Essays

The Adoption of Contract Grading in a University Writing Program: Navigating Disruptions to Assessment Ecologies

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Abstract

While there is growing interest among WPAs in adopting contract grading, the contract grading literature is primarily focused on individual classes and teachers and offers little guidance regarding programmatic adoption. In this article, we draw on an ecological framework to discuss disruptions caused by the spread of contract grading throughout the assessment ecology of the University of California, Davis University Writing Program. We report on the results of a case study of contract adoption from the perspectives of students, teachers, and administrators at multiple levels of our program. We draw on our experiences and research to provide a heuristic for adopting contract grading at the programmatic level.

While a growing number of teachers and writing programs have adopted contract grading, most studies on contract grading focus on individual classes and teachers (Blackstock & Exton, 2014; Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Inoue, 2019; Litterio, 2016; Medina & Walker, 2018; Potts, 2010; Reichert, 2003; Shor, 2009). This focus on individual classrooms is reflected in Cowan's (2020) review of the contract grading literature, which does not mention programmatic issues, although two articles in the special issues of *Journal of Writing Assessment* in which Cowan's article appears do touch on programmatic issues in adopting contract grading. Tinoco et al. (2020) consider the impact of grading contracts on the assessment ecology of a department, and Stuckey, Erdem, and Waggoner (2020) survey students and faculty regarding the switch to contract grading in an online first-year composition program. These articles begin to explore programmatic issues in contract grading adoption, but they do not offer systematic guidance for WPAs who are navigating the disruptions contract grading can bring to a department or program's assessment ecology. Most prior research on contract grading centers on the student experience, including a focus on writing processes and on issues of equity in grading (Danielewicz

& Elbow, 2009; Inoue, 2015; Litterio, 2016), often absent the experience of others in the ecology. While there has been some focus on increased transparency in grading with the adoption of contracts (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Reichert, 2003) and the unexpected complications contracts can instigate (Carillo, 2021; Craig, 2021, Inman & Powell, 2018; Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020), the wider impact of contract grading on a writing program is less studied.

In this article, we apply an ecological perspective to respond to the call from Albracht et al. (2019) for "more robust inquiry around contract grading in department meetings, teaching, research, and writing more broadly" (p. 149). We—Dan, as the director of first-year composition; DJ, as a graduate student at the time of study and now a lecturer; and Lisa, Sarah, and Erika as lecturers in the program—present a case study of the University of California, Davis University Writing Program that includes interviews with teachers and administrators and student surveys as well as our own perspectives as faculty in the ecosystem. An ecological perspective helps us examine our complex writing program, which encompasses sheltered multilingual writing classes, entry-level writing, first-year composition, and upper division writing in the professions and disciplines. We focus on the ways contract grading spread, and the results of that spread in terms of attention to assessment, exposing assessment misalignments, and a resulting amplification of tensions surrounding assessment. We offer a heuristic for writing program administrators adopting contract grading in their programs to aid them in preparing for and navigating potential disruptions to the assessment ecology caused by the introduction of contract grading.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

An ecological framework allows us to consider a network of connections that move beyond our individual courses and positions in the program to capture the complexity of how contract grading moved through and impacted our program. We build on Inoue's (2015) seven ecological elements: "power, parts, purposes, people, processes, products, and places" (p. 10–11). While he uses this framework to describe contract grading in the classroom, we adopt it to contextualize our research site. Specifically, we observe how the ecological people or the actors—students, faculty, and administrators—interact with one another within the ecological place of our program. The ecological framework makes visible the ecological process in which the ecological people as "organism[s]-in-[their]-environment" (Bateson, 1987, p. 457) interact with one another using different ecological products of assessment, including different outcomes and rubrics, to

eventually spread contract grading across our program. Those ecological processes are driven by different ecological purposes, which are largely influenced by our program's grading standards—the ecological parts, which are defined by Inoue (2015) as "artifacts, documents, and codes that regulate and embody writing" (p. 125). While the ecological parts may embody the beliefs of the program, the ecological products serve as instruments to practice those beliefs. Our study also displays how ecological power, which is "consciously constructed and manipulated" (p. 122) by the ecological people, manifests in misalignments and tensions regarding assessment within the program.

While Inoue's (2015) framework provides language to discuss our research site, we draw from a broader ecological perspective as a lens to discuss how contract grading spread within different areas of our program. Reiff, Bawarshi, Ballif, and Weisser (2015) state in their introduction to *Ecologies of Writing Programs*, "An ecological perspective shifts the emphasis away from the individual unit, node, or entity, focusing instead on the network itself as the locus of meaning" (p. 6). An individual actor, as an organism-in-its-environment, functions within "environmental structures that both powerfully constrain and also enable what [actors] are able to think, feel, and write [and do]" (Syverson, 1999, p. 9). In our contract grading adoption experience, feedback—the "flow of information between organisms and between organisms and their environment" (Fleckenstein, Spinuzzi, Rickly, & Papper, 2008, p. 396)—played a critical role.

