Flexibility and Engagement

Joe: *[00:00:00]* Okay, so the final chapter is called "Forging Ahead," and she says here that a shift from *labor* to *engagement* as the standard by which we are determining final course grades might be a "more flexible" strategy (Carillo 57).

An engagement-based grading contract offers "a range of ways a student might interact with the course" that the students can choose from (*ibid.*). Following Wood, she says "we need a paradigmatic shift in the way we construct time for our students" (59).

In the way we construct time for our students…. That's a challenge, right?

As Wood says, "students' anxiety might be alleviated through cripping time, increasing flexibility, avoiding rigidity, and lowering the stakes of writing, (particularly in the beginning stages of a course)" (Wood 270, qtd. in Carillo 59.).

The other strategies *[00:01:00]* that she suggests besides shifting the way we construct time for students is to do

individualized contracts, where students share their goals, and you contract based, with students based on that. It's kind of a start-from-scratch approach that really let students in on the creation of the contract.

My question for… for you two is: do these strategies seem feasible? Are there other ways to uncouple willingness from ability?

Sarah: So to answer the question on feasibility, I think it's really important to think about our institutional contexts and our student population before we make decisions about strategies.

So for example, I teach upper-division courses in a 10-week quarter to seniors who are ready to graduate. They're graduating basically after my class, right? Asking them, at that point, to come up with individual contracts super quickly because we're rushing through the assignments in those 10 weeks… *[00:02:00]* I haven't figured out how to make that happen in a way that wouldn't be, at worst, a really huge source of stress for them, at best, a source of frustration.

So I've stayed away from individualized contracts for that student population. Instead, what I've done is create a very flexible contract so that students can come up with their own

ways to complete the work, kind of like a *choose-your-own-adventure* possibility of, of learning and completing tasks, which I think fits well with that population because it allows them to fit their learning goals and their graduation goals to what we're doing in the class.

Carillo brings up *flexibility*, right, as one of the strategies, and I think, more than the… the detailed strategies of talking about discussion boards and, you know, all, all kinds of examples that are brought up in the book, I think that *[00:03:00]* flexibility is really key here. To me, it's what changes things in the class, what changes things for a contract.

Jacob: For me, what I... Well, it's what I love about this book, but I think it's simultaneously the biggest strength and the biggest weakness about this book. And I think that's dependent upon who you are as an audience member.

If you are somebody who is just entering this conversation about alternative assessment and you haven't done labor-based grading contracts, and you're looking for like a "How to Do This at My Institution" guide, then this might be a weakness that Carillo leaves her conceptualization kind of open, right? It's open for interpretation for you as an individual.

It's more about thinking about these things and recognizing there are all these different moving parts that we need to consider that often our scholarship about contract grades has not considered and in *[00:04:00]* publications.

But it's also a super strength, I think, because if you're somebody, like us, who's been interested in alternative assessment — who's been doing alternative assessment with grading contracts — it makes it so we're like, "I already have a general idea, but now I can take this information that Carillo is providing in this book and apply it holistically to my contract grades," and in the way that I'm conceiving of that aspect of assessment; I think there's an inherent level of flexibility as opposed to her providing some very strict model that you have to follow, right?

It's all about context. And I think it's important to note that Carillo's not attacking, like, Asao's work, it's just building upon it. And one of those key takeaways is what works for others isn't always going to work for you.

It depends on what state you're in, it depends on what rank you have within an institution, and it depends on what school you have, and the *[00:05:00]* departmental support as well. So for me, like it is a strength [for the text to be somewhat vague about how to do an engagement-based contract].

It might also leave some people wanting more if they, if they need that level of, kind of guidance. And I think that just is something for potential readers to keep in mind before coming to this book.

Joe: I agree. Since I've been using contracts for a while and reading a lot of research, to me that was a strength that she doesn't prescribe what I should do next in light of the issues she raises.

Jacob: Yeah, and... Joe, you mentioned the strategy of individualizing contracts with students, right? And as rhet/comp people, we see this as kind of a democratization of the classroom and there's benefit there. And it really makes me think of the article “Negotiating Authority by Designing Individualized Grading Contracts” by Nathan Brubaker from 2010.

In that *[00:06:00]* article, right, which I think really kind of set the intellectual ground for this sort of thing, Brubaker discusses this research with 22 undergraduate students designing grading contracts individualized for them.

I think this is kind of a pie-in-the-sky sort of thing. It certainly is ideal. It's the best situation to be able to individualize with each student how they're to be assessed.

And we see a similar thing in a lot of ungrading scholarship where students select their criteria that they will be judged on for themselves in a specific course. But then we get to the question of feasibility. It's one thing to be doing this in a single section with 22 students who may be your upper-division [students].

It's a different story if you are contingent labor and you're teaching a 4/4, or a 4/5, or a 5/5, and you've got 120 students *[00:07:00]* that you are supposed to be individualizing grading contracts on.

