

# Northwestern Reimagining Assessment Practicum



## **Core Session 2:**

When and where might we  
implement alternative  
grading strategies?

Veronica Berns, Lauri Dietz, and Reggie Jackson

# INTRODUCTIONS

In the Zoom chat, share

- Your name & pronouns
- Role & department
- 3 words that describe how you feel about grading.

Don't hit send/enter until we say "Go!"

# Participation Guidelines

- ✓ Assume **positive intent**, and take **accountability** for what you do and say.
- ✓ Be aware of your **assumptions**, **expectations**, and **judgements**.
- ✓ Choose the **best way to engage** for yourself, and **respect the choice that others make** to participate.
- ✓ Commit to **curiosity** over **certainty**.
- ✓ Identify your **learning edges** and push them.
- ✓ Embrace **discomfort** and **silence**.
- ✓ Listen **actively**.
- ✓ Monitor your **time**.
- ✓ Speak for **yourself** from your own experience and your own perspective.
- ✓ What is **said stays**; What is **learned leaves**.



Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching • 1h

## Reimagining Assessment Practicum (RAP) Feedback and Insights Board - 2023 Fall

INSTRUCTIONS: Please share your thoughts and feelings below. Please specify which Core Session or Recommended Session, if/when applicable. If you have a Padlet account and would like to remain anonymous, please log out of Padlet before posting. If you have a concern that requires immediate attention, please contact [practicum@northwestern.edu](mailto:practicum@northwestern.edu). | PURPOSE: The purpose of this Padlet is to collect formative feedback and insights about the practicum sessions for making decisions in the short- and long-term. This allows colleagues leading the practicum to easily access the information, address your needs, and make timely adjustments to the practicum structure and/or delivery as needed.

💡 A helpful, important, interesting, meaningful, and/or useful thing that I learned is \_\_\_\_.

+

? A question that I still have that needs addressing is \_\_\_\_.

+

👍👎 Do you have any specific feedback for any of the CORE SESSIONS? If so, please share below and specify which session.

+

👍👎 Do you have any specific feedback for any of the RECOMMENDED SESSIONS? If so, please share below and specify which session.

+

Add section

# Feedback and Insights Board



Melissa Ko, PhD (RAP Consultant)

<https://calendly.com/mesako/rap-consult>

# GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How can grades demotivate learning?
2. What are some assessment frameworks that decenter grading?
3. How might one or more alternative grading framework apply to your learning & teaching context?

# AGENDA

1. The Problems with Grades
2. Alternative Grading Frameworks
3. Contract Grading
4. Specifications Grading
5. Ungrading



# THE PROBLEMS WITH GRADES



Aggregate Learning &  
Non-learning Metrics  
(Construct Validity)



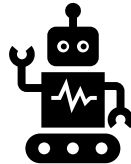
Discourage  
Experimentation &  
Risk-taking



