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Joyce Olewski Inman and Rebecca A. Powell

In the Absence of Grades: Dissonance and Desire in Course-Contract Classrooms

Acknowledging students' and instructors' desires for grades as affective carriers of achievement, belonging, and identity can move us beyond ideals of socially just assessment, making space for decolonizing action and explorations of how the classroom community and the field grapple with the dissonance between being a writer and being a student.

While it's certainly true that we've created an educational system that encourages our best and brightest to become cynical grade collectors and, in general, have developed an obsession with evaluation and assessment, I must tell you that venal though it may have been, I loved getting good grades. . . . I suppose I'd been mediocre for too long and enjoyed public redefinition. . . . I carried them around like a club emblem.

—Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary*

Scholarship on grading and responding to student writing has a complex history in the field of composition studies. The past twenty years

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of grade-related research in the writing classroom have focused on how writing teachers respond to student writing, on the relationships between these responses and the awarding of grades (Connors and Lunsford; Smith; Haswell), and on alternatives to grading student writing (Shor; Tchudi; Huot; Reichert; Danielewicz and Elbow; Inoue, "Grading," *Antiracist*). In an attempt to examine the ways students might benefit from assessment that privileges students, their labors, and their learning over actual grades and to continue the conversation about how contract grading might benefit student authors, we piloted a course-contract system of grading in the stretch composition sequence at our institution.

The majority of the literature on course contracts frames contract assessment as beneficial to student learning (Danielewicz and Elbow), as a more democratic version of critical pedagogy (Shor; Thelin), and as a more just form of assessment (Inoue, "Grading," *Antiracist*). Indeed, while much of the literature addresses concerns expressed by presumed critics, most studies claim contract grading fulfills its promises. Two exceptions to this are Cathy Spidell and William H. Thelin's "Not Ready to Let Go: A Study of Resistance to Grading Contracts," and Asao Inoue's "Grading Contracts: Assessing Their Effectiveness on Different Racial Formations." Spidell and Thelin argue that student voices are not represented in most contract scholarship and provide data from their own study suggesting students resist contract grading due to a lack of contextualization within the course. Inoue, in contrast, notes how different racial demographics respond to course-contract grading based on both student responses and pass rates. Ultimately, however, each of these authors continues to advocate course contracts as effective means of classroom assessment when they are designed and implemented appropriately. Similarly, our study suggests that course contracts seem to orient the classroom and instruction to the work of writing and learning, but our initial findings of the promising effects of course contracts also yielded surprising insights about how grades function for students and instructors in writing courses.

Grades, we began to realize, work along the axis of affect in ways unexplored in the literature on assessment and grading. These surprises are the focus of this article, and they led us to question the field's assumptions about grades, to deeply engage students' and instructors' experiences with grades, to probe the dissonance between how the field of composition and institutions define grades, and to argue that the relationship between

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grades and affect position desire as a key to just assessment. Ultimately, we argue that acknowledging the ways students and instructors desire grades moves the field beyond ideals of socially just assessment and creates a space for decolonizing action—a space in which the classroom community and the field grapple with the differences between being a writer and being a student.

Institutional and Study Contexts

Our regional, research-extensive university is the most racially diverse four-year institution in the state. On average, we serve 1,500 first-year, first-time students each fall, and our first-year student body mirrors the state's racial makeup almost exactly. The demographic makeup of our institution and the institutional conversations surrounding student success and retention provided exigency for our pilot of course contracts. We hoped to reframe discussions of student success, rethink assumptions about student behaviors, and increase awareness about student and teacher expectations. Thus, we solicited volunteers from our faculty, graduate instructors, and part-time faculty who were interested in teaching in our expanded composition program and in rethinking their classroom assessment processes. Ultimately, we worked with four faculty members, four graduate instructors, and two part-time faculty members (N=10) to incorporate grade contracts into their expanded composition classrooms.¹ We collected data from ten sections of expanded composition in which instructors in the cohort used course contracts for assessment purposes (N=219 students).² We also collected similar data from six expanded composition courses that used traditional grading methods (N=144 students). Cognizant of Asao Inoue's argument that grades "reinforce a norming to a white racial habitus" (*Antiracist* 185), we began our data coding by identifying student and instructor racial and gender demographics. When comparing student satisfaction rates with their qualitative responses, however, it became obvious that students, all students, had similar responses to a lack of grades in their classrooms.³ We recognize the significant role students' and instructors' identities play in

their relationships to grades. However, the anomaly of their common reactions related to dissonance and desire is the focus of this article.

Our corpus of data includes instructor-designed course contracts, instructor interviews, instructor surveys, student surveys, student writing and final portfolios, and institutional research data. This mix of data provides a nuanced picture of the experience of course contracts from the vantage point of students and instructors. Those experiences were shaped by our initial aims for course contracts; we endeavored to use course contracts to make clear to students the relationship between the work and labor of writing and their final writing products.⁴ We hoped that removing the emphasis on products and the grades that accompanied those products would allow students the freedom to focus on the works and acts of writers, and we also trusted that course contracts might provide students with a more transparent view of what we valued as teachers. Similarly, we saw course contracts as a way for instructors to articulate their writing values and exercise agency in institutional discourses about student success and retention. In short, we saw course contracts as a way to proactively address student writing success and instructor agency and reflection.

