

# On Neurodivergence/Disability and Labor- Based Grading

## A Response to Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) and Carillo (2021)

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**Abstract:** This essay responds to existing scholarship on neurodivergence/disability and labor-based grading, contending that current critiques define labor-based grading too narrowly and conflate the lack of quantitative grades with a lack of scaffolding. The essay further suggests that labor-based or other alternative assessment approaches, especially those which move away from authoritative, quality-based judgments of student work, invite students to express agency over and open a conversation about expectations around writing processes and habits. The article concludes by calling for additional research and conversation about how labor-based approaches may account for access and accessibility.

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*Keywords:* labor-based grading, neurodivergence, accessibility

As a writing assessment scholar with a focus on alternative assessment, I want to respond to a particular argument in recent scholarly work, especially in Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) and Carillo (2021): the claim that labor-based contract grading does not account for and may harm neurodivergent (ND) and/or disabled students.<sup>1</sup> In these scholars' work, the argument runs thus: labor-based contract grading, by neglecting the reality that time is not equally available to all students and removing the structure(s) and feedback that grades and grading provide, often makes it more difficult, not less, for ND/disabled students to succeed. Such students may require more robust support and/or more attention to their complex lived realities than labor-based approaches can provide.

This is an important argument, and I take seriously teachers' obligation to ensure our classes are universally accessible to students. I am grateful to Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) and to Carillo (2021) for opening conversations and individual reflections about how we support ND/disabled students in our assessment choices.<sup>2</sup>

Yet I have two concerns about this critique: that it does not acknowledge the variation and structure in labor-based contract grading models and that it bypasses the ways that labor-based approaches invite teachers to consider how to more fully support ND/disabled students. In the essay that follows, I outline my concerns more fully to complicate the emerging narrative that labor-based grading is dangerous for ND/disabled students and invite fellow scholars into (re)considering its benefits. I also briefly discuss my own approach, used at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, a predominately white public R1 university in the Southeast where I taught as a PhD candidate. This piece is a response essay, primarily intended for scholars invested in assessment literature and narrowly focused on engaging existing scholarship's model of labor-based contract grading and the related claims about its relationship with dis/ability and disabled students.<sup>3</sup> However, I hope it will lay the groundwork for more extended theoretical and empirical scholarship on writing assessment that engages, with precision, accuracy, and reflexivity, the potential for alternative forms of assessment to both support and interfere with student learning.

I focus here on scholarship addressing labor-based contract grading. By *labor-based contract grading*, I mean assessment models or structures that link students' credit, and their grade(s), not to (perceived) quality judgments of their writing but to their completion of assigned work for the course, or their labor over the term.<sup>4</sup> Following Virginia Schwarz's (2022) argument that grading contracts are a genre of assessment, not a single, specific thing, I see labor-based grading

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1 I focus on Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) and Carillo (2021) because at the time of this writing, these are the most prominent texts on neurodivergence/disability and labor-based grading—and, crucially, the two articles that kicked off extended interest in the relationship between alternative forms of assessment and disability.

2 Neurodivergence and disability often, though not always, overlap, depending on the form of neurodivergence and the identification preferences of individual neurodivergent people. Rather than *ND and/or disabled students*, I abbreviate to *ND/disabled*, gesturing towards the messy, incomplete overlap and divergence between these two identities.

3 For another response essay, consider Albracht et al. (2019) to Inman and Powell (2018). Albracht et al. highlighted, in Inman and Powell, the inappropriate use of the term "decolonization" and the lack of models to clarify the particular form(s) of labor-based contract grading discussed.

4 As I note in this paragraph, the terminology around alternative forms of assessment, including labor-based (contract) grading, is currently messy—the natural result of a period of intense focus and (re)thinking of our assessment practices, across our scholarly and teaching activities. For the purposes of this essay, I refer at times to labor-based grading (vs. labor-based contract grading) in the following pages, primarily for reasons of space; however, the phrase *labor-based grading* or *labor-based approaches* also emphasizes that the critique of these approaches as ableist focuses first on the labor required, and only secondarily on the contract as an element or extension of that labor and because, as I note, Inoue is increasingly not alone in emphasizing student activity over adherence to standardized American English, as part of the final grade. While *contract grading* is often invoked as an umbrella term, I avoid that usage here since, as I discuss later in the essay, it is possible to have versions of contract grading that maintain qualitative judgment of student work (Spidell & Thelin, 2006). (I also personally dislike the language of *contracts*, which I find too business-like.)

as an umbrella term, describing any approach that centers students' "labor or process"—doing the things, as I tell my own students—in the grading process over "teacher perception of quality" (p. 66). Many versions of labor-based grading ask students to produce required work—often just a few core assignments, the major projects for the course, but sometimes many more.<sup>5</sup> The best-known model for labor-based contract grading is Inoue's (2023), emphasizing "negotia[tions] with students," along with "labor logs, tracking documents, and labor instructions" (pp. 8–9). But at least thirteen additional scholarly texts on labor-based grading have appeared in print since Inoue first published his model in 2019.<sup>6</sup> Even when these writers do not publish their labor-based grading contract, we cannot assume that they follow, identically, the approach Inoue lays out in his book; the approach is inevitably adapted to meet teachers' pedagogical goals and institutional contexts. Some of the writers find labor-based approaches valuable; some critique them, but the point is that the more work there is on labor-based (contract) grading, the more variation is introduced. To give one example of such variation: Litterio (2018) at once frames her grading approach as labor-based, but also, drawing on Danielewicz and Elbow (2008), integrates collaborative and self-assessment; the emphasis on self-assessment distinguishes her approach from Inoue's (p. 3).<sup>7</sup> Her course further includes a multimodal project—a website (p. 3)—among its required assignments to prepare students for professional and technical writing.