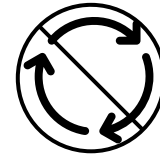
Limit Transferable &  
Lasting Learning



Reward Performance  
over Learning Gains

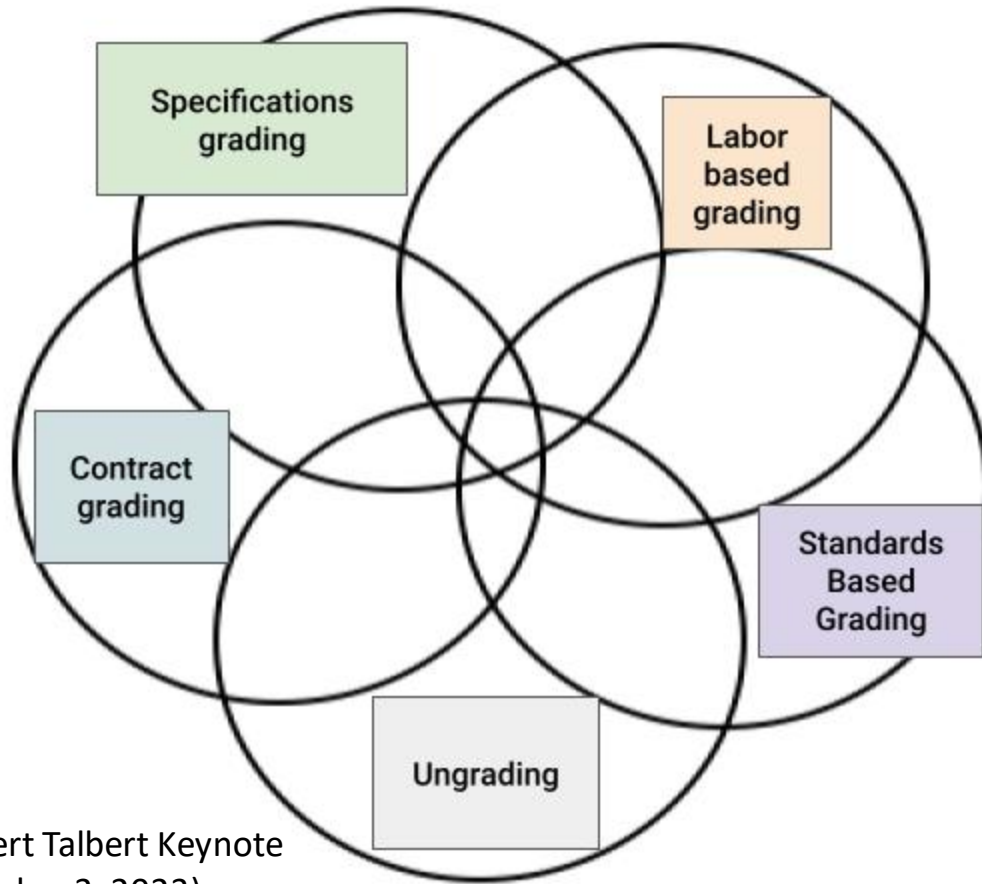


Increase Academic  
Integrity Transgressions



Stop the Continuous  
Improvement Process

# ALTERNATIVE GRADING FRAMEWORKS



Robert Talbert Keynote  
(October 3, 2023)

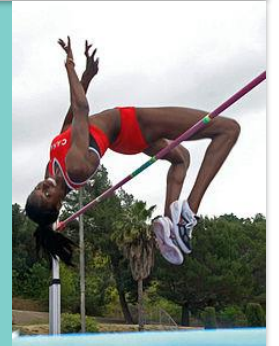
# ALTERNATIVE GRADING DECISIONS

Where do students demonstrate their learning?

