Life, Learning, and the Liberal Arts: A Hybrid Contract Grading Model

Jason Hendrickson
LaGuardia Community College, CUNY

In the introduction to *Zeal*'s inaugural issue, Bernard Prusak notes that "the liberal arts now live in an increasingly pre-professional world in which they are all too often denigrated and dismissed."[1] Indeed, higher education itself is the subject of much skepticism: polling has shown that the proportion of Americans who believe college has a positive impact has decreased by fourteen percentage points since the beginning of the decade.[2] While some of this skepticism is the result of skyrocketing tuition costs, the public's frustration with higher education might also be a product of its shifting purpose: whereas a half-century ago the vast majority of first-year students saw college as a platform to "develop a meaningful philosophy of life,"[3] the public, including students, now perceive it primarily as a means of economic security.[4] In short, it has gone from a public good to a private good; or, put crudely, when it comes to an education, *the only outcome that matters is the income*.

Lamentable as this may be, classroom practitioners would be wise to consider not just reality, but also possibility: What can be done to rescue and revive a sense of learning within such a hostile climate? And, must the liberal arts and the pre-professional world be mutually exclusive, at loggerheads, opposite each other?

Against Traditional Grading

Ultimately, by its design, the classroom is an undoing of the project of learning, education, and career preparation itself. For learners, especially those new to or historically unwelcomed in higher education, the classroom can and should be an opportunity for self-exploration, a space to build self-advocacy skills and career readiness, and an environment of care. Yet, regardless of one's beliefs in the ultimate purpose of higher education—be it a space for critical inquiry, a site of ideological sharpening for a world that demands nuanced ideas, a conduit for professional advancement and economic security, or some combination of these—the very bedrock of

assessment in higher education is anathema to student success. Grades undo learning.

My predominantly working-class students are surprised to be confronted by the cognitive dissonance they have for years accepted: the system of assessment they so readily acquiesce to—and even *defend*—will almost certainly be irrelevant in their professional futures, no matter what their path. (Ironically, the one path for which this is the exception is if they pursue a career in education.) I ask those of them who are employed: *When was the last time you were graded by your supervisor?* Students unwaveringly note that they were given feedback, to varying degrees, instructed through conferencing or other means as to how to improve. If we accept the alignment of the classroom with the broader public—liberal arts, public humanities, practical humanities, or even workforce preparation—why then would we continue to enforce antiquated systems of assessment that reduce students to artifacts?

The problem is multifaceted, so what follows is but a step toward a solution. I offer an implementable hybrid contract grading model, one that de-emphasizes the mechanizing, de-humanizing rankings of traditional grades that stifle learning, all while emphasizing fortifying techniques to engender students' sense of self-advocacy essential to navigate their post-undergraduate journey. As Michelle D. Miller notes in this forum, while grades are not inherently negative, the attention given by students and instructors distracts from the ultimate objective: learning. This approach is designed to foster a sense of agency and accountability while also freeing students from purely outcome-driven, corner-cutting, numbers-based grading systems so that they can focus instead on learning.

A Hybrid Contract Grading Model

The idea of contract grading, where students select their grade at the outset and uphold a set of agreed upon expectations or deliverables throughout the course, is nothing new. Scholars like Fran Hassenchahl (1979) and Elmer Dickson (1974), lamenting the educational pitfalls and administrative labor of traditional grading, wrote about its possibilities nearly a half-century ago. Similarly, and inevitably, hybrid models of contract grading would proliferate to reflect the wide range of needs and approaches present for instructors and learners. Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow, for example, offer a baseline of "B" for adherence to all objectives and an "A" to reward mastery and exceptional work.[5] Building upon this work, I present a model that similarly combines student choice with instructor discretion.

But before the details and design comes the delivery. How can we get skeptics on board?

Students, given their longstanding experiences with assessment, tend to balk at the idea that each of their papers will not be graded, or that they will be choosing their own grade. To meet this doubt head on, I begin the semester with a claim on the board for my class to discuss: *Students would learn more if we did away with grades*. I give them no other instruction but to disagree or agree with the statement and explain their rationale. Without fail, I am met with looks of incredulousness and bafflement at what initially seems to be a trick question. Questions abound: *But how would I know I am learning? How would I know if I am doing well*? To that I respond, *What do I learn about you or your abilities from a "B"? Does your GPA reflect your intelligence?* After critically engaging the shortcomings of traditional grading, we can begin to discuss the value of feedback, clear evaluations, and expectation-setting. Further, the stage is set to depart from a system that ultimately undermines their ability to acquire knowledge. We can now proceed.

