# CONTRACT GRADING AND PEER REVIEW

*Christina Katopodis and Cathy N. Davidson*

A new batch of students sits in your classroom on the first day of the semester, quietly reading over your syllabus while you talk them through it. They are wondering, "How do I get an A in this class?" This is the first-day-of-school ritual we all have repeated, year after year. It's what we knew when we were sitting in those desks long ago, when we were students. It's what our students now expect from a college class.[1]

Now imagine a different scenario: you begin by looking students in the eyes, and you ask them, "What is success in this class for you? And how can I help you achieve it?" By asking these questions at the start of the class, an instructor offers students an opportunity to think about why they are taking a course and what constitutes success. Students may not know how to answer these questions at first because in all likelihood they have never been asked such questions *before* a class begins—or ever. We front-load our courses with a commitment to student success, as students define success for themselves, rather than asking too late, "How can I help?"

Questions like these, asked at the outset, shatter old habits and expectations, turn the future into a blank canvas, and give students autonomy within the safe structure of a classroom. Students *need* to practice and exercise autonomy in higher education before they enter a

significantly less structured world outside the academy. Asking students
to determine success for themselves, and to carefully review and agree
to a contract as members of a community, affords them an opportunity
to practice self-determination—one of the most important qualities a
self-reliant adult needs in any career path or community.

Our purpose in discussing our ungrading and peer review methods
is to offer others step-by-step advice about the thinking, methods, as-
sumptions, and practical choices that go into redesigning classroom
assessment inspired by equality, not oppression (to use Paulo Freire's
famous terminology).[2] A pedagogy of equality aims to support and
inspire the greatest possible student success, creativity, individuality,
and achievement, rather than more traditional hierarchies organized
around a priori standards of selectivity, credentialing, standardization,
ranking, and the status quo.

That, of course, is the most binary way of framing the redesigned
student-centered classroom. However, in the real world in which most
students live, if they are paying tuition, they also want something more
concrete than a sense of their own learning: they want some formal, in-
stitutional recognition of the effort they have invested in their learning.
(Otherwise, why not just learn from a friend or from a book or online?)

That is where contract grading and peer evaluation come in. To us
they are expansive alternatives to conventional grading, while still offer-
ing students a meaningful, documentable, and responsible credentialed
form of credit for learning attainments. Thus contract grading is both
an idealistic, student-centered way of writing one's own learning goals
and a better alternative to conventional grading and credentialing. By
adding the peer review component, contract grading is also an act of
community.

## INSTITUTIONAL MATTERS

Our first rule for contract grading: talk to your registrar's office first.
Some colleges and universities do not allow it. Always make sure what
you are doing meets the formal rules of your institution. Institutions
are "mobilizing networks."[3] They offer places of organization, activism,
networking, and support. They also come with their own restrictions

and rules, and you have to learn to work around and with them. There's no right way to implement contract grading and peer evaluation—both can take on many forms in classrooms with varying student bodies and teaching styles, which is why we offer more than one adaptable example and template at the end of this chapter.

Institution and level don't matter, in our experience. We believe contract grading, combined with peer review, works well at any kind of institution and with any level of course. We've observed it used exceptionally well in a highly diverse middle school class with a number of students with learning and attention issues, for example.[4] Cathy Davidson has used it in classes primarily at Duke University, and Christina Katopodis has used it in classes from first-year writing to advanced English courses for majors in her experience teaching across three very different campuses, at Tallahassee Community College, New Jersey City University, and Hunter College, CUNY.

Size *may* matter: we don't personally know whether it does, but it may. We have never used contract grading in a course where we have had more than thirty students.

## WHY—AGAIN. NEVER FORGET THE WHY.

Problems that arise are not with the level of students or the kinds of institutions but with institutional requirements. We have found that students respond to the challenge of taking their own learning seriously if they believe the instructor takes that challenge seriously, consistently, and for a reason: always explaining why is hugely important when you are changing the status quo.

