

Using Completion Rubrics to Grade Engagement in Online Spaces

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Abstract: This study examines how completion rubrics impact student learning and agency in online asynchronous courses. The study was conducted during the Fall 2021 term in three seven-and-a-half week courses: two sections of ENGL 101 and one section of ENGL 300. The analysis focuses on student survey responses. We found that student responses focused on defining labor, coming to terms with invisible labor, how they experienced this new assessment system, their perceptions about the connection between assessment and learning, and four distinct time-related themes. First, time emerged as a theme while students defined labor. Second, it appeared repeatedly as students discussed invisible labor and grading not accounting for time a task might take. Third, students distinguished between how previous experience and skills impact an individual's time on task. Finally, students associated saving time with gaining agency and being able to prioritize other areas outside of the class. Completion rubrics empowered students to make well-informed choices about where they spend their time, allowing them to prioritize their learning needs. However, designing equitable assessment systems requires considering classroom context as each context presents unique challenges and opportunities. This study offers valuable insights for designing more inclusive online course curricula and assessments that acknowledge and account for students' time.

Keywords: completion rubrics, invisible labor, student agency, online assessment

Just as many of our colleagues in writing studies, over the past seven years, we've been trying to be more inclusive—specifically more anti-racist and socially just—in our assessment practices. Like Stuckey et al. (2020), as online instructors, we've slowly adopted and adapted strategies for more socially just assessment. As with Danforth and Naraian (2015), we do not conceive “inclusive education as an outcome that must be achieved, we have conceptualized it as a process that is always ongoing, continual, and by extension, unfinished” (p. 72). This pedagogy and research is a snapshot of where we currently stand in our journey of baby steps towards continuous improvement in socially just assessment practices in online classes.

In Fall 2018, Asao Inoue came to our writing program's big meeting at the start of the semester and did a presentation on adopting labor-based contracts. Many of our in-person instructors, including Rochelle, adopted labor-based contracts with success. However, for our online courses, which are primarily seven-and-a-half week asynchronous courses, the labor-based grading contracts as presented by Inoue (2019) were problematic for our instructors and student population for a variety of reasons. While Inoue's method of labor-based grading contracts isn't the only inclusive assessment strategy, it was the impetus for our next step in creating a more inclusive classroom because of the campus visit. The labor-based grading method has proven to be effective in certain teaching contexts (Cowan, 2020; Mallette & Hawks, 2020); however, in an article about the history of grading contract scholarship in composition, Cowan (2020) claimed that “disagreements and changing approaches” to grading contracts over time “suggest that finding a system of assessment that will work for every student and every class is illusory” (p. 7). Thus, it is vital that we consider the context of our teaching and adjust our strategies accordingly to the environment, student population, and our goals (Supiano, 2022).

Online asynchronous classes are definitely a different context from traditional in-person classes. According to internal statistics from our institutional online program, in Fall 2018, 67% of our online students worked full time and 42% had at least one child at home. As Cowan (2020) pointed out, higher education is facing a future “in which self-directed, online classes dominate the teaching landscape,” so grading contracts have the potential “to increase student ownership of work and set individualized goals” that should merge well with their busy lives (p. 8). However, *labor-based* grading contracts have been problematic for our online students; the majority of students simply do not have a lot of available time. Asking them to do the additional work of tracking their time and their labor on top of the inability to reasonably and ethically negotiate contracts in such a fast-paced, asynchronous environment meant that we needed to find a different solution to achieve the underlying goal of racial justice in a way that was ethical for this particular student population.

All of this is not to say that contract grading *cannot* be successfully used in online courses; in fact, some recent scholarship shows that online contract grading can be fruitful (Mallette & Hawks, 2020). However, in their article on contract grading in an online technical communication course, Mallette and Hawks (2020) asserted that “students *need time* to process how contract grading differs from the assessments they are most familiar with” for it to be successfully implemented (p. 4). In our particular writing program, most of our online courses are 7.5 weeks, which makes providing the adjustment time for contract grading not exactly feasible. In short, time matters, and our assessment practices need to be flexible to account for it.

Inoue (2019) has begun to articulate the difficulty of equitably measuring labor, saying that “measuring labor by time encapsulated in a commodity is difficult because it is always relative to

the laborer's skill or other material conditions that may constrain or aid the laborer in their tasks" (p. 110). Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) and Carillo (2021) discuss those constraining material conditions, complicating the concept of equitable labor with more nuanced discussions of the diverse positionalities of our students. Both publications critique the assumptions being made by the contracts. Carillo (2021) asserts that "labor-based contract grading inaccurately assumes that labor is a neutral measure . . . these contracts enforce a White, middle-class . . . normative, ableist, and neurotypical conception of labor" (p. 11). Labor-based contracts also put a heavy emphasis on traditional forms of participation, such as near-perfect attendance. These participatory standards of grading contracts "create inequitable disadvantages predicated on physical and mental ability" (Gomes et al., 2020, p. 2), ultimately rewarding able-bodied, neurotypical students who are able to maintain their physical and mental health throughout a term and to also contribute in class in normative ways (Carillo, 2021; Gomes et al., 2020; Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020). In "Stories About Grading Contracts, or How Do I Like Through the Violence I've Done," Inoue (2020) reflected on how labor-based contracts impacted a past student who was "raising a son on his own, going to college, playing basketball," all while "being Black in America" (p. 4). He remembers feeling compassion for him, but under a labor-based system in which he was asking this student to put in a good deal of time on his labor, Inoue (2020) wondered, "was I just telling him to work more, work harder, do more, with no clear evidence that *he had more time* to do more labor?" (p. 4, emphasis added). In short, labor-based grading contracts have done good work toward making writing assessment more socially just, but there is more work to be done to ensure that all student populations benefit from our assessment practices.

Much of what Inoue (2020), Kryger and Zimmerman (2020), and Carillo (2021) argued we had felt in our guts for quite some time, and we weren't able to clearly articulate why labor-based grading contracts were not ringing *inclusive* for us and our online student populations.

