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Building Student Agency Through Contract Grading in Technical Communication

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The scholarship on contract grading has focused on the impacts in first-year writing, but little work explores how contract grading is used in other writing contexts, specifically technical communication. In fact, a focus on contract grading can align with the social justice turn in technical communication if viewed as a way to enact feminist and antiracist pedagogies. In this reflection, we--an instructor of an introductory technical communication service course and a student who took that class--share our experiences around contract grading. After providing an overview of the course and institutional context, we reflect together on our experiences around student perceptions and attitudes as well as the impact contract grading had on us as teacher and learner. We conclude with lessons learned and how instructors can take up contract grading in their technical communication classrooms. Our goal is to share our experiences that could lead to scholarship on assessment practices in the context of the field's social justice turn.

Keywords: contract grading, technical communication, student agency, social justice, feminism

With the surge in scholarship on feminism and social justice in technical communication (e.g., Agboka, 2012; Colton & Holmes, 2018; Frost, 2016; Jones, 2016; Jones et al., 2016), one unexplored area is the use of assessment, such as contract grading, as a feminist and social justice-oriented approach to student learning. Work on contract grading in particular tends to focus on first-year writing (e.g., Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Inoue, 2015), but how can these practices be used to promote an equitable, socially just technical communication classroom?

Despite acknowledgements from the field that technical communication is neither neutral nor objective (Jones, 2016; Jones et al., 2016), technical communication materials and pedagogy tend to teach from this framework. For instance, while gendered and racial identities impact how individuals communicate in the workplace, most textbooks elide or gloss over these concerns, sending the message that technical communication is focused on conveying objective truth to an audience devoid of various identities (White et al., 2016). Assignments then focus on generic content that may not grapple with how communication emerges from the biases and perspectives of its creators and may imagine one type of user at the expense of others. These assignments may also fail to help students understand the potential for technical communication to be used for socially just ends or the ways technical communication can empower users to overcome injustice (Jones, 2016; Walton et al., 2019).

To potentially disrupt ideas of technical communication as neutral or objective descriptions of reality, Jennifer (referred to as Jenn throughout) teaches an Introduction to Technical Communication course with a feminist and social justice orientation, which Amanda took online in Spring 2019 at Boise State University. Located in the Mountain West, Boise State is Idaho's largest university with over 26,000 undergraduate students in the 2019-2020 academic year, offering a range of undergraduate and graduate degrees (Boise State, 2020b). Boise State bills itself as a metropolitan research university and has been ranked in the U.S. News and World Report's 50 Most Innovative Schools (Boise State, 2020a). Boise State's student body is 73% White, 13% Hispanic/Latino, 5% biracial, 2% Black/African American, 2% Asian, and less than 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (Boise State, 2020b). In 2019, Introduction to Technical Communication was part of the general education curriculum, counting for a social science elective, and the course was required by a range of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) disciplines, including electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, civil engineering, computer science, and environmental studies as well as the Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication English degree emphasis. This requirement meant the course gender demographic skewed toward male-identifying students, with racial demographics roughly reflecting Boise State's general population.

In this class, Jenn asked students to think about the impacts of lived experiences and identities (such as race and gender) on their communication, particularly in team settings. Furthermore, students proposed and researched topics for a collaborative proposal, report, and presentation that incorporated an element of diversity and inclusion. This requirement meant they had to focus on those who might be excluded, such as first-generation college students, lower-income students, or students who may not see themselves represented in curriculum. Jenn also used contract grading, which provided an assessment approach linking technical communication with social justice, particularly since contract grading may give students more agency to take risks, try new approaches, and engage in authentic learning experiences.

In addition, the contract grading approach aligned with feminist approaches. Calling on Erin Frost's (2016) theory of apparent feminism, Jenn relies on pedagogical and ideological approaches to make apparent how technical communication practices are aligned with feminist aims. Frost discusses how apparent feminism asks communicators to redefine efficiency to focus on the impacts on human lives instead of only accounting for time and money in order to understand users in more complex ways and to work toward social justice. Her argument is that efforts can be aligned with feminism, even if they aren't explicitly feminist (Frost, 2016). In this vein, contract grading operates to disrupt what might be understood as masculine modes of achievement that use grading to rank and categorize students. Contract grading also forces instructors to understand the user—our students—in a more complex way than simply effective or ineffective writers or as passive recipients of instruction. Instead, it acknowledges their past

experiences and knowledge they bring with them to the classroom and creates an evaluation approach that supports each student's own path to learning, while disrupting White, masculine concepts of achievement, rigor, and evaluation.

