

Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom, by Asao B. Inoue. The WAC Clearinghouse, 2019. 334 pp.

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“If you use a single standard to grade your students’ languaging, you engage in racism” (“How do” 359). Asao Inoue starts and ends his chair’s address at the 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) by problematizing White language preferences in writing classrooms. He calls on his colleagues to feel the discomfort—instead of think or study it as a subject—that raciolinguistically diverse students feel having to meet the standards set by White language habitus. He has argued that writing assessment is one of the most evident ways of promoting White language supremacy, and in his latest book, *Labor-Based Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*, Inoue continuously and compassionately urges readers to create labor-based grading contract ecologies as an anti-racist practice that not only moves teachers’ focus on students’ products to their labor in assessment but also has students engage with the politics of language. To exceptional effect, the book intertwines theories of labor and standard language ideologies with Inoue’s reflection on his teacherly identity and experience.

Inoue begins the book by contextualizing White language supremacy as grounds for readers to problematize the current assessment ecology. Drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of racial habitus, he argues that all performances, including judging writing, are reflections of our racial habitus—“structured dispositions associated with local racial formations” (26). The wicked, paradoxical nature of White racial habitus is that it is embedded as invisible, naturalized, neutral, objective, apolitical, and rational dispositions within larger structures that make up the society. Because these sets of White racial dispositions (i.e., Whiteness) are naturalized and neutralized, they have determined “standards” of various areas of the society, including literacy performances. What the framework of racial habitus allows us to see, then, is that “White language supremacy is a condition and outcome, not simply a trait, and is structured in assessment ecologies in such a way as to function simultaneously as an ideal and as the norm” (28).

Thus, White racial habitus is at the center of dominant academic discourses that dictate who gets the highest grades (53). Inoue turns to working-class, multilingual students of color who didn’t have first-hand access to such discourses and often didn’t receive an A-grade even though they tried hard. Seeking an answer to how teachers could create an assessment ecology that

is fair and acknowledges student labor, chapter two offers the successes and misfires of variations of grading contracts over the years. One is Bill Condon's community-based assessment that uses peer evaluations as the only grading rubric. Although this model excludes teacher's judgement, peer evaluations were not free from racialized dynamics and hence the process itself created another structural way of policing non-standard languaging. Another is Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow's hybrid contract, which became the prototype of Inoue's grading contract. In Danielewicz and Elbow's contract, B-grades are given to all students who conscientiously participate and complete assignments, and A-grades are given under specific criteria of good literacy performance. Inoue finds problematic the idea of the teacher's judgment as the sole determinant in grading and reflects on the purpose of grades in the first place. Is this process a result of student learning outcomes or is it an institutional systematic marker? Inoue concludes the chapter by emphasizing that learning comes from the act of doing, not from grades. If grades are absent, students must ask: "What am I motivated by? What do I really care about in the learning?" (73). Grading without quality as the measurement, in other words, allows students to pay attention to what they do, not what teachers think about what they do.

Given these problems of writing assessment and a tendency to see work as a prerequisite of learning, Inoue further defends labor by drawing on Marxian theory in chapter three. Juxtaposing political economy with assessment ecology, Inoue finds that they share close similarity in the system of exchange—exchanging a commodity (*habitus* embodied in texts) with currency (grades, scholarships, degrees, jobs, etc.). One who doesn't have any commodity, then, has nothing to gain in exchange. However, if we look at labor as a commodity—here Inoue notes that Karl Marx considers labor power as a commodity because everyone, no matter the socio-economic status, "owns their own labor, the work that they can do" (82)—then everyone can exchange it for currency. As with labor power, labor-based assessment ecology allows *all* students to exchange their labor in a course—the "bodily work of reading writing and other activities associated with what it takes to engage in a writing course" (78)—with grades. In this exchange, Inoue reminds that "we can only labor at the paces we can," so measuring labor separate from its worth or rate must be followed (127).

All these discussions and theorizing of grading based on labor don't mean a thing if students don't believe in them. Therefore, in the last parts of the book, Inoue focuses on practicing labor-based grading contracts in classrooms. He includes his contract as an example assignment set-up that tracks labor, readings related to labor and White racial *habitus*, and mindful practices for both teachers and students. Among these resources, two things stand out as the core branches: (1) continuously introducing and discussing the philosophy behind

grading on labor and (2) setting compassion as the core value of the class. In the first page of his sample contract, Inoue delineates the four key statements that open up conversations about the purpose of doing labor in learning, about agency in one's control over labor, about what absence of grading could mean, and about resisting White language supremacy. Throughout the semester, he brings in readings like Rosina Lippi-Green's *Linguistic Facts of Life* or Joseph Williams' "The Phenomenology of Error" to create a space for students to consider their "resistances, confusions, or concerns, respond[ing] to them, and find[ing] ways to have enough faith in the system" (146). Tasks are assigned with detailed step-by-step processes and then carefully documented to reflect time students have spent completing each step. As students understand the goal is labor, not product, they try new and unfamiliar things without fear of losing points. Most importantly, as Inoue emphasizes in chapter five, grounding the grading contract must be built upon students' understanding of practicing compassion in discussing politics of language. Through reading scientific research into the relation between compassion and collaborative learning, as well as peer-review practices that have compassion as a criterion, students are asked to think "how someone else's suffering in the world may be connected to their own" (182). This way of cultivating brave culture and an "uncomfortable yet safe space" prepares students for understanding racial, socio-economic power differential that comes with language ideologies (189).

In light of decades of calls for linguistic justice—from the 1974 CCCC "Students' Rights to Their Own Language" resolution to the 2020 "This Ain't Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!"—*Labor-Based Grading Contracts* is a must-read for all writing teachers and scholars who seek to combat linguistic racism through real action. As a multilingual transnational teacher of color and writer, this book touches close to my heart by, one, providing consolation and acknowledging battles I went through in U.S. academia, and two, equipping me with literature against linguistic injustice. I also realize that I see students who are predominantly White and monolingual sitting across from me in the classroom, listening to my racial—and transnational—language habitus. Although the book does not address the role teacher identities play in practicing grading contracts in-depth, having to address the multiplicity of my positionality to navigate this power dynamic, creating the labor-based grading contract ecology opens up a space for not only students but for teachers by inviting students to actively interrogate White language supremacy and critically reimagine what "good" languaging is together.

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