For us, what connects the groups Carillo (2021) listed together (neurodivergent and marginalized students) with our online student population is the differences associated with *time*. Many inequities for online students have always been about understanding how we, and our students, conceptualize and experience time. Western culture, and most of the world, predominately conceptualizes and experiences *time* as a linear phenomenon, specifically tracking clock time. *Clock time* is the time standard that everyone uses to talk about things like time management. And, as Adam (2004) claimed, linear clock time is an imposed structure. Wittmann (2017) asserted that how we perceive time is greatly influenced by emotions and *experiential time* emphasizes our understanding of how we are perceiving or feeling time happening. Disability studies scholars like Price (2011) defined and described a more flexible *crip time*, recognizing that individual people arrive at various activities and can do various things at various rates. Finally, we have *cultural time*; the time that you learn to feel based on how the culture around you operates. Levine (2008) wrote that cultural time is shaped by localized rules, ones that can often conflict with the rules of new places and people:

The world over, children simply pick up their societies' conceptions of early and late; of waiting and rushing; of the past, the present, and the future. There is no dictionary to define these rules of time for them, or for strangers who stumble over the maddening incongruities between the time sense they bring with them and the one they face in a new land. (p. xvi)

In other words, the Western cultural emphasis on *clock time* is a cultural construct, and not all cultures value or construct time in the same way. Distinctions between how we understand and experience time help clarify what Inoue (2020) suggests about the differences students might experience in doing certain tasks. These distinctions also provide an explanation for why labor is not neutral, as Carillo (2021) asserted.

Beyond these broader cultural constructions of time, the institution of higher education's emphasis on personal time management disadvantages nontraditional and online students. Time management, which is often portrayed as a self-regulation skill, is considered a major contributor to success in college coursework (Song et al., 2004; van der Meer et al., 2010; Wandler & Imbriale, 2017). While there are many self-regulation models, self-regulation in higher education institutions is perceived as the ability to manage your own thinking and actions for a specific purpose (Wandler & Imbriale, 2017; Zimmerman, 2011). Studies have found that a lack of ability to self-regulate and use specific self-regulating strategies, like time management, may be a contributing factor to online student drop out (Song et al., 2004; Wandler & Imbriale, 2017). However, defining time management as an ability to self-regulate puts the onus of responsibility on the students' shoulders and ignores the ways that classroom demands on time might be unreasonable, especially for nontraditional adult students. Suggesting that students do not have enough control or discipline to manage their time, without acknowledging their responsibilities outside of their education, is both demeaning and dishonest. Many of our online students might be great at time management; they just simply don't have enough of it. Online students have competing responsibilities and challenging distractions (Stuckey et al., 2020). For example, a full-time student with no job or familial responsibilities might complete an assignment at 9am, clear and refreshed. An online military student, on the other hand, might be working on the same assignment at 11pm, after a full day of work and emotional stress over an upcoming deployment or even while deployed. These students have to make daily decisions about what to prioritize; and when it comes to school or caring for a sick child, it likely will not be school (Hachey et al., 2013). By emphasizing self-regulation strategies, educators and educational institutions are blaming the individual student for a culturally contextualized problem.

To conclude where we conceptually stood for this project, we knew that we wanted to adopt Inoue's suggestions for not focusing on quality, which can be a biased interpretation of what constitutes "good writing." We also knew that we really needed to do that in a way that was not going to harm our online asynchronous, primarily adult, student population. Taking away traditional quality-based grading does not automatically fix an entire classroom ecology or protect our students from neurotypical and colonizing practices (Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020; Mallette & Hawks, 2020; Supiano, 2022). Socially just assessment practices cannot stop short at well-meaning labor-based contracts; many more pedagogical factors need to be considered to meet our goal of promoting equitable assessment practices.

Our Assessment Practices

While labor-based contract grading has been a good starting place in some of our in-person courses, we never explicitly tried a labor-based grading contract as outlined by Inoue (2019) in an online course. Based on our experiences with in-person implementation of labor-based contracts, plus our more than 30 years combined experience of teaching and researching online writing courses, we knew it would not work well primarily because of the time constraints of our students.

We had, however, already started working on trying to develop assessment criteria and feedback frameworks that would help us grade in a less biased and more equitable manner. For example, we were already giving students more time to complete work, and we tried to identify where we were assessing for quality and shift to a more neutral language. We also used feedback frameworks that would ensure we were giving similar amounts and types of feedback to each student on any given assignment. In other words, we worked to adapt what scholarship claimed work in in-person classes to a condensed online environment.

Stuckey et al. (2020) confirmed our concerns with online instructors needing to adapt contract grading models; they adapted models by Danielewicz and Elbow (2009), Shor (2009), and Inoue (2019). Specifically, they did not negotiate contracts with each class; they implemented contracts across the pilot courses unilaterally. Whereas Stuckey et al. (2020) did not really discuss student's experience of time, Tinoco et al. (2020) specifically discussed Hispanic, first-generation students struggling with submitting work on time. Specifically, Tinoco et al.'s (2020) Hispanic, first-gen students struggled with alternative priorities like work, caregiving, and technological access. To account for students' competing priorities, Tinoco et al. (2020) shifted their contract's emphasis from timeliness to work submission: "the grading system where work was not graded based on meeting the deadlines seems to be especially beneficial for students who struggled more with managing school work and their family expectations, and would otherwise quickly fall behind" (p. 4). Like Tinoco et al. (2020), we had already de-emphasized timeliness in our courses; however, we didn't do that via grading contracts; we just allowed students to take more time to submit assignments.

In our next attempt towards more socially just assessment, we explicitly wanted to combat cultural assessment bias. To do so, we emphasized assessing students by their labor by taking out any assessment criteria that judged their work based on some value of *quality*. For example,

Table 1

Converting Quality Based Criteria to Completion Markers

Criteria Based on Quality	Observable & Measurable Criteria
Introduction engages reader	Uses one of the introduction strategies outlined in the class/textbook
Reasoning supports claim/thesis	Provides at least two reasons to support claim
Uses appropriate sources	Uses three peer-reviewed sources
Essay is well-organized	Essay includes at least one-full paragraph for each of the following sections: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• introduction• reason #1• reason #2• conclusion
Includes an appropriate conclusion	Conclusion prompts explicit action for the reader to take
good control of syntax and mechanics	Separate Process Assignment

instead of asking students to include *appropriate sources* in their argument, we would switch to something like, *students must use at least three peer-reviewed sources*; see Table 1 for more examples.

