



Student Experiences with Labor-based Grading Contracts

Marina Ferro, Nicole Fernandez, Jean Carlo Picado,
Nikash Kale, Maya Hernandez, Gianna Depina, Jahnica Treadwell, & Jasmine Mena PhD



background info

Labor-based grading contracts (LBGC) reward students for the amount of labor they invest in a course separate from feedback about the quality of their work.

LBGCs Aims: To increase equity, foster student agency as learners, prize repeated and concerted effort, encourage cooperation over competition, and build mindful attention to learning and compassion as classroom norms (Inoue, 2019; Mena & Stevenson, 2022; Smith, 2024).

LBGCs Benefits: Reduce stress and anxiety, increase sense of control, and increase the standard of achievement (Ward, 2021a; Ward, 2021b).

Study Purpose: To understand psychology students' perceptions and experiences with LBGCs.

method

- Qualitative Description (Sandelowski, 2010).
- Semi-structured interview methodology.
- Recruited students who took a psychology course (in one liberal arts university) that used LBGCs in the previous semester.
- Interview questions informed by prior literature.
- Participation incentive: \$40.
- Data analysis conducted in Dedoose.



participants & researchers

- $N = 18^*$
- 44% Seniors, 39% Juniors, 11% Sophomores, & 6% Master's students.
- 78% GPAs over 3.59.
- 83% Women, 12% Men, & 6% Non-binary
- 56% White only, 44% Ethnoracial Minority Groups or Multiracial.

*10 included in preliminary analysis.

- The research team includes seven undergraduate students and one professor.
- All are academically high achieving scholars with experience with LBGCs as students or instructor.
- The team is diverse with respect to a broad range of identities.

course structure

- Student-centered and focused on effort, participation, collaboration, & revision of work.
- Some were hybridized: Part of the grade labor-based and another was conventional (e.g., exam scores).
- Approaches included quizzes, exams, essays, projects, reflections, discussions, and immediate feedback.
- Sometimes the volume of assignments felt like "busy work."

stress

- LBGCs courses were more welcoming (i.e., easier, clearer, collaborative, flexible) which allowed them to focus more on learning rather than stressing over a grade.
 - "I just think the security of knowing that if I truly do my best on this, I will succeed and do well."
- Students felt less stress and anxiety because there were various ways to boost grades; not only exams.

findings

learning

- Constructive feedback increased student motivation to learn and improved the quality of learning.
- Students felt more engaged and retained information better by focusing on "how" not only "what" they were learning.
 - "I think the focus on actually learning and putting in the work helped me learn more."

experiences

- LBGC courses motivated greater engagement with and retention of the learning material.
- Room for students to slack off; Unclear standard for effort; & when professors provided insufficient feedback, students were not able to gauge growth.
 - "It gives me more motivation to actually learn the topics that I want to learn rather than getting all the information that the teacher wants."

recommendations

- More descriptive feedback helped students improve their work.
 - "With feedback, I'm more likely to go back and engage with my previous work."
- Fewer assignments to better manage the turnaround time to provide feedback on assignments.

discussion

- Students felt more invested in their learning, more engaged, and less stressed and anxious.
- Feedback was crucial to learning, yet at times insufficient was provided by instructors.
- **Limitations** include self-selection (women, high GPAs) and unique community (liberal arts).

references



Contact: j.mena@bucknell.edu