

Continuing the Conversation

A Response to Megan Von Bergen's "On Neurodivergence/Disability and Labor-Based Grading"

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I appreciate Megan Von Bergen's (2025) response to my book titled *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading* (2021). Working with her on projects exploring alternative assessment practices over the last few years has been both rewarding and instructive. I am grateful for the opportunity to keep the conversation going. In what follows, I respond to Von Bergen's critiques, ultimately advancing a deeper consideration of a central disciplinary issue that, like alternative grading practices, is intricately bound up with the politics of standardization.

In "On Neurodivergence/Disability and Labor-Based Grading," Von Bergen (2025) points out that *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading* (2021) "target[s] common features within Asao Inoue's approach in particular" and "glosses over the reality that labor-based (contract) grading is an increasingly complex model" (pp. 5-6). Moreover, she notes that I don't "account for the multiple emergent methods of designing more inclusive, accessible forms of assessment, often captured with umbrella terms such as *labor-based grading*" (Von Bergen, 2025, p. 6). Von Bergen is absolutely right. In fact, I focus on Inoue's approach to labor-based grading precisely for the same reason Von Bergen focuses on my and Kryger and Zimmerman's (2020) scholarship, which she explains as follows: "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 assessment and disability" (p. 2, note 1). Inoue's scholarship (2019) on labor-based grading was the most prominent at the time I wrote *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading* and, along with his 2019 CCCC's Chair's Address, unequivocally "kicked off extended interest" in the subject.

Referencing *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading* (2021), as well as Kryger and Zimmerman's (2020) "Neurodivergence and Intersectionality in Labor-Based Grading Contracts," Von Bergen (2025) shares a related critique about conflation, registering her "concern...that...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" (p. 5). This is a valid concern, particularly in the present, but it is less relevant when applied to the earlier period under discussion wherein Inoue's (2019) model was the most prominent. With the benefit of hindsight our critical lenses sharpen, but that doesn't change the initial conditions.

Von Bergen's (2025) critique of the monograph's limited scope is confounding, too, not only because *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading* (2021) is necessarily brief to remain consistent with the other books in the Current Arguments in Composition series but because Von Bergen herself registers the limits of certain genres in her very own piece, writing, for example, that "an argument about whether labor logs are, or are not, anti-ableist. . . is beyond the scope of this short response piece" (p. 6, note 9).

In addition to critiquing the scope of *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading* (2021), Von Bergen (2025) notes that I reference only Lisa M. Literrio's 2016 study of labor-based grading and neglect Literrio's 2018 follow-up study. As Von Bergen details, the 2016 study finds that "students perceive labor-based grading as confusing" (p. 8, note 11) while the later study revealed 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" (p. 8). I am grateful to Von Bergen for pointing out this oversight. I was unaware of that follow-up study.

Von Bergen also takes issue with my treatment of Matt Gomes et al.'s (2020) conceptualization of participation:

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. (p. 10, note 12)

Perhaps I should have aligned myself more with Gomes et al. at the time. I have since had a chance to further develop (and revise) the concept of engagement-based grading in a range of other, more capacious venues. As I continue to do so, I will return to Gomes et al.'s (2020) discussion and use these expansive formats and genres to think in more nuanced ways alongside these scholars.

In fact, engaging Von Bergen's (2025) critique of *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading* (2021) has led me to think about the range of formats and genres we have available to us in writing studies and the problems associated with the privileging of the single-authored monograph. I agree with Von Bergen that “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” (p. 6). Moreover, Von Bergen observes that:

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. (pp. 4-5)

These are the very reasons that immediately following the publication of *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading* (2021) I began work on a project that attempts to do just this—the special issue on ungrading of the journal *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* (2024), to which I invited Von Bergen to contribute. That special issue would give me the requisite space to expand the conversation by collecting and publishing variations of ungrading practices, including labor-based (contract) grading. Although not published until 2024, the proposal for what would become this special issue was written in 2022, less than a year after the publication of *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading*.