Data collection took place in the spring and summer of 2019. We first received IRB exempt status from our institution and then administered a student survey via email (n=77).[1] The survey asked student participants to describe the type of grading contract they encountered and asked whether the contract affected their attitudes towards writing and their relationships with their instructor. In order to give voices to the actors in the ecology most directly impacted by the implementation of contract systems of grading and to triangulate the initial survey data, ten students chosen from a variety of courses in the program were selected from a pool of survey respondents who indicated they were willing to be interviewed. To reduce bias, we did not interview our own students. Because of the voluntary nature of our sampling and our limited sample size, our findings are not generalizable to the entire student population. Rather, our research is descriptive of our students' experiences, as well as the experiences of our program's teachers and administrators. An invitation to participate in the study was sent to faculty who used contract grading, and we interviewed six faculty who teach courses across our program. We also interviewed five

WPAs from different parts of the program, none of whom used contract grading themselves at the time of the study.

Table 1
Overview of the University Writing Program

	Staffing	Administration	Student Population	Assessment
English for Multilingual Students	Lecturers with TESOL training	Lecturer director, lecturer assistant director, and graduate student assistant to the director	-First year or graduate -Primarily international -Broad range of English fluency	-Shared learning outcomes -Shared curriculum -Shared portfolio assessment rubric
Entry-Level Writing Requirement	Lecturers and some graduate students	Tenure-line director, lecturer assistant director, and graduate student assistant to the director	-First year -Primarily international and first generation	-Shared learning outcomes -Shared curriculum -Mix of traditional and portfolio assessment
First-Year Composition	Primarily graduate students	Tenure-line director, lecturer assistant director, and graduate student assistant to the director	-Primarily first year and sophomore -Approximately 25% international	-Shared learning outcomes -Shared portfolio assessment rubric -Portfolio norming session each fall -Contract grading
Upper Division	Lecturers and some tenure-line faculty	Tenure-line director and lecturer assistant directors	Broad range of students: -transfer -international -first generation -underprepared -high achieving	-Separate learning objectives for each course type -Programmatic rubric of grading standards used by some teachers -Customized rubrics used by many teachers -Contract grading used by a growing number of teachers

The University Writing Program is an independent writing program at an R1 university with a STEM focus whose student population has become much more diverse in recent years. Currently 79% of our first-year students are students of color (University of California, Davis Information Center). The university also enrolls a high proportion of first-generation college students: 41% of first-year students are first-generation students as are 52% of transfer students (University of California *2018 Annual Accountability Report*). As a public university, University of California, Davis has a 2:1 ratio between students who enter as first-year students and students who transfer from community colleges.

The University Writing Program houses instruction of first-year composition and upper- division writing, as well as the entry-level writing requirement and the English for multilingual students programs. While there is overlap, the faculty, students, curriculum, and assessment in these four sites within the departmental ecology can differ considerably. Table 1 outlines the faculty staffing, administrative team composition, core student populations, and predominant modes of assessments in each of the four sites at the time we conducted our research.

As table 1 illustrates, each program housed in the University Writing Program is represented by a writing program administrator who oversees curricula and assessment practices. In the entry-level writing and first-year composition programs the assistant directors are tenure-line faculty who oversee shared curricula and assessment practice. The English for multilingual students program also has shared curricula and assessment practices, but it is typically overseen by lecturers. In the upper division, assistant directors have typically been lecturers, mentoring faculty but not overseeing curriculum and assessment, which are individual to instructors, rather than shared programmatically. Once introduced, contract grading rapidly spread throughout our assessment ecology. Figure 1 outlines a model of the impact contract grading may have on an assessment ecology. The processes are detailed in the following sections: The Spread of Contract Grading throughout an Assessment Ecology; Increased Attention to Assessment; and Exposing Misalignments and Amplifying Tensions.

