

# Exploring Labor-Based Grading Contracts as an Assessment Model that Builds Equity and Inclusion

## CILA Lunch Discussion

Facilitated by Christina Spiker

Thursday, November 12th, 11:30am - 12:40pm

# The Original July Workshop with Christina & Rehanna

You can see some of our materials here:

(1) **CILA website (including sample syllabi):**

<https://wp.stolaf.edu/cila/exploring-labor-based-grading-contracts/>

(2) **Asao B. Inoue's *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom* (2019):**

<https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/labor/>

(3) **Asao B. Inoue's blog: <http://asaobinoue.blogspot.com/>**

# Labor-Based Grading Contracts at St. Olaf

**Did you know that students are noticing this shift in some of their courses?**

Satirical essay by Hannah Summers in *The Halloweenian*:

<https://www.theolafmessenger.com/2020/the-halloweenian/>



## Contract grading debacle, Edina student sues professor

*By Hannah Summers*

Litigation wrapped up on Tuesday in the semester-long court drama involving Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology Amanda Mensucc and sophomore Tony Patriocky Jr.

The saga began on syllabus day, in the first Zoom meeting of Intro to Women's and Gender

# How does standard-based grading uphold racism?

“All grading and assessment exist within systems that uphold singular, dominant standards that are racist, and White supremacist **when used uniformly**. This problem is present in **any** grading system that incorporates a standard, no matter who is judging, no matter the particulars of the standard” (Inoue 2019, 3).

## Primary goals of grading by a standard:

- **Control** (grading is almost always employed in order to control students)
- **Enforced accountability** (to force students to be accountable)
- **Measurement** (to measure or rank students either against each other or against a single standard)

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**“Each of these purposes for grading...is detrimental to learning generally, and more harmful to many students of color and raciolinguistically diverse students. This is because “diverse students” means “not White students,” or students who use varieties of English that are not the standardized version used in the schools”** (Inoue 2019, 5).

# What are Labor-Based Grading Contracts?

**Inoue's key assumption:** It's better to separate the course grade from how and what students learn in the course.

**General Components of a Labor-Based Grading Contract:** basic labor required to achieve a "B" grade ("safety net") includes description of participation, timeliness of submission, and consequences of missed or ignored work.

## Inoue's Model ("labor-based")

- Final course grades are based on the labor students complete, not by any judgments of the quality of their writing.
- While the quality of student work is still at the center of classroom discussion and feedback, it has no bearing on the course grade.
- Additional assignments are required to surpass the contracted "B" grade (including multiple options for labor-based projects that benefit the whole class. Completing each raises grade by  $\frac{1}{3}$  of a letter grade (B to a B+). Quality has no bearing on assessment.

# Why Labor-Based Grading Contracts?

## Labor-based grading encourages us to be:

- Mindful of our **assumptions** about grading
- Mindful about what we assume an assignment **demonstrates** to us about a student
- Mindful of what markers we use to assess so-called **quality** in a draft

When we are mindful that we grade in particular ways, we have a better chance to pay attention to details about our own practices and how they happen.

At its best, the practice of grading can be a cyclical, self-conscious, evolving practice informed by reflection on that practice and dialogue. It can be just as much **a learning practice** for the teacher as it is meant to be for students.

Labor-based grading contracts require / encourage this kind of **mindful attention** because the rules of the grading game are so dramatically different from conventional, standards-based rules.

Assessing labor / effort / engagement is arguably much closer to assessing **the act of learning** because these dimensions embody the experience of learning itself.

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# The Big Experiment!

After the summer working group, several of the participants decided to try out labor-based contract grading for a whole or a part of their course.

