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Neurodivergence and Intersectionality in Labor-Based Grading Contracts

by Kathleen Kryger, University of Arizona and Griffin X. Zimmerman, University of Arizona

This article explores how labor-based grading contract (LBGC) systems can be informed by neurodivergence. To date, little research has described how grading contracts impact students of varying neurological abilities. This article addresses this gap by investigating how neurodivergent students experience LBGC systems. Neurodivergent students face increased academic and emotional labor, thus shifting power and ease of access in such contract-grading classrooms to neurotypical students who may be more adept at “performing academic labor. First, we articulate the ways in which neurodivergence is defined and made invisible, how it manifests in our writing classrooms, and the ways in which our institutions uphold normative conceptions of neurological ability. Second, we illuminate how grading contracts, by altering the activity systems of schooling and writing classrooms, create barriers to accessibility that heighten neurodivergent students’ experiences of schooling- and grade-related anxiety. Finally, they offer an ethnographic exploration of ways to unite the socially just aims of LBGC systems with the intersectional lens inherent in a consideration of the neurodivergent student experience.

Keywords: neurodivergence, grading contracts, academic labor, assessment theory, disability studies

Assessment is directional. As Sara Ahmed (2017) notes, “Power works as a mode of directionality, a way of orienting bodies in particular ways, so they are facing a certain way, heading toward a future that is given a face” (p. 43). Conventional writing assessment systems, like other structures of sociocultural power, are presented as meritocracies that orient students toward academic advancement and bright futures. However, composition as a discipline has been grappling for decades with the stark reality that this representation elides a reality in which historically oppressed students are pointed in the opposite direction of their White, socioeconomically advantaged peers.

Grading contracts are one answer to this need to create more egalitarian composition pedagogies, yet power still flows through, to, and around them. As Spidell and Thelin (2006) and Inman and Powell (2018) both explain, alternative assessment systems challenge students to rethink not just composing practices, but also the purposes and functions of schooling and grading. Grading contracts challenge students to negotiate their classroom anxieties, to navigate their emotional and affective investment in grades and teachers, and to (re)orient themselves to a new schooling system. Rethinking can create productive discomfort; rethinking can be generative. But this rethinking is also labor: cognitive, emotional, embodied, intangible. And for some folks^[1], that labor is less visible than others. For some folks, that labor is magnified.

Inman and Powell (2018) write, “To dismiss cultural constructs such as grades, a repeated part of the education system from students’ earliest memories of schools, ignores the affective domain of learning” (p. 34). We begin with these thoughts to highlight the systems in place that keep these populations fearful, that keep them/us (re)pressed in powerful ways. As Marylin Frye argues, to be “oppressed” is to be “pressed”: “Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing’s motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce” (as cited in Ahmed, 2017, pp. 49-50). We begin also with this dissonance to demonstrate the power teachers have in affecting students, especially those who are neurodivergent, those who are multiply oppressed, those who are marked by their (ab)normality. As feminist scholars who feel called to socially just and fair composition pedagogies and praxes, we are sensitive to the ways these writing assessment practices (and the larger ecologies in which they function) create inequities not only based on race and class, but also based on physical and neurological ability, and the interstices of these and other identities.

The goal of this article, then, is to articulate the ways in which neurodivergence as a lens can contribute to our field’s understanding and application of classroom assessment practices, especially in the context of labor-based grading contracts (LBGCs). As a beloved colleague once told Kathleen, “Good writing is good thinking.” While there exists a great deal of scholarship about what constitutes “good” writing, we must also be critically engaged with normative assumptions and expectations that underpin conceptions of “good” thinking. In solidarity with the authors in this special collection, we believe writing assessment must be a site of social justice intervention, and we add our voices to illuminate the challenges of the often invisible marginalized and non-normative populations: neurodivergent students, especially for those who experience multiple marginalizations. By focusing on these students, we offer a lens through which we can begin the work of shifting our assessment ecologies from single-axis interventions to sites that acknowledge the complex interconnected nature of a student’s intersectional identities.

In this article, we explore the intersections of neurodivergence and socially just writing assessment scholarship. First, we articulate the ways in which neurodivergence is defined and made invisible, the ways in which it manifests in writing classrooms, and the ways in which academic institutions uphold normative conceptions of neurological ability. Second, we illuminate how LBGCs, by altering the activity systems of schooling and writing classrooms (Russell, 1997; Spinuzzi, 2008), can create barriers to accessibility that force students to reject their own ways of learning, knowing, being, and languaging. And, finally, we use our experiences as neurodivergent students and teacher-scholars in an ethnographic exploration of the various opportunities to create interventions on

our interventions: to unite the socially just aims of LBGCs with the intersectional lens inherent in a consideration of the neurodivergent student experience.

Defining Neurodivergence

We proceed with the assumption that neurodivergence exists and intersects with the fields of disability studies and rhetoric/writing studies in meaningful ways. Scholars and activists such as Melanie Yergeau (2018), Alison Kafer (2013), Margaret Price (2011), and Eli Clare (2017) have illuminated descriptions of neurodivergence in fuller capacities in their own work. While we will reference and build upon their important scholarship, we will maintain a focus on how LBGCs complicate and illuminate labor considerations for neurodivergent populations in writing assessment ecologies that uphold normative conceptions and frameworks of academic performance and labor.

