

# Contract Grading and the Development of an Efficacious Writerly Habitus

**Gita DasBender**, New York University, US, [gdb2038@nyu.edu](mailto:gdb2038@nyu.edu)

**Nate Mickelson**, New York University, US, [jnm306@nyu.edu](mailto:jnm306@nyu.edu)

**Leah Souffrant**, New York University, US, [ljs17@nyu.edu](mailto:ljs17@nyu.edu)

\*This article was co-equally authored

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**Abstract:** Contract grading has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety, promote self-directed learning, and disrupt unjust educational norms (Cowan, 2020; Inoue, 2019; Medina & Walker, 2018). Yet, there is growing recognition of challenges associated with the approach, including the unintended effects of deemphasizing grades (Inman & Powell, 2018) and the possibility that labor-based contracts may put some students at a disadvantage (Carrillo, 2021). This article reports selected findings from a multi-semester comparative study of labor-based and labor-informed contract grading in first-year writing courses at a large private research university. The study affirms several findings from existing research on contract grading. Specifically, it shows the approach mitigates students' stress and anxiety and increases their overall satisfaction with grading. Contract grading shifts the assessment ecology of the first-year writing classroom so that the challenges and rewards of writing take priority over the pressures and limitations of grades (see Inoue, 2015). Drawing on the literature of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1994, 1997; Pajares, 2003), the authors theorize that contract grading encourages students to develop an *efficacious writerly habitus* grounded in self-motivated effort, increased confidence, and heightened understanding of writing as a mode of thinking.

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Radical changes in assessment practice are hard to achieve. Since spring 2020, and in the midst of both the COVID-19 pandemic and other upheavals of American public life, our large, long-established writing program has begun to attempt exactly that. Through a year of study initiated by our faculty Diversity & Inclusion and Curriculum & Assessment committees, we have implemented a flexible model of labor-based contract grading (FCG) as an assessment option in first-year writing (FYW) classes.<sup>1</sup> Our aim has been to make our assessments more transparent, humane, and socially just by decentering grades and encouraging students to value their writing processes and writerly identities more than judgments about the quality of their writing. We turned to FCG in particular to help students recognize choices they can make with their writing and encourage them to develop an *efficacious writerly habitus* that will serve them throughout their undergraduate careers. We conceive the disposition we aspire for students to develop as consisting of three elements: *self-efficacy*, or students' beliefs in their own capabilities to perform and exercise control over designated activities, including the potential or promise of success (Bandura, 1994); the *writerly*, or the sense of identifying as a writer (see Adler-Kassner et al., 2016); and *habitus*, or the evolving set of practices and learning habits that emerge from individual experiences and collective experiences in the classroom (Bourdieu, 1990; Reay, 2004; Stone et al., 2012). We mean the term *efficacious writerly habitus* to be open and flexible in the sense that it refers both to the confidence we hope students will build in their capabilities as writers and the knowledge we hope they will gain that to write well requires them to persist through uncertainty.

Contract grading has a long history in our field and in higher education more broadly. As Cowan (2020) has documented, the approach has been used to lessen writing anxiety (Consilio & Kennedy, 2019), encourage agency and metacognition (Albracht et al., 2019; Inman & Powell, 2018), and mitigate systemic injustice, including the negative effects conventional grading has been shown to have on students from nondominant groups (Inoue, 2015, 2019; Poe & Cogan, 2016; Poe et al., 2019).<sup>2</sup> Researchers have theorized that contracts achieve these effects by prioritizing the work (or labor) students do ahead of judgments about the quality of their writing in determining course grades. As Inoue (2015, 2019) and Cruz Medina and Kenneth Walker (2018), among others, have noted, quality judgments often reflect the internalization of the norms of a white, middle-class habitus more than they indicate objective evaluations of writing. By intervening in the judgments embedded in grades, contract grading enables students and instructors to construct supportive learning environments that encourage intellectual risk-taking and genuine engagement with writing skills and processes. Risk-taking is central to FYW because it is a learning opportunity that challenges students to adapt and transfer “prior” strategies, such as those they might have developed in high school and other literacy experiences, to new, unfamiliar ends (Yancey, 2017, pp. 326–328).

Recent research has drawn attention to the challenges and limitations of contract grading. For example, Ellen Carillo (2021) has suggested that the approach risks enforcing a “White, middle class . . . normative, ableist, and neurotypical conception of labor” that heightens the disadvantages

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1 We use the acronym FCG to refer to our program's flexible use of two related contract grading approaches, a labor-based approach adapted from the one proposed by Asao Inoue (2019) and a labor-informed model that links labor and perceived writing quality by adapting principles from the “unilateral grading contract” proposed by Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow (2009). See Appendix 1 for the model contracts instructors adapted for their courses.

