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“Call Us Romantics: A Study in Open, Flexible, Student-Centered Teaching
(Or Why We Taught a Course in which We Gave Almost Half of the Students an A+)”

“I have never read that much in my life before.”

—Student, blog post

“I’m no longer afraid of reading anymore.”

—Student, comment on blog post

After COVID: Reclaiming Opportunity

We wanted to do better. The COVID pandemic should have prompted a breakthrough for open, flexible, student-centered teaching. Almost overnight, most of us working in higher education were asked to make dramatic changes in our courses: taking them online; rethinking the place of lectures; reconceptualizing classroom interaction; reinventing forms of assessment. Under intense pressure, universities were forced to drop age-old rules and regulations, and we were all shaken out of our accustomed routines. Almost everything was up for grabs. This should finally have been the chance for those of us who have long been urging changes in our approach to pedagogy to give full reign to the experiments that we had been wishing to try out. But this did not happen. Instead, the past couple of years have seen a retrenchment of some of the more pernicious aspects of contemporary teaching practice, including further outsourcing of pedagogical functions to private corporations whose logic is fundamentally alien to the ethos of the university. A historic opportunity has been lost.

Take for instance the fact that, over the (northern) summer of 2020, as university faculty scrambled to prepare for a year spent largely online, we were learning, often belatedly, to record and upload lectures that would be watched, asynchronously, to students often

dispersed across the globe, in advance of class discussions that would be held via software such as Zoom or Teams. Even where faculty still gave lectures synchronously as the year unfolded, these were often recorded to be reviewed subsequently by students. Individual universities thus, over a matter of weeks and months, found themselves creating immense repositories of teaching materials. This should have led to a golden age of sharing and cross-pollination: there was no good reason why students in British Columbia should not have had access to lectures and discussions from (say) Boston, London, or Buenos Aires, and vice versa. Or we could have gone further, and opened the doors of these virtual lecture halls up to anyone, wherever they may be. But in practice, in an extraordinary reduplication of resources, these materials were, and remain, captured by Learning Management Systems such as Canvas and Moodle, unavailable to students in the same university—or even to students in the classes for which they were made, once the semester ended—let alone to others beyond the institution.

Even as academic seminars, conferences, and symposia went online, enabling easier participation without the barriers of expensive and time-consuming travel, classroom doors remained firmly shut. Our response to the pandemic seemed to be determined by the notion that knowledge and learning are proprietary, available only to those who pay for them. We turned over the management of online learning to technological capture, while the stock of surveillance systems such as Proctorio boomed, in an atmosphere of collective distrust and paranoia. The fear was that students, now online, would find new ways to cheat the system and so throw “academic integrity” to the wind. In reality it was academia itself whose integrity (further) dwindled.

But it is not too late. In what follows we describe our experience teaching a course in the latter days of the pandemic (in Spring 2022: the first few weeks were online; the rest of the semester was in person, with everyone wearing masks), a course in which we tried to keep to the ideals of openness, flexibility, and student-centered choice.

Though they were new to the students, and mostly also new to us, none of the strategies we employed in this course were particularly novel. Moreover, though they are not mainstream in higher education, we do not claim either that they are all that radical or risky. Plenty of instructors, for instance, have advocated for and innovated in open education, not least in constructing what are commonly called Open Educational

Resources. Our university even has a repository of such resources (at <https://oer.open.ubc.ca/>), designed to encourage others to follow suit. We pay lip service to such ideals; it is time to live up to them. Moreover, most university courses allow students some measure of choice, whether that be in essay topic or special projects. Indeed, student choice has become something of a mantra across university systems, if in line with a logic of marketization rather than freedom. Finally, alternative grading practices or flexible assessment are increasingly discussed and proposed across a spectrum of different disciplines—various models of contract grading have been offered by scholars such as Cathy Davidson, Peter Elbow, and Asao Inoue—and again, at our university there is an active group of instructors trying out what comes under the rubric of “ungrading.” But this remains at best a minority practice. Still, we do not wish to construct some kind of straw figure of a university system that is wholly rigid, homogenous, and unresponsive to experiment. Perhaps what is novel is simply the way in which we put these different strategies together, and maybe also the extent to which we asked students to report back and reflect on their experiences.

