators believe that the more the students’ focus is on how they are doing — what grades they are getting, what scores they are receiving on tests —, the less interested they are in what they are learning (Kohn, 2020; Blum, 2020; Stommel, 2020).

Negative Effects of Grading

Though, as I have detailed above, grading has existed in many forms and has been continuously tweaked over decades, many educators believe that, at its core, grading is inherently problematic (Blum, 2020; Kohn, 2013; Inoue, 2019). For educators, grading has proven to show biases and inconsistencies. Conversations surrounding the reliability of grading have been ongoing since the introduction of the graded report card in the early 1900’s, the first

¹ Arguments have since been made against the use of this language as racial and cultural inequalities have contributed to this “gap.” As a result, scholars have sometimes referred to this, instead, as an “opportunity gap” (Howard, 2020)

impactful research project on the effectiveness of grades being conducted in 1911 (Bellanca, 1977). Stommel (2020) argues that, though educators may not believe that they are actively engaging in these judgments, grading was originally created to serve a certain type of student. “Students who are female, Black, Brown, Indigenous, disabled, neurodivergent, queer, etc. face overt and systematic oppression whether expectations are explicit or implicit” (Stommel, 2020, p. 35).

Just as teachers have often argued, scholars who have written about grading have also pointed out that grades take away from student interest in what they are learning (Kohn, 2013; Blum, 2020). This appears to be the root of many issues stemming from grading. Reliant on this extrinsic motivation, many have observed that students begin cutting corners in order to obtain the grade that they desire (Kohn, 2013; Blackwelder, 2020; Blum, 2020). Whether this is giving into the pressure to cheat, or choosing the easiest route for an assignment, “impress upon students that what they’re doing will count towards their grade, and their response will likely be to avoid taking any unnecessary intellectual risks” (Kohn, 2013, p. 144).

Scholars believe that grades not only have an effect on the students and instructors, though, but the curriculum as well. As I mentioned above in my discussion of the history of grading, claims were made that NCLB led schools that serve students whose communities have been historically marginalized in educational settings to strictly teach for the standardized tests as part of the policy (Guisbond et al., 2012). Due to this, Kohn (2013) claims that educators practice assessment of their students’ skills, but fail to question whether these skills are valuable to the students beyond just obtaining the grade they need. Though the NCLB policy was replaced in 2015, Aaron Blackwelder (2020) mentions how Kohn challenged teachers at the time to “consider the value of curriculum” (p. 47). If students are going to be taught particular

information then students should understand why they are being taught that particular information, and instructors should be thoughtful in why they are presenting it (Kohn, 1999; Blackwelder, 2020).

In her book, *Grading*, Brookhart (2004) illustrates for her readers the “perfect world” without grades. Scores would be replaced by discussions of strengths and weaknesses; mistakes would be met with grace; and there would be no hierarchy, only individual attention and goals. Unfortunately, Brookhart claims this standard is currently unattainable because, “the demands of schooling as we know it have kept us from reaching that utopia” (p. 4). Kohn (2013), however, challenges this claim. “Replacing letter and number grades with narrative assessments or conferences — qualitative summaries of student progress offered in writing or as part of a conversation — is not a utopian fantasy” (p. 149).

Ungrading

Due to the limitations of traditional grading, many instructors have begun to switch to alternate methods of grading. While the concept of alternate methods of grading is not, itself, all that new, there has been a surge in conversations surrounding the topic within the last decade (Blum, 2020). The purpose of alternative grading methods is to move away from the harm created by standardized grading practices, putting the emphasis on student learning rather than where they settle within the hierarchy of education (Kohn, 2013; Blum, 2020).

One of the most recent movements of alternative grading has been dubbed “ungrading;” though, as Susan Blum (2020) explains in her book *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, it has also been known as “de-grading” or “going gradeless” (p. 2). While these names may suggest the idea that grading should be disposed of altogether in pursuit of this “utopia” that is often discussed in tandem with alternate

grading (Brookhart, 2004), the concept is not quite so restrictive. If there was a standard for ungrading, the idea would be quite counterintuitive. In the introduction of her book, “Why Ungrade? Why Grade?,” Blum makes it very clear that every classroom, every student, every instructor is different, and while those who adopt ungrading tend to utilize it for similar purposes, there are a variety of ways to execute the practice (Blum, 2020). Below, I have highlighted just a couple of these practices that are showcased in Blum’s book as alternatives to traditional grading that educators have found successful in their own classrooms.

Narrative Approach

Scholars like Alfie Kohn (2013) and Laura Gibbs (2020) discuss an approach to grading that takes the spotlight off of letter grades and focuses it on qualitative, in-depth feedback. The goal of this feedback is to emphasize the learning process instead of the outcome. With qualitative feedback versus quantitative feedback, students are more focused on *what* they are doing and their priorities when it comes to learning, versus *how* they are doing and what might be most important to the instructor (Kohn 2013; Gibbs, 2020). This approach also takes pressure off of students and encourages them to take more risks in the classroom. Gibbs (2020), who names her method the “all-feedback-no-grades approach,” gives her students weekly, individualized feedback to help them improve. “Learners need the freedom to make mistakes in order to learn from those mistakes; they should not be punished for making mistakes” (Gibbs, 2020, p. 97). In his article “The Case Against Grades”, Kohn (2013) reveals that many instructors have replaced grading with detailed, narrative feedback as it limits biases that are emphasized by quantitative assessment. He goes on to quote Max Marshall’s 1968 publication when he writes “On the latter view, ‘the alternative to grades is descriptions’ and ‘the starting point for description is a plain sheet of paper, not a form which leads and homogenized

descriptions” (Kohn, 2013, p. 151). While narrative feedback does require a more thoughtful and time-consuming response from the instructor, it can eliminate the pressure of justifying solely qualitative grades, and provides students with clear and constructive commentary that can lead them to success (Kohn, 2013).

Self and Peer Evaluation

Self-evaluation has been declared a major component in the majority of ungrading practices, and for good reason. As Marcus Schultz-Bergin states (2020), “Self-evaluation and reflection promote ownership of one’s own learning and therefore assist in an individual’s development into a self-regulated learner who will be capable of learning and honestly evaluating themselves for their entire life” (p. 175). Scholars like Blum (2015) and Bellanca (1977) agree that the ability for students to evaluate themselves will not only help them in the classroom, but later on in life as well, as it exercises intrinsic motivation and encourages self-directed learning. Kohn (2013) highlights an instructor who assesses their students through written self-evaluations, explaining how, not only has their students’ writing improved with the elimination of grades, but so has their relationship with their students. Peer evaluation exercises intrinsic motivation and encourages self-directed learning as well. As long as the instructor is explicit about what dictates valuable review practices, peer evaluation can exercise a student’s communication skills, as well as their ability to give and receive beneficial feedback later in life (Katopodis & Davidson, 2020; Scherff, 2017; Schultz-Bergin, 2020). However, as Kohn reveals, self and peer evaluation can remain within the confines of an instructor’s expectations, the students often evaluating their growth in correlation to a pre-set scale (Kohn, 2013). An alternative to this that is not highlighted in Blum’s book is authentic assessment, where students and instructors work together — whether that be individually or as a whole class — to create an

assessment that they both believe fairly evaluates the students' learning, then reflect on the purpose of the assessment itself (Kohn, 2013).

It comes to a point where instructors must determine where their priorities when teaching lie. Alfie Kohn (2013) sums this up well when he states:

“If we begin with a desire to assess more often, or to produce more data, or to improve the consistency of our grading, then certain prescriptions will follow. If, however, our point of departure isn't mostly about the grading, but about our desire for students to understand ideas from the inside out, or to get a kick out of playing with words and numbers, or to be in charge of their own learning, then we will likely end up elsewhere. We may come to see grading as a huge, noisy, fuel-guzzling, smoke-belching machine that constantly requires repairs and new parts, when what we should be doing is pulling the plug” (pp. 148-149).

As I have explained above, there are multiple different alternatives to this “huge, noisy, fuel-guzzling, smoke-belching machine” (p. 149) and they all have their benefits and difficulties. Contract grading is one alternative that has gained popularity among instructors who are looking for students to take charge of their own learning and “understand ideas from the inside out” (p. 149).

Grading Contracts

There are a variety of ways to implement a grading contract, but two by which most instructors' contracts are modeled are Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow's (2009) hybrid contract, and Asao Inoue's (2019) labor-based grading contract. When adopting a grading contract, whether it is hybrid or labor-based, instructors typically write up a physical document that is shared and agreed upon by students in their classes. This document explains in language

that is accessible to the students what they need to accomplish in the course in order to receive the baseline grade, which is typically a B. Hybrid contracts (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009) evaluate how much effort a student has put into an assignment up to a B, and any assignments evaluated above that are then graded for quality. With the labor-based grading contract (Inoue, 2019), according to how much labor a student puts into that which is outlined in the contract, they will receive the grade that correlates with that effort. If a student performs labor beyond what is outlined in the contract to receive the baseline, they have a chance to elevate their grade. If a student performs less labor than is outlined in the contract to receive the baseline, their grade will be lowered accordingly. Inoue (2019) has argued that hybrid contracts, such as Danielewicz and Elbow's, are unfair to institutionally vulnerable students' efforts; "they changed the rules of the game in the last inning, when the score was tied and there was a runner on third" (Inoue, 2019, p. 67). Scholars and teachers who argue for labor-based grading believe that this approach, like other methods of ungrading, has the potential to provide students with an opportunity to take control of their education and learn what it means to prioritize. Giving them this autonomy prepares them for the minimal structure they will find outside of the classroom walls. As Christina Katopodis and Cathy Davidson explain (2020), "asking students to determine success for themselves, and to carefully review and agree to a contract as members of a community, affords them an opportunity to practice self determination" (p. 106).

