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## NOT READY TO LET GO: A STUDY OF RESISTANCE TO GRADING CONTRACTS

*“When I first received my contract, I was unsure whether it was a good idea or not. Being only less than a month away before the semester ends, I still find myself in the same situation. All throughout life, we have repeatedly seen the grading system that is based on points rather than a contract that we sign at the beginning of the semester. This reappearance has gotten us accustomed to the grading system, which might cause the students to be a little critical to any type of change.”* (A first-year student response to the use of grading contracts as a pedagogical heuristic)

The impetus for using grading contracts in composition courses stems from two separate but complementary goals, represented through the theorizing and practice of Peter Elbow and Ira Shor.<sup>1</sup> Elbow sees the grading contract as one way to “step outside of grading,” as he sees serious flaws in concentrating on the quality of writing, what he calls indefinable “true excellence,” as opposed to the meaning or the substance of any given paper (6-14). Such thoughts respond to the critique of grading set forward by Jerry Farber, who used contracts to undermine the “slave mentality” he believes traditional grading systems foster in students (136). Shor, on the other hand, views a

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grading contract as an early, necessary component in negotiating the curriculum with his students, the overall goal being for them to experience democracy in the classroom to aid in their development as responsible, empowered citizens (*When Students* 71-75). Marie Wilson Nelson tacitly supports Shor's views with her observation that the "choice of approach for assessment functions as a vote for or against democracy" (16).

With such student-friendly goals at their foundation, grading contracts would appear to be ideal for any classroom situation. Certainly under Elbow's method, students could see an instructor who has reflected deeply about the meaning of grades. In Shor's, students would have the opportunity for empowerment to make a classroom meet their needs. In both cases, students would have a better idea about what to expect and a firmer understanding of how to accomplish goals, which could lead to increased student motivation. Because student reaction to contract grading has been generalized from the teacher's perspective in college-level literature, we have limited understanding in the field of composition about students' perceptions of this form of grading.

While Hugh Taylor reviewed the existing research on contract grading in educational settings, he did not list one study involving the teaching of writing, and we could not find any other research bibliography compilation. Our field's knowledge about contract grading seems to be limited primarily to self-reporting from practitioners (see, e.g., Farber; Radican; Reichert; Shiffman; and Smith). With the exception of Shor, who narrates a re-creation of his classroom, student voices have often been absent from discussion of contract grading's success or failure. Shiffman, for instance, gives contract grading a "mixed review" and summarizes results from her experiences with it (67-68). She does not quote any student, though, and apparently bases her conclusions on her own impressions. She, like others, speaks for the students rather than letting their words start the conversation. To our knowledge, then, student reaction to contract grading has not been systematically tracked in a college-level composition course.

Wanting to learn more about how students experience grading contracts, we collected data from students in the classes of co-author Cathy Spidell, hereafter referred to as "teacher-researcher." The teacher-researcher enacted a contract system with goals rooted in Elbow's critique of grading but with a hint of the democratic possibilities of which Shor writes.

As she wrote in her reflective journal:

I think students' obsession with "making the grade" has most of them involved in a tug-of-war—with themselves, with their peers, and with the instructor. This produces a counterproductive state that I cannot but help think is perpetuated via our traditional competitive educational

system. Wouldn't it be great if I could loosen the hold that grades and learning apathy have on first-year college students? And counteract the ravaging effects of years of hegemonic and curricular control?

In keeping with Malcolm S. Knowles, the teacher-researcher hoped that the grading contracts would help students replace “conventional teacher-imposed discipline with self-discipline in the learning process [and] provide . . . a way for the learner to obtain continual feedback about progress being made toward accomplishing learning goals” (46).<sup>2</sup> She saw as an advantage that students would know from the start the specific goals of the class and the level of quality needed for each task. Students could plan their course work, prioritize, and avoid the ambiguity and pressure of grading, motives consistent with what Taylor believes contracts accomplish (17).

While the perceptions of contract grading forwarded in the literature tend to favor its use, concerns mentioned include fears of quantity counting more than quality (Farber; Reichert), student confusion with the contract system (Smith), student sabotage or resistance to the system (Shor, *Empowering*), the teacher's authority still not waning (Elbow; Shiffman), and the degree of student effort needed to earn strong grades (Radican; Shiffman; Smith). We designed our study, then, to bring student voices into the conversation to see how well their concerns reflected those generalized in the literature. We also desired student input into the efficacy of the contract system, its fairness, its clarity, and its relevance to their educational background and goals.

## **BACKGROUND**

At the beginning of the semester, the teacher-researcher reviewed the syllabus and discussed the concept of contract grading with her three writing classes. She then gave the students a template that suggested what students had to do to reach an “A,” “B,” or “C.” This template originated in another section of the same course from a previous semester, where the students generated specific provisions regarding attendance, late work, revision policies, as well as failsafe mechanisms in case they underachieved in certain areas (see Appendix A for a representative copy of each contract and associated preamble).

She separately worked into the ensuing discussion the objectives of the course, target dates of accomplishment, the way she would judge written work, and types of work to meet those objectives within her syllabus (Knowles 38). The teacher-researcher then asked for both oral and written input, allowing students to offer suggestions and questions either in class or out of class via e-mail communication. She received only limited feedback. Still, the student

responses led to stipulations regarding their accountability for course readings and further revision opportunities for “C” students (limited to just one revision in the original contract). While each class ultimately had slightly different contracts, the gist of the contents remained the same. After allowing the students the weekend to consider any other adjustments, she asked for further deliberations on Monday and brought the matter to a vote. All three sections voted unanimously to approve the contracts. After the students signed them, she collected the written agreements, added her signature, and made copies for the students to refer to throughout the semester. She also allowed for renegotiation of contracts, as Knowles suggests is appropriate for academic settings (141) and established room within her syllabus for a whole class review of the contract, should it be warranted. She experienced and observed, however, considerable student resistance to the grading contract.

She wrote at the time:

I’m wondering if the contracts might be a mistake. The students seem confused and I cannot help but become confused with them. I want to assist them to make their grades, but while everyone wants an “A,” most of them don’t want to do the work. They don’t like it when I remind them of the language of the contract. Are they suspicious of something? Or do they now think they automatically get an “A” because they signed up for it? I’m not giving grades. They have to earn them.

Consistently vocal in their responses and class participation, certain class leaders grew concerned that the requirements of the contracts were too rigid, echoing complaints from students in Warner and Askamine’s study of an education course. While the teacher-researcher worked to ease student concerns, the semester ended with many students not obtaining their contracted grades. More discussion will follow that suggests that the local context in which students contract for grades (i.e., who, what, where, when, why, and how) plays a large role in the contract grading methodology employed and assessment results.