Labor-based

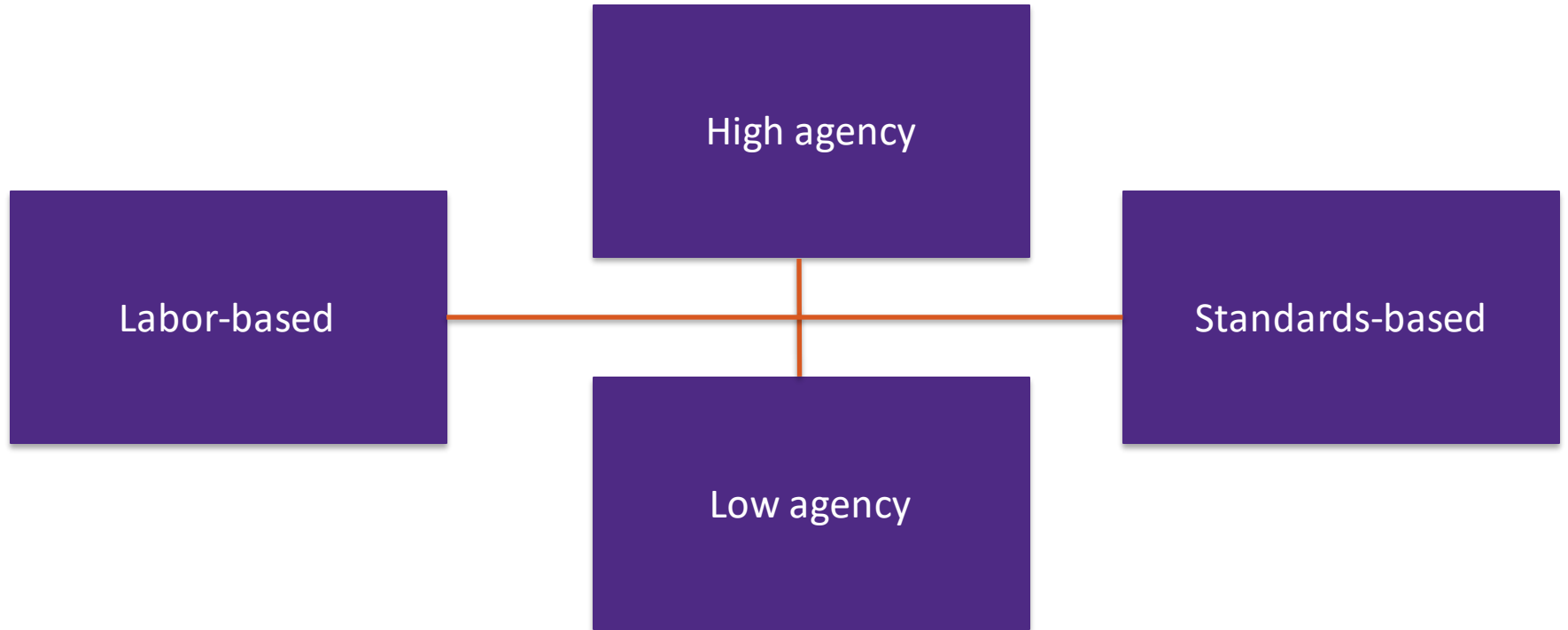


Standards-based



# ALTERNATIVE GRADING DECISIONS

What degree of agency do students have in the course?



# ALTERNATIVE GRADING **SANDBOX**



- **Start Small:** Experiment with one course component.
- **Mix & Match:** Combine approaches that work best for your discipline, students, and learning outcomes.

# Contract Grading

# CONTRACT GRADING

“[Grading contracts] seek to authorize students to take as much control over their lives as possible as individuals and as a community.”

(Danielewicz & Elbow, 2008)

# CONTRACT GRADING

## In Practice:

- Tasked-based grading framework that invites students to select what to complete based on their grade goals.
- Tasks are preset by the instructor, negotiated between student and instructor, and/or agreed upon by the class community.
- Final grades determined wholly by contract or supplemented with instructor or student evaluation of quality.