At this point in our teaching and assessment practices, we have continued to deemphasize grading syntax and mechanics as part of the rubric for the final submission of a project. Instead, we build in one or two polishing activities that prompt students to work on specific surface features that are relevant to the genre in which they are writing. For example, if they are producing a resume, we would build in an activity that has them learning about and then closely reviewing their draft for parallelism. In that activity, we would prompt them to make revisions on a draft, show where and how they made revisions (e.g., versions in Google Docs or compare versions in MS Word), and have them reflect on their revisions. The activity would be graded for turning in the comparison and the reflections. In other words, the student would earn credit for their *grammar work* by completing the assignment. The associated rubric, which we started referring to as a *completion rubric*, was designed to assess students solely based on whether they had completed the required tasks.

Converting to completion rubrics was a slow process. First, we made the shift to adjust the rubrics just for the major projects by removing any assessment of quality. The next term, we converted the assignment descriptions and requirements for every assignment in the online course. As we revised, we kept prompting ourselves to make sure that any given task that was assessed was observable and measurable. Our resulting rubrics gave credit for these observable and measurable tasks. For example, we have a discussion board assignment that asks students to answer five of eight possible questions to help brainstorm possible topics. The prompt then asks them to freewrite about three separate interests that emerged from the answers. Finally, the students had to reply to at least two classmates asking at least two questions to help them further explore ideas. For this assignment, the observable and measurable completion checklist style rubric includes:

- Initial post includes: list of answers to one prompting question
- Initial post includes: list of answers to second prompting question
- Initial post includes: list of answers to third prompting question
- Initial post includes: list of answers to fourth prompting question
- Initial post includes: list of answers to fifth prompting question
- Initial post includes: freewrite for specific interest #1
- Initial post includes: freewrite for specific interest #2
- Initial post includes: freewrite for specific interest #3
- Reply #1 with 1 question
- Reply #1 with 2nd question
- Reply #2 with 1 question
- Reply #2 with 2nd question

In this first iteration of our rubrics, we had three possible assessment categories: present, partially present, and not present (see Figure 1). As you can see from this other example of an introduction assignment (Figure 1), each criterion was placed in the LMS rubric. Therefore, instead of having columns that described different levels of quality, the list of criteria simply asked for everything required and columns simply marked whether or not those things were completed (see Figure 1).

We are not the first to make similar shifts while continuing to adopt alternative grading systems and moving away from contract grading. In *Specifications Grading*, Nilson (2015) argues

Figure 1

Example of Two-Point Rubric

START HERE: Weekly Calendar

(not graded yet)

Criteria	Present 2 points	Partial 1 point	Not Present 0 points	
Calendar is uploaded and complete Add Feedback				/ 2
Calendar includes a reflection that discusses staying on task Add Feedback				/ 2
Calendar includes a reflection that discusses managing the due dates Add Feedback				/ 2
Calendar includes a reflection that discusses expected roadblocks and overcoming them Add Feedback				/ 2

for and develops a grading system that restores rigor, motivates students, and saves faculty time. Nilson (2015) claims “specs grading started under the name of contract grading, and most of the course examples in this book were taught under this name” (p. 74). While setting up the need for her alternative grading system, she outlines 15 criteria for evaluating grading systems. Nilson (2015) places the highest emphasis on upholding high academic standards and reflecting student learning outcomes (p. 9) while also including criteria about making expectations clear (p. 12) and having a high interrater agreement (p. 14). Nilson’s specifications grading guides instructors to assess all work on a simple pass/fail rubric that lists all the required specifications to pass the assignment. Although Nilson clearly privileges readers designing a *pure* specs course that bundles together units and all assignments have the single pass/fail option, she acknowledges some instructors might transition through or feel more comfortable adopting a *synthetic* version of specifications grading. One type of Nilson’s (2015) synthetic specs grading schemas is designing a rubric where assignments are graded pass/fail based on the “quality on each criterion in the rubric” (p. 122).

Specifications grading is really about things being present or not present. Nilson’s (2015) grading model helped encourage us to break down our tasks even further for students. The takeaway for us was that specifications grading both supported the type of rubric that we built and gave us permission to make the rubric more simplified. However, although it may appear we should call what we are doing specifications grading, we believe the subtle shift to using the phrase *completion rubrics* is important in theory and practice. First, we believe Nilson’s continued emphasis on *rigor* is counterthetical to the call for socially just grading in the field of writing studies. In contrast to Nilson’s persistent focus on rigor, the use of labor-based grading contracts is more commonly adopted in writing classrooms as a means to deemphasize quality-based assessment practices (Inoue, 2020). Quintana and Quintana (2020) highlight that although specifications grading can alleviate student stress by establishing clearer assessment criteria, it also intensifies the focus on excellence due to its rigorous academic standards. Students are required

to meet specific requirements and are not given the chance for partial credit, thus amplifying the emphasis on quality (Nilson, 2015).

Additionally, the established specifications are often related to student learning outcomes (SLOs), which means that the rubrics often use subjective language to meet the requirements (Bonner, 2016; McKnelly et al., 2021). Here are some specific examples from literature on specifications grading that utilized subjective, quality-based language in their rubrics:

- “good-faith effort” (Nilson, 2015, p. 58)
- “modest” and “more depth” (Nilson, 2015, p. 60)
- “provides nuanced description” (Quintana & Quintana, 2020, p. 530)
- “articulates clearly specific learning goals that allow learners to show evidence of their learning” (Quintana & Quintana, 2020, p. 530)
- “the author adequately responds to all parts of the assignment” (McKnelly et al., 2021, p. 1203)
- “the writer has constructed a consistent and coherent narrative” (McKnelly et al., 2021, p. 1203)
- “the policy report should not look like a regular class paper; instead, it should look ready to publish” (Jones, 2020, p. 536)
- “grammar and prose should be clear and concise” (Jones, 2020, p. 536)
- “give clear reasons for conclusions in the proof” (Carlisle, 2020, p. 948)
- “do not include irrelevant detail” (Carlisle, 2020, p. 949)
- “response makes appropriate comparisons” (Blackstone & Oldmixon, 2019, p. 194)
- “someone who is not in this class should be able to read and understand the content of each sentence” (Prasad, 2020, p. 914)

We think that the attempt to emphasize *rigor* leads instructors to wanting a criteria where they have the opportunity to assess based on *knowing it when they see it*. While acknowledging that some specifications might still be vague, Nilson (2015) emphasizes that instructors must provide example submissions to help clarify “acceptable and unacceptable” work (p. 59).