Our aims were also shaped by our own university trajectories. As a first-generation college student who never wrote a paper until first-year composition, Rebecca saw a focus on labor as a way to overcome systematic inequality in schooling. Joyce's scholarship on race and basic writing led her to see course contracts as a way to reframe the discourse surrounding basic writers. As two white women with teaching experience in majority-minority and diverse institutions, we worked from Inoue's claim that "classroom writing assessment is more important than pedagogy because it always trumps what you say or what you attempt to do with your students. And students know this. They feel it" (*Antiracist* 8). We did not yet consider that the imprints of affect and history trump a sixteen-week writing course. As we began exploring our study results, we were surprised by the contradictory reports by students, who would give the contract assessment strong ratings and then note that they would have liked the assurances of grades. And we were equally surprised by the ways instructors seemed to desire grades. These revelations led us to rethink the ways the field has dismissed grades, the affective ties that seemingly bind students to grades in ways that deserve additional attention, and the ways alternative assessments such as course contracts might also norm students to a dominant habitus.

Reexamining Grades and Affect

Because we both have backgrounds in writing program administration, we have spent more time considering programmatic and classroom assessment than grades, so we want to begin by defining what we mean by grades. In this case, it is not the act of grading or how one grades, more commonly associated with assessment, but the actual grade, or what education literature previously referred to as a *mark*, literally the letter or number given by a teacher to indicate achievement on an assignment or in a course. Scholars in writing studies and education have investigated the validity and the cultural and social justice implications of grades, and in almost every case they have found grades wanting. Research as far back as 1912 questioned the scientific validity of grades. In 1912, Daniel Starch and Edward Elliott found that teachers grading the same essay awarded a range of over fifty points and proclaimed it impossible to reliably score high-achieving es-

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says. Paul B. Diederich, an assessment specialist with the Educational Testing Services, sounded the death knell of grades' validity in *Measuring Growth in English*. Diederich's now famous study gave three hundred papers to fifty-three judges to grade. One hundred of those papers received every possible grade, resulting in a low correlation among grades, -.31. Now repeatedly replicated

(Bowman; Dulek and Shelby) and cited over 509 times, Diederich's work is built into the cultural assumptions of writing studies and education and the foundation of arguments for course contracts: grades are unreliable and arbitrary. In addition to validity studies, researchers have investigated grades as cultural constructs and carriers of racial and socioeconomic bias (Inoue, "Grading," *Antiracist*). Until this study, we had never questioned the implications of this research, how it might mask other truths about grades, or the ways alternatives to grading might carry similar biases.

To dismiss cultural constructs such as grades, a repeated part of the education system from students' earliest memories of schools, ignores the affective domain of learning. The affective domain of learning, that of values and emotions, understands grades within the realm of experience and identity. As Brian Huot notes, "grades are part of a larger system of values

that have been used to identify or label people. In education, grades are a totalizing evaluative mechanism. It is common for people to sum up their experiences as students by saying, "I was an A or C student" (6). This is to say, simply casting grades as ineffective ignores these identities and affect, the emotional residue and system of values, that students and instructors associate with grades. These affects, gained from years of cultural conditioning, bear further exploration because it is affect that colors experience, motivation, and dispositions. Affect orients, but it also moves and situates us; as Byron Hawk claims, "affect moves us toward new relations among bodies" (843). As the students and instructors in our study sought to navigate the discourses of the university and basic writing, they forged new connections through affect, yet they were missing a way to convey and confirm that affect: grades. Finding themselves in a system that had already labeled them as basic writers, they seemed to yearn for the labels grades provided them in past educational experiences.

Empirical research indicates affect is a significant factor in writing efficacy. Student attitudes and beliefs are related to a host of writing issues: "attributions of writing success and failure, cultural beliefs about writing and the value of writing in different contexts" (McLeod 14). Studies about affect and writing have shown that students' success in writing assignments is dependent on more than previous knowledge and aptitude, "mediated by psychosocial and emotional factors such as students' perceptions of themselves as students, to their motivational level, and to their beliefs about learning and knowledge-building" (Harklau 36).⁵ Research has also "shown strong positive associations between self belief in writing and writing scores" (Pajares and Valiante 199).⁶ Positive affects and a strong self-concept seem to aid students as they work through the "difficulties and frustrations that typically accompany the writing process" (Lee 24).⁷ Other studies have associated how one feels about writing "with affects such as enjoyment, intense anxiety, or apprehension before or during writing" (McCarthy et al. 23).⁸ In a survey of data gathered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Lee relates lack of perseverance to lack of successful writing experiences, particularly writing experiences rewarded by grades. In other words, writing achievement, persistence, and grades are woven together to produce lasting affects that influence future writing experiences. To understand affect and writing, we must acknowledge the relationship between grades and affect.