When instructors choose to use a grading contract, their intention is typically to create a classroom environment where students are relieved of the pressures associated with the standardized grading systems. These pressures — such as the pressure to assimilate to a pre-established standard created with the intention of serving White students, whose literacies and languages have historically been valued in classrooms in order to obtain the desired grades —

are said to be linked with educational capitalism, limiting freedom and stunting student's ability to be self-directive (Elbow, 2009; Shor, 2009; Inou, 2019). This freedom given with the grading contract is also linked to the aims of critical pedagogy; it gives students the ability to take ownership of their own learning (Inou, 2019).

The History of Grading Contracts

In her 2020 article "A Legacy of Grading Contracts for Composition", Cowan walks readers through the evolution of grading contracts, educating them on how the contract has been improved over time. For well over a century, composition instructors have been employing grading contracts as a way to counter the issues of traditional grading, including scoring inconsistency, demotivation, and the imbalance of the student-teacher power dynamic (Cowan, 2020). In some of the earliest forms, the grading contract was made to initiate conversations between instructor and student. In addition, contracts were used to mimic real-life situations, and relieve stress on the mind and workload (Cowan, 2020). With a surge in scholarly articles written revealing instructor's concerns about traditional grading, in the 1960's and 1970's, learning contracts, more broadly, became a popular topic of study in higher education. At this time, and for several decades after, the focus was mostly on individualized contracts for each student. These contracts involved negotiation between instructor and student, as well as setting personal goals for students according to their own academic interests (Cowan, 2020).

The Use of Grading Contracts in the Writing Classroom

In his book *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*, English educator Asao Inoue (2019) details his experience with labor-based grading contracts in the writing classroom. This includes how he defines "labor", how he addresses the concerns surrounding the alternate grading practice, and how he

was brought to using labor-based contracts. After describing his love of the writing classroom, Inoue (2019) describes grades as an obstacle:

“But of course, my biggest problems in my teaching had always been grading writing. I didn’t like doing it, and I’ve never met any writing teacher who liked doing it. I don’t know many students who like grades either, which isn’t to say that there aren’t a lot of students who don’t want them. My students back then at OSU, Chemeketa, and WSU didn’t like getting grades either, at least not the grades I gave them on their writing. It ruined my relationship with their writing and even with them. In most cases, my grades ruined their relationship with their own writing” (p. 52).

From there, Inoue recounts how furthering his education helped change his perspective on assessment. After discovering alternative grading methods, and after much trial, reflection, and modification, Inoue states that he now uses “a purely labor-based system that only uses quantity of labor, no matter its products, as a way to calculate final course grades” (p. 75). Once grades are removed from the equation, students begin to question what they are truly motivated by (Inoue, 2019).

Inoue (2019) deduces that, once the only thing being measured is the labor, traditionally White language no longer holds the power that it once did. This erases the necessity of assimilation, and encourages freedom in the writing classroom. With so much freedom provided by rewarding the amount of work versus the quality of the work, he understands how some readers might believe that the labor-based grading system “would not be very effective at helping the institutionally vulnerable students that [he has] spent most of [his] career teaching” (Inoue, 2019, p. 74). However, referencing a study that he conducted involving the use of labor-based grading contracts in Fresno State’s writing program, Inoue (2019) reveals that “most students of

color actually do better in many dimensions of quality in final portfolios, and are happier with their writing experiences, feeling that the absence of grades helped them in their learning” (p. 74). Using labor-based grading in the writing classroom, Inoue (2019) is encouraging his students to find “motivation in and through their own languaging instead of grades” (p. 75). Stommel (2020) explains that, within a standard grading system, students grow accustomed to their worth being measured quantitatively against their peers. “It’s important to acknowledge that these systems have been (in some cases intentionally) crafted to privilege certain kinds of students” (Stommel, 2020, p. 34). But, as Asao Inoue (2019) reveals, labor-based grading eases some of the pressure of being compared and allows writers to find worth in their own, individual voices.

Research Conducted in the Writing Classroom

As I mentioned above, Asao Inoue (2012) conducted an empirical study exploring the effect of labor-based grading contracts titled “Grading Contracts: Assessing Their Effectiveness on Different Racial Formations.” Through the collection of surveys, and scores from midterm and final portfolios — half of the semester’s instruction being assessed by a traditional grading system, and the other half utilizing a hybrid labor-based grading contract similar to that of Elbow and Danielewicz (2009)— Inoue (2012) came to the conclusion that, while there is a possibility of grading contracts being unequally effective among various races of students, it is also possible for this this unequal effectiveness to be ameliorated by an elimination of “quality bias” (Inoue, 2020, pp. 92-93). While Inoue (2019) promotes the use of a full labor-based grading contract in order to discourage any bias, Elbow and Danielewicz’s (2009) hybrid contract appears to be favored by many composition scholars.

Cathy Spidell and William Thelin (2006), who were seeking to understand the effectiveness of a labor-based grading contract from the student's perspective, also utilize Elbow and Danielewicz's (2009) hybrid contract in their study. Spidell and Thelin (2006) ran their study in three sections of a general education writing course from their own university taught by Cathy Spidell herself, using the same contract for each. The researchers then created interview questions from an end-of-the-year feedback assignment, in which each student was asked to write honest feedback about particular aspects of the course, including the grading contract. Then, creating questions with this feedback on the contracts, they interviewed students during the mid-term evaluation of the course as well. The answers from the interview showed that the students held some resentment towards the grading contracts for various reasons, such as being accustomed to the normal points system and the perceived increased difficulty of the course due to the contract. However, Spidell and Thelin (2006) concluded that, if contextualized and renegotiated on a consistent basis with feedback from students, a labor-based contract can be beneficial in a college composition setting.

Lisa Litterio's two studies utilizing grading contracts reinforce a similar conclusion, using different methods. Litterio's (2016) study highlighted in "Contract Grading in a Technical Writing Classroom: A Case Study," examined the attitudes of her 20 students enrolled into her undergrad technical writing class, as well as their perceptions of their own involvement in the contract grading. Implementing the grading contract, Litterio (2016) collected data from her students through surveys that were conducted mid-semester and at the end of the semester. Litterio (2016) found that, by the end of the semester, though there was involvement of students in the process of the writing contract, students were growing resistant to the system, especially to the idea of the instructor serving as an assessor for criteria being created by students.

After some revision in her study, Littero conducted her second study in 2018, her methods and findings detailed in her article “Contract grading in the technical writing classroom: Blending community-based assessment and self-assessment.” In planning for this study, she asks “how does a contract grading system with a blend of community-based assessment, as used in her first study, and student self-assessment result in student involvement throughout the entire process, and what do students perceive as the advantages and disadvantages of such a system” (p. 2)? Where, in the previous study, Littero (2016) had been the one grading the student’s work despite their involvement in the process of creating criteria, in this new study she intended to allow students to create the criteria for each assignment, and also assess their own work through careful reflection. The study involved 18 undergraduate students in Littero’s class, and involved three types of data. One first form of data was a preliminary survey to be taken after the first assignment, asking students of their background knowledge on grading contracts. The next was a variety of self-assessments students would engage in following each assignment. And the third type of data was a final survey that asked about the students’ overall experience with the grading contract. Littero (2018) discovered that, provided with even more involvement in their own assessment, students felt more in-tune with their own learning, and were more greatly involved in all aspects of their assignments.

Conclusion

The conversation around grading contracts has been rapidly growing over the last decade, as made apparent by the increasing amount of texts addressing its use as a tool to combat the issues being recognized in traditional grading. Though research has been done on the implementation of grading contracts outside of the writing classroom (Poppen & Thompson, 1971; Lindemann & Harbke, 2011), there is limited empirical research within this context

(Inoue, 2012; Spidell & Thelin, 2006; Litterio 2016, 2018). There is even less research that discusses the use of grading contracts in the secondary classroom to assess writers and support them in their growth.

In this chapter, I explored the conversations that have taken place around grading, as well as the recent literature on alternative grading. In chapter three, I will present the plan for my study that aims to bridge the gap between post-secondary and secondary education, focusing, specifically, on the use of grading contracts to work toward educational freedom.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Methodological Framework

In his article “Teachers as Transformative Intellectuals,” Henry Giroux (1985) addresses how teachers are continuously stripped of their power and their credibility, being reduced to “specialized technicians within the school bureaucracy” (p. 1). Instead of positioning teachers as knowledgeable and prepared to engage in thoughtful decision-making in their classrooms, “teaching is reduced to training and concepts are substituted by methods” (Giroux, 1985, p. 2). Giroux (1985) argues that teachers must be positioned as more than passive mediators and recognized as experts — transformative intellectuals — with the ability to make critical contributions in their communities. Teaching as a transformative intellectual means addressing political and social injustices in the classroom and encouraging student voice by recognizing diversity in class, race, ethnicity, and gender (Giroux, 1985). Teachers have developed a movement in order to reclaim the power that is often taken from them named “practitioner research” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009), which aids them in their transformative efforts.

According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s book *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation* (2009), practitioner research is a development recognized “as a promising way to conceptualize the critical role of teachers’ knowledge and actions in student learning, school change, and educational reform” (p. 5). Though practitioner research can take on a variety forms, including “teacher research” and “self study” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009, p. 40), the ultimate goal of research performed within this movement is to answer questions they develop in their teaching lives. The study I highlight here is an example of practitioner research as it grew out of questions and concerns I had when taking on the role of student teacher at the

conclusion of my undergraduate English teacher licensure program. I was concerned when I saw that certain students—many of whom were speakers of Black English—seemed to feel inferior in their English classes, and did not seem to feel welcome in the schools they were part of. I wondered how I could create a classroom in which students' voices are heard and, as I continued my research, developed an interest in contract grading. I was curious about whether or not contract grading could help support educational freedom (hooks, 1994). Where traditional grading inherently supports an outdated, unyielding system that only efficiently serves middle to upper class White students whose languages and literacies have more often been valued in classrooms, grading contracts emphasize the significance of individual student voice through negotiation of classroom expectations.