Instead of providing examples, which of course is still a good idea, we argue that while constructing completion rubrics, teachers need to emphasize that each criteria has to be observable and measurable. We agree with Nilson’s (2015) assessment criteria for high inter-rater reliability; in fact, we think it should be 100%. If all assessors do not align, the criteria are not observable or measurable enough. Writing studies already understands the difference between assessing and providing feedback. By constructing an emphatically clear completion rubric where an instructor can quickly identify whether something is included, or not, it leaves the instructor time to engage with quality, creativity, or *rigor* with the feedback. Therefore, although our completion rubrics are the same as Nilson’s (2015) specifications rubrics that grade pass/fail on each criteria, we resist the title and its connections to rigor. Calling them “completion rubrics” lets us continue emphasizing labor and completion, rather than quality. We are making a stronger stance than Nilson (2015) on emphasizing observable and measurable rubric criteria.

We continued to revise assignment rubrics so that they included observable and measurable criteria and used a more simplified scoring schema. For example, in an assignment preparing students to complete secondary research, they are first prompted to read materials about how to do secondary research. They completed our university library’s “How Do I Create a Search

Strategy” tutorial and then were asked to post in a discussion board six key words/phrases they might use as search terms and the names of two disciplinary specific databases that aligned with their research. Students were also prompted to briefly describe how and why they thought those two databases might yield resources on their topic. They were then prompted to reply to two classmates, suggesting at least two more or alternative search terms and one more database. As demonstrated in Figure 2, we further simplified the rubric scoring to only two levels for assessing each criteria: present or not present. This allowed us to shift the focus to completion and remove the numbers across specific criteria (see Figure 3).

Figure 2

Top Half of One-Point Rubric

Criteria	Present 1 point	Not Present 0 points	Criterion Score
Initial post includes 1 search terms/phrases			/ 1
Initial post includes 2nd search terms/phrases			/ 1
Initial post includes 3rd search terms/phrases			/ 1
Initial post includes 4th search terms/phrases			/ 1

Figure 3

Bottom Half of One-Point Rubric

First reply to peer includes 2nd alternate search term/phrase			/ 1
First reply to peer includes 1 database suggestion			/ 1
Reply to 2nd peer includes 1 alternate search term/phrase			/ 1
Reply to 2nd peer includes 2nd alternate search term/phrase			/ 1
Reply to 2nd peer includes 1 database suggestion			/ 1
Total			/ 16

We three co-authors, and some of our program colleagues who teach from the same courses, have found that these observable, measurable, but not qualitatively judgmental completion rubrics have made “grading” activities more efficient as well as prompted more detailed instructor feedback. They’ve given us time and space. The completion rubric already leaves the details about what labor was not completed; however, in looking for the various pieces, we are more likely to engage with the work as readers, leaving critical suggestions that are separate from the rubric. Depending on where and how the assignment is submitted, we sometimes leave qualitative or formative feedback on or within actual assignments, in the comments area of the rubric, or for many cases of homework assignments that scaffold producing major writing projects, we make announcements to the entire class that discuss trends we saw across submissions. In that instance, students who did not complete the assignment as prompted would have the rubric to quickly list what was missing and then the entire class received formative feedback to apply to their work moving forward.

Again, anecdotally within our program, using completion rubrics as part of the scaffolding process of student drafting has also led to what we feel are better, more complete projects (more students better understand what is required of them and include all core elements). All completion rubrics now explicitly list the required components that directly align with what the students have been learning and practicing, and has resulted in us better scaffolding our major projects to help students identify the tasks to complete to build those projects. For example, the first draft of a listicle assignment might require an introduction, a minimum number of list headers and content sections, and a conclusion. After working on finding images and exploring the citing of images, a second draft might add images and their citations to the draft rubric. The final project rubric would then include the list of required project items as articulated in the assignment prompt (and used by classmates as part of peer review). Assessing the final project by checking that it included required components shifts the focus from both completing and grading the project to the labor involved in completing the work to check off each box.

Research Methods

To move beyond anecdotal evidence (what Nilson (2015) relies upon in *Specifications Grading*), we wanted to assess the impact of completion rubrics in our classes. Our three overarching research questions included:

- How do students define labor?
- How do they view the labor they do in their online courses?
- In what ways do labor rubrics help students to separate their grades from their learning?

It is through the results of this study that had us shift from labeling the rubrics as *labor-based* and switching to *completion rubrics*.

We conducted this IRB-approved study (#2108108938) during the Fall 2021 term in one of each of our courses: two sections of ENGL 101, Foundations Writing, and one section of ENGL 300, a writing-intensive Literature and Film course. All three sections were 7.5 week online asynchronous courses. We began by sending out announcement emails with a pre-survey that asked students if they wanted to participate in the study and, if so, to read and agree to a linked consent form. We let them know in that process that although their instructors were all on the research team, their individual instructor was not going to be aware of their students’ participation

until after final grades were submitted. Additionally, if students completed all four surveys for the project, they would receive a \$50 Amazon gift card for their participation.

In the pre-survey (see Appendix A in supplemental materials), we asked students to define *labor* in their own terms and what it meant to them in regards to completing coursework. We also asked them to detail the types of labor that they typically put into writing a paper as well as having them answer questions about how being graded based on completion rather than on the quality of their work might impact their grades and their desire to learn. Throughout the remainder of the term, we followed up with three additional identical surveys that we sent out to them following important assignments that were spread out throughout their coursework (see Appendix B in supplemental materials).