Although writing studies has engaged affect as a topic of research and as a theoretical frame, definitions of affect and its relationship to emotion have changed since its first appearance in the literature. This change in definition, explored in Julie D. Nelson's "An Unnecessary Divorce: Integrating the Study of Affect and Emotion in New Media," separated studies of affect and emotion, ignoring their interrelationship, and, more importantly, disregarded the anticipation of emotion as a cultural construct that builds affect, dispositions, and identities. However, affect and emotion were not always separated in the field's discussions. When Lynn Worsham turned the field of rhetoric and composition to emotion, and subsequently affect, she defined emotion in terms of affect. For Worsham, "*emotion* [refers] to the tight braid of affect and judgment, socially and historically constructed and bodily lived, through which the symbolic takes hold of and binds the individual, in complex and contradictory ways, to the social order and its structure of meaning" (216, emphasis in original). Worsham's definition illustrates how grades as symbols could evoke emotions that might tie stu-

Repetition creates expectations. Thus, primed to expect grades or give grades, students and instructors associate grades with affects and emotions; grades become affective carriers of emotion. And this emotion signifies the binding of students and instructors to the social order of education, the university, and basic writing.

dents and instructors to institutional discourses and, therefore, identities, and how the absence of grades might evoke dissonance and yearning.

Worsham's use of affect to define emotion disappeared from the field, separating affect and emotion in our studies and theorizing (Nelson). By separating emotion from affect, many studies relegate emotion to a reflection, an instance, a moment, and affect to "change, movement and relation" (Nelson). Emotion is assigned to the singular and all too often the personal, and affect becomes unknowable (Nelson; Massumi). Nelson carefully analyzes the interrelationship between emotion and affect, theorizing, "If we begin, instead, with emotion, we can theorize affect both as the bodily intensity that precedes it and the affective capacities and potentials that grow out of it." In this conceptualization, affect, a force and a capacity, "primes us for particular emotions" (Nelson). These emotions become expected parts of experience, leaving residue, and repeated experiences result in patterns, forming dispositions (Nelson). Repetition creates expectations. Thus, primed to expect grades or give grades, students and instructors associate

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grades with affects and emotions; grades become affective carriers of emotion. And this emotion signifies the binding of students and instructors to the social order of education, the university, and basic writing. This binding creates desires for institutional approval and confirmed identities. Thus, in the analysis of the ways students and instructors experience grades, or the lack of grades associated with course contract assessment, that follows, we anchor our explorations in a theoretical framework that acknowledges the affective domain of grade markers and the institution's role as the colonizer, as a political entity whose epistemologies create a reliance on—and, therefore, a desire for—grades as markers of achievement.

Dissonance and Complexity

Dissonance points to the unresolved. In students' reported experiences with course contracts, we came to think of the dissonance between their likes and dislikes as the point of tension between their current experience with course contracts and their schooling history. As mentioned previously, quantitative data pertaining to our study suggests that students enrolled in courses using contract methods of assessment were more successful than the students enrolled in courses using traditional grading methods. Indeed, our first analysis suggested our pilot study did exactly what we hypothesized it would do. Course contracts allowed faculty to present a more transparent set of expectations to students about the labor involved in successful writing ventures; consequently, students' achievement increased.⁹ Students enrolled in contract courses were over 40% less likely to fail the class, and the withdrawal rate for students in noncontract courses was three times that of the contract courses.

In addition to institutional grade data, our survey asked participants for Likert Scale feedback (a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being strongly agree) on six different questions related to writing assessment, and responses to these questions were overwhelmingly positive. In the question pertaining to whether students found the criteria for their writing assignments to be clear, almost 90% of students responded with a score of 4 or 5. In response to questions related to their understanding of what constitutes not meeting, meeting, or exceeding expectations, over 90% of students answered 4 or 5. Similarly, when responding to questions meant to determine the instructor's ability to provide transparency pertaining to quality writing, "the instructor's definitions of good writing are clear," over 87% of students agreed or

strongly agreed. Some 90% of respondents reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that the grades they were receiving were fair. Moreover, 95% of respondents reported that their instructors provided feedback that helped them improve their writing. And, finally, 89% of respondents rated their individual instructor's grading and response practices as effective, rating them with a 4 or 5. Similarly, every instructor said they would use course contracts in future classes based on this experience.

As we know and as our goals for this project exemplify, however, grades and quantitative data do not tell the whole story. In fact, as noted by Derek Rowntree, "grades, percentages, and category labels are hopelessly inadequate to convey the load of meaning that we sometimes believe we are putting into them and which other people desperately try to get out of them" (70). Rowntree's sentiment is commonplace in education and writing studies: grades fail to communicate the complexity of learning. And we found that students' actual and perceived success rates in classes did not encompass the nuanced ways they experienced the freedoms provided by the course contract or the anxieties produced by a lack of grades. This complexity becomes increasingly evident as we move from quantitative to qualitative data. In our coding of the students' responses to open-ended questions, the following themes arose: freedom, fairness, clarity, fear, im-

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provement, and focus. In our second pass through the data using linguistic markers, we tagged student responses with the appropriate theme or themes. Contradictions arose within individual student responses. A student sounded

notes of freedom and improvement with notes of fear. Clarity was both appreciated and yearned for in the same response. These contradictions sounded the dissonance of students' experiences and pointed to the surprising influence and specter of grades. While we could tell a success story with our quantitative data, we wanted to honor students' experiences; we wanted to listen to our data. Our success story got complicated. We share these complications below because it is through students' experiences that we begin to understand the impact of our theories and assumptions, the very work of writing studies.