2 We use the term “conventional grading” in this article to refer to grading approaches that involve evaluating individual assignments on numerical or letter-grade scales and then tallying them to determine course grades. One convention in our program has been to assign roughly 30% of the course grade to three separate essay assignments and determine the remaining 10% based on attendance and participation.

for disabled or otherwise marginalized students (p. 11). Similarly, Kathleen Kryger and Griffin Zimmerman (2020) have described challenges neurodivergent students encounter when working with grading contracts. Warning against their hasty embrace, Sherri Craig (2021) has questioned the value of implementing contract grading as an anti-racist practice without considering the broader, more systemic anti-Black racism that exists within universities. Relatedly, Medina and Walker (2018) have observed that students who value the “accrued cultural capital” associated with letter grades tend to experience “misgivings about workload and resentment” (p. 64) that contract grading cannot fully address. This “dissonance,” as Joyce Inman and Rebecca Powell (2018) have argued, results from disruptions to students’ positive affective ties to conventional grades. Taken together, this emerging research signals the importance of studying students’ individual, distinctive experiences rather than assuming a homogeneous student response to a grading approach.

Our work with contract grading has been guided by our commitment to promoting inclusive classroom environments, attending to implicit bias on part of faculty and students, and encouraging what we have termed an *efficacious writerly habitus*. Like Carillo (2021), Kryger and Zimmerman (2020), Medina and Walker (2018), and Inman and Powell (2018), we have been motivated by our recognition that students in our FYW classes come from increasingly diverse backgrounds, and our sense that the diversity of their lived experiences and writing backgrounds has affected the learning environments in our classrooms in unexpected ways. Our institution is a large, selective private university. It draws students from around the country and the world, including approximately 20% overall who are multilingual or non-native speakers and writers of English. Regardless of their backgrounds and prior schooling, students recognize the cultural capital of strong, effective writing and the practical effects of earning high grades. Many put intense pressure on themselves to maintain high GPAs so they will be competitive in applying to internships and graduate and professional schools. We anticipated that many of our students might resist FCG, or be poorly served by it, for these reasons.

Our study, however, indicates that contract grading mitigates students’ stress and anxiety about grades and increases their overall satisfaction in comparison with conventional grading approaches. In addition, our findings suggest that FCG promotes engaged effort, increased confidence, and self-efficacy. We theorize that this is because grading contracts reorient students’ efforts to the challenges and rewards of writing and away from the pressures and limitations of grades. This reorientation encourages students to develop positive affective ties to writerly identities by helping them understand the purposes of the writing process. Further, it gives more control over their course grades. FCG establishes an “assessment ecology,” to use Inoue’s (2015) term, that encourages students to develop efficacious beliefs about their capabilities and an increasingly personal sense of themselves as writers. Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of habitus as a “method” (as cited in Mahar, 1990, p. 36) deeply informs our work with contract grading. Bourdieu (1988) uses habitus as a means of exploring “the experience of social agents...and the objective structures that make this experience possible” (p. 782). As Diane Reay (2004) has explained, it is only through “self-questioning [that] habitus begins to operate at the level of consciousness and the person develops new facets of the self” (p. 438). By inculcating an *efficacious writerly habitus*, FCG makes it easier for students to engage in and with the writing process and exercise genuine agency over their learning.

Albert Bandura (1994) has defined self-efficacy as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their

lives” (p. 71). Self-efficacy beliefs “determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave” by driving their “cognitive, motivational, affective and selection processes” (Bandura, 1994, p. 71). Peter Khost (2017) explains that students’ beliefs about whether they can “take [a] task to completion” interact with their expectations about the “consequences that would follow from engaging” in that task (p. 275). A student who is confident in their writing abilities but doubtful about how their work will be perceived and graded might exhibit low self-efficacy in the context of a writing class. By contrast, a student who doubts their capabilities and encounters a grading approach that consistently and transparently rewards effort, engagement, and choice might gradually develop an *efficacious writerly habitus* despite their initial doubts.

### Study Overview & Rationale

With approval from our institution’s IRB (protocol number IRB-FY2021-5091), we worked with 23 full-time faculty over multiple semesters. In fall 2021 and spring 2022, we surveyed a total of 871 students, including 477 in sections using grading contracts and 394 in sections using conventional grading approaches.<sup>3</sup> They were enrolled in several different required FYW courses, including our standard one-semester course; versions of the course offered for students enrolled in the university’s schools of the arts and engineering; and a modified sequence of courses designed for multilingual students. Students self-reported their demographics related to racial/ethnic and sex/gender identifications as well as their status as multilingual or first-generation-in-college. The data we analyze in this article is drawn from courses where we received responses from students in multiple sections using contract and conventional approaches. We excluded data from students in courses where no comparison data was available because, for example, only one section was offered or conventional grading was used in all sections offered.

Faculty participants used one of two contract grading approaches: a labor-based contract, adapted from the model proposed by Inoue (2019), in which grades are determined on a semester basis and include no graded assessment of quality beyond ensuring labor is completed “in the spirit it is asked” (p. 130); or a labor-informed hybrid contract, which we developed based on faculty feedback and by adapting principles from Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) “unilateral grading contract,” in which grades are determined on a semester basis through a combination of completed labor and assessments of quality by instructors and students. We provided templates for each approach and invited faculty to adapt them to suit their classes (see Appendix 1). Allowing flexibility made it possible for participants to design contracts that responded in transparent, just, and humane ways to their specific teaching situations. All faculty participants used a baseline grade of B, assigned grades on a semester basis rather than by assignment, and provided clearly defined opportunities for students to earn grades above B. Faculty participated in three discussion-based workshops per semester, one before each semester began, one at the midpoint, and one near the end.