In the post-activity surveys, we wanted to see how students' answers changed or stayed consistent by asking those same sort of questions throughout the duration of the course. The surveys asked questions about students' experiences completing the labor for that particular assignment and whether or not they found the rubrics to be equitable and fair for those individual assignments. Students were also asked to describe the labor that they completed, as well as indicate if there was any individual invisible labor that wasn't accounted for in the grades. We also asked students to offer suggestions or ideas on how any invisible labor could be accounted for in the rubric. Finally, we asked them how being graded on having done the work rather than the quality impacted how successful they felt.

We acknowledge that student perceptions of a course, its activities, and its instructor can be wildly different based on factors such as prior experience, context, and expectations. Student self-reporting how they perceive and experience a specific type of assessment practice is subject to students' previous experiences and potential biases. However, these perceptions are important as they are connected to traditional definitions of success and retention (Herbert 2006; Morris & Finnegan 2009; Pajares 2003). When students perceive failure despite putting in the work, which is often the experience of our underserved students, they're less likely to persist (Herbert 2006; Morris & Finnegan 2009; Pajares 2003). Student perceptions are also an important consideration in student agency. If students perceive something isn't worth the effort, then they're less likely to see the value and earn from the activities in class.

During this study, we definitely felt the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student engagement; across the three courses (two ENGL 101 sections capped at 25 and the ENGL 300 class starting with 130 students), we only had 26 participants, with only seven completing all four surveys. We analyzed all of the results we received, including participants who only completed the pre-survey. Since we had a manageable amount of data, the three of us collaboratively coded all of the answers. Our first round of coding focused on in vivo and process codes (Saldaña, 2021); our second round focused on values; however, in this article we are solely reporting out on our first round of coding. During the first round of coding, the three of us repeated three cycles of developing and defining codes, coding, meeting to discuss, refining codes, and then meeting again. During the fourth time we met, we finalized our codes by discussing and agreeing upon the final identification and labeling of all individual responses. Although we acknowledge the limited nature of this study, we believe the trends and themes of students' perceptions provide interesting perspectives that suggest completion rubrics as a socially just assessment system are promising.

Data and Discussion

In completing our analysis, we found that student responses focused on defining labor, coming to terms with invisible labor, how they experienced this new assessment system, their perceptions about the connection between assessment and learning, and the meta-theme of time. Below, we provide our analysis of each of these themes along with samples of student responses.

Defining Labor

In a pre-survey that we asked students to complete regarding the completion rubrics, our first question asked them to define *labor* in their own words, especially when considering what *labor* meant for completing coursework. When initially discussing their understanding of labor, students primarily talked about *time* in their definitions; they also frequently referenced *work* and *energy*. Some students also started to distinguish between physical, mental and even emotional labor. For example, when discussing time, one student claimed, “labor is physical and mental work done to complete a task. The more time and effort you put into a task, the more labor you have done. Thus, labor can be thought of as time plus effort.” And another student wrote that “labor, in relation to completing work for classes, refers to the physical, mental and emotional time devoted to completing that work.” Once students started connecting *time* to other concepts like *work*, *energy*, *emotional*, and *mental*, their understanding of time moved beyond just clock or linear time into more complex cultural laden experience of time (Levine, 2008; Wittmann, 2017).

Other students also brought in the concepts of *work* and *energy*. One student said, “to me, labor implies a level of active work that takes will and energy to complete.” That same student, even in the first survey where we were asking for definitions, had already started to acknowledge that labor is not always equal: “though not all labor is equal, some people can get accomplish with better results using the same amount of labor than a less experienced person.”¹ We noticed as students continued to participate in the study, more started to distinguish the difference between how someone labors when they may have had different previous experience levels with the course content. They began to express similar viewpoints as Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) by exploring the idea that labor varies depending on a student’s pre-existing advantages. Like Inoue’s (2020) own shifting understandings of labor, students being attentive to their own experience of labor prompts more critical and nuanced thinking about it.

The most common element of the students’ definitions was connecting the concept of *labor* to the concept of *time*. Students’ connection and then complication of the relationship between *labor* and *time* aligns with the complexity discussed in Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) as well as Carillo (2021). Students did not just discuss the concept of *time* in the initial survey while defining labor. *Time* was a concept and concern, a meta-theme, that students referenced throughout their reflections upon using the completion rubrics. Not surprisingly, some students demonstrated a shift in their understanding of time, labor, and learning over the course of the study.

Invisible Labor

We were very excited about the content we received from students in terms of how they see, feel, and understand invisible labor. While Battery et al. (2022) discuss both cognitive and psychological labor as types of invisible work managed by minority math students, our student participants primarily emphasized cognitive labor. Three major categories of types of invisible

1 In this article, we directly quote students. We have not corrected grammatical errors.

labor emerge from students: reading and viewing, thinking, and time. First was reading, and with the English 300 Literature and Film class, there was reading and viewing assigned. Not surprisingly, the often repeated meta-theme of *time* both explicitly and implicitly emerged when students identified reading and viewing as invisible labor:

- “I spent a long time reading the text which was not accounted for in the grade”
- “Reading and comparing the two pieces of work.”
- “The labor involved with watching the movie was not accounted for in the rubric”
- “Time spent watching and finding the movie.”
- “Reading the peer reviews.”
- “Watching movies, creating my own notes”
- “It was a lot of rereading and analyzing to get down to the final product of my reverse outline.”

This last example, which includes both *rereading* and *analyzing*, transitions nicely to the second theme of invisible labor: mental labor or thinking. What we especially enjoyed about the comments from students about their thinking is the many terms they used describe various levels of critical thinking and learning, especially as described and exemplified by Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy:

- “The mental time and effort spent thinking critically about the how each paragraph of my essay contributes to my narrative and then reflecting on my essay as a whole at the end.”
- “Comprehension”
- “Brainstorming was accomplished which isn’t typically accounted for.”
- “Creating outlines for the paper”

Hopefully not surprising at this point, the third major category of invisible labor was explicit mentions of time. Some students understood how time would be different for different students; one said, “invisible labor is different for everyone. Freewriting can be an easy task for some but for others it requires research and more time.” One student said time is invisible and “subjective. Each person will be different. I could take 20 minutes to read 5 pages and the other person takes an hour. Different amounts of labor but the same outcome.” We also appreciated the two participants who discussed the invisible labor and time associated with technological issues. This acknowledgement of differing perspectives and incoming experiences is exactly why it’s important to consider how students are experiencing assessment and feedback.