## **METHODOLOGY**

We undertook this study at a mid-western four-year university campus, where the population consists of middle- to working-class students. In three sections (n=74) of a general education writing course, we constructed a plan to collect student feedback throughout the semester in order to gain an overall picture of student reaction to grading contracts. Toward the end of the semester,

the teacher-researcher asked the students to write honest feedback (remaining anonymous unless wishing to be identified) about particular aspects of the course, including the grading contracts, so that we could use student comments to construct interview questions. Thirty-eight students chose to comment on the contracts. We reviewed this feedback and constructed a list of questions generated from the students' thoughts. For instance, feedback mentioned the students' desire to participate more in the construction of the contracts. Therefore, we developed an interview question to follow up on this idea, asking students whether more input earlier in the semester would have impacted their reaction to the system.

We also included questions to uncover students' previous educational experiences with grading, using their reactions as controls to make sure our respondents were reliable. We felt that students who always complained when a particular grade did not meet their expectations would skew our results, so we developed prompts to help the students talk about a time when they did not receive the grade they thought they deserved and a time when they received a grade higher than their knowledge and effort would indicate was fair. These questions contextualized the students' responses and also triggered comparisons with other grading systems that proved to be helpful in our understanding of their responses.

After developing interview questions, we sought students who had commented on the contracts in the mid-term evaluation to contribute videotaped interviews based on these questions, and with the help of a student audio-visual assistant, we conducted interviews with twelve students during the last week of the semester. We used purposeful sampling as a means to balance our student sample to align ethnically with classroom demographics. For example, one student participant came from a middle-eastern background and another self-identified as African-American. The student sample was made up of traditional-aged freshmen students, only one not having come to the university the fall term after graduating high school.

In analyzing the data, we looked both at the written feedback and the interview transcripts, focusing on recurring themes. We coded the two sources separately but depended on the interview responses in locating the dominant patterns. We could not find any correspondence among the specific section the students attended, their grades, or their majors. Therefore, we do not report the data along these lines and instead group key responses from all students together to find the most repeated comments about contract grading. To determine where recurring responses constituted a pattern, we agreed that at least six separate students (half of the interview subjects) had to have alluded to the basic issue under discussion. After

identifying these patterns, we supplemented our understandings with the written comments and relied on them frequently in our Results section.

We feel much can be gleaned from this close view of students' perceptions of the success and failure of one particular contract system. Our main goal was to include student voices in composition research about contract grading and to open a dialogue about some of the key issues, such as fairness and student empowerment. Our methodology, we feel, accomplished this goal.

## **RESULTS**

The patterns we uncovered from the data revealed considerable resistance, verifying the teacher-researcher's ongoing sense of these students' reactions. In the following analysis, we try to uncover the reasons behind this resistance, aligning the patterns we found with ideas posited from practitioners and critical theorists. This analysis suggests that the students in our study had a difficult time letting go of previous educational conditioning, much of which had disempowered them. Yet, while contract grading disturbed the comfort some students felt with traditional grading systems, we also heard student voices that indicated the implementation of the contracts into their classrooms simply had not done enough to change the educational atmosphere. Therefore, we feel that our results demonstrate the need for grading contracts to be contextualized within a democratic, critical classroom, as advocated by Shor.

### **STUDENTS' HABITUATION TO A POINT SYSTEM OF EVALUATION CAUSED RESENTMENT**

Many students seemed predisposed to a point system due to their familiarity with weighted grading from previous educational experiences. "This is new to me," Kevin<sup>3</sup> said in his interview, "I would prefer a point-based system. You don't know how much everything weighs [within the contract]. A point-based system is a little more objective." He thought that, normally, "major papers are worth more. . . . A contract is not as specific. No assignments have had numbers, only letters." Joe added in his interview that "the weight of assignments is a problem. . . . Just sometimes I don't know what assignments are worth. . . . I am not a huge fan of how homework was going to be [factored into] the grade. . . . papers are the biggest thing [and] ought to be weighted more heavily." Yet, he also said, "people aren't used to it. If all classes used a contract, no one would think anything about it."

Other students expressed worries that they never knew where they stood with the contract in terms of their grades. Notable, however, is that the

student population was advised at the outset to consult the contracts often, preferably each week. If any questions or concerns arose during the term, the students then could meet with the teacher-researcher to discuss problems or their progress in meeting course expectations.

According to one student, Angie, the point system “would have been easier,” as students could have just added up their points and known what they had to achieve to either maintain or catch up to the grade they wanted. She stated that “points help grasp at it better. You can add them up. With a contract, you want this grade but you won’t necessarily get it.” Nicole claimed confusion over the contract, saying that she had a “point-based system in another class [where] you can keep track of the grade. You know exactly what you’re getting. Papers are twenty points each and responses are twenty each. You get so many points out of twenty.”

The students generally, then, resisted the implementation of a contract because they could not conceive of a grading system that did not quantify their efforts—a challenge for any system that involves a subject as subjective as writing. While the contracts clearly differentiated the expectations in quality between the main essay assignments and other writing tasks, such as critiques and syntheses, the students insisted that such distinctions did not exist, that contracts did not contain any weighting mechanisms. They seemed to avoid any reliance on the factors they agreed to within the contract—attendance and over-achievement in certain areas—that allowed for dipping below the standards set for a grade. Out of the three classes, a total of only three students approached the teacher-researcher to take advantage of the ability to renegotiate or to even discuss violations of the contract. Since the students clearly knew where they stood, as the teacher-researcher gave letter grades on assignments, their lack of initiative could reflect resistance or failure to understand all of the provisions that were in place to help them achieve the grade they desired. During the semester, only a few students checked on their grade status, despite having multiple opportunities for one-on-one revision conferences with the teacher-researcher throughout the semester.

Elbow claims that “conventional grading often makes students feel a bit mystified, helpless, and even paranoid about what they will ‘get’ for the course” (10), but it seems that the contract for the courses we studied equally failed to push students from this mindset. Furthermore, we perceive the contract used in these courses as being much more precise than examples found in Elbow or Shor (*When Students*). While Shor discusses letter grades only in terms of “all written work” (120), the contracts in the teacher-researcher’s classes specified the minimum standards for each type of writing, allowing students to receive “B’s” on such items as the reflective essay and the group research project and still adhere to the “A” contract. On the individual assignment sheets, the standards

for achieving the grade for rhetorical elements were spelled out (e.g., audience awareness, content development, and proofreading). Elbow rejects letter grades altogether, relying on the word “excellence” appearing in his comments more than half the time to distinguish between “A” and “B” levels of writing while not giving any exact standards for what constitutes appropriate copy-editing (“free from virtually all mistakes”) nor how he will determine “solid work” or other matters (21). (See Appendix B for copies of Elbow’s and Shor’s contracts.)

