

Contract Grading: A Heuristic for “Productive Failure” in an Eight-Week Hybrid



Second-Semester Composition Class

Debra Siebert

Department of English, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Why Use Grading Contracts?

Writing teachers use grading contracts because they

- give students agency in their writing
- enable students to see value in their own writing and the writing of others
- invite students to become members of a more democratic, participatory community (Inoue, 2012; Danielewicz, 2009).



Wolf River, Wisconsin

Recent History of UWM’s First-Year Writing Program

The First-Year Writing (FYW) program created and maintained a rich, dynamic nationally recognized program for over twenty years that was

- grounded in rigorous course-specific portfolio assessment
- recognized nationally for its “innovative and challenging writing pedagogies, teacher training, and applications of contemporary composition theory” (*A Student’s Guide to the First-Year Writing Program at UWM 2015-2016 2*)
- awarded the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s most prestigious programmatic award in 2010, the Certificate of Excellence



Black Earth Creek, Wisconsin, August 17, 2013, Corey Coyle

Current Context of UWM’s First-Year Writing Program

Lacking innovation and continuous vigilance, the FYW program, like most programs, became stale and inert overtime and needed a new perspective. Several reports from outside the FYW program provided that perspective showing

- recent data that students, and particularly students of color, fail FYW portfolio writing assessments, at unacceptably high rates (Caucasian students at 14% and students of color 18%- 28%)
- data that ENG 102: College Writing and Research is a course designated on campus as a “High D-F-W Course”
- ENG 102 as the third highest among the “Top 30 Undergraduate Courses with the Most Unproductive Credits and Opportunities for Impact in 2015” and among those “hindering student progress”

Purpose of SoTL Study

- To investigate how a grading contract in an eight-week hybrid second-semester composition class for at-risk students impacts students’ beliefs about writing, writing self-efficacy, and writing performance
- To measure shifts in students’ beliefs about writing and analyze its impact on their writing self-efficacy and performance in the class
- To analyze students’ weekly writing about their work with the grading contract for themes that emerge such as habits of mind (i.e., dispositions such as curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, and metacognition) and to see how the grading contract leverages self-assessment at the end of the term

Project Design

- Implementation of a grading contract in two sections of Eight-Week Hybrid English 102 for at-risk students who are taking the course for a third time Spring 2018
- Using the work of Asao Inoue (2014) as a guide, students and instructor together at the beginning of the term create a class grading contract rewarding student effort and work instead of letter grades
- Students write weekly about their work; analyzing effort, success, and “productive failure” in terms of the class grading contract that defines “productive failure” as

reseeing what unsuccess means and can become in drafts and work. Productive failure is positive and signals the opportunity to learn, grow, and develop in purposeful ways. Thus, productive failure can happen when students and teacher negotiate learning at the point where an absence of success, quality, or sufficient labor seems visible (Inoue, 2014, “Theorizing Failure,” p. 346).
- Students take the Beliefs about Writing Survey (BWS) (Sanders-Reio, 2014) at the beginning and end of the term

Beliefs about Writing Survey (BWS)

- Measures beliefs about what good writing is and what good writers do
- Many have noted how beliefs about writing shape composing processes, engagement patterns, audience orientation and influence writing self-efficacy beliefs and writing apprehension (Kellogg, 2008; White & Bruning, 2005; Sanders-Reio, 2010)
- Writing self-efficacy beliefs focus on one’s beliefs about one’s own writing

Evidence of Student Learning

- Measurements of shifts in students’ beliefs about writing using results from pre- and post Beliefs about Writing Survey (Sanders-Reio, 2014)
- Emergence of themes in students’ weekly writing about the grading contract
- Portfolio pass /fail rates
- Course pass /fail rates

Preliminary Findings

- An informal review of the Beliefs about Writing Survey results from both sections shows some shifts in students’ audience orientation and transaction beliefs (Sanders-Reio, 2014)
- An interesting theme emerged from students’ weekly writing about their use of the grading contracts: feeling more comfortable asking questions during or after class or knowing how or what questions to ask and recognizing the importance of asking questions
- All but one student from each section has passed portfolio and the course

Selected References

- Burger, E. (2012). Teaching to fail. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2012/08/21>
- Carr, A. (2013). In support of failure. Retrieved from <http://compositionforum.com/issue/27/failure.php>
- Danielewicz, J. (2009). A unilateral grading contract to improve learning and teaching. *College Composition and Communication*, 61(2), 244-268.
- Inoue, A. B. (2012). Grading contracts: Assessing their effectiveness on different racial formations. In A. B. Inoue & M. Poe (Eds.), *Race and Writing Assessment* (pp. 79-94). Peter Lang Publishing.
- Inoue, A. B. (2012). A grade-less writing course that focuses on labor and assessing. In A. B. Inoue & M. Poe (Eds.), *Race and Writing Assessment* (pp. 79-94). Peter Lang Publishing.
- Inoue, A. B. (2014). Theorizing failure in US writing assessments. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 48(3), 330-352.
- Kellogg, R. (2008). Training writing skills: A cognitive developmental perspective. *Journal of Writing Research*, 1(1), 1-26. doi:10.17239/jowr-2008.01.01.1
- Mateos, M., Cuevas, I., Martin, E., Martin, A., Echeita, G., & Luna, M. (2011). Reading to write an argumentation: The role of epistemological, reading and writing beliefs. *Journal of Research in Reading*. Retrieved March 3, 2018.
- Sanders-Reio, J., Alexander, P. A., Reio, T. G., Jr., & Newman, I. (2014). Do students’ beliefs about writing relate to their writing self-efficacy, apprehension, and performance? *Learning and Instruction*, 33, 1-11.
- White, M. Bruning, R. (2005). Implicit writing beliefs and their relation to writing quality. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 30, 166-189.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the University of Wisconsin System Office of Academic Programs and Educational Innovation and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Office of the Provost and the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL).

