

“Assessment is the Engine of Learning”: An Interview with Asao Inoue

Sarah Faye and Dan Melzer

*Asao B. Inoue has become a key figure for those interested in the connections between race and writing assessment. Those connections are explained in his book *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future* (2015) and his coedited collections *Race and Writing Assessment* (2012), and *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity* (2018). His book *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom* (2019) offers a link between writing assessment, race, social justice, and the use of grading contracts. It explains in detail labor-based contract grading, which is an assessment method that removes the judgment of the teacher on the quality of the final product and awards a grade based solely on the work that students have put in completing the tasks and assignments of the course.*

As Inoue argues in his work, this assessment method is antiracist because it does not grade based on writing standards that mirror the English spoken at home by most white students and which pose a roadblock to many students of color.

*Inoue is the recipient of many awards for his work. Among them, the 2014 CWPA Outstanding Scholarship Award for “Theorizing Failure in U.S. Writing Assessments,” the 2014 NCTE/CCCC Outstanding Book Award for an edited collection for *Race and Writing Assessment* (2012, coedited with Mya Poe), and the 2017 NCTE/CCCC Outstanding Book Award for a monograph, as well as the 2015 CWPA Outstanding Book Award for his book *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing for a Socially Just Future* (2015).*

Inoue is a professor and the associate dean of the College of Integrative Sciences and Arts at Arizona State University. He was the 2019 Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, as well as a past member of the CCCC Executive Committee and the Executive Board of the Council of Writing Program Administrators.

Woe: Your work on race and writing assessment has played a key role in how we understand and design writing assessment. For those who might not be familiar with your work, can you tell us what is so important about assessment and why we should all pay attention to it?

AI: I have found in my training as a teacher early on, and then later training teachers, the one thing that was always absent, or at least was tertiary, was training on understanding the way assessment functions as an engine for learning in the classroom. I'm not talking about response strategies. I think our field has had a healthy dialogue over the years about how we respond to student writing. But that's only part of the equation, and that always fits within an ecology that does other things and has a lot of other elements in them that have serious consequences for students and their learning as well as teachers and their own sense of authority. Assessment in a classroom is really important to pay attention to, at least simultaneously with pedagogy, if not before pedagogy. It's just not something we have been traditionally used to dealing with when we are putting together a course or thinking about our program. I think it always ends up seeping into the classroom and what students and teachers talk about. When we stop thinking that there's one judge who marks papers or marks performances and strings them along a linear line and everybody has to either obey the teacher, or not, and then face the consequences of that, then what we get are these interesting conversations about the nature of judgment itself. What do we teach when we teach writing? We're teaching how to judge language and make decisions about language. So for me, these are all very, very closely connected to the enterprise of being literate—that is, gaining literacy experiences and practices as we move through life. It makes complete sense to be thinking about these things at least simultaneously.

I have seen a lot of teachers, especially outside of the humanities and outside of English studies, think about their curriculum as, "What do I need to cover in this class?" And then, "How do I test students to make sure they know it?" They think of outcomes first, not how does assessment act in this environment. How does it act on students and their learning? And how do I make it so that it's not this punitive thing that damages students in the process of me finding out what have they learned so far? And what do they need to learn? Assessment is the engine of learning. It also can do a lot of harm, especially when we're not attentive to the differentials in power, in the way our words and judgments are circulated and affect different kinds of students in the classroom. And we should be paying attention to all those things, I think—especially in English studies and literacy studies.

WOE: You've mentioned the differentials in power and their importance for assessment: what are the steps that led you to connect race and writing assessment?

AI: I first started making serious connections in graduate school. I happened to work with two people in each of these fields of race and of assessment: Victor Villanueva, who was my mentor and my dissertation advisor, and Bill Condon, who was also one of my mentors. I was having these two separate conversations, one about race and racism and one about writing assessment. They seemed in the scholarship very separate. All we needed was someone to be like an old-fashioned telephone operator and start plugging these things together and then you can all of a sudden see these are connected. It was like a magical time in graduate school when I just happened to have the benefit of working closely with two really wonderful scholars in their respective fields, and I was able to make those connections. I went to WSU (Washington State University) thinking I was going to be a pure race and rhetoric scholar, just like Victor in many ways. The fact that WSU happened to have this really interesting program that allowed the individual to create a lot of it, and they had a lot of cross-listed courses with cultural studies and American studies—that helped me make these connections.

