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Authors

Reardon, Kristina
Guardado-Menjivar, Vanessa

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Perceptions of Fairness in Summer Bridge Classrooms with Contract Grades

by Kristina Reardon, College of the Holy Cross; Vanessa Guardado-Menjivar, College of the Holy Cross

This narrative explains how a summer bridge student turned writing fellow effectively communicated peers' comments about fairness in grading to her former professor as she prepared to teach her summer bridge writing course again. Co-authored by the instructor and undergraduate student, this reflection explores both undergraduate understandings of fairness in the context of contract grading as well as the teacher-student relationship. Both teacher and student advocate for the use of contract grading in summer bridge writing classrooms. However, they argue that systems of grading need to be clarified and contextualized for pre-college students who sometimes express confusion about college standards and/or may overextend lessons learned during their first college course to their fall semester when not all professors will use contract grading.

Keywords: fairness, summer bridge, writing fellows, revision, contract grading

Kristina: When I first implemented Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow's contract for a B in my summer bridge classroom, I thought: "I've finally found a fair way to assess pre-college students!" I thought it would allow us to set grades aside and focus on what mattered most: developing strong writing processes.

Vanessa: Meanwhile, as a student, I felt this approach underestimated my peers and me because it assumed that we *needed* a contract. It felt like Kristina was saying there was something wrong with the way we wrote. And she stated that a B was a good grade—whereas I saw the B as a detrimental way to begin college.

This teacher/student reflective narrative stems from Kristina and Vanessa's surprise at learning each other's thoughts about grading when, two years after being a student in Kristina's summer bridge classroom, Vanessa became a summer writing fellow. The way Vanessa sees it, summer bridge provides a unique opportunity for a cohort of mostly first-generation college students to ease their transition from high school into college. But she also identifies an unavoidable challenge: Many students who enroll in the program have excelled academically—and expect to continue excelling in college using the same strategies they used in high school, when, like most first-year students, they will need to change or deepen their study habits. Anxiety and stress frame conversations about grades, and a sense of fairness on both the teacher and the student's side can feel difficult to pin down.

Complicating things further, many students report mostly moderate to high levels of confidence in their writing through self-placement assessments coordinated prior to the program, but scoring of placement essays suggests that students' skills do not always match their self-assessments. The way Kristina sees it, she has two jobs as a summer bridge instructor. The first is to help students in her writing class identify their strengths as writers and to maintain or build confidence based on those strengths. And the second is to equip students with the skills they need to develop a positive growth mindset around writing, so they can identify and address areas for improvement as they cultivate their academic writing voices. But in a short, three-and-a-half-week program, grades can feel like they are distracting from these pedagogical goals.

This piece aims to illuminate how and why Kristina implemented a grading contract in her summer bridge classroom to assess students' labor and ability to articulate multi-step writing plans for the fall at the College of the Holy Cross, a small Jesuit liberal arts college in Worcester, MA. More importantly, it highlights how Vanessa helped her understand the concept of grading fairness from a student perspective—and why some students initially believed that contract grading was unfair.

For additional context: The summer bridge program, called Passport, invites students identified by the Office of Admissions to campus in August for four weeks to take either a writing or a math course before their first year of college. The Passport website states that invitees include, but are not restricted to, "first-generation college students, students who come from underresourced high schools, and students who are English language learners or for whom English is a second language" (College of the Holy Cross, n.d., "Is Passport for ALANA" section). There is no cost for attendance or room and board during the program, and fall admission is not contingent on participation, so the program is voluntary. Students attend classes and a variety of social and academic programs each day, and they earn an elective credit for the writing class (Holy Cross does not have a first-year writing requirement). Their Passport grade impacts their first semester GPA.

The genre of the reflective narrative has been chosen to capture insights about writing in summer bridge programs by Kristina and Vanessa over the course of four years as they continued to work with each other and how, outside the context of formal, IRB-approved research, students can positively impact professors' pedagogy.

