

109. Reimagining Assessments: Exploring the Untapped Benefits of Contract Grading w/ Dr. Leah Pate, Dr. Tamara Black, & Dr. Rory Lukins

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Dan Dissinger: On today's episode of Writing Remix, I'm here with my colleagues from the USC Writing Program, Professor Leah Pate, Rory Lukins, and Tamara Black to talk about their project, Reimagining Assessments, Contract Grading's Untapped Benefits for Learning, Teaching, and Well Being. All right, everyone, welcome to another episode of Writing Remix.

Um, today is a really exciting day. Awesome episode, and it's a great episode to kind of also, in a way, jump, re jump start the whole, the whole season of 2024's episodes, um, and it's going to be a really great conversation. I'm looking forward to it. I'm here with my, uh, colleagues from the USC Writing Program, uh, Professor Leah Pate, Rory Lukins and Tamara Black.

And, uh, as you heard in the intro, it's going to be a really deep dive into, um, assessment and contract grading. And I'm really looking forward to this because it's [00:01:00] something that is huge right now. And people have been thinking about, and we've been piloting a lot here in USC. So before we get started, I'd like to hand it over to my colleagues so they can, uh, introduce themselves.

So anyone can jump in

Tamara Black: hey, Dan. Um, it's such a treat to be here. I'm Tamara Black and, uh, I'm an associate professor at USC in the writing program and, um, I am mostly in an upper division kind of space in my teaching and, uh, my portion of this project has been, um, to, to Sort of spearhead and collect a lot of the upper division data.

Leah Pate: Hello. I'm Leah Pate. I'm also a professor. You have seen the writing program. I'm so happy to be here. Thank you for having us. I move between the lower division, upper division context, although I primarily Like to

teach in the lower division context and my area [00:02:00] of kind of research and respect to grading contracts in our books largely been on the faculty experience and issues pertaining to labor and emotional labor with faculty who use grading contracts.

Rory Lukins: Hi, everybody. It's Rory Lukins. I'm also associate professor here. And, um, yeah, I generally tend, I generally tend to focus on lower division, uh, courses and, uh, curriculum. So, yeah, that's, that's me.

Dan Dissinger: Well, I'm gonna just open it up to questions. Like, as a general conversation, and the first question really to kind of think about, why grading? Why assessment? Why grading contracts? Like, what was it that, um, interested you all in this, um, in this endeavor?

Leah Pate: Um, you know, I so just to give a little background. Um, you know, Asao Inoue gave a very big speech at the Cs at the college conference on composition. I in was it 2018 [00:03:00] or 2019 that he gave the.

Tamara Black: 19, I think it was 2019,

Leah Pate: 2019, uh, about his work on grading contracts, which had kind of been a trend in the field on and off for, for a long time, but it really reinvigorated the discussion around this kind of mode of assessment that was much more labor based. And so for people in the audience who maybe don't know what grading contracts are, uh, there's different kind of variations on it, but essentially.

At its core, a grading contract asks students to complete a certain amount of labor in exchange for a certain guaranteed grade. And it really shifts the sort of emphasis in terms of how we assess Student work, um, on their commitment, their engagement, their labor, uh, in order to address various inequities in order to encourage an election risk taking.

I mean, there's a lot of reasons to do it. [00:04:00] There's a lot of ways that it that it. You know, can be shaped. Uh, so USC. We decided to pilot this study and 2019 1st in our lower division context and and Rory and I were both volunteers from the get go, uh, and I can at least say to participate it in just as an instructor.

And I think that for me, one of the things that attracted me right away is that, you know, grading is such a laborious, tedious part of our job. It's so emotionally exhausting. And I loved this, this possibility of going into the

classroom and saying, okay, You're not going to get a grade if you work hard on this piece of writing.

What would you do? What is possible here? If I am not, if you're not laboring with this, you know, this kind of mark over your head, like, what, what do you want to write about? What do you want to do? And I was really intrigued with the pedagogical possibilities of having a classroom [00:05:00] space like that.

Tamara Black: I concur with everything Leah just said. Um, and then I think I, I absolutely want to give credit to folks like Sarah Mesle and Dave Tompkins. Um, they, like, me do a lot of teaching in the upper division space, and we were kind of like, oh, grading contracts pilot seems to be going.

Very, very well in lower division. Um, we, you know, what can we do to coordinate permission to try this in the upper division context as well? So, when we started putting that part of the study together would have been a little bit later, would have been like spring 2021 was when we started the upper division.

Um, and really the spirit of that was to, To build on the strengths that we'd seen the benefits that we'd seen our first year writing students, um, appreciate from this assessment format, and then sort of try it in in upper division 2, and then see, like, [00:06:00] what kinds of adjustments might need to be made to, um, to translate it into the advanced writing.

Space and so there were, you know, there were a few adjustments that we made as we, as we went along. But a lot of the work that we did kind of owes a debt to what had already been set up and piloted in in lower division. Yeah, we I think we changed it and we changed it in a few a few ways. But um, but yeah, it was very much very much building on that.

Leah Pate: I do want to give a shout out to Jeff Chisum , who was our associate director at the time who kind of launched the whole pilot in the lower division context. And Rory, who's here with us today, I think worked with Jeff from the very beginnings to set up the foundation. So Rory and Jeff Chisum were really kind of the two, I think, who, who really got the ball rolling at USC for this.

Program.

Rory Lukins: Yeah. You know, you have to give, give Jeff a shout out. I, I believe he was at the, um, the, the 2019 talk at the Cs [00:07:00] that, that you referenced earlier. And he thought that, uh, the writing program was a good

place to, to actually test this, you know, um, to, to see what it, what it produced in terms of student writing and student learning.

And, um, so he asked me to help him out. And, uh, you know, the kind of, the rest is history. Uh, we, we designed some survey instruments and we tracked students for a couple of years. And, um, you know, after a year or so, Tamara, Tamara picked up with a 340 and, um, you know, I, I think it's been a big success. Uh, you know, things are changing.

A lot has happened since 2019. Um, and so it's been a very interesting project to watch develop. Um, And and change and I think the students, the student population is has changed quite a bit in that time, too. But but all in all, I think we're seeing positive developments in the department and then we're in our teaching.

Tamara Black: I just want to really quickly pick up on, like, you mentioned, like, just desire and your desire to test [00:08:00] and I fully, I actually fully support that, because I think as eager as some of us were to try out grading contracts, we really didn't. We didn't. Enter this project at, you know, in a polemical way, or even as like, sort of like advocates with a with a sort of expectation.

That's like, okay, well, what can we do to empirically promote this form of assessment? We were really trying to see, like, how, how are students doing? How are faculty doing? Um, what are the, what are the problems that are coming up? How can we address people's concerns? It was. We didn't come into this project with the goal of asserting that grading contracts are better than other modes of assessment.

We just wanted to see how they were working in our department and just sort of figure out, like, to the extent that they are working, how can we make them even better? And to the extent that people are running into problems and concerns of which there are some, um, [00:09:00] That, you know, what can we do to, to recognize those and address them?

Um, so it's, I would say, like, it's, it's, we, we've taken, and guys, please agree with me if you want, but I think we've taken a very, an empirical approach rather than one that's like, we are advocates of this method above all else.

Leah Pate: Yeah, and I would also say, I mean, we particularly in the upper division context where we have collected data every single semester, both from students and faculties and the pilot, uh, we've collected quite a bit of data.

Um, we would adjust the data that we were. acquiring and requesting, you know, semester to semester based on the feedback that we were getting in responses and trends that we were seeing. So as things were kind of coming up, then we would test for that in the subsequent semesters. So we had sort of an evolving kind of Not methodology because it's [00:10:00] the same methodology, but sort of, um, evolving, evolving set of inquiries as we got more and more information over, over the years.

