

CONTRACT GRADING IN THE REALM OF ENDS AND MEANS

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### Abstract

This essay explores the use of contract grading as a means to combat the commodification of education. Starting with an examination of traditional grading practices, the author moves on to explore contract grading as an alternative to the free-market, capitalistic approach to higher education in the United States and its apparent ultimate goal of maintaining/exacerbating the nation's class boundaries and current unequal distribution of wealth and power. The author's use of contract grading as a vehicle for the exploration of the systemic forces at play in United States higher education symbolizes the implied thesis of the essay—the primacy of traditional grading as the sole means to evaluate student learning is evidence of majoritarian America's almost pathological quest to maintain the unequal and inequitable distribution of and access to wealth and influence within American society by reducing educational attainment to a mere means of production, the relative value of which is maintained by limiting the supply of educated individuals; thus, contract grading is itself a means to a very different sort of end: the fair and equitable recomposition of American society.

*Keywords:* educational attainment, empowerment, power structure, college curriculum, high stakes tests, placement

### Contract Grading in the Realm of Ends and Means

It is an interesting time to be an instructor in American higher education, in general, and in California, in particular. Over the two and a half decades since the 1991 Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund settlement suggested the California Community College system's placement methods were racially biased against Latino students (*Los Angeles Times*, 1991), and very likely against all non-majoritarian students, colleges and universities, both in and out of California, have struggled to create course sequences and placement models that maximize students' likelihood of successfully completing their courses and earning degrees. While we have made some progress in closing achievement gaps, improving access, and conferring earned degrees for all tracked demographics, we have fallen short of our ultimate goal. Indeed, the U.S. Department of Education's "Developmental Education Challenges and Strategies for Reform" (2017) report revealed what most of us have known for some time: initial placement into a developmental course, even one level below so-called college ready coursework, "can increase students' time to degree attainment and decrease their likelihood of completion" (p. 7). Institutions across the country have responded to this educational crisis in myriad ways, from accelerated math, English, and ESL courses to First Year Experience programs, from dual enrollment to guided pathways. Most of these efforts function primarily at the program level or above, but many instructors want to know what they can do in their individual courses, other than curricular modifications, to increase student learning and success. To that end, some instructors have embraced contract grading as one way to revolutionize what they do in the classroom and to reimagine how they define a prepared or successful student.

Grading contracts, also commonly known as learning contracts and--less frequently--labor-based grading, are not a new phenomenon. Almost a decade ago, Peter Elbow and Jane

Danielewicz (2009) explored the topic at some length, noting research dedicated to contract grading dating as far back as 1973 in their necessarily brief literature review as well as exploring a couple of the major approaches to and motivations for this relatively novel approach to student evaluation. At that time, the authors observed that the amount of scholarship dedicated to the subject was disproportionate to the apparent popularity and utilization of contract grading (p. 244). Since then, academics and educators alike have begun to take notice, and while peer reviewed research on the topic hasn't quite exploded, it is fair to say that more people are talking about it, and it is not uncommon to find at least one breakout session on contract grading at major educational/academic conferences.

Like some of my more adventurous colleagues across the globe, I use a contract grading system in all of my English courses as part of my efforts to shift student and teacher emphasis away from the notion that the A grade is the ultimate evidence or product of a student's intellectual and academic endeavors. The grading contract facilitates this shift by creating clear criteria for achieving a given grade on an assignment or in a class based upon a process rather than a product, an essential quality of all grading contracts. Understandably, some teachers, and a few students, too, fear that such a grading scheme will reward effort alone while simultaneously lowering academic rigor and actual student improvement in reading and writing; nevertheless, reduced rigor is not a feature of contract grading at all. In fact, appropriately and mindfully implemented, contract grading should have a positive impact on student learning, achievement, and academic growth relative to a traditional grading system. How is this accomplished?

Before exploring the rudiments of the contract grading system, however, it is important to understand what it seeks to supplant: traditional grading practices. Teachers reward "good" work with higher grades. A superior essay, for example, earns an A grade under this system.

There are a number of ways that a student can “earn” an A on such an essay, and many of these ways do not even require or encourage students to improve their existing skills. A student with strong writing skills may wing every essay in a class, earning an A but learning nothing over the course of a semester. Obviously, this is a problem. Another student may recruit outside assistance to “fix” or even write essays that will satisfy the teacher’s requirements for earning an A. Cheating is such a concern for English teachers that we have an entire industry dedicated to thwarting academic dishonesty--turnitin.com is but one example of many--and another shadow industry dedicated to helping students thwart those efforts! Ironically, traditional approaches to grading in the discipline are the root cause of this entire problem. After all, the message we are sending to students is loud and clear. We do not care about real student learning. We only care about the end product submitted for grading, irrespective of how it is generated.