One why is to prevent alienating students from their own education. In the words of Ira Shor, "Alienation in school is the number one learning problem, depressing academic performance and elevating student resistance."[5] Another why is to educate as a practice of freedom. According to bell hooks, "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin."[6]

Once you know your why, the next step is incorporating the most important part of learning into your curriculum: metacognitive reflections

about the activities themselves. *Metacognition* is the professional term for thinking about how we think—and we know that metacognition, like group and peer learning, helps students to learn better. It gives them the tools for and a sense of control over their own learning. Students need to hear how a lesson or skill set applies elsewhere; they need us to pull up the drapes and show the scaffolding at work in our lesson plans. The scaffolding behind an activity is not readily visible, not even to experienced pedagogues, without holding the blueprints in hand to understand *why* something works. Knowing an activity's purpose is crucial to learning its biggest takeaways.

## TWO MODELS OF UNGRADING

### Model I. Contract Grading for Twenty-First-Century Literacies

Rather than a hypothetical contract grade, below you will find an actual contract for A, B, C, D, and F grades that Davidson used in a course called Twenty-First Century Literacies. She hesitated even to write in a failure clause but in the end did so, reverting to professorial judgment since failure is a breach of contract, in essence.

Students contracted for A, B, and C grades in the course. The C student explained that he was competing in a major athletic competition and had a leading role in a play that semester; he said he didn't need a higher grade for his GPA, and yet very much wanted to be in the course. Contracting for the lowest grade he had ever earned allowed him to take a class that, unfortunately, our institution had not allowed to be offered as pass-fail. This was an advantage of contract grading that was surprising, and yet another benefit.

Giving students more autonomy is *not* about cutting corners—not for us, not for them. Equality must be thoughtfully structured into a classroom.[7] Experiment with the model below as a template to start with, and then take some time to make it your own. That is, after all, some of what we mean by peer-to-peer learning, acknowledging that none of us is ever entirely independent in our thinking, however original we may think ourselves to be.

## A Note on the Badging Method for Judging Satisfactory Work

Before you read the model below, the peer evaluation methods used in this specific course need some contextualization and elaboration.[8] While contract grading sets up how much work one wants to do, peer evaluation establishes parameters for what might constitute satisfactory work and gives students responsibility for determining what does or does not constitute the satisfactory completion of a contract. The terms for peer evaluation should be structured as carefully as contract grading. The first step is for students themselves to determine the categories for judging. One such method is peer badging, a system of recognition for satisfactory work originally developed by open-source computer coders in the 1990s, who often worked together anonymously online yet needed a way of evaluating and praising one another in order to facilitate collaborations, including with new partners. Now badging is more commonplace—for example, it is used in systems such as Lyft or Uber where passengers can commend drivers for such attributes as good navigation, friendliness, a clean car, or fun conversation. In a classroom, students might discuss what they consider to be most important in a project and then define categories for evaluation accordingly, such as depth of research, originality of thesis or argument, persuasiveness, clarity of the writing, examples, application, and the significance of the project. Students know in advance that they will be reading work by their peers with these categories in mind and that their own work will be read in the same way.

An important feature of badging is that students are not required to give negative grades; they simply award a badge when they admire someone's work in that category. One effective way of badging is for, say, three students to read the same paper or project independently and award badges. Then the writer sees the aggregated results. If, for example, three peers have awarded them badges for depth of research but none for examples, the student very clearly sees they need to add examples, and so forth. This method works for individuals and also for teams. In group or team projects, badges might be awarded for such contributions to the group as leadership, implementation, creativity, and other characterological and management practices essential for good collaboration.[9]

In the model below, you will see that students determined whether their peers' work was Satisfactory, earning them full credit for the assignment, or Unsatisfactory, meaning that students believed the work required substantial revision in order to obtain credit. A badge system offers more detailed feedback to supplement this ungrading method and allows students to communicate to one another what's working and what needs improvement. It is at this point that, in Davidson's classes (as in the model below), the instructor uses the badges as well as discussion among peers (those who evaluate the project and the person who wrote it) to devise suggestions for how to improve the paper and bring it up to the "acceptable" standards of the group. Evaluation is a complex process and a life skill, yet it is almost never taught in higher education, even in management programs where giving and receiving feedback and taking a project to the next iteration are essential.