What we offer is not necessarily a model. Yes, on the whole, the course went well—certainly, if judged by student satisfaction; also, we claim, in terms of student learning—but equally we no doubt made mistakes. Moreover, we had to respond to specific circumstances and constraints that operate at this institution, even in this particular semester. To that extent, much of the time we were making things up as we went along, even as our choices were, so far as possible, governed both by previous experience and by ideals and philosophy drawn from critical pedagogy and theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and others. The course was in many senses experimental or, as we would rather put it (following Stefano Harney and Fred Moten), a study: a preliminary exploration, an attempt to work with the material at hand, to sketch what might be achieved in the future. We are sharing what we have done, so that others (you?) can accomplish something different from, and no doubt also better than, what we ourselves achieved.

The Course: Inventing Romance Studies

"totally thought i was gonna be reading romance novels."

—Student, response on Exit Survey

We wanted to try something new. Our course was in Romance Studies, which—much to many of the students' surprise—is the study not of love or amorousness, but of the "Romance" languages (Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian, and so on) that are derived from Latin, and by extension of the literatures and cultures expressed in and through those languages. Beyond that, however, what Romance Studies may be is vague at best: putting these languages together is usually more a matter of administrative *fiat* than part of any particularly coherent intellectual project. This, after all, is the pre-history of our own Department of French, Hispanic, and Italian Studies, which is the consequence (a couple of decades ago) of a merger of the Department of French with the Department of Hispanic and Italian Studies. Elsewhere, such departments take the name "Romance Studies" or "Romance Languages" (or similar), but in effect the programs that they administer continue for the most part to be undergraduate (and graduate) programs in Spanish, French, and so on. Degree programs in "Romance Studies" are rare and tend to have few, if any, students. Here at the University of British Columbia, Romance Studies for many years existed only as an honours program for students who had a high degree of fluency in both French and Spanish, and attracted one or two students every few years.¹

Recently, however, the UBC Romance Studies program has been refurbished and relaunched, mostly as a way to teach literature in translation, but also in line with upcoming new Faculty guidelines on the undergraduate "breadth" requirement, which are set to declare that "creative and interpretative inquiry" only takes place through the medium of English. The Romance Studies degree requirements now necessitate minimal linguistic fluency in any of the Romance languages, and all courses designated "RMST" are taught solely through the medium of English.

Specifically, our course has the code RMST 202. As a 200-level course, it is in principle an offering for second-year students, but in practice, though there were more second-year students than any others (30 out of 76), the students enrolled ranged from first- (24 out of

¹ Over the decade from 2011 to 2021, three students graduated from the UBC program in Romance Studies.

76) to fourth- and even fifth-year standing. None had declared a major or minor in Romance Studies. Most (45 out of 76) had yet to declare a major of any sort; of those who had, the clear majority (19 out of 31) were in Psychology, but they also came from Sociology, Philosophy, Geography, Anthropology... They were taking the course as an elective, mostly to help satisfy the Faculty of Arts (current) literature requirement, which obliges all Arts students to complete six credits in literature.

Initially, student numbers were capped at 40, but months in advance the course was already over-subscribed. We therefore asked for the cap to be raised, and ultimately it was set at 90. After the usual flux of the first few weeks of the semester, 76 students were enrolled and completed the course—making this one of the largest, if not the largest, course ever taught in our department. As is typical in many Arts courses, especially literature courses, it was majority female, with around 60 women and 15 men, and at least one student who was gender fluid. It was as diverse as the general UBC (and Vancouver) population, if not more so: though we did not survey them on origin or home background, there was a large proportion of students (first and second generation) from East Asia, predominantly China but also for instance Japan and Singapore; there were a significant number of students of South Asian heritage; there were students from or who had lived in Central Asia or the Middle East (Iran, Afghanistan, Dubai, Palestine) and even Africa (Egypt, Sudan); there were second- or third-generation European students (from Eastern Europe, Italy, and Portugal, for example) and several from Latin America (particularly Mexico); many students told us that English was not their first language, though only a few spoke a Romance language such as Spanish or French; they also came from across Canada, including Ontario and the Prairies, as well as from different regions of British Columbia. White, Anglo Vancouverites were in a very small minority. There was one Professor, and two Teaching Assistants, both of whom are graduate students in Hispanic Studies, and one of whom is also an international student.