There are reasons, of course, that teachers have long relied upon traditional grading. Some of these reasons are sensible, at least on the surface. We need to ensure that our schools’ products (educated students) are able to function in society in reliable and expected ways. An English composition track that does not produce students who can write apparently devalues a college education. Grading, therefore, is a way to make sure that only students who have achieved the minimum standards will move forward and complete their educations. Traditional grading and teacher emphasis on product over process places the burden for success and blame for failure squarely on the students. From a teacher’s perspective, albeit a rather self-serving one, holding the students solely accountable for their success is liberating. We can do whatever we want in our classes (or nothing at all, as occasionally happens), and if students do not learn, we simply chalk it up to undermotivated or unintelligent students. Indeed, proponents of this grading practice presuppose that teachers “are doing all they can” and that grades are the only way to

force students otherwise unconcerned with intellectual growth or the values of the academy to take their lessons seriously. Under such a system, instructors function as gatekeepers first and teachers second, a state of affairs antithetical to the mission of the academy as I understand it.

Contract grading, on the other hand, takes effort. Most particularly, the effective implementation of contract grading requires intense, mindful planning, and afterwards, the instructor must remain vigilant to ensure that the process is not merely rigorous but actually effective at promoting the desired skill development. My own grading contract lays bare the requirements for earning a given grade in my classes along the usual F-A scale. As with many instructors who use a contract grading system, the default grade in my classes is a B; however, a B mark is by no means guaranteed. I award a B to students who not only complete all of the assignments in the class to the minimum standards but also revise at least one essay, miss no more than six hours of class, and participate regularly in class and group discussions. The revision assignment alone includes revising an essay, multiple times if necessary, and then completing a metacognitive revision reflection wherein the student discusses three aspects of the revision experience: what was changed, why it was changed, and how the student's future compositions will benefit from having completed the revision assignment. Previously, I noted that skeptics of contract grading fear that academic rigor will suffer as a result of eliminating the traditional grading scheme. To be sure, if contract grading is poorly planned, one could end up rewarding participation alone with a passing grade. Fortunately, contract grading represents only one part of a comprehensive pedagogical divergence. Contract grading is a pedagogical tool predicated on a simple belief, but a belief that is nothing short of a complete reversal from previous attitudes toward higher education: students, barring severe cognitive obstacles, are capable. We use contract grading as a way of acknowledging students' engagement in a process,

and in turn, we craft a process that guarantees transformation. The difficulty is in creating a process that--once undertaken and completed--will necessarily be *a priori* proof of intellectual growth and/or skill development; in other words, if students pass a class that uses contract grading without the associated/expected skill development, it is the curriculum and other parts of the educational process (including instruction, individual instructor methodology, etc.) that is at fault, not the grading system itself. Truly, this is no different from how traditional grading should--but does not, and maybe never really did to begin with--work.

Admittedly, much of the previous discussion is rooted in my own assumptions about the purpose of higher education, so some critics might very reasonably argue that contract grading is a “bad idea” simply by endorsing a very different view of education and its role in modern society. Alas, such critics are not alone. A prevailing belief in American society is that education, like any other product or industry, exists only to fill an economic need, a demand. As such, education is subject to market forces like any other service. Perfectly crystallizing this viewpoint, Bryan Caplan (2018), professor of economics at George Mason University and adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute, wondered “[why]...English classes focus on literature and poetry instead of business and technical writing” (para. 4). Ignoring, for the moment, that the vast majority of English classes in higher education focus on reading non-fiction articles/essays and on writing argumentative papers, Caplan did a fine job of summing up perhaps the most common attitude toward education within the United States. College-level courses, and by extension higher education in general, should teach students how to perform routine tasks needed in the workforce. He reinforced this point by lamenting what he saw as a “disconnect between college curricula and the job market” (Caplan, 2018, para. 5). Caplan's point is well taken. If we assume, as Caplan so obviously does, that the purpose of education is to prepare workers to

complete specific tasks in their ultimate fields, we have little choice to agree with his appraisal of the state of higher education. Even so, one cannot help but wonder if Caplan would have written so eloquent and persuasive a defense of the utilitarian view of higher education if he had been limited to a strict program of “business and technical” writing in his own education.