The following chapter will detail the qualitative study that was developed in order to explore the potential of grading contracts to empower writers and work toward educational freedom in the secondary English class. Billups (2019) explains that “qualitative research allows us to uncover the meaning individuals ascribe to their experiences, through close interactions, rich conversations, multifaceted interpretations” (p. 2). I found using a qualitative approach to this study while engaging in this practitioner inquiry to be most effective because I was looking to find connections between the unique experiences of the teachers when answering my research questions. As I moved through my undergraduate and graduate years, my inquiries centered around secondary education because it has always been my goal to teach high school. While speaking with secondary English teachers during my program, I found there were recurring concerns about the strict standards they were meant to assess their students by. I felt an uneasiness when thinking about the grading protocol I might be encouraged to adhere to in my future, but that dread fueled my desire to explore alternative forms of assessment. I was formally

introduced to grading contracts in a post-secondary writing class, where I was instantly interested in how they aided students in becoming more confident in their individual skills and practices. I appreciated how it gave students freedom in their learning, but also promoted accountability for both the instructor and the students. If grading contracts were something that writers had found success with at the post-secondary level, I thought, there was the possibility that this was something that could support writers at the secondary level as well. In order to understand more, I planned for study that would draw from the voices of both post-secondary writing instructors and secondary teachers in order to consider the potential of this alternative method of assessment.

Research Questions

As I shared in chapter one, this qualitative practitioner inquiry was designed in order to come to the following understandings:

- What have post-secondary writing instructors learned through the implementation of contract grading?
- How do secondary writing teachers respond to the possibility of implementing contract grading?
- What might it look like to design a grading contract that works toward educational freedom in the secondary English class?

Context of Study

Table 1

Steps of Data Collection

Process step	Timeline	Data collection
Step 1: Recruitment	October, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Recruited participants for focus groups via email
Step 2: First Focus Groups and Document Analysis	October, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conducted focus group with post-secondary instructors ● Collected examples of contracts
Step 3: Second Focus Group and Document Analysis	November, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Distributed contract examples for secondary teachers to review and comment on ● Conducted focus group with secondary teachers

Recruitment

In October of 2022, I put out a call over email to post-secondary writing instructors who have used grading contracts and would be interested in participating in my study. It was my hope to understand their journey from traditional grading to this alternative grading practice. In order to understand this journey from all different perspectives, I wanted post-secondary instructors who were at various levels of experience with both alternative grading, and in the whole of their teaching careers. In order to ensure diverse representation, I selected some participants from my own peers, as well as some that were recommended to me because they were known to be using, or have used grading contracts in the past.

In October of 2022, I also put out a call over email for secondary teacher participation. It was important for me to find participants who were open to discussing the potential of alternative grading practices within a secondary setting. With this in mind, I decided it would be most productive to find secondary teachers who already had some knowledge on grading contracts. I did this by retrieving the contact information of the secondary teachers who attended the 2020 Old Dominion University Spring Writing Conference where Asao Inoue, the keynote speaker, spoke on the use of grading contracts in the writing class. Choosing participants from this list would eliminate some confusion for the participants. However, when trying to get in contact with the over twenty secondary teachers who had attended the conference, I only received one response agreeing to participate in the study.

In order to increase the number of participants, I reached out to alumni from the undergraduate English teacher education program at the university in which I was studying to find additional participants. To ensure my participants' openness to discussing alternative grading, the email I sent enclosed a few questions for them to answer, including their name, their availability for the study, and a couple of sentences on why they would like to participate in the conversation about the use of grading contracts to support writers. I was able to recruit five participants over email.

Participants

The six post-secondary writing instructors who participated in this study all taught First-Year or Developmental Writing at their respective universities. Each participant shared their racial and gender identities with me, and chose a pseudonym for themselves in order to protect their identities. Five out of the six participants worked at a large Mid-atlantic public research university that served a demographic of 46.6% White students, 28.9% Black students, and 8.59%

Hispanic or Latino students. The sixth participant joined from a Hispanic-serving public research institution in the south that supported a demographic of 90.5% Hispanic or Latino students, 3.38% White students, and 1.41% Asian students. The experience of these teachers ranged from one semester teaching to 23 years of teaching, and each shared an example of one of the grading contracts they had previously used with student writers.

Table 2

Participating Post-Secondary Instructors

Pseudonym	Enrique	Taylor	Lydia	Marie	Regina	Trish
Identity	Hispanic, Male	White, Male	White, Female	White, Female	White, Female	Black, Female
Teaching experience	Teaching for 7 years	Teaching for 10 years	Teaching for 23 years	GTA for one semester	Teaching for 8 years	GTA for one semester
Currently teaching	First-year writing	First-year writing	First-year writing	First-year writing	First-year writing and Developmental writing	First-year writing

In addition to the post-secondary writing instructors, five secondary English teachers participated in this study— two of those at a public middle school, one at a public high school, one at a private college preparatory school — and one participant taught previously, then moved to teacher support within their district at a public high school. Each participant shared their racial and gender identities with me and chose a pseudonym in order to protect their identities. The four public schools were located within two districts in the Mid-atlantic, and the first district served a demographic of 58% Black students, 21% White students, and 12% Hispanic or Latino

students, while the second district served a demographic of 46% White students, 24% Black students, and 13% Hispanic or Latino students. The private school was in the Southeastern United States and served 91% White students, 3.1% Black students, and 2.3% of students that were two or more races. The experience of these teachers ranged from two years to 15 years.

Table 3

Participating Secondary Teachers

Pseudonym	Mr. H	Olivia	Joanne	Miss Khay	Ann
Identity	White, Male	White, Female	White, Female	African American, Female	White, Female
Experience	Teaching 2.5 years of public middle school English	Teaching 14 years of private high school English	Taught 15 years of public high school; now part of teacher support	Teaching 5 years of public middle school English	Teaching 2 years of public high school English

Methods of Data Collection

I used two methods of data collection in my study, those being focus groups and document analysis. Billups (2019) argues, “As a qualitative research method, focus groups remain an ideal strategy for obtaining in-depth feedback regarding participants’ attitudes, opinions, perceptions, motivations, and behaviors” (p. 97). This is because they give researchers a chance to obtain extensive primary data due to collective responses and interaction among the participants. Meanwhile, while document analysis can be used independently, it can also be used to “ground, supplement, or enhance a study” (Billups, 2019, p. 144). Document analysis

provided an additional layer of support for my research, and enriched the data provided by the focus group.

Focus Group

In her book, *Qualitative Data Collection Tools: Design, Development, and Applications* (*Qualitative Research Methods*, Billups (2019) explains how focus groups have many different applications, including their ability to increase the validity of findings. “In this role,” Billups (2019) states, “focus groups probe findings, corroborate similarities or differences, or reveal bias or inconsistencies in the preceding or subsequent findings” (p. 99). When acting as the main method of data collection, however, focus groups can prove to be both beneficial and challenging. While they provide opportunity for enthusiastic discussion among participants, which could result in a variety of comparisons and experiences that deepen the intricacies of a study’s findings, there is also a chance that the participants’ conversations produce insufficient information for the data (Billups, 2019). To prevent this, Billups (2019) emphasizes how the researcher must be careful when determining what questions to ask their participants, and the manner in which they conduct the focus group, stating that the researcher must “possess characteristics akin to those of a therapist, counselor, or coach; they need to listen, to communicate with sensitivity and compassion, and to elicit a participant’s story in rich detail” (pp. 98-99). After researching this method, I felt much more confident in setting up, and mediating a focus group for this study.

Focus Groups within this Study

In order to secure a time that participants for both focus groups were available, I created Doodle Polls and shared them over email. All focus groups were conducted over Zoom, making it easier to include participants that were not in the immediate area where the study was

conducted, and were recorded using two methods: with the recording feature on Zoom, and with the Otter.ai website. After asking all participants if they consented to be recorded, I started the focus group of post-secondary instructors by having each participant give their name, their years of teaching experience, and what classes they were currently instructing. During the focus group, I asked questions about their experiences with traditional grading and what prompted them to switch to contract grading. Then, I asked them to reflect on any changes to the classroom culture since the switch, as well as any changes that they have made to their contracts and why. Finally, I ended the first focus group by asking the post-secondary instructors what advice they would give to a secondary teacher looking into contract grading.

The group of secondary teachers had to be broken up into separate focus group sessions — the first one consisting of three participants, the second consisting of two — as there was no time that all participants could convene at the same time. Once I had confirmed all participants were comfortable being recorded, I asked the participants about their experiences with grading in the secondary setting, and how their students responded to being graded. I then asked about their experiences with giving feedback on the contracts designed and used by the post-secondary instructors, including what they appreciated and what would be challenging about grading in their own classrooms. Finally, I ended the focus group by asking them what changes they would make to the contracts, if they were to use them, and what assistance they might need in order to adopt a grading contract within their classroom.

Document Analysis

In her book, *Qualitative Data Collection Tools: Design, Development, and Applications* (*Qualitative Research Methods*, Billups (2019) illustrates the value of document analysis by referencing Bowen's (2009) five ways that the method can be utilized in a study; to provide

context, to prompt additional questions, to provide additional data, to trace the development of research over time, and to compare findings from other research methods. In order to fully take advantage of document analysis, the researcher must prepare carefully. This requires a clear understanding of the purpose of each document, as well as where they are located—either physically or digitally—and how they will be accessed (Billups, 2019).

Document Analysis within this Study

After finishing up the focus group with the post-secondary instructors, I asked each of them to share a recent version of one of their grading contracts with me. I made copies of and posted them into Google Drive to make them easier to share with and to be commented on by the participating secondary teachers. Then, I removed all names or identifiers on each contract in order to maintain confidentiality before making five copies of each of the six contracts shared with me. One copy of each contract was put into a separate folder, which I shared with each corresponding secondary teacher participating in the study. This way, each participant only had access to their own copies of the grading contracts that they could read and comment on.