Metacognitively, what does that do in terms of feedback for assignments, or like grading assignments, or, you know, understanding a student's growth and progress throughout the course of a semester, when every single student has an individualized [contract]?

Right? So there is some give-and-take between, maybe an overwhelming amount of individualization, and “we can allow some like class-to-class based individualization” pragmatically, right?

Like I think these are— it's a, it's an ideal; we should strive toward this sort of thing, but again, it really does go back to your pedagogy, your institution, your rank. And I think that as long as we're thinking through these, these things and considering them and the way that we're implementing grading contracts, we're headed in the *[00:08:00]* right direction, at the very least.

Joe: I agree wholeheartedly on those comments about the individualization of contracts. Which brings us back to the other suggestion, which is flexibility. And I don't know if there's a whole— I'm not aware of research on what it means to be a flexible instructor in college.

I want to know more about what that is, what students perceive that as, as to be, and what faculty perceive that to be. I go back to what we were talking about earlier about neoliberalism; I think we're uncomfortable with talking about flexibility because it challenges notions of work and what it means to be a responsible adult in the United States.

Let's be clear, to me it means flexible due dates. It means not, it means not holding students to… yeah, you know, getting your paper in on-time all at the same time, right? At the same *[00:09:00]* time, we can't just have papers trickling in throughout the semester because we have our own workloads to manage.

So, do y'all have any ideas about how we can actually practice flexibility? Besides, you know, flexible due dates or how does this work with attendance policies?

Sarah: I agree. And one of the main things that I got from this book is the focus on creating a contract based on engagement. My contract is now an engagement-based contract where I ask students to explain how they've engaged in the class, how they've engaged with the material, how they've engaged with the assignments.

It's not quite an individualized contract. There is one contract, but there are multiple ways to interpret it, right? And so it's bringing in flexibility back into, into the conversation here of allowing students to have this contract interpreted and then explain how they've *[00:10:00]* interpreted it and how they've met the goals, the tasks that were listed.

I think that this switch to engagement seems so tiny; it's a simple thing. It's quite revolutionary because it really breaks up a normative standard on ability. It's removing our authority, our control over the students. It allows students to find their own ways to learn and, and, and critical… think critically and complete the work.

And then it allows us to learn from our students, right? Cause we're seeing our students are doing things differently, which means that we are learning too, which is great. Cause we're not in the classroom just to teach, right? And so it's, it's again, just a tiny switch, and you have a revolution.

Joe: I really like that. I tried calling mine an engagement-based grading contract a few semesters ago, and I found it very difficult *[00:11:00]* to — not quantify — but just gather evidence of engagement. But I feel, Sarah, like your reflective writing from your students does serve as evidence of engagement and reminds me of ungrading philosophy, in a sense.

Let me tell you what I've done this semester in light of Carillo. It's basically calling— still calling mine a labor-based grading contract, because at the, at the end of the day, we are always asking our students to labor. What this book is suggesting is that we just trouble, challenge, complicate, what we mean by labor and who we— who we are centering, what kind of laboring body we're centering our contract around.

So when it comes to attendance: there I have flexible, vague guidelines, which actually is an idea I got from you, Sarah, about attendance. You know, folks who *[00:12:00]* get B’s

tend to show up in class. “Do I even know you? Have I seen you?” You know, we get a chance to talk about that throughout the semester.

And when it comes to assignments, yeah, there are due dates. But in the contract, what does a student with a B do? They tend to turn things in on time. It's leaving room for negotiation with the student about whether or not they… how they feel about how they met that vague guideline, which I can… which sacrifices objectivity, I feel, for negotiation, which the hegemonic idea of education that I came into teaching with says that “we do not negotiate with students. Negotiation is bad.”

This flips that on its head and says “negotiation is good.” And it's not the typical negotiation of “why did I get a 98? I want those final two points.”

It's a *[00:13:00]* negotiation of “am I laboring in ways that I can labor taking into account, my, you know, the way my brain works or the time I have with regards to my job or, you know, taking care of my sick grandmother” and things like that.

So Sarah, I'll let you know how that goes and you let me know how yours goes. And Jacob, you let me know how yours goes and we'll continue this conversation.

What else would everyone like to say about this book before we end?

Sarah: Just the idea that assessment is a process. That we are never done, which I've learned my lesson when I switched to labor contracts, I thought I was done, and Carillo's book really showed me you will never be done. You will keep talking about— talking and thinking about assessment throughout your career. It never stops.

So that's really a gem that I got from the *[00:14:00]* book. And I really appreciate that… that insight.

Jacob: And I think this is more of just a matter-of-fact thing. But one of the, one of the bits I appreciated about the book was that it's relatively short. It's like about 70 pages. So it's not a very long book, but there's a lot condensed into it.

So it makes it maybe more approachable than something that's 400 pages, but you're still walking away feeling like, you know, maybe you've had like a crash course in

considering disability studies and assessment. And if that's the first time that you've had that crash course, I think it's really impactful.

[Musical Interlude]