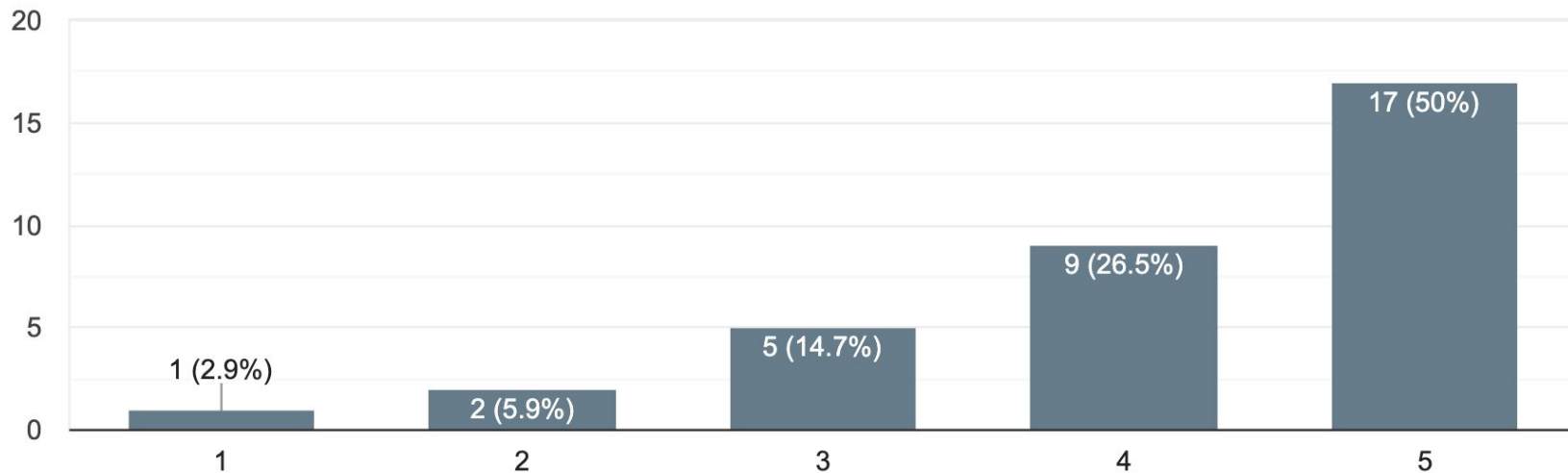
**What were the successes?**

**What were the challenges?**

**Questions to pose to the group?**

**This course uses a labor-based grading contract for assessment and puts a lot of emphasis on work you produce on a day-to-day basis. How is the labor-based grading contract working out for you thus far?**

34 responses



**1 = Not Working**

**5= Working Well**

# Feedback from ART 161

## Positive:

- I have liked that it takes the pressure off to learn things for a perfect grade and that, ironically, makes me more motivated. Especially since many of the things in this class can be reflected on in our daily lives, I connect a lot of things back to what I have learned. Overall, just not having to stress about a perfect grade and only having to focus on covering all elements of the assignment makes for a more productive class, in my opinion.
- I like that I am in charge of what grade I get based on the amount of effort I put in! It has motivated me to turn in every piece of homework on time.
- Again, this grading system helps me focus my attention into everything I do. I want to do my best work because I know that I am totally responsible for my grade in the class. It encourages me to think differently and find new ways to challenge myself since I can pick and choose how to go about certain assignments.
- I think it helps a lot to have your efforts being seen and made important.

## Negative/Ambivalent:

- As I stated before I do not think that this format works at all, I think that this encourages poor work on time from students and not actual engagement. I also think that the amount of work is a challenge if there is anything that comes up in our life.
- While I have liked the contract, there are times I am frustrated about the grading contract, and feel as though if I'm doing work equivalent to a certain grade, that should be the grade I get. However, I do enjoy if an assignment is especially tough, I won't be hit too hard if I do poorly.



# Caitlin Schmid

Visiting Assistant Professor of Music

**Successes:** “So much of this teaching experience has been so rewarding (the projects the students came up with!; the first email saying "I'm going to be late" without asking for an extension; I tried small group oral exams and everybody--including me--loved them; the many midterm comments that had students realizing they were more invested in learning for themselves than they expected). I'm planning for all three of my classes to use contract grading next semester.”

# Caitlin Schmid

Visiting Assistant Professor of Music

**Challenges:** “Some of the challenges I'm still thinking about: group work--it played out beautifully at the beginning of the semester and not nearly so well at the end; the problem of what "exceptional circumstances" covers right now and how long it covers it for.”