Typically referred to as “mental disorders” or “mental health issues,” neurodivergence can be defined as any biological or trauma-induced condition that manifests in differences in cognitive function, processing, sensory processing, or stimulus response from the cognitively normative (or neurotypical) population (Yergeau, 2018). We assert that neurodivergence is an implicit, value-neutral part of an individual’s overall personhood and, as such, is a substantive consideration in a student’s overall experience within the classroom. In solidarity with the broader disability studies narrative, we argue neurodivergence is the appropriate terminology (as opposed to the above; there are additional terms used within disability studies that apply to specific populations and are outside the scope of this article). The term neurodivergence centers the experience of the individuals within these communities and rejects mainstream narratives of deficit and/or cure. In all instances where the phrases “mental disorders” or “mental health issues” are used, we use quotations to denote our rejection of the implications inherent in the terminology.

Positionality

As feminist scholars, we are committed to the tradition of critically engaging with our own positionalities and biases as they intersect with and inform our scholarship. We are both White, settler-colonial, first-generation, middle-class folk who were assigned female at birth. Kathleen is a cisgender woman with a history of trauma. Meanwhile, Griffin is a non-binary trans man with intermittently (in)visible chronic illness and physical disability. We both benefit from multiple privileges, among them our socialization into a White, middle-class *habitus* (Inoue, 2015) and our current access to higher education. We acknowledge that we each benefit from our U.S. citizenship status and our White privilege.

In addition to these already complex interlocking identities, we are also both neurodivergent. Griffin is autistic with anxiety, depression, and complex posttraumatic stress disorder, diagnoses that carry with them not only social judgement, but a host of sensory and executive processing issues intimately linked to their personal and professional identities. Kathleen has experienced generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder since adolescence, the results of which have had multiple physical, cognitive, and emotional effects. Though we are more than our disabilities, these experiences live with us, move us, shape us—discursively, cognitively, physically, and emotionally.

We disclose our positionalities as an acknowledgment of how our identities privilege us and orient our perceptions. We speak from a White perspective, one that certainly cannot represent perspectives crucial to historically oppressed peoples; we recognize and remind our readers that our experiences are not comparable to those who have experienced racial discrimination and/or historical trauma (see Gobodo-Madikizela, 2016). Our current positions as White college educators and doctoral students at a predominately White institution allow us to use academic language and a cerebral approach to the visceral experiences of individuals. While we recognize the limitations of our perspective, we are committed to sharing this language and our experiences, so future teacher-scholar-activists may more easily advocate for neurodivergent-accessible academic spaces. As we move through our argument, we will use our experiences as both teacher-scholars and students to exemplify different challenges for neurodivergent students, as well as offer ethnographic perspectives on opportunities for LBGCs to be leveraged in service to a more intersectional assessment ecology.

LBGCs’ Single-Axis Lens

Recent scholarship in assessment and higher education has continually pointed out the ways in which the academy has been structured to “limit public access and interaction in such a way as to avoid the chance encounter of diverse populations, creating a series of protected interior and isolated spaces” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 41). Among the solutions created to address the gross inequities built into the culture of higher education, various forms of grading contracts have been designed to address challenges for specific teacher and student populations.

As others in this special edition have historicized/contextualized, grading contracts as an intervention into issues of student agency and social justice in writing classrooms are not new. In his 1973 article “Teaching without Judging,” Mandel addressed many of these same issues, and scholars such as Moreno-Lopez (2005), Danielewicz and Elbow (2008), and Shor (2009) have also taken up these critical and liberatory pedagogies. Yet with the publication of his book *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching*

and *Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future*, his Conference on Composition and Communication Chair's Address, and his recent monograph *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*, Asao B. Inoue (2015, 2019a, 2019b, respectively) has done substantial work toward making institutional space for antiracist writing assessment praxes. For many, Inoue's LBGC system has provided an invaluable starting place for the practical application of racially just writing assessment. Importantly, grading contracts and other assessment technologies are not apolitical/rhetorical and are thus still subject to critical analysis. As Inoue (2009) explains,

The problems writing assessments solve refer existentially to—and are constructed by—the socio-cultural forces that define those in and outside the academy and classroom, the ways we define acceptable and unacceptable writers, and the ways in which our assessments construct the naturalness of racial formations, social groups, and other constructs that divide and distinguish people for dominant interests and purposes. Assessment is not a value-free technology because it is more than the methods, machines, and materials we use to make judgements. (p. 101)

We start from this recognition of assessment itself as a technology laden with power because we see our intervention as extending this exact argument: Grading contracts can also “divide and distinguish [students] for dominant interests and purposes,” namely for neurological norms of academic performance and labor. While we could provide a simple and easily replicable list of methods and practical applications that would undoubtedly be useful for many well-intentioned teachers and administrators, we would be perpetuating that which we claim to be disrupting. It is not the assessment technology itself that does the social justice work; it is how we implement, explain to stakeholders, critically analyze, and recursively revise the technology that matters. When we overintellectualize these issues and divorce ourselves from the normative expectations naturalized and enforced in our assessment ecologies, we give them power: the power of silence, the power of institutional space, the power of naturality/neutrality. By focusing on neurological ableism in LBGCs, we seek to give language to and begin making institutional space for these concerns.