We wonder, then, if, adhering to letter grades for different types of writing throughout the contracts—being clearer about expectations—somehow produced the discomfort or uncertainty in these classes. These contracts contained little room for waffling and might have challenged the disempowering methods students used during previous educational experiences to bargain for grades. We feel, ultimately, that habituation to a non-liberatory system of grading—unilaterally established points—summoned the habits of resistance learned “early and well by many students,” leading to the type of sabotage Shor discusses, that of both traditional resistance and “resistance coming from the invitation to empowerment” (*Empowering Education* 139).

## **PERCEPTION OF INCREASED RESPONSIBILITY LED TO ANXIETY AND RESISTANCE**

Perhaps a corollary to this first point, though, is that students felt more responsible for understanding the course structure—especially evaluative measures—and perhaps resented the added burden. One student, Warren, mentioned this as the realization of “what you have to do ahead of time, not just what grade you have to get for a test, but what you have to do all the time.” Several students perceived the teacher-researcher sharing part of her power and alluded to in both the interviews and the written evaluations a transfer of responsibility and the concomitant sense of increased difficulty. Note the students in the previous section who spoke of a point system being easier.

The shifting of responsibility for learning from the teacher to the students, however, should have offered the opportunity for success: students were to be challenged, not pressured to achieve (Codde). That students became anxious and/or resistant to such responsibility can be linked, as mentioned in our first point, to their educational backgrounds and experiences. James Atherton notes that “[i]nitially, there may be considerable student resistance to learning contracts: they are not part of the rules of the educational game as they are familiar with it.” Atherton recounts the sentiment often expressed by students as “[j]ust tell me what to do!” Students who resist taking responsibility for their learning in the form of grading contracts want the instructor to manage and direct learning activities and assessment. Pedagogical praxis based on the

traditional teacher as unilateral authority tends to foster this passive educational philosophy. Students are used to and expect “education being done to them” (Shor, *When Students* 18). Shirking or opposing responsibility for learning is easier than accepting the growing pains associated with an unfamiliar learning situation. The road to empowerment is not a smooth one.

The perception of power sharing that took place in the teacher-researcher’s three classes increased some student worries about what the contract could do to their grade. As one student, Alan, responded in his written feedback about the contract system, “Essentially, I think it does force a student to think about how much he is willing to do for a good grade in an English class. And, I can see the value in the exercise, but I don’t believe that value counteracts the surprise in receiving a contract and the annoyance of worrying about fulfilling the requirements of a contract.” Another student, Linda, remarked, “A contract is very binding! Although I have always strived to do my best, signing a contract makes me even more aware.”

We find these students’ anxiety about power and responsibility akin to Elbow’s rationale for his use of grading contracts: “One of the main reasons I use contracts is to avoid having arguments with students about grades—arguments that stem, I believe, from problematic communications of the power relationship” (10). Instead of placing the sole obligation for determining grades in the instructor’s hands, where it often leads to student resentment and dissatisfaction, “the contract gives students more control; they can more easily know and choose their grade” (10). Student uninvolvedness in learning is often cited as a byproduct of teacher-centered curricula. Elbow, however, has not used negotiated contracts, wherein students and the instructor agree to discuss, adopt and amend the terms set forth. Furthermore, in opposition to his view that “no matter how genuine the negotiation is, full power will ‘remain with the teacher . . .’” (10), we hold that the grading contract does, in fact, alter the locus of power. Students are no longer passive recipients of preset learning objectives and arbitrary standards when engaged in contract negotiations. Contracts, then, help equilibrate power as well as accountability for learning. Shor notes that a “co-governing teacher has special responsibilities to launch and maintain the process but not sole authority in it or over it” (*When Students* 122-23).

We view students’ worrisome reaction and resistance to the contract as an example of experiential hegemonic conditioning, wherein their first impulse is to seek instructional directives and to placate the teacher. Despite the fact that some college students may consider themselves independent thinkers and activists, in the face of challenging classroom politics, the status quo offers a secure refuge. While we do not claim that a contract is *the* antidote to student apathy, our study indicates—and, as Alan

and Linda note—that a contract does foster a sense of responsibility for and ownership of learning, albeit with a corresponding rise in anxiety and resistance. Still, discordant responses are necessary and to be encouraged if true counter-hegemony is to occur and flourish.

### **HIGH PERFORMING STUDENTS RESENT A PERCEIVED LEVELING EFFECT**

Some of the students revealed a dislike of the contract system because it allowed for multiple revisions and individual renegotiation, giving students with initially weaker skills a chance to earn an “A” or a “B.” The refrain we noted in five of the interviews consisted of “I don’t need a contract to help me do my best work.” This annoyance or disapproval coincides with a mindset not unlike the cultural belief system shared by members of a dominant class in society, bearing a striking resemblance to an oppressive group’s view of the world, as discussed by Rick A. Breault (4). Specifically, adherence to the status quo and little or no tolerance for those viewed as subservient or undeserving of the chance to better themselves are hallmarks of oppression or elitism (2).

The oppressor and elitist can be seen as operating within a limited frame of reference, what Breault refers to as dichotomous thinking. In essence, diversity and unity are incompatible (3). We witnessed this elitist notion in high-performing students who expressed resentment of a democratic system of grading offered to every student in their learning community. In their mind, the freedom to choose and to negotiate curricula puts them at a disadvantage in terms of their conception of effort and rewards. Put another way, they question who is deserving of superior grades and/or capable of negotiating a curriculum, with the exception of themselves.

The teacher-researcher noted in her reflective journal that a few students in her class “consider themselves superior to the non-achievers who may not present written work to their standards or who chose to sign a ‘B’ or ‘C’ contract. [The high achieving students] seem to resent students who—they believe—submit mediocre or passable work and then have multiple opportunities for revision.”

Joe expressed this sense of superiority without mincing words: “I don’t believe in turning in a paper that’s not perfect. . . . I write it and then critically go over each section. I am not going to turn something in that I’m not satisfied with.” Joe also added that he thinks he is doing too much work when other students can start at a “C” and move forward. His resentment stems from the fact that he does meticulous revisions on his own. In his written response, the connection between Joe’s thoughts and elitism appears most pronounced: “My third complaint deals with the overachievement /underachievement policy.

Although it is a nice buffer to help students reach their contract goals, it more or less seems like a scapegoat to justify giving a student a grade he or she does not totally deserve.” Maria, a student who submitted written feedback only, put it this way: “I don’t like this contract setup. . . . A person who signs up for a C contract is still able to receive an A grade if they ‘deserve’ it. . . . I feel that the people who sign up for an A contract are getting ripped off because they have higher expectations of themselves.” In an interview, Carol shares her thoughts that constructing a contract as a class would lead to conflict: “There would be too many people with their own ideas [agendas]. The standards would not be hard enough; students would make the contract easier.”