Three students identified time as invisible, but describe how and why they don’t think it is appropriate to incorporate into the completion rubrics:

- “I think it is just part of the work, sometimes it take more effort for others.”
- “It shouldn’t, its something that is needed for the assignment but it is subjective.”
- “I don’t think there is a practical way for it to be accounted because if I student reports the invisible labor they did then they could easily lie. And it is not practical to watch students to measure their time spent on an assignment.”

Beyond just tracking time on task, asking students to track and document the time they spend working, as in Inoue’s (2019) implementation of labor-based grading contracts, has the potential to help students become self-aware of how they both spend and experience time. However, these quotes show that students are already aware that spending and experiencing time can fluctuate

based on a number of variables. And, as the last student comment reminds us, “they could easily lie”; our students confirmed our educated belief that it is not practical to ask online students to do the time tracking suggested by Inoue (2019).

Experiencing Completion Rubrics

There were two recurring themes about how students experienced the completion rubrics. In the first theme, students discussed how they felt *successful*, *good*, and *confident* after completing work and receiving assessment and feedback through the completion rubric. They also began to reconceptualize learning, seeing it as a separate entity that is not reliant on quality-based grading. In one reflection a student claimed:

by being graded on having done the work, I feel successful because just by doing the work, you have to do a lot of reading or research to complete the work and so even by doing the bare minimum, I am still doing the work, therefore I am learning.

Similarly, another discussed how the completion rubrics made them “feel successful because in the end, I would have completed a lot of tasks and in order to complete the task, there are a lot of requirements so by just doing the work, I am learning a lot.” These students were connecting to the idea that learning is not intrinsically tied to a grade or even the “quality” of the work they submit. With completion grading, feeling successful does not require a stamp of approval from the instructor; instead, these students took pride in what they learned through the work process.

Besides feeling good and confident when completing work with the completion rubrics, the students claimed that the completion rubrics helped to *decrease stress* and *pressure* for them. For example, one student connected less stress with more feelings of success: “I think I’m less stressed about the assignments which helps me feel successful.” Another student explicitly stated that the completion rubrics took “the pressure off being perfect.” Finally, a third student shared:

Though, by being graded on having the work done, I feel more at ease and am able to focus on other classes that may need more time than others. But that is not to say I don’t care about this class, cause I do.

Students’ perceptions of their experiences with the completion rubric impacted their perception of the class and their learning.

Knowing that emotions impact learning (Cavanagh, 2016; Pekrun et al., 2002), it was encouraging to see that students felt less stress and pressure when being graded on completion. Many students felt that quality-based grading is subjective, especially when assessing writing: “I think grading on trying one’s best despite quality can help people’s motivation to always try. Quality can be subjective and discouraging in writing.” The way students feel about quality-based grading is not a new phenomenon. Quoting Talbert and Clark (n.d.), Supiano (2022) claimed that grades “have gotten in the way of learning,” with students often just “playing school” to get a good grade, rather than being concerned with their own learning and growth, as a student and as a human being. In our minds, if completion-based grading can get students away from playing school and toward being an independent learner, it is something worth exploring more in our classrooms.

Whether they explicitly referenced *time* or discussed “doing the work,” students continued to reference the meta-theme of time while reflecting on their experience of the completion rubrics. While discussing their success or lack of anxiety in using the completion rubrics, students continued seeing the connection between previous experiences and their ability to complete the work. One student said, “I always do the work. So for once, it feels good to have put in my effort and

not be graded on the skills I brought to the class beforehand.” This perception of not being graded on writing skills they already have brings up an interesting point about student agency: students, especially our non-traditional students that wind up in many of our online classes, often come to us with specific learning goals and varying experiences in educational systems. This student is particularly highlighting the importance of kairotic teaching.

Perceiving Learning

Trying to analyze students’ perceptions of their own learning got muddy very fast because it’s complex and nuanced. And not all of the participants’ perspectives remained the same across the course and the study. Some demonstrated some shifting of experiencing and appreciating the completion rubrics as guides for learning. We felt three categories of student perception started to emerge:

1. making the connection that doing the work is learning;
2. appreciating the ability to track the completion of the work so that they can go learn in other spaces (both this class and others); and
3. feeling that the completion rubric was just a checklist.

Laboring Is Learning

We were excited to see the comments where student participants made strong connections between the completion rubric and their perception of learning. To us, these perceptions were significant because it indicates that students felt they were learning. Even if it wasn’t something intended, they came to our classrooms and they walked away with what they perceived as better understanding. That’s why we’re here. Two quotes explicitly demonstrate students’ understanding of learning through doing the work:

- “The rubric made it clear what I needed to do, which made it easier to grasp what the lesson intended.”
- “The rubric tells me what I’m supposed to do, not what I’m supposed to learn. By doing the assignment as it tells me to do, I usually end up gaining knowledge I wasn’t looking for it ends up being beneficial in the end.”

Another student described how reflecting back on the course allowed them to understand what they learned: “When I look at the amount of work completed I am able to backtrack on the information that I have acquired over the course of completing the assignments.”

Wisely, one of our peer reviewers asked, “what are they learning?” First, as we have mentioned above, distinguishing assessment from feedback leaves feedback comments as a place for learning. We also argue students help demonstrate what they are learning within reflective prompts and assignments, especially when the prompts ask for specific reflections like:

- Discuss an example in your project where you made a specific writing choice to meet the needs of your rhetoric situation;
- Describe 2-3 editing choices you made to better meet the needs of your purpose and audience; and
- Describe where and how examples of your process and final product help demonstrate where you worked on specific course learning objectives.