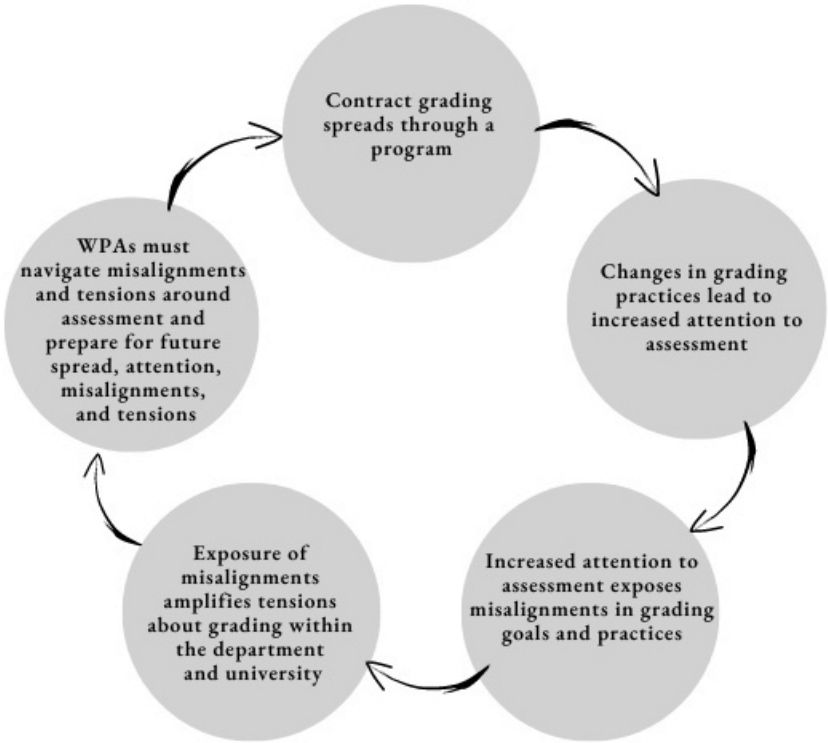

Figure 1: Model of the Impact of Contract Grading on an Assessment Ecology

The Spread of Contract Grading throughout an Assessment Ecology

Contract grading was introduced into the first-year composition assessment ecology through a pilot by DJ. Figure 2 outlines the spread of contract grading in the first-year composition program, using Inoue's (2015) assessment ecology to explain how those elements interacted with one another.

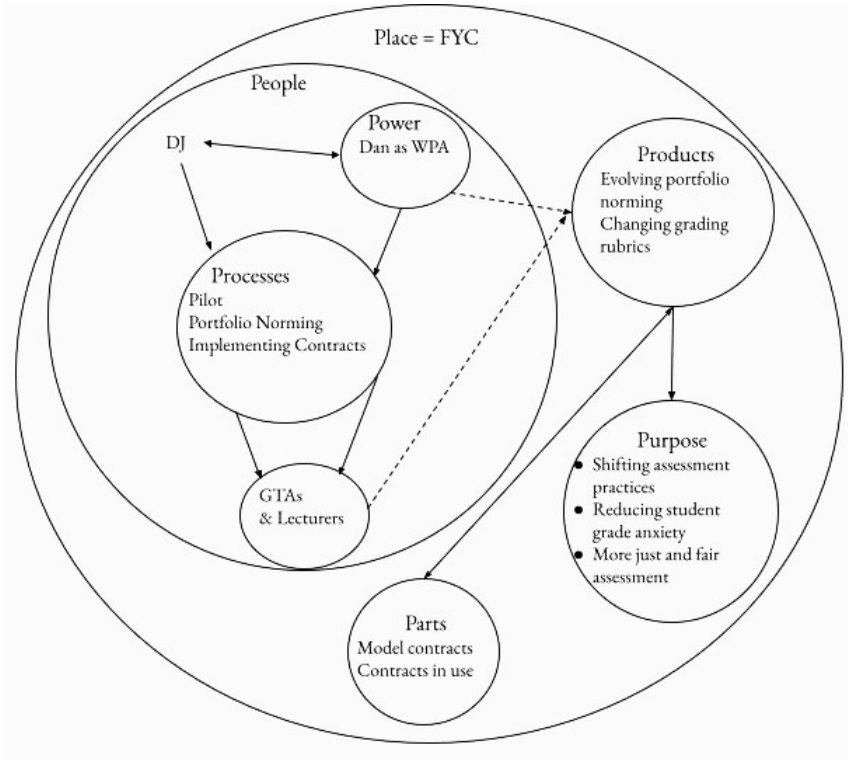

Figure 2: Map of the Initial Spread of Contract Grading in First-Year Composition

After DJ presented the results of his pilot to the other graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), Dan was surprised by how quickly the use of contract grading spread among first-year composition teachers. Most GTAs have little teaching experience, and their inexperience as teachers, together with their status as students, seemed to facilitate a spirit of experimentation. Lacking both the long-established assessment practices and high-stakes personnel evaluations of lecturers, the GTAs embraced contract grading as aligning with their developing pedagogical philosophies. One GTA we interviewed, David, told us that "the [first-year composition] program culture is generally supportive of contract grading, which makes it feel safer to choose that route—that is, safer than it would feel if one were *only* contending with the overall institutional culture." A feedback loop quickly amplified contract grading through the close-knit network of graduate students teaching first-year composition. Only a year after DJ's pilot, the majority of GTAs were using contract grading, and currently contracts are the default method of assessment in first-year composition.