Recognizing calls for empirical research on contract grading approaches (e.g., Albracht et al., 2019; Cowan, 2020), we analyzed three streams of data from students and faculty—course grades, numerical survey responses, and narrative survey responses—and compared data from multiple course sections and semesters, including sections using FCG and conventional grading approaches. Comparison data from the fall 2021 and spring 2022 semesters show consistent,

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<sup>3</sup> In the data we report below, counts of student responses vary slightly per question. This is because students had the option to skip questions. We report the actual count of responses by question.

**Table 1**

*Comparison of Students' Understanding of Assignment Expectations*

Survey Question	Student Group	N	Agree (5 or 4) (%)	Neutral (3) (%)	Disagree (2 or 1) (%)	M	p
I understood the type and amount of effort it took to meet expectations for the assignments	Spring 22 – Contract	166	88.0	10.2	1.8	4.5	< 0.01
	Spring 22 – Conventional	168	76.8	14.9	8.3	4.0	< 0.01
	Fall 21 – Contract	227	78.0	13.7	8.4	4.1	0.07
	Fall 21 – Conventional	309	74.8	14.6	10.7	3.9	0.07

**Table 2**

*Comparison of Students' Stress or Anxiety Related to Grades*

Survey Question	Student Group	N	Low (1 or 2) (%)	Moderate (3) (%)	High (4 or 5) (%)	M	p
Rate your level of stress or anxiety related to grades in your writing course	Spring 22 – Contract	156	34.0	23.7	42.3	3.2	0.01
	Spring 22 – Conventional	162	17.3	29.6	53.1	3.6	0.01
	Fall 21 – Contract	218	40.4	21.1	38.5	3.0	<0.01
	Fall 21 – Conventional	293	20.5	25.6	53.9	3.5	<0.01

**Table 3**

*Comparison of Students' Experiences with Grading*

Survey Question	Student Group	N	Dissatisfied (1 or 2) (%)	Neutral (3) (%)	Satisfied (4 or 5) (%)	M	p
Please rate your experience with grading in your first-year college writing course.	Spring 22 – Contract	153	9.8	9.8	80.4	4.1	0.06
	Spring 22 – Conventional	155	11.6	17.4	71.0	3.9	0.06
	Fall 21 – Contract	210	12.9	16.2	71.0	4.0	0.17
	Fall 21 – Conventional	279	15.4	19.0	65.6	3.8	0.17

statistically significant differences in students' experiences with contract and conventional grading approaches (see Tables 1, 2, and 3).<sup>4</sup> In both semesters, students in sections using grading contracts reported greater understanding of the type and amount of effort required to complete assignments; lower levels of anxiety or stress related to writing course assignments and grades; and higher levels of satisfaction with grading. Students in sections using grading contracts were also more likely to agree or strongly agree that they felt supported as writers and that the grades they received in their writing course were fair. Additionally, they were more likely to report that the amount of effort they put into their writing course matched their expectations. These differences were consistent across student demographic groups and more positive and pronounced for students who identified as first-generation and those who reported being multilingual.

We observed minimal variations in course grade distributions (no more than +/- 5.0%) between sections using contract and conventional grading approaches in fall 2021 and spring 2022. Two exceptions to this pattern were that first-generation-in-college and multilingual international students were more likely to receive A grades in sections using FCG. First-generation students earned 4.0% more A grades in fall 2021 and 8.0% more A grades in spring 2022. International students earned 8.4% more A grades in fall 2021 and 13.7% more A grades in spring 2022. Students identified as Black earned fewer A grades overall than their peers in both semesters. The use of FCG did not affect this pattern. Relatedly, White, Hispanic/Latino/a, and Multiracial students earned similar course grades in sections using conventional and contract grading approaches in both semesters.

The similarities and differences in these quantitative data raised several questions. First, they led us to wonder about relationships between students' perceptions of the learning environment, including clarity of expectations and levels of supportiveness, their levels of confidence and self-efficacy, and their experiences of stress and anxiety related to writing assignments and course grades. Second, the data made us want to learn more about the type and amount of effort students exerted in our courses and how this effort was motivated, for example, by an instructor's expectations, by the possibility of earning a low or high grade, or by a student's own intellectual curiosity. Finally, students' quantitative ratings encouraged us to explore how students described their relationships to the writing process and the texts they produced in their classes. We analyzed students' narrative responses with these questions in mind. What we learned led us to theorize that FCG encourages students to develop an efficacious writerly habitus grounded in self-motivated effort, increased confidence, and heightened understanding of writing as a mode of thinking.

### **Students' Experiences with Contract Grading**

Students had the option to provide narrative explanations in response to several survey questions. We asked for elaborations in hopes they would give us a deeper sense of students' individual experiences. We examined students' open-ended responses using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We coded the text to arrive at thematic categories. In our analysis below, we delve into the narrative responses to these questions by examining several coded categories that emerged.

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<sup>4</sup> We used a two-tailed test to calculate the statistical significance, or *p*-value, of differences between mean ratings from students in sections using contract and conventional grading. *p*-values of 0.10 or below indicate there is 90% likelihood that the differences are statistically significant rather than the result of random variations. We are grateful to Forest Fisher, Associate Professor of Mathematics at Guttman Community College, City University of New York, for his advice in conducting this analysis.

