Contract Grading: A Heuristic for “Productive Failure” in an Eight-Week Hybrid
Second-Semester Composition Class
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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).

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%- 29%)
- that data ENG 102: College Writing and Research is a course designed 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

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)

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

- Inoue, A. B. (2012). A grade-less writing course that focuses on labor and transaction. In A. B. Inoue & M. Poe (Eds.), Race and Writing Assessment (pp. 79-94), Peter Lang Publishing.

Acknowledgments

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