## Twenty-First-Century Literacies: Syllabus Description of the Course's Contract Grading

You determine your grade for this course by fulfilling a contract that spells out in advance the requirements as well as the penalties for not fulfilling the terms of your contract. Peer evaluation comes in when students charged with leading a unit assess (as Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory) how well their classmates fulfill the assignments.

Peer leaders for the given unit will work with the other students in this class, giving feedback to each student and working to achieve an S grade. If a student fails to submit an assignment or does not submit a satisfactory revision after receiving careful feedback, the peer leader will record a U grade for that assignment. (The same method will work on assignments graded by the professor.) Every student will be in a position of peer grader (working with two students at a time) once during this semester. Learning together, giving and receiving feedback, is a subject we will discuss in depth. *It is the single most valuable life skill you can take away from this course.*

## CONTRACT GRADING

The advantage of contract grading is that you, the student, decide how much work you wish to do this semester. If you complete your work on time and satisfactorily, you will receive the grade for which you contracted. This means planning ahead, thinking about all of your obligations and responsibilities this semester, and also determining what grade you want or need in this course.

The advantage of contract grading to the professor is no whining, no special pleading, on the student's part. If you complete the work you contracted for, you get the grade. Done. I respect the student who only needs a C, who has other obligations that preclude doing all of the requirements to earn an A in the course, and who contracts for the C and carries out the contract perfectly. *(This is another one of those major life skills: taking responsibility for your own project management and workflow.)*

## GRADE CALCULATING

At our second class session, each student will sign, with a classmate as a witness, a contract for a grade. I will countersign, and we will each keep a copy of your contract. In addition, you will be given an individualized online and physical grade reporting sheet. You will be responsible for maintaining these in an accurate way.

There are only two grades for any assignment: Satisfactory and Unsatisfactory. Satisfactory is full credit. Unsatisfactory (poor quality, late, or not submitted) is no credit. At the end of the course, we tally. If you fail to do a contracted assignment or your peers do not deem your work satisfactory, you will receive the appropriate grade as spelled out in the contract.

Peers (details below) who are in charge of leading a class unit will determine if the blogs or other assignments posted each week are satisfactory. If not, they will give extensive and thoughtful feedback for improvement with the aim of collaborating toward satisfactory work. The goal is for everyone to produce satisfactory

work (no matter what quantity one has contracted for). Our peer leaders will work with students to achieve that goal.

Basically the contract specifies the *quantity* of satisfactory work a student promises to complete during the term. *Quality* is determined by one's peers—with the goal that peers offer feedback to ensure that every assignment eventually meets the *quality* goal of a satisfactory assignment.

## REQUIREMENTS FOR A GRADE OF A

### (1) Class Attendance/Participation

Class attendance is required. If you contract for an A in the course, you may miss two classes (and the corresponding blog posts) without an official (doctor or preapproved) excuse. Penalty: If you have more than two unexcused absences, your grade for the entire class will automatically drop 0.5. If you miss four classes, it will drop 1.0, and so on.

If you are missing for a nonmedical/emergency reason, you have to have approval in advance and, at that time, state your plan for making up the missed work. You are still responsible for the readings and filing the weekly blog.

### (2) Weekly Blog or Equivalent Writing or Other Media Assignment (400–500 words)

Think of this as an evolving research paper. It has the same importance, weight, and seriousness. It will be on our class WordPress site, visible to all the other students and the instructor but not to the general public. There will be a comments section where you will receive feedback from the instructor, the other students, and the two or three students (*peer reviewers*) leading and assessing that particular unit.

Blogs must be completed by midnight the night before the class session. All students are required to read the blogs by their classmates before class and are encouraged to comment in writing as

well as in class discussion. Blogs are substantive, should use secondary sources where appropriate, and can use video, sound, images, and animation as well as text.

Penalty: If you are late and/or miss more than two blogs over the course of the semester, your grade will automatically drop by 0.5. If you miss or are late for four, it will drop by 1.0, and so on.