Notice that these are specific observable and measurable prompts that can be easily assessed by a completion rubric. In other words, assigning reflections is important for both the doing and learning of writing classes.

Students emphasized the inverse impact of stress on learning; in this quote, the student who discussed stress expands upon their experience:

I think I'm less stressed about the assignments which helps me feel successful. Since I know I'll get 100% as long as I address everything on the rubric, rather than trying to review my writing repeatedly to try and eke out more points my whole mindset can be focused on 'do I feel like this satisfies the intentions of the paper and communicates what I want?

As instructors who have worked very hard to design activities that (hopefully!) foster learning through completing the work and promote socially just assessment, reading these quotes was highly satisfying. For example, this student participant has the "ah ha" of what they needed to learn:

When you're looking at the Rubric you're seeing all of the work that you have to do and realizing at the same time what you're doing over time. For instance when it came to making sure that I had the right references I'm also gaining researching skills in the process. The knowledge may not come up front and center but when you think about it you realize that the rubric does indeed help.

This last quote also demonstrates, again, students' emphasis on time as labor; however, in this case, the student also starts to see the connection between time and effort and learning.

We see students starting to understand that doing work might equate to learning, and that learning can be an independent phenomenon; while instructor feedback on writing is important, students saw that learning also happens through the process of doing. In other words, students became aware of their learning through active engagement, of which numerous scholars have argued better facilitates learning (Blumberg, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2008; Weimer, 2002). Nilson (2015) shares that a number of different instructors using specifications grading experienced students that were more motivated to learn, even completing additional work. Some faculty also shared that students perceived that they learned more (Nilson, 2015, p. 105).

Tracking Work Matters

Other students showed their appreciation of how the completion rubrics helped track their work. They could then see the correlation between the tracking and their progress in the class. We saw comments like, "I knew if, if and where I lost points, how I can make them up." Students talk about the completion rubrics helping make clear expectations of the work to be done:

- "The rubric clearly outlined what was needed from the student. As a result, I knew what I needed to do and what goals I needed to meet."
- "I think the rubric clearly lays out her expectations and shows you what you did well and what was missed."

Finally, there was one student who saw the clear connection between the rubric as an assessment tool and instructor feedback as a mechanism to address learning; they wrote, "I can use the rubric to identify my completion of the assignments and focus on my instructor's comments as a means to improve, not a means to survive the class." This distinction is an important one as it helps to pull apart grading and feedback as two different teaching endeavors; we argue that this distinction

gives students more agency in deciding what, if any, feedback to use without fear of grades being impacted. When students perceive the classroom as a place devoid of fear, they can really focus on gaining the learning that they came for (Cavanagh, 2016).

In short, although these students did not necessarily see a connection between tracking the completion of their work and learning, they did see a benefit to tracking their work with the completion rubrics.

Checking the List Is Not Enough

While several students saw the benefits of completion rubrics as the courses progressed, others still felt that completion rubrics were just a checklist, and they were unable to connect the rubrics to their learning. As one student wrote, “the rubric was a guide that helped me determine if I completed everything that was asked of me. In terms of my learning, I don’t think it really helps. I just use it as a checklist.” Another student stated, “the rubric was more about completion than specific learning outcomes.” One student explicitly stated they believed that rubrics should be helping to measure progress or performance level, but the completion rubrics did not live up to this expectation: “The purpose of rubrics are to determine the performance level of something. I just do not see how it would help my learning, other than using it as a guide to make sure I get all the points I can by making sure I include what the rubric expects from me.”

We definitely had students who were not happy with the completion rubrics, and we wanted to make sure we shared their perspectives. For example, two students who did not find them useful only completed the early surveys and did not continue as participants in the study. One student who only completed the first survey did not like the idea of being graded on completion and said “I’d be less inclined to push myself. I’d see what the bare minimum others were doing was, and do that. I’d judge the grading system itself, frankly.” Another student who finished the first post-activity survey claimed, “the rubric doesn’t take into account the quality of the writing or answers, as such it is unfair in the way that is too easy to get 100% and doesn’t reward effort.” According to their viewpoint, grading based on completion is *unfair* and inadequate in assessing the effort put into the work. They argue that a focus on completion disregards the quality of the writing, which they believe is a more accurate reflection of one’s dedication and engagement. Many successful students have experienced prior advantages that allowed them to achieve success based on quality-oriented grading systems, reinforcing the belief that traditional grading determines educational worth (Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020) and, in some cases, can be deeply affectively attached to more traditional grading ecologies as well (Johnson, 2024). Implementing new grading practices does not erase years of educational indoctrination or fully protect students from neurotypical and colonizing practices that have likely been the cornerstone of their education for several years prior (Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020; Mallette & Hawks, 2020; Supiano, 2022). The transition to more equitable grading methods requires ongoing efforts to challenge deeply ingrained beliefs about academic achievement and redefine what constitutes fairness in assessment.

Changing Perceptions of the Rubrics

Since we did collect data over time, we did see some shifts in student perceptions. We had one student who clearly made a shift from more negative to positive perception of impact of the completion rubrics across the study.

- Post-activity survey #1:
 - “For learning, I don’t think as much. Like I had mentioned before, it seemed more like a check list of getting things done rather than learning, if that makes sense.”
- Post-activity survey #2:
 - “Sometimes if it is last minute, I’ll only add the specific points that the rubric is asking for rather than going more in depth. Though if completed before deadline, then I consider the thoughtfulness of the quality of work.”
 - “I was able to figure out which things I remembered/knew from passed readings that came up again and distinguish the things I had just learned and whether or not I needed to go back to the readings.”
- Post-activity survey #3:
 - “It plays a part in how much effort goes into the work. While I do everything the rubric asks of me, that is it. I don’t often take it a step further, especially with my current work schedule.”
 - “I was able to easily point out what I missed, what I had put in that was necessary/required, etc.”
 - “Specific points and necessary requirements made sure to touch on learning topics.”

This student clearly moved from seeing the completion rubrics as *just a checklist* to see where and how it helped them to understand what they were learning and make choices about how they were spending the little amount of time they have.