Dan Dissinger: So like, I was, I was thinking about everything you all said too, and thinking like, what's the difference between, what would be the difference between like the contract grading or just no grades, right? Like, and it's not to say that the contract grading is this like thing where it's like, you don't. Leave feedback right so they the feedback stuff like that's what we do right, but if we just then said well What is that?

What would be the difference like? What do you or? What do you see is the differences like? Contract grading versus like even what Jesse Stommel talks about is like ungrading or like this idea of no grades.

Leah Pate: I can speak to this for myself because this is something I struggle with because I think there's a lot of us teaching writing who would like to just not grade, you know, and just kind of go to an entirely like, [00:11:00] Labor based model of, you know, pass, fail or whatever.

I mean, we do face and certainly instructors across the nation face competing, you know, institutional demands and requirements. Um, I think with contract grading it. The difference between that and ungrading, it would be or, or, or no grades is that at least in the model of us and USC's model where there is a final grade, um, that comes in at the very end on a portfolio, right?

And the portfolio can take them up. We guarantee a B if they stay in line with the contract. And then if they get a higher grade on the portfolio, it brings them up. Um, I think the difference is between that and like a no grading model is this is saying that there is. There is some we are going to have the criteria and a rubric, but you're not going to get it until you have the full benefit, of course, so that attempts [00:12:00] to kind of, you know, account for some, you know, definite sort of.

different places that students are coming in. Um, but I would say that my personal preference would be, would be just to, uh, go to a totally process based grading contract. But unfortunately, most, uh, institutions of higher education are not, not. The transcript

Rory Lukins: kind of institutionalizes the need for, uh, A letter grade.

And so, um, you know, there is a big movement for this kind of labor based, um, scheme of assessment. Um, and it ties in with, I think there's a growing movement just to kind of try to get rid of grades on college campuses entirely. I don't know if any of you saw this. There was a There was an op ed in the Wall Street Journal to this point, um, you know, three, three or four weeks ago, which is, strikes me as an unlikely place [00:13:00] for it.

Um, but, uh, so, so that, that idea is out there and it's, um, it's one, it's one that's getting some serious attention. I, you know, part of me feels like the composition field is, is ripe for that because, um, writing, we approach it as a process, but there's also like a subjective element to it, not just the assessment, but it's, it's.

It's different from other forms of knowledge. I think in that, you know, you could be a great writer and just, you know, have an essay that falls totally flat. And if you only have, you know, if you're a student and you're a good writer, but you know, you have all these other competing ideas, you have these other competing coursework, all of these things competing for your time and attention on a college campus, especially at a place like USC, um, They're just a ton of it, you know, things can go awry.

And so I think what we've found is that this, this contract and, uh, kind of opens up the space for, for students to make mistakes. And, you know, I [00:14:00] think, I think that's a, you know, not just in terms of like how they organize their time, but, you know, they try something on an essay and it doesn't, doesn't quite go well, right.

It's just a misfire, um, that, that this model is a bit more, um, open to that, that reality.

Tamara Black: One of the things that's amazing about having brilliant co authors is that, um, we. Kind of constantly sort of like challenge each other check each other and talk about all the hard things I'm gonna take this opportunity to bring up Joyce Inman and Rebecca Powell They have this article about in the absence of grades and they argue that students actually expressed in their research students expressed an affective desire for For grades, um, as like, so sort of like grades function as affective carriers of achievement belonging identity that like earning a grade is a kind of like for students experience.

It is a kind of like professional socialization and we actually [00:15:00] found something similar that like. Okay, headline for us is students benefit in all kinds of ways from removing grades during the semester, which is what we do on the grading contract at USC. But when we ask students what they don't like about the grading contract, they're like, oh, we like, we actually miss a lot.

A gauge of class standing like we actually want an estimate of how we're doing how we're improving. So students will say things to us like without grades. It made me unsure of the quality of my papers. I was in the dark about my. My progress. And so I think to sort of speak directly to your to your question, Dan, for me, the difference between like, no grades at all versus a grading contract that offers opportunities for students to get that kind of letter grade assessment is that, like, I think for some students, they actually, they, they kind of, they kind of want [00:16:00] that for a number of reasons.

you know, sort of bureaucratic reasons, like they need a letter grade on their transcript to apply to medical school, but also the kinds of affective reasons that Inman and Powell are describing. Like, it tells me, like, this is, this is how I understand if I'm getting better. And if I don't have that, Um, sometimes they have more more anxiety about how to sort of decode our qualitative feedback.

Um, so that's, that's in the mix too. Um, and I think some, some of us have gotten around that by offering informational grades, which is to say that if we're like, yes, we're teaching the grading contract. If you would like an estimate of the grade, you can ask for it. We will give you a sense of what this grade would have been, but it actually doesn't count towards your, um, it doesn't count towards your, your calculation of your final grade and the students like this, they really benefit from this, um, but it [00:17:00] creates extra labor for faculty and it undermines some of the sort of, some of the, you know, Some of the reasons that we would want to have as faculty, some of the pedagogical reasons that we'd want to have great in contracts, right?

Because it doesn't shift the focus away from grades. It puts it right back on it. Faculty are still assigning letter grades. That creates labor. And even if the letter grades are just estimates that don't count students, then might still have questions about, like, oh, but, like, what? Why is this a C grade and not a B grade?

So it like puts us back into that space where we're like talking about grades again, instead of talking about voice and development and all the things that, that really matter.

Dan Dissinger: Yeah. I remember having, oh, go ahead, Rory. Go ahead.

Rory Lukins: I was going to say, that's a good. I mean, that those are important points.

Tamara. I don't want to give the impression that our project was, um, you know, strictly labor based. There was always a letter grade in the background somewhere, even if instructors were just giving comments and, you know, the 1st, the 1st semester we ran this, I kind of brought this up to [00:18:00] students at 1 point, um, In one of my classes, you know, the idea was that, you know, we were doing this and they were, they were very intrigued by it.

Um, and I was like, well, there's another, there's another theory similar that, that, you know, it should just all be labor and there should be no grades. And they all said, Oh, no, no, no. If there were no grades, I wouldn't be in class right now. **And, um, I wouldn't be, you know, I wouldn't be writing. That's essentially,**

Dan Dissinger: that's what I was going to say.

Like there was, I had a student that did a project, like a writing project where they surveyed. A bunch of students. Their first project was like doing a whole paper about eliminating grades. Then in their second writing project, they're like, let me survey students to see what type of grading they'd like.

And if they'd like no grades, and they were surprised that the students wanted a grading system, but they wanted one that would provide more feedback, kind of like in the grade, like they wanted both. And so in the third project, he wrote, like, almost sort of a project about, you know, A labor based grading system.

So it's interesting because what you're saying lines up with even [00:19:00] what he did as a student kind of exploring these ideas. But, you know, going back to some of the things you're saying too about the, the pedagogical reasons for two in terms of, I think sometimes what we do at USC, I mean, we're trying to push towards a more of a three project arc, right?

Like instead of four, but I think that even this, even like pushing on the pedagogy of process oriented writing more could give us a little more leeway to kind of go to get students used to more labor based like feedback where it's like we're moving towards a final idea and these two projects or whatever they get feedback that move towards a final project instead of every project get graded.

So maybe there's like so many there's different types of adjustments that even in how the writing program dispenses the writing projects in many ways. Kind of is antithetical because the 2 things are trying to, like, catch up with 1 another, right? Or, like, intersect in some [00:20:00] way.

Leah Pate: Unique.

Tamara Black: I was hoping to go for it there.