We begin our argument from a place of acknowledging the unavoidably complex and interwoven contexts in which writing assessment practices are deployed. It is our contention that contract-based assessment systems, while doing important work, are missing a vital intersectional lens and thus continue to privilege certain populations. We move with a “both/and” mindset; we resist the notion that grading contracts are either “good” or “bad.” To make such claims, we rely on Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) theorization of intersectionality, or the ways in which multiple identities that both marginalize and empower an individual co-construct the social, political/structural, and representational experiences of a person or marginalized group. Crenshaw (1991) explains, “My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (p. 1245). Contrary to the ways in which the term intersectionality has been co-opted as a label to simply denote the different/various identities to which a person may belong (see May, 2015), our work centers interwoven power dynamics; that is, we advocate research and pedagogical interventions that acknowledge and attempt to disrupt the ways in which various identities interact with power structures. As Ahmed (2017) writes, “Intersectionality is a starting point, the point from which we must proceed if we are to offer an account of how power works” (p. 5). For us, too, intersectionality is our locus.

Thus, while acknowledging the impactful work that Inoue and others (Elliot, 2016; Green, 2016; Poe, 2014) have contributed to forwarding antiracist assessment theories/praxes, we believe this work can further benefit from the scholarship of disability studies, especially that which centers neurodivergence and intersectionality. For example, Sami Schalk (2018) explicates how race and disability are linked:

Due to the conflicting social norms and stereotypes of various genders and races, certain behaviors and states of mind are interpreted in divergent ways when expressed and interpreted by differently situated individuals. In other words, a black woman behaving in one way is likely to be interpreted differently than a white man behaving the same way. (p. 64)

Schalk (2018) explains the ways in which multiple identities combine in experiences of marginalization as well as the ways in which one social identity can actually increase the likeliness of being labeled with or included in another marginalized status. Here, Schalk articulates how Black students are more likely to also be classified as “mentally disabled,” or neurodivergent. Given the ableist and discriminatory underpinning of the academy in general (aptly illustrated as “steep steps” articulated by Dolmage, 2017), it becomes incumbent upon us as educators to center neurodivergence in our own labors. In light of our current sociocultural contexts (notably the global pandemic and police brutality against Black Americans), we see this work as more important than ever.

Neurodivergence and the Writing Classroom

What has become apparent to us as neurodivergent teacher-scholars is that the deeply naturalized invisibility of neurodivergent students makes them a forgotten population—a heterogeneous group who experience a deficit of scholarship, even while they are often overrepresented in our classrooms, to the point of almost being a non-minority. Additionally, as we will soon explore, this population is an inherently intersectional one, and efforts to meet the needs of neurodivergent students offer the opportunity to “trickle up” in such a way as to meet students at the nexus of the multiple intersections they may hold.

While recent research in rhetoric and composition has begun challenging White supremacy and other social inequities within our assessment systems (see Elliot, 2016; Inoue, 2015; Poe, 2014; Poe & Inoue, 2016), little scholarship has tended to disability's role in assessment theory. Disability scholarship has been intervening in composition studies for a few decades now, with scholars like Dunn (1995), Brueggemann (2001), Brueggemann et al. (2001), Feldmeier White (2002), Lewiecki-Wilson et al. (2008), Browning (2014), and Kerschbaum (2015) leading the way. In addition, Jay Dolmage (2014, 2017, 2018) has published extensive scholarship describing how academic institutions are founded on systems that are deliberately excluding to disabled persons. And Tara Wood (2017) explains how the disabled student experience is heavily impacted by normative constructions of time and temporality. However, none of these scholars have specifically interrogated the ways in which our pedagogies impact neurodivergent student populations.

Neurodivergence is not a thought experiment; neurodivergence is a daily reality for a large portion of the population of the United States of America:

According to the U.S. Department of Education, in the year 2003-4, 22 percent of students with disabilities in college reported having "mental illness or depression"; 7 percent reported learning disabilities; and 11 percent reported attention deficit disorder ("Profile" 133). Results published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* put the numbers even higher: according to analysis of data from 2001-2 National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and related Conditions, nearly half (46 percent) of college students reported having experienced some psychiatric disorder in the year the survey was conducted. (Price, 2014, p. 7)

These statistics are staggering when framed in terms of the number of students in each classroom who may be silently, invisibly, and/or unknowingly coping with differences in cognitive function and processing. Neurodivergence can affect any population regardless of personal identifier(s). However, neurodivergence is more likely to affect historically marginalized populations, especially in a capacity outside the diagnostic structures of the medical-industrial complex (Dolmage, 2017; Sutter & Perrin, 2016). Such students are statistically less likely to have access to the ongoing care, especially behavioral health care, which is necessary to diagnose and treat various neurological conditions (Davidson, 2017; Dolmage, 2017; Schalk, 2018). Many of us take for granted our access to adequate health care and medical expertise, without which students are unable to access formal accommodations. Although disability studies remains critical of the U.S. medical field and advocates for constant interrogation of its complicity in systems of oppression, access is still a privilege. Diagnoses and medication are privileges. The current international COVID-19 pandemic has heightened awareness of these privileges to otherwise normative populations as folk grapple with tele-medicine appointments, supply chain issues inducing medication shortages, and deprioritized medical treatment. A popular meme in disability spaces summarizes this phenomenon aptly, describing how it feels like the whole world has suddenly awoken to the dissonance, uncertainty, and executive functioning challenges that trauma survivors consider business as usual.