Another student started with a more negative perspective but then waffled back and forth between seeing a benefit or not.

- Post-activity survey #1:
 - “The rubric was more about completion than specific learning outcomes.”
- Post-activity survey #2:
 - “The rubric clearly outlined what was needed from the student. As a result, I knew what I needed to do and what goals I needed to meet.”
 - “Because the rubric is more about completion than material, I have no idea if what I have submitted is any good.”
- Post-activity survey #3:
 - “With the feedback provided, I feel like I knew where I was, quality wise.”
 - “Rubrics did not ask specific questions that challenged us.”

For this student, understanding the distinction between *assessment* and *feedback* was critical to their perception of the usefulness of the completion rubrics.

The students’ experiences with the completion rubric emphasize the importance of explaining why instructors are using a different assessment system and how it works to the students’ benefit. We appreciated the students who emphasized their desire to get feedback on their learning; they wanted to learn. Helping students distinguish between *assessment* and *feedback* would help them see and understand their own improvement over the course.

Conclusion

Although small, and definitely not representative of all students, or even all online students, the data from this study still provided some relevant information to consider when adopting, adapting, and implementing socially just assessment practices. Whereas the data consisted of student perceptions, it is these insights that might help instructors understand students' responses to different assessment strategies and processes. For example, it appears more instructors, especially online asynchronous instructors who do not have the time and space for casual hallway chatter, should account for and explicitly engage with students' perceptions and experiences of time as related to learning and assessment.

Time was the meta-theme throughout the study. First, it showed up as a theme while student participants defined labor, usually with an emphasis on linear clock time (Adam, 2004). Second, it showed up repeatedly as students discussed invisible labor, specifically that grading doesn't account for the amount of time a task might take. These second types of references to time started to shift towards more experiential understandings (Wittmann, 2017). While talking about time as invisible labor, students fleshed out a third theme. They started to distinguish between how previous experience and different skills impacts a specific individual's time on task. The amount of previous experience a student has with a course or research topic, or how many times they completed a similar process, impacts the amount of time they had to dedicate to tasks in the course. This third type of time might also incorporate more cultural understandings of time (Levine, 2008).

There was a fourth time-related theme that associated students saving time with feeling they gained agency. Since students didn't feel like they needed to achieve a certain level of subjective quality on their assignments, they were able to let go of perfectionism and pressure they may have been feeling with a quality-focused grading system, release from perfectionism and pressure allowed students to prioritize other areas, whether that was things within the class, like more time for thinking and reflection and providing feedback, or if it was to focus on things that mattered outside of the class. Regardless of whether or not they mentioned the word time, there were students that were just indicating that they had more freedom and agency to be working on other things and not worrying about their grades as much. Maybe students perceived a psychological, individualized, understanding of agency (Nieminen & Hilppö, 2020) where students felt control over how they spent their time contributed to agency as "control over their own learning" (p. 89). To us, this final time related theme might demonstrate courses that provide the flexibility required for students needing to engage in crisp time (Price, 2011).

If we are going to design assessment systems that are based on labor, our online student participants would not be satisfied unless the system somehow at minimum acknowledged, but ideally accounted for, their time. It is not surprising online students with this acknowledgment; they are aware of and must make difficult choices about how to spend their time (Hachey et al., 2013; Stuckey et al., 2020). Completion rubrics allow students to be able to make conscious and well-informed choices about where they spend their time. Students don't have to check off every box in order to still earn an A. It's ok to miss smaller elements of an activity. Both Inoue's (2019) and Nilson's (2015) systems emphasize an *all or nothing* completion of individual assignments. The completion rubrics provide more nuanced options and a better understanding of how choosing not to complete an aspect of an assignment impacts an assignment or course grade. This power-sharing through transparency is a good next step, for us, toward an inclusive assessment system.

As a reminder, we do want to acknowledge part of the difficulty students may have had with labor-based assessment programs and processes were probably also impacted by the fact our classes were both asynchronous online and shortened terms (seven-and-a-half weeks). Many of our colleagues implementing labor-based assessments have discussed the number of impromptu conversations they have had to have with their classes to both help students understand the system and reassure them about their progress in the course. Impromptu synchronous conversations are almost impossible in online asynchronous, especially those offered over shortened terms.

Working toward equitable assessment is a work in progress, and as we've noted throughout this article, classroom context is vital when considering how to best serve our students. Each time we've learned something new, we've continued to take small steps towards designing more inclusive online course curriculum and assessments. Our online asynchronous students told us they valued the agency in choosing what they complete; we want to help them make choices about what work will be most important to their learning and success. Based on these results, some of our next steps include:

1. More clearly introducing the grading system with completion rubrics including a description that distinguishes assessment from feedback (especially in the beginning of a condensed online course);
2. Continuing to revise assignments and rubrics to focus on observable and measurable completion points;
3. Identifying "critical" steps in assignments;
4. Distinguishing "if needed" steps; and
5. Structuring rubric, gradebook, and grade distribution to account for "extra" "if needed" labor.

While describing rubrics for specifications grading, Nilson (2015) reminded us that "as with rubrics, specs grading should not assess a work on every possible requirement we can conceive of" because "for our students, we should carefully select a limited number of requirements that are really important for them to focus on and for us to assess in a particular assignment or test" (p.58). These revisions prompt us to refine exactly what we want versus what we need students to complete as part of the course.

We more generally conclude with a call for more research carefully studying students' experiences of time and agency (especially in online courses), possibly exploring more social-cultural frameworks describing agency (Nieminen & Hilppö, 2020) and using instruments like the Agency of University Students scale (Jääskelä et al., 2017). This kind of research is especially critical in online courses, as student demographics vary drastically between in-person and online spaces. If the future of higher education will primarily be "self-directed, online classes" as Cowan (2020) asserts, then it is imperative to consider the unique time constraints of online students (p. 8). In other words, socially just writing assessment needs to address issues of bias in assessing quality as well as more critically engage with student agency, moving beyond students being the "recipients of actions of others [teachers], not active agents in the assessment process" (Nieminen & Hilppö 2020, p. 88).

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