Student Perceptions of Fairness

When we began discussing fairness and grading contracts in the spring of 2019, Vanessa had already served as Kristina's writing

fellow in 2018, and both Kristina and Vanessa were preparing to work again with the summer bridge program in the summer of 2019—though that year, Vanessa would be a writing fellow for another professor’s writing course. As they worked to propose this very article, Vanessa reflected on her own summer bridge experiences. She wrote to Kristina:

In high school, quickly editing an essay would result in an A for me. When I first learned about the grading contract, I believed it underestimated my writing abilities, as well as those of my peers. I understood that the contract for a B would provide a safety net if I didn’t do well, but I felt overwhelmed when I thought about why: it seemed like the contract allowed for the flexibility for professors to be generous with their grading. I felt that this suggested that if I earned a B during the summer bridge program, I would earn even lower grades in my future courses. It concerned me how a 3.0 GPA would look when I was used to being a 4.0 student, and more importantly, I wondered if I was really qualified enough to be in college. Reflecting back on my cover letters which were required with every essay, it is clear to me how much I worried about my essays.

But I can also see how, over three weeks, I came to value the grading contract because you did not issue grades on assignments I turned in but instead provided positive comments on higher order concerns in my writing, as well as tips on how to improve areas that weren’t working yet. Eventually, I began to think that the grading contract provided me with the opportunity to tackle challenges in my writing without being penalized for taking risks in my first drafts. I could try something out and be assured that I’d get at least a B in the course and that my final grade would not be affected if I tried something that didn’t work. With the extensive feedback provided, I could see my areas of weakness and how to improve from there.

Looking at Vanessa’s reflections on her time as a student in 2016, it becomes clear that her definition of fairness at first hinged on a grade. Kristina used Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) contract for a B almost verbatim when Vanessa was her student; as she did so, she unintentionally overemphasized the B as she explained the concept of labor-based grading. Yet Vanessa, and a few other students, were able to work through that challenge. Vanessa recalls revising a visual analysis essay at the end of the course that pulled her out of her comfort zone; she took risks with her revision, pushing her conclusions further than she had in her first draft, even when she was unsure if what she was writing made perfect sense, specifically because of the contract. Other students also told Vanessa they appreciated the freedom the contract seemed to authorize since they could explore new ideas without being penalized.

Of course, not all students felt that way. In end-of-program evaluations, 50% of Vanessa’s classmates thought Kristina’s grading system was *unfair*. As they reviewed this statistic, Kristina and Vanessa began to think about what fairness really meant to students. To Vanessa, a grade is fair if the professor offers clear criteria upon which an assignment will be evaluated. This way, she argues, students know what they need to do to earn a certain grade. Based on this definition, Kristina sees where things might have gone wrong when she implemented the contract for a B. While there were classroom conversations about what strong writing looked like, the contract only outlined what needed to be done to earn a B and did not specify what needed to be done to earn a B+, an A-, or an A, making those grades (and grades lower than a B) feel random and subjective. Kristina and Vanessa suspect that lack of clarity led the 50% of students who had a negative experience with contract grading to believe the contract for a B was unfair.

Vanessa also thinks her peers who felt the contract was unfair resented the fact that completing an assignment did not automatically result in an A as many perceived it had for them in high school. Then there was the question of equity. From her vantage point as a writing fellow in Kristina’s class two years after she completed the summer bridge program, Vanessa could see that it took some students an hour or two to complete a revision, while others invested considerably more time over several days to complete the same task. Grading on effort, Vanessa explains, felt hazy since they were not sure how to make their efforts visible to their instructor, or if the investment of many hours of revision time was worth it if their final draft turned out different but not necessarily significantly better. With the contract for a B, students perceived that whether they spent one hour or 10 on a revision, they would receive the same grade (a B).

Many of these inconsistencies and complaints were addressed when Kristina adapted Asao Inoue’s (2019) contract and labor logs in the summer of 2019; this more detailed system of tracking allowed students to show the professor their investment of time more clearly and to opt in and out of specific actions (or units of labor) to gain control over their grades at all levels. When Vanessa reviewed Kristina’s 2019 contract, she felt that it allowed students to take more responsibility for their grades—thus shifting the emphasis from the professor’s generosity in awarding grades higher than a B to the student’s own ability to choose the amount of effort they wanted to invest into the course.

Still, in the summer of 2019, some students reported in office hours that they felt the labor logs were tedious and did not account for the fact that some students could complete revisions thoughtfully but quickly, while it took others longer to do the same. Students asked questions like: How many hours equal an A? How many for an A-? In other words, even though Kristina implemented a grading contract with the initial goal of trying to focus less on grades and more on learning in all four summers, Vanessa and other students reported they were often unable and/or unwilling to set grades aside. Grades still mattered to them, and grades still permeated conversations about writing.