David also mentioned that adopting contract grading "is made easier still by the fact that the [first-year composition] program shares templates and talks about contract grading in our pedagogy training—we don't need to invent a contract system from scratch." As contract grading spread, Dan developed support systems in the form of workshops, model contracts, readings about contract grading in the GTA preparation course, and integration of contract grading into regular portfolio norming sessions. Despite these faculty development efforts, the seemingly novel nature of contract grading demanded even more extensive support. As another GTA, Naiomi, told us:

> While the University Writing Program provided examples of grading contracts, I was really craving conversations with these people to understand how they were thinking through this version of assessment and how they approached it. I would have loved to sit down with 3–4 different people who used varying versions of contract grading and spend some time trying to understand how they saw their contract, how their contract evolved, and how they operationalized it.

Although first-year composition is primarily taught by GTAs, there are lecturers who traverse the first-year composition and upper-division microcontexts. Lisa and Sarah were teaching first-year composition as lecturers and helped spread contracts to the upper division. In actuality, contract grading had been used in upper division for years by a single teacher, but it did not spread until the department hosted a contract grading workshop led by this teacher and Dan, Lisa, and Sarah. This program-wide workshop on contract grading was organized by the director of the University Writing Program and this gave contracts the explicit, official support needed to inspire more upper-division teachers to adopt contract grading—especially those who had concerns that contract grading might not be supported in personnel reviews. The spread was then amplified by groups of teachers who adopted and adapted each other's materials.

The official support, however, did not translate into follow-up discussions about contract grading or programmatic discussion about assessment values and beliefs among University Writing Program faculty, as this spread caught WPAs off guard. An upper-division associate director (AD) reported in our interview that as contract grading began to spread in the upper division, at first, they felt unable to address concerns from some lecturers regarding disruptions to traditional grading practices. These traditional grading practices were based on an important ecological part—writing standards reflected in a shared grading rubric that more senior lecturers had been using. It felt to this upper-division AD that contract grading "has just sort of fallen from the sky." Another upper-division AD told us that they

had plans for future faculty development activities around assessment in order to create more programmatic coherence, but they were not sure how extensively contract grading was being used in the program, what types of contracts were being used, and exactly what impact contract grading was having on students and teachers.

Although contract grading spread rapidly from first-year composition to the upper division, it has been slower to spread to the English for multilingual students program, despite the program AD's openness to teachers experimenting with new pedagogies. However, contract grading *has* reached the English for multilingual students program, and its spread began when Erika—then assistant director of the program—learned about contract grading at the University Writing Program workshop. She understood this as an opportunity to implement contract grading in the English for multilingual students program, noting that contract grading emphasizes what the writer does, in terms of participation and effort, and she believed that the emphasis on the writer as opposed to the product would benefit her students. With the endorsement of the AD, Erika began using contract grading in the English for multilingual students program. A handful of teachers have now joined Erika in using contract grading in English for multilingual students classes, and this spread is likely to continue given the positive impacts of contract grading on international students that we discuss later in this section.

Because both hybrid and labor-based contracts were sanctioned by our program, instructors had the freedom to use the type of contract they were most comfortable with, which increased the spread of contract grading. While some faculty were interested in labor-based contracts, other faculty expressed more comfort using a Danielewicz and Elbow (2009)–style hybrid contract, which focuses on the quality of final products to determine course grades above a "B," and is therefore more similar to traditional grading. However, as the spread of contracts increased, many upper-division teachers using hybrid contracts switched to labor-based ones. We are not sure teachers would have been so invested in the process had a single contract template been thrust upon them as a new department policy.

Another factor in the spread of contract grading in the University Writing Program is the fact that both labor-based and hybrid contracts were effective in teaching different student populations. For our high-achieving, stressed out, pre-professional students, grades feel high-stakes. As a pre-med student, Jashvi is typical of this demographic. When she was introduced to contract grading, Jashvi's first thought was, "How can I get the best grade possible?" but she "really got into improving my writing rather than worrying what grade am I going to get. . . . I know it affected my process because

I was less stressed." Contracts supported students like Jashvi *and* our most vulnerable students. Guadalupe is a first-generation domestic student who was suspended from the university for low grades, damaging her self-confidence. When she returned, Guadelupe enrolled in an upper-division course using hybrid contracts and earned a "B," which "really boosted [her] perception of [her] intelligence."