Unfortunately—and this is by no means exclusive to writing studies—editorial work is often undervalued, especially when compared to single-authored monographs.¹ However, special issues, collections of essays, and similar publications wherein different versions of labor-based grading approaches exist side by side have the potential to do the kind of work Von Bergen (2025) describes—and more. Beyond just “acknowledg[ing] 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” (Von Bergen, 2025, p. 6), these kinds of publications model as much. Moreover, the special issue

1 The CCCC Position Statement “Scholarship in Rhetoric, Writing, and Composition: Guidelines for Faculty, Deans, and Chairs” (2018) explains:

Scholarship in the field includes a wide variety of areas of inquiry, methods, and publication genres/media . . . The work of rhetoric and composition teachers and researchers appears in professional and popular print and online publications, single- or coauthored monographs, edited collections, and textbooks. (paras. 5, 11)

However, my experience serving as a regular reviewer of tenure and promotion files for candidates in writing studies from institutions across the country suggests that the single-authored scholarly monograph remains the gold standard for promotion and tenure. While the field's position statement articulates its values, writing studies has not been able to successfully challenge the long-established institutional criteria that ultimately determine candidates' professional outcomes.

I edited and other publications like it don't just "account for the multiple emergent methods of designing more inclusive accessible forms of assessment" (Von Bergen, 2025, p. 6) but exemplify them through the inclusion of multiple voices and, by extension, multiple methods. This is one of the affordances of special issues and edited collections.

The special issue of *Pedagogy* (Carillo, 2024) not only expands the scope of my single-authored monograph, but it can serve as a model for the kind of work Von Bergen (2025) calls for, as well as a reminder that editorial work is scholarship. As a discipline, we must acknowledge that editing constitutes serious, scholarly activity.² If we continue to undervalue editorial work, we foreclose opportunities to engage with the genres that are most conducive to registering and showcasing the field's diverse approaches to assessment, including labor-based (contract) grading. Sites that already acknowledge the variation that exists among models of labor-based (contract) grading, like *Pedagogy's* special issue on ungrading, can provide a blueprint for what other sites might look like, as well as for the editorial work involved in selecting and framing newly emerging forms of labor-based (contract) grading.

Recognizing the value of other genres, including this very dialogue in which Von Bergen and I are engaged, as well as special issues and edited collections, would open the discipline to more sites where multiple voices and multiple methods can exist alongside each other. In terms of labor-based (contract) grading, these kinds of publications have the capacity to showcase the various models of labor-based grading that in Von Bergen's (2025) words "marry non-authoritarian assessment to access and accessibility needs" (p. 6). In representing a polyvocality that captures the differences across approaches to labor-based (contract) grading, these sites would address Von Bergen's call for the discipline to recognize that "Inoue's approach to labor-based grading is not the only or even, increasingly, the most common approach" (p. 6).

It has been exciting to see other approaches to labor-based (contract) grading emerge, including the three variations (Gabay & Smith, 2024; Larson, 2024; Nastal, 2024) I selected and published in the special issue of *Pedagogy*, representing 33% of that issue. Together these articles demonstrate that labor-based (contract) grading, in Von Bergen's (2025) words, is "a highly variable, fluid set of practices," (pp. 4-5) sometimes even in a single classroom. This is not something I could have demonstrated on my own (certainly not as well as this diverse set of voices on the subject) or something that fell within the limited scope of *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading* (2021). I appreciate the opportunity I had as guest editor to showcase articles by fellow teacher-scholars engaged in this important work and to highlight in the introduction how their diverse voices reflect evolving forms of alternative assessment practices.³

Ultimately, I am grateful to Von Bergen for helping me make the connection between the limitations of traditional grading and the limitations of the single-authored scholarly monograph. Just as grading that is based on a subjective standard of quality prohibits access and silences many students, the discipline's prioritizing of the single-authored monograph in tenure and other systems forecloses the polyvocality that the discipline purports to support. Writing studies must embrace alternatives to the single-authored scholarly monograph just as it must embrace alternatives to traditional grading practices. I look forward to the day when we stop treating the alternative as the exception and start seeing it as the standard. That might be a standard worth supporting.

² Salvatori and Donahue's (2016) "Guest Editors' Introduction: Guest Editing as a Form of Disciplinary Probing" offers a rare example of an argument for the value of guest editing.

³ I recognize that my tenured position affords me a level of privilege, including the ability to publish in a range of genres.

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