

Assumptions about Contract Grading

Joe: [00:00:00] Hello, welcome to our book review of *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading* by Ellen C. Carillo, published in 2021.

[Musical Interlude]

Joe: My name is Joe Schicke. I'm a PhD student at Texas Tech. We also have Sarah Faye and Jacob Weston, who are my fellow students in the program of Technical Communication and Rhetoric.

In the introduction of Carillo's book, she says she's moved to enter the discussion about labor-based grading contracts because of her commitment to her racially and linguistically diverse students and the [00:01:00] scholarship of Asao Inoue, Wonderful Faison, Carmen Kynard, Maya Poe, and Vershawn Ashanti Young, as well as Inoue's openness to critique from disability studies.

So in chapter one, she states two assumptions of labor-based grading contracts: 1), that labor is a neutral measure and "less inequitable a measure than quality" for determining

final course grades; and 2), that “willingness to labor is enough to succeed within the labor-based grading contract ecology” Inoue describes (12).

These assumptions, for Carillo, do not take into account strongly enough the presence of students in our classrooms with disabilities, neurodivergence, and socioeconomic barriers. Carillo says that students get disadvantaged “when willingness is conflated with ability” (14). She also quotes Ira Shor, who points out that “time is a luxury not all students have” (15).

Sarah: Chapter one was extremely helpful to me because it articulated some of the issues that I had sensed [00:02:00] in my contract, but I couldn't quite figure out what was going on that wasn't fully working. My contract was so helpful for a group of students and completely not helpful and stressful for another group of students.

If I, if I'm honest, it was actually stressful to all students because even the students who were on a very successful path also had unexpected emergencies that, you know, created disruption in their ability to complete the work. So really my contract was problematic on all students.

And I particularly like the idea that Carillo brings up, that we're not making changes to the assessment so that we're helping one little group of students. We're actually helping all students by doing those changes.

As an example, I think it's in chapter one that Carillo brings up Inoue's contract where he has what he calls a *gimme*, which is a one-time possibility to break the rules of the contract for emergencies and [00:03:00] Carillo points out that the very fact that you have this gimme shows that we all know that our students are not going to be able to follow the rules of a strict contract.

They will have an emergency. They will have things come up. And so already, that's problematic. But then it's even worse because as Carillo points out, the gimme really places the able-bodied, neuronormative students at the center of the contract because it has this assumption that, "oh, of course, all students will be able to complete the work on time. They just need this one-time exception for extraordinary circumstances."

We're all teaching. We all know that that is not the case. That's not the reality of what happens, right? So I, I really like the idea that we have to put disability at the center of assessment methods in a way, in order to help all of our students.

I just want to do a quick example. I started recording my class meetings so that students who couldn't come to class [00:04:00] because of their disability could still complete the in-class activities at home. But then I noticed that this is actually helping any student who can't make it to class for whatever reason, right?

So now there's no more need to discuss the reasons for not being in class or create individual accommodations. Any students who cannot make it to class can still complete the work, right? So we have more options and more possibilities. So focusing on disability actually helps everyone in our classes.

[Musical Interlude]

Sarah: Chapter four, "Labor-Based Contract Grading and Students' Intersectional Identities," warns that labor contracts can end up being [00:05:00] inequitable towards the students of color they're actually meant to support, right? One of the ways that they create inequity is by ignoring the intersectionality of students.

For example, while the goal of labor contracts is to be anti-racist, Carillo points out that Black students are more likely to have a disability, and very often an undiagnosed disability or racially-biased diagnosed one, and thus the students are at a disadvantage with contracts that reward normative standards of labor.

Even worse, these normative standards of labor become a substitute for *quality* when we ask our students to labor more to improve their work. Again, showing that we have a very specific idea of what that final product needs to look like, and we use labor to have our students reach it.

And this, to me, is one of the most thought-provoking chapters because it's a great demonstration of how disability studies lenses can help us notice ignored issues in our assessment methods. The next chapter also demonstrates this, but this time Carillo is [00:06:00] looking at the ableist assumptions in the research about contract grading.

In chapter five, "The Effectiveness of Labor-Based Grading Contracts," Carillo reviews the existing research on contracts. It is a quick review, because as Carillo points out, we need a lot more research on this assessment method.