For international students who must navigate the expectations of an unfamiliar academic context, contract grading may increase confidence and motivation. Tommy is an international student who described his previous writing experience as "strict," with grading based solely on the teacher's judgment. Tommy told us that he never felt confident as a writer, but "contract grading provided more motivation for [him]." For the first time in his academic career, Tommy began regularly attending office hours, and the six other international students in our survey all said that contract grading helped build a relationship with the teacher. Even though hybrid contracts have been critiqued for being aligned with traditional grading (Albracht et al., 2019), for students like Guadalupe and Tommy, any type of contract can provide essential support, helping them stay in college and stay on normative time while avoiding the damage to self-confidence that can result from academic failure.

It is important to note, however, that our students in our survey were self-selected, and that most of them had positive experiences with our contracts. Also, while we tried to hear from a variety of students in our survey and interviews, there are some voices that are missing, such as students with disabilities. Recent literature on contract grading highlights the problems that might be experienced by the less vocal and visible of our students. Carillo (2021) and Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) call attention to the inequities that can be created by labor-based contracts that put the neuronormative student at the center. As Craig (2021) points out, writing programs and instructors can easily fall into an unwarranted enthusiasm for contract grading, seeing it, incorrectly, as the answer to all of our social inequities. Additionally, Inman and Powell (2018) warn that grades have an important affective weight for students that might be disrupted by contracts. While the focus of our article is the spread of contracts in a writing program, we need to proceed with caution when claiming their benefits for all our students. As Carillo (2021) warns, the success of our contracts as creators of change ultimately comes from contracts that are designed with equity and engagement in mind.

Increased Attention to Assessment

As contract grading spread throughout the University Writing Program, two ecological processes, increased transparency and increased attention to assessment, had clear and unexpected impacts, including increased teacher reflection on the significance of grades and growing student attention to how their writing was assessed and for what purpose.

As a new form of assessment, contract grading disrupted GTAs' grading practices from their prior schooling and forced them to reconsider the nature of grades, traditional values about grading, and the role of labor in assessment. GTAs Naiomi and David both said that contract grading occasioned greater reflection on assessment practices. Naiomi said, "Contract grading has made me consider my beliefs about grading." David said contract grading has "made me think a lot about what I mean when I give a student a grade" and "challenged me to think more critically about my own practices, not only with assessment . . . but made me think about what my goals as an instructor are, what my goals for my students are, and how best to achieve those."

As first-year composition teachers moved towards assessing labor in lieu of departmental standards of language use, teachers like Naiomi struggled with how to assess that labor, becoming more reflective about grading in the process. As Naiomi said,

> I've had to really revise my own contract continually to think about—what does it actually mean? How many drafts are enough drafts or what does it even mean to have enough drafts? I'm still really working on that . . . no one seems to have the exact answer.

In first-year composition, the adoption of contract grading became a form of faculty development in and of itself as GTAs became more reflective about their assessment beliefs and values. GTAs felt that implementing contract grading forced them to reckon with received assessment practices, and to be more critical of how grades were and could be determined. Their increased attention to assessment encouraged Dan to focus more on assessment in the GTA preparation courses. In this way, contract grading caused Dan to implement more professional development while it also acted as a mechanism to reveal internal misalignments between individual teachers' grading practices and values. Even experienced teachers in upper division said that they found in implementing contracts an opportunity to better align their assessment practices with their values, continually refining their contracts to meet the needs of their students and better reflect their pedagogical goals.

Students, too, described a change in their attention to assessment after contract grading, but it might be more apt to describe the change in student attention to assessment as increasingly critical: the quantity of student attention to assessment may not be affected by contract grading, but the quality of that attention seems to be, as students who have experience in contract-graded classes are, as one student said, "thinking about grading in a conscious, deliberate way." According to student, teacher, and administrator conversations, student attention to assessment seems to shift from a focus on grades as an end in themselves to a focus on "fairness" and "improving my writing." Students noted that "contract grading opened [them] up to the prejudice behind" traditional grades, and they described contracts as "more fair." For example, Ana, a high-achieving student accustomed to earning A's in her writing classes, explicitly discussed the connection between linguistic privilege and grades. Ana described how her roommate took a traditionally-graded writing class and failed three times, despite working hard and improving each time. According to Ana, traditional grades in her classes privilege "English native speakers who went to a middle-class high school in the middle-class neighborhood," who "write an essay that is grammatically correct but what they write is bogus or they wrote in a week, but they still get a B or something," while students like her roommate, who lack that linguistic privilege, can work "five times as hard" and still not pass. Ana's experience illustrates students' increasing critical attention to systems of assessment.