From these students’ feedback, we can surmise that they “fear a loss of control or [of] their own rights” while not trusting the majority to bring about social change themselves (Breault 4). The highly motivated students’ dislike for what they perceived as the leveling effect of the contract presents a challenge to empowering students and transforming the existing order. Shor believes that such an adherence to the status quo reflects the students not seeing themselves as “constructed intellectually and emotionally by the ‘system’ and its machinery” (103).

In following Breault, we also focused on his connection between student feelings of intellectual/moral superiority and a sense of helplessness to change the system they helped create. Joe, for instance, questioned the purpose of the contract, asking, “Is the goal to get everyone the grade they signed up for?” Note that he did not phrase his objection in a way that would empower the students he considered of lesser abilities, as he implied that a subject, the instructor, would be the one to “get” the grade for the students, rather than phrasing his question in a way that would have made students the actors in the sentence, such as in, “Is *our* goal for everyone to *earn* the grade they signed up for?” Of course, Joe could have just been acknowledging the reality that instructors literally assign grades. However, he continued by implying that some people made jokes about the contract and that he and others did not respect the class. He worried that other students figured they could get away with not doing homework. He ignored the provisions in the contract that guard against such problems and demonstrated a powerlessness to work within the classroom to ensure the standards he desires. During the contract review at mid-semester, Joe remained silent, not offering any objections or suggestions.

## **MORE INPUT INTO CONTRACT CONSTRUCTION WOULD HAVE AMELIORATED TENSION**

Despite Carol’s objection to students having too much input into a contract, other students felt that they did not participate enough. Shor’s

negotiated curriculum starts with a proposed contract for students to consider along with three specific actions to take:

1. Sign up for one of the grade levels and the work required in my proposals (as amended in class debate), or
2. Sign up for the contract negotiated in class with personal amendments fitting your special interests or needs, or
3. Throw my proposals and student amendments out the window . . . , write your own document instead, and sign up for your own personal contract negotiated individually with me.

*(When Students 76)*

Shor also allows students to be graded in “the old-fashioned way,” as he believes “students cannot be compelled to be nontraditional” (77). We assume this traditional way refers to a system based in points, deductions for absences, and percentages determining the final grade (e.g., 70-79% equals a “C,” etc.). In the three sections we studied, students did not have any options beyond making amendments through class debates. It is safe to assume that the choices allowed for in Shor’s conception of the contract would have given the students a stronger sense of input. Although it is not clear in Shor’s summary of negotiations the effect of these additional choices, Lynda Radican in “Contract Grades: An Agreement between Students and Their Teachers” reports that students “seldom choose to forgo the opportunity to control their grades” (286).

It is worth noting, however, that neither Shor, nor Radican, nor the teacher-researcher in this study started from scratch, something advocated in Knowles’s conception of learning contracts (45). Like Elbow, Radican’s contract originated with the instructor and was non-negotiable. Shor and the teacher-researcher presented the students with a sample contract that, in effect, worked as a boundary for students to negotiate within. The amendments students proposed to the contracts in this study focused on issues already listed. They did not add or subtract any items. They modified the sample contract. Shor’s students added a revision policy not present in his sample contract and invented a policy on the plus/minus system, which Shor had proposed as an option, but otherwise, the students bargained within the limits of his sample contract (120).

Our data suggest that starting with the students and foregrounding their needs and concerns would be a better way of implementing the negotiations for grades. In her written evaluation, Tammy wrote that “more input into the contract” would have made the system “less intimidating.” When we asked students in interviews directly about increasing student input, most of them liked the idea. Kevin, for instance, felt that the opportunity to construct the

contracts would have made the provisions more clear. He added that the students “wouldn’t have anything to complain about” if they had been the ones to construct the first draft of a contract. Angie and Mark both said that there would have been fewer complaints, Angie adding that issues surrounding “absences and deadlines would have been solved.” Susan echoed these views, believing that if “it’s them that sets the standards . . . they would [have] to reach it.”

When asked, though, what provisions they would add to the contract and what provisions they would eliminate, the students did not reach beyond the boundary of the contract. Many, in fact, needed to take out the contract from their backpacks as a reference, as they could not remember which provisions they liked and which they objected to. Angie and Brian mentioned the inclusion of credit for participation, but every other student during the interviews focused on modifying provisions already in the contract, such as absences and deadlines, or made suggestions about points and differential weighting of assignments. It is possible, then, that students simply regretted not being more active in negotiations on key issues that they saw in retrospect as impediments to their fulfilling their contracts. We feel, however, that the inability to articulate clear desires toward the end of the course does not indicate an inability to participate more fully at the beginning of the course. Furthermore, even if a contract constructed from scratch resembled the sample contract in the number of provisions and the areas touched upon, the sense of empowerment and accountability for the provisions would have been much more strongly felt.

That students’ input is an essential ingredient in their learning is underscored by the progressive teaching that Alan Singer and Michael Pezone discuss as examples of change agency pedagogy: “active citizens in a democratic society need to be critical and imaginative thinkers; and students learn to be active citizens by being active citizens” (1.18). Singer and Pezone explain how they incorporated thought-provoking learning activities into their high school social studies classrooms that foster direct student involvement. Singer’s activities focused on student forums, preparing and presenting reports at public hearings, position papers (editorials), and organizing support for community programs. As Singer and Pezone report, Pezone used dialogues that, in practice, mimic the transformative effects of grading contracts:

At the start of the semester, he and his students decide on the procedures

for conducting dialogues so that everyone in class participates and on criteria for evaluating team and individual performance . . . . These criteria are codified in a scoring rubric that is reexamined before each dialogue and changed when

necessary. Students also help to define the question being discussed. After the dialogue, students work in small groups to evaluate the overall dialogue, the performance by their team, and their individual participation. (1.26)

Through these dialogues, the students experience participatory democracy. Their input is frontloaded and valued. They develop a sense of empowerment because they decide as a class what they will discuss in dialogues—generative content—and how they will be assessed. Moreover, as Freire stresses, dialogue “becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence,” thus situating and prioritizing teacher-student and student-student equality (80). In the classes we studied, then, more dialogue and substantial student input needed to be included.

### **STUDENTS FELT CONTRACT MADE THE COURSE MORE DIFFICULT THAN NECESSARY**

Students’ educational conditioning once again announced its importance in our study as we find resistance to the contract system reflected in expectations of course content that counters rigor. While Carol felt that students would “dummy-down” the standards and learning activities if given the chance to create a grading contract from scratch, others voiced the opinion that a challenging curriculum does not belong in an intro-level general education course and a writing class in particular. We heard echoes of Shor’s “Siberian Syndrome” in the student comments.