Before exploring the grading contracts I shared, I asked each of the secondary teacher participants to read two excerpts from Susan Blum's (2020) book, *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, that I had created a document of in their folder. The first excerpt was from the chapter titled "Contract Grading and Peer Review" by Christina Katopodis and Cathy Davidson, and the second was from "How to Ungrade" by Jesse Stommel. These excerpts gave the participants some understanding of grading contracts and their intentions, in case they had limited experience with this alternative method of grading. After they read this excerpt, I asked each participant to choose three of the six grading contracts provided by the post-secondary participants to read over and comment on, and encouraged them

to ask questions or comment on what they may like or dislike about the particular contract, giving thought to how grading contracts might work in supporting writers in the secondary writing class.

Data Analysis

Cycle 1

After cleaning up the transcripts from the post-secondary and secondary focus groups using Zoom and the Otter.ai website, I made notes in the margins of the transcripts summarizing each participants' answer to the question presented. By doing this, I was able to both create a profile for each participant from each focus group and discover commonalities across responses. This helped me as I moved forward into initial coding, as I was able to understand the context of each code depending on the participant, and categorized based upon the question it was addressing.

From there, I engaged in initial coding. This type of coding worked best during my first exploration of the data as it allowed me to practice pulling codes both paraphrased or word-for-word from the transcript, and gave me a direction for the rest of my coding. Saldaña (2013) states that "Initial Coding can employ In Vivo Coding or Process Coding, for example, or other selected methods profiled in this manual," which makes this type of coding particularly beginner-friendly (pp. 100-101). Initial coding also encourages researchers to look beyond their preconceptions of the study, engaging the data itself to shape the discoveries (Saldaña, 2013). After reading over all the transcripts multiple times, I felt comfortable pulling codes from them and transferring these codes to a Google document, where I could move them around.

Cycle 2

The first method of coding that I used for the second cycle was axial coding, in which I thinned down the number of codes that I had, and split them into categories (Saldaña, 2013). This method of coding is meant to reassemble the codes in a way that determines which are more or less significant (Saldaña, 2013). I cut out codes that were repetitive, or were not essential when looking across the patterns that appeared. Through this, I was able to see which codes dominated the study and any new “axis” that surfaced (Saldaña, 2013, p. 218). The second method I used for the second cycle was theoretical coding. “In Theoretical Coding,” states Saldaña (2013), “all categories and subcategories now become systematically linked with the central/core category” (p. 224). This is where I saw themes beginning to emerge for each set of data. See Table 4.

Table 4

Process of Coding

First Cycle Coding	Second Cycle Coding	
Open Coding	Axial Coding	Theoretical Coding
“I am a human being”	Humanizing the instructor	Communication
“That was me”		
Admitting to mistakes	Encouraging transparency	
“Specific, detailed instruction”		

When engaging in the coding process for the post-secondary instructors' focus group, two major themes emerged as I reached the end of the second cycle; how they found the use of grading contracts affected engagement, and how they found the use of grading contracts affected communication. While the discussion conducted within the secondary teacher's focus group was quite different, the themes remained consistent when I engaged in theoretical coding, inspiring the organization for the following findings chapters.

Positionality

Attending middle and high schools where the majority of the student body was White and upper-middle class, my educational experience was completely unperturbed by the learning standards of my district, as these standards were built on White ways of knowing. I found that praise came easily from my teachers for very little. Moving from my hometown that is made up of well over half White residents to a university that serves 28.9% Black students, and 8.59% Hispanic or Latino students, many who had likely experienced institutional marginalization across educational experiences, was a massive change for me, and opened my eyes to many issues with my experience in secondary education that I had not recognized before. As an educator and teacher researcher, I believe it is essential to recognize potential biases that influence not only how I teach and assess, but also how I make sense of data. In order to try and address these biases, I recruited participants with a wide range of experience in education, used multiple methods of data collection, and engaged in a coding process that would extract conclusions from the data itself.

Limitations

When thinking about the design of this study, there are some limitations that should be kept in mind. Many of these limitations have to do with the fact that no pilot study was

conducted beforehand. Billups (2019) explains that running pretests is important, as it helps hone the accuracy of the qualitative tools and gain more valuable data (p. 20). However, with the limited time allotted in order to conduct research, this study itself could be seen as a pilot for future research. Both the post-secondary participants and secondary participants were limited, and a larger number of participants could be useful in better understanding the diversity of responses to the use of contract grading. Not only this, but it is possible that having a focus group as the primary data source could be limiting, as the participants might have been influenced by groupthink. In the future, with the recognition of these limitations, it is possible for a larger study to be conducted that includes other methods of collection, such as classroom observations and surveys to be taken before and after the study. Classroom observations would provide further insight on how grading contracts function day-to-day in the classroom, as well as an understanding of how students respond, and surveys would provide opportunities for participants to provide feedback without the influence of others.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed methodology and context of my study. I then reflected upon my positionality and the potential limitations of my design. In chapter four, I will be presenting the findings that grew out of the data collected from the post-secondary instructors' experiences and perspectives on the use of grading contracts, as well as the analysis of the grading contracts that they provided.

CHAPTER IV

POST-SECONDARY INSTRUCTORS' PERSPECTIVES ON CONTRACT GRADING

Adopting a Grading Contract

I facilitated a focus group with six post-secondary first-year composition teachers and explored grading contracts they used in the first-year composition course. Toward the beginning of the focus group, every participant shared their story and reasoning for first adopting their grading contract, whether it was a labor-based grading contract, or something they had revised through the years. However, even with some changes that participants had since made and with such a wide range of experience in education, ranging from one semester to 23 years, there were common themes that connected the participants' responses in regards to why they chose to adopt the practice. There was a mutual agreement that traditional grading put too much value on the grades that were assigned, and a recognition that students were assigning their own worth to those grades. On the other hand, contract grading allowed for more freedom and encouraged teachers to assess students, not solely based upon what they produced, but the effort put into the learning process.

Enrique

At the time of the study, Enrique had been teaching first-year composition for seven years, and was working at a public research institution in the south that supported a demographic of 90.5% Hispanic or Latino students, 3.38% White students, and 1.41% Asian students. At the beginning of the focus group, Enrique was the first out of the participants to make it clear that he was a very “anti-grades” instructor. He explained that, while he recognized that grades do have a function—some students being dependent on grades for their scholarships—, he was against them because students see grades as a reflection of their own intelligence. Enrique’s frustration

was clear as he stated that, for many students, anything below an A they believed reflected badly upon their abilities. This was much of the reason that led him to adopting a grading contract, along with the desire to work toward a democratic system, where everyone is contributing to the culture of the classroom.

Enrique told us that he used a different terminology when introducing a grading contract to his students. He explained that he found the intense nature of the contract, including the term “contract,” may be intimidating for such young people who might be independent for the first time. By understanding who his audience was, Enrique redesigned and changed the name of his grading contract to “What We Owe Each Other” in order to most effectively reach his students and create a bond of trust.

Lydia

With 23 years of teaching experience, Lydia was a master lecturer at a large Mid-atlantic public research university, which served a demographic of 46.6% White students, 28.9% Black students, and 8.59% Hispanic or Latino students. At the time of the study, Lydia was then teaching first-year composition. Lydia revealed that, even at the very beginning of her career, she always remembered “choosing a purple pen over a red.” Like Enrique, Lydia stated that she struggled with students measuring their personal value by the grades they received, and turned to a labor-based grading contract in order to promote more conversations around what defines engagement in the classroom. Since implementing the labor-based grading contract, Lydia stated she received feedback from students about how the grading contract has lifted a weight off of their shoulders, and she also believed that it has encouraged more interest in the material, promoting the engagement she valued. Not only has it relieved stress for Lydia’s students, but for herself as well. Her switch in grading eliminated the need to justify such particular,

quantitative standards. Instead, she was able to focus on the bigger picture through the feedback she provided.

Marie

Marie was visibly excited to discuss her journey of implementing a labor-based grading contract, this being her first semester of teaching first-year composition at a large Mid-atlantic public research university that served a demographic of 46.6% White students, 28.9% Black students, and 8.59% Hispanic or Latino students. Like the above participants, she shared similar experiences with writers whose discouraging past with grading dictated their attitudes about the beginning composition class, but Marie illustrated how she was quick to step in and offer support. The reason that these students believed they were not good at writing, she explained, was because they had been graded by someone else's standards for so long, and it is not a standard that all students should have to be judged by. This was where the "beauty of labor" came in for Marie:

Whether or not it's considered perfect is not for me to judge. If I'm seeing the effort, the revision, the review, the editing, the idea development, and, you know. Or, if you're unable to do it because you're stuck, but you're coming to me, you're emailing me, you're coming to my office hours, or you know, if I'm seeing that collective effort, then you're doing fine.

Marie's use of the term "effort" in this scenario was similar to how Lydia was using the term "engagement." While the product of the student may not be perfect, there were ways that Marie identified if a student was engaged with the material or not, including communication through emails and the use of resources that were at their disposal.

Regina

Regina, who had been teaching for eight years, usually taught both a first-year composition course and a co-requisite that offered additional reading and writing support. She taught these courses at a large Mid-atlantic public research university that served a demographic of 46.6% White students, 28.9% Black students, and 8.59% Hispanic or Latino students. Regina's experience with grading contracts was different from those of her fellow participants. She explained how she started her journey with the use of a labor-based grading contract during the first semester of the Covid-19 pandemic that was completely online, figuring it would be a good time for it because the environment was more forgiving for trying out new assessment practices. The values of labor-based grading contracts aligned with the anti-racist and anti-ablest pedagogy that Regina made efforts to implement, but since then, Regina has moved away from the use of a labor-based grading contract and towards other forms of grading contracts, including self-assessment, in an effort to provide her students with more opportunities to grow as writers. "I've kind of run the gamut, doing all sorts of different things," she stated. In reflection on the different methods of ungrading, Regina mentioned that she appreciated the way that labor-based grading emphasized student creativity and gave students more freedom to explore their approach to writing in whatever way is most comfortable for them.