WOE: In addition to Victor Villanueva and Bill Condon, is there anybody else who helped you make those connections between race and writing assessment?

AI: Certainly there are lots of folks who inspire me and who I think are doing and have done wonderful work. Norbert Elliot has always done good work. Some of it is pretty technical, and so I don't think it gets read as often in writing studies as it should. His book *Very Like a Whale* and his article "A Theory of Ethics for Writing Assessment" in the *Journal of Writing Assessment*—in which he discusses the literature on fairness and its impacts on writing—were really quite good. My colleague and collaborator over the years, Mya Poe, has done really fantastic work and continues to do great work. So there's lots of inspiration for me.

WOE: Given all the people you mention who are doing work in race and writing assessment, do you feel that this area of research has finally reached a tipping point where it has become an integral part of any conversation about assessment? Or do you feel that we still have a long way to go before race is a central part of the conversation when people talk about writing assessment?

AI: I think that we are certainly farther along than we were ten years ago. And certainly farther along than we were when I was in grad school.

Before that we didn't really have any conversations about this. If we did, they were really informal at best. So we can always go further. I think that whether we're talking about writing assessment when we are training teachers, or in graduate school, or in writing programs, the first questions we should be asking are, What are the politics of this assessment? What is the society or the school or the group of students that we are engineering when we do this assessment in this way? Because that's basically what assessment has always done, whether it's IQ tests or the GRE or SAT or what have you. They engineer society in particular ways, some small and some big. So I think we should be asking those questions about the politics of language and judgment. And I think that we're headed in that direction. I think we should all be asking ourselves if we are ignoring certain important political aspects of writing assessment that are crucial at this place, in this moment, for these students.

WOE: Some people have had strong reactions to the arguments you make about the political aspects of writing assessment. How have you navigated the negative reactions that you've encountered from people who have a more traditional perspective on writing assessment?

AI: The best way to talk to folks who don't agree with the labor-based model is to show them the data. I show grade distributions. I show the data from my own classrooms over time. I can show them how my students respond to this model, through their words, and my students' words are always strong. I don't have a lot of students in my classes ever say this was a bad experience. It's always the opposite. "This was a great class, this is such a different class than any other language or writing class I've had, and I felt empowered to do work in this class." That's what I do, and it usually helps mitigate some of those criticisms. I'm OK with the criticisms. All I'm asking is that you give me just a few moments of faith. Let's just play out this hypothetical scenario. How do you know that's going to be your students' reactions to a labor contract? How do you know that they're not going to do the work? How do you know that they're not going to be prepared for their next class because you didn't grade, like somehow your magical grading made them all better writers for the next class? How do you know that until you try something else? So I say, in a small way, try this once. Think of it as an experiment. An experiment that has already been performed by many other people to good effect. So it's not like you're trying something untested. You're trying something quite well tested. And you might find it works for you.

Sometimes it's like they just can't conceive of this other way of doing things. And it does seem very, very foreign. But we get these messages

in our society about rigor. Like somehow standards are connected to rigor. Standards are not connected to rigor. Standards are connected to white supremacy. That's because rigor is connected to larger narratives in our society and academia that say you have to do it this way, and you have to keep doing it until you get it exactly this way. But I think of rigor as things like doing a lot of work, having a lot of time on task, or focusing your attention on something really hard. And separating that from whatever outcome we get from it. The outcome is going to vary because we're all different people. We all come with different stuff. Focus and the time on task is rigor. It's just not the kind of rigor that most people value.