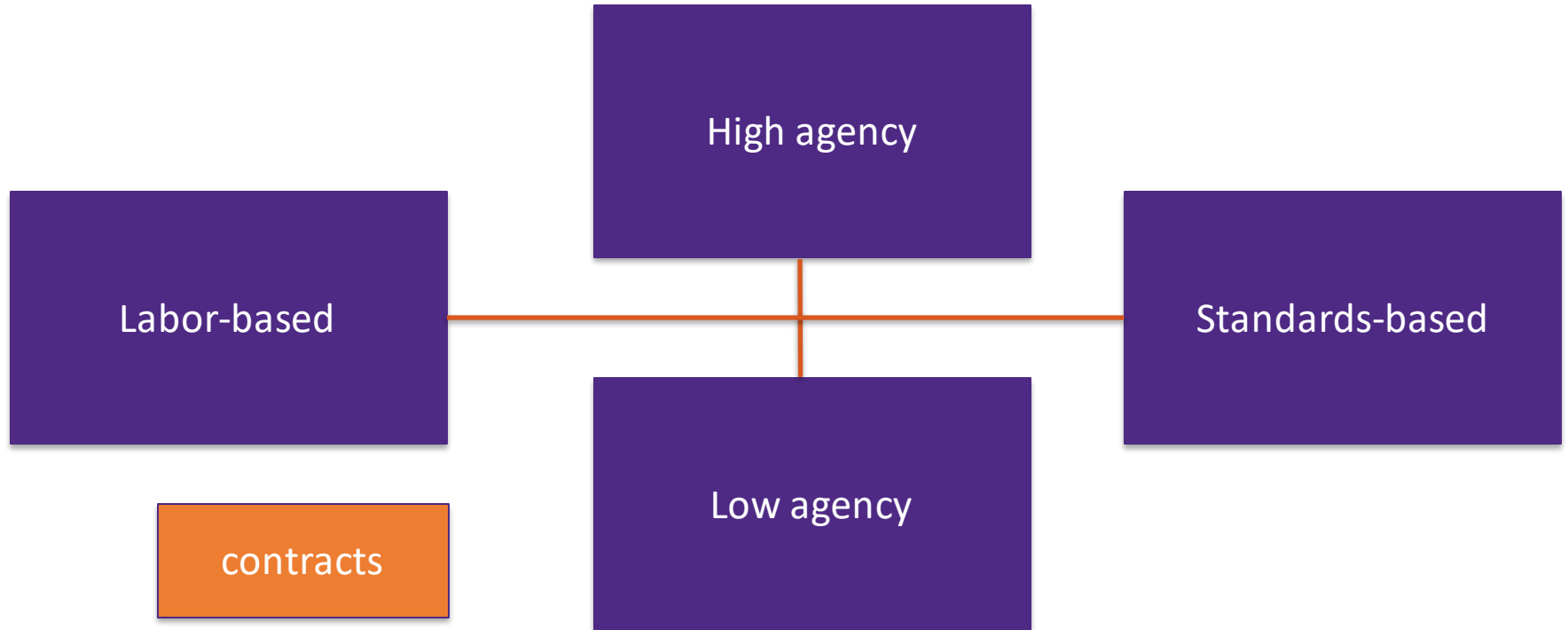


# LABOR-BASED GRADING

“[A labor-based contract] calculates final course grades purely by the labor students complete, not by any judgments of the quality of their writing.”

(Inoue, 2022)

# CASE STUDY: CONTRACT GRADING



# CASE STUDY



## Patti Wolter

Charles Deering McCormick  
Distinguished Clinical Professor & Helen  
Gurley Brown Magazine Professor  
Medill School of Journalism, Media &  
Integrated Marketing Communications

MAGAZINE EDITING, JOUR 311

- Concerned about importance of grades to undergrads
- Goals to lower pressure & focus on learning
- Taught graduate classes pass/fail for 12 years
- Believes in decoupling learning from grades

Research shows that giving standard letter grades impedes learning; it creates disincentives to experiment and instead rewards a focus on “doing it right for the professor” rather than critically examining ideas and principles. I want you to take risks, stumble, recover, and push yourself. I also have to assign grades at the end of the quarter. Thus, I am using this system of formative and summative assessments and the following grading scheme to aid in erasing the performative stress of grades while still rewarding excellent work. **This syllabus represents a contract** with you that emphasizes your commitment to putting in the **labor and effort** required to grow as an editor and editorial thinker.

# WOLTER'S FRAMING

# WOLTER'S CONTRACT

- You are guaranteed a minimum “B” grade if you:
  - Attend at least 17 of the 19 classes; Tuesday, Nov. 21 is mandatory.
  - Complete all summative assignments and receive a minimum grade of “B”
  - Complete/receive a “meets standards” grade (v) on 90% of formative assignments
  - Participate in at least 3 discussion board prompts
- You are guaranteed a minimum “A-” grade if you:
  - Attend all 19 classes (excused absences to be discussed with me); Tuesday, Nov. 21 is mandatory.
  - Complete all summative assignments with grades of B+ or higher; receive at least one “A-” grade on an individual assignment.
  - Complete all formative assignments. All “check-minus/ does not meet standards (v-)” grades *must be revised unless the instructor says otherwise.*
  - Participate in at least 3 discussion board prompts
- You are guaranteed an “A” grade if you:
  - Attend all 19 classes (excused absences to be discussed with me); Tuesday, Nov. 21 is mandatory.
  - Complete all summative assignments and receive an “A-” grade on at least three.
  - Complete all formative assignments. All “check-minus/ does not meet standards (v-)” grades *must be revised unless the instructor says otherwise..*
  - Participate in at least 5 discussion board prompts

# STUDENT RESPONSES

“The contract for a ‘B’ kept me enrolled.”

“Thanks for giving so much more feedback.”