On the very first day, as with most contract grading models, students are given an overview of their options and expectations. The contract is essentially "the *quantity* of satisfactory work a student promises to complete during the term,"[6] a clearly delineated number of essays with varied word counts for each level, along with low- and high-stakes assignments neatly packaged in tiers. The catch*: They can only select "B," "C," or "D"; no one can select an "A" at the outset*. They are informed that they can, however, *apply to be considered for promotion* in the middle of the course. In doing so, a student must submit a document similar to a cover letter that asks them to explain how and why their performance is exceptional and demonstrates mastery. This document is at once a reflection upon one's content acquisition (which is an essential part of metacognition[7]), and an exercise in self-advocacy. *What have I learned? How can I best show it?* Since I primarily teach writing, the document also reinforces the importance of recognizing audience and tone in a variety of contexts.

A**	B	C	D
Paper #1 Argumentative Essay Min. 5 pages	**Paper #1 Argumentative Essay** Min. 4 pages	**Paper #1 Argumentative Essay** Min. 3 pages	**Paper #1 Argumentative Essay** Min. 2 (full) pages

Paper #2 Reflection Essay Min. 1000 words	**Paper #2 Reflection Essay** Min. 800 words	**Paper #2 Reflection Essay** Min. 700 words	**Paper #2 Reflection Essay** Min. 600 words
Paper #3 Research Paper Min. 5 pages **Six sources**	**Paper #3 Research Paper** Min. 4 pages **four sources**	**Paper #3 Research Paper** Min. 3 pages **three sources**	**Paper #3 Research Paper** Min. 3 pages **three** sources
Revision of Research Paper – 1500 words	**Revision of Research Paper** – 1200 words	**Revision of Research Paper** – 1000 words	**Revision of Research Paper** – 1000 words
Paper #4 Email Assignment	**Paper #4** Email Assignment	**Paper #4** Email Assignment	**Paper #4** Email Assignment
TWO 1-on-1 confer-ences	**TWO** 1-on-1 confer-ences	ONE 1-on-1 conference	Conferences Not Required
Paper #5 Research Paper Proposal	**Paper #5** Research Paper Proposal	(Proposal Not Required)	(Proposal Not Required)
Two absences max	Three absences max	Four absences max	Five absences max
Paper #6 Petition for "A" – paper (150-250)	No Petition Required	No Petition Required	No Petition Required

** **Breaches of Contract:**
*1. Lateness/Absences***:** Going beyond the absences in your contract.
2. Unfulfilled Deliverables ***(late or unsubmitted work; unfulfilled requirements)***
3. Plagiarism

A central takeaway from this hybrid structure is a harsh but essential reality to confront: effort is not everything. Proficiency and aptitude do hold a necessary weight in our world. An "A," I tell students, is a designation of both exceptional output and aptitude, achieving or approaching mastery in specified abilities. This means, in a practical sense, recognizing a student with exceptional organizational skills, superior research identification and integration abilities, and other writing-specific competencies. I often share with my students that I have spent thousands of hours on the basketball court in my lifetime, but the closest I ever came to professional sports was

sitting comfortably in an arena, quite far from the court. Practice does *not* make perfect; however, it does build proficiency. Although perfection is an illusory goal, improvement is an expectation. This is the shared work of the writer and the instructor, with feedback being the primary means through which it is possible.

Regardless of one's choice in contract, the approach to feedback is the same. (In fact, when I am reviewing a submission, I am unaware of a person's contract choice until after I gather my comments.) Each student receives a bulleted summary of strengths and areas of focus or improvement for revision, essentially developing a narrative by semester's end. These become points of discussion and further elaboration during one-on-one conferences. Subsequent revisions may be accepted with understanding that the initial draft will always receive the most feedback. In more ambitious semesters, the narrative evaluations have become the foundation for end-of-semester reflection assignments where students self-assess and remark upon their progress in areas identified at the outset of the semester. Whether one is being considered for promotion to an "A" or has requested a "C," the feedback aims to give students language about their own abilities.

Combining this approach with mid- and end-of semester conferencing, this hybrid approach also encourages the following features:

- *Accountability*: Contract grading, Christina Katopodis and Cathy N. Davidson note, reinforces "one of those major life skills: taking responsibility for your own project management and work flow."[8] To add, at least half of employers think that the most important attributes of students are "Drive/Work ethic," "self-confidence" and "ability to take initiative."[9] In the classroom and out, this approach encourages learners to deliver on an intentional promise. Through conferencing with an emphasis on humanizing, which Sindija Franzetti writes about in this forum, accountability becomes a theme where students are essentially sharing their own progress with their own path, rather than purely reporting back on directives by an instructor.

