

Review Essay

Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Cultivating a Writing Classroom Ecology of Equity, Inclusion, and Compassion

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Inoue, Asao B. *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*. WAC Clearinghouse, 2019, wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/labor. 354 pages.

In his 2019 CCCC chair's address, Asao Inoue asks "How Do We Language So People Stop Killing Each Other, or What Do We Do About White Language Supremacy?" It may be an odd question for persons outside of the rhetoric and composition studies field to hear, yet WPAs, faculty, and scholars in composition-rhetoric may not find this question odd at all. His question points to a contradiction that our field has struggled to address since its founding, asking WPAs, faculty, and scholars not only to consider how their administration and teaching perpetuates White language supremacy, but to urge them to actively take on new pedagogies and practices that combat or ameliorate instruction that has been so destructive to populations not raised in a White, middle-class habitus.

Indeed, Inoue contends that not only do our current pedagogies and practices perpetuate White language supremacy, but he recognizes that current pedagogical practices are causing harm to society that is either unrecognized or ignored. He identifies the harm US writing instruction unconsciously transmits to its students: as a judgment in which the world is found lacking, and that tacitly approves of the violence against those who are not part of the White, middle-class social structure, or who choose not to conform to those particular values.

Inoue's address reproaches current pedagogical practices that we, administrators and practitioners, believe make a student successful, not only throughout their college career, but also when they navigate the world

as national and global citizens. He reveals that the practice of teaching writing is really a practice of judgment. Because we judge language and writing through the prism of a White racial habitus, he indicts writing administrators and teachers of engaging in racism by unintentionally promoting White language supremacy which he says goes hand in hand with White bias.

“How Do We Language So People Stop Killing Each Other?” is a necessary question we need to continue to ask ourselves. Why does bigotry continue to withstand societal pressure when so much thought has gone into combating it? How does a system of White bias, in which a majority of the academic establishment are engaged against, continue to endure? Inoue’s response is that it has to be more than good intentions or thoughts from academics to contest this way of being. He calls for paradigmatic changes in the practices we use when we administer writing programs and teach writing. Inoue insists that we, WPAs and writing instructors, no longer judge our students by a system which perpetuates these kinds of judgments and biases: “We need good changes, good structures, and good work that make good changes, structures, and people” (“How Do We Language,” 356).

Inoue advocates that rather than judging our students through a White middle-class habitus, we instead enter the classroom with a different paradigm, one that completely upends the current structure. He wants writing instructors to engage in a new pedagogical paradigm that acknowledges that the White middle-class habitus is one in which the dominant social structure values but not one in which we should judge or value our students’ work. Rather, in order to language differently, he believes that valuing the labor of languaging, both the physical and intellectual, is one way to combat the violence done to our students.

With this paradigm in mind, Inoue’s *Labor-Based Grading Contracts*, gets to the heart of valuing something other than the language of the White middle-class habitus. He asks writing instructors to escape the cages they find themselves in, which they’ve reinforced through their own assessment practices of valuing White language supremacy, and instead place value on the labor students expend to pass their classes, whether it is a first-year writing course or not. Indeed, students coming to the writing classroom with preconceived ideas of how writing is supposed to operate will learn that rather than rushing to produce a product, labor-based grading contracts offer a different understanding of how writing operates, one that does not look necessarily at the product but at the time and attention being paid to the process.

According to Inoue, labor-based grading contracts are one way out of the bigotry and bias we participate in, unintentionally or not. By answering

the question of how White language supremacy is perpetuated, he identifies the systemic structures he sees as culpable, from the training instructors receive from WPAs to the instructors themselves who are performing as taught. As the holders of the means of opportunity production in the classroom, instructors have the power to make, judge, and control standards of writing through pedagogical preferences, scholarship that is selected, and evaluation and grading practices, and he implicates those same WPAs and instructors as collaborators that continue to preserve the power structures that deter students who are not part of the White, middle-class habitus from continuing in a system that does not value their languaging.