### Supportive Learning Environment and Fair Grading

In response to the question “Please rate your experience with grading in your first-year writing course,” nearly three-quarters of fall 2021 students (71.0%) in contract graded courses rated themselves as Very Satisfied or Satisfied with their grading experience (see Table 3). In spring 2022, slightly more than three-quarters (80.4%) rated themselves as Very Satisfied or Satisfied. Students in sections using FCG were more likely to rate themselves as Very Satisfied or Satisfied than students in conventionally graded sections in both semesters (+5.4% in fall 2021 and +9.4% in spring 2022). We used a two-tailed test to determine the statistical significance of differences between the mean ratings. The p-values were 0.17 for fall 2021 and 0.06 for spring 2022. These values indicate a high likelihood that the differences in students’ ratings for this question are statistically significant rather than the result of random variations.

To interpret these differences, we coded and analyzed students’ narrative responses. Students cited a range of reasons to explain their positive experiences with FCG. The recurring theme of growth is reflected in comments such as “I enjoyed the labor-based grading because the emphasis felt more on my growth than my success, which is freeing when trying to learn a new skill,” offered by a student who identified as white and female, and “I enjoyed the course and the work needed to be completed as it helped me grow as a writer and pursue the work of my major,” noted by a student who identified as Black and female.

Two thematic areas emerged as we coded the responses related to students’ experiences with grading: *Supportive Learning Environment* and *Transparent and Fair Grading*. Focusing on the learning environment, a student who identified as Asian/Pacific Islander (API) and female noted that her professor “made the class intellectually stimulating and made me think in a different way about writing which I really appreciated.” Some students linked the learning they experienced directly to FCG. For example, a female student who identified as white explained, “I really enjoyed the labor-based grading because it allowed me to try new things without the fear of my grade being compromised.” A multilingual student who identified as male and API observed that FCG made it possible for him to “take risks in writing styles or using ideas, because I knew I wouldn’t be penalized for them. Instead, I would receive feedback that would allow me to grow as a writer.”

As these responses indicate, one factor that makes the learning environment produced by FCG feel supportive is that students feel more confident that the effort they exert in writing assignments will lead to the outcomes, or course grades, they aspire to earn. Bandura (1994) has defined this anticipation of success through an “expectancy-value theory” in which “motivation is regulated by the expectation that a given course of behavior will produce certain outcomes” (p.73). Grades and other feedback signal to students whether continued effort is likely to produce the outcomes they want. Since students do not receive grades on individual assignments in contract graded courses, they rely on instructor commentary and feedback for improving their written work. Students’ understanding of how the feedback they receive relates to their performance thus affects future self-efficacy beliefs. The students we cite above attribute their willingness to take intellectual risks with their learning to the confidence FCG gives them about the grades they will earn. By reducing uncertainties about grades, the approach encourages students to use instructor feedback to pursue their own learning goals and build confidence in their abilities to achieve those goals.

Indeed, a consistent refrain in students’ narrative responses was their perception of *Transparent and Fair Grading*. Several students commented on fairness associated with FCG

by explaining that the contract ensured that criteria for evaluation were clearly articulated. In their view, this made FCG a more just grading system. For example, a multilingual student who identified as female and API noted that “the professor’s grading contract was extremely fair. We know what’s expected of us, and that allowed me to want to participate more. This is because I didn’t have to worry about finishing a paper for a certain grade.” Another who identified as male and multilingual noted that FCG “was fair, manageable, understandable, and allowed students to grow and explore without worrying about consequences.” A third, who also identified as male and multilingual, explained FCG as a “fair system that really eases the pressure of grade.” The student concluded their response by explaining how the approach affected their mindset: “I get to challenge myself with a reward of a higher grade.”

### **Engaged Effort and Impassioned Learning**

Students’ experiences of support, transparency, and fairness contributed to their willingness to exert effort. To further understand how students experienced the labor of our courses, we asked them to assess the amount of effort they actually put into their writing in comparison with the amount they expected to exert (see Table 4). Students could choose three preset answers—less than expected, same as expected, or more than expected—and they could also choose to provide a narrative response. In fall 2021 and spring 2022, students in sections using FCG were more likely than students in sections using conventional grading to report that they put in the same amount of effort as they expected (+5.8% in fall 2021 and +8.3% in spring 2022). By contrast, students in sections using conventional grading were more likely to report that they put in more effort than they expected (+6.1% in fall 2021 and +10.3% in spring 2022). Neither grading approach prompted students to put in less effort than they expected.

**Table 4**  
*Students’ Comparisons of Effort and Expectations*

Survey Question	Student Group	<i>N</i>	Less effort (1) (%)	Same effort (2) (%)	More effort (3) (%)	<i>M</i>	<i>p</i>
How did the amount of effort you put into your first-year writing course compare with your expectations?	Spring 22 – Contract	157	6.4	47.8	45.9	2.4	0.06
	Spring 22 – Conventional	162	4.3	39.5	56.2	2.5	0.06
	Fall 21 – Contract	219	5.0	46.6	48.4	2.4	0.23
	Fall 21 – Conventional	292	4.8	40.8	54.5	2.5	0.23

We analyzed these data and students’ narrative responses about the effort they exerted in relation to their responses to two other questions. The first asked students to rate their level of agreement with the statement “I understood the type and amount of effort it took to meet expectations for the assignments” on a Likert-scale of 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree. As we noted above (see Table 4), students in sections using FCG were more likely to strongly agree or agree that they understood the type and amount of effort it took to meet expectations (+3.2% in fall 2021 and +11.2% in spring 2022). We used a two-tailed test to determine the statistical

significance of the differences between the mean ratings. The  $p$ -values were 0.21 for fall 2021 and  $< 0.01$  for spring 2022. These values indicate a moderate likelihood in fall 2021 and a very high likelihood in spring 2022 that the differences in students' ratings for this question are statistically significant rather than the result of random variations.