We inherited the course title, "Introduction to Literatures and Cultures of the Romance World II: Modern to Post-Modern,"² but we were essentially teaching it as an entirely new course, and we took the opportunity to contest, implicitly and explicitly, some of the

² RMST 201 is "Introduction to Literatures and Cultures of the Romance World I: Medieval to Early Modern," but the two courses are not part of a sequence, or at least they are not treated as such: 201 is not a pre-requisite for 202; at most one student had taken 201 before enrolling in 202.

assumptions presented by that title. So, for instance, though notionally the course would cover the entire period from the 1700s to the present, we treated it as a survey of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, beginning with *modernism*, rather than modernity, in the 1910s. We also chose to focus entirely on literature, in that all the set texts were recognizably literary and "culture" more broadly was discussed only in terms of context (the relationship between, for instance, modernist literature and modernist visual art). Finally, from the outset we questioned the notion that there is (or was) any such thing as a "Romance World," some kind of territorially-delimited and culturally coherent geographic entity. We sought instead new ways to think about what Romance Studies might be, how it might be defined as a field of study and enquiry, to see if some kind of rather more interesting endeavor could be carved out of this awkward non-discipline. *The challenge was to come up with a Romance Studies whose rationale would be conceptually (and pedagogically) stimulating, rather than simply a matter of bureaucratic convenience.* The course's introductory lecture is entitled "Inventing Romance Studies," and it outlines the course project as "to read, to think, to come up with new concepts, to open up horizons. This is what we will be doing week by week, rather than worrying too much whether we are following the program with sufficient fidelity. Why follow a program, when we could more creatively be inventing ways to escape it?"³ Or, to use the Deleuzian vocabulary that we often adopted throughout the course lectures, Romance Studies would constitute a "line of flight" within and beyond the university institution.

³ All course lectures are available at <https://rmst202.arts.ubc.ca/lectures/>. Videos are here: <https://rmst202.arts.ubc.ca/category/video/lecture-video/>. They can also be found in book form at <https://varioustexts.files.wordpress.com/2022/04/rmst-book.pdf> (with an additional preface and prologue). The introductory lecture is at <https://rmst202.arts.ubc.ca/inventing-romance-studies/>.

Our invitation to students to (help) invent Romance Studies goes further still than Charles Fornaciari and Kathy Lund Dean's argument (following Maryellen Weimer) that we should be "allowing students to 'discover' what the course is about in lieu of the instructor 'going over' the syllabus content" (712). This is what Fornaciari and Lund Dean call "andragogy" (in place of pedagogy): treating students as adults; or alternatively, it is simply recognizing that teachers should also be engaged in study.

Methodology: Seeking Feedback

"I liked how Dr. Jon was also asking for our input throughout the term."

—Student, response on Exit Survey

We wanted to experiment with both content and form. In the analysis that follows, we focus mainly on form, and so issues of structure and assessment. But we probably discuss content more than is usual in such reflections, as for us form and content are very much related: *what* we were trying to do helped to condition *how* we did it, and vice versa.

At the same time, we wanted ways to assess our experiment, even as the semester was in progress. Standard university course evaluations would come too late, and in any case are hardly fit for purpose. We therefore repeatedly polled or surveyed our students, while trying not to distract them too much from the task at hand, which was the course content itself. Just before midterm, in class, we conducted our first brief evaluation: in small groups, students were asked to write down three comments or observations on the course and how things were going, at least one of which had to be positive, and one negative. They then turned in these comments, unsigned, and we compiled them and made them public on the course website. Later on in the semester, also during class-time, we did a similar survey but this time focused on perceived workload and engagement. Again, these comments were submitted anonymously, compiled, and published on the website. At the end of the semester we constructed a longer (34-question) anonymous, online survey, which we invited students to complete (the response rate was just under 50%: 36 out of 76). We also conducted an hour-long focus group with a small but representative sample of those enrolled.⁴ Finally, throughout the semester students were regularly writing and commenting on blogs, for which they wrote both introductory and concluding posts in which they first set out their expectations, and then reflected over the semester as a whole. We have drawn on all this material, as well as on our own observations and reflections, in writing this article.

⁴ All this material, including survey results and a transcript of the focus group discussion, can be accessed via <https://rmst202.arts.ubc.ca/tag/feedback/>.

