

Framing & Reflection

Equitable Assessment

“Un Grading” Agreement

Grading anxiety & equity-aimed language.

Winter 2021 is the guinea pig for my “Un Grading” Agreement, which is sort of a tweaked grading contract. You’ll notice I don’t use “labor” or “contract” in the artifact; while I definitely enjoy and am eager to try out the philosophy employed by grading contracts, I’m still hesitant to use the former language. The goal of a grading contract itself is (supposed) to mitigate assessment inequities and grade competition, emphasizing the process (learning) rather than the product (an arbitrary letter evaluation). It points towards realigning power structures to free students from “coercive” grading standards--but as I was drafting my own agreement, language like “labor” and “contract” still carried connotations of power discrepancy and failure/success. Maybe it’s that the words are too closely clustered for me with ideas of capitalism and production, and penalty and standards.

So in my “Un Grading” Agreement, I’m trying to navigate that, starting at the very language that establishes classroom relations--I’m not a teacher, but a leader; I’m a mentor; their “greatest resource” in the context of the class; they are not classmates, but peers. Work is not “labor” but “effort.” The contract is not a contract, but an agreement. I’m still brainstorming against models from other instructors; I’m unsure how I feel 100% about reducing the number of core assignments as an adequate amount of effort for a certain grade. These are the places I’m going to have to be vigilant and careful re: risk of inequity. After all, isn’t “effort” different for each student and their incomes?

Antiracism.

“Cracking the code” also means challenging inherently inequitable assessment. In the Winter 2021 “Un Grading” Agreement draft, I stress in multiple places that standard academic language is not the A+ language; that a grade in ENGL 131 does not reflect the “ability” to use SAE, but WHEN one uses it and WHY. The pre-university education system at large indoctrinates students into White English prescriptive grammar and language for over a decade, punishing any deviation from the “standard” and degrading the richness and legitimacy of language itself, specifically non-white. Let’s recall some of our favorite traumas from grade school English class: “Ain’t ain’t a word.” / Can I use the restroom? “I don’t know, CAN you?” After all, what languages most prominently deviate from

“standard?” Exactly. Centuries of linguistic colonization and language supremacy manifest in prescriptive SAE assessment as a steep divide in advantage and disadvantage, namely in the areas of race and socioeconomic class.

Yet I’m finding that the more I press for decentering SAE/DAD, the more students WANT to master it. Removing the penalty from lack of proficiency promotes initiative, self-regulation and self-trust, and investment in one’s work. They communicate to me what it is they want me to emphasize in my notes. And I think that’s one of the best things to come of this strategy.

Knowledge acquisition is, at the core, an individual act. I can’t create knowledge for another person, but I can definitely guide them through the steps. I believe that individuals work best when they don’t feel claustrophobic: when curiosity and experimentation are given room to breathe and the fear of inadequacy is not built into every assignment. This is the biggest motivation behind a translanguaging and “un grading” approach to assessment.