Students also rated their level of agreement with the statement "The criteria for the writing assignments were clear." The differences between levels of agreement among students in sections using FCG and conventional grading were even more pronounced. In fall 2021, 76.8% of students in contract-graded sections strongly agreed or agreed with this statement compared with 72.5% in sections using conventional grading, and in spring 2022, 88.0% of students in contract-graded sections strongly agreed or agreed compared with 71.9% in fall 2021. We used a two-tailed test to determine the statistical significance of the differences between the mean ratings. The  $p$ -values were 0.07 for fall 2021 and  $< 0.01$  for spring 2022. These values indicate a very high likelihood that the differences in students' ratings for this question in both semesters are statistically significant rather than the result of random variations. Taken together, differences in the ratings for these three questions suggest that FCG helps students more fully understand the effort required to meet expectations in their writing courses. Further, they suggest that because students understand the type and amount of effort assignments require upfront, they experience the effort they put in as matching their own and the course's expectations.

Students' narrative responses provide a nuanced and complex picture. They affirm that sections using FCG inspired consistent effort and indicate that the grading approach encouraged students to become self-motivated and impassioned learners. Three thematic clusters emerged as we coded the responses: *Intensive Labor*, *Engaged Effort/Impassioned Learning*, and *Reduced Stress*. Students echo what we observed in their quantitative responses: the clarity FCG provides about the type and amount of effort required by course assignments promotes engagement. This was despite the fact that many students perceived the labor required to earn the baseline B grade and higher grades as demanding. We noted a surprising degree of positivity in respondents' descriptions of the effort they exerted.

Students described the *Intensive Labor* required in their writing courses in multiple ways. Many referred to specific tasks such as readings, in-class assignments, homework, and revisions. Emphasizing the labor expended in doing the course assignments, for example, a female student who identified as Hispanic/Latina and multilingual shared that, "Since the grading contract focused on the labor in doing these essays, I've worked harder to earn a grade higher than a B." Another student, who identified as male and API, explained that "The labor-based contract made me work harder for my grades. However, while doing so, I was able to focus on working hard on my own writing instead of trying to write [for] someone else." This student's use of "However" signals that the effort they exerted in the course felt meaningful. A multilingual student who identified as male and API used similar language in their response: "I just feel that there are more assignments to finish than I had expected to have, but in a good way."

We used the code *Engaged Effort/Impassioned Learning* to indicate responses like these where students emphasized the purposeful nature of the work and its meaningful outcomes. Several students reported feeling surprised by how hard they worked and how much they enjoyed the experience. For example, a student who identified as white and male wrote, "I didn't expect myself to be as passionate as I was during the course. It was exciting to put hard work into arguments that I wanted to flesh out to the best of my ability." A male student who identified as API explained their

experience in terms of the fact that the course was required: “I just worked really hard for this class even though I expected to treat it as my last priority because it’s required for every first year.” Other students linked their feelings of surprise to the mechanics of FCG itself. For example, consider this long response from a male student who identified as multilingual: “The grade contract was clearly explained at the beginning of the course, so I thought I would put in the bare minimum effort (plus bonus) to get the A. However, the freedom to write without worrying about a grade based on the quality of the essay encouraged me to really explore the ideas in my essay for myself and thus spend more time trying to develop the best essay that I could.” The response traces a shift in the student’s experience from relying on course requirements to motivate effort to engagement grounded in his own interests, indicating the development of an *efficacious writerly habitus*.

### **Transferring Skills and Knowledge**

As these responses show, students frequently justified the effort they exerted in terms of course requirements and personal motivation or desire to do the work. The supportive learning environment enabled by FCG allowed many to persevere despite fears about their preparation and abilities. Students bring a range of prior writing experiences to FYW courses. Because of this, part of our challenge as instructors is helping them recognize, build on and transform those experiences to fulfill college-level expectations. Research on transfer has shown that the ways instructors engage with these prior experiences play a significant role in students’ uptake (or not) of new skills and conceptions of writing (see, e.g., Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2016; Engle et al., 2012; Yancey et al., 2014). As Dana Lynn Driscoll and Jennifer Wells (2012) have argued, students’ prior experiences influence their dispositions, or attitudes, toward writing and toward themselves as writers. These dispositions, including attitudes related to “value, self-efficacy, attribution, and self-regulation,” play a key role in their willingness to use their existing skills in new contexts (Driscoll & Wells, 2012).