By the time students arrive in a first-year composition course, they have over a decade's worth of schooling experience. That experience tells

them assignments result in grades, that assignment grades accumulate, and that these grades result in course grades. Moreover, they realize from early on in their schooling experiences that course grades can grant and deny access to coveted lists, to enhanced opportunities and experiences related to school, to other courses, and even to institutions. History and repetition tells students grades do things: they sort, they mark, they reward, and they punish. In our students' experiences with course contracts, the logic of grades—a logic developed from years of repetitive experience—was missing from their everyday experiences. Assignments were not returned with a grade, only feedback. Students' open-ended responses to survey questions about their experiences dealt with that absence by sounding two notes, an appreciation for the freedom associated with a lack of grades and a yearning for the grades themselves; in other words, dissonance.

In the absence of grades, students felt free to focus on improving their writing. For example, one student framed her appreciation of the contract as the difference between worry and ability: "You really didn't have to worry if it was an A paper. You just wrote your paper to the best of your ability." The student's focus on ability and writing instead of worry over a grade seemed to indicate the student was experiencing a freedom from grades. Other responses, such as the following, "I like how we do not actually receive a letter grade, so that allows us to focus on what characteristics we need to focus more on," indicate that the absence of grades led to more focus on improving the writing. Students also wrote that they appreciated clear criteria and expectations, which contributed to their self-efficacy as students and writers: "The grading scale helped me to not focus on a number. it was easier because the letter grade kinda puts you in control of your own grade. its up to you if you fail or flunk the class. if you dont do the work, you breach the contract. if you do the work then you pass the class. so its like its up to the students whether we pass or fail." By associating passing with work, the student articulates ownership of his or her success in the classroom and articulates success in terms of labor (and not breaching the contract terms) instead of a grade marker.

However, when asked what they did not like, students who noted that they had no complaints typically focused on what course contracts removed: grades. This dissonance can be seen in the following student's responses. In response to what she liked about the grading process, the student wrote, "I like the fact that it didn't focus on the grade, but more on my work and

how to improve my writing.” In the next question, she was asked what she didn’t like, and she responded: “During the drafting process, I wanted to know what the grade would be but I couldn’t because it wasn’t about the grade but the development of the paper.” Clearly, this student understands the absence of grades created space for her to focus on her writing, “the development of the paper,” but even with knowing the purpose of the absence of grades, even experiencing that purpose as a benefit, the student still desires a grade. The dissonance between appreciating the learning from a process made possible by the absence of grades and yearning for that same grade illustrates the ways grades have worked as affective carriers in our institutions and classrooms. Below, we explore how students and instructors articulated their desires for grades, how those desires signify the affective work of grades, and how an understanding of grades as affective carriers needs to be considered in writing scholars’ conversations surrounding grades.

Desiring the Signifier: Grades as Progress and Identity

Perhaps one of the least surprising findings in our study involved the ways students often viewed grades as marks that noted their progression and ultimately served as identity markers. Grades, for these students, served as markers of becoming. Students are primed by our education system not to assess the quality of their own writing but to use the grades they receive to categorize themselves and to prepare for the emotions that come along with the identity these grades create (e.g., the A student, the teacher’s pet, the average kid, the kid who can’t cut it). This need for grades to mark where students are in terms of “mastery,” and therefore academic identity, seems a likely source for their appreciation of the freedom course contracts supply but also their inability to place themselves on a spectrum of success and their desire for a grade to do that work for them.

For example, one student noted that while she appreciated the ways the contract allowed her to learn from her mistakes, she did not like that she “did not understand if [she] was average or below.” She goes on to note, “I really do not know where I stand in the course.” For this student, her standing, which denotes not just a grade but a ranking, is signified by a grade that denotes her identity as above or below average. She understands her identity and standing within the course in reference to these scales. Improving her writing and achieving the aims of the course were

not scales that the student knew how to gauge. Her instructor's feedback and learning from her mistakes do not replace the signifier of standing, a grade. Other students expressed fear when discussing this: "I like the fact that the grade is at least set at a B but I don't like that I don't have letter grades on the previous essays because I don't know where I stand and that's scary." The assurance of a B without the signifiers of grades on each essay scared the student, for she was left without a sense of standing and, thus, without a sense of identity. Feedback may give students ideas about their writing and their next steps, but it does not convey who they are or how they measure up.

Similarly, another student valued the instructor's contract method of informing students about whether their work was of B quality or not, but she still explains, "I don't like not knowing what I have. I feel as if I need to know what each paper is on a point grading scale and what my average is." This student expresses her desire to know more about where she stands—wanting specific point values for each essay—as a need. In addition, she goes on to also complain that while she valued knowing if her work was of B quality or not, she does not "like hearing that [her] grade is just 'sufficient for a B.'" One of the implicit goals for contract grading, from our perspective, involves helping students learn to assess themselves—to free them from the need of an authority figure's mark of approval. As Huot notes, however, "even in our consideration of how students assess themselves, we have focused primarily on the ways in which one's progress in writing is connected to one's grades" (60). So while course contracts seemed to provide students with a new frame of reference for process and improvement, they could not divorce their ideas of improvement from the markers they believe are designed to reward that improvement.

