

MINDFUL LABORING IS THE LARGER THEME

A fundamental aspect of labor-based grading contract economies is slowing down, experiencing labor and time differently, or mindfully. I believe students usually learn best when they can just be in the labor, when they can stop thinking so centrally about the end product or goal and center all of their energies and attention on the labor they are engaged in right now. What we do now is all we really have, so I remind them continually in my labor instructions and through our mindfulness practices each class session, to be mindful of the fact that they are laboring in particular ways, to savor that laboring. It is all you have. We are lucky to be able to do this work for each other. One might think of mindful laboring as the act of self-consciously laboring at something, doing something while simultaneously noticing that you are doing that work, that you are doing it in a particular way, that you feel a certain way as you do it, that that laboring makes you feel, see, hear, understand, and experience other things that are wrapped up in the labor.

The institutional, historical, and pragmatic reasons for the fixation on the end-product are clear, and it's more than just about the writing classroom's heritage of product-based pedagogies, such as Berlin's Current-Traditional pedagogy. The focus on end-products in classrooms stems from the ways that classroom assessment economies function, how most are set up to produce a grade, an exchange-value, and pay little formal attention to the nuanced and contradictory meanings of the use-value and worth of labor. When most of the value and worth of students' labor is neglected, students themselves neglect it and are not in the practice of seeing it, or noticing that they labor, especially while they are in the act of laboring. Labor is usually something to get through, to be done with, not to savor. We try to do as little laboring as possible and produce the most product from that laboring. This is exactly the wrong way to learn literacies.

So getting to a place in which most students are mindfully laboring, that is, being in their labors for the class with less concern for what it produces and more concern for savoring the laboring experience, feeling and experiencing as fully as possible the doing of writing or reading, paying attention to what happens when they labor, can take all quarter or semester. Labor logs, labor journals, and labor tweets help make labor more present, more obvious, more there, so that students can begin to investigate it, and this allows the class to also use it as a fairer way to calculate course grades than judgments of so-called quality on products of their labors, commodities that inherently are valued in contradictory ways.

Labor-based grading contracts focus everyone's attention on time and tempo of practices and work, which automatically reconnects our intellectual labor to our bodies. Thus it is important to remember that labor-based grading contracts

ask students and teacher to pay attention to the doing of things, to what and how we do our work, then articulate that labor as learning. This means that we pay attention to our bodies, what they are doing, how they feel as they move (or remain still), where they are in time and space, and what the experience of that timing and spacing is like. This is tapping into ourselves as whole humans doing language in self-consciously embodied ways, ways that are situated in our lives.

When discussing how to meditate and form contemplative practices, Arthur Zajoc, a physicist, argues that one cannot meditate fast. It always happens at the speed of breath and heartbeat. It cannot be rushed. He explains:

Whether beholding a painting or listening to music, whether reading poetry or viewing a play, time must slow down in order for us to enter into the object of our attention with our heart as well as our head. If our thinking runs along with the worries of the day, or presses too forcefully, we remain outside the art of the painting, poetry, or performance. (51)

Zajoc is drawing on a set of contemplative practices, which have been used to help students learn in various disciplines (Barbezat and Bush). Contemplative practices help practitioners slow time down, or experience it as slower, enter objects of contemplation, such as our own breath, our bodies, an orange slice, a peanut, a picture or painting, a musical composition, the sensation of our feet in shoes or walking. Once entered, the practitioner explores the object of contemplation, feels as much as they can without judging themselves for not doing enough or experiencing something they think they should have.

I posit that our grading economies in classrooms should be more like the beholding activities Zajoc references. The OED's entries for "behold" all focus on spending time to view something in its beauty: "to hold or keep in view, to watch; to regard or contemplate with the eyes; to look upon, look at" ("behold"). Many of the early references to the word in English, which begins with Old English (*bihaldan*) refer to Biblical passages or God, thus it often is associated with looking upon or contemplating beauty or the divine, which takes time to do. One must pause and spend time to behold. It is respectful and reverent. Daniel Barbezat and Mirabai Bush tell us in their discussion of the practice for college classrooms that beholding has a recent tradition in art history (149). Beauty, as in art, requires that we keep that which is beautiful in our view, to hold it there. And if beauty can be found in everything, then writing assessment as a classroom practice, as an economy made up in part of people and their words, might incorporate practices of beholding, mindful practices that purposefully pause and pay attention to what is in front of us, what we are reading and how we are experiencing that reading, how we make judgments of the text and its author,

what pressures those judgments place on others in the economy, and how those judgments circulate in the economy before, during, and after our reading.