# BREAKOUT DISCUSSION

In small groups, discuss and share

- Your names and teaching & learning contexts
- If you have implemented labor-based contract grading into a course, share what you did and how that went.
- **Thought Experiment:** If you have not tried labor-based contract grading before, what might that look like in your context?
  - Would you apply it to one aspect of the class (e.g., discussion grade) or to the course overall?
  - What would be the potential benefits for students and you?
  - What are some potential challenges and concerns?

You will work in the same groups for all three breakout discussions.

# Specifications Grading



# SPECIFICATIONS GRADING

“[Faculty] can set and enforce whatever expectations they can clearly articulate to their students and enable them to meet. **Specs Grading** provides the framework for doing this without raising the ire of students.”

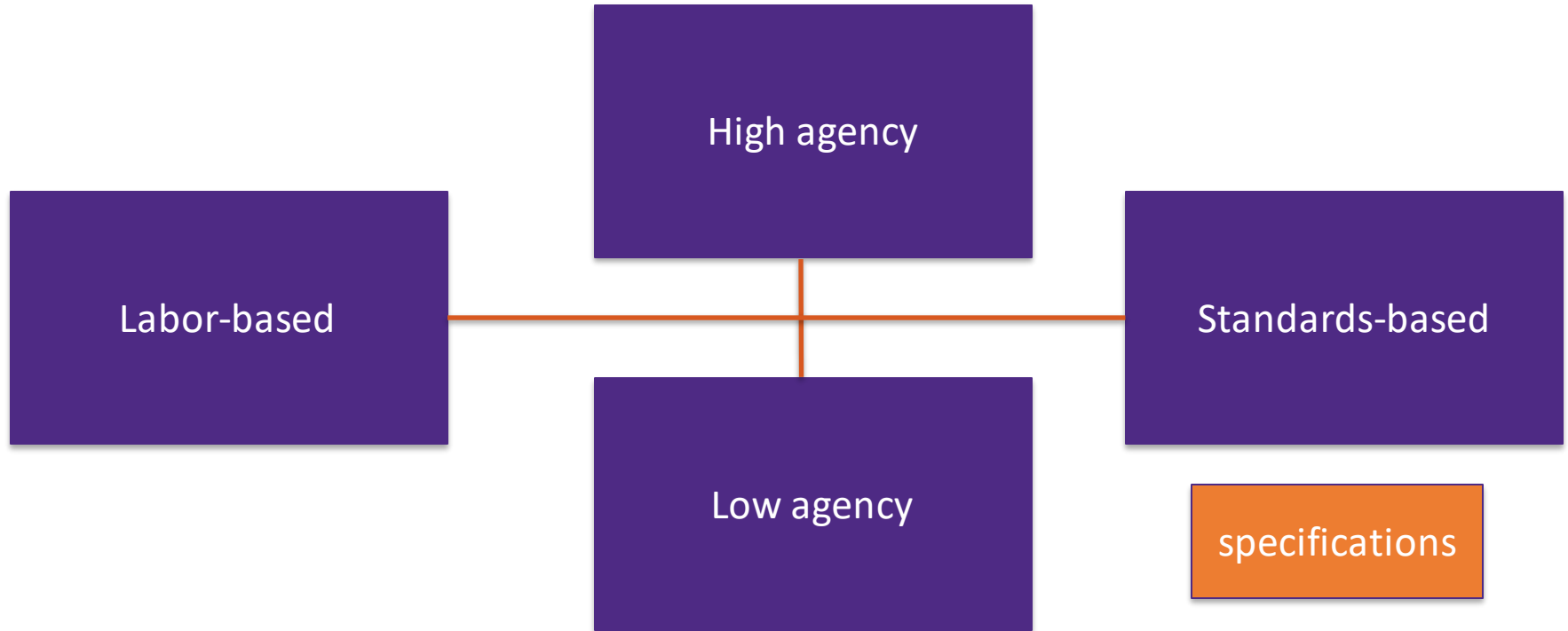
(Nillson, 2015)

# SPECIFICATIONS GRADING

## In Practice:

- Course is broken down into categories of achievement, transparently linked to learning objectives
- Within each category, goalposts are clearly defined for the student at the beginning of the course
  - i.e., Achievements needed for an A are outlined
- Student performance is compared to the pre-set goalposts and a grade is assigned accordingly
- Every student has the opportunity to make progress towards mastery of each specification individually