On the administrative level, WPAs in the program noted that the spread of contract grading brought increased attention to assessment practices in a number of ways. An upper- division AD noted that the program lacked "a clear set of values," and this lack of shared values could potentially lead to "widely different experiences" across courses at the same level. The upper-division AD did not feel that contract grading "increased the problem" of inconsistent assessment, but rather "made the problem more visible" because of a "value-driven system," which has the potential to shift the focus of what we assess and how we assess it.

Administratively, then, the introduction of contract grading and the conversations that ensued revealed existing issues that had been less visible. "The problem," an upper-division AD said, "is a lack of a centrally articulated set of values . . . contract grading has made this very clear." Contract grading has caused conversations about assessment and values that had not been happening previously. While WPAs noted that, "we can't escape grades, especially in this system" (a sentiment echoed by students interviewed), they also noted that contracts of all types encourage "active discussion about grading and evaluation." Thus, the increased attention leads to students questioning

the kinds of assessment that best support their growth as writers and to teachers exploring assessment types that align with their values.

According to administrators in the program, most formal conversations about assessment and values in the University Writing Program happen in the context of the Personnel Committee, an important ecological place. The Personnel Committee is an infrastructure, thus the place that evaluates teacher performance and makes decisions about retention. In the past this committee focused heavily on whether or not "grades were too high," and while this focus changed well before contract grading was introduced, this focus seems to have left in place a cultural concern for rigor. Changes in the culture of the University Writing Program, which WPAs note had been happening slowly, have been further put into relief by the spread of contract grading, and have encouraged the Personnel Committee to attend differently to assessment, and to ask questions about grades, grading, and values that had previously been unspoken.

When contracts began to spread through our writing program ecology, they forced a conversation about assessment culture. What are the ecological purposes of our grading standards? Do we need to revisit the policies and products of teacher evaluations? Is it fair to students that some classes use traditional grading while others use contracts? These conversations forced University Writing Program WPAs to consider a variety of factors as contract grading spread, including teachers' philosophies and prior assessment beliefs, department assessment culture, level of consensus around assessment, professional development needed to prepare for contract grading, protection for teachers within review processes, and consistency across courses.

Exposing Misalignments and Amplifying Tensions

Our case study reveals the ways that the adoption of contract grading can expose and amplify tensions in an assessment ecology that is not prepared for contracts. However, even a deliberate and programmatic adoption of contract grading in an assessment ecology that does have shared values and regular faculty development for assessment was disruptive and exposed assessment misalignments, as our experiences in first-year composition illustrate.

Assessment misalignments in the first-year composition program were exposed during quarterly portfolio norming sessions. Most of the first-year composition teachers had adopted labor-based contracts, but the portfolio norming was focused on discussing students' final drafts and not their labor. The first-year composition portfolio rubric did emphasize process and

growth, and there was some evidence of labor in students' portfolio reflection essays; however, Dan found it difficult to facilitate a discussion of labor when so much of the assessment artifacts shared in the norming were final drafts. In addition, Dan struggled with the tensions between norming to a programmatic portfolio assessment rubric and his support of Inoue's (2019) community-based contract grading approach, in which course goals and assessment criteria are developed collaboratively with students. The programmatic adoption of contract grading caused Dan to confront a number of questions regarding ecological purposes that are relevant to WPAs in any type of program: What is the value of a shared grading rubric when all teachers are using contract grading? What is the point of a portfolio norming session when the focus of assessment has shifted from the products in the portfolio to student labor? And how will the program maintain shared faculty development around assessment when rubrics and norming sessions no longer seem relevant?

In the last decade, the University Writing Program has rapidly expanded, and with an influx of new faculty, both tenure-line and non-tenure-line, came new beliefs and practices, sometimes misaligning with established norms. Contract grading exposed those misalignments. An upper division AD voiced concerns about program cohesion, describing the program as having "ill-defined values when it comes to writing assessment and grading," for example, "some faculty very much value clear, correct writing . . . whereas others focus more on . . . global issues." Contract grading also amplified differences in our assessment beliefs. As another upper division AD put it, contract grading "really throws [our differences] into sharp relief" and has created tension: "I've been approached by people who are more skeptical of, or in some cases, hostile to contract grading."