My point here is twofold. One, as someone steeped in the scholarly literature on alternative assessment, I see labor-based (contract) grading as any assessment method which prioritizes students' work for the course over its perceived quality, especially quality as determined by the norms of standardized American English (SAE). Labor-based contract grading is distinct from conventional grading practices, which *do* rely on measuring student work against a standardized set of assumptions about what "good" academic writing looks like, which include and often center SAE or, put another way, white mainstream English (Baker-Bell, 2020). Two, labor-based contract grading is increasingly a big-tent, messy term, encompassing a wide variety of practices which may—or may not—reflect the choices that Inoue makes in his own labor-based contract grading model. This reality—that labor-based grading may encompass any approach that determines students grades on the basis of the things they do for the course, regardless of how closely it follows (or does not follow) Inoue's blueprint—complicates critiques of labor-based contract grading as creating an additional burden for ND/disabled students. In the next section, I sum up these critiques.

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I use both *alternative assessment* and *ungrading* to gesture towards the wide array of any alternative or substitutionary approach to conventional grading, which includes but is not limited to labor-based (contract) grading.

<sup>5</sup> My goal in this essay is to engage with critiques of labor-based grading rather than to engage Carillo's (2021) conceptualization of engagement-based grading. For clarity, I'll briefly note that my sense is that Carillo sees engagement-based grading as distinct from labor-based grading on two fronts: (a) student choice, with few or possibly no required assignments, replacing them with a menu of options that students may choose to engage; and (b) an increase in multimodality, to more widely accommodate varying dis/abilities (pp. 56–59).

<sup>6</sup> By my count, the following texts use the term "labor-based" to refer, in part or in whole, to the grading approach studied or described in the article: Bristol (2022), Gomes et al. (2020), Hosman (2023), Lafen and Sims (2021), Larson (2021), Lince (2022), Mallette and Hawks (2020), O'Meara (2022), Reardon and Guardado-Menjivar (2020), Santos (2023), Sims (2021, 2023), and Tinoco et al. (2020). There may be more scholarly work beyond this; for the purposes of this article, I have omitted from the tally works that acknowledge their indebtedness to labor-based grading but find engagement-based grading more descriptive (Klotz & Reardon, 2022) or works that emphasize contract grading as the key term, though nodding towards the role of labor in the contract (Klotz & Whithaus, 2021). Other than Litterio, I have also omitted scholarship that appeared prior to 2019, when the first edition of Asao Inoue's *Labor-Based Contract Grading* was published. (Throughout this article, I cite the second edition of this book, released 2022.) Finally, I have omitted my own work from this list.

<sup>7</sup> Litterio cites Inoue's work on community-based assessment pedagogy and race and grading contracts in her essay.

### What Is the Impact of Labor-Based Contract Grading on ND/Disabled Students?

Labor-based contract grading—especially Inoue’s (2022) approach, which kicked off the popularity of the model over the past few years—aims to acknowledge and partially correct for the disparate impacts of linguistic bias on students. While acknowledging the validity of this move, scholars such as Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) and Carillo (2021) suggest the model focuses on only one facet of students’ identity—their racial/raciolinguistic identity—ignoring disability and neurodivergence. As these scholars point out, labor-based grading typically assumes that students work at roughly equal paces, and in roughly equal ways, when in fact ND/disabled students often work in varying, often unpredictable ways and at varying, unpredictable times. This wide variation in turn makes it difficult to track their work through features such as (but not limited to) the labor logs that Inoue’s model relies on. Kryger and Zimmerman go on to suggest that the labor of adapting to a new method of grading—a method that requires students change the way they make decisions about how they spend their time and energy in the course—places an additional burden on ND/disabled students, who are accustomed to the rhythms of conventional grading, despite its flaws. This work is increasingly taken up by scholars to argue against contract grading and for other, intriguing models, such as student-led grading (Aull, 2022).

I concur with the arguments expressing concern about addressing ableism in our assessment models. As we adopt new assessment structures, it’s essential to consider how those assessments work—or don’t work—for students’ multifaceted, complex identities, which may combine race and dis/ability, among other (minoritized) identities. Ethically assessing our students requires that we not over-focus on any one facet of their identity but consider how identities combine holistically in students’ experience of the world (McKinney, 2018). Indeed, since BIPOC students are underdiagnosed as ND/disabled compared to their white peers (Aylward et al., 2021), engaging with ableism in our assessment practices is an extension of antiracism, not contradictory to it.

However, the reality that intersectional approaches are required for ethical grading practices makes how we frame discussions of dis/ability and neurodivergence in assessment particularly critical. I am concerned about our common framings of this argument—in particular, our definitions of labor-based grading and conceptualization of its structural function in the course—and I turn to these concerns next.