# CASE STUDY: SPECIFICATIONS GRADING



# CASE STUDY



## Katie Gesmundo

Assistant Professor of Instruction  
Co-Director, General Chemistry  
Laboratory  
Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences  
Chemistry

GENERAL CHEMISTRY LABORATORY,  
CHEM 161



## Veronica Berns

Associate Professor of Instruction  
Co-Director, General Chemistry  
Laboratory  
Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences,  
Chemistry

ADV. GENERAL CHEMISTRY  
LABORATORY, CHEM 181

# CASE STUDY

## What do we want students to get out of a lab course?

- Lab techniques
- Experimental design
- Concept reinforcement
- Data and error analysis skills
- Application of concepts beyond the course
- Science writing experience

### Element

*How to measure your progress*

### Safety and Techniques ☺

*Write E, G, or N for each*

### Experimental Design ☺

*Write E, G, or N for each*

### Presentation of Results ☺

*Write E, G, or N for each*

### Data Analysis ☺

*Write E, G, or N for each*

### Beyond the Course ☺

*Write E, G, or N for each*

### Writing Focus - Content ☺

*Write E, G, or N for each*

### Writing Focus - Style ☺

*Write E, G, or N for each*

# CASE STUDY

Specifications as categories that shape the assignments

Question type	Assignment number *			
	1/2	3/4	5/6	7/8
Safety and Techniques				
Experimental Design				
Presentation of Results				
Data Analysis				
Beyond the Course				
Writing Focus - Content				
Writing Focus - Style				

Empty boxes for students to fill in their "grades" for each assignment

# CASE STUDY

TAs execute the grading

Clear communication of expectations is necessary on many levels!

Exceptional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>★ Describes the purpose of the experiment<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Details from experiment are included</li></ul></li><li>★ Compares the low temperature trial to the high temperature trial<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Connects their data to a generalized rule about heat in the experiment</li></ul></li><li>★ Explains that temperature trials are key to understanding the kinetics of the experiment, and without this design consideration we cannot write a mechanism for the reaction<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Includes a mention of error due to imperfect insulation of the reaction vessel</li><li>○ Explains that the experimenter had to measure the concentration of the solution *</li><li>○ Explains that temperature trials would not be needed if we were already certain of the order of the reaction</li></ul></li></ul> <p>For this question, Exceptional spec can be made with 4 of 5 ○ included</p>
Complete	<p>All top-level ★ specifications are met</p> <p>Only 1, 2, or 3 of 5 ○ included</p> <p><i>*If the student does not mention that a concentration measurement was needed, they can only <b>Complete</b> the question. They <b>cannot</b> get an <b>Exceptional</b>.</i></p>
Incomplete	Does not meet all ★ specifications

Element	Assignment number *				My total...			matches letter...	Minimum requirement
	1/2	3/4	5/6	7/8					
<i>How to measure your progress</i>									
<b>Safety and Techniques</b>	G	G	E	E	2	2	0	B	*See postlab Sheet
<i>Write E, G, or N for each</i>									
	Total E's			Total G's		Total N's			
<b>Experimental Design</b>	E	N	E	E	3	0	1	A	
<i>Write E, G, or N for each</i>									
	Total E's			Total G's		Total N's			
<b>Presentation of Results</b>	G	E	E	G	2	2	0	B	
<i>Write E, G, or N for each</i>									
	Total E's			Total G's		Total N's			
<b>Data Analysis</b>	E	G	E	G	2	2	0	B	
<i>Write E, G, or N for each</i>									
	Total E's			Total G's		Total N's			
<b>Beyond the Course</b>	G	G	G	G	0	4	0	C	
<i>Write E, G, or N for each</i>									
	Total E's			Total G's		Total N's			
<b>Writing Focus - Content</b>	E	E	N	E	3	0	1	A	
<i>Write E, G, or N for each</i>									
	Total E's			Total G's		Total N's			
<b>Writing Focus - Style</b>	G	G	N	E	1	2	1	C	
<i>Write E, G, or N for each</i>									
	Total E's			Total G's		Total N's			
<b>Timeliness</b>	Y	Y	Y	Y	4			A	A = 4
<i>Y if submitted by agreed-upon deadline, N if not</i>									B = 3
									C = 2
Total # ✓									

Students build their own "report card" for the class



# STUDENT RESPONSES

"The evaluation methods are fair, and encourage our improvement"

"Taking this course has made me realize what a lab actually is."

