

Disabilities and Contract Grading

Jacob: [00:00:00] Chapter two, “Substituting One Standard for Another,” specifically critiques the fact that, while labor-based grading removes an emphasis on *quality*, it replaces that with an emphasis on *labor-as-time*. While this discussion on labor-as-time appears in later chapters, here, Carillo is focused on the apparent objectivity which numerical data — for example, hours spent reading, number of revisions done, etc. — provides.

She continues that this objectivity can lead to the reification of, and definition for, the ideal, normative, able-bodied student, which is at odds with the reality of the actual students in our classrooms. Furthermore, she notes that things taken for granted — for instance, a student sitting still and paying attention in class — might actually constitute significant labor on the part of disabled or neurodiverse students.

Chapter three, “Labor-Based Contract Grading in Students’ Mental Health,” focuses on the intersections of mental health issues — for example, anxiety and depression — with disabilities. Carillo notes the rise in anxiety and [00:01:00] depression among college students in the past several years and the increase in students seeking disability accommodations.

However, she notes that while the number of students with disclosed disabilities has increased, there are many students with disabilities who do not disclose for multiple reasons. The second half of the chapter critiques the ethics of asking students with disabilities to adequately negotiate contracts in the classroom, which accommodate their needs.

While she does state that considering non normative students in classroom negotiations could prove a beneficial chance to make visible disabilities, especially to able-bodied students, which is aligned with Inoue's call for compassion within the classroom community. Instructors must be careful not to "further marginalize already marginalized groups" (32).

So, in light of these chapters, but specifically the part of chapter three that explores J. Timothy Dolmage's critique of *retrofitting*, which is essentially the idea that we often accommodate disability by applying a metaphorical bandage to an issue instead of rethinking the issue [00:02:00] holistically. How has this book changed either of your conceptions of contract grading or the possibilities afforded by contract grading?

Sarah: I have a confession. I used to be the queen of retrofitting. I'm not proud of it, but that is, that is the reality.

The reason for that is because I was using a contract that was similar to Inoue's contract with very strict deadlines, very strict attendance policies. And so, there was constant stress on the part of students and myself to make this contract work, along with the reality of their lives, right?

It didn't work. So I had a very strict contract and then a thousand side deals with students, long email exchanges, long office hours, conversations on how to make it work, right? And so, it was a huge amount of work for me and stress trying to keep track of all these individual accommodations that I would [00:03:00] make on the spot, right?

So I find that fascinating that retrofitting is not just wrong because it's asking students to disclose their disabilities or to explain their life emergencies to us, but it's also a huge amount of labor on the part of the instructor, right? So since I moved to a flexible contract, my student's lives are easier, but mine as well.

So again, I really love this idea that when we center disability in the classroom, everyone's life is better.

[Musical Interlude]

Jacob: I think that's a good connection there to kind of the broader call, that Carillo makes about uncoupling willingness from ability— or participation from a willingness to participate. And I [00:04:00] don't have an answer for it, and I don't think that Carillo really has an answer for it either. Reading the book, I think it's, it's super thought-provoking.

And it definitely is a direction to go in terms of research; I would love to see in the next couple of years, somebody piloting a grading contract that is considering willingness to participate. I think a first step is accessibility in terms of flexibility, right?

Instead of thinking about participation only as in-class discussion, especially with disabled or neurodivergent students, an option could be to allow, like, alternative participation in a digital space, so if students are uncomfortable speaking in front of a class, instead, they might be willing to post their thoughts on a discussion board, on a learning management system, and we're still... they're still engaging with the course, they're still participating, but it's in an environment [00:05:00] that maybe is a nontraditional manner.

I think there's still issues with that, right? Because it does require labor, it still requires students to do it in a textual way, so we could open that up into maybe multimodal avenues. And I think that would be an interesting route to take, but I am not confident in my expertise to, like, make any broad suggestions.

I think it's a... as a field, we need to continue to investigate how we can reconceive of participation, how we can accommodate nonstandard modes of participation and how we can eventually incorporate that into our practices of flexibility.