Leah Pate: Well, I was just going to say, I mean, one of the interesting things that we have found in our research with the grading contract is a really interesting tension, which, you know, as Tamara pointed out, and your own student found, there is this You know, you, they, they are so acculturated to grades is that they didn't get into USC not caring about their grade.

Like, that's not the deal that it's so when we come in and aren't giving them grades. I think there is such a relief and they are. They are into it, but like you cannot take a kid out of, you know, 18 years of a certain kind of system and, you know, just be like, and guess what they do. It is. It is struggle.

So I will one were mandated by university policy that at any point if someone wants to know how they're doing, we have to, we have to tell them. Um, but as Tamra said, [00:21:00] some students do or professors do offer an instructional or an informational grade. on every assignment. I do not. I say if they want to know, they can come talk to me.

But one of the interesting tensions with our data is in respect to the faculty experience, the not having to assign a grade is by far and away the thing that is the most, what faculty found to be the most beneficial, what they liked the best about the grading. This comes up over and again in the data. I mean, it's the most salient point.

is what they like the most is that they did not have to adjust, uh, justify a grade. That this is the best thing about the grading contract in respect to giving feedback and respect to the relationship with their student and in not having to give a grade a sign a letter grade and not having to justify it.

It completely changed the dynamic of the classroom for them, it changed their experience, it significantly reduced emotional [00:22:00] labor. So this is one of like the significant sort of tensions that we see is because even if you're giving an informational grade. Once you put that letter on the paper, it changes the

dynamic of everything right and you do kind of have to justify it a little bit more, even if it's just an informational grade.

So that those competing sort of experiences of like that desire for a grade versus the benefits to faculty who, whose labor that I mean, the faculty labor is a whole other issue that I hope to get to talk about, but, um, we're, we're trying to work that out a little bit as, as a field to, to figure that out because the, what the biggest benefit to faculty is the, is the The not giving grades.

That's what our data shows over and over

Tamara Black: to students of not giving the grades is that like it again helps us ideologically shift the focus away from grades. I think Sarah Mesley gets credit for this. I think she was [00:23:00] like, you don't get a B plus on your job interview or a B minus on your manuscript to a publisher.

She's like in, you know, once you leave an undergraduate setting, um, You know, students aren't going to receive letter grades to correlate with the sort of their quality of work or their success. And so, like, if we can sort of start acculturating them to different ways of receiving feedback and assessment, then we're actually doing, we're actually doing a good job of providing feedback.

So, I think that's really cool. Um, I think 1 of the amazing things about decoupling feedback from grades is that it allows students to engage with our feedback more boldly. 1 of the big findings at the student level is that students said to us over and over again that they, in other situations, they have avoided.

[00:24:00] professor's comments because of the grade and the like it's it's sort of like a kind of like a fear of the grade and a fear of the negative emotions that accompany a disappointing grade so it's like students will students will avoid our notes entirely because like the the possibility of The letter grade, the letter grade is so upsetting to them.

You take that out of the mix. You say like, okay, you don't want to see the grade. There's no great. You don't have to look at the grade and suddenly they're invested in process at the level of considering our feedback reading our feedback, using our feedback. I have a, I pulled a quote, one of the students said, Feedback became exciting and a way to improve my writing, as opposed to how stressful feedback usually is when a grade is attached to it.

This made me learn from my mistakes without creating burnout or immense stress. So, like, and that was a very typical response. The students are saying

again and again that, um, the notes that made them focused on future revisions, their producers, they're producing [00:25:00] stronger writing, um, and they suddenly they're, like, excited to read, like, they want our feedback and the grades are a barrier to accessing it.

And, like, we can actually take that barrier away and let them go for it.

Rory Lukins: Yeah, you know, to that point, Tamara, I mean, I use both sometimes I do give provisional grades because they are useful in benchmarking, but usually, at least early in the semester, I don't, I just give comments with, you know, with the proviso that I'll, I'm happy to give them a grade range and I'm, I'm actually usually, I'm surprised fewer students, they don't really ask for grades, you know, a couple of them will say, you know, I'm curious, they'll come up at the end of class, I'll say, okay, just, you know, send me an email, I'll let you know, because I have to check my notes, obviously.

Very few follow up so it's good. It's been a surprise to me over the last, you know, four or five years, how few students actually are willing to maybe they're not willing to or maybe they just not, you know that they've just bought into the idea and they're not, it's not an issue for them anymore. I don't know.[00:26:00]

Leah Pate: I had like five semester maybe.

Tamara Black: Yeah, I think if they if they know that we're not like, you know, I think students might have this sort of idea in their minds that, like, when we look at them, we see their letter grade on their forehead. That's how we think of them. And so for a student to come up to us and sort of be, like, how, how am I doing in terms of my grade?

And for us to be, like, I have no idea, like. You're here, you're making great contributions, like your drafts are looking good, like, I would have to, I really have to check my notes to know how you're doing. I think for students to know that, like, we are not constantly assessing them is actually, it brings down the temperature quite a bit, and I think they relax into that and start to trust it more and more.

Rory Lukins: When you get to that point about judgment that Leah was was talking about, and that that actually is a kind of note that carries through the early contract literature about when you're [00:27:00] not assigning a letter grade, you don't really have to justify why something is weaker than maybe, you know, an A or something.

And so you kind of take that notion of judgment out. And then suddenly your feedback, your feedback becomes, um, Uh, what we call formative, right? It's forward thinking. It's like, next time let's try this rather than, you know, I really saw your, your thesis week for these reasons. And therefore it's a B minus, you don't, you don't have to highlight that.

Um, I, you know, in this context, one of the things that really helped me was just, I came across a essay by Peter Elbow about actually like liking your students work, you know, it's like, it's, it's like part of the, part of the job is to try to like your students work. You read so much of it. And so, um, I started including a paragraph like this is what I thought you did really well, right?

Look at this going forward. And that made my commentary so much easier. It just wasn't like, you know, I wasn't racking my brain to explain why something was a B minus on our rubric instead of a B plus or something like that, which is a hard distinction. I mean, that's a [00:28:00] really tough distinction to articulate.

Tamara Black: And I've tried more and more to I've tried more and more to encounter student writing is as a reader to kind of, like, take their assignments seriously as communicative acts and, like, more than like, oh, I have to come up with a letter grade for this person. I have to be like, okay, here's like, yet another opportunity for me to get to know them through their, their writing.

And I think all these things together are having like, like, Actually, like, statistically significant mental health and well being benefits. Like, again, our thousands of students participate in this upper and lower division, it like students have significantly lower levels of grace related anxiety in our contract graded sections compared to our conventionally graded sections.

They, the students in both formats have. Robust learning outcomes. They're having a strong learning experience. Our faculty who teach the conventionally graded assessments are still doing a fantastic job, [00:29:00] and the students increase in confidence, and they become better writers. Like, all that stuff is still happening, regardless of assessment mode.

But as far as, like, the amount of time students spend worrying about grades, the degree to which they experience the course as stressful, Significantly lower in the contract classes. So that's like, huge for us. We keep all the benefits of rigor, but bring down like the anxiety. That's that's a tip to us.

That was a big, a big, um, a big bonus.

Rory Lukins: Yeah, we found that.

Tamara Black: Oh, sorry.

Rory Lukins: Sorry. No, we found that across the lower division and upper division classes. Those results were fairly similar. Um, and, you know, when we ran the statistical tests, they did, you know, the comparisons with the control group and the contract groups were, you know, they did meet those statistically significant thresholds.

