Contract Grading as a Pedagogical Tool to Minimize Racist Language Ideologies

Feature article by Sarah Wilhoit, University of Arizona

Writing assessment often relies on and fortifies racist language ideologies. In K-12 and higher education, white educators generally insist that student writing must adhere to white cultural norms, a tendency that not only penalizes students who come from marginalized backgrounds but also communicates white supremacist values. For example, many writing instructors deduct points based on grammar, diction, and structure, perhaps without recognizing that these elements vary depending on, among other things, a student's cultural, racial, and/or ethnic heritages. Even educators who aim to take these differences into consideration frequently demonstrate implicit bias when grading because they have internalized racist cultural messages that white students are more likely to succeed at writing tasks than students of color. Staats's (2015) literature review of educator bias reveals that many instructors are guilty of finding evidence to confirm what they already believe, a phenomenon commonly referred to as confirmation bias. Therefore, when educators consciously or unconsciously believe that students of color have inferior writing skills, those teachers are more likely to notice errors and disproportionally penalize those students compared to their white counterparts (pp. 30-31). This punitive form of assessment reinforces white supremacy by widening the achievement gap while simultaneously delegitimizing students' cultural, racial, and/or ethnic heritages.

To make our classrooms more anti-racist, writing instructors must consider how traditional forms of assessment are racist and should aim to find alternative models of assigning student grades. One such alternative is contract grading. Contract grading can reduce the deleterious effects of implicit bias because credit is assigned based on student labor rather than on subjective, and often racist, grading criteria.

Background

Many writing instructors assess their students based on what is commonly referred to as White Mainstream English (WME), a label that is grounded in white supremacist notions of what constitutes "correct" English. WME has been formulated by and for white people, and it is predicated on the idea that norms found in white culture and writing are the standard by which all students should be judged. When instructors require WME in the classroom, they legitimize the idea that racially diverse students' language skills are a detriment rather than an asset.

In her project of historicizing how Black language has been penalized, Baker-Bell (2020) argues that while

> WME-speaking students come to school already prepared because their linguistic and cultural practices are deemed 'academic,' most linguistically and racially diverse students begin at a disadvantage because their language and culture do not reflect the dominant white culture that counts as academic. (p. 10)

I would further argue that the insistence on WME not only strengthens the advantages of white students but also most benefits socioeconomically privileged students as well, particularly those who have insider knowledge about the norms and mores of higher education. First-generation college students of color already enter higher education at a disadvantage, which is only reinforced by requiring students to communicate in WME.

The antiracist pedagogical scholar Asao Inoue (2019) has argued that most white instructors rely on "White racial habitus [which] are durable, flexible, and often invisible (or naturalized) dispositions to language that are informed by a haunting Whiteness" (p. 37). Among these dispositions, which Inoue refers to as "habits of White discourse," are preferences for individualism, order, and neutrality—values which are not universal or shared among all cultural, national, and ethnic groups (pp. 37-38). Thus, relying on these criteria to evaluate students necessarily disadvantages students of color. Further, WME penalizes bilingual and multilingual students by requiring strict adherence to one particular form of discourse. This rigidity denies students access to the language(s) in which they might be most fluent. This can impact students of color, bi-/multilingual, and international students' ability to comprehend classroom material and/or engage in class discussion with their peers.

Incorporating Contract Grading Into the Writing Classroom

A Contract Grading Assessment Approach

To cultivate an anti-racist classroom, I argue, in alignment with Asao Inoue and other anti-racist pedagogical scholars, that contract grading and other alternative modes of assessment are needed. Peter Elbow (1994) popularized the term contract grading, alternatively known as the use of grading contracts, to describe an assessment approach where instructors assign students a final grade based on their labor, rather than calculating or averaging scores on individual assignments. In contract grading, there is only one grade provided: the student's final grade in the course.