Contract grading also exposed misalignments between teaching practices and personnel review procedures. For some teachers, adopting labor-based contracts feels like a risky choice because personnel review in the upper division is conducted by a committee that could include people aligned with more traditional grading standards or who lack experience with contract grading. Compared to hybrid contracts, labor-based contracts present a particular vulnerability, since final grades are not based on traditional grading standards. A newer non-tenure-line faculty member, Isabella, chose to adopt hybrid contracts "to teach with more of a civically engaged social justice-minded advocacy pedagogy." However, she realized that a hybrid contract is not "in line with my pedagogy." Isabella wanted to use a labor-based contract, but she felt concerned by how her materials might be evaluated: "I'm still in a vulnerable position because I don't have my continuing lecturer status yet. . . . I do think there's a division in our program

right now that we are not approaching a conversation about of what do we value in teaching." For teachers like Isabella, using labor-based contracts meant abandoning traditional grading standards and potentially moving in a different direction from the rest of the program. Assessment standards can be a hot button issue: a few of the faculty we interviewed asked us not to include in this article the discussions we had with them around issues of misalignment and tension.

From the Spread to Increased Attention to Amplifying Tensions: Where Do We Go from Here?

The previous sections outlined how contract grading was introduced to and impacted the assessment ecology of our program. We learned that even an intentional and carefully piloted implementation of contract grading may overwhelm a WPA with rapid spread. Even an assessment ecology such as first-year composition that offered extensive faculty development for grading prior to the introduction of contracts may not be fully prepared for the level of support teachers need as they shift their assessment paradigm and adopt an entirely new system of grading. As Reiff, Bawarshi, Ballif, and Weisser (2015) emphasize, writing program ecologies are "emergent" and create new structures and evolve as the actors in the ecology engage in new behaviors (p. 9)—and this includes new assessment approaches. Further, we learned that contract grading has the potential to spread even to areas of a program where the ties to teachers adopting contract grading are weak. In first-year composition, contract grading was implemented programmatically, but spread occurred in parts of an assessment ecology that were not intending to introduce contracts and may be less welcoming to the contract grading approach.

In this context, introducing both hybrid and labor-based contracts to faculty considering contract grading was key—many upper-division teachers who currently use contract grading found hybrid contracts to be a useful transitional tool. Although the freedom to use different types of contacts may have played a role in teachers' adoption of the grading system, interestingly, students responded very similarly to both hybrid and labor-based contracts, and this was true for both upper-division and first-year composition students. When asked to identify benefits of contract grading, students independently identified five major benefits previously reported in the published literature:

- 40% of our students described reduced stress and anxiety, a benefit discussed in Blackstock & Exton (2014)
- 18% indicated taking more risks, a benefit discussed in Inoue (2014)

- 15% reported an increased focus on process, a benefit discussed in Danielewicz & Elbow (2009) and Litterio (2016)
- 15% noted increased grade transparency, a benefit discussed in Reichert (2003)
- 9% felt that contracts improve student-teacher relationships, a benefit discussed in Moreno-Lopez (2005) and Reichert (2003).

However, our survey results differ from prior literature in that they include different types of contracts, demonstrating that these results were experienced by students regardless of contract type.

Preparing for and Navigating the Disruptions Brought by Contract Grading

Although we have described the spread of contract grading in one particular program, many of the issues we experienced regarding the spread of contracts will resonate with WPAs regardless of their program type: the value of piloting contract grading and building in structures that will help support faculty as contracts spread, the ways contract adoption multiplies rapidly in a tight-knit community of teachers, and the likelihood that contracts will eventually spread even to parts of a writing program that are siloed.

WPAs can expect that along with the potential for rapid spread, contract grading as a novel and potentially disruptive form of assessment is likely to bring increased attention to assessment for all of the actors in the ecology: students, teachers, and administrators. Whether that takes the form of teachers new to contract grading having to reflect on the role of grades, student conversations about how they are being evaluated and how they want to be evaluated, or WPA conversations about the nature and goals of assessment within a program, the more the actors in the ecology bring their attention to assessment, the more rapidly and intensely those conversations seem to take place. Spread leads to awareness, which amplifies the spread.

With increased attention to assessment comes the potential for misalignments within the assessment ecology to be exposed and tensions to be amplified. As Syverson (1999) notes, complex ecologies need to be adaptive in order to respond to conflicts and misalignments and avoid stagnation (p. 4). Part of this adaptivity for WPAs is anticipating the likely impacts of contract grading and preparing for its spread. We present our heuristic for implementing contract grading as a tool for WPAs planning to adopt contracts in their program to help them prepare for and navigate the inevitable disruptions caused by the introduction of contracts. Our heuristic incorporates the interdependent factors that affect contract adoption in a writing program assessment ecology, from individual teachers' assessment beliefs,

to institutional context and values, to students' needs. Our heuristic maps onto Inoue's (2015) elements of assessment ecologies, with connections between purposes and program beliefs, parts and contract variations, processes and professional development, places and courses, people and student population, and products and ongoing assessment. Inoue's most critical element, "power," is present throughout the heuristic, with important issues for WPAs to consider regarding potential conflicts surrounding assessment beliefs, the extent to which contracts are negotiated with students, who gets to decide what types of contracts are sanctioned, and how teachers are evaluated in personnel processes when the assessment ecology is disrupted.