- *Self-advocacy and negotiation*: Integrating features that offer learners the chance to exercise more control over their experience is a cornerstone of this hybrid approach. During conferencing, students are encouraged to think critically about their own performance, including discussing their possibilities for promotion and explaining extenuating circumstances.

Considerations and Caveats

One might claim that this approach and its emphasis on post-professional success represent a capitulation to neoliberalism, a surrendering to the mission then-Governor Ronald Reagan started more than five decades ago to make higher education a jobs training ground and nothing more. It might be said that contract grading reinforces "credentials, obedience and the sorting of have and have-nots" by requiring students to choose their place on a tiered system as a centerpiece of its design.[10] Indeed, contract grading by design incorporates levels, but this approach does so in a way meant to promote learning and an especially pressing need to prepare students for the world that awaits them.

Attention to these dynamics by the liberal arts and humanities is particularly pressing in this current moment, especially as it relates to an equitable society. At the onset of the decade, Black and Hispanic families saw a significant dip from the middle class (about a fifth), while only half as many from lower income levels saw an increase in earnings.[11] Hernandez and colleagues find that Black men and women on the whole are expected to negotiate less when searching for employment.[12] Not responding to these realities is both disingenuous and even irresponsible; to wit, nearly half of my students, whether they are financially independent or are still living with their families, have an annual family income of less than $25,000.[13] Thus, focusing on the practicality of how student learning in all classes will translate in a climate often hostile to those systematically marginalized within it embodies the true humanistic spirit of our work.

What I am responding to is an opportunity to inculcate skills that translate beyond the classroom, skills responding to everyday needs inside and outside of the academy, skills that empower students to be advocates for their own success. By design, this approach promotes critical inquiry and self-reflection while also integrating a pragmatism that can help students in need. In a time of transition for the liberal arts, our challenging of traditional grading structures presents a unique opportunity to find harmony where there is often discord: We can meet the institutional challenge of career preparation while also maximizing learning in the process. Indeed, our present demands it.

---

[1] Bernard Prusak, "Introduction to *Zeal* 1/1," *Zeal* 1/1 (2022): 1.

[2] Rachel Fishman, Sophie Nguyen and Louisa Woodhouse, *Varying Degrees: New America's Sixth Survey on Higher Education*, July 25, 2022, 13.

[3] Dan Berrett, "The Day the Purpose of College Changed," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 26, 2015.

[4] See Thomas Adam, "From Public Good to Personal Pursuit: Historical Roots of the Student Debt Crisis," *The Conversation*, June 29, 2017, https://theconversation

.com/from-public-good-to-personal-pursuit-historical-roots-of-the-student-debt-crisis-79475.

[5] Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow. "A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching," *College Composition and Communication* 61/22 (2009): 244–268.

[6] Christina Katopodis and Cathy Davidson, "Contract Grading and Peer Review," in *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead),* ed. Susan D. Blum (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2020), 112.

[7] Ruth Helyer, "Learning through Reflection: The Critical Role of Reflection in Work-Based Learning (WBL)," *Journal of Work-Applied Management* 7/1 (2015): 15–27. See also Giada Di Stefano, Francesca Gino, Gary Pisano, and Bradley Staats, "Learning by Thinking: How Reflection Improves Performance," *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge* 11 (2014), 10.5465/ambpp.2015.12709abstract; and Bo Chang, "Reflection in Learning," *Online Learning* 23/1 (2019): 95–110.

[8] Katopodis and Davidson, "Contract Grading and Peer Review," 111.

[9] Ashley Finley, *How College Contributes to Workforce Student Success* (Washington, DC: Hanover Research, 2021), 8.

[10] Susan Blum, "Ungrading," *Susan Blum* (blog), November 14, 2017. http://www.susanblum.com/blog/ungrading.

[11] Rakesh Kochner and Stella Sechopolous, "Black and Hispanic Americans, Those with Less Education More Likely to Fall Out of the Middle Class Each Year," *Pew Research Center*, May 12, 2022.

[12] Morela Hernandez, Derek R. Avery, Sabrina D. Volpone, and Cheryl R. Kaiser, "Bargaining while Black: The Role of Race in Salary Negotiations," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 104/4 (2019): 581.

[13] LaGuardia Community College, *Institutional Profile*, 2022, 6.