Thus, one key aspect of all labor is time. As the contemplative practice of beholding illustrates, the most fundamental aspect of what I'm calling mindful laboring is taking the right amount of time and noticing that you are doing something in a particular way, in a particular place, under particular conditions. Mindful labor is experienced as labor while one is laboring. One notices that they are laboring, which opens up ways to notice the context, conditions, and nature of that laboring, and then what meanings might be understood. But it requires time.

I don't find that most students are practiced at paying close attention to the various dimensions of time in their laboring. Beyond understanding what time it is on a clock, we often do not pay attention to the multiple ways that we experience and frame time in our lives. Doing so can help students collect data on their labor time and make sense of that data in reflections, producing a fuller, richer sense of their three-dimensional labor. Barbara Adam, a Sociologist who has done copious research on the concept of time, offers a theory of timescapes that may help explain time as a component or measure of labor. In turn, her work may help teachers consider various kinds of labor data to collect, and language and activities that move students toward mindful laboring. Adam's research on timescapes (*Timescapes of Modernity; Time*) theorizes that time is complex and multidimensional. Her purpose for such theorizing has been to develop better ways for sociological research to be conducted, but her conception of timescapes reveals how time is not a simple construct, and we conceive and manage it in a number of ways. She offers seven ways by which time is experienced, understood, and/or framed:

- *Time frame* – bounded, beginning and end of day, year, life time, generation, historical/geological epoch;
- *Temporality* – process world, internal to system, ageing, growing, irreversibility, directionality;
- *Timing* – synchronisation, co-ordination, right/wrong time;
- *Tempo* – speed, pace, rate of change, velocity, intensity: how much activity in given timeframe;
- *Duration* – extent, temporal distance, horizon: no duration = instantaneity, time point/moment;
- *Sequence* – order, succession, priority: no sequence = simultaneity, at same time;
- *Temporal modalities* – past, present and future—memory, perception/experience and anticipation. (*Timescapes Challenge* 7-8)

Each way of framing time offers very different observations and conclusions

about time and people, about what might be recorded in labor logs, or what might be considered in labor journals. Adam's seven ways of time, as I'll call them, offer ways to consider time in labor-based assessment economies. I'll discuss just three that I find most useful.

Time as *duration*, *sequence*, and *temporal modalities* have been touched on already in my earlier discussions of labor logs, through the data I currently ask students to keep track of. For example, through labor logs, students know the amount of minutes they have spent on either reading or writing labors, when those labors took place, and the sequence or order in which they did any given labor assignment or the order they did various assignments in the quarter or semester. In labor journals, we consider past and future labor sessions, often comparing two past sessions, and always projecting forward toward future practices. However, Adam's *time frame*, *timing*, and *tempo* offer additional possible data and reflective prompting.

Adam explains that time frame is constructed by the researcher, and is a choice that creates boundaries and determines findings by determining where you "place subjects" (*Timescapes Challenge* 8). The time frame of clocks and calendars are stable, "externally located, [and] socially constructed," while "personal frames of life time and family time, or times of illness and stress" are more fluid, contingent, and relative. Thus the units of measure for more personal frames of time "expan[d] and contrac[t] as people move along in their life course" (8). For labor-based assessment economies, thinking about our labor from our own personal time frames generates a host of interesting and educative questions. What kind of time frame is the student working from? What are the boundaries in which labor for the class is forced to adhere to? Does the student work full time and go to school? Does she have family obligations each day? Does she take other courses? Let's say she works, goes to school full time, and is a mother who must share childcare duties with a partner. This might segment her typical weekday into three or four units of time in any day with boundaries like: time that she attends class; time that she takes care of her children and family; time that she has to do school work; and time that she works at a job. These will likely not be equal segments of time, but may be how she conceives of her time in a day. Meanwhile, her week may be broken up into two or three larger segments of time: school time and work time during the weekdays; and school-work time, family time, family care time, and sleep and relaxing time on the weekends. These are the boundaries that form the time frames in which the student might consider the labor required of her for the class.