What follows is our reflection on contract grading based on our experiences in the context of a technical communication classroom. In this reflection, we discuss the course and disciplinary context, student perceptions and attitudes, and contact grading's impacts on us as teacher and student. Rather than communicating findings from an empirical study, we focus on our lived experiences to examine how contract grading functioned specifically within a technical communication classroom setting. We hope that our reflection here can lead to more work on the impacts of contract grading in technical communication in connection with the field's social justice turn.

What Is the Context We Taught and Learned in?

Jenn: Introduction to Technical Communication is taken by students from a range of majors, many STEM-based. Like many writing classes, the course can be a foundation for writing skills that will benefit students in upper-level courses and/or the workplace, but it can also function as a gatekeeper as a required or pre-requisite course. Institutionally, we have found that students from vulnerable populations (first-generation, Pell-eligible) are more likely to withdraw from the class or earn a D/F, impeding their progress toward graduation. To support a range of students, particularly minoritized students in STEM and first-generation students, I used contract grading. The latest iteration I reflect on here is based on Danielewicz and Elbow's (2009) B contract approach, modified with materials from a colleague to incorporate Inoue's (2015) labor-based model.

I have used contract grading since Fall 2015 for this course. Each semester, my approaches have evolved as I reflect on past teaching experiences and my own commitments to social justice and feminism within technical communication. For instance, I went back to traditional assessment practices when I first started teaching online in Spring 2016, but in Spring 2019, I no longer could justify *not* using contract grading, particularly when confronted with Inoue's arguments about how assessment is often used to shore up White language supremacy (Inoue, 2019). Thus, I returned to contract grading in the online course, informed by approaches used in my institution's first-year writing program. When I submitted final grades in Spring 2019, I realized I had begun to shift to a labor-based model (Inoue, 2015), which bases letter grades on the labor students perform rather than shifting standards about what constitutes A- or B-level writing. I had initially attempted to evaluate the students as writers (are they an A or B writer?) but then focused on if the students met the guidelines I had laid out for how to earn an A or a B based on completion of homework assignments, active participation, and substantive revising and reflecting. Ultimately, a student earned an A if she was committed to the course, demonstrated a willingness to use feedback and to revise substantively to address her audience's needs, and was engaged in active learning, even if her final written products may have earned lower than an A under my previous evaluation criteria. I ended that semester with the realization that, by using labor-based contract grading, I could support students with clear feedback and demonstrate their effort and learning (the process) were truly more important than the products. This approach also meant that, instead of justifying a letter grade, my comments focused on how the writer could be more effective within the technical communication discourse community and how their development as a writer within and outside of technical communication is a process that should extend beyond this course.

Amanda: As a student in rhetoric and composition, I've seen many of my instructors shift from traditional grading toward more progressive models meant to encourage growth and creativity. The first time I experienced contract grading, the reactions of my fellow students were mixed, with many students disliking the method. As someone who liked the approach, I was in the minority, but after transitioning from a traditional grading system, I felt this method was objective, with guidelines and expectations clearly outlined. In the other classes, I felt I had to go through trial and error to understand what type of writing my professor expected, but contract grading had a clear set of expectations from the beginning. I experienced contract grading for a second time in Introduction to Technical Communication, which I took online. This was my first experience with technical communication, and I was initially hesitant about the field. As a student of color, I have a lot of interest in social justice, and most of my research and classwork has focused on that. Without a clear understanding of what technical communication was, I thought the field mostly focused on genres like science and technology writing without a vested interest in social justice.

In Introduction to Technical Communication, the guidelines for the contract were similar to my first experience, but the online layout made it even easier to understand course requirements and evaluation criteria. The instructor, Jenn, used a table to outline expectations, and from that table, students could decide which grade category they wanted to complete. At the beginning of the class, I signed a contract that indicated I was aiming for an A, and I had clear guidelines of what to do to earn that grade. For example, I knew I would have to complete all of my assignments and do substantial revision on at least two major projects from the class. In both experiences, rather than going through trial and error to discover course expectations, I had clear guidelines for how to proceed right away. Because of the contract, I knew I would have the opportunity to do substantial revision and get instructor feedback. This was reinforced by frequent check-ins with Jenn throughout both the writing and revising process. Overall, the contract gave me a clear outline of what steps I would have to take to earn the grade I wanted.

Additionally, even though the course was online, I had many opportunities to meet with Jenn and discuss my progress, which helped me to understand the content even as I initially struggled with it. We had five major assignments in the class: a resume and cover

letter, a document analysis, a project proposal, a recommendation report, and a final portfolio. For each of these assignments, we had the opportunity to send Jenn a rough draft to get initial feedback. For the first assignment, this meeting was required but became optional for subsequent assignments. Even after it became optional, I decided to meet with Jenn before turning in each assignment because I could check in, make sure I was meeting assignment requirements, and see what changes I could make. Even after we turned in our final draft, Jenn gave us more feedback that we could use to meet revision requirements for the end of the semester.