Kathleen Blake Yancey (2016) has observed that students develop their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about writing in a range of contexts, including writing classes, extracurriculars, and social and private activities. Their “prior knowledge . . . coalesce[s]” in various ways as they attempt new writing tasks (p. 39). For some, the knowledge they bring to FYW aligns with course expectations. For others, what they bring to the course conflicts or interferes with the tasks and assignments they encounter. For this reason, Yancey (2016) categorizes “the prior” as a threshold concept students must negotiate to advance as college writers (p. 41).

By definition, threshold concepts are not easy to engage or master. As Jan Meyer and Ray Land (2005) have argued, threshold concepts are “troublesome” because they involve both the integration of new knowledge and “shift[s] in the learner’s subjectivity, a repositioning of the self” with respect to that knowledge (p. 374). Glynis Cousin (2006) has described a similar principle, noting that “grasping” threshold concepts “involves an ontological as well as a conceptual shift. We are what we know. New understandings are assimilated into our biography, becoming part of who we are, how we see and how we feel” (p. 3). The troublesome knowledge that characterizes these interrelated shifts becomes transformative when learners cross the metaphorical “threshold” into states of “liminality” where discomfort serves as a spur to “creativity and problem-solving” (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 380).

While students did not use the terms “threshold” or “liminality” in their narrative responses, they described experiences of transformation related to the effort they exerted. Several noted that

FCG encouraged them to reconceptualize their prior dispositions toward writing. For example, a student who identified as Black and female explained, “I didn’t realize how different writing was in college compared to high school, nor did I realize the amount [of] writing techniques I had to work on, so that caused for me to put more effort into my writing, which I enjoyed.” The student “enjoyed” the liminal experience of learning new approaches to writing even though it required considerable effort. A student who identified as male, multilingual, and API explained his experience in a similar way, noting that he expected the course to be “like a regular English class that I took in high school” but found that “it wasn’t.” The difference was that, in the student’s words, “For the first time I created the question and research I would be doing.”

These responses show that students brought a range of prior dispositions toward writing into their FYW course. Some students, like the last student cited above, expected FYW to be similar to classes they completed in high school. Others, like the student cited above who described feeling “intimidated” by the course, anticipated that it would be more time-consuming and challenging. Negotiating the transition into college writing requires students to confront different kinds of troublesome knowledge, including new techniques and approaches as well as new self-perceptions, and FCG mediates between the prior and the new learning experience by providing an environment in which an *efficacious writerly habitus* can be cultivated.

As Inman and Powell (2018) have observed, contract grading generates a distinct kind of troublesome knowledge, or “dissonance,” for students who look to assignment grades for “identity confirmation” and indications that they are making “progress to the identities they desire” (p. 41). Assignment grades are a positive force for learning when they motivate student performance. Students “derive comfort” from grades because they convey “identities and standing” (Inman & Powell, 2018, p. 42). Because of prior positive affective associations with grades, students can experience feelings of disorientation when they are asked to write in their absence in courses using FCG. Students in our study described experiences of dissonance very similar to those Inman and Powell (2018) have described. For example, a student who identified as transgender and first generation-in-college wrote, “I appreciate the structure of having a B as a base grade but dislike being able to get higher than a B by simply doing the assignments I was given. I think doing exemplary work on the assignments given and nothing extra should be deserving of an A.” A student who identified as a Black female echoed this perspective: “I am used to getting letter grades and I feel that they actually help me improve. If a C or B is given on an essay, the student receives feedback about what the essay lacked and its strengths . . . Simply getting a B when work is done does not effectively push a student towards extra labor.”

The dissonance students experience due to the absence of assignment grades carries multiple meanings. Medina and Walker (2018), for example, have interpreted it as a signal that “students have internalized the dominant cultural narratives of grades” (p. 52). In their view, student resistance to contract grading provides an opening for dialogue and inquiry about what students and instructors value. Their analysis suggests that FCG generates troublesome knowledge and experiences of liminality for students and instructors alike. In particular, as Inman and Powell (2018) have acknowledged, contract grading makes it possible for writing instructors and the field as a whole to “ask new questions about students’ affective ties to grades and [how] to create classroom environments that allows students to create identities as authors outside of a letter grade system” (p. 49).

Students in our study offered narrative explanations of their effort that suggest they are asking these questions themselves. For example, a student who identified as multilingual explained that the grading contract allowed them to “freely learn and revise without feeling the added burden of grade pressure.” Another student who declined to identify their demographics shared that “At first, I was worried I wouldn’t put in as much effort in my essays because of the safety net of the system. However, I found that because I was less stressed, I was able to get more invested in my essays and therefore spent more time crafting my thoughts on the page.” These students describe the liminal space opened up by FCG as a proving ground for examining their prior dispositions toward writing and developing new investments and motivations. Their narrative responses reinforce the trends we observed in students’ quantitative ratings: By clarifying requirements and mitigating anxiety and stress related to grades, FCG encourages students to develop positive affective ties to the writing process, which in turn contribute to engaged effort and impassioned learning.