Beyond issues of access, it is critical to acknowledge the core intersectional nature of the concept of disability itself. In their article, "Work in the Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework," Bailey and Mobley (2018) unpack the spaces in which Black feminist studies can integrate with disability studies to foster a deeper understanding of how disability is intertwined with race and gender. The authors explain,

Black people cannot afford to be disabled when they are required to be phantasmically abled in a white supremacist society. By bringing disability studies and a Black feminist theoretical lens to address this myth, scholars are better able to explain Black people's reluctance to identify as disabled and potentially offer new strategies for dismantling ableism within Black Studies. (Bailey & Mobley, 2018, p. 4)

What is deeply generative here is the awareness that concepts of neurodivergence are founded in concepts of race; from the psychiatric condition of drapetomania that marked slaves desirous of freedom as mentally aberrant to measures of cranial size as markers of racial inferiority, Blackness has always been conceptualized as disabling. And likewise, the label of neurodivergent or disabled is segregating, separating those labeled from their normative peers. "Race marks Black people as being inherently disabled, fundamentally other. In this way, race and disability are mutually constitutive" (Bailey & Mobley, 2018, p. 6). Thus, when we ask our readers to consider the presence of neurodivergence in their classroom, we are urging a greater awareness of a set of interconnected identifiers and the mutually constructed, mutually magnifying consequences of their existence for students.

As students and teachers, we have both personally experienced how disabilities are often construed as physical, unfortunate, and unnatural. Disability activist, scholar, and crip scholar Eli Clare (2017) notes,

Strangers offer me Christian prayers or crystals and vitamins, always with the same intent— to touch me, fix me, mend my

cerebral palsy, if only I will comply. After five decades of these kinds of interactions, I still don't know how to rebuff their pity, how to tell them the simple truth that I'm not broken. They assume me unnatural, want to make me normal, take for granted the need and desire for cure. (p. 5)

While Clare and other disability scholars have dedicated their careers to countering this narrative of cure, the strength of disability activism as a whole is still strongly focused on disabilities that are visible. Yet the first step toward any change is recognition, or "seeing" the problem. Whether a student enters a classroom with a faltering gate, a missing limb, or a visible assistive device, the disability is immediately apparent and therefore *knowable* to the observer. That which is known can be accommodated: seating changed, aisles widened, captions added, passing periods extended. We contend that neurodivergence is the silent attendee in our classrooms, one that accompanies roughly one quarter to one half of our students, one that consistently intervenes during their efforts of producing academic labor.

At most, signs of neurodivergence are experienced in a kind of sideways, slipping, liminal way through the constant bouncing of leg and knee, the gaze that never quite makes eye contact, the inability to articulate around a specific topic, or the queer phrasing of written passage. None of these examples specifically outs a student as neurodivergent, but they are all possible extensions of the neurodivergent student experience. Neurodivergence certainly shapes how a student will negotiate their classroom experience. Unfortunately, neurodivergent narratives are lacking in disability pedagogies, accommodation recommendations, and conversations around curriculum and assessment. We have witnessed how trying to imagine a neurodivergent student (and, thus, a neurodivergent student's needs) is to try to put a name to an invisible face.

The invisibility of neurodivergence can be both an advantage and a disadvantage: As with any socially constructed group, there are power structures functioning within difference (Crenshaw, 1991; May, 2015). Because some types of neurodivergence are almost always overlooked, they are not marked by the institution and therefore can escape systemic/sociopolitical oppression. For example, Kathleen's generalized anxiety and panic disorders are invisible to most. Yet many of the coping mechanisms she developed are valorized in a neoliberal capitalist system: perfectionism, inability to say no, overworking, etc. These socially rewarded responses to trauma and chronic stress perpetuate systems that work against relationship- and community-building by prioritizing ideologies of individual competitiveness and productivity. So, while Kathleen's ways of coping are often system(at)ically rewarded (at her own expense, of course), other types of neurodivergence are less socially acceptable and are therefore more easily targeted by stigmatization and discrimination. For example, Griffin's autism results in coping behaviors that are less socially acceptable: isolating from sensory or adverse emotional stimulation, various stimming activities, constant apologies to account for perceptions of unmet social expectations, and a rigidity in method or process in an attempt to supply predictable, navigable situations. All of these behaviors out Griffin as "socially inept," "overwhelmed," "emotional," or just plain odd.

We reveal these "within-group differences" to highlight the ways that neurodivergence, as an already unstable categorization mechanism, is still and always functioning within overlapping and interacting systems of oppression (May, 2015, p. 22). Just as some physical disabilities confer privilege in some scenarios, so do some forms of neurodivergence. We understand on a deeply personal level how neurodivergence is not homogenous. By centering the neurodivergent experience in our exploration of LBGCs below, rather than the perceived behavioral product of these experiences, we work to provide a better understanding of academic labor and its articulation in college composition assessment ecologies.