This focus on grades occurred not just when the professor was present in the classroom and in office hours but also when writing fellows held afternoon sessions and provided tutoring during mandatory evening study halls. In the summer of 2018, Vanessa recalls trying to help other students explore their creativity through writing, but she felt unable to make progress because some believed they already were A-level writers who did not need to embrace new writing habits while others felt they would receive at least a B if they just logged a few hours of writing time, whether or not they applied lessons from class and fellows sessions to their writing.

In both Summer 2018, when Vanessa was Kristina's fellow, and in 2019, when Kristina worked with a labor-based grading contract, some students complained about the very idea of a contract, stating they would have preferred to receive grades on each draft and homework assignment, so they knew where they stood and what sorts of grades they could expect in the fall semester. They felt the contract obscured their ability to self-assess in preparation for the fall, as their conception of self-assessment was reliant more on grades than the qualitative feedback offered by both the professor and writing fellows. This made Kristina and Vanessa wonder: If one of the goals of a summer bridge program is to prepare students for a full-length college semester, is a grading contract the best way to proceed with assessment when hardly any faculty across the college used such methods of grading?

Responding to Student Concerns

Kristina and Vanessa ultimately concluded that, with its compressed academic schedule, mandatory study halls, and robust daily social and academic support, the summer bridge environment is in many ways very much unlike the full-length semester when students have more agency to determine their own schedules and to opt into and out of programming. If we move past the idea that summer bridge programs are meant to fully prepare students for a fall semester and instead embrace the idea of summer bridge as an in-between space that allows students to try new writing practices and develop new habits, there becomes less of a burden for grading practices to conform with more traditional methods other faculty might employ across campus. Yet these differences in grading and in scheduling need to be made clear to students who might otherwise internalize summer bridge practices as college norms.

Vanessa's reports of other students' desires for more traditional grades reflect common first-year anxieties about succeeding in college. The bridge program setting renders them starkly because adjusting to college both socially and academically is compressed to a space of less than four weeks. And the contract lays bare immediately what other grading systems might obscure until midterms: that while all students have strengths as writers, they also need to adjust their writing in some ways to succeed in college—and often in ways that often demand that students develop more extensive writing practices than the ones that brought them success in high school. These complexities can produce stress and fear, even before the unfamiliar grading contract is introduced. Both Kristina and Vanessa now agree this makes contract grading all the more crucial, yet difficult to “sell” to summer bridge students at first.

One of the reasons the contract is challenging to present is that, when students receive the message their labor is being assessed by the professor, Kristina and Vanessa note they sometimes conflate labor and time. While Inoue's (2019) labor logs provide students an opportunity to register their time and investment in an assignment, in both Kristina and Vanessa's experience, it is not uncommon for summer bridge students to misread prompts, invest unnecessary time into drafting a handful of sentences, or otherwise work diligently to produce prose that does not meet basic requirements as specified in writing prompts and related evaluation guides. One common example involves a student drafting a personal narrative when the writing prompt requires an academic argument. In other words, a student might spend a lot of time doing something that does not fulfill an assignment. Effective labor would involve not just spending time on writing but making sure effort was leveraged effectively to meet requirements.

Mostly, Vanessa says, whether they ultimately liked or disliked the contract in her cohort in 2016 and when she was a fellow in 2018, they often saw it as a source of stress because it was different than what they were used to and seemed to suggest they might not earn As. Kristina learned from Vanessa's feedback after the summer of 2018, and in response, she redesigned her curriculum in the summer of 2019 to incorporate mini lessons about grades, stress, fairness, and rewriting. Kristina realized she needed to have conversations in class about the ways labor and investment of time are linked and how productive labor involves deep engagement with course materials in a way that, for some, requires more focus than their high school work might have demanded. Vanessa notes that conversations about college adjustment, grades, and equity in education occur regularly among student staff and in social programming in the summer bridge program, but adding this focus to the academic component helps connect the academic and social sides of things and gives pre-college students different forums to work through both their excitement and fears.

Vanessa helped Kristina see that she should not use contract grading to minimize the focus on grades. Instead, Vanessa has shown her that embracing conversations about grades through course assignments can better achieve Kristina's goal of helping students focus on learning and developing strong writing practices. When students research and learn about grades and their impact on education systems, the labor-based grading contract comes into clearer focus.