Trish

Like Marie, Trish participated in the focus group during her first semester of teaching a first-year composition course at a large Mid-atlantic public research university that served a demographic of 46.6% White students, 28.9% Black students, and 8.59% Hispanic or Latino students. Ever since hearing about the concept of a labor-based grading contract while she was taking a Teaching College Composition course during her graduate studies, she was enamored

with the idea, as it offered flexibility and grace to students who needed it. She went on to explain that she was concerned that all of her grades would look the same, but she had had a wide variety, from C's to A's, the grades being an indicator of the effort that her students are putting in.

Taylor

Taylor was teaching both a first-year composition course and a co-requisite that offers additional reading and writing support to students taking first-year composition. At the time of the study, he was working for a large Mid-atlantic public research university that served a demographic of 46.6% White students, 28.9% Black students, and 8.59% Hispanic or Latino students, and had been teaching for 10 years. Taylor explained that he was first introduced to the labor-based grading contract when he attended a university writing conference for secondary and post-secondary instructors that explored the theme "Equity, Access and Justice For All." That year, Asao Inoue was the keynote speaker, and Taylor said that the first contract he used was an adapted version of the labor-based grading contract that Inoue provided as an example. Since then he has continued to edit his contract based upon his own research and experience in the classroom, and stated, "I like that these contracts reflect our time together in class." Taylor explained that, while he did not utilize the traditional grading system, there is some use to grades because of the expectations that students are coming into the first year composition class with.

Effect on Engagement

One recurring theme that grew out of the data analysis was engagement. In looking across the data, I noticed that teachers believed the use of grading contracts improved engagement both inside and outside of the classroom. In this case, engagement was defined by a students' overall contribution in the class, their effort on their assignments, and was measured

however the instructor defined in the contract. While a common experience among them was of students who initially did not grasp the importance of engagement coming into college, the participants shared how the use of the labor-based grading contract helped to open their eyes.

Enrique

Enrique loosely outlined how the first day of class typically started, and explained that engagement was immediate:

I asked them before I introduced the syllabus, how many of you see yourselves as writers? And maybe I get one or two hands raised, if any, uh, and the first sentence in my syllabus is, ‘I probably already asked this question, how many of you are writers? And only one or two of you responded.’ And that happens every semester, and I should not be that accurate.

Using his past experience as a writing instructor and his knowledge of his past students’ relationships with writing when entering an introductory composition class, he was able to grab students’ attention, assuring them that he has an understanding of where they are coming from as writers. From there, Enrique explained in the focus group how he had two separated sections on the document of his labor-based grading contract: one section detailing what he was expecting, and one where he allowed his students to state what *they* needed in order to meet those expectations. Some examples of expectations that students have had of Enrique and of their participation in this course included “Professor [Enrique] must allow any sort of fidget toy/trinket to use during class,” and “I hope that Professor [Enrique] can be understanding of each student's personal situations.” With the labor-based grading contract, Enrique was able to give students the opportunity to engage and shape the class.

Lydia

During the focus group Lydia recalled a conversation she had with one of her students at the beginning of that semester involving the nature of the labor-based grading contract:

This semester when I was talking about the grading contract, I had a kid in the back of the class. ‘It, so, so it's like A for effort, huh?’ And, and, I said, ‘No, it's B for engagement. Engage, and you can earn a B in the class.’

Lydia clarified how her intention was to get students comfortable with their individual voices in their writing and, at least, engage in the content in the way that they had collectively outlined in the class. She said that, since the labor-based grading contract took emphasis away from having to “create a perfect response to an assignment,” it encouraged students to explore new techniques with writing and take risks if they found something that was particularly interesting to them. A word that she repeated many times during the focus group was “try,” which was an action that must be carried out to achieve engagement. Given the biased nature of traditional grading, students are less likely to take risks with their writing, fearful that this could have an impact on their grade (Kohn, 2013; Stommel, 2020).

Marie

Marie stated that she found engagement in class to be at a very high level with the labor-based grading contract. To illustrate how the labor-based grading contract promoted engagement, she told a story of a quiet student who did not upload the necessary amount of work for an essay outline assignment. When Marie asked if he was struggling with this outline assignment, the student said that he was not struggling with it, but he just preferred to engage with his part of the writing process in his notebook. Marie told him that he was welcome to upload a picture of the outline in his notebook to earn credit for the assignment if that was what worked best for him, as

long as he was performing the labor expected of him, as per her labor-based grading contract, which stated “other submission forms will be accepted when the situation dictates. Please speak with me ahead of time (if possible) if you need alternative arrangements.” With the labor-based grading contract being focused upon the labor and not on the final product (or how it was shared with an audience), Marie found this student’s engagement increased quickly.

Trish

Discussing the engagement in her classroom when using the labor-based grading contract, Trish was smiling. While other participants were sharing, she pointed out, she had received a notification that one of her students had turned in the “down-draft” (Lamott, 2005) of their newest assignment:

I am smiling ear to ear because he turned in an actual complete draft. It met the word count and everything. Um, so I'm super excited to read it, and he's one of the ones that, um, that kind of felt, you know, that all throughout high school and middle school, because he was a student athlete, that no one was going to take him seriously ever, and you know, he was not doing good in English classes. So it was super exciting to see.

Trish went on to conclude that she believed the labor-based grading contract helped provide encouragement to those who were fearful of engaging “incorrectly” in the course.

Taylor

When students first entered his class, Taylor explained, there was often a misunderstanding of how he measured engagement when it came to the labor-based contract. Instead of participating fully, many of his students would begin the semester skating under the radar. They would not turn in certain assignments, but put in just enough effort to get by, as

outlined in the contract. However, when they would hand in their first assignment that would have earned them an A in high school, they were surprised by a B.

Uh, they submit the work, and they earn a B because I can find a number of specifications that merit it, but then they feel a little bit disconcerted because they are not being brought through the same, uh, kind of institutional experience. Right? 'Well, this would have earned an A in my senior English class. Why isn't it earning an A?' Now and then I have to point back to that contract and essentially say, 'the grading philosophy in this class is very different.'

This moment, Taylor states, tends to shift the gears into understanding that engagement in the class is key, not just the content of what is being turned in. What may have exceeded expectations being traditionally graded meets expectations with labor-based contract grading. By using the labor-based grading contract, Taylor finds that his students are engaging at a higher level than they once were, which provides opportunities for them to continue their growth and development as writers.

Effect on Communication

Another theme that grew out of my data analysis was communication. In looking across the data, it seemed that contract grading encouraged communication between students and teachers that often was lacking in the participating teachers' experiences with traditional grading. According to the participating instructors, communication included both the transparency from instructors about the classroom expectations, and the voices of students who felt comfortable advocating for their own education. With the ability to negotiate a grading contract, both instructors and students were able to contribute to the culture of the class and find what worked best for everyone.

Enrique

Enrique believed that, when an instructor was honest with their students in a way that humanized them, it was easier for an environment of trust to be created. The nature of contract grading encouraged this honesty, since a key component of the contract was negotiation. To promote this negotiation, Enrique said he was highly transparent, explicitly explaining to his students his proposed policies, processes, and ways to engage in his classroom, and if any of his students had any issues with what he laid out, the contract allowed room for negotiation.

You know, 'I know some of you might not be fully into it. I try to make sure that as many of you are. But if you're not, that's where you vocalize it to me, right?' So you know that that two-way trust of here's what you need for me. And here's what I need from you, right? All of that is embedded in the language that I use every day, uh, it's in the language of the contract, or, you know, the document.

Enrique found that being honest and transparent about the inner workings of the class supported students in feeling comfortable contributing to the contract.

This support came with Enrique's ability and willingness to change aspects of his class in order to make the course work for his students. This was apparent in the contract he submitted as part of the artifact collection for this study, which stated that the document "lists and names the ways in which the instructor and students have come to understand what they owe each other to create an equitable and just classroom where our work and effort is acknowledged and made more meaningful."

Regina

Regina explained that she believed that grading contracts presented a great opportunity to be open and transparent with students. She stated that there were some moments in her class

when she realized that when something was not working for her in terms of the contract, it may not have been working for her students either. At these times, Regina said the use of the contract made checking in with her class much more comfortable, as the contract encouraged others to be flexible to change.

Marie

To back up Regina's statement, Marie stated that she believed that the grading contract's allowance for transparency made it easier to create a bond of trust with her students. Marie explained that the use of the labor-based contract grading encouraged teachers to communicate with students when something in the curriculum they created was not working, or needed to change, and that that was an important lesson for students to take away.

Admitting that you didn't do something correctly ...or you reevaluated it and you're changing your process, I mean, those are all lessons that, especially at a young age, are really really important for them to have anyways...I mean, seeing the processes revised through everybody, and labor-based grading has an opportunity to have that happen on a more regular basis.

Taylor

Taylor was quick to say that it was important for secondary teachers looking to use a labor-based grading contract to listen to their students. He believed that listening to students not only helped him learn more about them and build bridges of trust, but his students also provided some great suggestions for how they wished to be graded. Taylor gave a first-hand example of this experience, explaining how a student of his had an alternative idea they were interested in for an assignment. When the suggestion was brought to him, Taylor took the opportunity to add the idea to the contract, utilizing the flexibility that the contract provided.

Conclusion

Two clear themes emerged from the post-secondary participants' responses within the focus group and were highlighted in the grading contracts they shared with me and the secondary teacher participants: grading contracts encourage engagement, and grading contracts encourage communication between the instructor and the student. By taking value away from grades and moving it to the learning itself, participants believed that the grading contracts promoted more thoughtful engagement. Students are being evaluated on more than just the final products of their assignments, and they are not afraid of the penalties that come with hegemonic practices. Simultaneously, grading contracts encourage communication in the classroom through inviting teacher and student negotiation and increasing teacher transparency. The participants claimed that making space to negotiate these grading contracts inspired both the instructor and students to voice when something was not working for them.