Open Education: Fleeing the Routine

"I hope/intend/plan to keep this blog going. [. . .] I'd been looking for a push to start a blog for quite a few years now, and I don't want to let my current momentum to stop."
—Student, blog post

We wanted to open this course to its outside. As far as possible, everything produced for or by the course is on the open web, rather than behind a pedagogical paywall such as Canvas. The syllabus and assessment rubric, as well as updates and announcements, are posted on a website with a distinctive URL: <http://rmst202.arts.ubc.ca>. Course lectures and supplementary conversation videos are uploaded to YouTube and embedded in the website. Other resources for students as they read and seek to understand the course texts (videos, image galleries, information from Wikipedia and other sources) are highlighted on a dynamic and ever-changing front page. Student written work is also available on the same site: they create and maintain blogs on platforms of their choice (which may be wordpress.com, blogger.ca, or the university's own blog service, blogs.ubc.ca) and write weekly reading responses that are syndicated to the course website. Following links for the full text takes you to the original blogs, whose styles and formats they have chosen for themselves. The website is therefore a point of access to what is effectively the students' own domain. It is on the original posts that they comment on each other's blogs. Other material generated in the course (such as survey responses) is also posted in public.

The framework for the course website is the university's Wordpress-based Content Management System (developed by a team led by Novak Rogic at our Centre for Teaching, Learning, and Technology), adapted into a flexible template by Angela Lam and others from the Faculty of Arts Instructional Support and Information Technology division.⁵ It is important to credit the educational technologists who provide the scaffolding on which the course relies, but part of the value of their work is that, once that framework is established, everything is more or less intuitive and requires little ongoing support. In fact, our experience, in other courses, with proprietary software and websites

⁵ We also acknowledge the invaluable advice over the years of Brian Lamb, educational technologist formerly at UBC and now at Thompson Rivers University, and of Will Engle, of UBC's CTLT. Both have constantly provided support and inspiration for open education and experimental pedagogy oriented towards flexibility and student empowerment.

(for instance those provided by textbook publishers such as Cengage) is that they are much more labor intensive and more frequently require technical intervention, as well as being far less secure in that they demand significant integration with university software and services. The only integration with our course site comes with the Wordpress plugin FeedWordPress, which scans student blogs and syndicates their posts on the main website so that neither they nor we have to be checking 76 separate sites to look for new posts. Beyond this, the website was created and updated by hand, with the familiar tools (either basic HTML or a "what you see is what you get" editor, plus tags and categories) offered by the Wordpress back-end. Dedicated Learning Management Systems promise to make things easier—and in some cases they do, symptomatically when it comes to grading—but too often they simply duplicate, badly and awkwardly, what can be done better on the open web. Moreover, they set learning materials off from the rest of the university, let alone the public. Worse, they alienate students from their own learning in so far as assignments and discussions are locked within these educational walled gardens, becoming inaccessible as soon as the semester ends. Why then do so many of us continue to use them?

Open education should hardly be controversial. Since Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society*, if not before, many have recognized that too often schooling is the site of discipline, confinement, and surveillance. Illich dreamed of tape cassettes circulating in the mail, but with the Internet, we now have the technology readily available to open education up. *Openness should be the default, with closed spaces and systems employed only when strictly needed and legitimately justifiable.* In particular, making lectures and other teacher-generated content openly available should be natural and instinctive, rather than the other way around. In fact, however, the opposite is now the case: the paraphernalia of Canvas (and Moodle or Blackboard etc.) have become ingrained habit for teachers, students, administrators, and technicians, so much so that reflection on why and how we are using them is scarce to non-existent.

The prime rationale for the use of closed Learning Management Systems is no doubt economic: students have the right to their learning materials only if and when (and for so long as) they are paying for them. They are charged by the credit hour, and it is the tuition payment that grants them access. This is in line with the more general trend to frame education as private good rather than public benefit. The marketing departments of

universities and colleges often promote degree programs in terms of career enhancement, self-realization, and individual lifestyle trajectories. As tuition rises, the rhetoric of learning outcomes enhances this notion, to assure students (and their families) that tertiary education still represents value for money even as their debt burden accumulates and in the face of cheaper alternatives that have sprung up in recent decades.⁶

But the real reasons why we continue to teach in closed spaces are more banal and arise from low-level anxiety. Frequently, instructors mention concerns about copyright infringement—for instance, that they are using images in lecture videos whose copyright status is uncertain. But Learning Management Systems give a false sense of security: the misuse of copyright images is no less illegal under cover of Canvas than on the open web. For our part, we make every effort to ensure that images and clips posted to the course website or incorporated in lecture videos are in the public domain or were licensed for re-use (usually taking them from Wikimedia Commons); in the rare cases when we do use copyrighted material, we do so on the basis that this is “fair dealing,” because they are short extracts integral to our educational purpose. Some instructors are also concerned about the other side of copyright: that what they make publicly accessible may be taken up and copied by others. But on the one hand, proof of prior publication helps to insure against plagiarism. And on the other, we prefer to welcome re-use of our material, publishing everything under a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC license, so that anyone can adapt it to their own (non-commercial) purposes.