Before I do so, however, I want to acknowledge that since I began writing this essay in late 2022/early 2023, Inoue has himself published a response to disability-focused critiques: *Crippling Labor-Based Contract Grading* (2023). There, Inoue argues labor-based contract grading as he envisions it is not inherently ableist and may accommodate ND/disabled students through (among other features) its emphasis on reflecting on one’s own labor and its acceptance of failure as normal (pp. 20-21). Inoue also proposes several changes to his own labor-based approach, including exchanging the B-default for an A-default. Important as this work is, Inoue’s book reads to me as an extended response of its own, justifying his model and rethinking how it may answer the concerns that Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) and Carillo (2021) raise. My own emphasis in this essay lies elsewhere: I argue that the critique of ungrading as ableist emerges (in part) from conflating Inoue’s model with the increasingly wide variety of labor-based approaches circulating across our scholarship and classrooms. The more we move away from linking labor-based approaches with Inoue’s work specifically and see labor-based grading, or ungrading writ large, as a highly variable,

fluid set of practices, the easier we will find it to pinpoint ableist approaches in our choices and develop inclusive models of assessment.

In this vein, I turn to my next argument: the idea that labor-based contract grading is inherently ableist does not account for the increasing variation and diversity in ungrading models today.

### **Labor-Based Grading Does Not Inherently Disadvantage ND/Disabled Students**

As part of making the case that labor-based contract grading disadvantages ND/disabled students, scholars often target common features within Asao Inoue's approach in particular. Scholars point to a range of problem features, including the equivalence of major and minor assignments, meaning that projects (regardless of size) carry the same credit within the course (Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020; see also Inoue, 2022, p. 127); the use of a "gimme" to allow students to opt out of one assignment per semester (Carillo, 2021, p. 13; see also Inoue, 2022, pp. 137–137); negotiations and re-negotiations of required labor in the course (Carillo, 2021, pp. 29–30; see also Inoue, 2022, pp. 136–137); and labor logs, or students' personal records of the time they spend doing their coursework and their reflections on that work (Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020; see also Inoue, 2022, p. 135–136). All these features, scholars explain, take for granted that students work in normative or typical ways, at a normative or typical pace, and in the case of a "gimme," that students have a (very) limited number of health or family needs each semester. Put another way, these features enforce invisible standards about when and how work gets done, meaning that rather than measuring students' work against the ideal of standardized American English, they measure students' work—and students themselves—against neurotypical, abled ideals such as completing work at predictable times or speaking up in class. As Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) and Carillo (2021) explain, students who may not be able to (easily) track their time or prioritize assignments due to neurodivergence or disability, students who struggle to advocate for themselves in a public, group setting like negotiations over a contract, or students who prefer not to disclose disabilities or other social/personal needs may be disadvantaged by the use of such features.

I agree with these critiques. My concern is that in focusing critique of labor-based assessment on these particular features as representative of that form of assessment, scholars conflate the ways Inoue does labor-based grading with the broader, and expanding, use of labor-based grading beyond the model(s) he offers up. To give just one example, my own use of labor-based grading (which I discuss in more detail later in this essay) does not include any of the features most commonly objected to: I do not use labor logs; I distinguish between major and minor assignments for determining credit (students can miss some minor assignments and still pass or even receive an A in the course, and I specifically coach students to prioritize labor for major projects); I use a unilateral contract for the sake of time, with opportunity for student input through collaboratively generated rubrics and self-assessments; and I use flexible late and submission policies to ensure students are able to complete work without disclosing disabilities or out-of-class obligations, such as family or work responsibilities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In critiquing "gimmies," Carillo (2021) implies that a better approach would be adopting greater flexibility around when and how assignments can be submitted, which would not assume students work in normative ways, nor would it require students to disclose disabilities. Yet other scholars, such as Karen Costa (2022), argue that such flexibility can be disastrous for ND/disabled students, who often benefit from clearer structure. I call attention to this contrast because it illustrates the fuzzy boundaries around labor-based practices and the complexity of reading any one practice as inherently dangerous to or insufficient for ND/disabled students' success.

Distinguishing between features of labor-based grading as Inoue describes it and labor-based grading more generally is important. As I observe above, the further we get from the original publication of Inoue's work, the more crucial it is to acknowledge that labor-based contract grading is better thought of not as one single thing, offered up by one single scholar, but as a "genre" of assessment, or a set of "constell[ated]" choices which educators mix-and-match to meet students' needs, as well as their own (Schwarz, 2022, p. 65). If we—and I use the first-person plural here deliberately; my goal is not to target the scholars whose work I engage but to join and extend the ongoing conversation about neurodivergence, disability, and labor-based grading—fail to distinguish between the model Inoue outlines and labor-based grading broadly, we close off opportunities for teachers to take up and (re)design labor-based assessment in ways that marry non-authoritarian assessment to access and accessibility needs. Some features of labor-based contract grading, among them labor logs and "gimmies," may reproduce ableism by taking for granted that students need a limited number of (retroactive) accommodations per semester (Carillo, 2021, pp. 32–33). Other features may not. While Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) and Carillo (2021) have correctly critiqued the potential ableism of Inoue's approach, their work glosses over the reality that labor-based (contract) grading is an increasingly complex model and do not account for the multiple emergent methods of designing more inclusive, accessible forms of assessment, often captured with umbrella terms such as *labor-based grading*. As the conversation about access and assessment moves forward, my hope is that we can focus on being precise about the particular feature of our assessment model(s) causing the problem. This precision, along with clarity that Inoue's approach to labor-based grading is not the only or even, increasingly, the most common approach to labor-based grading, is important in developing versions of labor-based assessment that work towards both antiracism and anti-ableism.

