A Contract for Success: Increasing Student Engagement and Confidence through Grade Contracts

Dominic Ashby
Eastern Kentucky University, dominic.ashby@eku.edu

Margaret Frozena
Eastern Kentucky University

James Franklin McClure
Eastern Kentucky University

Author Biography

Dominic Ashby is Assistant Professor of English at Eastern Kentucky University, specializing in Composition and Rhetoric. His research interests include new media, rhetoric of popular culture, and pedagogy. Previous publications include an article in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, and you can find more of his writing on grade contracts and e-portfolios on the blog unhingedgates.blog.

2019 Pedagogicon Proceedings

A Contract for Success: Increasing Student Engagement and Confidence through Grade Contracts

Dominic J. Ashby
Eastern Kentucky University

Co-researchers: Margaret Frozena and James Franklin McClure
Eastern Kentucky University

The co-researchers implemented grade contracts in their English classes. In Spring 2019, 41 students participated in an attitudinal survey about the contracts. A majority responded positively and would like to see grade contracts in more classes. Responses suggest the appeal comes from the transparency of expectations in the contract, resulting in greater student agency.

Introduction

Beginning with sections of ENG102: Rhetoric, Writing, and Research in Spring 2018 and continuing into other courses throughout the following semesters, co-researchers Ashby, Frozena, and McClure replaced traditional grading methods with course-specific grade contracts. Drawing upon the work of Jane Danielewicz, Peter Elbow, and Asao Inoue, we reimagined how the grading structure of our course could support student innovation, reward student labor, and change how we and our students focused our energies. Like Inoue, we also see grade contracts as a way to support social justice by more equitably rewarding student work.

The grade contract increases transparency in learning and teaching by making all grade requirements explicit, while evaluative criteria become more fair because they are based upon student labor, rather than subjective grading. Student responses to an anonymous survey suggest that these explicit requirements reduced student anxiety and increased confidence and engagement. This piece will provide a brief overview of literature on grade contracts, discuss what the researchers observed in classes when we implemented a contract, and share survey response data.

Theoretical Context

Use of grade contracts, or contract grading, is nothing new. Several journal articles from the 1970s share teachers' experiences using them in a variety of writing classes, encouraging their wider use (Poppen & Thomson, 1971; Parks and Zurhellen,

1978; Hassencahl, 1979). Grade contracts have cyclically risen and fallen in popularity, while there have also been constant stalwarts of the method. Notably, Ira Shor (1992, 1996) made grade contracts a central feature of his approach to Critical Pedagogy in writing classes. Peter Elbow (1996) argues that grade contracts "can make evaluation healthier and more productive by untangling it from grading" (p. 3). More recently, Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow (2009) offer further arguments in favor of grade contracts as a means to increase fairness and clarity. They share their use of a "unilateral grading contract," a document that "give[s] students written evidence that we contract ourselves to keep this unusual promise to award a B for doing things rather than for writing quality" and which "tries to eliminate ambiguity" (p. 247). They find that contracts "improv[e] learning and teaching" in several ways:

- "Contracts make evaluative feedback more effective for learning" in part by "decoupl[ing] evaluation from grades" (p. 254).
- "Contracts give students more control" and reduces "uncertainty about grades" (p. 255).
- They "yield more work from students," (p. 256) and
- Provide a form of extrinsic motivation that acts as a "wedge to create more breathing room for *intrinsic* motivation (p. 257; emphasis in original).

Shor (2009), while "admir[ing]... the transparency of their grading policies," (p. 7) objects to the "unilateral" nature of Danielewicz and Elbow's approach, arguing that "[a] 'contract' requires 'a meeting of the minds,' that is, a covenant of explicit understandings between all parties affected by the terms... no contract exists if one party unilaterally obliges another to abide by terms to which the second party did not formally consent" (p. 13). Shor advocates instead for a "strong" version of a grade contract, such as his own more actively negotiated approach, driven by Freirian critical pedagogy. While inspired by Shor's application of critical pedagogy to college writing classrooms, we found Danielewicz and Elbow's approach a better fit for our institutional setting, as it allowed us to fit the grade contract to the Student Learning Outcomes set by the Department of English for writing courses. In future semesters, way may experiment with Shor's more critical approach.

While Danielewicz and Elbow's model forms the foundation of our approach to using and designing a contract, Asao Inoue's writing on grade contracts provides the ethical core. Inoue (2014) writes passionately and convincingly about the importance of labor in education, and how traditional methods of grading are unfair and often racially biased:

We know that students come to us from very different educational systems that do not equally prepare them. We know that we judge the quality of writing in most writing courses by a white, middle-class standard, one not native to poor, the working

classes, or many students of color. We know that our students have no control over any of these factors in their lives, and yet we still say that judging writing quality, particularly for a course grade, is fair. My ideal course says that it is not fair, nor does it help students learn better reading and writing practices. My students deserve better. (p. 92)

In addition to drawing inspiration from Inoue's insights about labor, race, class, and social justice, we have also borrowed directly from Inoue several pragmatic features in our contracts: one-on-one meetings with students at midterm and finals where students have the opportunity to more directly negotiate some terms of their contract.