Above all, instructors fear looking foolish. This fear is exacerbated by the rhetoric with which universities, having allowed education to be framed as individual benefit, justify the state funding or subsidy that they receive (even if they are private institutions) and seek to conserve their residual public status: they promulgate a cult of expertise, hubristically promising to come up with answers to social ills, solutions to a broad array of problems from cancer to climate change, race relations to international security. This is precisely the wrong way to understand the university’s mission, in that our job is to reveal or even make problems, not solve them; it is to raise questions, not provide answers. The condescension that suggests otherwise only gives succor to the populist

⁶ For instance, why pay for a language course when you could use Duolingo? On such alternatives, fueled by dissatisfaction with rising debt, see Anya Kamenetz’s *Generation Debt* and *DIY U*.

backlash against expertise. It also inhibits us, as academics, in that the standard we set for public engagement is that we should present ourselves as always and only making expert pronouncements. Afraid to be shown up for our mistakes, we then too often retreat into the security of the closed classroom where we are less likely to be questioned, and few will notice if we are.

None of us teaching Romance Studies claims to be expert in the material. Among the three of us teaching RMST 202, if we have any expertise, it is in Spanish and Latin American literature and culture, whereas here we were called to teach also French, Italian... and (why not?) Portuguese, Romanian, Catalan, and Angolan literatures and cultures. Indeed, we deliberately set out to stretch ourselves as much as we were challenging our students, who frequently told us how "grateful" (as one student blog post put it) they were to "be pushed out of [their] comfort zone in this course." We saw ourselves also as students, rather than experts. Without denying the skills or prior knowledge that we had—as everyone has⁷—the point here was to try something new, to experiment and to innovate, not least in a (non-)discipline such as Romance Studies for which, to quote again from our introductory lecture, "we are all strangers, and have a stranger's prerogatives to interrupt, to question, and to begin anew." Why even pretend to be experts? It is so much more productive and interesting to be students, because it is only as students that we can dare to invent an entire field. And if we are going to do such a thing, why not do so in public, in the open?

We should not fool ourselves that simply making material open will ensure that it is accessed and used. Over the semester, we uploaded 24 videos to YouTube, including not only 18 video lectures but also five "conversation videos" (one of which was of a class session with the distinguished Romanian writer, Norman Manea) and one extra, off-the-cuff, "behind the scenes" video.⁸ On average, each of these has, so far, attracted only a

⁷ The cult of expertise runs headlong against Paulo Freire's observation that students (and indeed, people in general) are far from empty vessels: they bring their own knowledges and understandings to any encounter with the educational system. To suggest otherwise is simply to replicate and reinforce social ills, rather than resolve them. In Freire's words, "Those truly committed to the cause of liberation can accept neither the mechanistic concept of consciousness as an empty vessel to be filled, nor the use of banking methods of domination (propaganda, slogans—deposits) in the name of liberation" (79).

⁸ The conversation with Manea was, for us and for many of the students, a highlight of the course, and another instance of what Zoom and similar technology can enable. The recording is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvQuTOWIpbA>. We tried also to arrange the participation of the other living writers from our syllabus—José Eduardo Agualusa, Javier Cercas, and in lieu of Elena Ferrante,

few more viewers than we had students in the class, with some minor variations: the introductory lecture has 250 views to date; the lecture on Marcel Proust has 150. We do not claim to be shaking the world (though even such relatively paltry numbers compare favorably to the readership of most academic articles). On the other hand, one video has already taken off: the lecture on Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*. Spurred by the release of the latest season of the HBO series based on Ferrante's Neapolitan novels, as well as by the vagaries of YouTube's algorithm, after six weeks this 20-minute lecture has 5,000 views, with the number rapidly increasing (as we write, it is attracting over 250 new viewers every 24 hours). One never knows when or why such material goes "viral," even in this moderate way. It is not due to any special expertise on our part in Ferrante and her work. But it is our small contribution to public discourse on the novel, presenting it in the light of insights from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu on language, class, and the "taste for necessity."⁹ It is fitting that it is a lecture on a book that shows profound ambivalence for the educational system, as a route of social mobility for some but an engine to reproduce and enforce inequality for the vast majority, that should be the first to escape the confines of this university course.