In *Labor-Based Grading Contracts*, Inoue creates an assessment ecology that focuses only on the labor the student completes and by which the final course grade is calculated. What the contract does not do is make a grade assessment based on the quality of the work turned in. For Inoue, labor-based grading contracts are a way of enacting a social justice pedagogy that interrogates and dismantles White language supremacy in schools and society (4) by providing opportunities where students can critique and “problematize their existential writing assessment situations, which in turn changes or (re)creates the ecology so that it is fairer, more livable, and sustainable for everyone” (16). The grading contract, labor log, and student exercises provided are good examples of how labor practices are meant to work in the classroom, and they demonstrate an assessment ecology that values equity and inclusion and that promotes a deeper engagement with the course subject.

How did Inoue come to labor-based grading contracts and the corresponding assessment ecology? In chapter four, Inoue interrogates the idea that grades do not equate learning. He highlights teachers’ practice for giving students “opportunities” to raise their grade through extra-credit assignments. This action underscores the notion that there are students coming to class without the requisite expertise or fluency of academic discourse. What inevitably happens is that additional assignments are created to assist those students who are not steeped in the literacies of academic discourse to be on par with those students who have already developed those literacies. He sees these extra-credit assignments as a labor hack: “Do this extra thing, and I’ll raise your grade, goes the logic” (132). It is a feel-good exercise for the teacher and the student. Teachers feel principled and students obtain the desired grade.

For Inoue, this exercise sets up an interesting dilemma; in his view, if the assessment ecology students are entering is equitable then there should not be a need for extra-credit assignments. Writing instructors know that the current assessment ecology being utilized is not equitable and that stu-

dents are not entering the classroom with the same skillsets and literacies that are normally rewarded in a traditional assessment ecology. Instead, students of varying skill and fluencies are evaluated against idiosyncratic models of academic discourse their instructors believe should resemble; and those students who do not exhibit, possess, or are aware of those skillsets either fail or are punished with low grades therefore requiring those extra-credit assignments in order to justify a higher grade. Inoue considers the idea of labor itself as a more equitable gauge on which to grade students. Because it is quantifiable, if students do this amount of work, outlined in the contract, then they receive the corresponding grade. The more work students do the better the grade; there is no need for additional assignments.

Inoue's journey toward labor-based grading contracts began as a search for a socially just way for students to earn grades in his classroom. In chapter two when he problematizes his own assessment ecology and investigates his own biases and practices, he is confronted by the intellectual and emotional contradictions he had been aware of but not able to vocalize. The principal contradiction he confronted was in evaluating, judging, and grading his students' work with the desire to unlock the systemic and institutional chains around his students' hands and feet: "Grades based on my own judgments of quality seemed to be links in those chains" (21).

One of the systemic issues Inoue interrogates through his problematizing is the conditioning and naturalizing of the White racial habitus and White language supremacy all instructors teaching English (and I would suggest any discipline taught in US institutions of higher education) engage in. Naturalizing White language supremacy occurs throughout years of training all faculty undergo in the U.S. Because the White racial habitus is the center in which social power is circulated, language is the primary means of ensuring this hierarchy continues to endure (it is something in which we participate in and this action ensures its survival). Therefore, regardless of our background (socioeconomic, racial, or gender), we perpetuate White supremacy through our pedagogical practices of grading, judging, and evaluating. Although teachers may not adhere to any radical ideology that raises White supremacy as an ideal social order, our practices suggest otherwise by conditioning our students, through assessment ecologies of evaluation and grading, to believe that White, middle-class languaging is the rule which we must all conform to.

Inoue's problematizing his own positionality as a teacher who believes and preaches social justice in the classroom collides with opposing forces: How does a colonized person (a self-identified half-brown/half-white, cis-gender male) who perpetuates colonization through his own authoritative position at the same time try to decolonize his own colonizing judgments

(37)? He apprehends that it is his own evaluations that continue to create those unjust links: “once one takes on a White racial *habitus*, it’s your *habitus*, and becomes part of your values and dispositions, which makes finding fault in it harder to see and feel. Lots of shit you found fault with earlier becomes natural and good when it’s our habits you’re looking at” (36). This is the crevasse into which many teachers fall, regardless of intention, of inscribing and reinscribing the White racial habitus and White language supremacy; of walking a fine line between what has benefitted the recipient and recognizing that this adopted habitus has conferred a comfortable living, of legitimacy, but at the same time knowing and understanding that it is asking WPAs, writing faculty, and scholars in the field to make a choice, of rejecting the habitus we were brought up in as unworthy or illegitimate.