But also just posing the reflective, problematic question for folks: What are you really afraid of? What I think many teachers are really afraid of is giving up perceived control of their classroom. They think, all I have over my students is that I'm grading their work. And that is sad. That is basically coercion. So you want to build a career on coercion? I'd rather build my career on friendships and relationships with people and them wanting to be in the room with me. I don't want to force people to do things. A life of enforcement feels really deprived and barren. I know that it's more complicated than this. I know that we have dispositions that we have gathered over a lifetime of training and teaching. And that we have a lot invested in. "I have these standards. I just know they're good for students and they need to be able to do this." But you can't force them to do it. You can't make somebody language in another way when they're not ready to do it. That doesn't mean you can't urge them to do things. It just means they're not you. If they're eighteen or nineteen or twenty or twenty-one and if you're fifty-two you're a totally different human being than they are. It's like you trying to be an eighteen-year old, but as a grader, I'm going to give you an "F" for being an eighteen-year-old. If your grasp on your class is so tenuous that if you lose the grade, you've lost control of the entire class and the respect that you think your students give you, you should probably rethink a lot of stuff, and grades are the smallest thing to rethink.

WOE: How did your background and work in race and writing assessment lead you to get interested in labor-based contracts? How do you see labor-based contracts connecting to your work on race and writing?

AI: When I was taking a grad school course on assessment with Bill Condon, I produced some work that Bill said I should think about submitting to the journal *Assessing Writing*. I submitted and I got an acceptance, and one of the reviews was this really wonderful, long letter signed by the reviewer, and the reviewer happened to be Peter Elbow.

Peter said, "I got this great idea. It really matches this pedagogy you're doing. Would you call me and I'll tell you?" So I'm a graduate student, and if Peter Elbow says call me, you call. So I called, and he said, "You should try grading contracts. I think it really matches the stuff you're talking about in terms of how you get your students to do assessment and build rubrics. I think you're going to find it might work really well for you. So of course I tried it the very next semester, and I never went back. That was my introduction, someone whom I respected telling me, You should try this.

I realized after several years of using a hybrid contract that the switch from "B" to "A" still left a lot of people in my classroom out of the full range of grades, and it tended to go directly by race. Realistically, within fifteen weeks, how much can I expect them to match what I want? It felt dishonest to say throughout most of the semester, "It doesn't matter what I think. Try to do what you can with my feedback. But ultimately, you'll be okay." That's true up to a point. But what if you are a multilingual Latinx student who wants an "A" and who's worked really hard in the class, and yet the "A" is not going to be available to you because you just can't meet my expectations? Especially when you're sitting in the classroom next to monolingual, middle-class, English-speaking students. I have a very difficult time saying, "How am I going to give this quality here an 'A' and that one also?" That was problematic for me. What I didn't have a problem with was, "You are doing a lot of work. Well done. You're getting a lot from this class." That feels more equitable.

At Fresno State we did some research and did several measures of portfolios and grade distributions across the various racial formations in that program and found that labor-based grading contracts equalized almost every dimension. Students generally grew the same amount or more in the labor-based model. This was mitigated by the fact that we were also doing a DSP (Directed Self-Placement) and a stretch model, so there are those factors that probably contributed to this, but part of that stretch model was a mandated grading contract in the first course, and eighty-two percent of the teachers used contracts in the second course. Those students who experienced grading contracts all the way through had higher retention rates a year later. Those who failed retained at higher rates than those who had passed in the traditional program several years before we had any of these changes. So I think there was something there. Again, I'm not going to place all of that on the contract because there was a larger ecology that was working. But we did do some surveying of students at the end of all of those courses to find out how students experienced grades and the grading contract.

The vast majority of the students of color—like ninety-one or ninety-two percent—preferred grading contracts. They found them helpful to their learning of writing in the class and found that contracts gave them more confidence in their writing. It's amazing when you don't have those rankings placed on your writing over a semester or a year, how your confidence will start to edge up. We meet quite conventionally strong writers in our classrooms and we ask that question, "How many of you feel you're a good writer?" and nobody raises their hands. They all have these horrible war stories about writing, and those war stories happen to almost always be around the ranking and judging of their work. In my research and in my classrooms, I found a lot of evidence to suggest that labor-based grading contracts helped improve the conditions of students of color. At Fresno State these students were predominantly designated by the university as remedial students, and they were mostly multilingual in a variety of ways.

WOE: Labor contracts can sometimes be disorienting for teachers, especially when they use them for the first time, because of the dramatic change of the focus of assessment. Can you explain what we're assessing when we're using labor contracts?

