



Contract grading in the technical writing classroom: Blending community-based assessment and self-assessment

Lisa M. Litterio

Bridgewater State University, 131 Summer Street, Bridgewater, MA 02325, United States

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ABSTRACT

This article builds from the author's previously published article, "Contract Grading in a Technical Writing Classroom: A Case Study". This prior study examined how students in a technical writing classroom collaborated to generate criteria relating to the quality of their writing assignments with the instructor determining whether or not they met this criteria. This study demonstrated that although students perceived more involvement in the grading process, they resisted participation in crafting criteria as a class and preferred traditional grading methods by an expert. Based on feedback from reviewers and additional reflection, this IRB approved study consists of a revised contract grading system implemented in my spring 2017 technical writing classroom. This contract grading system consists of full student involvement throughout the contract grading process, which includes generating classroom-agreed upon criteria for each assignment and self-assessment of each assignment. The results from this study show that students embraced being involved with all aspects of their assessment, specifically in generating criteria and having clear expectations and more autonomy. The study concludes with additional implications and encouragement to continue to experiment with contract grading.

1. Introduction and background

In fall 2014, as a new instructor of technical communication, I piloted a study detailed in "Contract Grading in the Technical Writing Classroom: A Case Study" (Litterio, 2016). Arguing that much of the work in contract grading has been situated in traditional writing classrooms (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Inoue, 2005; Shor, 2009), I advocated for a contract grading study that involved the technical communication classroom. As a teacher-researcher and someone new to contract grading, I provided a comprehensive study that examined how students generated their own criteria for assignments based on consensus while I had the final assessment over each assignment. This study allowed me to serve as the mediator, assessing the criteria students developed and taking an active role in analyzing whether they applied these criteria.

The results of this study showed that students overall were more comfortable with traditional grading practices and experienced difficulty seeing themselves as experts. Based on the first inception of this research study and interest in revisiting the research design, I carefully considered the reviewer question of: "Why not allow students complete autonomy over their work?" Instead of involving some aspects of contract grading, what can happen when students are involved with every aspect of their assessment? Based on this prior research study, reviewer comments, and student feedback, this follow-up study still involves students developing class criteria for each assignment and voting on it, but it also involves students assessing themselves through a written reflection of their work, asking them to demonstrate how they meet the criteria laid out through a community-based model. It also mitigates the issue of the instructor determining "quality" as some contract grading systems do by inviting students to critically respond to their own work and

E-mail address: llitterio@bridgew.edu.

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analyze the criteria set forth by the class.

This study engages with the following research questions:

- (1) How does a contract grading system with a blend of community-based assessment and student self-assessment result in student involvement throughout the entire process?
- (2) What do students perceive as the advantages and disadvantages of such a system?

This article contextualizes these questions through literature that addresses contract grading, community-based assessment, and self-assessment. Then, I provide a framework for this study using methods of student surveys and analysis of reflections to determine student involvement. I then conclude with the results, implications, and opportunities for future research.

1.1. *Traditional notions of contract grading*

As early as 1912, researchers were critical of traditional grading practices such as “A”, “B”, “C”, etc. as too subjective for students (Ellsworth & Willson, 1977, p. 188). O’Hagan et al. (1997) created categories that delineated the problematic aspects of traditional assessment practices. She argued that grades “form a barrier between students and teachers”, counterproductive in the writing classroom (p. 11). In order to mitigate some of the problematic aspects of grades, Radican (1997) detailed a contract grading method she experienced as a graduate student, stating she “felt a tremendous amount of freedom because [she] could write for [herself], rather than the professor or the grade” (p. 298). Thus, contract grading was formed due to some of these obstacles with traditional assessment practices and also as an opportunity for students to take more risks in their writing. As its name suggests, contract grading is a written contract between the teacher and student, based primarily on the quantity of work the student will complete. Elbow (1997) stated, “The point [of contract grading] is to focus less on trying to measure degrees of quality of writing and instead to emphasize activities and behaviors that will lead to learning” (p. 133). Similarly, Moreno-Lopez (2005) argued that contract grading “focuses on students’ voices and encourages active learning” (n.p.). Traditional contract grading systems typically allow for the students to select the assignments they would like to complete. It also involves the instructor developing criteria for each assignment and marking the assignment as acceptable or not (Elbow, 1997; Potts, 2010). In order to engage students more fully in a contract grading system, this research design employed the labor-based aspect of contract grading but also invited students to have more ownership of their writing, both as a class determining criteria for assignments and on an individual basis through self-assessments.

1.2. *Class generated criteria & community-based assessment pedagogy*

A number of researchers advocate for community-based assessment, which involves the student in all parts of the assessment process (Inoue, 2005; White, 1994). Inoue (2005) is heralded as forming a system that invites his students to have complete autonomy over their assessments and assignments. The goal is to “coach [them] toward sound assessment practices and active learning stances by making them do the hard work of assessment” (p. 221). In his 300-level course entitled “Writing and Rhetorical Conventions,” he piloted a community-based assessment pedagogy where students developed rubrics for each assignment in conversation with one another. Beginning in the second week of class, students brought in “a paragraph of good writing” and collaborated in small groups and whole class sessions on iterations of the rubric used to assess their work (p. 216). According to Inoue, “the rubric is central because it forms both our discussions of writing as a set of conventions, and its used to assess the writing of the class. . . and provides an opportunity to see how writing conventions may change as our class’ writing purposes and needs change” (p. 221). Although Inoue structured the assignments for his class, his students have complete involvement in their assessment, their peers’ work, and examples of exemplary writing.

Inoue is careful to call this system “not a contract system, nor a default grade system” (p. 211) since the crux of his assessment involves conversations between him and the student. Another central aspect of Inoue’s method and community-based assessment pedagogy is inviting students to comment on one another’s work, using the rubric as a guide. Inoue stated, “The student judges the paper according to the rubric, makes a brief, specific comment for each criterion (a sentence or two) that shows the writer where the potential seems to be, and includes a short general assessment of the paragraph that points to the place the writer should revise first” (p. 223). These assessments allow students to comment extensively on each other’s work in a way that is more substantive than peer review. For one, they post these comments publicly and as a result students feel more connected to one another. As he summarized, “Having stake in these processes means students can critically engage their writing as meaningful practices situated within a community for particular purposes” (p. 222).

Beyond the use of rubrics, another feature of his system is “hard agreements” within the rubric process. He stated, “By ‘consensus,’ I do not mean that the class is in complete and full agreement, only that *hard agreements* have to be explicitly made eventually, despite some individuals’ disagreements about a few particulars in the rubric” (p. 216). This process encourages what Inoue called a “dialectic vying”, a way for students to grapple with rhetorical conventions and understanding that criteria for assessment are not static. Elbow (2006) criticized Inoue’s study for this process of agreement, arguing that it implied that “communities produce agreements about value—when in fact they produce agreement only about conventions” (p. 88). Elbow’s criticism focused on this rubric process as a “set of rhetorical conventions” that the class agrees to rather than values about their writing. Inoue (2007) responded that the process of creating rubrics through community-based pedagogy led to students grappling with their own values in the rubric and what they end up valuing as they read and analyze texts; this process resulted in a critical consciousness and a deeper understanding of assessment practices. This study seeks to intervene in the dissension between corporate rubric/standards vs. individual standards,

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