So it's really, it's really encouraging. I

Leah Pate: mean, just to and faculty observations reaffirm this. I mean, 85 percent of our upper division faculty [00:30:00] found that the students anxieties and stress levels decreased to a certain extent. So, in, you know, so obviously this experience that students was that we're having was also being reflected in the tenor of the classroom and the instructor student relationship as well.

So,

Rory Lukins: Yeah. And, you know, I, because I was involved with the lower division one and after the two years that, um, had elapsed, I tried to interview all the instructors who participate. I didn't get to chat with everybody, but I got to chat with a lot of them and they were overwhelmingly positive. I mean, some of them were like, I'm not going back.

I'm not going back to the model we had before, before. And I think a lot of the things that Leah said about, um, you know, the lessening or the decreasing, um, Yeah. Absolutely. Effective emotional labor and that kind of thing really played out in those interviews as well.

Dan Dissinger: Are they, are faculty, are faculty taking more or less time with assessing the projects?

Because I know when I speak to faculty, [00:31:00] like one of the things that everyone talks about is like, I is take, you know, I have a lot of assessing to do. We'll use that word instead of, you know, just assessing, right? But that, you know, is that something you, Asked about I'm curious because like, because for me, I do conventional grading, but, you know, we develop a rubric in class with the students developed a rubric for me and stuff.

So there's like other steps and things. Um, so I'm curious about. Did they did you see less time spent assessing or was it just the same amount and that didn't matter. I'm really curious about that.

Leah Pate: I can speak directly to this because I've been totally immersed in this data. No, it has a faculty did find some faculty did find like a slight reduction in overall labor, but the nature of that is not entirely clear.

Uh, there, you know, people spend the same amount of time giving feedback. But what [00:32:00] changed. Is the experience of giving that feedback. So I, I mean, I have some quotes here. It was so much more meaningful. I was able to treat, uh, giving feedback as a learning experience. Uh, it was wonderful. Uh, my feedback was more productive, meaningful, enjoyable.

I got to emphasize revision more. The whole experience made it process based and more pleasurable, more pleasurable and more meaningful come up in all All the qualitative to qualitative data coming from faculty on the nature of feedback. So it did not change the time and labor commitment that way, but in vis a vis this kind of shift in the nature of the experience because you didn't have to justify the grade because it kind of eliminates this adversarial sort of, you know, dynamic that's kind of built into assigning a letter grade.

It really reduced stress. It improved instructors [00:33:00] experiences of teaching the class. It reduced their own anxiety about giving feedback. So it really had notable, both in the quantitative and qualitative data, Experiences of reducing emotional labor, so not time, but the emotional labor that that instructors experience because giving feedback is, I mean, in scholarship widely documents this, the, the signing of grades.

Is the most emotionally laborious, uh, fraught part of our profession and teach position,

Rory Lukins: you know, Dan, I did, when I was talking with, uh, our colleagues, I did, I'd actually did ask them what their perceptions of their workload was. I think most people felt it didn't change much. Some people thought maybe it was a little bit more, but some people thought it was a little bit less, but, uh, one common theme was that they found the commentary, like the commenting, the, Grading process, much less onerous.

Um, and so that, that, that, I think that resonates with what Leah is [00:34:00] saying. Um, so that, that came up in the one 50 setting as well.

Dan Dissinger: Yeah, that was something I was always curious about because I was like, okay, I know I'm like, cause I'm always thinking about that. How is contract grading the thing that everyone is like, as we're working on continually piloting it and exploring it, how, you know, is it very.

Is it student centered and not so much about this idea is like, Oh, I'm going to be able to do less, you know, less assessing and spend less time. But it's interesting to think that like, that even with the same amount of time spent on assessing student work, that the, the experience of that assessment is, is really kind of at the core, what people were seeing, um, um, improve, which.

It's really, I mean, that's really important, right? Because then it's like you improve in the class. You don't go there being like, oh boy, here we go. I just graded everyone's projects [00:35:00] and I'm walking in here and looking at everyone because I remember having to hand projects back with grades on it. And the first time I ever did that I was like, oh, yay.

Here we go. And it was always like very, you know, Very nerve wracking. Um, so what are the differences? What is the differences between the upper division and the lower division contract? Like, I'm curious about, because there are certain adjustments you said that had to be made. What type of adjustments did you make from upper to from lower to upper?

Tamara Black: Contracts are pretty similar. Um, the, I think the adjustments that we made were and Leah mentioned this earlier, um, were more in terms of how we were studying the process. Like, we added a question about informational grades. We added I think we added questions. Roy, remind me, were we collecting demographic data on the students in lower division 2?

I don't remember if we had that. Cause I know we did,

Rory Lukins: but not, [00:36:00] Near the end, we did start doing that. Um, at the beginning, no, but as we thought we could get the data from other sources than having students self identify, but we did, we did at the end. I don't know how incisive that, that, that, that was. That information has been, but it's much more robust in the 30, excuse me, in the upper division courses.

Yeah, we can speak.

Tamara Black: Yeah, students were able to and the upper division students can self identify gender race. Um, status as a veteran, a transfer student, someone with an accommodation, international student. Um, so we've been sort of

cranking through some of the, some of the data on whether there are significant differences in how populations within our sample we're experiencing.

Uh, we're experiencing the grading contract. Um. In terms of, in terms of how the contract is [00:37:00] administered, we have always encouraged our faculty to adopt the contract and sort of apply it faithfully, but also to feel free to make adjustments and to sort of like, you know, if they keep us posted on the adjustments that they're making, because I think one of the things that, that I'm just sort of a big fan of is instructor autonomy.

So that even if we're sort of rolling something out for like, Hey, this is what we're testing. This is how it works. Um, we also want instructors to feel empowered to, to adapt it. So, um, 1 of the things that a lot of instructors had expressed early on is that they, they sometimes felt that the, the contract was.

Uh, was very restrictive so that they would see they were sort of spending some time making, you know, sort of like doing this sort of like bureaucratic record keeping and like suddenly things like, oh, is the student present or absent becomes

Dan Dissinger: very,

Tamara Black: very important. And then you're in a situation where you're, [00:38:00] um.

You know, maybe assessing the quality of someone's reasons for being absent. Certainly, you know, if somebody's hospitalized, you don't want to you don't want to hospitalization to destroy their grade if they're right back in class 2 weeks later. So, I think I think I think some of the faculty and where you can speak to this in lower division context, I know Leah, you're you're you've worked with the faculty data so much.

You might have thoughts on this too, but I know some some faculty have struggled with, like, the issue of, like, how do I. How do I show compassion to students who are struggling for very good reasons while also being fair to students who might also be struggling and upholding the contract perfectly? Um, yeah.

So it gets, so that gets really squishy. That sort of like balance between compassion and fairness.

Leah Pate: Yeah, I would say to that, um, in response to your question about [00:39:00] differences in the contract between the upper division lower division context. This is something that comes up in the data, the faculty upper division faculty responses that they, Did not feel that the contract, um, that we were using, that we had used in the lower division context, which was appropriated for the upper division pilot.

Uh, they, they felt that it needed to be adjusted a little bit to account for the realities of upper division student lives. The fact that a lot of them have internships that a lot of them at that point are not living on campus, that they are working part time or full time. So for instance, um, On the, the typical grading contract template that we use, you basically can have one week's worth of absences.

Before you break the contract and start suffering penalties, which would be two days for Tuesday, Thursday, three for Monday, Wednesday, Friday, uh, they felt in the, the faculty felt in the upper division context that [00:40:00] that absence policy was too stringent, given the reality of what most of our upper division students are dealing with.

Um, So there are things that, and I think that, you know, faculty in both contexts sort of responded to different things. So, for instance, I know that in the lower division context, something that came up early on when we were first trying this was the fact that a student could have a really bad week or two at the beginning of the semester and blow their grade.