Heuristic for Adopting Contract Grading

Assessment Beliefs of Students, Faculty, and Administrators

- What beliefs about assessment and grading do students, faculty, and administrators currently hold? How might they be shifting?
- How do long-held beliefs and emerging beliefs shape the assessment ecology of the course/program/department?
- How do those beliefs connect to or conflict with the assumptions that underlie contract grading?
- What are the risks of using contract grading for faculty in more vulnerable positions?
- What is the mainstream assessment culture of the institution? Are there unacknowledged assessment cultures within the institution?

Contract Variations

- To what extent should the contract/s being adopted focus on processes and labor or products and quality of writing?
- To what extent should the contract/s be negotiated with students?
- To what extent should the contract/s be individualized for each student or standardized for a course/program/department?
- How does the type of contract/s being considered connect to or conflict with teachers' teaching philosophies?
- To what extent are the types of contract/s adopted by the program addressing the needs of non-traditional students, underrepresented students, and students with disabilities?
- To what extent might contracts challenge institutional exclusion or simply replicate it?

Professional Development for Faculty and Administrators

- What challenges will teachers face if contract grading is adopted? How will they adapt their teaching and help their students navigate contract grading?
- What professional development activities and resources for teachers will be needed in order to successfully adopt contract grading?
- How will teachers be protected if the assessment system is misaligned?
- Which instructors are being tasked with making the case for contract grading to students and faculty who may be resistant?

Course

- Do the course learning outcomes or grading standards conflict with the assumptions that underlie contract grading?
- How is the course positioned within the ecology of the program/department?
- How will consistency in assessment be maintained across course sections as contracts spread?

Student Population

- What are the attitudes and experiences of the student populations in regards to assessment and grading?
- How might contract grading shift student attitudes about learning and perceived roles in the classroom? How will these shifts in attitude empower or disempower students?
- How can contract grading support the specific student populations of the course/program/department?
- What challenges will the different student populations face if contract grading is adopted?
- How are the needs of neurodivergent and other marginalized students being considered in the application of the grading contracts?

Ongoing Assessment of Adoption

- What are the current ongoing assessment practices of the course/program/department?
- How might contract grading disrupt these practices?
- What are the best methods for assessing the impact of contract grading?
- What are the best methods for assessing the unintended impact grading might have on non-traditional students, underrepresented students, and students with disabilities?

- Who are the audiences for reporting the results of this assessment, and what types of data and arguments will be most persuasive to those audiences?

This heuristic is available as a figure at bit.ly/contract_grading_heuristic.

Programs that are adopting contract grading will benefit from considering the factors in the heuristic and being aware of the ways these factors are interdependent. WPAs adopting contract grading should first make sure they understand the beliefs that inform the current assessment ecology and be prepared for disruptions for students, faculty, and administrators that are likely to arise from the introduction of contract grading. When there is a lack of shared assessment beliefs, instructors who use contracts may be professionally vulnerable, putting pressure on WPAs to be aware of the assessment ecology. Negative disruptions can be mitigated by scaffolding for students and planning for faculty development and ongoing assessment. Contextual factors such as the individual course, student population, and department and institutional assessment beliefs will shape the way that contract grading is received and adopted. Programs adopting contract grading can also benefit from thinking in nuanced ways about contract types and the unintended harm contracts can create even with the best intentions.

Our research indicates that students respond positively to both labor-based and hybrid contracts and that both vulnerable and high-achieving students benefit from contracts. Contracts also support multilingual students by guiding their learning behaviors and thus increasing their self-regulation. While some student and instructor voices may not be well-represented in the current study, particularly students with disabilities, our heuristic provides a method for WPAs to consider those voices in contract-grading discussions and for future researchers to explore. Allowing teachers flexibility in contract design encourages individual instructors to be more receptive to the change, and among teachers whose philosophies aligned with contract grading, hybrid contracts were often a stepping stone to labor-based contracts. An ecological framework moves the discussions surrounding contract grading away from a focus on the individual teacher and course, shifting awareness to the broader ecology. As our study illustrates, to fully understand and manage the adoption of contract grading, the entire assessment ecology must be understood and considered. We hope our research will help broaden the focus of contract grading discussions from individual students or teachers to the departmental ecology in which students, instructors, and administrators operate.

Note

1. IRB protocol number 1401239-2

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