But what's worse is that the few studies on contract grading do not focus on disabilities, again showing the tendency of imagining our students as non-disabled. Carillo reviews some of the negative results found by some researchers, notably the resistance and dislike students can experience towards this form of assessment.

And she wonders if it might be due to the fact that labor-based contracts declare themselves to be equitable when in fact they're not. This is illustrated in Inoue's 2019 study where Black students labor more for lower grades, thus highlighting that this assessment system has not yet resolved racial inequalities, even though we have ascribed onto labor-based contracts an *[00:07:00]* imaginary automatic ability to level the playing field.

Chapters four and five are tough on those of us who thought we had solved all of our problems with assessment by switching to labor contracts. I am definitely one of those persons. I thought, "everything was good, now; I didn't have to think any more about assessment." I was done.

So these chapters were really good wake up call. But there was also an exhilarating effect that comes from reading them because once the assumptions are out in the open and made evident, we can do something about about them. We can fix them. We can change the contracts.

And so there was... yeah, really exhilaration of getting back to work and getting back to square one and rethinking my contract.

Jacob: I think Carillo does a really good job of centering this critique on the use of the term *labor*. And I think we can extend that even to the use of the term *contract*, right, that we're... we're envisioning education through a [00:08:00] neoliberal lens, right? We're imagining the work that students are doing as something they would do in a job, which is beneficial as a metaphor, but I think problematic at the same time.

In my research, piloting grading contracts at Texas Tech, one of the things that has become apparent to us is what is the level of efficacy that students have to actually negotiate or understand these contracts, right? We can, as instructors, go into the situation with as much compassion as possible and assume that students will advocate on their behalf.

But since this is— tends to be a totally different assessment environment than what students are getting in the K-12 environment, and it's so new and unfamiliar, often they're not sure if they can say, “Oh, I don't like this part” or, “Oh, I do like this part.” And I think that for [00:09:00] me, that's, that's really the value of Carillo's critique is that it's

re-imagining grading contracts as a whole, as opposed to viewing them just as a monolithic entity.

Joe: Sometimes grading contracts can seem like a precursor to an employment situation. And I know that oftentimes as college instructors, we feel a desire to prepare students for the, for the work world. Sometimes that's a good thing. I don't think it's always a good thing.

Why are we uncomfortable with proactivity when it comes to issues of ability? To me, and I'm only pontificating here. It has to do with the— with what we were just talking about.

We tend to see a college classroom as kind of a preparation for a capitalist system and the idea that we would [00:10:00] alter time, or responsibility, or how students labor, because of the fact that there are neurodivergent students in our classrooms, that there are mental health issues, and that there are students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, I think, is really uncomfortable to a lot of us.

And that is something I felt early on using contracts, especially my first semester when I used Inoue's contract pretty much exactly as he writes about it in his book *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: [Building Equity and Inclusion] in [The] Compassionate Writing Classroom*.

And so, I think that's an uncomfortable reality to sit with, and one we're really going to have to see more research on in the future.

Couple things I want to point out is that this book— in these chapters that you summarized for us Sarah, remind me of Dr. Michelle Cowan's [00:11:00] article "The Legacy of Grading Contracts" because it provides a broad overview of some of the research that's out there and there's a lack of empirical studies on the efficacy of grading contracts but there are some.

And one that I found really important that I think Carillo really draws from, especially in chapter four, is Kryger and Zimmerman. And they're talking about intersectionality in— and ability in, in labor-based grading contracts. And I, I recommend that article if anybody wants to know more about kind of the inspiration that I feel that Carillo drew from in writing this book, I think a lot of it probably came from Kryger/Zimmerman and I appreciate the way Carillo really amplifies that research.

And one thing that I want to know more about after reading these chapters is something that— I guess you could say it's a drawback of Carillo's book or maybe [00:12:00] just an

opportunity for further research — is the impact of social class on labor-based grading contracts.

She alludes to it here and there, but I think that's a huge area for further research is how, you know, when students have to go to work when they have to pay for their own education out of pocket as they're in the middle of college that has to impact their ability to labor.