So then, uh, what some faculty started doing, and then I think this was, uh, uh, incorporated later into the contract is that, uh, the grade they got on the final portfolio could pull them up that many steps from where they were. So let's say they had gotten down to a certain grade. C and then they ended up getting an A minus on the con on the portfolio.

Then they could go up to B minus because we realized, I think very quickly that the students would lose incentive and [00:41:00] motivation if they had blown the contract, you know, or the middle of the semester. And then there's also, you know, not just incentive and motivation, but again, this idea of like, well, you'll have two bad weeks and you get into this area that, you know, Tamra's talking about of like starting to make.

Judgment calls on who's, who's problems, whose issues, whose circumstances are, you know, worthy of making an exception and who's aren't and that adds a whole, you know, additional layer of emotional labor that problematizes the

experience of instructors as well. And certainly during COVID, this became a A very big problem for many, many instructors because there were so many things that we were being called upon to make exceptions for very good reason.

I mean, absolutely, you know, the circumstances that our students were facing were just mind boggling. But at the same time, if you are making so many exceptions and kind of. Then the grading contract starts to [00:42:00] lose integrity, right? And then it's like, well, and as Tamara said, what about the students who are upholding it?

And, you know, in the face of circumstances that can be very challenging. So this, this is something that faculty, I think, really struggle with in terms of trying to be Compassionate and respectful and you know people who are writing professors I think generally by and by are like very compassionate caring people who want their students to do well and we want, we root for them.

And yet, The whole thing with the contract, it is this labor based agreement and it's like we have to still count those things. So that is something that we see a lot of tension with in the data and I, you know, certainly during COVID and I think all of us who taught during COVID with the contract experience this personally as well.

Tamara Black: I think to the extent that we are making judgment calls about like, which is sort of infractions to [00:43:00] excuse, we have to always keep monitoring for our own biases, because every time we make a judgment about whether something is like a, you know, an excuse, an excused infraction or an unexcused infraction, it's like, well, what, what can we relate to?

What do you know? It's like. Yes, you're excused for your Goldman Sachs interview, but like, no, you're locked out of your car. That's stupid. Like, you know, it's, I think, you know, I think, and this becomes even, I think becomes even a bigger issue when, when, um, we try to apply this, this kind of contract more, more broadly when you have populations of students who are juggling more stuff, right?

When you have, you know. Populations that are like working parents or people with full time jobs. And, you know, if somebody says, like, look, I can't come to class tonight because if I miss another shift, I'm going to lose my job, which is I'm going to lose my housing. I, I don't, I don't think I would dock a person for saying, like, I'm going to make the choice that keeps me housed.

Um, I just, I couldn't

Leah Pate: [00:44:00] do

Tamara Black: it

Leah Pate: and Ellen Carrillo, who has written, uh, uh, A pretty substantial critique of the idea of labor based grading contracts talks about the idea that labor based grading rating contracts in whatever form, essentially, a kind of discriminate against students who have certain kinds of disabilities or just in the way it thinks of labor and thinks of time.

Tamra says, like we, you know, at USC where we, the context that we work and we have by and large, like very traditional students, right, who are enrolled in school full time, who don't have children, uh, who maybe work part time, but, you know, we, we, you know, it's, it's a pretty like 18 to 23 year old kind of student body living near campus for the most part, but that is not true nationwide by any means.

And so. This concept of like time and attendance, uh, [00:45:00] it, Corre's critique of this is that that's really prioritizing a very particular type of student and a very particular type of student circumstances. Um, and so that's something I think that, I mean, I know that our data and Tamara can speak more to this cause I know she's, she's done research on this show that students with OSAS, uh, Office of Student, uh, Accommodation Services, did fine with the grading contract that they were not hindered by it, but I do think stepping up more broadly and looking at the applicability of grading contracts and other context.

This is something that we really have to think seriously about is the way that labor is looked at the way the timeliness is looked at, given the reality of circumstances that students on a nationwide scale are facing.

Tamara Black: Yeah, we're still chewing through what that means. Like, we've got, um, the, the statistical tests that we've run compare students who have OSAS accommodations and identify themselves as such on our [00:46:00] survey to other students who did not identify themselves as OSAS students.

And the only difference we found between these 2 populations is that the, uh, OSAS students thought significantly less about their grades. Like, they just, they were worried about it less than the non OSAS students. So, like, the one difference we found tilts in favor of grading contracts. Um, we're still trying to make sense of that.

Um, I think part of it is what Leah just said. Part of it might be that, like, maybe OSAS, Identification is an imperfect proxy for students who need accommodations, right? Not everybody who needs an accommodation has one. Um, so that might be part of it, that might be part of it as well. But, um, but in, in our preliminary analyses, we, we actually aren't finding that OSAS students are having a, a much more negative experience with the contract, um, than other students.

So in some ways that's, it's good news, um, but we're still trying to make sense of it. [00:47:00]

Dan Dissinger: Uh, Leah, I know you wanted to talk about the faculty labor aspect, especially emotional labor and, and, and things like that. So I would love to hear about that because that's something I feel like we, professors kind of, I know I'm, I know I do this.

I've been doing this for years and I've just started. caring more about my health mentally and emotionally as a teacher. I think I've done way more work on myself in that way in the last couple of years, um, which is why there's less episodes of this podcast in the last two years. But I think it's something that we are Professors are prone to, in terms of workaholism, in terms of, you know, sacrificing your mental health and emotional health and which then bleeds into your home and things like that.

And I think, um, I'm curious how the grading contract, um, the work you all did, uh, shed light on that type of part of that part of it.

Leah Pate: Yeah, I mean, this is something that I've been really interested [00:48:00] in because obviously our first priority is our students in respect to our professional responsibilities and being pedagogically sound, but I think one there is a well documented mental health crisis amongst faculty and higher education for I think a variety of reasons.

reasons like certainly, you know, the transformation of higher education to kind of a more corporate model that has really like a limited tenure track lines where the vast majority of jobs that are available at this point are part time jobs. And, you know, when you teach part time, that's why they don't have to give you health insurance.

They don't have to give you benefits. Uh, I know that you and I, Dan, I can't remember on Tamara and Rory, but you and I, certainly put in our time as freeway flyers. You know, at one point I was teaching six classes at three

different places and commuting 400 miles a week and still was on my parents health insurance.

Um, so I think, you know, we have this crisis in mental health, but I also think we [00:49:00] have to look at the writing field. Particularly right in the field of composition, I think is certainly the most disproportionately exploited labor force in academia. Um, you know, the average salary for a composition teacher nationwide, I want to say something like 24, 000.

And most fact, not most, I shouldn't say most, but many composition instructors are working without health insurance. I mean, the general model, the general professional model for instructors of composition nationwide is not full time. So I do want to say that USC. What and I think this is one of the things that makes our study interesting is that we are all full time we are on promotional tracks we have.

research funds, we have faculty funds. I mean, we have, we're, you know, we have faculty governance, so it's a very different kind of experience that we have, but that is not the experience that most writing instructors have nationwide. So my concern, uh, [00:50:00] with the grading contract in this idea of labor and emotional labor is I think that You know, certainly grading contracts, one of the things that reinvigorated their popularity was their DEI benefits, right?

That's what I saw in a way was really interested in. But I think that any DEI initiative for students has to consider the realities that most composition faculty are dealing with as well. And composition faculty, again, compared to other field is disproportionately women. By far disproportionately women and disproportionately people of color.

We are underpaid in comparison to other disciplines. So I think there's like a whole other de I sort of area to think about with grading contracts and any sort of pedagogical trend that we look at, we need to be thinking about. We have a very like kind of marginalized, exploited workforce when we look nationwide who are teaching, you know, who comprises our field.