Contract grading is premised on the idea that students who engage with course material, regularly participate in class, and partake in meaningful peer review will necessarily become better writers over the course of the semester. Instead of using a rubric or other explicit or implicit grading criteria, most of which are steeped in a preference for white writing, to evaluate each assignment, instructors instead simply mark work as "complete," "incomplete," or "missing." In most iterations of contract grading, instructors include a grading contract in their syllabus that explains the rationale of this assessment method and the necessary requirements for students to earn their target letter grade in the course. Because contract grading removes the instructor's reliance on racist grading criteria, this assessment method enables students of diverse linguistic and racial backgrounds to earn the same credit as their white peers.

In the writing classes I teach, I have incorporated grading contracts that were inspired by Asao Inoue's (2019) work on anti-racist pedagogy. The grading contract I use determines a student's final grade based on their timely completion of assignments, their attendance, their adherence to assignment prompts, and the revisions they incorporate between their first and final drafts of major projects. To adhere to the prompt, students must fulfill the basic instructions on the assignment sheet, such as meeting the length or topic requirements. For example, if I assign a rhetorical analysis of a TED Talk, students must analyze the rhetoric of a TED Talk for their essay to be marked as complete. If a student fails to do so, they will be asked to rewrite or revise their essay and resubmit it.

Peer workshops and instructor conferences are key components of this approach. Ongoing feedback provides students the opportunity to ensure they understand the assignment criteria and to see the value of revision and collaboration in the writing process. Instructor feedback, therefore, becomes more geared toward student improvement versus justifying a letter or numerical grade. So long as students complete the labor in the course, regularly attend, and participate in class activities, their work will be marked as complete. As part of my grading contract, I also give every student a "free pass," which they can use to skip a homework assignment, turn in a major project late, or miss an additional day of class. The free pass enables students to make a mistake or two during the semester without being derailed from their target final letter grade. It is also one of my ways of incorporating compassion into the classroom, something that is more important now than ever.

I distribute my grading contract in the syllabus and also provide what I call "easy reference table" where students can easily determine the quantity of work they need to complete in order to receive a certain letter grade. During the first week of the semester, we discuss the grading contract and sometimes make modifications based on what students find to be reasonable. Once we all agree on what each letter grade represents in terms of student engagement and labor, our contract is binding for the semester. Of course, these terms are not entirely rigid, and I make accommodations when students need extra time due to personal, health-related, or family-related circumstances.

Outcomes

In my experience teaching first-year composition and literature courses, students have indicated a strong preference for contract grading over points or percentage systems. When graded based on labor, my students have expressed that they have more autonomy over their grades, feel more inclined to use their authentic voices, and can take more intellectual and/or linguistic risks in their writing. I also have found that contract grading helps to alleviate student anxiety as well as to reduce the dreaded end-of-semester conversations about grades. Students know where they stand in the course because grades are not assigned based on my perceptions of their writing but on their own labor.

As I have experimented with contract grading over the last few years, I find myself modifying my approach based on my own pedagogy and my students' needs. In my view, revision is one of the most critical components of first-year writing classes, particularly since revising fosters a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset. No matter the skills and background of each student, my aim is for each course participant to improve their writing by the end of the course. By submitting multiple drafts and reflecting on the revisions they have made, students also recognize how their skills have improved. No matter how or what they revise, each person can still retain autonomy over their language without fear of being penalized for using their authentic voice.

Concluding Thoughts

Prior to using contract grading, I sometimes noticed that students of color received lower grades in my class than their white counterparts. I initially found myself baffled by this since I felt I was fair in how I applied grading rubrics to student writing. It simply had not occurred to me that the criteria itself were racist. My sense that I was being fair was exactly the problem. Whether or not it was my intention, my assessment method was grounded in white supremacy. And, as has been made evident this year by the ongoing violence against people of color in the United States, intentions ultimately do not matter. Anti-racist work does. Contract grading can help to mitigate instructor bias and can contribute to anti-racist pedagogy and classrooms, though it is certainly not enough on its own. Yet we, as writing instructors, and particularly those of us who are white, must take every opportunity to eliminate the white supremacist culture of academia. Contract grading is a critical step towards this goal.

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