These blogs will not be visible beyond our class. Students may choose to reblog their work in a public place or on their own blogs (optional).

### (3) Collaborative, Peer-led Unit on a Selected Literacy

Students will work in teams of two (or, in some cases, three) and will be responsible for a literacy, a unit of work that will occupy us for two or sometimes (when there is a visitor or an event) three class sessions. Typically students will make a presentation, guide a reading, or conduct a field trip one class and then will do follow-up, with the help of the instructor, in the second class. *No talking heads please!* Think of ways to make your presentation as interactive, engaged, thoughtful, and inspiring as possible.

### (4) Public Contribution(s) to Knowledge

Each student is required to make two substantive contributions to a significant public resource such as Wikipedia. One contribution can be a detailed comment on a *New York Times* article or another major media outlet, including a significant blog post on the HASTAC site.

Penalty: Failure to make these two public contributions will result in an automatic 0.5 deduction from the total course grade.

### (5) Midterm Contribution to a Collaborative, Wiki-Based Midterm

In lieu of a traditional midterm exam, the class will, collectively and using a wiki, create a concise blog post tying together key lessons and insights about twenty-first-century literacies studied

in the first half of the class, will post the finished blog on the www.HASTAC.org website, and then will work on a social media campaign to draw attention to the blog through your own various social networks. The instructor will open the wiki with the challenge topic: What are twenty-first-century literacies? Students are invited to change the topic in the course of the online discussion. At the specified due date, the blog must be ready to be posted to www.HASTAC.org.

This is an exercise in collective thinking, leadership, and project management. Everyone must contribute, but remember our method in this course is "collaboration by difference," the HASTAC methodology based on open web development that we all have something in which we are excellent, and we do best by learning how to pool resources wisely. At the end of the assignment, you will need to let the instructor know what and how you contributed.

### (6) Final Collaborative Three-Minute Public Literacy Video

You will turn your work on your peer-led literacy unit into a video that will be hosted on the HASTAC YouTube channel and will be open to the public at large. The rough cuts will be viewed during the last week of class as a recap of the entire class and will receive feedback from the class, and then final versions must be submitted for uploading to the YouTube channel by final exam day.

### CONTRACT FOR A GRADE OF A

By signing this contract for an A in this class, I agree to all of the terms above.

### CONTRACT FOR A GRADE OF B

I wish to earn a grade of B in this class. To fulfill my contract for a grade of B, I will complete satisfactorily #1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 above. I will

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## CONTRACT FOR A GRADE OF C

I wish to earn a grade of C in this class. To fulfill my contract for a grade of C, I will complete satisfactorily #1, 2, 3, and 6 above. I will not miss more than six classes. If I do, I understand that my grade for the entire class will drop by 0.5 for each absence beyond that.

1. Your Contract Grade: _____
2. Your Name: _____
3. Signature: _____
4. Date: _____
5. Witness Name: _____
6. Witness Signature: _____
7. Date: _____
8. Co-signed by Instructor: _____
9. Date: _____

## A NOTE ON D AND F GRADES

The instructor reserves the right to award a grade of D or F to anyone who fails to meet a contractual obligation in a systematic way. A D grade denotes some minimal fulfilling of the contract. An F is absence of enough satisfactory work, as contracted, to warrant passing of the course. Both a D and F denote a breakdown of the contractual relationship implied by signing any of the contracts above.

### Epilogue

This story of contract grading has a surprise ending. Instead of a collaborative, public midterm and a three-minute digital literacy video, the students in Twenty-First-Century Literacies took charge of the class during a class period when the professor was out of town. When she

returned, they produced a full table of contents for a book and a new contract, insisting that all but one of the students would work for an A and an A meant a perfect, proofread, satisfactory, publishable chapter in a book that the students, collectively, would copyedit, design, and publish on HASTAC.org, on GitHub, and as a physical book available on Amazon.com. What was a progressive pedagogue to do? She threw out the original contract and, after many warnings that this was incredibly ambitious, allowed the students to write *Field Notes to Twenty-First Century Literacies: A Guide to New Theories, Methods and Practices for Open Peer Teaching and Learning*.[10] The landing page for this book has had nearly twenty thousand unique visitors. The introduction to the volume has had over ten thousand.