And is this going to cause [00:51:00] more labor for them? Does this, you know, and again, I, you know, it's balancing that our professional responsibilities are to best serve our students. But are we advocating for something that actually is going to cause more work for people who are already working? And underpaid.

Um, and like I said in this, and what we found with our data was that it did not increase emotional labor, it did help emotional labor. Um, now in terms of the labor labor in terms of material labor we saw both in the lower division upper division like a slight statistical demonstration that it could.

Decrease it a little bit. But again, you're giving the feedback still. Um, but you know, the emotional labor, the changing the nature of the feedback by making a more positive classroom environment and a less adversarial relationship that did seem to benefit faculty. But again, something that comes up that I'm still working through that we're all [00:52:00] working through I talked about this a PAMLA is this.

balancing of this is the contract, these are the rules, and then this compassion, right? Because when so much is on the line for attendance, let's say, all of a sudden you do have to, as Tamara mentioned, like it is a great consequence, actually, whether you excuse an absence or not. And so I think that this is, you know, again, working with our particular student body.

It's lessened but I, I do think about this as something I'm really working through for myself and working through on the book project is the applicability of the broader applicability here and what this means for the field more largely but more broadly because our field is very problematic in terms of labor conditions.

Tamara Black: I think I, I would add to that that, um, I've seen I've seen students to freak [00:53:00] out about the possibility that they would be docked. I had a student who, like, I wasn't, I didn't realize he was going to do this, but he joined our in person class by a zoom to put himself on camera to show us that he was on the highway in front of, like, an accident that he could not drive around.

And, you know, it was just kind of like, all right, so, like, now, you know, There's something about these conditions that, like, the student thinks the student has decided that his best option is to connect to you while driving on the highway. Um, it, you know, like, we talked, we talked about it. We talked about it later.

Um, and it was, you know, it all worked out, but, um. Yeah, this is, we have a, we have a population that's, that's very, that's very great. That's very much focused on on grades. Um, so they, so they're, they're responsive to, to that aspect of the contract. And it does, it creates, it creates stress. It introduces bias.

Um, I [00:54:00] think, like, in terms of, like, DEI benefits for our students, I can speak to upper division DEI benefits. I can tell you for sure our students of color, uh, on the grading contract reported an overall stronger learning experience. Significantly stronger than, uh, white students in the contract graded classes.

And I can also, uh, report that, um, if you compared, um, Contract graded to conventionally graded students of color students of color on the contract thought about their grades less often. They were significantly less worried about grading. Um, conventionally contract rated students of color compared to white white students on the contract.

Um, the, um. Like, okay, so let's see, how do we want to say this? There were a couple of differences in conventionally graded classes, a couple of racial ethnic differences that disappeared once we, once we looked at the contract [00:55:00] data. So among conventionally graded students, students of color worried about their grades more and found writing 340 significantly more stressful than white students.

Both of those differences disappeared. When we compared students on the contract, so, um, there are, it seems like there are, there are a couple of equity. There are a couple of equity benefits that we, that we have seen, um, in, in the upper division context.

Rory Lukins: Yeah, I don't know that we see those in the lower division. Unfortunately, we didn't really, um, yeah, I think it was a big missed opportunity when we 1st started not to kind of track those demographic categories. Um, I guess I just have to refer to Jeff on, on those, um, cause he, he, he has been following that.

Um, I do want to note here though, uh, Dan, because you asked about the difference between the 340 and the 150 contract and, um, we did try to keep things as uniform as possible for, for the purposes of having the [00:56:00] study, um, that, that was a different, you know, that was difficult because of like the, you know, 2000 or the 2020 kind of 2022 timeframe where things were just, um, Evolving so quickly, but I personally, I'm pretty confident that the faculty kept to that contract, at least at least the, um, you know, it at least the policies of it.

You know, yes, yes, we made certain, um, compromises with with students and that was unavoidable. Right. I mean, you just, you just had to do it. It wasn't. I mean, I don't think anybody regrets that. And, um, But what's been very

interesting, I think, at least in the lower division classes, is that since the, since the study ended, um, and I've got a, I've got a fire engine coming right, right by my window, it's right there.

This happens every time I'm in my office, by the way, I get these, uh, crazy sirens. Um, so, and so since it [00:57:00] ended, the apartment. The department adopted the contract as a viable model of assessment, right? We didn't impose it. We didn't even, it wasn't recommended. It was just this, this has worked. It's an option if you want to do that.

And since then, I think a lot of faculty have been tweaking the kind of contract and making slight little adjustments, um, in interesting ways, uh, that, that I don't, I don't know if we're still being tracked, I mean, I'm sure there's a lot of really interesting innovation going on, um, that's probably worth following up with everybody about.

Dan Dissinger: Yeah, it's interesting. I feel like with the, the way the contract is being tweaked and worked on and how, you know, since we have like almost about 100 faculty members, basically, that there, whoever's using the contract, like, much like the rubric gets tweaked. I mean, my rubric's different every project, every semester, you know, it changes because my students are writing different rubrics.

Um. It would be interesting to see the types of, um, [00:58:00] tweaks that they're making, why they're doing it. Right? Especially in terms of the well being part is the well being, a collective well being, right? The well being of students and well being of the faculty at the same time. Right? Especially in terms of attendance.

Like, that, that is something that is. I find more stressful for myself than the grading part. Like, to me, it's like students that vanish because they miss two classes and they think they, they can never show back up. You know, I'm constantly telling them, you're always welcome back. You can always come back.

And I'm telling them, please come back. It's okay. We'll figure it out. There's always a, There's always a plan forward. Like, there's no reason for this to take you out of this. It's writing 150. Like, you know, you don't have to, you miss two, three classes, you don't have to vanish on me. But, you know, they're, they're also being, I think what's interesting about the writing program is that while we're doing this work, they're also being you know, inundated with very, very strict rules and other courses.

So [00:59:00] like they're in, it's like different planets that they're living in. Right. And I mean, you know, it could be interesting to think about, like you go from one space to the next and it's like two different, like extremes of a spectrum that you're being, you know, dealt with on, in terms of one's own humanity, right?

Like, I mean, they're being actually seen versus then they're going to a place, they're a number. And so it's like, fill this out. Who cares what you're doing? And so like, it's a lot different of an experience. So, um, it's interesting to kind of feel, see what they're like, how they even compare that, because I, I've, I've never taken large classes like that to me, like, you know, that they take larger, less your room classes before.

Tamara Black: One of the things that, like, the contract really sort of marries in a useful way is, like, stringency with compassion, right? It's like, please be here, to the greatest extent possible, you know, every single time if you can, not [01:00:00] because you will be punished if you don't, which, like, Loki, you will be punished if you don't, but, like, can't, like, keep showing up because that's how we do community.

I will try to offer you something of value every time you bring your voice and nobody else brings your voice. So you've got to be here. We miss you when you're not here. We notice when you're not here, right? Like this kind of like this sense that like part of what we're doing is gathering to exchange ideas.

And so the stringency is The stringency is itself an act of care that promotes the well being of students at the level of the community, which promotes our well being at the level of individuals. And it's well being for all of us. It makes the students feel better about what's going on. It makes us feel better about what's going on.

It creates an engaged

Leah Pate: community. I was gonna say also you were asking about adjustments on Brent Chappelow who's one of our brilliant colleagues in the program is doing a [01:01:00] pilot right now where he is actually gone to an entirely by labor based contract he's he's he's piling this with a few other faculty members and where.

Um, the so they can do the grading contract, and they're guaranteed to be right. And then if they want to revise one paper, and they have to do a revision plan and reflect on their then write like the reflection on the revision, ultimately, they

want to do one paper, they can that takes them to be plus, they want to do the second paper that'll take him to an A minus.