Seeing one's labor in a personal time frame requires a student to first notice what time frame they work in or might work in. Then they might begin to see how much time (in minutes or hours) they actually have to do the labors of the

course. This can help students notice particular kinds of data to be logged or reflected upon. For example, a class might keep track of the kinds of segments of time in their personal time frames they have, how much time each segment gets in any given day and during each week, and when those segments occur in the day or week. What time frames are students trying to fit the course's labor into? How many segments are there in their personal time frames? What is the biggest segment: work, school work, family obligations, something else? What should it be at this moment in their life? How many minutes or hours are they giving to each segment of their life's time frame? At what point in the day or week does the segment of time dedicated to the course's labor occur? Where did a particular labor session fall during that week and how productive or meaningful was that labor? How might its position in their daily or weekly time frame help create that labor, make it productive, engaging, or meaningful (or not)? Are they consistent each week in where they fit the course labor in their life's time frame? What are the consequences of its position in the day or week? Is it at the end of other taxing or strenuous labors? Is it first in any given day or week? What segments in their personal time frames are being sacrificed each week?

Obviously, part of reflecting and learning from one's labor as situated in one's personal time frame is not just about reading and writing in more engaging and meaningful ways, but also about learning how one learns, managing one's time best, and understanding the boundaries and limits one has in one's life. Knowing one's labor in this way can alleviate some guilt and the sense that one is not good enough for college when one realizes that their life's personal time frame is not ideal or works against them in subtle ways, and other things are either more important at this time or can be reprioritized temporarily. Further, sharing these insights with colleagues in class can help students see that they are not alone in their struggles, that often personal time frames coalesce into patterns for reasons that are outside of the students in the room. Many students may be oppressed by larger societal structures that unfairly place boundaries and limits on their lives, making it nearly impossible to accomplish what is expected of them in college. But understanding this insight from their own labor data may offer ways to problematize their own existential situations.

Adam explains that timing, the third way of experiencing time in the list above, offers other kinds of measures and observations. This element concerns itself with synchronizing and "achieving good time" and it is relative to other events, contexts, that happen around or in conjunction with the events in question. For students, again, this provides different useful labor data, often comparative data. When are the good and bad times of each day or week for the labor of the class? That is, when during each day or week is the student most equipped, ready, and able to do the kinds of labor the course asks of them? Why

are these times best? Could they change these timings during the semester or quarter? Does a student typically do the labor of the class during a good period, a bad one? Why? Was a particular labor session done at a good time in the day or week, one conducive to their learning or engagement? How many labor sessions in the semester or quarter fell into good time periods and how many into bad ones? Why? What kept all labor sessions from being done in only good periods? How did the timing affect the student's engagement and interest in the activity? What other activities or obligations synced up in the student's day or week that made it easier or harder to complete this labor session? Were multiple tasks or obligations coming at the student during certain periods in the labor? At what points? Why? How did the student respond? How did this syncing or timing affect what the student learned or how they engaged in the labor?

Finally, Adam says that tempo is about speed and pace, who must adapt to whose timing. How fast is an activity going? When must it begin or end? These factors make tempo a function of power arrangements (9). In other words, who or what dictates pace and speed of labor indicates who has more power in the arrangement. In labor-based assessment economies, students might use the concept of tempo to keep data on tempo of assignments in order to understand some of how power moves in the class, and perhaps to change it when that movement of power is not helpful to students' learning. How much time is given for an assignment of labor and who determined this? When does that labor begin and when must it end, and who decided these tempo limits? How well does the tempo of the labor match what the student feels they need before and after completing the work? Does this tempo fit within most students' personal time frames? Did the student adjust the tempo of the labor (e.g., exclude or skip steps) from what was given in the labor instructions? How often does the student adjust the tempo of the labor instructions over the course of the term or semester? What effect did this have on the total amount of time spent on reading and/or writing labors in the course?

The important thing to remember when attempting to make labor more mindful in an assessment ecology, one that uses labor to determine course grades, is to honor whatever labor is offered by students, while still pushing students to ask hard questions about that labor. What happened in your labor? How did you experience it? Did you do enough? What shortcuts did you take? Could you change some things in your habits or weekly routines that would allow you to do more or labor differently? Thus, mindful laboring is practicing reading and writing self-consciously by noticing and articulating where and how our labor fits into our own personal time frames, how it and other things sync with good and bad moments in our life, and what the speed, intensity, and engagement of that labor is.

There are no bad ways to labor if laboring is done in a compassionate spirit and with an attempt to learn and help others learn. We can only labor at the paces we can, the only pace anyone can learn, which always takes time, time not so ironically we should pay attention to itself. As Zajonc reminds us of meditation, I believe the labors of reading and writing too cannot be done fast, especially if it is connected to people, to their beauty, to their languaging, to their bodies, to their agency, to their becoming. Mindful laboring allows for such praxis, and connects it to the grading of a course, which makes grading not a method to measure students' writing competencies or development but a process of paying attention on purpose, a process of learning about one's whole self and the structures of language and judgment that make up and affect each of us.