So that is the lesson of ungrading: once you create a structure where students can imagine themselves as large, authoritative, creative, and confident, be prepared—they may just take you seriously enough to achieve that optimistic and idealistic goal.

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### Model II. Collaborative Peer Evaluation

An American Literature: Origins to the Civil War course that Katopodis taught at Hunter College in fall 2018 was based on a wide variety of peer learning, colearning, and participatory practices. Students cocreated a syllabus, voting on how attendance should be taken, on a fair and just participation policy, and on learning outcomes based on their own goals for the semester. They also chose to receive feedback instead of grades on their reading reflections so they could focus on personal development, especially in critical thinking and clear writing, throughout the semester.

Another aspect of ungrading in this course was an exercise in self-evaluation before peer evaluation at the end of the semester. Although these evaluations were eventually used to inform students' individual and group participation grades, the grades were the least important part of the process. The evaluations guided students through thinking about assessment in sophisticated ways that allowed them to understand what it means to judge and to be judged and how

evaluation can lead
and humiliation.

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**Self- and Peer-**

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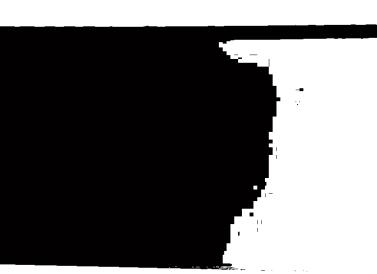evaluation can lead to excellence and confidence, not mortification and humiliation.

To move toward this deeper understanding of ungrading, Katopodis offered students a list of thought topics for their consideration in the forms below. These topics focus on student preparedness, group leadership, volunteerism, good listening, and other service qualities students can apply and improve on in the future.

### A Note on Static Groups

Throughout the semester, students worked in static groups (the same five to six students per group) during and outside of class time. Static groups operate more like teams: students learn one another's names, each student finds their role in the group based on their strengths, students help each other catch up on missed work, and absences impact group performance in class. The time spent with the same five to six students throughout the semester enables peers to give more detailed qualitative feedback in their evaluations. Another advantage to keeping students in consistent teams throughout the semester is that students are given more flexibility (one bad week is not enough to condemn a student when a good week can offset the bad); however, this model can also work for rotating groups if evaluations are given at the end of all projects. At the end of the semester in this particular class, students determined, through self- and peer evaluations, a recommended grade for themselves as well as for each of their group members—but only after they provided detailed, qualitative assessments of their work according to the forms below.

## Self- and Peer-Evaluation Form for American Literature: Origins to the Civil War

Take a moment to think about how you worked with your peers and how they worked with you this semester. Working in groups helps us practice listening and leadership skills as we organize different

points of view through effective communication to achieve common goals.

## SELF-EVALUATION

1. How prepared were you to work in groups? Did you complete the readings every time, most of the time, some of the time, or rarely?
2. Were you a good listener? Did you take your peers' opinions into account all of the time, most of the time, some of the time, or did you most often dominate the conversation?
3. Were you a good volunteer? Did you volunteer contributions to the conversation, take notes, or speak on behalf of your group to give the class a recap of what you talked about?
4. What else would you like to share about your participation? Feel free to share any of your reflections on your skills (what you feel strong about, what you would like to keep working on in the future) or notes about what happened this semester that may have prevented you from being an ideal group member. (Keep in mind that no one is perfect! We are all working on things and always getting better at what we set out to do!)
5. What grade do you think you earned for your participation in group work? (And if you feel that group work wasn't your strength, but you shared your notes in the collaborative notes Google Docs fairly frequently, take that valuable contribution into consideration too.)

These are the questions students answered for and about themselves. The form guides students in disassociating participation from talking to think instead about participation as both *service* and *leadership* within a democratic community. In the final and most complex evaluative action of the semester, students used these deep self-evaluations as a way of then evaluating one another. This process of self-scrutiny and self-discovery helped students to realize that judgment and feedback are not criticisms but the beginning of really learning. In addition, these

insights about themselves helped prepare students for evaluating their peers thoughtfully, generously, and fairly.