Kristina now includes large and small group discussions in class about what constitutes effort and writing labor in college, and she talks with students in office hours about their fears and concerns about grades and their writing abilities. She assigns readings and

TED Talks on these college writing practices and grading systems, and two out of her three writing assignments now directly ask students to analyze and argue about their educational experiences, equity, and grading. These moves allowed students to more thoroughly explore the grading contract on their own terms. It also strikes Kristina and Vanessa that these conversations that initially began as a means of engaging with a grading contract also get at one of the most important goals of summer bridge itself: Helping students learn how to adapt to a college academic setting by making elements of the college academic setting the focus of study.

Conclusions

Prior to Kristina's implementation of the contract for a B in 2016, faculty used conventional grading (assigning a grade for each assignment and averaging them together). Both Kristina and Vanessa see that as potentially problematic, particularly if a student's first grade in the summer bridge program is a C or lower. Vanessa says that, if she had received a low grade like a C on one of her first assignments, the shock would have been so great she might have just given up or accepted that she would be a C student for the duration of the program and possibly in college in general. The contract for a B, though imperfectly implemented, gave her some sense of security, especially when she realized it did not mean she could *only* achieve a B in the course. And both Kristina and Vanessa think the baseline of a B makes sense in a highly structured summer bridge program where students are required to complete work in study halls and to seek tutoring and other academic support. As such, if students attend to the minimum required elements of the summer bridge program, they will have invested the labor required to earn a B on Kristina's new labor-based grading contract.

While moving beyond the explicit contract for a B feels important in making grading more transparent and fair to students, Kristina and Vanessa feel strongly that it would be unethical to assign grades below a B to summer bridge students who completed the basic program requirements, such as daily attendance and on-time submission of fully completed assignments. After all, grades in the C or D range might negatively impact students' confidence as they enter the fall semester and weigh down their GPAs for participation in a voluntary program before they formally matriculate in the fall. Kristina and Vanessa believe the instructors and fellows in pre-college programs should be mindful of the ways that all elements of the program—especially grading—send messages to students about whether they belong in college. They believe that labor-based contract grading allows students to take responsibility for their own learning and their own grades in ways that prepare them well for the fall semester, even if other professors that students later encounter do not use contract grading.

As Kristina and Vanessa discussed methods of improving the grading method used for summer bridge programs, Kristina has wondered whether a pass/fail grading system or even an ungraded class might be more appropriate for a summer bridge program. Under such a system, there would be no stress over a grade, allowing students to spend their time solely focusing on their writing and how to transition from high school to college writing. Yet Vanessa dislikes the idea of eschewing grades. She thinks first-year students, to enroll in a voluntary summer program to begin with, need the motivation of receiving a grade, so the class can count toward graduation. Without grades, she argues, there is no reward for participating in the program, and the ability to earn college credit is a selling point as the summer bridge program recruits students. Vanessa ultimately thinks that removing grades would sow confusion about college assessment and evaluation as courses are graded in fall and spring semesters. And Vanessa's comments helped Kristina to see her impulse for a pass/fail or ungraded system only sidesteps grades when it is beneficial for students to discuss, research, and reflect on grades in their very first weeks of college.

The sort of reflective teacher/student narrative we have written here has, as we wrote and revised, driven home to us just how important student and teacher reflection is in conversations on assessment. Both Kristina and Vanessa reflect on their teaching and learning regularly on their own and with their peers, but only in sharing their thoughts did the two come to an understanding of the concept of *fairness* in a meaningful way. It seems particularly important, in work on contract grading, to consider student voices. If one of the goals of contract grading is increased fairness or equity across student populations, it makes sense to consult with students on their perceptions of fairness. Kristina is grateful to Vanessa for honestly sharing her insights, from her positive affirmations to her criticism.

And it is worth noting that, perhaps unsurprisingly, after receiving Vanessa's feedback and adjusting her grading contracts in 2019, nearly all of Kristina's students in summer bridge rated her grading as *fair*.

Author Bios

Kristina Reardon is the associate director of the Center for Writing at the College of the Holy Cross, as well as the director of the peer tutoring center, the Writer's Workshop. Her research considers student voices in the writing process and the role of peer collaboration in revision.

Vanessa Guardado-Menjivar is a 2020 graduate of the College of the Holy Cross, where she worked as a writing consultant and writing fellow in the College's summer bridge program. She is currently taking a gap year to gain patient care experience before applying to physician assistant programs.

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