### **Emerging Writerly Identities**

Kevin Roozen (2015) has proposed that “identity work” is central to FYW (p. 51). In his view, the best versions of our courses “approach writing not simply as a means of learning and using a set of skills, but rather as a means of engaging with the possibilities for selfhood available in a given community” (Roozen, 2015, p. 51). Advocates for contract grading have argued that the approach helps students and instructors do identity work in two ways, first by mitigating unjust biases inherent to conventional assessment practices and second by encouraging students to value their development as writers on their own terms. Inoue (2019), for example, has consistently positioned FCG as a corrective response to assessment practices that “[hold] every student in the classroom to the same standard regardless of who they are or where they come from or what they hope for in their lives” (p. 302). Medina and Walker (2018) have argued that while grading contracts cannot, in themselves, guarantee just (or even more just) outcomes, they can be used to “open up conversations” between students and instructors about what “agencies, competencies, and performances” should be valued in a writing course (p. 53). Contract grading has the potential to “change the balance of power in the classroom” by “increas[ing] student ownership of work” and the likelihood they will “set [and pursue] individualized goals” (Cowan, 2020, p. 8). The approach opens up the possibility that instructors and students can do the kinds of identity work Roozen (2015) has described together. As a case in point, Matthew Gomes and three student co-authors (2020) reported that the approach encourages “participatory agency” by providing a “structured environment” where students can “make meaningful choices about participation, rather than meet a common behavioral standard” (p. 9).

Students in our study characterized their sense of agency and their experience of developing distinctive writerly identities in similar terms. They wrote about cognitive shifts they experienced as they immersed themselves in projects motivated by their particular interests and curiosities in their responses to two questions: “How much did you challenge yourself to take intellectual risks in the writing assignments in this course?” and “How much effect did the work of the course have on your identity as a writer?” Students’ responses to these questions suggest that FCG encourages students to develop positive attitudes toward the writing process and high levels of self-efficacy regarding the texts they are producing.

For example, a student who identified as male and multilingual explained that “prior to the course I didn’t exactly have the best skill set by any sorts. But after the completion of this course,

I've eventually built up the confidence to identify as a writer with potential." Another student, who identified as female and white, emphasized that the course allowed for an intellectual repositioning, since "through my writing, I actually ended up changing my position on a number of views I had prior to this class." Other students noted that the course helped them focus on themselves and their thinking in an unexpected way. A male student who identified as multilingual observed that "I got to actually find out what I think," while a female student who also identified as multilingual reflected on how "the assignments helped me understand what type of a writer I can be." A female student who identified as API and first-generation-in-college hedged some in her response, noting that while the course revealed limitations in her skills, she developed confidence in her ability to improve: "I think it solidified me as a mediocre writer, but I am still improving and now I have been given the tools to teach myself how to improve." Remarkably, in each of these comments we observe a dispositional shift in students' writerly identity, contributing to the development of an *efficacious habitus* that would serve them in future writing situations.

In addition to developing new writerly identities, students reported a sense of freedom and agency derived from intellectual risks they took in their work. For example, a student who identified as female and white wrote that "because I was allowed to write about basically whatever I wanted, I was able to really grow in areas that make me happy to be writing. This course didn't put me in a box, and that was amazing!" Echoing this sentiment, another, who identified as male and API, wrote that "because I was able to experiment, I think that I found myself as a writer," and another, who identified as female and Black noted, "the course was helpful in my journey of figuring [out] my writing style and the interests I have."

Jasmine Harris (2018) has urged college faculty to keep students' backgrounds in mind when they craft expectations regarding intellectual risks: "What feels brave to students who come from privileged backgrounds, or the ways in which bravery is expressed . . . among those (mostly White) students is not necessarily similar to that of racially minoritized students who often find themselves as alone and isolated in specific classrooms as they do within larger institutions" (p. 253). Pursuing written work without the fear of assignment grades, we observed, motivated some nonwhite students, among others, to challenge themselves more than they expected to. A male student who identified as API described his experience in detail: "I feel like throughout this course, I tried to put myself in positions that I have never been in before. I tried to expand my writing outside of my comfort zone because of the flexibility of the contract. Since each essay is not specifically graded, I was able to take risks and use the feedback given to improve those writing techniques." Similarly, a student who declined to identify their demographics and reported only moderate satisfaction with FCG explained, "I now realize taking risks and asking questions in my writing makes it more profound and interesting." A male student who identified as Hispanic/Latino contrasted his experience writing under FCG with the fear of failure he previously associated with grades: "In a traditional grading system, I would not want to take risks because I was under the fear that I would fail the assignment for not following the exact structure to get a good mark." As the responses we discuss in this section suggest, FCG encourages students to define intellectual risks on their own terms. The approach contributes to a classroom assessment ecology (Inoue, 2015) that foregrounds sensitivity to diverse learning backgrounds and their disparate effects.

### **Contract Grading and Self-Efficacy**

Bandura (1977) has long argued that self-efficacy beliefs “determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences” (p. 194). Based on student reports, we hypothesize that FCG makes it easier for students to trust that the effort they exert will pay off in the grades they hoped to earn. In turn, this clarity about grade outcomes makes it more likely students will perceive their efforts as beneficial for their growth as writers. Self-efficacy beliefs produce “diverse effects,” including “the staying power to endure the obstacles and setbacks that characterize difficult undertakings” (Bandura, 1994, p. 76). This form of resilience is reflected in students’ explanations of their willingness to take intellectual risks. As a student we cited above noted, “I tried to put myself in positions that I have never been in before. I tried to expand my writing outside of my comfort zone because of the flexibility of the contract.” Our study suggests that FCG functions as an opportunity structure that enables students to confidently (and comfortably) enter the precarious, liminal space of FYW. Their increased willingness to take intellectual risks translates into engaged effort and increased sense of self-efficacy. FCG contributes to a positive cycle: as students gain confidence in their abilities and trust in expected outcomes, they become more willing to take on new and difficult writing tasks and begin to identify as writers. This further strengthens their *efficacious writerly habitus*.