In order to understand how this point of view works, it is important to consider education in the context of ends and means. Education, from this point of view, clearly belongs to the realm of means, for the function of education is to prepare a student to fill a higher order role in society, while economic viability of the individual falls into the realm of ends. An individual’s education, then, is reduced to a mere transaction between a student and an educational institution. Naturally the institution has a vested interest in maintaining the extrinsic value--in the purely capitalistic sense of the word--of the education it provides, for education, as a means alone, can have no real intrinsic value. The surest way to accomplish this goal is to ensure that the supply of educated individuals remains at or beneath the demand for such individuals. Curiously, some of the student resistance to contract grading in the literature comes from a similar place. In “Not Ready to Let Go: A Study of Resistance to Contract Grading,” Cathy Spidell and William H. Thelin (2006) concluded that much of the student resistance to contract grading is really a recoil against “the leveling effect...the contract” creates (p. 45). In other words, student resistance isn’t usually rooted in pedagogical disagreement so much as fear of losing privilege relative to students from less affluent or academically prepared backgrounds. Even to the individual student in such a system, education is not a means to improve oneself but a means to lift oneself above others.

Historically, maintaining a low supply of educated people, relative to the overall population, and subsequently the market value of a higher education, has not been a problem in



the United States for a number of reasons, most notably social and economic causes and their intersection. African slaves, for example, were prohibited by law from receiving an education, just as their southern slave masters were prohibited from educating them, and even after so-called emancipation, they remained in abject poverty and were generally prohibited by law from receiving even a basic education. Other poor Americans were not prohibited from pursuing higher educations by law, but in practice, few could afford to attend college, even low-cost community colleges. Again, to use the language of economics, the opportunity cost for would-be students was too high. It is well-documented (and so I will not trouble my readers by documenting the following point yet again) that people born in American society tend to remain in the social, economic, and educational conditions into which they are born, so an unequal distribution of education, as with wealth, is a truth from America's founding that persists even today. In the cold hard world of ends and means, supply and demand, and general conservative economic thought, education is a means to a purely economic end, people a means of production to be used and discarded, and intellectual enrichment, happiness, and personal fulfilment perks reserved for those lucky few born into one form of privilege or another.

At long last, we come to see contract grading's potential as a small part of a larger ideological shift in higher education, one traceable to the earliest days of critical pedagogy. Education, from this perspective, is more than just a simple means to an end but in some respects an end itself--or at least a means leading directly to some ultimate end for the individual, such as happiness, a sense of fulfilment, and so on--necessary not only for success in American society as it is today but also for understanding the very forces that seek to move and shape each one of us. Tragically, I have yet to read a job description that requires applicants to understand the social, cultural, and economic forces that shape them. Such knowledge transcends simple

function, which means that traditional views of higher education are in conflict with the idea of education as social change, for in order to create intentional change, we must understand the thing we seek to change. I accept this statement as a maxim. Thus, we are left with but one conclusion: the traditional system of higher education exists to maintain the system of class boundaries and to prevent, or at the very least, minimize, upward class mobility, by providing students with what they need in order to maintain, at best, their current conditions, but never to exceed them. We could take this another step further and postulate that traditional education seeks also to hide from its victims the very awareness of their own victimhood.

Rejecting the false promise of traditional views of education, modern educators embrace the notion that all students are capable and deserving of an education, and these educators employ tools and practices designed to maximize the potential of each student to develop the skills and mindsets necessary to earn their degrees. This philosophy is by no means new. Over a century ago, in the first few years of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois, in contemplating the sort of education that newly-freed-yet-not-truly-free African-Americans needed, declared that “[the] true college will ever have but one goal - not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes” (as cited in Shaw, 2013, p. 49). Du Bois’s words ring especially true at a time when research by PwC, the second largest financial services corporation in the world, estimates that more than thirty percent of current U.S. jobs, and not just menial jobs, are likely to be automated within the next fifteen years (Hawksworth, Berriman, and Goel, 2019, p. 7). A comprehensive, dynamic approach to higher education that develops a student’s ability to think critically and creatively is an ideal way to prepare students for an uncertain future. Even in the eventuality that workers replaced by automation remain unemployable, do they not at least

have a basic right to understand the forces, largely out of their control, that forced them out of the workforce to begin with?

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