Chapter five will highlight the responses of the secondary instructors when asked about their own grading practices, as well as their reactions to grading contracts as well as the examples provided by the post-secondary writing instructors. It was my hope that the secondary teachers' insight in response to the post-secondary instructors' experience in designing and implementing grading contracts would allow me to better understand how to approach the design and facilitation of grading contracts in a secondary English class.

CHAPTER V

SECONDARY TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON CONTRACT GRADING

Familiarity with Grading Contracts

I facilitated a focus group with five secondary English teachers and explored their responses to grading contracts that the post-secondary first-year composition instructors used to consider how a contract might work in the secondary English class. Towards the beginning of the focus group, I asked the participants to identify themselves and provide any knowledge they had of grading contracts prior to their involvement in the study. Their teaching experience ranged from two to 15 years, but even with their time in the classroom, all five secondary instructors knew little to nothing about grading contracts before their participation, which is something I kept in mind when analyzing this data.

Olivia

At the time the focus group was being conducted, Olivia was teaching at a private preparatory school in the Southeastern United States that served 91% White students, 3.1% Black students, and 2.3% of students that were two or more races (U.S. News & World Report). Before participating in the focus group, Olivia had never heard of the labor-based grading contract before. In terms of how they would fit into secondary education, she was skeptical, stating she believed that the system sounded “idealistic and idyllic.” Though it sounded like it would be great in a standalone context, Olivia believed it would not function well within the educational pipeline. And Olivia’s comments on the labor-based grading contract examples illustrated this as well. On the three contracts that she chose to review, she identified where language might be problematic or confusing for secondary students. For example, on the grading contract that Taylor provided, he had written a section with questions for his students to self-

assess whether they have achieved their baseline grade. Where he asked, “have you done what was asked of you in the spirit it was asked? Have you put in the appropriate amount of labor?” Olivia pointed out that these guidelines were “very vague” and questioned, “can second-language learners interpret this subjectivity?” Olivia believed that all students may not be at the level that they could understand what those questions are asking.

Joanne

After 15 years of instructing in her own classroom, Joanne was no longer teaching writing and had moved on to work as teacher support for a public high school in a Mid-atlantic district that serves a demographic of 46% White students, 24% Black students, and 13% Hispanic or Latino students (Public School Review). Joanne had heard of contract grading before, but had never put it into practice. There were some comments that she left on the labor-based grading contracts she was invited to explore that questioned what was being written. In the introductory language of Lydia’s document, for example, where Lydia had employed some of Inoue’s explanation of labor-based grading contracts, Joanne had stated that she felt like was “overwhelmed with the content of the contract. There [was] a lot to read through.” Despite this, Joanne was overall very appreciative of what the alternative grading system was trying to do. She explained that she admired how these contracts lowered the stakes and might encourage students to take risks and use their own voices in their writing.

Mr. H

While participating in the focus group, Mr. H was within his third year of teaching middle school English at a public school in a Mid-atlantic district. This public middle school served a demographic of 58% Black students, 21% White students, and 12% Hispanic or Latino students (Public School Review). Mr. H stated that he had indeed heard of contract grading

before, but that was as far as his knowledge went. After reading the documents that were provided, he noted that the grading contracts he had explored had flexibility in due dates. Mr. H explained that he appreciated this decision since he, too, allowed for some changes in his deadlines, recognizing that writers' processes were different.

Miss Khay

During the time of the focus group, Miss Khay had been teaching English for five years at a middle school in the same district as Mr. H in the Mid-atlantic. Miss Khay had heard of instructors using grading contracts, but had never been formally introduced to them, nor had she read any practitioner or scholarly literature that offered insight on the use of grading contracts in the classroom. She felt that contract grading was something interesting to consider, but believed it would be difficult to implement in a secondary writing classroom, especially in her public middle school.

I could not give this to my twelve year olds and say “go forth and be great!” Um, I would spend every waking moment clarifying every minute detail. And then, even if I broke it down into minute detail, it would still need more.

Miss Khay explained that she does not think secondary students today had the learned autonomy they need to succeed with a labor-based grading contract like a college student does.

Ann

Ann had been teaching English for two years at the same Mid-atlantic school district that Joanne was employed at. Before participating in the focus group, Ann had never heard of a labor-based grading contract. Like Miss Khay, he found it to be an interesting form of grading, but was not sure if it would function well in a public secondary education setting, especially for middle school students with IEPs and 504s. She worried that it may not be straightforward

enough for them to potentially meet the learning goals set for them. The language as well would cause a problem. Since we are older with more experience, Ann stated, we understand, but a middle schooler looking at a contract like the examples that were shown may not.

Engagement

Like the first focus group involving post-secondary instructors, engagement was a recurring theme in the second set of focus groups. However, this discussion of engagement was tightly wrapped around the role of grades in the secondary classroom. All participants believed that their students' engagement was entirely dependent on the promise that they would be receiving a grade. When asked about how the students' relationship to assessment might change with a shift in the assessment practice, there was a nearly unanimous response that there would be little to no change. They felt strongly that students would remain extrinsically motivated by what scores they would receive.

Olivia

Olivia explained that, especially since she worked at a private school that aimed to prepare students for post-secondary participation, grades were seen “through the lens of commodity,” as she put it.

So, we have, I guess, had to learn how to harness that power, so to speak, um, for better or worse. That is the motivator that will get students to work hard.

Teaching dual enrollment, which allows students to take classes that count towards college credits, Olivia found that the prioritization of grades seemed to diminish intrinsic motivation. Drawing on her dissertation research, Olivia noted that students were most interested in enrolling in her dual enrollment course because of the potential of a high grade in a class that counted towards college credit.

When asked how she believed her students would react to a change in the current grading system, Olivia thought her students would be “very unsettled and insecure.” After spending eleven years using the same system, and with there already being a certain level of discomfort when it came to writing, it would be difficult for students if they were robbed of what parameters they had. Olivia explained that, being part of a dual-enrollment program, setting goals for themselves was not something they have had to do yet, as it was done for them. Since some students’ scores determined whether their class would count towards their college credits, Olivia believed that their goals of achieving A’s would not be deterred by a change to the grading practice.

Joanne

At the school Joanne was at, where she worked as a teacher's aid, she said that encouraging students’ interest in learning was the struggle that most instructors were having. While they were trying to encourage students to “improve skills” and “take risks,” students were more focused on receiving an A.

Though Joanne was not a teacher of record while participating in the study, Joanne said that the last classroom she taught in was dual enrollment, like Olivia, and noted that her students were highly grade motivated, as well. She believed that, if there was a shift towards contract grading, half of her previous students would appreciate the opportunity to work for a higher grade. However, with the use of traditional grading creating a very competitive environment, the other half would be very upset by the idea of being given a chance to earn higher grades based upon anything other than skill.

I think they would feel a little bit unmoored by the fact that they could also earn the same score as somebody who was not as skilled, um, because they see it as such a measure of

intellect, even though that's skewed, obviously. But I think that would shake some of them a little bit more than they would probably admit.

Since the students put so much of their value on grades, Joanne believed that the possibility of earning the same grades as their classmates for work that would originally give them a higher score would be frustrating for them.

Mr. H

Mr. H stated that, while the experience was completely different from teaching high school or college students, his middle school writers were still highly grade motivated. However, he tried to teach his class in a way that scaffolds the pieces of each essay, inviting revision and encouraging students to re-see their writing in order to earn grades. While the students were still working to earn grades, Mr. H explained, the grades were used to encourage students to focus on the process of writing rather than the product.

While, Mr. H said, the emphasis on the process of the writing when using a labor-based grading contract aligned with the way that he approaches assessment as students negotiate a writing invitation, if he were to ever shift the grading system in his classroom he was worried that students could feel stuck. This system, Mr. H stated, might work much better with students who were more mature, as he believed his middle school students were not yet able to define success for themselves. They were so used to the system that they have participated in, that they may not know where to go with anything else.

Communication

Although the secondary teachers voiced concern that engagement could decrease with the use of grading contracts, as grades seemed to motivate their students in engaging across a writing process, many of their responses to the grading contracts came with an appreciation for the

transparency that they could offer, especially when it came to information like grading policies and details about assignments. It became clear through the focus group that this specificity was something that the secondary instructors found was necessary for their students to produce quality work.

Olivia

Explaining how she had always been an advocate for student voice, Olivia said she appreciated the values of the contract—like how it worked to minimize the power structure in the classroom—and how it encouraged students to take responsibility for their learning. The secondary teacher participants recognized this balancing of power in Enrique’s grading contract, in which he encouraged his students to contribute to the grading contract with their own expectations for the course.

When the focus group shifted to discussion of ways to revise the contracts in order to make them work in their own secondary classrooms, Olivia referred to a study from the book *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life* by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006). On the student-expectations section of Enrique’s document, one student had written, "I hope that Professor [Enrique] is able to explain lessons and assignments clearly," and Olivia made a note there to mention this particular research, as the particular expectation pertained to the subject of the article. The study she referred to in particular included an analysis of the way that instructors teach writing and the different operating definitions they use, coming to an identification of five categories by which “good writing” is valued. Using the study as a jumping off point, Olivia explained that it might be helpful to allow students to, within certain boundaries, define what would be fair when it comes to what they need to be successful and how

they would be assessed. This would allow them to develop a co-constructed contract that would be both detailed and written in a way that they could understand their expectations.

Joanne

Joanne emphasized that she appreciated how transparent the contracts could be and how they encouraged communication in all facets. She noticed how many of the contracts had expectations and assignments for the entire course laid out.