Shor coined this term to highlight the distance marginalized students feel in traditional classrooms, suggesting that “Siberian” students occupy a “symbolic state of intellectual exile, pushed away from learning and pushing it away in response” (*When Students* 14). While Shor mentions the spectrum of responses that can be attributed to this syndrome, including seat selection in the room, we feel he neglects the cooperative or semi-cooperative students who achieve high grades in traditional classrooms while maintaining their space in Siberia. We sense that contract grading disrupted these types of students in the teacher-researcher’s courses, as many felt they could cruise to a good grade in a supposedly easy general education class.

Several of the interviewed students appeared to us to disdain English classes in particular. Nicole could not understand what “the big deal” was, stating that the course was “just an English class.” She felt that the instructor should have unilaterally said how the grading was “going to be” and to move on. She claimed to be a “simple person” and distanced herself from English majors, presumably those for whom a grading contract

would be relevant, saying, “the contract is really complicated.” Kevin felt that the class had too much work for an intro-level course and that the contract seemed “a bit legal . . . [and] binding” for English Composition. Kevin was quick to respond, though, that he was not “qualified” to judge such a system.

Other respondents expressed concerns that might indicate students benefited previously from easy standards of grading while putting in effort consistent with the Siberian Syndrome. In the written evaluation, Rachel claimed that the contracts were “strange” because they “almost forced people to work that hard.” She says that people who normally “wouldn’t do anything in the class” resented the contracts:

It’s kinda crazy because it [the contract] just makes them angrier. If they just planned on showing up, doing minimum work and passing with a C, than forcing them to sign a contract that says that’s what they have to get is a bit crazy.

Rachel connected negative student attitude to students who signed up for a “B” but ended up with a “C,” believing that the contracts exerted pressure on students, making them feel like failures when they realized they would have to renegotiate downward. It is interesting to note that Angie in her written evaluation also referred to the contracts as “crazy,” feeling they were “stressing” for people with “A” contracts.

Jason felt his fellow students were “frustrated” for reasons similar to Rachel’s reasoning. He claimed that some students were “unable to reach the standards they ha[d] chosen” and could not understand why they were not getting “A’s” and “B’s” like they said they had achieved in the past in English classes. The students, according to Jason, felt that the contract made the instructor “give students lower grades in order for them to revise the paper and turn it in.” Melissa also believed that the contracts made “it hard to receive an ‘A.’” In other words, it appeared to them that the contracts prevented them from achieving the grade they were used to receiving, even though this same type of complaint could be directed toward any assessment criteria in students’ transition from high school to college. We should note that the grade distribution fell well within departmental standards, and the retention rates in two out of the three sections were higher than the average composition course during that semester.

It seems possible, then, that the standards demanded in contract grading irritated the Siberian notions the students brought with them to the classroom, especially those students who had achieved success elsewhere. Still, we find students not negotiating more strenuously at the beginning of the course odd from this perspective. If they felt the habits we associate with Siberia were

worthy of high grades, why not try to make those habits the standard for an “A”? But, of course, their submission to the authority of the sample contract during the initial negotiations could be indicative of the Siberian Syndrome. The need for further democratization of the classroom, then, impresses us again as important, as all strategies to counter this Siberian cycle must start with the students sharing authority in meaningful and clever ways. We believe student perception of difficulty coincides with non-investment in the course content. Thus, we think our respondents’ references to general education courses in their interviews and written comments actually reflect the need to participate more. Their frustration and resistance might be the first push against the invisible Siberian walls. They might have seen an opportunity not carried forward in the rest of the non-negotiated course curriculum. We will develop this point after we discuss student attitudes to specific parts of the contract.

### **STRUCTURE AND PROVISIONS LED TO VARYING ATTITUDES**

Many students spoke of the motivating effect of the contracts, an important principle behind them, as Knowles states emphatically that contracts must challenge students to “tap into the intrinsic motivators” we each have (42). The impetus to motivation arose in many of the students’ written evaluations and interviews. Susan, in an interview, said she liked the contract system because obtaining a good grade was not “unreachable.” She said that “high standards mean that teachers think I can reach those standards” and she felt she would not do her best with lower standards. Yet, other students bemoaned the lack of motivation in the contracts. In his written evaluation, Mark said:

[The contracts] give the students a set of guidelines to achieve the grade they want. However, it also gives the student a chance to do the bare minimum to achieve a passing grade because they have what is needed to achieve a C. So therefore, the contracts don’t encourage a student to go above and beyond what is expected of them.

These conflicting views of motivation within a grading contract system applied to both the general structure and concept of grading contracts as well as provisions and particular aspects within the contract. We noted varying responses to the terminology of “contract,” to the act of signing the contracts, to the preamble, and to grade choice.

George Boak posits that “the use of the word ‘contract’ sometimes gives rise to apprehension based on its associations,” as although not legally binding, it makes an allusion toward agreements that can be enforced through a court of

law (3). Using the term “contract” can cause students to react in different ways. For instance, in her written evaluation, Linda said that a “formal document” helped her, as the commitments she made to herself were in writing. Nicole, however, rejected this aspect of the contract: “I think by calling it a ‘contract’ and you sign it and it has all these words, it makes it sound more than it is.” She recognized that the term “contract” carries more impact, apparently, and felt the term was unwarranted. She rebelled against it, dismissing the importance of the contract throughout her interview with sarcastic responses to questions. For instance, when asked what provisions she would eliminate from the contract in retrospect, she claimed she did not know, adding, “I didn’t memorize it.” In her written evaluation, she called the contract system “elementary” and a “waste of trees.”

Some students commented on the act of applying their signatures to the contracts, feeling that it added weight to the decision. Carol’s written evaluation indicates a positive reaction to this added importance. She focused on the individual responsibility each student put upon himself or herself and said that once signed, “it meant that we would follow it.” She said, “With the Professor’s signature and ours, we all knew our part.” Yet, Brigitte indicated that some students did not take the signing of the contracts seriously. “They would rather party than work,” she wrote, “so they may just sign the contract just so they have one.” Mark added that “signing it [the contract] did not matter.” Given that exactly 50% of the students signed up for an “A” and that 40% of those violated the contracts and received lower grades as a result, we cannot establish a clear connection between the students giving their written word to abide by the terms and increased/decreased motivation.

The contracts contain a preamble that assures students of certain rights: revision, third party intervention in grading disputes, renegotiation, allowances for underachievement, and rewards for attendance. This preamble originated with students from a previous semester’s section and was brought to this semester’s students in the sample contract due to its effectiveness in delineating student rights and motivating students to work their hardest. Yet, some student responses suggest that the class perceived the preamble as a series of loopholes, that they equated their rights with having a way to do as little as possible. Recall that Joe said he and other students made jokes about the contract and did not take it seriously. In the same vein, Angie claimed, “more people ignored the contract than anything” and that it “had little influence on the course.” Nicole pointed specifically to the preamble, saying that the bulleted part of the contract was “black and white” and that it made “common sense” while the preamble was “too much” and “confusing” because it contained “a lot of words.” Mark, however, in responding to a complaint from others about the lack of clarity, defended the preamble, saying that the contract covers problem areas, implying the contract’s

precision and clarity. No students, though, mentioned the preamble as protection for them or as a motivator for them. We noted that Peter Elbow's grading contracts contain an elaborate preamble in the form of a letter to the students and use many more words than the contracts in the courses we studied (20-23). Clearly, then, others have seen a preamble as important in explicating and qualifying provisions within the contract. In our case, it appears to have brought about more confusion than motivation.