We have come to understand conventional grading as a “norm” to which students and faculty have become habituated. This understanding is grounded in emerging research by Inman and Powell (2018), Albracht et al. (2019), and Medina and Walker (2018), among others, and our students’ complex explanations of their experiences in our FYW courses. FCG refuses this norm. In *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Sara Ahmed (2012) asserts: “When you don’t quite inhabit the norms, or you aim to transform them, you notice them as you come up against them” (p. 175). Following Ahmed, and at our most ambitious, we have come to consider FCG as a deliberate challenge to historic injustices at the juncture of grades, learning and student potential, with confidence and academic success at stake. The approach invites students to actively shape possibilities of their own distinctly *efficacious writerly habitus*. Jack Halberstam (2013) has evoked the potential opened up by this sort of refusal in the introduction to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s *The Undercommons*: “So we refuse to ask for recognition and instead we want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and access the places that we know lie outside its walls” (p. 6). The refusal occasioned by FCG expands our ability to find each other in the liminal spaces of first-year writing. By eliminating assignment grades, the approach makes it more likely students will develop positive affective ties to their writing processes and experiences. These ties contribute to increased confidence and a willingness to write and think beyond the boundaries delimited by grades.

### **Guiding Principles Leading to Practice**

Our ongoing assessment practice using the Flexible Contract Grading model has led to the articulation of three fundamental principles that can guide instructors as they design grading contracts customized for their specific teaching contexts and course outcomes.

Principle #1: Grading contracts emphasize student growth through achievement of learning goals, decouple learning from grades, and make course expectations transparent by clarifying relationships between assignment prompts, student effort, feedback, and course grades. Faculty

developing contracts or contract-informed grading approaches should take steps to ensure students experience these kinds of clear connections.

Principle #2: Grading contracts create opportunity structures by offering a variety of options (beyond the “B” baseline) for advancing course grades. Faculty developing contracts or contract-informed grading approaches should craft prompts that invite students to define and act on their intellectual ambitions.

Principle #3: Grading contracts foster a confident, efficacious writerly habitus by engaging students through targeted feedback, reflective commentary, and metacognitive activities that are built into assignments. Still, at least at first, some students experience discomfort and frustration in a contract grading environment, and faculty should plan to devote time in class to discuss how the approach works and why it might be beneficial to their writing.

### **Conclusion**

As our findings suggest, despite its promise, contract grading is not a one-size-fits-all solution to the inequities assessment can perpetuate. The flexible model we have piloted provides a framework that allows faculty to make choices as they design their contracts. For example, we provided two model contracts when we piloted our study in spring 2021 and developed a third model in response to faculty feedback. Similarly, while participants were required to adopt a baseline grade of B and offer additional opportunities for students to earn higher grades, they were encouraged to choose bonus options (or “additional contributions” or “opt-in assignments”) tailored to their classroom contexts. We believe this flexibility has been a critical element in helping our colleagues manage the challenging labor of developing grading contracts and adapting their courses to take full advantage of the approach’s affordances.

Even as we “refuse” the norms of conventional grading approaches, though, we remain cognizant of Craig’s (2021) warning that contract grading is an insufficient means for undoing the unjust structures embedded in our writing programs and universities. The students in our study did not universally endorse FCG, nor did they universally criticize conventional grading approaches. As we describe above, some students reported experiences of dissonance similar to those documented by Inman and Powell (2018) and Medina and Walker (2018). Holding these complexities in mind, we have endeavored in this article to maintain flexibility in characterizing the elements that constitute an efficacious writerly habitus. For some students in our study, efficacy emerged through reductions in anxiety and stress they experienced related to the absence of assignment grades. Others developed a sense of writerly identity by applying what Yancey (2017) has termed “the prior” of their existing writing skills and knowledge in new contexts. Still others approached the troublesome, liminal spaces opened up by FCG as a venue for pursuing new interests and ideas. Our study suggests that by making expectations more transparent, FCG offers a stronger opportunity for each individual student to reflect on and even determine their own repertoire of interests and writing strategies.

We might picture the efficacious writerly habitus nurtured by FCG as dancing along a line of choice and invention constituted by students’ relationships to their past experiences with writing and grades and the constraints of particular assignments, classes, and the university as a whole. As Yancey (2015) explains, FYW courses require students to confront the “inherently

paradoxical nature of writing—that we write both as individuals and as social beings” (p. 53). How we define ourselves as individuals and as a writing community affects the range of possibilities we create in our courses. This is the case regardless of the grading approach an instructor chooses. Stone et al. have argued that learning environments can be reconceived as “dynamic field[s]” in which intersubjective communities have the potential of transforming themselves (p. 76). We look forward to learning more about how FCG can further contribute to our individual and collective efforts and transform our writing classrooms to be more just, transparent, and humane.

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