I am not arguing that we should discard Inoue's approach. Nor am I arguing that its individual components, such as labor logs, are inevitably inequitable. Recently, scholars have hypothesized alternative versions of labor logs that may dilute their demand that students meet particular quantitative expectations for labor (Beam et al., 2023), while Inoue (2023) himself has offered up a defense of labor logs, noting that he "do[es] not use labor logs as a way to grade students" (p. 28).<sup>9</sup> My point focuses on how we *frame* our critique of labor-based grading in the scholarship. Asserting that labor-based grading perpetuates ableism, while using as the primary evidence of this ableism features best known as belonging to Inoue's model, muddies the waters of the conversation, making it unclear whether the problem—the existence of ableism and discrimination in our assessment practices—lies with labor-based grading generally, or with particular features of a particular version of labor-based grading. I argue that we scholars need to commit to framing labor-based grading—or, if we use a different term, ungrading or alternative assessment—as a fluid, diverse approach that increasingly may or may not look like Inoue's model, depending on teachers' institutional contexts and pedagogical commitments. By focusing our critique on specific features, which are not inherent to labor-based grading, we can cultivate more precise, actionable discussion that promotes scholars' efforts to move beyond conventional forms of grading towards

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<sup>9</sup> This is an argument about how we frame and discuss the limitations of labor-based contract grading, not an argument about whether labor logs are, or are not, ableist. That argument is beyond the scope of this short response piece. I personally am of two minds about the practice. I believe that ND/disabled students as well as neurotypical, able-bodied ones benefit from reflecting on their own working habits. I have not yet encountered a version of weekly logs or labor tracking, especially over the course of the entire semester and open to critique by teachers, that does not imply some surveillance or normative standard.

more equitable, alternative versions of labor-based grading and/or writing assessment, anti-ableist as well as antiracist.

A second limitation to arguments that labor-based grading may undermine ND/disabled students' success is the claim that labor-based approaches collapse the structural supports provided by grades. Citing Inman and Powell (2018), Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) point out that ND students in particular may rely on grades as "recognizable measures of 'correct' labor, teacher expectations, and academic performance"—in other words, a handy way to gauge where they are in the course. An ND student who logs onto Canvas and sees an A knows roughly their standing in the course; the same student, enrolled in a course which uses labor-based grading, may feel uncertain and off-kilter without, in Kryger and Zimmerman's (2020) words, the "predictability and clarity" of a grade. I appreciate the reminder to prioritize students' needs over any innovative plan we may adopt for writing assessment. As we consider whether and how to move beyond grades and grading, we have to grapple with the load-bearing function that grades play for our students.

At the same time, I want us as teachers to recognize that grades' conventional function as a shorthand for students' standing in the course, and/or for the quality of their writing, is deceptive. Grades cannot, in fact, reliably serve this function (see Bauman, 1997). A relatively recent invention, over the 1920s and 30s grades were used to discipline first-year writing (FYW) students into the use of standardized American English, ranking them against that standard; grades did not serve to document student learning. I found in my own research that faculty leaders and administrators in the 1930s at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville aimed for particular grade distributions—especially the bell curve, then seen as a marker of scientific objectivity—as an indicator of rigor and prestige and went so far as to urge departments to assign lower grades (see Von Bergen, 2023; see also Boyd, 1998; Elliot, 2005; Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Given this susceptibility to institutional pressures, grades are not a valid measure of students' writerly development. Research on grades/grading practices at the time suggest that even in ostensibly objective subjects, such as geometry, assigned grades varied widely from one grader to another (O'Hagen, 1997, p. 4). As I note elsewhere (Von Bergen, 2023), grades function less to mark students' learning than to signal university prestige and students' production, in English courses especially, of white mainstream English (Baker-Bell, 2020). I am sympathetic to the value of the informative role that grades purport to play for students; students do indeed need to be able to gauge their standing during the course, not only at the end. Yet given how historically unreliable grades are as such a gauge, and steeped in discriminatory linguistic ideologies, I suggest that a better move is to be up front with students about the evaluative deficiencies of grades as part of our reason for adopting new assessment methods.

I would add here much of what allows conventional grading to masquerade as feedback about students' performance is "cop shit." While "cop shit" often conjures up pedagogical moves such as (for instance) penalizing students for lateness, the term as Jeffery Moro (2020) defines it extends to measuring students against established metrics, often via surveilling their behavior. When we grade students' work, assigning it a certain number of points or a particular grade based on its alignment with the construct, or fiction, of academic English, we position ourselves as an authority or judge, and students as falling short of the standards we set.<sup>10</sup> (For more on gradebooks

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<sup>10</sup> I discuss the role of labor-based grading or ungrading as offering an alternative to top-down, hierarchical practices elsewhere (Von Bergen, 2023).

as surveillance see Johnson, 2021.) Engaging in cop shit to alleviate the amount of labor we ask of students, or the uncertainty and anxiety they experience due to a labor-based model, is risky, as it potentially perpetuates another sort of harm, subordinating students' agency and choice as writers to standards set by discriminatory institutions. Teachers may reasonably decide that the additional labor a labor-based assessment approach asks is too much for ND/disabled students and maintain conventional grading practices instead. But it's important to be clear that decision is not a neutral one; it comes at a cost, of leaving the course enmeshed in a particular arrangement of surveillance and hierarchy that may also affect students' agency and growth as writers.

### **Labor-Based Grading May Challenge Neurotypical or Ableist Expectations for Labor**

I would also like to suggest that labor-based assessment may open reflection on our parts as educators about the ableist standards built into expectations about what so-called effective writing and an effective writing process looks like. Noting an emphasis on *racial* diversity in labor-based grading scholarship, Carillo (2021) calls for greater attention to the interaction between the expectations writing courses place on students and their complicated, overlapping identities—their socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, and family obligations, among others. Using labor-based grading can, I believe, offer a way into these conversations, surfacing and asking educators to confront unarticulated standards about what work they expect students to do and how they expect students to do it. Specifically, by shifting the grading mechanism away from our own authoritative judgments as the locus of perceived quality in the course, labor-based contract grading opens space for us as teachers to reevaluate what good writing turns out looking like and how students get there. I describe this process in the paragraphs that follow.