"Some TAs are lenient, others can be way more strict"



# BREAKOUT DISCUSSION

In small groups, discuss and share

- If you have implemented specifications grading into a course, share what you did and how that went.
- **Thought Experiment:** If you have not tried specifications grading before, what might that look like in your context?
  - Would you apply it to one aspect of the class (e.g., discussion grade) or to the course overall?
  - What would be the potential benefits for students and you?
  - What are some potential challenges and concerns?

Ungrading

“[S]elf-assessment ask[s] students to do the work of reflecting critically on their own learning.”

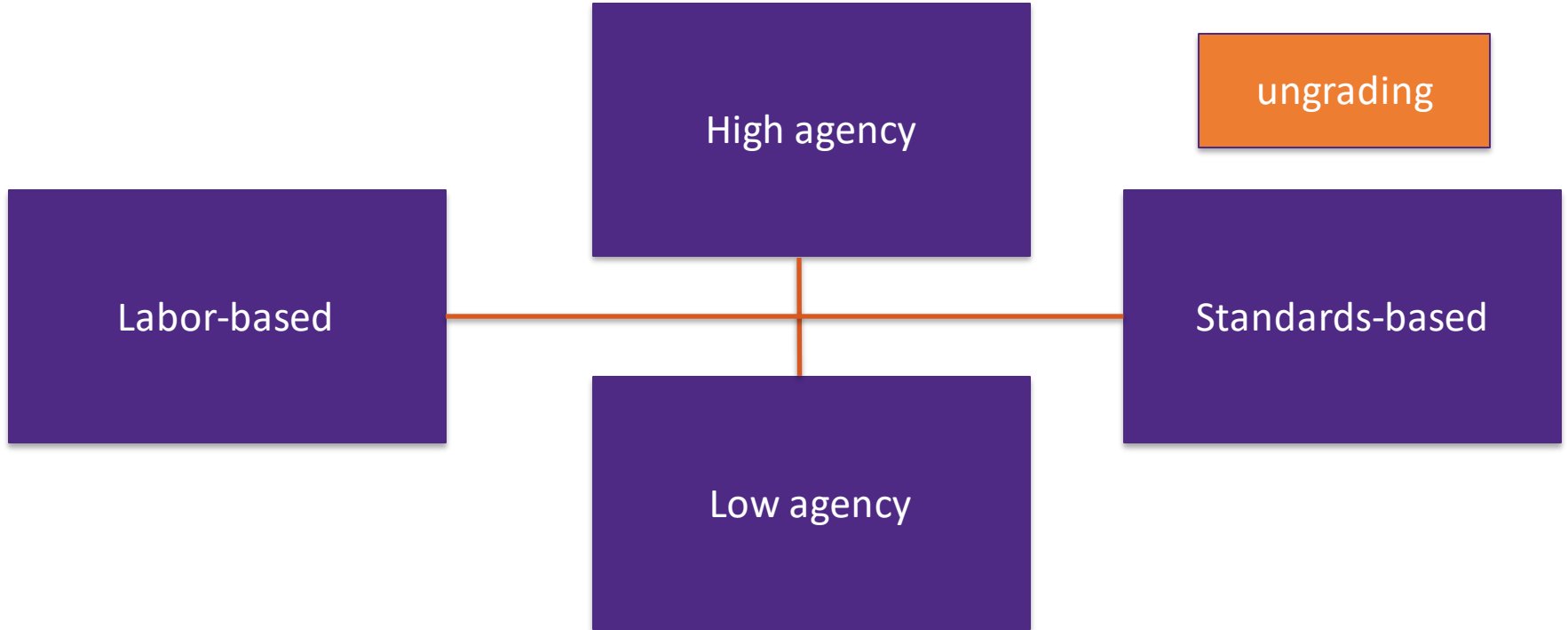
(Stommel, 2020)

## In Practice:

- Students set some or all of their learning outcomes
- Students regularly reflect on their progress towards those goals through written self-assessments and instructor conferences
- Instructor provides feedback to coach students on achieving their learning outcomes and their ability to self-assess
- Students determine their final grade based on their self-evaluation of their progress towards their learning outcomes
  - The instructor may adjust final grade as warranted

# CASE STUDY: **UNGRADING**

What degree of agency do students have in determining their grade?