Choosing a grade also produced mixed reactions from students. Lawrence H. Newcomb and J. Robert Warmbrod felt that in traditional grading, "the motivational effect of the final grade is greatly reduced once the student realizes it will be impossible to reach his or her goal" (2). Thus, allowing for a "C" student to gauge his or her abilities and effort and to try to accomplish a realistic goal spares the student the pressure of teacher comments aimed at turning a draft into an "A" paper and instead promotes written or oral responses that clarify what is needed for minimum competence. The students will be motivated to achieve the standards they set, as their goal is still within reach. In our study, some students looked at this choice negatively. Brigitte felt that every student "should aim for an 'A'" and that the instructor must take responsibility for confronting anyone who slips from this standard. Yet, only two students out of the 74 under study signed a "C" contract. Everyone else believed an "A" or "B" remained within the realm of possibility, suggesting that the contracts succeeded, at least initially, in motivating high student aspirations.

## **CONTRACTS MUST ACT WITHIN A CONSTANTLY NEGOTIATED CURRICULUM**

Student responses indicate that students failed to distinguish the contracts from traditional grading systems. Nicole did not look at the contract after initial negotiations, reasoning that "in other classes, 'A's' on papers equal an 'A' grade." She assumed that the papers mattered the most. Others indicated they had not looked at their contracts since the first day, Angie saying that the requirements were "universal" and that she would have done the same work whether or not she had a contract. In his written evaluation, Gary said he had not looked at his contract, figuring he would just do the work and get the grade. He said, "Those are the grades we try to get in every other class too, we don't need a contract to tell us to do the work." Alan called the contracts "unnecessary," not wanting to have to renegotiate or "switch" contracts when he violated his commitment to an "A." George said the contract he signed did not matter, as "we will still get the grade that we did the work for." He believed the contract merely reflected the instructor's expectations. Helen, in

her written evaluation, compared the contract to a statement of “class rules that a teacher hands out the first day of school.” She said she simply tries her hardest and turns in assignments when due, believing students do not need a contract if they want to “do good.” She said she had not read the contract since she received the sample.

A few voices, however, led us to believe that a more fully integrated democratic system within the classroom would have helped students perceive the difference. In his written evaluation, Mark understood the different responsibilities entailed by the contract, claiming he took every assignment seriously because of the contract. “In previous classes,” he said, “I treated some assignments with more respect than I did others. Assignments of lower work load or just easy assignments usually get blown off.” He wished that every class used a contract. He recognized under this system the importance of every assignment, an importance undermined, we feel, in the weighted point system to which other students clamored. Rhonda also noted a difference, discussing the obligation she felt to work for the grade she wanted. She recognized the helpful features of constant revision and lamented the necessity of a “C” contract. Combined with the many students who said they enjoyed what the teacher-researcher called “democracy day”—a session where representative students brought the perspectives and concerns of the majority for a full class discussion, resulting in certain modifications such as the acceptance of late work in one course and procedures for talking in another—we believe that students would have reacted very positively to ongoing negotiations during the semester, both in regards to the contract and the curriculum.

In Shor’s negotiations, the contract embodies one element of a democratically negotiated curriculum. Students participate in the selection of texts and have veto rights over topics and assignments. While this might sound too permissive, Shor maintains a distinction between the democratic process and students doing “what they want whenever they want” (*Empowering Education* 160). He authorizes the sharing of authority by making students responsible for speaking up when some element of the classroom hurts the functioning of the group. A key component of this process comes with the “after-class group,” representatives from the course who meet every day after the session to plan with Shor the course as it proceeds from day to day. The group attempts to build on successes while discussing in depth the difficulties with unsuccessful projects or activities. The contract operates within a system that empowers students and highlights the differences between grading contracts and traditional classrooms.

Even without the full implementation of a negotiated curriculum, however, we venture that instructors can still realize the goals behind contract grading by calling more attention to the provisions of the contract and making

it more of a factor in the curriculum. For instance, provisions calling for greater workloads for an “A”—six essay assignments, for instance, instead of five, or oral/PowerPoint presentations to replace the non-quantified role of participation—would make the distinction between “A,” “B,” and “C” students more pronounced from traditional grading systems, where every student must perform the same amount of work. Eliminating grades altogether when responding to papers through a simple assessment of acceptable/unacceptable, a la Shiffman, could produce a similar understanding from students of the different concept behind contract grading. Buzz R. Pound suggests another variation of the grading contract wherein students construct a list of goals based on the syllabus and assess themselves against the criteria they established, with or without the aid of students in their group. Simply allowing for multiple and earlier chances to renegotiate the contract as a group to accommodate the students’ evolving understanding of the course and contract grading would point to the distinction between contract grading and traditional grading. More than anything, we learned through this study that stressing the difference in contract grading is crucially important, as the efficacy of contract grading wanes the more students view it as just another way of saying the same thing.

## IMPLICATIONS

Each pattern of student response seems to point to the need for further democratization of the classroom and for strategies to deal with destructive habits from students so silenced by unilateral authority that they resist desocialization and try to get by with the least amount of work possible (Shor, *Empowering* 132). The results also indicate, though, that some of the concerns mentioned in the previous literature on the subject are warranted, especially worries about student confusion and their perceptions about the effort needed to achieve the desired grade. Contract grading might solve some problems with the oppressive application of grades and with what, exactly, the grade represents to the students, but in so doing, contract grading can also unsettle students by exposing flaws in our educational system, such as the conditioning to obey authority rather than to take risks in their learning. This unsettling state may have produced the student confusion and resentment.

The patterns we found also suggest the many variables of which instructors must be aware. No teaching takes place in a neutral space. No student group enters the classroom unaffected by previous educational socialization. No one specific contract can fit the needs of every classroom. Instructors must negotiate each section of every course, then, and be prepared for the resistance that comes with student attempts at letting go of previous,

undemocratic educational conditioning. In coming to this conclusion, we believe, then, that the contract cannot simply substitute for another grading system, particularly one that is under considerable control of the instructor. The teacher-researcher's words at the end of the semester offer a reflection on her experience:

My venture into contract grading gives me information to build upon for future research and for use in the classroom. I really think that I have grown from this experience. The challenges I have encountered are not road blocks. No. I want to consider and understand students' resistance to shared authority—limited in application this semester. I really want students to see the relevance and the possibilities of using a grading contract. In the future I think I will work with students to construct a contract that is agreed upon as understandable and workable, using clear language in any preamble assembled. And, I want to implement a more democratic pedagogy than I have used this semester, giving students more of a voice in classroom activities and assignments.