"Academic Performance" and "Labor"

When we use the phrase "labor-based grading contracts" (LBGCs), we include any grading system that requires students to meet goals of academic performance rather than standards of academic quality. As Inoue (2019b) explains in *Labor-Based Grading Contracts*, the goal with labor-based assessment ecologies is to shift the assessment criteria from that of quality to that of labor so as to provide students with opportunities to better understand their own languaging practices. While this system provides educators with vital opportunities to reflect more critically on their pedagogies and to dialogue with students about how they labor in their writing processes, LBGCs fundamentally shift classroom activity systems. This shift requires students to adapt to the new schooling expectations and modes of production. To better understand how students experience this shift, we make a distinction between labor and academic performance.

For us, this distinction highlights the ways in which assessment technologies shift power. These closely associated terms are two sides of a subject position and power structure: that of the instructor or broader assessment ecology, and that of the student. We define *academic performance* as the observable or quantifiable products of student participation within academic systems. For example, this may include measures of attendance, verbal participation in class, and submitting assignments. Conversely, we define *labor* as the time, energy, and effort that students invest in the production of and adherence to normative conceptions of academic performance. In other words, students perform what is often impalpable labor, including but not limited to their emotional, psychological, temporal, and intellectual investment in the product of academic performance. Academic performance becomes the visible/tangible products assessed and judged by teachers, similar to what Inoue (2019b) calls "labor power" (p. 83). The primary distinction between the Marxist conception of labor power and academic performance is this: We intentionally claim the performative aspect of academic labor. If we know not all labor is equitable in exchange value, then somewhere in the conceptual liminal space is

a socially coded “performance.” Thus, we can see how a labor-based system of assessment privileges neurotypical students who are more adept at producing labor in codified ways that meet the requirements deemed appropriate academic labor. As Inoue (2019b) notes, these students are often White and middle-class, and these students are typically intersectionally privileged by their various subject positions and are habituated to the White, middle-class *habitus* of academia.

We focus on LBGCs as a site of intervention both to acknowledge their important interruptions into writing assessment ecologies and to highlight the ways it is incumbent on our professional ethics to further problematize their values and applications. We contend that LBGCs create inequity for neurodivergent students in two central areas: (a) they disrupt the dynamics of the classroom activity system, creating what some may call “productive dissonance,” and (b) they focus on labor but may not account for the additional time/labor of adjusting to, adhering to, putting trust into, and understanding the new activity system. These seemingly value-positive interventions may actually further marginalize the neurodivergent student population; we must interrogate and uncover the neurological norms inherent in these systems, so we may better center the needs of all our students when constructing and implementing grading contracts.

Classroom Activity Systems and Neurodivergent Labor

All alternative assessment practices change the activity systems of a classroom, whether they be an LBGC or another unconventional grading system. As explained by Russell (1997), an activity system is

any ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated human interaction. ... The activity system is the basic unit of analysis for both groups’ and individuals’ behavior, in that it analyzes the way concrete tools are used to mediate the motive (direct, trajectory) and the object (the *problem space* or the *focus*) of behavior and changes in it. (p. 510, emphasis in original)

Students become accustomed to the rhythm of these activity systems, and this includes internalized understandings of how to labor in ways recognized as academic performance, how that performance is valorized, and how grades are the primary currency exchanged within the broader academic ecology. When we remove these expected systems, we automatically require students to adapt, to (re)orient. The concept of “productive dissonance” is the belief that it is useful, healthy, and even preferential for students to experience the “academic growth” it takes to make connections between the old activity system and the new. Yet cognitive dissonance can only be “productive” if it is transformed or directed into positive action (such as the discomforts of [un]learning systems of oppression); for neurodivergent students, the converse is often true: The dissonance can stymie growth by trapping the student in unfamiliar and unnavigable territory.

Imagine a common classroom activity used to introduce students to cultural diversity: Students are situated at tables to play a card game with simple rules, one of which is no talking. As they begin to play, students are periodically moved to sit at a different table. They attempt to join in the game at the new table, only to quickly become frustrated by the perception that no one is following the rules. They cannot verbally communicate, so they attempt to gesture or otherwise intervene, which only confounds the other students at the table. Some students become so frustrated they bow out altogether, refusing to play at the “rigged” tables. Only at the conclusion of the activity do the students learn that each table received slightly different rules, and that differing expectations created the conflict.

When we introduce grading contracts, especially contracts that remove grades completely, we are asking students to move to a new card table. And even though we explain that the rules are different, we know it will take time for students to remember and apply the new rules. Except that for some neurodivergent students, anxiety prevents them from remembering the new rules, so they freeze, unable to figure out how to proceed. Other neurodivergent students receive their copy of the new rules overwritten on a previous copy, so they are constantly trying to read the new rules, but the old rules obscure their view. Still others understand the new rules but lack the schema to apply them in the new context. In all these examples, we see that while grading contracts may be steps in a more ethical direction, they are also difficult steps for all students to take with us, and for some neurodivergent students, they are steep steps that create greater barriers to access. Further, it is essential we remember the intersectional nature of neurodivergence. For example, while LBGCs are specifically designed to attend to *linguistic* disparities, they may introduce *neurological* disparities by putting students in a position to perform labor under a societal construction that makes them reluctant to admit to neurodivergence and ask for help, if indeed they had access to the medical resources to acknowledge and diagnose their neurological difference to begin with. What we are emphatically stating is that students do not experience our classrooms through only one axis, and by focusing only on dispelling biases in quality of languaging, we run the risk of creating an inclusive classroom for one aspect of their experience while ignoring or worsening others.