AI: We should probably be precise about what we mean by assess in this situation. Typically, when we say, "What are we assessing in this ecology?" if it's a conventional one, we're assessing student writing, and that usually means we're making judgments of quality. I think we have to rethink that. At the most basic level, in a labor-based grading contract model, we're assessing the labor of students. But what does assessment mean there? It could mean, like it does in all of my classes, accounting for time on task over the semester. How many words are produced and how many words are read in any given session or week of labor? That's a very different kind of judgment than judging writing and saying this is good enough, this is not good enough, or this gets an "A" and this gets a "B," this gets a "C," etc. So I think labor contracts have very different implications for students in their learning. And I think they are good implications, if we're thinking about these other kinds of judgments: I want five hundred words from you for tomorrow or for Wednesday; please spend at least thirty minutes doing this reading or this writing. The important part is the time on task.

The one thing labor-based grading contracts highlights, especially for the new teacher using it, is that you have to trust students in a very different way than we're used to trusting them. Questions I often get are things like, "How do you know that students won't just do the bare minimum, or just turn any old thing in, and then they're not really

getting the learning that you're wanting from them?" But you can't really control that if you are grading, either. To use that as the metric by which we decide whether we are going to use a particular assessment system over another is pretty arbitrary. We always have to trust our students at some level. In this case, I'm willing to trust my students if they say, "I spent an hour doing this and I produced these words." My default is to trust them until there's some clear reason for me not to trust them. I'll say to them, "What happened? This doesn't seem like what we were asking for in the spirit of the assignment. Can you tell me how you produced this? What's going on? Is everything okay? This isn't what I was hoping for. How come you couldn't do that? Tell me more about your process here." Their lives are so complex, and so different from mine, that I just need to ask these questions. So when we ask the question, "What will we be assessing?" I think it's a good question, but we should probably say, "What does assessment mean to me in this scenario?"

WOE: Do you think that the word "assessment" is still a useful word to describe the work we do with labor contracts?

AI: Maybe. If we're having to keep redefining it, then maybe the way that word has been used in the past doesn't work as well any more. I've been sort of brought up scholastically with assessment and I'm just stuck with that word. Maybe you're right, maybe that isn't a good word to use for this, although I do know that it also cues people who are not thinking as deeply as we are about these things. And for good reasons. They've got other priorities; they are doing other kinds of work in the academy or in school settings. I'd love to figure out another node/word/concept/family of concepts that would work better. The theoretical underpinnings for my use of the term "labor," instead of "work" or "effort," has been Marxist theory. That's why I find labor to be really important. Brian Huot had that really wonderful book years ago, *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment*, and I think that was the start of trying to rethink assessment in the classroom. I'd love to see folks out in the field try to take that rethinking up. Especially teachers theorizing their own assessment practices.

WOE: As a user of labor contracts, I spend a lot of time trying to explain contracts to others with words that don't match what I do—"grade inflation," "assessment"—all these things that don't fit.

AI: When you use a labor-based grading contract system in a larger system or institution that's not traditionally been that, you get these ill-fitting corners. Grade inflation doesn't make a lot of sense to me. My

response to those questions around grade inflation and labor systems is: you're asking the wrong question. "Are you giving away grades?" is not the question to ask. The real question to ask is, "How good can this ecology be?" Why would we not think this is a really great teacher? Why would we not think that these students are really outperforming themselves? Why would we not want to have systems where everybody succeeds at the highest level? Just because we haven't had it doesn't mean that we can't have it tomorrow. That usually is based on that bell curve, that human populations all fall along a normal distribution. If we buy into all these institutional assumptions about clarity of expression and standards and so forth, then sure, you can get a bell curve every time. But what about diversity of expression? What about new ways of expressing thinking, being, existing in the world that don't easily fit? Wasn't yesterday's incomprehensibility today's genius? By fitting everybody into one standard you get this bell curve because some will fit it really well and some will not. And if students don't fit the curve, it does not mean that they are not learning. It does not mean that they don't have some important contributions.