Without hearing from the students of other instructors strictly adhering to Elbow's conception of contract grading, we cannot tell if the small steps this teacher-researcher took from unilateral teacher authority and toward democratization caused the resistance we document in this study. Likewise, we do not know if a full critical, democratic contract system would ameliorate student resistance. However, we do know that students seek grades, as did those in our study, and a system of evaluation pretending to be anything but evaluative will cause both student suspicion and resentment. Based on the evidence we have, we feel that if students see grading contracts as a negotiated evaluation rather than a substitute for the rewards and punishment of grading, grading contracts can work against the temptation students sometimes feel to put forth perfunctory effort toward general education courses. By listening to student needs and valuing their experience and input, instructors can provide the opportunity for students to construct and negotiate a rigorous and meaningful curriculum.

*The authors would like to acknowledge Peter Elbow and Ira Shor for granting permission to republish their grading contracts. As this article was going to press, both sent their most recent work in contract grading for our consideration. While we decided to limit our references to work already in print to which readers would have more immediate access, we thank both of them for their collegiality and interest in this project.*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this study, a grading contract will refer to an evaluation tool, either developed by the instructor or co-created with students, that allows students to choose individually the grade they would like to achieve in the classroom and then outlines specific student and instructor responsibilities needed for the students to receive the grade they have chosen.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars have used the term “learning contract” in a way that would make its classroom implementation broader than that of a grading contract, possibly aligning learning contracts more with Shor’s pedagogy than Elbow’s grading contract and have, thus, not distinguished between the terms.

<sup>3</sup> We have used pseudonyms for all students quoted in this article and received their written permission to use their words and refer to their work.

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## APPENDIX A

### Contract for an “A”

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to abide by the following terms of this contract in order to secure an “A” for this semester in English Composition 112. I reserve the right to revise all three of my essay assignments in order to achieve the grades necessary to meet my contract. If I disagree with my professor’s assessment of my work, I will work with her to construct a system to bring in the judgments of other professionals. I understand that plagiarism or submitting someone else’s work as my own will void this contract, earn me an “F” for the course, and subject me to disciplinary measures. I will immediately consult my instructor should I fall below the standards set below and will accept the consequences if I do not act to renegotiate or sign a lower contract. Overachievement in one area will counteract similar underachievement in another. As an example, if my group writes an “A” project but my critiques receive a “B-” rather than an “A-,” the contract will not be voided. I understand, though, that the degree of my overachievement must be matched by the degree of my underachievement. I cannot expect an “A” on the project to undo a “C” or lower on the critiques. Perfect attendance—except for excused absences--can also work to keep the contract from being voided if I underachieve in one area. Otherwise, I will do the following to earn an “A”:

- I will work with other students to help them develop as writers and thinkers
- I will take a leadership role during draft workshop days
- I will meet all assignment deadlines
- I will achieve at least an “A-” on two essay assignments and no lower than a “B-” on the other or a similar ratio, such as an “A,” “A-,” and a “C+”
- I will fulfill my responsibilities for the group research project and ensure that my group receives a “B”
- I will earn at least a “B” on the reflective essay
- At least one of my critiques will achieve an “A” while the others will not fall below a “B-”
- I will earn at least a “B+” on the syntheses
- I will actively engage the reading for the class through participation and receiving better than average marks on whatever measuring tool the class decides on

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Student's Signature

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Date

I, \_\_\_\_\_, will do everything in my power to help this student achieve an "A," including being available for conferences, allowing for multiple revisions up until the last day of class, giving appropriate feedback, making my expectations clear, and treating the student and her or his desires with respect

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Professor's Signature

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Date

## Contract for a “B”

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to abide by the following terms of this contract in order to secure a “B” for this semester in English Composition 112. I reserve the right to revise all three of my essay assignments in order to achieve the grades necessary to meet my contract. If I disagree with my professor’s assessment of my work, I will work with her to construct a system to bring in the judgments of other professionals. I understand that plagiarism or submitting someone else’s work as my own will void this contract, earn me an “F” for the course, and subject me to disciplinary measures. I will immediately consult my instructor should I fall below the standards set below and will accept the consequences if I do not act to renegotiate or sign a lower contract. Overachievement in one area will counteract similar underachievement in another. As an example, if my group writes a “B+” project but my critiques receive a “C” rather than a “B,” the contract will not be voided. I understand, though, that the degree of my overachievement must be matched by the degree of my underachievement. I cannot expect an “A” on the project to undo a “D” or lower on the critiques. Missing no more than 3 classes, except for excused absences, can also work to keep the contract from being voided if I underachieve in one area. Otherwise, I will do the following to earn a “B”:

- I will respect and encourage other students
- I will be prepared for and actively participate during draft workshop days
- I will miss no more than one deadline for prewriting assignments, research activities, syntheses, drafts, and revisions
- I will receive no less than a “B” on two of my essay assignments and no worse than a “C” on the other, or a similar ratio, such as a “B+,” a “B,” and a “C-”
- I will fulfill my responsibilities for the group research project and ensure that my group receives a “C+”
- I will earn at least a “C” on the reflective essay
- Two of my critiques will earn “B’s”
- I will earn at least a “B” on the syntheses
- I will do the reading and demonstrate my knowledge of it in a way that the class sees as reasonable

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Student's Signature

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Date

I, \_\_\_\_\_, will do everything in my power to help this student achieve a "B," including being available for conferences, allowing for multiple revisions up until the last day of class, giving appropriate feedback, making my expectations clear, and treating the student and her or his desires with respect

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Professor's Signature

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Date

## Contract for a “C”

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to abide by the following terms of this contract in order to secure a “C” for this semester in English Composition 112. I reserve the right to revise all three of my essay assignments in order to achieve the grades necessary to meet my contract. I also understand that plagiarism or submitting someone else’s work as my own will void this contract, earn me an “F” for the course, and subject me to disciplinary measures. I will immediately consult my instructor should I fall below the standards set below and will accept the consequences if I do not act to renegotiate or sign a lower contract. Overachievement in one area will counteract similar underachievement in another. As an example, if I earn 3 “C’s” on my essay assignments, but earn only a “D” on my critiques, the contract will not be voided. I understand, though, that the degree of my overachievement must be matched by the degree of my underachievement. I cannot expect a “C” on the third essay to undo an “F” on the critiques. Missing no more than 6 classes, except for excused absences, can also work to keep the contract from being voided if I underachieve in one area. Otherwise, I will do the following to earn a “C”:

- I will treat fellow students respectfully
- I will be prepared for and attend all draft workshop days
- I will miss no more than one deadline for prewriting assignments, research activities, syntheses, drafts, and revisions
- I will achieve at least a “C” on two essay assignments and no lower than a “D” on the other
- I will contribute my fair share to the group project
- I will earn a passing grade on the reflective essay
- I will write honest critiques that are of passing quality
- I will earn no lower than a “C-” on the syntheses
- I will demonstrate that I did the majority of the reading in a way the class sees as reasonable

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Student's Signature

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Date

I, \_\_\_\_\_, will do everything in my power to help this student achieve a "C," including being available for conferences, allowing for multiple revisions up until the last day of class, giving appropriate feedback, making my expectations clear, and treating the student and her or his desires with respect

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Professor's Signature

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Date

## APPENDIX B

### Ira Shor's Contract (1996)

#### Requirements for an "A" Grade:

- 3 free absences allowed; grade reduction after 3 absences or do a makeup assignment for each absence after 3.
- 1 free lateness to class (2:10 is late), and after that 2 latenesses count as an absence.
- No leaving class early except for emergency.
- A-quality writing on all written work.
- A-level minimum number of words (1,000) on all written work.
- One late assignment okay without penalty.
- Home assignments can be rewritten for a higher grade if handed in on time and if redone one week after you get them back.
- Lead class discussion, respond to other students, keep the dialogue focused on the issue, and participate every class hour.
- Do 2 project groups or 1 project and ACG [after class group]; write final project reports and evaluation, and make class presentations.
- Write on all 3 assigned books.
- Plus and minus grading will be used on assignments and on final grade.

#### Requirements for a "B" Grade:

- 3 free absences; grade reduction after 3 absences or do a makeup assignment for each absence after the 3 free ones.
- 1 free lateness to class (2:10 is late) and after that 2 latenesses count as an absence.
- No leaving class early except for emergency.
- B-quality writing on all written work.
- B-level minimum number of words (750) on all written work.
- Write on all three assigned books.
- 1 assignment can be handed in late.
- Home assignments can be rewritten for a higher grade if handed in on time and if redone one week after you get them back.
- Participate in every class discussion.
- Write 2 project reports (or 1 project and ACG) and make 1 class presentation.
- Plus and minus grading will be used on assignments and final grade.

### Requirements for a “C” Grade:

- 3 free absences.
- More than 3 absences require a makeup for each or a grade reduction will follow.
- 1 free lateness to class (2:10 is late) and after that 2 latenesses count as an absence.
- No leaving class early except for an emergency.
- C-quality writing on all written work.
- C-level minimum words (500) on all written work.
- Write on all 3 assigned books.
- 1 assignment can be handed in late.
- Home assignments can be rewritten for a higher grade if handed in on time and redone one week after you get them back.
- Participate sometimes in group discussion.
- Write one project report.

## Excerpts from Peter Elbow's Contract (1997)

You are guaranteed a B for the Final Grade if  
You meet the following conditions:

- (1) Don't miss more than one week's worth of classes.
- (2) Don't be habitually late. (If you are late or miss a class, you are responsible for finding out any assignments that were made).
- (3) Don't have more than one late major assignment and one late smaller assignment.
- (4) Keep up your journal assignments.
- (5) Work cooperatively in groups. Be willing to share some of your writing, to listen supportively to the writing of others and, when they want it, give full and thoughtful responses.
- (6) Major assignments need to meet the following conditions:
  - Include a process letter, all previous notes and drafts, and all feedback you have received.
  - *Revisions*. When the assignment is to revise, make it more than just a correcting or fixing. Your revision needs to reshape or extend or complicate or substantially clarify your ideas—or relate your ideas to new things. Revisions don't have to be better but they must be different—not just touched up but changed in some genuine way.
  - *Mechanics, copy-editing*. When the assignment is for a *final draft*, it must be copy-edited—that is, free from virtually all mistakes in spelling and grammar. It's fine to get help in copy-editing. I don't ask for careful copy-editing on early and mid-process drafts, but it's crucial for final drafts.
  - *Effort*. Your papers need to show solid effort. This doesn't mean that you have to suffer; it's fine to have fun and even fool around with assignments. It just means that I need to see solid work.
  - *Perplexity*. For every paper, you need to find some genuine question or perplexity. That is, don't just tell four obvious reasons why dishonesty is bad or why democracy is good. Root your paper in a felt *question* about honesty or democracy—a problem or an itch that itches *you*. (By the way, this is a crucial skill to learn for success in college: how to *find* a question that interests you—even in a boring assignment.)
  - *Thinking*. Having found a perplexity, then use your paper to do some *figuring-out*. Make some intellectual gears turn.

Thus your paper needs to *move or go somewhere*—needs to have a line of thinking.

- *Please don't panic because of these last three conditions.* I cannot and do not ask that your essays always be tidy, well organized, and perfectly unified. I care more about working through the question than about finding the neat answer. It's okay if your essays have some loose ends, some signs of struggle—especially in early drafts. But this lack of unity or neatness needs to be a sign of *effort*, not lack of effort.

Your final grade will fall rapidly below a B if you don't meet these conditions.

You are guaranteed an A if you do the following things:

- (1) Fulfill the contract for a B.
- (2) In your process of writing for the final draft of each paper, show (a) a good picture of the structure and organization of your paper; (b) how your paper pursued a line of inquiry and thinking—didn't just describe a static opinion.
- (3) At some point during each major writing assignment get an additional person's feedback on your midprocess or final draft (additional to what I set up as part of the regular class procedure). For this extra response, you can use someone in this class or outside. On one occasion before midsemester, make this "skeleton feedback," and on another occasion, a "descriptive outline" (I'll have a handout describing these). The rest of the time you can get whatever kind of feedback you find most helpful, as long as it is thoughtful and substantive, not perfunctory. Please show me this feedback in writing: a good page long at least—though informal is fine. (It's okay a couple of times to get oral feedback and write up a summary for me.)
- (4) At some point during each major assignment, *give* extra feedback to someone else—someone in this class or not. (Same guidelines or conditions as #3.)
- (5) At some point around the middle of the semester, take a paper you've already written for this course or another course and make a major, substantive revision of it. Include with this paper a write up of substantive feedback you've gotten from someone else and a descriptive outline of the revised version. Also, some process writing about the changes you've made.

- (6) Make a good effort to get something published. Send out something in good shape to a suitable place. Possibilities: a letter, essay, or feature story to a local paper or campus paper; an essay, story, or poem to a magazine or journal.
- (7) Make some genuine efforts to help others learn and to help the class go better. Possibilities: help bring out the thinking of others, especially people who are not being heard; listen well to others; set an example of being open and honest in class—without hogging the floor; help your peer group work better. Drop me an informal note at mid semester and at the end explaining or exploring ways you have tried to fulfill this admittedly fuzzy condition.

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