In addition to the challenges presented by changing expectations in grading contract classrooms, some neurodivergent students are also disadvantaged by the removal of certain grading structures, checkpoints, and quantitative representations of progress. For instance, in Inoue’s (2019b) system, there is no way for students to calculate their grade in numerical terms. As Inman and Powell (2018) have shown, the lack of grades causes some distress amongst students, who rely on grades as commodities with which they

gain cultural and fiscal capital. Inman and Powell (2018) argue the use of course contracts can gloss over the “affective domain of learning”:

Grades, then, serve as more than measures of identity for these students; they are signifiers of how much work remains to be done for the students to meet their goals and thus enact their desired identities. And these students do not have the authorial confidence to determine for themselves how much work remains; rather, they seem to desperately want a marker capable of making that determination for them. (p. 42)

While this research does not specifically address neurodivergent students, the observation is doubly relevant for this population. When combined with the knowledge of the impact of changing activity systems on students who may approach the new expectations with debilitating dissonance, the further removal of conventional grading systems creates deeply problematic and anxiety-producing terrain for students who are already grappling with the need for increased labor to participate in traditional classroom structures. While “grades, and the lack thereof, are linked to fear” (Inman & Powell, 2018, p. 46), for many neurodivergent students, they are also linked to predictability and clarity; they function as recognizable measures of “correct” labor, teacher expectations, and academic performance that, when absent, plunge neurodivergent students into activity systems in which they do not always have the means, time, or ability to decode. Thus, when implementing LBGCs, we must necessarily view the removal of grades as a step toward ethical improvements in our assessment practices while at the same time acknowledging how they create a culture of increased marginalization for neurodivergent students.

Assessments of Labor and Time

Our distinctions between academic performance and labor allow us to disentangle some of the complicating factors Inoue (2019b) identifies in his treatise on labor. Inoue (2019b) argues that labor ought to be considered three-dimensionally: how students labor (use-value), that students labor (exchange-value), and why students labor (worth), with worth acting as the most “unaccounted for” and the most important dimension (p. 88). These three dimensions are approached as both discrete and interwoven complexities, so students attune themselves to various aspects of their laboring. Some activities in Inoue’s system include labor logs (which track time spent laboring, levels of engagement, etc.), labor journals (weekly reflections), labor snippets (brief updates about their work), and multiple reflection essays (long-term labor reflections) that ask students to track, notice, and analyze their own labors. Despite the pedagogical benefits of these activities, these labors and their exchange-value(s) could do more to consider the additional labor that neurodivergent students are often required to complete to perform in these normative ways.

Inoue’s (2019b) underlying premise mirrors our own pedagogies, our own lived experiences with learning both within and without academia: “One learns *in the labors* of researching, drafting, and revising—in the doing—and learns best if one pays attention to how one is doing those labors” (p. 108, emphasis in original). We recognize the ways in which asking students to reflect on their labor is beneficial to most students. The premise is simple enough: To learn is to labor, to labor is to do, and this takes time and effort. But what if to labor does not always mean to produce the appropriate academic performance within the normative time frame? What happens when the “labor power” is not reflective of the intangible labor? Our distinction between “performance” and “labor” still comes to bear in inequitable ways: Neurotypical students who are fully enculturated into the dominant White, patriarchal, middle-class *habitus* of our institutions are more likely to be comfortable *performing* the academic work assigned to them; they will repeat the same well-rehearsed behaviors that have carried them to higher education. We cannot neglect these considerations of academic performance, of ease-in-doing, of habituation; Inoue (2019b) recognizes that certain languaging behaviors will be easier for White, middle-class students to enact, but what of neurological differences in expression, activity, reflection, and action? The orientation to particular schooling activity systems, including the navigation of demands of the writing classroom, are also habituations, performances we learn.

By focusing on these aspects of LBGCs, we are hoping to invite a more expansive, intersectional lens to this invaluable work. In a system that exchanges labor for a final course grade (and thereby access, capital, and affective validation), the exchange-value of labor is not any less disadvantaging for neurodivergent students as a conventional grading system is for students out of tune with White middle-class *habitus*. Labor-based assessment hinges on a key assumption: that each assignment, each product, each performance, requires a roughly equitable amount of labor from each student. Inoue (2019b) recognizes how this assumption is still complex, still unresolved:

What about students who have other demands on their time, intersections of class and economics, intersections that surely played a role in my own background? Aren’t there students who likely don’t have to work and go to school at the same time? Won’t they be just as privileged in a purely labor-based grading system where arguably time is the key factor for success as in typical quality-based systems of grading? Aren’t those more time-privileged students also more likely to come from more economically well-off families, and aren’t those families statistically more likely to be White families? (pp. 69-70)