In her study of a labor-based technical communication course, Litterio (2018) argues that labor-based contract grading, combined with collaborative and especially self-assessment, gives students “ownership” over their projects, including the standards or criteria they aim for.<sup>11</sup> This argument is a key theme in the literature, as labor-based assessment, though it often leaves teachers some power to decide whether students' work meets core expectations, typically gives students a much looser rein in determining what good writing looks like, situated in their own rhetorical context(s) and background and identity as writers.

From there, it is a small step for us as teachers to consider how we may also center students' agency, and their own sense of their embodied needs and working habits, in deciding how they will go about producing quality writing. ND/disabled students may struggle to meet standard or typical labor requirements in composition courses—for instance, required brainstorming strategies such as “mind map[ping]” or indeed any “requir[ed] sequence of assignments” (Birdwell & Bayley, 2022, p. 232) leading up to a finished paper. Although we educators may be willing to accommodate students who deviate from these requirements, our willingness may depend on students' own willingness to disclose their ND/disabled status, at our request (or too often, demand). Such disclosures are “invasive” and sometimes “illegal” (Birdwell & Bayley, 2022, p. 222).

My point, in bringing up the example of ND/disabled students' possible difficulties with mind mapping, is not to call into question common labor(ing) practices such as brainstorming. My point instead is that the work of designing an assessment sequence or structure that surrenders control over what quality writing looks like, also invites us as instructors to consider how we might

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<sup>11</sup> Importantly, Litterio has an earlier study (2016) of labor-based grading in a technical writing classroom, in which she finds the opposite—the students perceive labor-based grading as confusing. I am intrigued by the progression of student input Litterio finds in her repeated studies and feel that the change is worth drawing attention to.

surrender control over what quality prewriting or drafting looks like, or quality participation and engagement in the course—or even what meaningful, logical, or persuasive rhetorical production looks like (Price, 2011). Put another way, neurodivergent students often work at different rhythms and in different ways than their neurotypical peers, producing different kinds of texts. The work of dismantling or undermining a singular, qualitative standard for good writing makes possible challenges to singular standards around good writing—in other words, processes (such as brainstorming) and characteristics (such as rhetorical power or logic) that we associate with good writing.

I want to be clear that while this work requires us to acknowledge variation among learners, I am not arguing that labor-based forms of grading allow us (merely) to “accommodate different learning styles” (Dolmage, 2015). I am arguing that coming to terms with the fact that grades/grading discriminate against African American Vernacular English (AAVE), along with other raciolinguistically diverse vernaculars, puts us as educators in a position to *also* grapple with the fact that grades/grading discriminate against disabilities, including ND/disabled people’s agency, rhetorical styles and writing/work habits. Granting students’ agency to use, if they choose, their own language(s) in their (academic) writing pushes us to likewise grant ND/disabled students’ agency, to approach their writing via pathways aligned with their own ways of being. Of course, many ND/disabled students are also BIPOC and may use AAVE, or other vernaculars, which multiplies the urgency of adopting non-punitive assessment approaches that honor students’ agency in their writing choices and languages. The work I describe here is often carried out through universal design for learning (UDL), albeit UDL approached not as a checklist for “maxing out all modes of teaching, all of the time” (Dolmage, 2015) without even mentioning the word “disability” but as a process of (re)considering and expanding the ways students take in the material, engage with the course, and ultimately, represent or communicate the results of their learning.

Such work is not identical with or even parallel to the work of (re)considering our racialized standards for good writing, of course. But neither can we ethically engage in the work of expanding, and dismantling, standards for good writing to include diverse raciolinguistic practices without also (re)considering our *abled* standards for good writing practices and engagement in the course, and expanding, as much as possible, the expectations we hold about what writing habits look like, when students do the work, and what that work turns out looking like. Reflecting on our assessment practices urges us as educators and scholars to challenge “compulsory able-bodiedness” (McRuer, 2006, p. 8) embedded throughout not only our grading practices (whether conventional or labor-based) but our very assumptions about writing. In effect, such reflecting urges us to root out and challenge the assumption that good writing is a static and standardized thing, a sort of Platonic ideal, and to replace it with a commitment to seeing and judging good writing as situated in students’ own embodied and en-minded experiences.

One particularly strong approach that I want to highlight as an example of offering such flexibility is Gomes et al.’s (2020) approach to participation, which urges instructors to rethink commonplaces about students’ engagement and learning in the classroom. While Gomes et al. find that a labor-based approach increases the opportunity for “student choice,” including the choice to use diverse composing modalities, participation remains a sticking point, as “standard[ized]” expectations—attendance and late policies, both features that Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) and

Carillo (2021) rightly critique—“privilege[s] able-bodied and neurotypical students.”<sup>12</sup> Gomes et al. conclude that such policies are at odds with labor-based grading broadly and re-envision participation, allowing students to receive credit from choosing among a menu of options, such as completing extra peer reviews or writing discussion questions. Additionally, though Gomes et al. do not mention it, offering up a menu of options decreases the (perceived) need for teachers to ask that students disclose (mental) health needs, a violation of students’ privacy which Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) correctly call out as a concern in Inoue’s labor-based contract grading model.<sup>13</sup>