Grade Contracts and TILT:

Grade contracts promote transparency in learning and teaching by making course expectations clear and up-front. The contract becomes a document students and teachers return to repeatedly throughout the semester. Our contract makes discussion of student progress a requirement, both by scheduling mandatory conferences at least twice a semester, but also through the use of a student-directed project. This project, a requirement for an A in our iteration of ENG102, and required for both an A or B in ENG345, insists on negotiation, because each student must propose a project and discuss it with their instructor; together, student and instructor negotiate what would be sufficient work for the project to qualify for an A or B level project. In these negotiations, student and teacher share power: the teacher does not abdicate authority but rather advises students through the process, while the student takes control of their learning and focuses their project onto something meaningful for them. Students retain the option to renegotiate their project, while the instructor helps the student to meet course learning outcomes. Reflecting Inoue's (2015) standard for student work, these projects and any negotiations must be made "in the manner and spirit it is asked" (p. 332). This approach pushes students to take more responsibility for their own successes and failures, and to learn from both. This sense of responsibility also contributes to a sense of fairness for many students, because each student feels more control over their grades.

As instructors, we found the use of grade contracts in classes we had previously taught using traditional grading systems immensely satisfying. How we responded to student work changed drastically, as we could focus on providing formative feedback rather than on assessing a grade. The absence of traditional grades, and so of traditional point-by-point grading, is a key part of the contract. For some, this may appear to be a work or time-saving feature; however, we as instructors still put in just as much time with our courses, but what we do with that time is different. A grade contract is not a labor-*saving* device, but a labor-*changing* device.

Grades did not disappear from the conversation, but rather conversations about grades changed. Students themselves came to conferences with a much clearer and more accurate self-assessment of where they stood grade-wise; rather than coming in asking what their grade was or why they came in telling us what their grade was, and wanted to discuss plans for how they could keep it there if they were happy with it, or how they could improve it if they weren't. We found students being more engaged with their work, exhibiting more ownership of it and of their grades.

Student Survey Responses

How have students themselves responded to our use of grading contracts? Below, we share some of our survey results. 41 students participated in the survey: 28 from a section of first year composition (ENG101, 102, or 102R) and 13 from upper-division English courses (ENG345 or 405). Our survey asked students about their perceptions of the course, particularly about clarity of expectations, their level of effort, worry, and satisfaction with the contract.

When asked about clarity, on a five-point scale, 32 students (78%) agreed with the statement that the contract made course requirements and other expectations clear; 7 students rated this at a 4, one at a 3, and one at a 2. In an open response field at the end of the survey, one student had the following praise for the level of clarity offered by the contract: "The grade contract is a terrific way for students to fully grasp what is required of them for each class. This is especially helpful with anxious students, or students like me who have ADHD and need a reminder of what it is I need to do exactly to pass a class." Another student commented on how the contract helped with planning, and also suggests that this increases the fairness of the course: "I like the grade contract because I knew how much work to put into the class from the start. Some classes I feel like I've done a lot of work but then I'll receive a lower grade than expected but not know why. With the contract I know areas to work on to make my grade successful." A third student noted that "It made the course more enjoyable knowing the expectations from the beginning!" No students wrote comments critical of clarity in the survey. All these students' comments point to another area of interest for us, the issue of worry or anxiety.

We asked students whether the grade contract influenced worries about their grades on a five category scale. 15 or 36.6% indicated much less worry and 20 (48.8%) less worry, meaning in total, 85% responded that the grade contract led them to worry less about their grades. 3 reported about the same worry, 3 more worry, and none reported much more worry. It is perhaps not surprising that moving away from traditional point-based grading to a holistic, labor-based assessment would reduce worry for many students. What is more interesting from our perspective is what students also reported in regards to the level of effort they put into the course with a contract grade. In the survey we asked, "How did having a grade contract impact how much effort you put into the course? Please indicate how much effort you put

in because of the contract." 12 students reported much more effort and 18 more effort, meaning 73% put in more than their usual effort for the course. Of the remaining students, 8, nearly 20%, reported about the same effort, while 2 put in less and 1 reported much less, meaning only 3 repondants actually put in less work as a result of the contract.