Thus, it seems that many of our students rely on grades to confirm their academic standings and to measure how much higher they might need to climb (or whether they needed to climb at all) in order to reach their goals; their very identities and their progress to the identities they desire are enmeshed with grades in ways that contract grading did not seem to address for them. Grades deliver an identity confirmation, becoming affective carriers of emotions intimately tied to students' understandings of academic and social hierarchies. Although contract grading made room for a better understanding of progress and process, it did not alleviate students' desires for marks that rank them so they could make decisions

about the work that may still be expected from them. Indeed, one student acknowledged how much she enjoyed the focus on process as opposed to grades but then noted that she prefers receiving grades because “I can see how i need to improve or what i need to do in order to get the grade i wish for at the end of the year.” Similarly, another student noted, “i did not like any of the grading in this course i would have rather been graded for my work and seen what type of grade i would have made so i could’ve known what i needed to work on.” Grades, then, serve as more than measures of identity for these students; they are the signifiers of how much work remains to be done for the students to meet their goals and thus enact their desired identities. And these students do not have the authorial confidence to determine for themselves how much work remains; rather, they seem to desperately want a marker capable of making that determination for them.

Desiring Reassurance: Grades as Comfort Objects and Assurance of Rigor

Grades convey identities and standing, and in that conveying, students derive comfort. Course-contract classrooms featured various types of written and verbal feedback from instructors and peers, feedback students valued and used to improve their writing. However, even when feedback included reference to a grade, “your work qualifies for a B,” it did not satisfy students’ desire for “an actual grade,” “a number grade.” As one student explained, “I’ve always been a fan of the old school A, B, C, D, F system, so not seeing those grades is really strange.” That strangeness underscores how grades function as ritual endmarks, as caps to assignments, courses, and learning. A grade marks the end of a learning sequence, and seeing a grade provides reassurance. One student wrote, “I wish we got an actual grade just for us to see but where our paper would fall on the actual grading scale.” The student’s language, “just for us to see,” mirrors the phrase “just checking,” evoking the image of repeated, ritualistic behaviors meant to comfort or reassure, like checking bank balances or phoning a relative to touch base. The sight of a grade might reassure students they are correctly interpreting an instructor’s feedback, all is well, and they are progressing. In another example, one student wrote that they enjoyed course contracts and instructor feedback because it “was very open and helpful” but also wanted to “just know my actual number grade.” This wish for a number, a definitive marker, was a missing cap to the student’s learning experience.

Grades equaled a knowing, a ritual, a reassurance. This reassurance was also linked to expediency: "I did not like that I couldn't immediately know my grade." Grades provide instant reassurance of standing and progress, while the course contract asked students to develop a body of work and a repertoire of skills to produce that work over the long course of a semester. Many students wrote that they enjoyed, learned from, and improved their writing due to the course contracts, but they also missed the reassurance and comfort of an "actual number grade," the ritual of gazing at the signifier of achievement, progress, and identity.

Although students framed grades as comfort objects, their course placement would seem to indicate grades have not always brought good news. This is important to note because it is not that

grades always deliver warm fuzzies, but that they always deliver a clear delineation of rank and standing in a recognized institutional parlance. Grades provide comfort because students know what they are and what grades mean in the wider university setting; they are known entities. While it might seem ironic that students would crave a bad grade, when we understand grades as affective carriers capable of binding students to institutional discourses, to the institution itself, the irony disappears; a grade, any grade, carries the possibility of belonging, of institutional identity.

While grades served as identity markers and rituals, students also linked their desires for grades to the institutional function of grades, including ensuring rigor, calculating grade point averages, and record keeping. Surprisingly, with the contracts' emphasis on work, effort, and labor, some students worried that the course contract "made it a little too relaxing." These students equated rigor with unease, an unease perhaps best exemplified by grades as explained below in our analysis of instructors' explanations of the function of grades. In particularly telling comments, a student wrote that the course contract "is good because if you have problems writing what counts is your effort and work," and when asked to write about what he did not like, he wrote, "I don't like is that we don't a record of our grades. Even though a B is a good grade, it could drop my GPA." That the student explains the link between grades and grade point averages illustrates his

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awareness of the institution at large. And the institution at large counts grades, not work, not effort. The institution hovered behind students' experience of the course contract. Students seemed sure grades were lurking behind the feedback on their papers (and in many ways they were correct): "I wish that we got an actual grade just for us to see but where our paper would fall on the actual grading scale." For these students, the course contract seemed an artifice behind which they would find "actual grades" on an "actual" grading scale—and these "actual" grades are what students believe they need in order to be comfortable with their own identities as students—and note that we are intentionally suggesting this about their comfort level as students, not as authors. Grades, then, reassure students in ways that qualitative feedback and individual responses do not, no matter how detailed and comprehensive that feedback may be.

Desiring Regulation: Teachers and Grades as Carrots and Sticks

It is, perhaps, not surprising that instructors using course contracts for the first time found the act of consciously not awarding a grade almost as disorienting as students found not receiving the grade. As Mary Soliday and Jennifer Trainor note in their recent *CCC* article "Rethinking Regulation in the Age of the Literacy Machine," our field has "long debated the relationships between regulation and liberation, disciplinary constraint and individual choice, explicit teaching and implicit learning—dualities that we negotiate every day in our classes" (127). This is to say, both scholarship in our field and pedagogical conversations in hallways continue to center on how best to teach writing and whether students need more or less freedom in order to write "well." And, as Soliday and Trainor note, the institutional assessment and transfer-related demands of writing courses have only served to further stratify these perspectives. Soliday and Trainor explore the ways writing assignments and the rubrics attached to them either promote craft-based responses (templated and regulated writing) or artisanal responses (exploratory and complex writing) from students. But writing assignments themselves are not the only artifacts that students encounter that our field tends to categorize similarly: textbook choices, informal writing prompts, opportunities for revision, feedback style, and, yes, grading choices are typically designated as political choices by the teacher that suggest either a regulation of literacy or an invitation to explore literacy. Thus, instructors struggled more than we anticipated they

would with adhering to a grading system that they saw as an ideal with the everyday practicalities of providing writing instruction. Indeed, instructors seem to have experienced a number of conflicts in their reflections about the efficacy of course contracts, suggesting that they too have affective ties to grading and performance.

