Review of Asao B. Inoue's Cripping Labor-Based Grading for More Equity in Literacy Courses

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Inoue, A. B. (2024). *Cripping Labor-Based Grading for More Equity in Literacy Courses.* The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. Retrieved from https://wacclearinghouse.org/books/practice/cripping/.

The first time I gave feedback on student writing I froze, disarmed by what I now know is a common question: How do I know I'm assessing *the right way*? I tested rubrics, weighted point scales, portfolio grading, and more, but most systems felt like justifying my quality judgements about student writing in support of what I didn't yet know to call "habits of white language" (Inoue, 2021). Teacher-scholars inside and outside our discipline have repeatedly acknowledged this problem in critiques of writing assessment practices (Butler, Casmier, Flores, et al., 1974; Kohn, 2006; Kynard, 2008, 2013; Baker-Bell, Williams-Farrier, Jackson, et al., 2020; Blum, 2020; Stommel, 2020).

In 2019, I read Asao Inoue's *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*. Inoue offered Labor-Based Grading (LBG) as a tool to value the work students do over the "quality" of their written products. LBG relies on *completeness*, measured through word requirements and clear labor instructions. Students use labor logs and reflective writing to assign value to their work, and instructors focus on feedback to guide students through the process. When I began using LBG, students repeatedly impressed me with their investments in process, experimentation, feedback, and revision.

In 2024, Inoue wrote *Cripping Labor-Based Grading for More Equity in Literacy Courses*, a monograph responding to disciplinary conversations and critiques of LBG. In this text, Inoue engages with disability studies to create a theoretical framework that accounts for the biases inherent in quantifying labor and time and models more flexible, intersectional heuristics for writing assessment.

In Chapters 1-3, Inoue incorporates insights from disability studies. Chapter 1 explores claims that LBG advances ableist and neurotypical performance expectations and disadvantages learners who don't (or can't) fit. For Inoue, this is an opportunity to improve how LBG foregrounds *completeness* over *quality*. In Chapter 2, Inoue creates an intersectional definition of disability that allows more students to succeed by reconstituting labor and its measurements. Finally, he explores how "crip time" changes labor. Referencing Margaret Price, Tara Wood, and Allison Kafer, Inoue (2024) explains crip time as "a reorientation to time" (p. 18) that asks us to

be “more capacious” and “more generous” (p. 19) in understanding what successful processes and outcomes look like. He defines *crip labor* as labor that “considers the ability to labor as universal but flexible, open-ended in terms of what it looks like, feels like, or is expected to be or produce” (Inoue, 2024, p. 22). This definition challenges notions of student progress that disadvantage marginalized learners.

Chapters 4 and 10 respond to Ellen Carillo’s *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading*. Chapter 4 discusses the critique that labor is construed as “neutral and quantifiable” (Inoue, 2024, p. 25). Inoue agrees that without a definition of disability to structure labor expectations, this is a risk. However, reflection and metacognition are critical “talk-back” moments; through reflection, Inoue (2024) understands “[w]hat labor means to a student” and thereby “the success or effectiveness of the ecology” (p. 27). Critically, *only a student can articulate this meaning*. Chapter 10 examines Engagement Based Grading (EBG), Carillo’s alternative. EBG centers how students engage with a course: students choose how to labor and instructors assess their choices. However, making sure students *know how to choose* is an equity issue (Inoue, 2024, pp. 99-101). Further, “engagement” is a problematic standard given the difficulty of measuring a phenomenological experience (Inoue, 2024, p. 75).

Chapters 5-9 respond to other critiques. Particularly important is Inoue’s (2024) attention to contract negotiations in Chapter 5, comparing “forced intimacy” (p. 33) and “access intimacy” (p. 34). Disability justice activist Mia Mingus (2021) defines access intimacy as “that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs” (para. 4). Access intimacy is *not* “charity, resentfulness enacted, intimidation, a humiliating trade for survival or an ego boost” (Mingus, 2021, para. 9). Access intimacy sees contract negotiations as complex, engaged, and relational, not fill-in-the-blank exercises.

Chapters 6 and 9 explore quantitative measures of labor and affective attachment to grades. Inoue (2024) reminds us of Peter Elbow’s warning about “a deep hunger to rank” (p. 87) in writing classrooms. Ranking promotes “racist culture and White supremacist discourse,” using allegedly neutral measures to decide “who is ‘better,’ who is more valuable, who is more deserving” (Inoue, 2024, p. 87-88). However, removing these standards may disadvantage neurodivergent students who rely on structure and predictability to learn. We must *replace* grades as the structural support for courses; flexible measures are especially critical. For example, time estimates in LBG should strive for “reasonable accuracy”*while* clarifying that labor looks different for different students (Inoue, 2024, p. 45).

Chapters 7 and 8 explore how hidden quality judgements become implicit in labor standards and how to redirect biases in grading ecologies. Biases accumulate in rigid time and labor expectations, which disadvantage a wide variety of students. “[I]nherently neutral measures” (p. 56) do not exist – measures of labor are *not* an “accounting system” (p. 75) or surveillance practice (Inoue, 2024). Rather, labor practices are negotiated with student input. In turn, formative feedback should “offer the teacher’s experiences of the student’s written work for their benefit” (Inoue, 2024, p. 78). Feedback *should not* “justify a grade,” “determine completion of

[an] assignment," "substantiate any decision about an assignment," or "articulate future quality or labor expectations" (Inoue, 2024, p. 78).

To close, Inoue gives suggestions for revising LBG ecologies. First, he writes, "[t]he highest grade possible should simply be the default grade in the contract" (Inoue, 2024, p. 81). Open access to an A increases equity for *all* students in the classroom. Chapter 11 is particularly helpful for experienced LBG practitioners as a checklist for retooling LBG assessment. Teachers interested in trying LBG should read this book after Inoue's (2019) introduction. The appendices provide updated sample documents critical for setting the scope and tone of contract negotiations at the outset of a course.

Ultimately, Inoue's book reminds us of our duty to continue asking hard questions about assessment. No standards are neutral – approaching equitable writing assessment requires intersectional framing, regular critical reflection, and thoughtful revision.

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