We often are talking about communicating with all stakeholders at this level especially, um, a students education. And so, having that information upfront, I think really demystifies a lot of the grading practices that students are often unaware of.

The participating secondary teachers had an opportunity to see how a grading contract can demystify grading through exploring the post-secondary instructor, Lydia's, contract. When interacting with this grading contract, Joanne commented, "I appreciate the use of a table to quantify the work required to earn a particular grade in the course."

Ann

Ann said that she liked how straightforward some of the contracts were when it came to how students could find success in the writing classroom, like the way that post-secondary instructor, Marie, detailed in her document the differences between earning an A and a B in both the form of a table, and a grading breakdown. Ann also explained how she believed the use of a baseline grade—like the B Inoue's students achieve then they execute the minimal amount of labor outlined in the contract—could be helpful for students to focus on improving their writing.

I think it clearly outlines that, in order to truly succeed, you have to excel past something, and so it's placing more emphasis on the growth element. And um kind of pushing

beyond just the basic expectations. So it's, kind of, giving them the opportunity that if you're not happy with that grade there is room for improvement.

Ann believed that this idea that the baseline grade created “room for improvement” in combination with specific details on *how* to achieve this improvement might be encouraging.

However, as important as clarity was to the participants, Ann explained that she found that some of the language may be misleading for secondary students, just like the vague language that Olivia identified in Taylor’s labor-based grading contract. Ann emphasized that the instructions and policies needed to be clear, direct, and worded in a way that would be encouraging for students.

Mr. H

Mr. H agreed with Joanne and Ann, and appreciated the transparency and specificity of certain contracts. He specifically mentioned the documents provided by the post-secondary instructors Jane and Trish, who detailed all of their assignments and grading policies in their contract. However, like Ann, he did also observe that there were some contracts that did not contain as much specificity, which he believed may be a problem with secondary students who could be inclined to turn in the bare-minimum. If the details of an assignment were not laid out explicitly, Mr. H was curious about what was keeping students from just turning in “nonsense” that would get them the grade they wanted.

Conclusion

These secondary instructors, though they understood that their students’ focus should be on learning, recognized that their classes were highly grade motivated as a result of the educational system in which they had participated throughout their histories of schooling. However, they also suspected that a change in their current grading practice would not motivate

their students to engage more deeply in the writing process, as post-secondary instructors had experienced in using grading contracts with writers. Across the board, all the secondary instructors appreciated that grading contracts could be written to clarify expectations, ensuring that students and teachers were on the same page regarding what students should be working towards in order to grow as writers. But, even so, there was some concern over the amount of detail on certain documents, as well as the language that may lose the attention of secondary students.

In chapter six, I will be responding to the research questions and discussing the implications of my analysis using the data derived from both the post-secondary and secondary teacher participants. In this, I will be reflecting on the concerns voiced by the participating secondary teachers and providing suggestions for future research that could be facilitated beyond this study.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussion

In the previous two chapters, I presented the findings by identifying the themes that could be found across the participant's responses. In this chapter, I will draw on the findings in an effort to respond to the research questions that guided the design of this study. In my responses, I will draw on examples from the data, as well as outside literature to provide support. Once I address the research questions, I will then move the focus towards the future. Specifically, I will be looking at the future of grading contracts in the secondary writing classroom, and possibilities for future research. My goal for these discussions is to amplify the voices of educators from various backgrounds in order to encourage conversations around educational freedom in the secondary writing classroom.

Research Questions

What Have Post-secondary Writing Instructors Learned Through the Implementation of Contract Grading?

Drawing on data collected from the post-secondary writing instructors as they participated in a focus group and shared examples of their grading contract to highlight their approaches to making use of grading contracts, I found that the participants had learned several things through the utilization of contract grading. Nearly all of the participating post-secondary instructors explained how, by utilizing the contract, their students perceived that they had more freedom to negotiate writing invitations in a way that was most effective for themselves. For example, Lydia found that, in her class, students seemed to feel that the use of the labor-based grading contract took emphasis away from having to "create a perfect response to an

assignment,” and her words were echoed by Marie’s interaction with a student where the students preferred to engage with some of the tasks on paper, versus using the computer. With the pressure of the teachers’ potential judgment being off their shoulders with the use of the grading contract, the participants found that their students were able to focus upon their learning.

The post-secondary participants also found that the use of a grading contract allowed for clearer communication that prioritized everyone’s comfort in the classroom. Negotiation being one of the cornerstones of these instructors’ grading contracts, the participants believed that the transparency that is encouraged by the practice humanizes instructors and levels out the power-imbalance between instructor and student. As an illustration of how he would speak to his students in order to gain understanding, Enrique stated, “I know some of you might not be fully into [the grading contract]. I try to make sure that as many of you are. But if you're not, that's where you vocalize it to me, right?’ So you know that’s that two-way trust of, here's what you need from me, and here's what I need from you...” When using a grading contract, participants believed that instructors and students were prompted to talk about what needs to happen in the classroom in order to make the space welcoming for everyone.

A few of the post-secondary instructors shared that they started out with labor-based contract grading, and then moved toward other forms of ungrading. For instance, Regina explained that her experience began with using a labor-based grading contract, then moved to contract grading, using labor to assess only certain assignments. At the time of the focus group, she stated that she was trying out a self-assessment approach, joking that she had “kind of run the gamut, doing all sorts of different things.” Meanwhile, Ben explained that he changed the name of his method from a “labor-based contract” to his own name of “What We Owe Each Other” in hope that would most effectively help him create a bond of trust with his students, and, while the

actual method of grading did not change, this re-naming helped encourage the essential negotiation of the contract. These instances provided an illustration of Blum's (2020) description of ungrading in the introduction of her book: "Though the destinations tend to be generally the same, there is variation in the routes, the reasons, the contexts, and the specific ways various individuals at different levels of education enact our change" (p. 2). Though some of the participating post-secondary instructors found that different forms of ungrading worked better for them than others, they were all using ungrading in an attempt to create a classroom that allowed every voice to be heard. And their decision to try multiple approaches of ungrading in order to meet the needs of their students, echoes CCCC's (2021) "Writing Assessment: A Position Statement," which specifies "Writing tasks and assessment criteria should be revisited regularly and updated to reflect the evolving goals of the program or curriculum." These educators who use ungrading recognized that they can change their practice as needed to support their students' growth as writers.

Though post-secondary instructors seemed to have learned a lot through the implementation of contract grading, some of the ideals of traditional grading still seemed to influence their practices. For instance, during the focus group, Trish mentioned that she had initially harbored some concern that all of her students' grades would end up being the same with the use of the grading contract. That semester being both her first time teaching and using a labor-based grading contract, she had no prior experiences with how it would play out. However, as the semester progressed, she was relieved to find her students were producing a range of grades, from A's to C's. This reflected the theory valued by many who embrace traditional grading that students' grades should fall into a normal distribution, or normal-curve, with fewer students receiving A's (Kohn, 2013). However, as Kohn (2013) states, "...this pattern is not a fact

of life, nor is it a sign of admirable ‘rigor’ on the teacher’s part” (p. 148). When addressing the subject of normal distribution, Inoue (2019) explains that, while this theory can successfully be applied to something as objectively measured as the heights of men and women, this is not the case for something as idiosyncratic as a student’s brain. With that being said, Inoue suggests that looking at grade distribution may be more productive if used to assess any unfairness within the class. He explains, “The rule is that if my course’s grade distribution can show that most students who abide by the labor-based grading contract get good grades (B-/B range), then my ecology has ensured a reasonable degree of equal opportunities” (Inoue, 2019, p. 289).

How Do Secondary Writing Teachers Respond to the Possibility of Implementing Contract Grading?

When encountered with the possibility of implementing contract grading in their own classrooms, the secondary writing teachers who participated in the study were skeptical overall. They were appreciative of the aim of the contract. For instance, Joanne explained that she liked how these contracts lowered the stakes and might encourage students to take risks and use their own voices in their writing, and Miss Khay and Ann both found grading contracts to be an interesting idea to look further into since they might address the problem of their students attaching their self-worth to their grades. However, the participants also believed that the contract would not serve its purpose the way it was intended if used in their secondary classroom. Nearly all of the participants were convinced that their students would continue to focus solely on obtaining their desired scores and, if anything, be disoriented by everyone being offered the same opportunity to succeed, despite their writing abilities. Olivia used the words “very unsettled and insecure” to describe how her students would likely feel, and Joanna explained that she thought “they would feel a little bit unmoored by the fact that they could also

earn the same score as somebody who was not as skilled because they see it as such a measure of intellect.” Since all of their students have participated in schools in which traditional grading was used, the secondary teachers believed that implementing grading contracts would prove to be counterproductive.

I wondered if much of this doubt had to do with the lack of experience with grading contracts that these instructors had coming into the study. Three of the five participants had heard of grading contract, but had limited experience with the practice, and two had never heard of contract grading at all. While a document with excerpts from Susan Blum’s book detailing the main functions and elements of grading contracts was provided for them to read before they looked at the example contracts, there is more that needs to be done in order to fully understand what it means to utilize this practice. Arellano Cabusa et. al’s (2019) NCTE position statement on professional learning claims, when recognized as professionals and provided with opportunities to collaborate and explore, English educators are more likely to better understand how to implement practices that benefit their students, as well as their own growth as teachers. Secondary teachers may need more chances to interact with grading contracts and instructors who use them, including discussions about various styles, and support in creating contracts of their own.

Not only that, but the contracts provided by the post-secondary instructors were all curated especially for a university-level class, and in order to imagine a contract that would work in their secondary English classes, they believed that there were some revisions that would need to be made. For example, Ann questioned how these contracts would function around students’ IEPs and 504 plans. Meanwhile, Olivia stated she could not see the practice working if it interfered with any school ranking systems, which affect the naming of valedictorian and

salutatorian students' senior years, and student transcripts, which are sent to colleges as part of the application process. Without a proper example of a contract that has been used in a secondary classroom, or a further understanding of how the contract can be altered in order to fit each instructor's needs, it is clear why these secondary writing teachers would be hesitant at the idea of implementing their own.