Here, Inoue (2019b) reveals the key tension in labor-based assessment systems: Besides the benefits of freedom in languaging, these technologies do not fundamentally intervene on other intersectional dynamics of power and privilege. Instead, they sidestep the deeply problematic and subjective quality-based assessment practices and exchange them for a less understood but still marginalizing focus on labor, performance, ability, and time. While there will always be students who have other commitments outside of the classroom, neurodivergent students frequently need to perform vastly different quantities and types of labor to accomplish the same academic performance. For example, anxiety or depression can cause students to struggle to maintain sustained effort on a task; ADHD can require a student to read a passage multiple times to gain the same benefit as a neurotypical student due to difficulties in managing attention; autistic students may need assistance to produce expected levels of linguistic expression on assignments; and dyslexic students may need to access materials through differentiated technologies that require additional time investments. In each of these cases, neurodivergent students often invest more embodied/physical and emotional/affective labor toward completing the cognitive labor than a neurotypical peer but are provided the same reward for these arguably more extensive efforts.

Thus, inequity is created in LBGCs where the question “Did you complete the task?” flattens student production of academic performance to a variable that is more difficult for neurodivergent students to achieve through their labor, even if there are guided instructions. This labor-based model also elides the difference between “major” and “minor” assignments by arguing that all labor (and thus all academic performance) is equitable in the classroom, which in Kathleen’s experience has created opportunities for discussions about which kinds of student labor are often neglected. Likewise, Griffin has noticed students struggling with the lack of self-direction and choice this view of labor creates: Since all assignments have the same exchange-value, students can struggle to choose when and where to direct their labor to maintain a balance between course requirements and personal situations. They don’t know whether to invest time in reading or time in this smaller writing assignment or that larger writing project if they have limited labor resources. Wood’s (2017) exploration of crip time in the writing classroom, defined as “a flexible approach to normative time frames” (p. 264), helps us make sense of our observations:

This negotiation reflects the crip time that Nishida theorizes, a space in which the limits and potentials of time are flexible, and all members of the space have a voice in constructing the temporal means of participation. ... Such pedagogical designs should be negotiated with disabled students, not simply for disabled students. Allowing agentive control reduces the risk of imposing normative or compulsory modes of composing onto students in writing classrooms. (pp. 277-278)

Thus, the prioritizing of academic performance in these assessment systems creates an incomplete narrative, one that obscures the very real and visceral labors neurodivergent students must perform just to access a space in which they may manufacture the academic performance required, and one in which students’ negotiation of their own participation is prevented by lack of prioritized labor and quantifiable progress.

A grading system that centers student labor requires a way to assess and reflect on these academic performances. In Inoue’s (2019b) model, one method is that of tracking or otherwise attending to the labor (and time laboring) students are investing in the course. Inoue asks his students to maintain a “labor log” that tracks their labor by duration, date, description, location, level of engagement, and mood. Inoue (2019b) argues, “The more time one spends laboring, the more one will learn ... and that labor is best when it is mindfully done and when one’s labors are reflected upon in order to understand them and do them better next time” (pp. 150-151). While we agree that reflection on processes is beneficial, writing teachers—and their assessment technologies—should not presume that all students lack and/or would benefit from such sustained metacognitive efforts. Wood (2017) reminds us that neurodivergent students already “often possess a sophisticated metacognitive awareness of how to navigate the strictures they face in the classroom” (p. 272), helping us understand that this labor-tracking activity may produce a deficit model for neurodivergent students who are already deeply aware of how their laboring differs from the normative population. We maintain Wood’s (2017) understanding of crip time and temporal means of engagement, and we turn to our own experiences to explore the difficulties with this type of metacognitive activity, which we believe can be deeply problematic for various neurodivergent students.

In our experience, tracking time is a complex activity that requires not only an attention to types of labor and time spent, but also a kind of rigorous consistency that is simply not accessible to all students. For Griffin, for example, any work is usually divided into either intense “flow” states in which time is not a sense that is easily perceived or, in contrast, choppy, highly fragmented states too divided to be easily tracked with any certainty. Additionally, Griffin’s neurodivergence often manifests in a lack of self-awareness such that being aware of physical and emotional states can take conscious effort, and maintaining schedules or executive functioning is in and of itself labor that requires conscious, dedicated effort. Thus, time-tracking activities ask questions that are not only difficult to answer, they raise anxiety and consciousness around difference and redirect energy and labor away from actions that directly contribute to other necessary tasks. In other words, while Inoue (2019b) claims that “the most important factor is how much time the student spends on the labors of learning to write, because the student *has the most control* [emphasis added] over these aspects of learning to write” (p. 151), Griffin’s experience is that their neurodivergence directly impacts how they perceive, experience, and mediate time, thus making it a highly unreliable and uncontrollable measure of learning.

Kathleen has experienced the tracking of time laboring as a *both/and*, with both benefits and hazards. In one way, this activity has been useful in reducing her anxiety by helping to maintain balance in her various roles as student, teacher, and administrator. Being able to assure herself that an adequate amount of time was spent on certain tasks has helped her to set and maintain personal/professional boundaries that are often nonexistent for academics, especially those who reward and perpetuate overworking. Despite these benefits, as well as the organizational proclivities that enable them, meticulously tracking time can also trigger or worsen anxiety and lead to panic—when certain parameters aren't met, feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy quickly replace any notion of productivity and balance.