Key to my argument is that for Gomes et al. (2020), the reimagining of participation in varied, accessible ways that better accommodate ND/disabled students stems from earlier engagement using labor-based grading, particularly the sense that contracts prioritize and allow for students’ agency. A reworking of labor-based grading—rather than, say, a reversion to conventional grading practices—makes possible an assessment approach that acknowledges and seeks to dismantle singular standards around raced, abled expectations for good writing. Illustrating my earlier claim that labor-based grading is increasingly a fluid practice, which may or may not include particular abled or discriminatory moves, Gomes et al.’s expansive approach to participation demonstrates that because labor-based grading is inherently invested in asking us as teachers to surrender control of what good writing turns out looking like, it is also a powerful tool for inviting us to consider how we can respect students’ agency and privacy related to their ND/disability status. Ultimately, our goal as educators is to chart a path forward to designing expansive and flexible assignments that give students control over the processes or steps they use to produce that writing, based on their personal as well as rhetorical needs, whether disclosed or undisclosed.

Certainly, there are many versions of labor-based grading out there that continue to measure students’ work against singular or narrow notions of quality and do not invite us as educators to reconsider the (ableist) standards of work and work processes we measure students against. But by granting the premise that the quality standards that typically govern writing assessment are linked to discriminatory expectations, labor-based grading leaves room to have conversations with students about what practices or ideals they want to strive for, in the context of their own identity, audience, and goals; and it encourages teachers to be open to students’ diverse ways of doing the work. Educators have in fact used labor-based approaches to invite students into conversations about expectations and work processes across contexts, for instance in community colleges (Blackstock and Exton [2014] cite Danielewicz and Elbow’s [2009] approach in their own contract). Despite the legitimacy of critiques, then, labor-based grading is positioned to invite both student and teacher into questioning ableist norms about how the work gets done, in their particular contexts, by the people who dwell there.

I draw out participation in anti-ableist versions of labor-based grading as an example of my larger point, that (re)constructing writing assessment along labor-based lines may invite

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12 Carillo (2021) gestures towards Gomes et al.’s (2020) participation credit as a step in the right direction but expresses concern that overall the course is too locked into a “normative concept of labor” (p. 58)—a critique that confuses me a little, given that Gomes et al. describe the use of varying “modes of participation labor,” which students are free to choose from among completing participation-associated tasks.

13 This essay is a critique of the idea that labor-based approaches are necessarily ableist, grounded in the argument that by now such approaches extend (far) beyond Inoue’s model; it is not a critique of Inoue’s recent book on the potential anti-ableism of his own model. I do want to observe, however, that the privacy concerns at stake give me pause when Inoue (2023), quoting Mia Mingus, describes “access intimacy” (pp. 33–35) and wonders about fostering opportunities for disclosure and preventing forced disclosure. In making choices about our assessment approaches, it is important to honor robust notions of privacy and non-disclosure.

teachers—especially if they do not adopt Inoue’s model, or any other model, wholesale but adapt the model to their own teaching preferences and institutional contexts—to identify and reevaluate potentially ableist standards for the work students do in the course and how they do it.

### A Model

None of the authors writing on labor-based grading and disability suggest returning to conventional forms of grading, measuring students against a singular qualitative standard normed to white mainstream English (Baker-Bell, 2020). Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) rely on a combination of specs grading (a model attentive to students’ completion of certain kinds of tasks; see Nilson, 2014), “flexible deadlines,” and regular “check-ins” between students and teachers, while Carillo (2021) proposes engagement-based grading, which “offer[s] a range of ways that students might engage with the course” and permits “students [to] choose [the] forms of engagement” which count towards their grade (p. 56). Assessment scholars such as Inoue have made a powerful argument that conventional grading disadvantages students from raciolinguistically diverse backgrounds. Fully recognizing students’ multiple identities requires us not simply to avoid or revert to conventional grading to avoid perpetuating ableism but to think critically about how to (re)design antiracist forms of assessment to support ND/disabled students within our institutional contexts/teacherly needs.

Before I close, then, I want to briefly discuss the assessment approach I use in my courses—a version of labor-based grading that allows for, and pushes me to meet, ND/disabled students’ needs through straightforward, flexible requirements. My goal here is not to advocate for my own approach, simply to illustrate the ways that labor-based approaches may fall outside the scope of the model Inoue popularized (at least, pre-*Crippling Labor-Based Grading*) and invite ongoing revision to support students’ diverse needs. A copy of my labor-based approach appears at the bottom of this essay (see Supplemental Materials). I used this particular version in a 200-level professional writing course at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. However, its core elements—listing quantitative expectations for certain kinds of labor, prioritizing large assignments over small ones, and allowing students flexibility through the participation credit—served as a model for my assessment choices, including in FYW courses, at my subsequent academic positions at teaching-focused institutions, where I was often working with students from minoritized populations, first-gen students, and students from other disadvantaged backgrounds.

In my assessment approach, I shift the mechanism for calculating grades from my own qualitative judgments rendered as points or percentages to the quantitative work students do for the course. Each assignment students submit either passes and receives credit, or it does not pass, and students are asked to redo it, until it does. As I explain to students, “If you do the things, you’ll get an A.” Students who do fewer things (so to speak) may receive a B or C. I display these requirements in a grading matrix or table, listing the requirements for each letter grade in a vertical column.<sup>14</sup> Students need to complete all or most of the items in that column to receive the associated grade; students who complete fewer assignments, spread across two or three columns, may receive a plus or a minus version of the grade which most closely reflects the work they’ve

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<sup>14</sup> I got the idea/format for the matrix from Jennifer Eidum (n.d.), who refers to it as a “grade chart.” Eidum uses a series of columns, each associated with a particular grade and filled with the labor or work required of students to earn that grade, in her TESOL and FYW courses.

completed. (For instance, a student who receives four checks in the A column but two in the B column would likely receive an A-.)