In the same ways that students' responses suggest they enjoyed the freedoms associated with course-contract methods of grading but felt adrift without the reassurances provided by grades, instructors found their inability to provide students with grades required more reflection and adjustment than they anticipated. One instructor, a full-time writing faculty member, notes the following in her interview: "I do realize that I used to use grades to communicate to my students, whether I was proud of them, whether they were working hard, whether they were being lazy and not doing the work at all. I used those grades to communicate. Those grades were taken away, and I kind of felt like I had to get my sea legs."

This idea that grades as markers are used to communicate progress or lack of progress to students and that instructors found it difficult to substitute a different kind of communication to help students self-assess is one echoed throughout instructors' responses to our questions about their experiences with course contracts. Indeed, a number of the instructors devised different methods of communicating with students to fill the vacuum they felt when they were unable to award grades. For example, one instructor awarded students whose products met or exceeded the criteria established by the class with stickers. Another instructor designed color-coded cards that she awarded to students during class to ensure that the entire class knew which behaviors she found valuable. Instructors too, then, felt an intrinsic need to provide students with markers of success or failure, and when grades were not available to serve as these markers, they devised substitute markers within their classroom communities.

What is also interesting, however, is that this notion of grades as communicators was also acknowledged as a type of shorthand response. It is an easy way to communicate with students in part because it is the expected way—on the parts of the students and the institution. Instructors particularly valued this shorthand form of communication when they wanted to help students understand that they were not meeting expectations. One instructor, a PhD candidate in literature and respected teacher in our department, explained in response to our questions about grading that "just

the fear factor aspect of getting an F within the first month of your first semester of college, I think personally is sometimes enough, and I grade normally, in a normal class, grade really hard on the first one to let them know like there is something at the end here.” This emphasis on fear and shocking students into acknowledging that they are somehow not performing up to par becomes something of a constant in instructors’ reflections on what they missed about grades as markers. Moreover, it echoes the students’ fears of not “seeing” a grade on assignments. For both students and instructors, grades, and the lack thereof, are linked to fear. Another instructor, one of our valued part-time faculty members, noted that when students were not enacting the contract behaviors and doing their work, he felt like “slapping a D minus on it would probably have been much more effective than . . . just saying ‘Mmm, doesn’t quite meet expectations.’” The violence

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and haste of the word *slapping* took us aback, but it points to the power and clarity of grades. Instructors and students share a definition of a D minus. These responses illustrate truths about the ways many faculty rely on grades, particularly grades that signify failures, to communicate for them—a shock-and-awe style of response that

they know students understand and to which they will be likely to respond, whether that response is to work harder or give up—allowing the instructors to know whether this student wants and deserves additional effort on their parts. Effective and productive critique is hard and emotionally taxing for instructors and students, and course-contract methods of assessment remove one of the tools upon which many instructors rely to communicate pleasure or displeasure with student performance and production. Thus, it became clear that instructors, like students, implicitly understand grades as affective carriers of emotion, as symbols that communicate the complexities of praise and critique, approval and disappointment, rewards and punishments.

In addition to effects on communication strategies, course contracts also seemed to create dissonance in terms of both instructors’ concerns related to grade inflation (i.e., what if the student doesn’t really deserve a

B?) and concerns related to institutional support and recognition. There were numerous discussions among our group of colleagues about whether students could somehow meet the requirements of the contract and receive a B in the class but not actually be “B writers.” And it was, we believe, this sense of approval with which many instructors struggled. There seemed to be a fear that we might award a student this approving marker undeservedly and that this was problematic ethically in terms of standards but also in terms of the students’ future successes in other classrooms. One instructor noted that if students “do the behaviors, they create a revision plan, they go to the writing center; they do it, and then they get their B even if it isn’t ‘good’ writing.” Most of the instructors expressed at some point during the semester that they had these types of concerns—that the grades they might ultimately award would not represent students’ “true” academic standing. We believe these concerns were less about grade inflation and more about instructors’ concerns that they, as representatives of the institution, are charged with somehow accurately identifying students and their abilities. The course contract, in their initial experiences, blurred the lines of their roles in passing judgment on student writing, on their identities as judges and juries of writing. And there were concerns that they, as the people who sanctioned these students, would be judged as ineffective teachers by the institution.

The contracts also led to explicitly defined emotions related to individual assessment practices on the parts of instructors. One instructor noted that she felt demoralized during the semester because she promised so much to her students via the contract. And while her “promises” are actually pedagogical choices we believe this instructor would have made no matter how she was assessing the class, she notes that the “personal, demoralizing aspect of it is because I set myself up in a contractual situation to do everything.” This recognition that contract assessment requires more time and investment and that the instructor also plays a role in the contract was discomforting to some of the instructors, particularly those who were juggling their roles as teachers and graduate students. They took their commitments to their students very seriously, and having those commitments in writing seemed to increase their feelings of responsibility—an uncomfortable position when one of their primary means of communicating was no longer available.