Several comments explicitly connect the reduction in worry and the increase in effort reported. One student wrote, "I loved working with the grade contract. It helped me worry much less, but I ended up working a lot harder in the class because of it—I knew the class would be based off of how well I could perform, so I performed my best." This student's comment suggests a turn towards intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation for doing work; yes, the final course grade remains as an external motivator, yet in this comment the student appears to be challenging their self to do more. Another student comment makes a strong case for a constructive, inverse relationship between worry on the one hand and effort and learning on the other, which is facilitated by a contract:

> "As a student, we are constantly worried so much about the grade we receive in a course. This takes away from the true purpose of the course which should be having learned something new. Grade contracts allow for students to immerse themselves into their work while building deeper connections to content. Without students consistently having anxiety about the grade they receive on each assignment, we can focus on our growth and celebrate achievement."

In feedback and reflections at the end of each semester, we have been encouraged by students' support for grade contracts. Their satisfaction with the use of the contract is likewise borne out in the survey results. When asked, "Overall, how do you rate your satisfaction with using a grade contract to determine your course grade?" 25 or 61% were very satisfied, 12 satisfied, 1 neutral, and 3 unsatisfied. We believe that much of this high rate of satisfaction comes from a combination of having all course expectations laid out at the beginning of the semester in the contract, and by the required one-on-one conferences at midterm and near the end of the semester when we discussed and negotiated with students. Together, these give students greater agency and a clearer understanding that they are responsible for their grade. Again, the earlier student comment about clarity comes to mind: "Some classes I feel like I've done a lot of work but then I'll receive a lower grade than expected but not know why. With the contract I know areas to work on to make my grade successful." Not surprisingly, 33 respondents or 80.5% said they would like for more of their classes to use grade contracts, 5 were neutral, and only 3 would not want grade contracts in other classes.

Conclusion

We believe that students who have taken our courses see many of the advantages that we and others who have adopted and studied grade contracts see. The approach promotes fairness and transparency in several ways; the contract:

1. Values labor—gives credit for the work that students do towards learning (Inoue).

2. Allows personalized attention for each student—we're not comparing students to other students, we're looking at each student's labor over the semester, alongside the student during midterm and final conferences—and applying that to the contract.

3. Enables students to experiment and try new things, because of the emphasis on process and labor over product. By focusing on labor rather than outcomes, the contract does not penalize students for learning through trial and error, or for trying out new things. Rather than disproportionately weight the mistakes and errors that are part of learning, the contract helps students to focus on their successes. It allows for failure to be productive. Certainly, learning through failure can happen in traditionally graded class too, but there is often a sense of being penalized for it through grades, thereby disincentivizing risk-taking.

4. Helps students to move towards intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic (Danielewicz & Elbow 2009). The contract is still an external motivator, but it functions as a bridge. This move towards intrinsic motivation is supported by taking the value off the table—students are told their work has value, but that it doesn't need to be quantified. The contract brings the focus on what the student *does*, not on what they think about how the teacher sees them.

For these and other benefits to learning, we and many of our students encourage more instructors to implement grade contracts in their classes as a means to bring about more transparent and equitable teaching, assessment, and learning. Our own work with grade contracts continues, and we will continue to gather survey data from more students in our classes. After three semesters of use, we are convinced of their value.

References

Danielewicz, J., & Elbow P. (2009). A unilateral grading contract to improve learning and teaching. *College Composition and Communication*, *61*(2), 244. Retrieved from http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.40593442&site=eds-live&scope=site

Elbow, P. (1996). Getting along without grades—And getting along with them too. Retrieved from http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=eric&AN=ED401545&site=eds-live&scope=site

Hassencahl, F. (1979). Contract grading in the classroom. *Improving College and University Teaching*, *27*(1), 30–33. Retrieved from http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=eric&AN=EJ201638&site=ehost-live&scope=site

Inoue, A. (2014). A grade-less writing course that focuses on labor and assessing. In D. Teague & R. Lunsford (Eds.), *First-year composition: From theory to practice* (pp. 71–110). West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press.

Inoue, A. (2015). *Antiracist writing assessment ecologies: Teaching and assessing writing for a socially just future*. Fort Collins, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor Press. Retrieved from https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/inoue/

Parks, A. G., & Zurhellen, H. S. (1978). Student attitudes toward the grade contract. *Improving College and University Teaching*, *26*(4), 239–242. Retrieved from http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=eric&AN=EJ198264&site=ehost-live&scope=site

Poppen, W. A., & Thompson, C. L. (1971). The effect of grade contracts on student performance. *Journal of Educational Research*, *64*(9), 420. Retrieved from http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=eric&AN=EJ040114&site=ehost-live&scope=site

Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Shor, I. (1996). *When students have power: Negotiating authority in a critical pedagogy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Shor, I. (2009). Critical pedagogy is too big to fail. *Journal of Basic Writing (CUNY)*, *28*(2), 6–27. Retrieved from http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=eric&AN=EJ877253&site=ehost-live&scope=site