WOE: Do you think that labor contracts lead to a new sense of identity for writing instructors? How do we think differently of our profession and of ourselves as writing teachers with labor-based contracts?

AI: Here's the shift I'd love to see. I'd like to think that we are teaching the whole student. So when we only use a product, no matter what we say about how we care about process, or we have a post-process pedagogy, our assessment is oftentimes that we're grading and we have a rubric or a set of standards and we collect documents. We're collecting to grade and we grade those things and give them back. I don't know how you can argue that you are doing anything other than what we've always done with writing, which is very product-oriented. There's nothing wrong with product. We need to produce products in the world. But that approach erases or devalues the labor that it took students to do that work, and I always want to try to account for the various ways in which students labor to produce something in my class. So I think that one shift might be when we pay more attention to how labor is circulated, and gets produced, and gets paid attention to and reflected upon in a classroom, and then used in an integral way to help determine whether a student succeeds or passes through the class or not. I think we start to realize and start to pay attention to and honor the whole student.

For instance, in my classes every week we look at excerpts from our labor journals that look at explicit sections of our labor logs, and

we reflect on those. I'm reading those for issues or problems or things that we want to talk about. But I'm also looking for ways for us to be able to acknowledge how some of us have to read in the car for an hour in the parking lot across the street because of the timing of where the class is and dropping the kids off at school. Others have to read on the train, or the bus, or they have to do work on their breaks at Target or whatever it is. We make explicit in the classroom that we have these very complicated lives and we're fully human beings with bodies and other demands. They get tired or hungry or thirsty or need exercise, and we can account for all those things and make sense of them and maybe even do something about it, at least for this short period of time.

So every semester I adjust at least a couple of times in the course. They may not be giant adjustments—they can be subtle, small ones. Often they're encouraged by my students. They'll say, "It's clear we're all struggling to get this work finished. Can we change the date for this?" I'm always wanting to see if that's the will of the group. And of course, as long as I can swing it, and usually I can, then yes, we should do that. When we start to pay attention to labor we're paying attention to more than simply what can this student give me. I want to know what you can do for yourself, and why would you do that for yourself. For me, that's much more important. And I have better relationships with my students than I've ever had. I wouldn't want to do something where I didn't get to have these rich, wonderful relationships that aren't combative or competitive. They're collaborative and communal and we want to help each other. I remember grading back in the day—it almost always felt like there was this chess match. Me and the students, we're all going to try to get the most out of this. They're going to try to get the most out of this, and I'm going to try and get the most out of them. And this is not a good method. It just felt very dishonest. And I think I would have been burned out within ten years. Now I get rejuvenated by a class. I finish a class and I don't want to leave. I get weepy at the end of the semester because we're all leaving. I enjoy my students' writing and I enjoy working with them.

Woe: One critique about grading contracts is the lack of flexibility: you get the grade because you completed the work on time. You've talked about students having complicated lives, but there are also other things to keep in mind, such as being inclusive about neurodiversity and finding other ways to complete the work. Is there a way that we can use contracts to create a creative learning space?

AI: I don't know if labor-based grading contracts have to have limits or clear boundaries on when something's turned in. The important thing

is the amount of time you spend. In my pedagogy, I find it important over a semester to have consistent time on task, so I don't think it's a good idea to do this feast and famine kind of thing where you don't do any work in a class for two weeks, three weeks, and then you do a ton of it in one week. Some students' lives function that way out of necessity. There's a way that we can accommodate those students. It is not the ideal and they should know that. But life is never ideal. We have agreed ahead of time there will be no due dates. There is just going to be this much work, and you've got to do it by the end of the semester and give me time to be able to respond, give your colleagues time to respond, etc. I have not been a good enough teacher to figure out how to do that fully in a semester under those time constraints. Thinking creatively and trying to find ways to help make courses fit better for neurodiverse students and the variety of lives that students come to the classroom with is important. Any system can be adjusted for any kind of student.

WOE: What don't we know about contract grading? Where should the research on contract grading go next?