As demonstrated by these lived experiences, this time-tracking labor directly influences the affective domains of anxiety, emotion, self-efficacy, and self-worth. Similar to conversations around productive dissonance, some may argue that anxiety can be productive to students' maturation and performance; however, as Wood (2017) notes, "What's crucial here is that when anxiety is connected with disability, reducing said anxiety becomes a matter of access, not only a possible goal but an ethical (and sometimes legal) responsibility" (p. 271). Likewise, asking students to report on their level of engagement, mood, and duration of time all carry normative valuations of "appropriate" labor detrimental to neurodivergent access. In our experience, folks with ADHD in particular struggle tremendously with this sustained task. Measuring duration of labor thus creates an implicit expectation of sustained activity that may range from unattainable to undesirable to a neurodivergent student.

We again recognize that often, when LBGCs are employed, the instructional goal behind tracking this information is to assist students with identifying habits as well as conditions that are most conducive to their own laboring. As Inoue (2019b) explains, "Labor time is not the only way engagement, motivation, and learning can be manufactured in a course's assessment ecology, but perhaps it is a good internally relative indicator" (p. 154). Yet neurodivergent students may have to habitually vary their locations to combat attentive fatigue or may have less consistent patterns than their peers. When mood, duration, and engagement are not necessarily connected to the student's labor, the additional details become so much extra "noise" for neurodivergent students to wade through as they seek to demonstrate adequate academic performance. Students with depression, for example, cannot rely on mood as indicative of their academic performance. Therefore, we encourage instructors to consider how their conceptions of labor, and specifically time, offer (de)limiting experiences for our neurodivergent student populations. As Wood (2017) reminds us, "Crippling time means tapping into that awareness and harnessing its potential, not only for particular students but also for the greater possibility that it may release our own pedagogical approaches from the limiting constructs of normativity" (p. 273). As scholars further examine grading contracts' effectiveness, we hope these lesser-known neurological norms are centered and challenged.

Conclusion

Despite these challenges, LBGCs still have much to offer, especially if these assessment systems are paired with the continual (un)learning of systems of oppression and critical investigation of language ideologies, composing practices, sociocultural norms, and the production/consumption of academic performance and labor. We must reiterate here that attending to neurodiversity in writing assessment practices is not separate from attending to antiracism, anticolonialism, and feminism. These pursuits cannot be separated, for they cannot be untangled in the lives of those who live at the intersections of these social systems. As Bailey and Mobley (2019) remind us, "Notions of disability inform how theories of race were formed, and theories of racial embodiment and inferiority (racism) formed the ways in which we conceptualize disability" (p. 9).

As we approach our own classrooms, we have both moved away from strict LBGC systems to those that incorporate elements of LBGCs within a broader consciousness of neurodivergence and intersectional student identities. Kathleen's approach, which borrows in part from Linda Nilson's (2015) specs grading, relies heavily on a dialectic between teacher and students to negotiate what academic performance and labor is reasonable and desirous to demonstrate learning, growth, and the goals of our institution. Griffin's classroom incorporates flexible deadlines that are supported by weekly check-ins where students are able to report on their efforts and progress in the manner that is most productive for them, thus bridging the gap between attentiveness to academic labor and student neurological diversity. Importantly, we both see the separation of grades from feedback as fundamental to our approach to writing assessment.

LBGCs have significant value in compassionately (re)orienting our students to an assessment system that does not value and uphold racist/classist linguistic ideologies. Similar to what Inman and Powell (2018) found in their study, our students have shared with us the perceived benefits of the LBGC—many students said they felt freer, less anxious, and more joyful during the actual composing process. In addition to these benefits, neurodivergent populations certainly benefit from the key tenets of Inoue's (2019b) system: open dialogue about what labor means and how it is produced/consumed/exchanged, critical inquiry into linguistic ideologies, a decentering of Whiteness, and (re)centering of student-led ways of learning and knowing.

For us, an intersectional and neurodivergent model of writing assessment recognizes, investigates, and challenges the existence of neurological norms in the design and implementation of assessment systems at classroom, program, and institutional levels. For us, an intersectional model of writing assessment makes institutional space for a few key conversations: (a) crippling time in our grading systems and program policies so that neurodivergent conceptions of time, effort, and presence can be adequately accounted for; (b)

flexible pedagogies for various modes and ways of learning and being; and (c) the denaturalization of White supremacy, especially within linguistic ideologies. For us, an intersectional model of writing assessment sees neurodivergence as the locus of socially just writing assessment for a few reasons: When sites of oppression are multiply invisible or unrecognizable, they are inactionable; when we as a field think about cognition, we often mean neurotypical cognition; and despite the current momentum behind disability-accountable pedagogies, a specific focus on neurodivergent student populations is still nascent.

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[1] Folx: a genderqueer alternative for “folks.” When we use this term, we do so to intentionally center the various gender-expansive

identities that fall outside of the binary categories of men and women that “folks” has traditionally encompassed.

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