# CASE STUDY



## Trish Bredar

Postdoctoral Fellow in Public Humanities  
Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities

WANDERLUST: TRAVELS IN  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY  
LITERATURE, HUM 370 / ENGL 350

- Looking for ways to make the classroom more equitable and reduce student stress about grades
- Introduced to the idea of “ungrading” in an inclusive pedagogy workshop
- Read Susan Blum’s chapter on ungrading
- Ready to “take the plunge”

A central aim of this course is to encourage your development as critical thinkers and writers. To that end, assessment in this class will work a little differently. There is significant research showing that not only are grades poor representations of student learning, but that grades actually inhibit learning. You will not receive numerical scores or grades on individual assignments. Instead, your progress in this course will be assessed through a combination of self-assessment, written feedback, and student-teacher dialogue. At the end of the term, you will complete a structured review of your work in this course and suggest a grade for yourself. I reserve the right to adjust your final grade if necessary, but will make that decision in dialogue with you.

This approach to assessment is meant to reduce stress, promote learning, encourage curiosity and risk-taking, and make our classroom more equitable. We will discuss the details in class at length and schedule one-on-one check-ins throughout the quarter to assess your progress. If you still find this approach anxiety-producing, I will work with you to arrange a strategy that works for both of us.

# BREDAR'S FRAMING



# BREDAR'S FINAL SELF- EVALUATION (ABBREVIATED)

## Step 1: Gather Materials

## Step 2: Review Materials

## Step 3: Reflect

### Engagement

1. How many assignments did you submit on time (or with an approved extension)?
2. How many unexcused absences did you have this quarter?
3. How much of the assigned reading did you complete for this class
4. How would you characterize your participation during class (including class discussion, group work, and other class activities)?
5. How would you characterize your overall engagement in this course? Use this space to elaborate on or further explain any of the metrics above.

### Learning

Please discuss how you worked toward each of the following goals in this course. Make sure to provide specific evidence based on submitted work and/or feedback received. Which goal(s) did you make the most progress towards, and why? The least progress towards? Which did you find most challenging? Aim for 1-3 sentences per goal.

## Step 4: Assess

Based on the evidence of learning and engagement provided above, what letter grade would you assign to your work in this class? (You can provide a percentage if you'd like, but only the letter grade will be recorded). How did you arrive at this grade?

# STUDENT RESPONSES

"I was more engaged because of the focus on improvement and intellectual risk-taking"

"I paid more attention to how I was learning"

"Coming up with goals, describing my progress, and grading myself was at times stressful"



# BREAKOUT DISCUSSION

In small groups, discuss and share

- If you have implemented ungrading into a course, share what you did and how that went.
- **Thought Experiment:** If you have not tried ungrading before, what might that look like in your context?
  - Would you apply it to one aspect of the class (e.g., discussion grade) or to the course overall?
  - What would be the potential benefits for students and you?
  - What are some potential challenges and concerns?

# NEXT STEPS

## Consultation



Melissa Ko, PhD  
(RAP Consultant)

<https://calendly.com/mesako/rap-consult>

## Co-Created Rubrics

Thursday, Oct. 19 | 12-1 PM



Lina Eskew, PhD  
(Searle Center)

## Learning Lab



Meaghan Fritz, PhD  
(Cook Family Writing Program)

Lauri Dietz, PhD  
(Searle Center)

# FURTHER READING

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- Butler, R. (1988). Enhancing and Undermining Intrinsic Motivation: The Effects of Task-Involving and Ego-Involving Evaluation on Interest and Performance. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 58(1), 1-14.
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