Inoue further problematizes his assessment ecology by considering the concept of fairness in the classroom. He believes teachers fall into a trap of fairness by grading everyone the same. We believe we are applying a consistent standard, but instead of fairness he explains that grading and evaluating are actually unfair, especially to students not steeped in the White middle-class habitus. And rather than trying to be fair, we should actually try to not be unfair. This statement is interesting in how he problematizes the world in which we live. By trying to not be unfair, he acknowledges the open secret we know or intuit: That the institutions we work in and the systems we live in are not fair in a fundamental way, that the system in which we live is structured to value a particular way of being—White, middle-class—and that that value enables access and opportunities that are otherwise closed or apportioned in small doses to those persons or groups not born or brought up in the White, middle-class habitus. And it is the White, middle-class group that determine the standards and rules that the rest of society is judged by; the rules that must be followed; the standards that must be met. So rather than trying to be fair in how teachers are evaluating the work that is being produced, which basically predetermines failure, trying not to be unfair asks the judge to consider a new paradigm for an assessment ecology.

Inoue’s focus away from grading toward labor enables a new habitus to form. In chapter three, the emphasis is on the labor itself, in which students are working towards quality through class discussions and exercises, yet are not expected to write academically without the ability of practice, where the product is not the primary emphasis. “One doesn’t learn to write by turning in a finished paper. One learns *in the labors* of researching, drafting, and revising—in the doing—and learns best if one pays attention to how one is doing those labors” (108).

Through labor-based grading contracts, Inoue catechizes students into active participation in their own learning by placing value on the time-consuming and embodied labors of reading and writing (including invention, research, drafting, and revision). In order for students to place value on these actions, it is necessary to understand what exactly labor is and how it affects what they are most interested in (grades, at least initially). His breakdown of labor into three values offer students direct ways to quantify and articulate their labor: it is a framework that addresses grades (exchange-value), circulates reflection about students' labor (use-value), and problematizes through reflection students' existential labor situations (worth), which aids in articulating what their labor means and how it is significant to them (107).

These values convey to students the characteristics of labor in terms they can understand. "Use-value, or how students labor" articulates the process of labor involved in assignments, the step-by-step processes. By directing attention to labors a student can determine what is the labor I am doing offering me? How is this labor useful to me? "Exchange-value or how students labor" quantifies labor through measurements such as time spent on tasks or through word counts. This value is primarily associated with the quantified exchange of labor for a grade; and more importantly, clarifies to students how much time tasks such as reading and writing actually consume. Lastly, "worth or what does this labor mean?" measures the noncognitive or metacognitive terrains of engagement, mindfulness, and reflection. The value of paying attention to labor gives meaning and awareness to the work students are undertaking.

Labor-Based Grading Contracts offer WPAs, writing faculty, and students a lot to think about. The key assumption is that separating grades from learning enables possibilities beyond the writing classroom. It demonstrates that value and worth should be placed on the labor itself, that labor is an agentive act, and it's in those moments of agency when learning occurs. This pedagogy provides a link that has been missing between compassion for our students, which is a large part of discussion in composition pedagogy courses, and the requirement of issuing a course grade. As a PhD student attending a Hispanic-serving institution, and at an earlier period would have fit the undergraduate student profile identified in this book, I think Inoue has arrived at that sweet spot writing instructors are trying to achieve in their classrooms: a place where learning occurs and a formula for how to achieve it. This review scratches the surface to the time and thought Inoue gave to the classroom grading paradigm, but it is a good example of what we are asking our students to do: problem posing, asking questions,

judging our own responses, and demonstrating those problematizing practices through writing.

WORK CITED

Inoue, Asao B. “How Do We Language So People Stop Killing Each Other, Or What Do We Do About White Language Supremacy?” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2019, pp. 352–69.

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