

Troubling Definitions, Expanding Conceptions: A Response

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One of the academic opportunities I am most thankful for is the ability to learn from other scholars and to revise and grow from my own previous understandings. I think this work too often happens somewhat clandestinely as we read critiques of our scholarship, serve as anonymous reviewers, or shift our stance from one publication to the next without the ability to go back and formally acknowledge a stance since left behind. For that reason, I am deeply grateful to both Von Bergen and the *Journal of Writing Assessment* for allowing me the opportunity to lift some of this complex reconsideration out of obscurity and respond to this article.

When Kathleen Kryger and I (2020) wrote “Neurodivergence and Intersectionality in Labor-Based Grading Contracts,” we were fresh out of our first year of our Ph.D. program. Our department had hosted Asao Inoue as a speaker that spring, and we had both enthusiastically attempted to adopt his version of labor-based grading contracts (LBGC). I had been introduced to various models of alternative assessment in my master’s program, but LBGC was new and offered an enticing script (and, as an autistic, I do love a script) for enacting inclusive assessment practices. We both quickly learned that this particular flavor of alternative assessment was troubled from our own neurodivergent lenses, and our article grew out of an attempt to encourage engagement with neurodiversity and disability in conceptualizations of alternative assessment.

Perhaps, were I to revisit this piece as the scholar I am today, I would take care to be more deliberate about how we defined our critique. At the time, we understood LBGC to be synonymous with Inoue’s approach, rather than the broader definition that Von Bergen (2025) offers of “any assessment method which prioritizes students’ work for the course over its perceived quality” (p. 3). In a more recent publication (Zimmerman, 2024), I acknowledge the myriad of ways one might refer to the process of decentering or abandoning traditional grading structures, including ungrading, contract grading, socially just assessment, alternative assessment, and so on. Were I to revise my definition today, I would single out LBGC as a specific method that seeks to document, attend to, or evaluate the student labor that contributes to an academic product as part of an assessment system. Put another way, I am unaware of any alternative assessment model that does not prioritize work over perceived quality. However, to me, LBGC was and remains unique in the argument that “the more time one spends laboring, the more one will learn” (Inoue, 2019, pp. 150–151) and therefore in the need to quantify and assess the labor students invest in a course. I stand by our claim, which Von Bergen adeptly integrates, that neurodivergent students can be adversely impacted by any pedagogical or assessment method that seeks to assess student labor through documenting their labor, especially through time spent. It is critical that scholars understand that a personal awareness of time and attention is not just *difficult* for some neurodivergent students, but *impossible*, that is, completely outside of their own perceptual abilities. As someone who accidentally worked past midnight yesterday because of a flow state, I am intimately familiar with this perceptual disconnection.

All this being said, I do not believe that it is productive to reduce this response to a semantic argument over definitions. What I will say is that it is intensely gratifying to see disability and neurodivergence making its way into the lexicon of liberatory pedagogies and alternative assessment practices. I am deeply thankful for, and in agreement with, the numerous ways Von Bergen has taken care in her critique to acknowledge the central concern of being intersectionally aware of how our practices impact neurodivergent and disabled students. I would like to echo her call to avoid interpreting our previous work as a universal prohibition against LBGC or

alternative assessment in general. In fact, Von Bergen's description of her assessment contract and methodology strongly parallels my own current practices, as I have grown in this effort to adapt and account for the complicated, messy, and multifaceted ways students may challenge us to show up and adapt to their personal identities, abilities, and needs. I want to thank Von Bergen for presenting an opportunity to revise my personal accounting of the complex relationship between LBGC and neurodivergence and for continuing to expand our alternative assessment conversations to consider disability and neurodivergence.

References

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