Conclusions

In many ways, our study confirms Soliday and Trainor's argument that "regulation is so omnipresent in education now that students may expect to be regulated" (145). We argue, however, that regulation is more than an expectation on the part of students but has also morphed into an affective

We argue, however, that regulation is more than an expectation on the part of students but has also morphed into an affective need due to this conditioning.

need due to this conditioning. Returning to Worsham's theories of pedagogies of emotion as affect, and as "particularly effective ways of locating and anchoring us in a way of life," this begs the question of how we might better implement

course contracts as a pedagogy of affect and achieving that acknowledges students' and instructors' reliances on grades but also opens up spaces for the risks and opportunities that we firmly believe course contracts offer—as a nonviolent pedagogy that commits to "real individual and social change" (Worsham 216). Such a move, we believe, requires composition scholars to take up two different sets of challenges: our field's decision to accept research on the lack of validity related to grades without acknowledging the affective roles these markers play in the lives of students and instructors and a move from course contracts as social justice (Inoue "Grading," *Antiracist*) and as pedagogy (Danielewicz and Elbow) to course contracts as decolonizing action.

First, we want to note that we agree that grades are problematic; indeed, we both turned to course contracts for our classroom assessment because we found grades insufficient in a process-based writing course. And, as noted earlier in this article, we found little reason to question the ways assessment research deemed grades unreliable measures of student success. As we revisited the literature on alternatives to grades, we were also somewhat surprised to see that most arguments against grades rely almost exclusively on Diederich's previously mentioned 1974 study illustrating the lack of reliability and significant subjectivity among graders of student writing. And while we understand that once a comprehensive study has been proven accurate even in replicative studies, there is little reason to doubt the knowledge it provides, we do think that our acceptance of this literature means we have not asked enough questions about when and why grades might matter to students and instructors, even if both parties understand the subjective and unreliable nature of the grades themselves.

For if we simply dismiss grades as markers, we are ignoring the affective needs of our students. Consequently, rather than simply accepting early research on grades as a starting point for why grades should be discarded, we must conduct more research on how and why students and instructors are so bound to grades and address this dissonance in our classrooms and our institutions.

As Elbow notes, “most teachers are obliged to give grades at the end of each course. And many students—given that they have become conditioned or even addicted to ranking over the years and must continue to inhabit a ranking in most of their courses—will object if we don’t put grades on papers” (“Ranking” 4–5). Yet neither of us intend to return to a more traditional system of grading. We are, however, conscious of the fact that we need to ask new questions about students’ affective ties to grades to create a classroom environment that allows students to create identities as authors outside of a letter grade spectrum and that better prepares students to assess the ways their labor acts lead to stronger writing—and we need to do this without relying on replacements for grades. Moreover, we need to create these spaces with the knowledge that students strongly desire grades and may have difficulties translating alternative forms of communication about their progress in our classes.

Previous justifications for course contracts work at the level of classroom critique, locating “agency within the classroom and enabl[ing] teacher and students to envision local changes and micropolitical action—rather than to succumb to paralysis at the specter of a large and untouchable institutional structure” (Porter et al. 616). This vision of change is seductive; in fact, it is why we began using course contracts in the first place. However, the focus on the classroom kept us from theorizing the “shadowy” presence of the institution and its logic, and in so doing, that logic “seem[ed] monolithic and beyond an individual’s power for change—except in a kind of liberal, trickle-up theory of change that pins political hopes on the enlightened, active individual” (Porter et al. 617). By analyzing the desires for grades among students and instructors, we are able to see the points of dissonance between the institution and the composition classroom. Within the classroom and thus within the course contracts, instructors constructed identities for writers, behaviors for writers (drafting, peer reviews, revision, etc.), and rewards for writers (feedback from engaged readers). However, students and instructors position the composition

classroom as a microcosm of the institution, and in the institution, grades construct identities, motivate behaviors, and reward those identities and behaviors. Students' appreciation of the contract illustrates that it met their writerly needs, but their desires for grades illustrate institutional imprints on expectations, emotions, and interactions. Grades carry the institution's approval or disapproval for instructors and students. The course contract plunged students and instructors into the dissonance between our field's dismissal of grades and the institution's privileging of grades.

This dissonance marks more than a disagreement on the scientific validity of grades; it marks a difference in how the field and the institution construct the identities of students and the weight of those constructions. The course contract and many of the pedagogies and practices of composition construct students as writers, writers in need of tools and practices to improve and self-assess their writing. Constructed as writers, students are expected to garner their satisfaction and emotional needs from the work and labor of writing and the assumed subsequent writing achievements. The institution constructs students as students, students in need of gauges

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and labels to define their progress and to establish their identities and rankings. Constructed as students, students get their emotional needs met through the official mechanisms of the university: grades, grade point averages, degrees. Ultimately, the institution's construction holds more weight because the institu-

tion primes, creates, and satisfies desires for its official approvals through repetition, expectation, and shared definitions. Moreover, students do not necessarily recognize the liberatory possibilities in being constructed as writers. The course contract, and the field of composition, do not create desires so much as foist the identity of a writer upon students, another act of colonization; and in that foisting, we place our hopes for social justice and sound writing pedagogy in individual classrooms, students, and teachers.