My approach, nevertheless, makes several moves that I hope accommodate ND/disabled students. I use an A-default, versus the B-default Inoue used up until his most recent book (see Inoue, 2022, 2023), so that students need to complete minimal additional labor, beyond the core major projects, to succeed fully in the course. The approach is unilateral, not negotiated, so that students with disabilities that prevent them from (easily) speaking up in class are not required to participate, especially early in the term.

I also use a participation credit (Gomes et al., 2022) to invite students to engage the course in ways that reflect their embodied needs, strengths, and interests. The use of a participation credit also allows me to recognize the labor, or work, of both reading and regular attendance, without penalizing students who do not complete these activities. Students who do the reading (and submit the reading responses) and attend regularly receive credit, while students who do not meet these requirements receive no penalty and may choose to earn full participation credit in another way, such as by interviewing a professional in their field (presumably, someone they know and may feel more comfortable talking with than in a class setting).<sup>15</sup> The participation credit is key for me, since flexibility around reading, attendance, and other forms of engagement allows ND/disabled students to join in class in ways comfortable for them without disclosing a disability or suffering a penalty for non-disclosure.

Starting in Spring 2024, after receiving my PhD and taking an appointment at a teaching-intensive university, I extended Gomes et al. (2022)'s approach to other assignments, increasing the range of ways that students could "do the thing." Self-assessments, for instance, could be submitted as a voice memo, instead of as a written text, and I provided guidelines for both written length (about a page) and audiorecorded length (about two minutes). I retain core required assignments intended to teach students certain composing skills, such as the self-assessments, which hone students' metacognition and agency as writers, the increased flexibility around what those assignments students a range of pathways towards meeting the goals and accommodate (hopefully) a much wider range of needs.

Another choice I make in using labor-based grading is to communicate clearly with students about their overall standing in the course, based on the grading matrix. As Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) note, removing or downplaying grades can cause stress for ND/disabled students who may depend on the "predictability and clarity" of a grade and may struggle to adapt to labor-based approaches. I have already discussed a theoretical response to this concern, the importance of recognizing that grades are an inherently unreliable measure of quality or performance and may perpetuate surveillance. Here, my point is more practical, that regular, early grade updates can alleviate some of this stress and additional labor for students. Immediately after I finish assessing students' work on their first major project, marking each submission "pass" or "not pass," I return to students a copy of the grading matrix filled out as though their work on the first project characterizes their work all term. For instance, if a student passes the peer review, rubric discussion, and first major project, I fill out the A column in the matrix, return it to the student, and say, "If you keep up the work you've been doing so far, you're on track to receive an

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<sup>15</sup> Reading responses are short and assessed entirely quantitatively: Do students submit a response? If there is a required length (say, 3 sentences), do students get close to that? If the answer is "yes," students receive credit, regardless of whether I think their work is "good" or even correct. This method of assessing reading responses ensures that students are being credited for the labor of participation, vs. the quality of their work for the course.

A in the course.” My hope is that these conversations re-introduce a measure of predictability and clarity into my labor-based approach, by showing students how to use the grading matrix to gauge where they are in the course and enabling them to make decisions about their work going forward.

I would also add that talking with students regularly not only about their standing in the course but the reasons we choose to use labor-based approaches—and its relationship to more conventional assessment practices across the university—may help minimize possible student “confusion” (p. 145) and promote smooth(er) “transfer” (p. 145) from one course to the next, both concerns that Sherri Craig (2021) raises and which may pose particular challenges for ND/disabled students who may not as easily or quickly pick up on subtext. When I talk with students who use, or may use, AAVE or another vernacular, about my assessment approach, I stress the validity of AAVE and other vernaculars and foreground my own desire that ungrading allow for greater equity and pedagogical creativity; I rely on videos introducing the link between language and identity (CrashCourse, 2020) and essays such as “Dressed but Not Tryin’ to Impress” (Hull et al., 2018) to spark students’ recognition that language and identity intersect and that folks with diverse ways of languaging or writing may be harmed by rules for standardized, so-called professional discourse. At the same time, I aim to be up front with students that I cannot speak for the institution as a whole and that my colleagues’ choices about grading vary, often widely; while students are not required to perform standardized American English to receive a high grade in my course and instead are free to lean into ways of writing and meaning-making that reflect identities, they may be asked to do this in other courses. My hope is that by talking with students about the goal(s) of labor-based assessments and its impact(s) on their learning, we can maintain assessment practices that suit our own pedagogical aims while also ensuring that students are not caught off-guard, surprised, or misled about grading practices or the (lack of) institutional supports they may encounter during their college career.

My approach is also missing several features that (I hope) make it work better for ND/disabled students—in particular, labor logs and penalties for late work. As I observed above, labor logs—often rightly critiqued for assuming students’ labor, or work, is easily trackable and meets certain standards—are a feature of Asao Inoue’s model, but they are not an inherent or necessary feature of labor-based approaches generally. I hope that without required labor tracking, students feel freer to write in ways and at times comfortable to them, focusing not on meeting arbitrary labor norms but on completing the project. Neurotypical standards about how work gets done will persist, of course, but without labor logs, those standards will be at least partially defanged, so that students feel less pressure to conform to them.