To aid students in evaluating one another (a task that takes real courage), Katopodis offered an abbreviated template that mimics the process above to help students present their evaluations of their peers in a pointed, succinct way. This template also affords students a structure within the classroom to help depersonalize their evaluations and make them part of the collective learning process of the class, even on the level of the method, format, and instrument through which it was presented.

Here is what that peer-evaluation template looked like.

### PEER EVALUATION

My peer, _____,

1. Was mostly PRESENT for class, 50/50, or mostly ABSENT? (circle one)
2. Read EVERY TIME, MOST TIMES, SOMETIMES, or RARELY? (circle one)
3. Was a good listener ALWAYS, MOSTLY, SOMETIMES, or NEVER? (circle one)
4. Was a good volunteer ALWAYS, MOSTLY, SOMETIMES, or NEVER? (circle one)
5. What else would you like to share about this group member's participation?
6. What grade do you think your peer earned for participation in group work?

### Epilogue

What the class discovered through this careful evaluation of their own evaluation practices confirms the research and scholarship on ungrading as a practice: conventional grading can be an obstacle to real learning as well as to developing one's own intellectual voice. Conversely, structured, responsible peer evaluation opens doors not just to learning but to self-discovery, community building, and collective action

and change. Scholars such as Peter Elbow, Asao B. Inoue, Alfie Kohn, Jeffrey Schinske, Jesse Stommel, and Kimberly Tanner have studied these practices extensively.[11]

However, the scholarly voice with which we will end this essay is that of the students themselves: "I received your class comments regarding our group work. I thought they were a supremely deft touch that shows your commitment to a democratic and connected classroom. I've never seen that sort of feedback before and think that every class should include introspection and positive critique of a student's ability to work together with others." Significant here is the student's commenting evaluatively on evaluation itself.

Similarly another student writes: "Thank you so much for your response and advice—I've never received such detailed advice from any professor/educator . . . before, so I wanted you to know I really appreciate it." This is the opposite of grade grubbing, of cringing and becoming defensive about feedback. The student has clearly come to understand response and advice not as criticism but as something powerful, helpful, and, sadly, unique.

In the end the students' evaluations of one another were so constructively and sensitively framed, serious, and sophisticated that the instructor, with permission, shared peer feedback anonymously with each student. Rather than ungrading being an exercise in teacherlessness (as its detractors so glibly assert), everyone in the course became a teacher, a coteacher and a colearner. Everyone in this course became, in the end, in the words of one student, "a real educator, not just a teacher."

## NOTES

1. Throughout this essay, the authors refer to themselves by both first and last names or last names only. This is strategic since research shows that female scholars (and professors) are typically referred to by their given names and male scholars by their family names. Like all of the seemingly arbitrary or simple aspects of teaching, there are values embedded in these practices. For a fuller discussion, see Savonick and Davidson [2015] 2018.
2. See Freire 1972.
3. Davidson and Goldberg 2010: 145.
4. Davidson 2012.
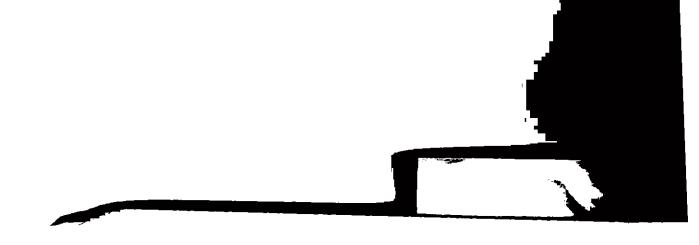
5. Shor 1987: 13.
6. hooks 1994: 13.
7. See Graduate Center Learning Collective 2017.
8. See Davidson 2019.
9. For further discussion, see Grant 2014.
10. The 21st Century Collective 2013.
11. See Elbow 1994; Inoue 2019; Kohn 2006; Schinske and Tanner 2014; Stommel 2018.

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