By the time I finished each project, I knew there were still revisions I could make. Even if I wasn't happy with my final product, I was able to make changes for my final portfolio. Additionally, even after we had turned in our final product, Jenn frequently had times available so we could meet with her and talk about revisions. In tandem with the contract, these meetings emphasized constant learning. Instead of feeling like I had to grasp the concepts immediately to receive a good grade, I realized that understanding technical communication would be an ongoing process. This was reinforced by the contract, which prioritized the revision process and labor over the end product.

How Did Students Experience Contract Grading in Technical Communication?

Jenn: As I've taught technical communication, I've realized students in the class may arrive with particular attitudes about writing in these spaces, reflective of the ways technical communication is viewed as neutral. They may view their work as communicating reality through objective language. They may also have little patience for assignments or projects that don't seem immediately applicable to their majors or future careers as scientists or engineers. Some students resisted my attempts to show how language contains bias, how communication disadvantages marginalized readers and writers, and how feminism can and should inform technical communication—these students simply couldn't see how these approaches would allow them to be better engineers, scientists, or members of organizations. One even thought I was accusing them of sexist attitudes. In the same vein, some students had mixed feelings about contract grading. Several students were resistant because they wanted to know how all their assignments added up to a score that would allow them to maintain their GPAs. While many mentioned that the contract was helpful to their learning, others felt the guidelines were somewhat unclear, and one felt that grades were completely arbitrary and up to my whims and biases. These valid criticisms reflect their experiences and their confusion because I didn't always explain this assessment approach clearly and perhaps was still caught in problematic mindsets about quality over labor and effort.

Because I came to see the conflict between what I said I valued and how I assessed student writing, I knew I needed to align my ideologies with my assessment practices. To pursue a more equitable classroom and disrupt the impacts of my own biases, I persisted with contract grading. In Spring 2019, to better communicate what was required for each grade (using principles for clear technical communication), I clarified the guidelines with a table modeled after the work of a colleague at Boise State, Dawn Shepherd, as well as added periodic student check-ins. These two tools helped students understand how the new grading system worked and gave them a clear path forward. While one student still felt the guidelines were unclear, generally students expressed that the contract helped them learn, and the course received high evaluations. In this class, most students accepted and found a way to also pursue the requirements to incorporate social justice into their collaborative reports, and the team project opened up space to begin to address how neutral understandings of the field obscure the lived experiences of individuals communicating, collaborating, or working in STEM fields. I also believe that contract grading prevented at least two students from earning a D, failing, or withdrawing from the class, and it allowed another student to withdraw early to avoid failing. While I will continue to revise my approaches, this class was my most successful online course, highlighting the advantages of contract grading to support both retention and student success.

Amanda: When I started at Boise State, I planned to focus on rhetoric and composition because it gave me space to explore theory and look at the world through a social justice lens. Introduction to Technical Communication was required for upper-division classes, but I wasn't very excited about it because, as I mentioned earlier, I thought technical communication would be a neutral field without room for social justice advocacy. Because I aim for As, I felt I would have to present work that was neutral and objective instead of work that aligned with my advocacy goals.

However, contract grading helped challenge my initial perceptions. Because of my previous experience with contract grading, I already understood how it's used to support students. By using the contract, Jenn showed me that she was already committed to social justice, which helped build trust immediately. Throughout the class, we also had frequent check-ins where we discussed our progress, and for one of the final projects we were required to pick a subject that featured an element of social justice. The check-ins, the project requirements, and the contract helped me feel empowered to propose a project focusing on representation (or lack of) in the English literature curriculum. Because the project was critical of the English department, I knew there was some risk in pursuing it. However, because of the structure of the class so far, I knew my instructor would be supportive of my work and grade based on content rather than individual bias or loyalty to the English department. Here, I was able to focus on a social justice-oriented project that aligned with my academic interests despite my initial perception that I wouldn't be able to.

Additionally, because this class was my first experience with technical communication, I sometimes struggled as I was introduced to the course concepts. In the beginning of the class, I frequently read about technical communication and imagined I grasped the

principles, but in practice I struggled to shake habits learned in other contexts. Because I aim for As and usually do well in my classes, this process was daunting because I didn't always feel like I was grasping the content as well as I normally would. For example, on my first assignment in the class, my resume and cover letter, I remember getting what felt like more feedback than I had ever received previously. At first, I took this as an indicator that I wasn't doing well, mostly because I wasn't used to receiving this much feedback on my writing, and I had grown to interpret lots of feedback as negative. However, by the end of the class, I understood that the amount of feedback I received was not necessarily associated with the grade that I would receive. Instead, because the contract emphasized revision, I knew the feedback I received would be important to my learning as I continued to revise. By the end of the semester, getting this feedback was one of my favorite parts of the class.