And if they want to get their third paper in early for him to give them feedback, so they can revise that, then they can get an A. And so it's Really, um, he is finding I can speak to like it because he's a he's a close friend of mine. that it, he meets with them a lot more because there's a lot more of like metacognition involved in this with the revision plans and then the reflections and keeping going, [01:02:00] but that it has also really decreased his emotional labor, even though he's time wise meeting with them, um, because they feel so in control of their grade and they feel so, um, in control of their and he feels like the metacognition that's Invited by this sort of approach actually is like really benefiting them.

Tamara Black: I love that. That's like, so I think like I'm just amazed at the generosity of that. I think if I were, I think, I think if I were chatting with him about the study, I, I would probably say like I'm super interested in whether that decrease in emotional labor and improvement to students process offsets the increase in like.

Time and material labor, because any arrangement that reward students for, like, submitting more provisions and like, having more meetings with me. I'm kind of like, like, multiply that times 57 people [01:03:00] and like, suddenly I don't, you know, so, but I think it sounds incredible and generous and very beneficial to his students.

For sure. I

Leah Pate: mean, 1 way, I think he's ameliorating some of that that labor just this him is, um. The conferences, he does the feedback in the conferences, so he does quite a bit of additional conferencing, but he's like, I haven't worked on the weekends since I started doing this because he's not marking up the stuff because it's this ongoing dialogue of them revising and doing his reports.

He actually meets with them to do, he'll read the paper before and then meet with them and do the feedback that way.

Dan Dissinger: Wow.

Tamara Black: That's intense. I can imagine that helping some students because they sort of like, get feedback in a way that feels like friendly, collegial, and that it might be, um, maybe 1 drawback of it is for for students who like to

have written feedback that they can kind of like, go back to again and again and sort of like, analyze and digest and sort of iterations that like, [01:04:00] some students might sort of be like, oh, can I deal with that by like, recording our conference or like, you know, the, their ability to get feedback.

written feedback would depend on like their ability to like, take good notes on that conversation or record a version of it.

Leah Pate: There's new technology now on the zoom that it will record and transcribe it all into like an agenda, which is a little scary. Something I wanted to turn to that you said Dan is about students and the requirements of other classes and the really strict rules.

It was, and I was just, uh, interested in that because for me, like what I have found at least with so many of my students is they're not used to things like attendance and homework because so many really big classes that I, that I was just interested that that had been your experience because I, I feel like the sort of reverse that they are not used to me being, Oh, you need to come here and know you need to have attendance because so many of their classes are, you know, Lecture huge lectures where they [01:05:00] show up for their tests in there.

Dan Dissinger: Yeah, you know,

Leah Pate: and yeah

Dan Dissinger: My lower division students they get very worried about being on time to other classes my class like they, you know, don't They'll like wander in but uh, maybe that happens then in 340 because I I had I just you know I've been in 340 now. I'm in 150 again. I'll be back in 340 So it'll be interesting to kind of compare how how that changes.

Um, but it's you know, I think You I think it's interesting with writing composition courses that the constant development and redevelopment of pedagogy because it's so, it's practice, right? You're changing a craft, right? And you're developing craft along with the way things change. I mean, I have like one more big question and then I would love to hear about like the next steps of this project, um, before we end.

But like, You know, now with all the AI stuff that's been discussing, right? And now I'm in the tech committee. So that's a big conversation about AI. Um, like this [01:06:00] semester I have my students like bringing a physical notebook to class and we do things in the notebooks. I'm trying to get them like interested in

handwriting things, even if it's just like a small prompt, but, um, time to take control back over their own idea making, I guess, but, um, how.

Do you see a sort of influence in the use of artificial intelligence in terms of chat GPT or other ways in which people have been doing generative AI or anything in terms of AI? Because it's such a big conversation in terms of the field, like influencing any sort of part of this or the way in which these things are assessed,

Tamara Black: I would say, if we take out the stakes of receiving a letter grade.

And talk so incessantly with our students about how important and central it is to, you know, hone your voice, take creative risks, express yourself, find topics that you are intrinsically motivated to [01:07:00] research, like all of that stuff, which I, you know, I know it's not, it's not a feature that is Exclusive to grading contract assessment.

Obviously, I think a lot of a lot of our faculty advocate these same things, but like, if we center those values and take the grade out of the mix, so that there's no perception that you will be punished for taking that kind of risk. Or trying to develop your style in a way that maybe it's, you know, you're shaky at first or it's, it's not quite in focus yet.

Um, I think it, it actually authorizes students to derive more satisfaction from the writing process and to, um, and, and, and sort of in some, in some ways disincentivizes the use of, the use of AI because it's like, oh, well, if me trying to like develop a skill, Can't hurt me, then I might as well try to develop the skill.

Um, so I think a lot of this goes back. I think that, like, this is the success of any class, but the [01:08:00] success on the grading contract turns in part by our ability to design, um, the scaffolding and also major assignments that students feel excited about. Um, I think that's like, that's the that's the biggest way we, we fight the urge to get, you know, for the students to use AI and their assignments is like, we got to pose problems that they're like, actually curious to solve.

And I think we can partner with them to do that, right? Like, in an old school kind of like, prairie in way, right? Like, what problems do you want to solve? What problems do you care about? Um, so I think as long as we keep censoring that, it disincentivizes asking AI what to do.

Rory Lukins: I, uh, I, I'm a little bit more pessimistic on this, particularly, um, no, I mean, I love what Tamra said there about, you know, in the classroom, kind of engaging them, um, and Dan, this kind of speaks to your notebook thing too.

I tried the notebooks in class [01:09:00] years ago. I didn't, I didn't really stick, but, you know, it may be time to revisit that, um, but the idea of a process oriented class, right, with it, where things are low stakes, um, yeah. You can do the classroom stuff. And I mean, I've actually taken to having them upload the stuff at the end of the class, just so I have it there.

I can look at it. It's I know that they did it. And so I feel like if they they know they did it and I know they did it. And so why not just keep going on with it? Um, but I'm a little worried about things like reading responses, you know, stuff we, we, we ask him to do to prepare for a discussion, um, that, um, Uh, I, and I just don't know.

I've honestly, I've just been kind of hoping for the best. I don't think I don't get a strong sense. Anybody's really figured that out. Maybe we will, but I am a little concerned about the kind of the, or the process orientation of our, our curriculum and our pedagogy,

Dan Dissinger: my, my reading response prompts are like.

Getting so ridiculous and also like wide open to the point where [01:10:00] I did one where I'm like, all right, we've read this book, All They Will Call You by Tim Hernandez, um, write a response inspired from the energy of the book, whatever you want to create. And so like, they're just so confused. I'm like, good. I did my job.

They're totally confused. Now we'll see what happens. And some people have did some interesting things. They interviewed some people or they created some. Interesting visual projects or whatever, but I'm like thinking I'm like I'm gonna have to like really make it so there's that they think, how can I put that into the chat?

Like I can't, like they have, while I'm doing this week, like asynchronously, I'm like, all right, this week, go on an artist day from like the artist way and think about it this way and do this. And like, so they have to document it, then they have to do all this stuff. So like, I'm like trying to do less responses, but more very weird Naropa type responses.

One's from my MFA, where it's just like, do a walking meditation and write about your identity afterwards, and you sit by blah, blah, blah. It's like, I [01:11:00] don't, like, I'm like, you worry, like, I don't, I'm like, I'm more pessimistic in terms of the AI usage in my class than I am about that they will be invested in what they want to do, and I'm almost trying to, Trick them a little bit and I feel bad saying it that way, but like doing it in a way where it's like They can't do it that way like i'm literally attempting to be like what is more impossible for them to get a response back from And and so that they have to actually put thought into it Yeah, I don't know what's in class.