Decolonizing the Field: Recognizing Desire and Affect

The field has attacked grades with reason (logos) and morals (ethos), but we have ceded emotion (pathos) and desire to the university. By ceding

emotion and desire, we encourage changes in thought and belief but discourage action, the work of social justice. In this way, previous work on course contracts has taken steps toward decolonization, but we would argue these efforts are stopped short because of a fear of the feminine specters of emotion and desire. Emotion and desire invoke the field's long fight against the feminization of composition, and that history leads to reasoned, moral arguments that fundamentally misrecognize the affective capacity of grades. In that misrecognition, we shirk our responsibilities as scholars and teachers who recognize the need to point out the social injustices created, encouraged, and continually fostered by institutions of higher education. We ask students and instructors to intellectually agree with our arguments about what it means to be writers, but we do not recognize the significance of the ambiguities created by colonization and how those ambiguities weaken our arguments and situate our students in the midst of a symbolic struggle that is the field's to wage.

To recognize grades as affective carriers and institutions as makers of desires, we must first acknowledge how the field's thinking and reasoning have been shaped by institutional narratives and disciplinary status wars. As a particularly reflexive discipline, we have applied that reflexivity to the systems that create grades (Inoue, *Antiracist*; Huot), but we have shied from acknowledging the desires and emotions those systems create because of an honorable motivation not to "place" failure "in the laps of students" (Inoue, *Antiracist* 347). "The laps of students" and the hands of instructors are primed and imprinted to expect grades, grades that bind them to the institution. Our disciplinary preferences to analyze systems rather than individuals, to privilege behaviors over emotions, and to construct writers and not students are also shaped by the institution and the field's own desires to both be recognized and valued by the institution. However, as noted by Worsham, "curriculum holds most of us so deeply and intimately and yet differently within its logic that our affective lives are largely immune to the legislative efforts of social critique and to the legislative gains of progressive social movements" (216). In other words, we refuse to recognize, in spite of everything we know, the influence of the institution on the curriculum and, similarly, the lack of effect social critiques of the institution have when they do not consider affective ties to that same curriculum and the institution itself.

One place we might begin to address this lack of reflexivity and the

process of decolonization is by encouraging students and instructors to voice their desires, and by understanding that desires are not always pretty. In our data analysis, students desired to be “better” than other students, to “rank,” to have their worth valued over others. Instructors wanted students to feel their disapproval. Few of students’ desires had anything to do with

Few of students’ desires had anything to do with writing, but in these anonymous desires, there was power, and by exposing and owning those desires rather than voicing them anonymously, students and instructors might begin to unbraided affect and judgment and bind themselves in different and, we would argue, less destructive ways to the institution and the classroom.

writing, but in these anonymous desires, there was power, and by exposing and owning those desires rather than voicing them anonymously, students and instructors might begin to unbraided affect and judgment and bind themselves in different and, we would argue, less destructive ways to the institution and the classroom. As Worsham cogently argues, “pedagogy provides and limits a vocabulary of emotion and, especially to those in

subordinate positions, it teaches an inability to adequately apprehend, name, and interpret their affective lives” (223). And she goes on to claim that “decolonization and the struggle for social change must therefore take place at the primary level of emotion” (223). This is to say, we must encourage students and instructors to name their desires, provide them with the tools to interrogate those desires, and help them consider the roles of institutions in fostering those desires.

When applying this affective theory of decolonization to grades and assessment, this means we must allow and encourage students to understand and voice their desires for grades even while denying them the satisfaction of that desire. And, consequently, once these desires are made public, we must help them begin to understand the ways authors assess their own writing and how to do so within the institution. As Huot points out, students must surely ask, “Why struggle with assigning value to your work when it will be thoroughly and often mysteriously judged by someone else?” (66). And the results of our study suggest that students ask this question even more when they are not receiving regular marks but know that a mysterious grade and judgment are lurking and will have to be faced eventually. And while Huot argues that we must teach students to self-assess in order to address the

dissonance between what it means to be a writer and what it means to be a student (67) and makes a call for what he terms “instructive evaluation” (69), we argue that until we also acknowledge the ways assessment is tied to emotions, such a pedagogy continues to be symbolic and incapable of the decolonizing acts that our students need us to forge.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. This study received IRB approval from our institution.
2. The course-contract cohort self-reported the following demographic data: 18% White female, 14% White male, 19% Black male, 37% Black female, and 12% Asian, Native American, Hispanic, or other. Students had the option of not identifying in both categories.
3. Of the cohort listed in note 2, student reports of dissonance closely align with the demographics of the survey: 23% White female, 9% White male, 18% Black male, 34% Black female, 13% Asian, Native American, Hispanic, or other.
4. Instructors participated in a two-semester workshop related to implementing course contracts. All instructors ultimately implemented individualized versions of contracts that were labor based up to the grade of B—similar to contracts advocated by Danielewicz and Elbow.
5. See also Zimmerman and Schunk.
6. See also McCarthy et al. and Pajares et al.
7. See also Bruning and Horn.
8. See also Clark and Dugdale.
9. The number of students who received Bs as final grades reflected the same percentage (36%) in both cohorts. Of students in contract courses, 25% received a grade of A for the final grade, whereas 36% received an A in noncontract courses. Letter grades of C were awarded to almost 25% of contract students but to only 7% of noncontract students.

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