I also have no penalties for late work. With the exception of a few assignments which need to be submitted at a particular time or in a particular order (for instance, peer reviews must be submitted prior to the relevant paper, and self-assessments need to be submitted within a day or two of the associated paper), all work is accepted for full credit through the last day of term.<sup>16</sup> I still use due dates and stress the importance of meeting these deadlines to students, which provides structure for students who thrive on it (see Costa, 2022). But if students fail to meet those deadlines, nothing happens; they can still submit the work and receive full credit through the end of the term, which grants flexibility to those ND/disabled students who need it.

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<sup>16</sup> Many fellow teachers express concern that this policy will result in a flood of late work during the last week of class. I acknowledge the legitimacy of this question—we teachers also need to develop structures accommodating to our own needs—but speaking for myself, this result has never occurred in the years I’ve been using a version of this policy.

One final note about my assessment approach: I have designed my labor-based approach to minimize the concern that this method of assessment requires substantial additional labor or stress for students (see Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020).<sup>17</sup> I do not question the accuracy of those who report that labor-based grading burdens students, of course. I do wonder to what degree the additional burden placed on students by labor-based grading is a consequence of using a model such as Inoue's, which (through its design, its use of labor logs, and its use of features such as "gimmes" that students additionally need to track) demands from students a great deal of time and intellectual labor. While a full consideration of what features of labor-based grading may minimize its demands on students is beyond the scope of this piece, I would point to several key features of my own approach as key—among them, the A-default, the grading matrix, and the centering of passing the major assignments as passing the course. In contrast with multi-page contracts, such as Inoue's (see Inoue, 2022, pp. 325–331), my own labor-based contract is rendered on a single page which students can easily read and work through on their own; additionally, as I described above, I take care at midterms to walk students through how their work thus far in the term maps onto the grading matrix, teaching them how to use the matrix to calculate their standing in the course. In light of my earlier arguments that using labor-based grading may invite educators to (re)develop their approach within a framework of universal design, I suggest that the burden may stem in part not from labor-based forms of assessment but from the ways we design our labor-based approach and communicate it to students.

By no means am I arguing that my approach is fully anti-ableist. Far from it. Each semester, I reflect on multiple, often varied data points—among them, what my own goals for the course and its assessment model are, what students found most helpful (and most confusing) in supporting their learning, and any recent literature on labor-based grading that suggests promising new directions for my own classroom and teaching contexts—and make changes to the approach for the next term, so that my models remains fluid and centered on student needs. Over the next few semesters, I am concerned going forward with mediating my own labor-based approach with student input and self-assessment, including teaching self-assessment directly, as a way to allow students to front their own needs and working/learning preferences in the assessment process. No grading system, of course, can be entirely nondiscriminatory; the best we can hope for is an approach that reduces the harm (for more on alternative assessment as *harm reduction*, see Fernandes et al., 2025).

My point in laying out my own approach is to illustrate my earlier claims: that labor-based grading is a complex, multi-faceted form of assessment, not a singular model, and that the work of disinvesting from racist language ideologies in our assessment design may also invite us as educators to disinvest from ableist and neurotypical standards. In this, I aim to frame the work of labor-based grading as an ongoing, reflective process that pushes us as teachers not to adopt a model and dust off our hands but to work through how our design choices open, or close off, opportunities for all our students (see Poe et al., 2018, on assessment as opportunity structures).

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17 Other writers have argued that labor-based grading, or ungrading, demands additional labor from faculty, especially pre-tenure faculty (see Craig, 2021; McCloud, 2023). These are important claims and worth accounting for in our educational and administrative decisions; for instance, as an administrator and a colleague in writing studies, I take care to prioritize instructors' agency in choosing the assessment approach that works for them and for their course. However, because these arguments largely center faculty experiences, vs. students', they are beyond the scope of this essay.

## Conclusion

When we grade students using conventional methods, we are often (not always) asking them to inhabit a place of discomfort, at the intersection of power and evaluation. Combine (critical) feedback with authority, hold students to standards they cannot meet and that may or may not even be visible, and students may struggle to communicate clearly about their work and needs.

Scholars such as Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) and Carillo (2021) have made a powerful argument about the ways that labor-based grading, especially as presented in Inoue's work, reproduces these invisible standards and interferes with their success. I am grateful for the point.

As we continue the conversation, I hope that we can make room for its other half, exploring ways to open up labor-based grading, along with related alternatives such as self-assessment, in accessible ways. Our choice(s) about assessment are not between a newfangled, potentially-dangerous method of assessment such as labor-based grading and a neutral, pre-existing practice; instead, we are choosing among several options, various points on the spectrum from top-down, quality-based approaches to decentralized, non-authoritarian assessment and variations on labor-based grading or related alternatives to conventional grading.

Whatever we choose, as educators, we are called to two commitments: to recognize the autonomy and capacity of our ND/disabled students (Yergeau, 2017), and to ongoing, reflexive interrogation about how we can root out ableism and normative standards in our own practice (Lewiecki-Wilson et al., 2008). The process of developing an accessible, supportive assessment practice is ongoing and iterative; this work is not done in a semester, a year, or even five years. (Re)considering our assessment practices to move away from conventional standards that privilege normative ways of writing and towards alternatives—whether labor-based grading or some other approach—that open conversation about the many ways we do writing, and what that writing turns out looking like, is a good place to start—crucial to supporting all our students, and ourselves as educators and scholars.

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