In addition, because the contract relied on frequent revision, I was able to adjust my work without fear that my initial mistakes would negatively impact my grade in the end. In other words, I knew I would have the opportunity to incorporate the feedback I was getting and show my learning. As a result, I was eventually able to step out of my comfort zone and start taking risks and working on more ambitious projects, like the team project focused on representation in the literature curriculum.

How Did Contract Grading Provide Space for Student Agency?

Jenn: Contract grading is a great fit in a course framed around social justice. It also potentially disrupts notions of technical communication as objective and neutral, supporting the ethos I want to create as an instructor. Essentially, if I communicate clearly why we are using contract grading to assess learning and to debunk ideas that any assessment practice is free from bias, I can also demonstrate how technical communication itself is deeply rooted in the surrounding culture and thus conveys biases, ideologies, and attitudes that the writers/readers hold. These two pieces are linked, and in future courses, I'll more overtly connect assessment and these perspectives. Moreover, contracts can grant students the agency needed to take risks and provide space to explore writing in connection to their identities because it supports effort and labor over "perfected" products. For future courses, I want to continue exploring how contract grading affects students, possibly better supporting transfer and future success. More research is needed in technical communication contexts linking assessment practices to pedagogy and how assessment can improve student learning experiences while disrupting their beliefs in neutral and objective communication.

Amanda: Without the written-in room for improvement in the contract, I would have been less willing to take risks. As a student of color, I am constantly aware that my identity might affect my college experience, especially at a predominantly White institution (PWI) in a conservative state. Luckily, in the English department, I've had more good experiences than bad, but I am still not always sure there will be space for me to explore topics that surround social justice and inclusivity without alienating a professor or risking my grade. This fear was heightened going into technical communication because of my initial perception of the field as neutral. However, the use of contract grading helped build trust with my professor, Jenn, because it highlighted her commitment to social justice and created opportunities for feedback and conversation. Before taking the class, I didn't imagine I would explore this field beyond this required course, but now I've begun to take more technical communication classes where I feel empowered to pursue projects that align with my goals and are motivated by social justice. Also, in the work I do outside of classes, and even in classes that aren't related to technical communication, I find myself constantly using the principles I learned to make writing and design choices and even to think about issues of accessibility. Despite my initial belief that I wouldn't enjoy technical communication, I now find that it's useful in a variety of settings and am always eager to continue building on the knowledge I gained in the introductory class.

Lessons Learned and Conclusion

Because contract grading is often unfamiliar to students and instructors, it requires adaptability from both. Over the past five years, Jenn has revised and adapted the contract to meet students' needs and to better align with her own learning. Based on our experiences, we offer lessons we learned that may make the transition smoother for instructors wanting to adapt contract grading into a technical communication setting. These strategies include spending time articulating why an instructor or course uses contract grading and allowing students to negotiate requirements, providing feedback on a range of work, and checking in with student understanding.

First, instructors wanting to use contract grading should clearly explain why this assessment practice works for the course content and context. In explaining the reasoning behind the approach, instructors can detail what students can expect from instructors and what the instructor expects from students, which can help students see how assessment connects to course outcomes. For Amanda, clear explanation helped as she was first introduced to contract grading. Understanding the method also helped her understand what expectations she needed to meet and how contract grading was grounded in social justice. As part of this discussion, instructors should be willing to negotiate or adjust contract terms based on student feedback or instructor assessment of what's happening in the class, such as if the number of allowed missed weekly assignments seems too low, as Jenn found in Spring 2019. Jenn plans to more clearly offer students a chance to weigh in and negotiate the contract terms in future courses to actively invite students to engage with and understand the course's assessment practices.

In the class itself, students need time to process how contract grading differs from the assessments they are most familiar with. They

may be puzzled when their major projects don't receive grades, which leads them to feel uncertain about what their final grade might be. To support students, an instructor should provide lots of feedback, both verbal and written, on a range of assignments. This feedback reassures students they are on the right track and helps them learn what might be unfamiliar material, particularly in technical communication. In addition, instructors can check in with student understanding of the contract periodically, starting with a clear explanation at the start and asking students to explain the contract in their own words. Students can then reflect on how they are meeting the terms of the contract periodically throughout the semester and set goals for how they can continue to do so. For example, when Amanda was initially concerned about the amount of comments she received, check-ins helped her understand what to do with the feedback and what her next steps were to succeed in the class.

For both students and faculty, a new approach to assessment requires rethinking teaching and learning philosophies. In technical communication specifically, the standards for success are often narrower as the genres and expectations may seem more constrained than in a first-year writing setting. However, contract grading can encourage students to have agency over their own learning because they can see a path for success as they use what might be new standards of writing. Contracts thus offer the potential to reduce barriers and increase student agency in a course that supports their academic and professional success, and it can help them understand the power of the field for social justice and advocacy.

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