We

Tamara Black: play with and like, I like to be right there with them when they hit up against, like, all the problems that is creating and all of the things that is doing wrong. I've had my students sort of say, like, oh, my gosh, like, I asked to spit back the literature on my topic. A major in this field, and I can tell that I did very well on this strand of the conversation, but it totally missed this whole other piece of the [01:12:00] conversation.

It misrepresented 1 of the major authors. I can't trust it anymore. I had a student. Was trying to write up a debate that was going on in her home community of Compton. And she's like, guess what? Chat GPT has no idea what's going on in Compton. Um, and so she was like, chat GPT is going to be useless for this.

I actually have to go interview the people that I actually was going to talk to anyway. So I think in some ways, like, and again, I think we're getting a little bit farther away from, from grading contracts, but I think, um, I think. Whenever we whenever we let students play with AI, we also open up chances for them to notice the limits and flaws of AI.

Like, so, like, give them opportunities to see, like, this shit hallucinates. Right? So, um, beware. And now you're accountable for anything. It has hallucinated. Um, and. Then they're [01:13:00] kind of like, Oh, wait, I'm the author and my, my assistant is hallucinating. So maybe I got to take

Leah Pate: control

Tamara Black: back.

Leah Pate: I do worry a little bit with the grading contract and AI with, because it is so labor based and like with like homework and stuff, I think that, um, if your homework is credit or no credit, particularly that's where I really.

Come across like a lot. I mean, I have had real problems in the last year and a half. I'm very, uh, I'm very attuned to and I'm very paranoid and incredibly demoralized. But that's where I see it. And I, I, I mean, I blame them. I'm at it. I'm like, Oh, why'd you do that? But on the other hand, I think like they're doing triage and they've got so many competing demands and they're like, well, this thing doesn't have to be good.

It just has to be done. And that is something I'm, I mean, there's, you know, there is no perfect rating model. And like we've found with all our testing, both the [01:14:00] pilots in the upper and lower division, that this was really successful in a lot of ways. And we were really pleased with it, but there are, it's, it is not perfect, you know, there, but I don't think that there is a perfect, you know what I mean?

This is ultimately such a human relationship and like, you know, we're never going to get it, get it quite down. But that, that is where I see it is like, well, I just have to get this done. And so they're not, not necessarily about papers, but certainly unlike ancillary work and things like that.

Dan Dissinger: Awesome.

Well, I mean, this has been so great. I'd love to like just one last thing, like, where's the, what's the, what's the next steps in the project. Right. So it's a, Dynamic. I mean, just the conversation itself. I feel like we can do like a five part series here, but and like, I'm just so the next steps in your project.

What kind of where is it going? Now?

Leah Pate: We're out with, uh, different publishers. We've all been working on the book. I mean, I, you know, we're very excited about [01:15:00] it. Stages of our chapters. I think we have a very clear idea. I mean, we have a very detailed outline for the book, and we have kind of our chapters that we're each individually working on, and then we have things that we're collaborating on, and we are, um, you know, looking for the, the best home for it at this point.

Displays

Tamara Black: our perfect world would be to secure a publishing contract in the near future, hopefully finish the manuscript sometime next year and then publish by 2026. Um, our data collection is wrapped. So we are like analyzing and writing up.

Leah Pate: I'm just curious why you I don't know why you have not wanted you said you don't use the great contract.

Dan Dissinger: Yeah, I, um, I don't know. I mean, I just the way in which I'm, I guess, like, with the way I do the rubric building with my students and how hands on we are talking about how the projects will be assessed prior to their.

Being, [01:16:00] like, we go through every stage of what the rubric is together. We frame it together, they vote and revise. It takes, like, two weeks sometimes and get the rubric done. Um, sometimes the rubric's not done up until the project. And I tell them, like, the rubric is for me. So you're, you're. directing how you want your feedback.

And so, and in a way, I've, over time from, I mean, like, you were saying, Leah, like, I've been doing, I've been teaching since, like, 2009, and so I've changed my assessing over time. And then with, when I had Carmen, Dr. Carmen Kynard as a professor, she really did a lot of work in terms of The way she left feedback for us and graded and the way I saw it and we talk about it in turn in the class.

Like I just started changing how I left feedback in terms of how I wrote it. So with the student rubrics, I have space in the beginning where I'm like, here's, I have like a paragraph or two. Sometimes I'll write short ones that are like, everything that I [01:17:00] thought worked so well in the projects, they're like, here's what I enjoyed, this was really strong, this works really well here, and then I'm like, in your revision of this one, because WP1 and WP3 in my classes are both revision, are both projects that could be revised for new grades.

So when they know that the highest percentage projects can be revised for new grades in the end, they go, okay, I'm That's okay. And so then I go here in the revisions. I want I want you to focus on these things And then I go through every stage of the rubric. They built Every subtitle section and I leave feedback in every subtitle section Unless it's not applicable to their project if it's not like a multi modal project Then I just go this is a not applicable section and then I leave their grade They know what the grading key looks like prior to this.

They've seen everything and so My class is like almost like a very open book course in terms of like, here's how everything happens. And they feel comfortable. Like I've just, you know, they've seen their BP one, [01:18:00] I get, I haven't had a great dispute. So sometimes they go, Oh, what does this mean? And I'll tell them.

And they're like, okay, this could be revised. I'm like, yes, it can. And they're like, okay. And that's it. So I feel like with me, like, and we go over an attendance policy part, like kind of for the course, but like, I don't know how the grading contract, I feel like I'm doing one in a different way, I guess, I don't even know, but like I just never felt the need to continue to put it into my course because I just, um, it's just so student controlled in the way they're assessed.

I don't, I don't do anything until I get their rubric basically.

Leah Pate: Okay.

Dan Dissinger: That's really, I mean, I could share all my rubric. So I have every single rubric from, from like the last three years or so from like my students. So, but, um, yeah, that's, that's why, but I mean, I'm curious about it a hundred percent. So I'm thinking, I'm looking at like, I'm, that's, you know, all this [01:19:00] really kind of opened up, um, my eyes through a lot of different aspects of it, especially especially like the idea of tweaking it, like being able to work with it, you know, cause you hear the word contract and it's like, you know.

It's like, I think of a contract like my cell phone. Right Or at least it's like how dare you and then like, you know But it seems much more like an agreement in a way between two parties where you kind of try to like work it out In a way, so it's it's quite interesting Well before it gets too dark in this room that i'm podcasting in As you can see i'll be because i'm three hours ahead that um, Thank you so much, all three of you.

This is really such a great conversation. I, you know, acknowledge all the amazing work that you all did on this project and everyone that you shouted out to that, um, all their names will be in the show notes, um, that like have been working with grading contracting here in USC and definitely cannot wait for this to come out and [01:20:00] take a look at it and love to have you back on after that as well to like kind of also Think about the reactions to it and things like that, but also, you know, where, you know, from here into publishing kind of how it's, you know, if anything like changed or shifted.

Um, but thank you all so much. Thank you. Thank you Dan thank Thanks. Thanks us on so

Leah Pate: much, Dan. Thank you so much. Thank you.

Dan Dissinger: Yeah, of course. And everyone please leave your comments on your ideas and questions on grading contract assessment and anything that would, you know, piqued your interest in this, um, conversation.

Like, subscribe and share this episode with. Someone in the field that you think would find this conversation really interesting as well. And we'll see you on the next writing remix. All right, everyone. Bye.

Leah Pate: Thank you.