AI: What we don't know are the associations of the effects that grading contract environments have on noncognitive dimensions of learning in students. Noncognitive dimensions like persistence or grit and open-mindedness are some of the most powerful indicators of success in a variety of domains for students. There might be strong evidence that grading contracts key in on these noncognitive dimensions. Part of having openness to new experiences, ideas, and perspectives is having the room in the environment to do so. When you have one standard and you're being judged by it, you do not have room for open-mindedness. It's a crapshoot and you risk your grade and you risk wounding yourself psychologically. We don't want to be wounded, especially for something so personal as our language. We don't know enough about grading contracts' abilities to enhance or build noncognitive dimensions in students.

When I'm asking students to do this much labor every week, ten to twelve hours of labor every week, and see how close you can get to that every week, when we look at it in their labor logs at the midpoint and at the final, we can see whether they got there. That is a kind of measure of persistence, or a kind of measure of grit, over at least one semester. It certainly boosts their confidence: "Wow, I was able to do that much." Maybe that's just enough to keep you going. One of the ancillary benefits of using a labor log is at the midpoint and final, when we look at the numbers and we do some formal assessment or reflec-

tion on the patterns of students' engagement ratings and the patterns of how many minutes each week students did reading and writing. I didn't realize initially how I was just trying to have some quantifiable measures for everyone to be able to see their labor and then do some thinking about it. Many students say, "This is a huge accomplishment for me. I didn't know I could do this much reading, or I didn't know that I was doing this much writing." Just having that little boost makes a world of difference.

WOE: What do you believe are the next steps towards social change and writing assessment?

AI: I think we still have a long way to go in terms of having assessments that are antiracist. I think we have a long way to go for us to find ways to have writing assessments in and outside of classrooms that are anti-white supremacist. And those are complicated structures in our society. I don't know if we can have an assessment that can fully combat white supremacy. White supremacist structures feed into the school, into the academy, and it's outside surrounding us. There's a lot of work to be done, structurally. That's always the next step for me, what structures can we change? First in the classroom. Then in the program and the department and the school and college and university and the discipline and our society.

It's not just writing assessment specialists and compositionists that have to do this work. We have to have politicians do this work with us. We have to have community activists do this work with us. We have to have church officials and others do this work with us. We have to have mothers and we have to have others in the community doing this work with us. And that's why it's really hard. And that's why it's not going to be tomorrow. But I don't see that as a downer. I see it as these are opportunities for a lot of people to do work together who wouldn't normally be sitting in the same room or normally feel like they're on the same side. I always get energized by doing collaborative work or being on a project locally with people who I never would have met. I go to my classes, I go to school and so forth, but all of a sudden I'm in a room with an accountant or with an engineer or with a lawyer. If we have a common purpose, we can figure out what to do from there.

I can't control other people's reactions to me or to the work I do. This is so much more the case today where what I do is available to people who don't know anything about academia but want to send me a really nasty email to tell me what a horrible person I am and how I'm stealing money from the state because I'm not holding up standards in my classrooms and blah, blah, blah. When they've never seen me teach

and don't know anything about my classes or about me. And all I can say is, "Man, I wish you peace. Clearly, you've got things going on. I feel compassion for you, man. You got work to do." And it's not a fight I can fight, because they're not going to let it go. I can't win, and they're not going to win it. We'll both be upset and angry and it's not worth it.

Sometimes in the classroom I think that's the case as well, given the topics that I tend to have in my writing classes, which are the politics of language. Those politics are always racialized and gendered. And some students have a hard time seeing why we can't just talk about clarity of expression. But that's never been language. That's a fairy tale that the dominant group told itself. And some of us got to peer over the wall and look in and see that discussion and think, What are they talking about? That is not the way language works, because I'm not included in that conversation. So I work on letting stuff go, not being angry when people don't agree with me, and acknowledging seriously the alternative position. "I see what you're saying. Let's play that out. How does that work? Standards. They're good. They can offer students a lot of stuff. How do we make them critical? What do you do about people who don't already have those dispositions toward language? How do they fit in? Or are they just relegated to failure? How long did it take you to learn your language? What can we do in fifteen weeks? How fair is that system? How do we make it fair? What do we do now?" But this shows, we have better questions now, or rather, questions that link social justice with writing assessment in classrooms. That's good. So I think that's where we are now.



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