What Might it Look Like to Design a Grading Contract That Works Toward Educational Freedom in the Secondary English Class?

As I shared in my response to the second research question, much of the skepticism these secondary writing teachers felt at the possibility of implementing a grading contract may have had to do with the fact that they had not had any previous opportunities to explore alternative forms of assessment, and the example contracts the post-secondary instructors provided did not resemble any document that they believed could work in a secondary classroom.

My first thought was to sift through the feedback that the secondary teachers provided, collect what they believed would be necessary if a grading contract was to work in their classroom, and weave those suggestions in with the elements that Asao Inoue (2019) outlines as part of a labor-based grading contract. However, I realized after constructing this list that a checkpoint of this nature may only benefit an educator like me, who has had the educational freedom to research the value of labor in the writing classroom and has had chances to participate in conversations about teaching and learning across secondary and post-secondary contexts. Simultaneously, making a list based solely upon a labor-based grading contract contradicted the flexibility that grading contracts offer. Instead of a prescriptive list, I aimed to create a springboard for future research on this topic based upon the concerns of secondary educators.

With all of this in mind, the following are three suggestions that have been written based upon the recommendations of the participating secondary teachers:

- 1) *The grading contract should be written and designed in a way that is accessible for both parents/guardians and students, and should be revised as necessary over the school year.*

During the focus group, many of the secondary teachers made it clear that the language used in the contracts that they were shown would not have worked for their students. For example, Olivia pointed out a section in Taylor's contract where she believed the language to be "very vague," while Joanne had left a comment on the introduction of Lydia's document explaining how it looked like an overwhelming amount of information—especially for a secondary student—to read through.

- 2) *Instructors that choose to employ a grading contract would benefit from extra support in the classroom.* A few of the secondary teachers made clear that, if they were to be using the grading contract in their own classroom, it might be helpful to have an extra person or two assisting them to ensure that students continually understand the contract. Ann explained that, with how big the class sizes at her school are, it is more difficult to reach every student and give them the necessary feedback they would need, as the grading contract—while its aim is to limit bias—allows for high quantities of teacher feedback to support student growth. Mr. H agreed with Ann, mentioning the potential inclusion of writing specialists or tutors when implementing the grading writing contracts into larger classrooms would be helpful. With more hands in the classroom, students who are struggling would get the attention they need, whether it be with receiving the feedback they need, or with apprehension of the grading contract.

3) *The usage of grading contracts should start off on a small-scale.* Another recurring idea was to start the grading contract small, before expanding. Joanne explained that she had thought grading contracts could possibly be something implemented in small groups, building up “stamina” over the course of each year of high school. This way, Joanne stated, the students would be more familiar with the language necessary to have the necessary negotiations, such as goal setting or the writing process. Olivia had a similar idea, stating that the contract grade could potentially work if started with a “pilot class.” This pilot class, she explained, would perhaps be an elective and, if that went smoothly, the students would work as “little ambassadors” to introduce the concept to their parents and to other students.

Implications

Future of Grading Contracts in the Secondary Writing Classroom

As this study revealed, these conversations about ungrading and creating a culture of educational freedom are not as prevalent in secondary education, and there are still more questions that need to be asked before grading contracts can be employed comfortably by secondary teachers; one of these questions being whether or not there are approaches that might serve different teachers and groups of students better than contract grading. As illustrated by the participating post-secondary instructors, grading contracts are living documents that are meant to be negotiated and changed as needed, and the philosophy of ungrading is not a one-size-fits-all. As Stommel (2020) states, “there is no single approach to ungrading that will work universally. And ungrading works best when teachers feel they can fully own their pedagogical approaches” (p. 36). Secondary educators should be provided with opportunities to explore all means of ungrading in an environment “in which teachers are recognized as learners, leaders, and

knowledgeable professionals” (Arellano Cabusao et al., 2019). This means encouraging teachers to share their expertise and experiences, giving them time to engage in their own research, and promoting collaboration among educators (Arellano Cabusao et al., 2019).

Collaborative learning between secondary teachers who are interested in ungrading and post-secondary writing instructors who are using it could prove to be beneficial for the pursuit of educational freedom. In the conclusion of her book, Blum (2020) explains that one of the major challenges in the pursuit of systematic change is being alone. Both secondary teachers and post-secondary instructors are facing similar issues when it comes to traditional grading, such as the diminishment of intrinsic motivation and the limits it puts on student voices, “yet K-12 and higher education educators rarely speak to each other” (Blum, 2020, p. 225). Opening up opportunities for secondary teachers to share their own goals and collaborate with post-secondary instructors who have already engaged in research and have experience with ungrading practice would be valuable for the conversation of educational freedom.

Future Research

Ideally, this study would work as a jumping-off point for future research in the areas of educational freedom through alternative grading in the writing classroom, and the importance of ongoing professional learning for English teachers to support them in transforming spaces of teaching and learning for writers. As mentioned in chapter three, while there was no pilot, this study could serve as a pilot for a larger study that allots more time to conduct the research, and includes a greater selection of both post-secondary and secondary participants. This larger research study could also include drawing from other methods of data collection, such as observations of post-secondary classrooms that are utilizing grading contracts in order to further understand their function in real-time, and narratives from students to understand their

perspectives and experiences participating in a writing classroom in which grading contracts are employed.

Other Stakeholders

When thinking toward new research in the secondary classroom, another element to consider is other stakeholders that play a role in the lives of students and teachers, including parents and administration. During the focus group with secondary teachers, three of the five participants mentioned the importance of support from other stakeholders. Miss Khay explained that the parents or guardians must have involvement in conversations about teaching, learning, and assessment since parents and guardians are often who are supporting the students at home, and Olivia and Joanne agreed that keeping administration in the loop is key since they are involved with the teachers' communication with parents, as well as in teachers' professional growth and assessment. Knowing this, in continuing research, I believe it would be beneficial to bring these other stakeholders into the conversation around possible alternative grading methods that might work towards educational freedom.

Co-design

Another direction that this research could take is to explore other forms of ungrading beside contract grading, and consider which may better support a culture of educational freedom. These other forms of ungrading could include alternative assessment practices like minimal assessment, authentic assessment, and self-assessment (Stommel, 2020), and could be explored by secondary educators alongside researchers to collaboratively create a study that would yield the best information. For example, Fowler-Amato & Warrington (2017) planned for social design experiments, inviting teachers to collaboratively explore theory and use that theory to co-design interventions in an effort to transform classroom practice. This would also support the

identity of secondary teachers as transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1985) in their pursuit towards educational freedom in the classroom.

Final Thought

As a result of designing and facilitating this study, I have gained a deeper understanding of some of the problems that secondary educators are facing and what barriers stand in the way of them achieving educational freedom. With this said, I have also come to recognize what support may be helpful in working towards this achievement. As the participating post-secondary instructors discussed, grading contracts may be designed in order to encourage engagement and communication, but they are one of many potentially beneficial forms of alternate assessment. What works for one classroom may not work for another, especially when considering the concerns expressed by the participating secondary instructors that may not affect the post-secondary classroom.

In the conclusion of her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) speaks back on the nature of educational freedom:

“The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom” (p. 207).

I believe that hooks is right in her claim that the classroom is a location of possibility, and I have found that the first step to embracing possibility is to listen to the teachers who are experiencing these limitations first hand. This, along with providing them with opportunities to collaborate

and research with other educators, could prove to be the start of something much bigger in the fight for educational freedom.

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APPENDIX A

POST-SECONDARY INSTRUCTORS' FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Purpose: The purpose of this focus group is to better understand the reasoning behind English college instructors' use of grading contracts and how these instructors' practices have changed since its implementation. Along with this, the discussion will also involve their thoughts on educational freedom and how grading contracts affect educational freedom in their classrooms.

1. Ask for introductions.
2. What are your thoughts/feelings about grading writers?
 - a. How have your student writers responded to being graded across your career?
3. Tell us about your history using a grading contract.
 - a. How long have you been using a grading contract?
 - b. What led you to pursue the use of this tool?
4. Tell us about your experiences using a grading contract.
 - a. Has the use of a grading contract shifted the culture of the classroom? Explain.
 - b. Has the use of the grading contract increased engagement/excitement/joy in the classroom? Explain.
 - c. Has the use of the grading contract led students to feel more empowered? Explain.
 - d. Have students' thoughts/feelings about grades shifted with the use of grading contracts? Explain.
 - e. In what other ways has the grading contract impacted student experiences in your writing classes?
5. How have you revised your grading contract over time? What led to this revision? What was the impact of this revision?

6. What advice would you give to secondary English teachers who want to begin using a grading contract in their classrooms?

APPENDIX B

SECONDARY TEACHERS' FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Purpose: The purpose of this focus group is to better understand secondary English teachers' views on grading contracts. After commenting on the contracts provided by the participating post-secondary instructors and the document with excerpts with information about grading contracts, the discussion will focus on the secondary teachers' thoughts on utilizing this tool in their own classrooms.

1. Ask for introductions.
2. What are your thoughts/feelings about grading writers?
 - a. How have your student writers responded to being graded across your career?
3. Before your participation in this study, had you ever heard of a grading contract? What were your initial thoughts after reading the excerpt by Susan Blum?
4. What do you appreciate about this grading contract practice?
 - a. How might the contract aid your teaching practices?
5. What concerns do you have about using a tool like this in the secondary English classroom?
6. How do you feel your students would respond to a change like this in the grading system?
7. What revisions might you make to a tool like this to make it work better in the secondary English classroom?
 - a. What modifications would you make to this tool to ensure that it could work in your classroom with your current students?
8. What additional support might you need to implement a tool like this in your work with secondary writers?

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