Students, too, are thinking in the open in this course. The majority of their contributions are reflections on their reading which they write up weekly on blogs that they themselves set up and control on sites such as wordpress.com, blogger.ca, or their university equivalent, blogs.ubc.ca. They can establish these blogs anonymously, or under a pseudonym, if they so want, but almost all of them chose not to do so. Again, there is no reason to exaggerate their contribution to public discourse. It is true that the course website now has over 1,100 of their posts, all fully open and public, organized according to tags that they chose—an immense archive of thought and discussion on the texts we were reading. But we do not necessarily expect others to come flocking to this resource.

More to the point is how this exercise affects students: by encouraging them to write and think in the open, we hand them responsibility for their own learning and reflection. They

her translator, Ann Goldstein—but these efforts did not come off. In future, we would do more of these. Similarly, we would add more conversation videos with colleagues and other scholars (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLOSP13zdyx3kpoVe9AdWbb2rErgxQWGP8>), and produce more "behind the scenes" videos, to follow up on questions that arise during class discussion.

⁹ See Bourdieu, *Distinction* 372. Watch the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vl434Ui-dhs>. Or embedded in the course website: <https://rmst202.arts.ubc.ca/ferrante-on-class-capital-and-language/>.

have control over the technology and the learning environment. For instance, they can format their blogs as they saw fit—some posted images or chose slogans or mottos (“Romance... but not really”; “Letters to the Romance World”); some experimented with the template or theme—and at the end of the semester they are free to delete everything, or to keep it as a record of their thinking.¹⁰ In their final entries, many of them noted their pride in their accomplishments: several mentioned the physical fact of the books residing on their bookshelves—“I am grateful to have taken this class, and excited that it contributed so many colourful and diverse books to my physical bookshelf (which I hold as a prized possession)”—but the blogs, too, are a reminder of their reflections and discussions about those books. When we confine student learning within the boundaries of the classroom, it is as though the learning stops when the course comes to an end. This impression is accentuated by Learning Management Systems that bar student access once the semester is over. But as Harney and Moten point out, it is at the fringes of the classroom, in the spaces in between, in the undercommons, that study takes flight.

This is, however, the one area in which we encountered (minor) student resistance. As a student in our focus group put it, the convenience of the Learning Management System is that it sends out notifications when any work is due: “I’m so used to Canvas constantly telling me ‘You have an assignment, you have an assignment, you have to do this!’... I’ve started to rely on it.” We may look to enable such notifications in future courses. On the other hand, there is no clearer sign of the ways in which such systems habituate students, as well as faculty, and deny them responsibility for even the minimal elements of their own workflow. Our course structure sought to hand back agency and choice to the students, dislodging them (if only slightly) from the programming implicit in the everyday routine to which we have all become inured.

¹⁰ Jim Groom, with his “Domain of One’s Own” initiative, pioneered at the University of Mary Washington, has gone still further in empowering students by handing them the tools to their own learning technology, and at the same time helping them establish a durable academic and professional footprint online. See <https://umw.domains/> for the current articulation of that project at UMW.

Flexible Pathways: Letting Students "Choose Their Own Adventure"

"Since I was able to choose what I got to read, and when I got to do so, that sparked my engagement. That ability to choose allowed me to focus my interest into what I chose to read."

—Student, in focus group

We wanted to give students choice. One of the course's themes was excess. We wanted it to overflow the boundaries of the institution, and of the semester. We were interested in how excess plays out in the books chosen for study and analysis: the fact that so many of these texts also map lines of flight and escape. More prosaically, we also realized early on in planning the syllabus that there was simply too much to fit within a twelve-week semester. Even after shifting our starting point from modernity to modernism, and deciding to focus on novels (rather than non-fiction, poetry, drama, or film), there was still so much to cover: all the major Romance languages—Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian—but also at least a couple of less-commonly studied literatures; Europe but also the Americas and Africa; canonical texts but also books that allow for diversity and inclusion; representative styles and approaches from different periods. It was hard to decide among the many possibilities. In the end, we prepared *too many* texts, and allowed students to choose which ones they would read.

In some ways, there is nothing very radical about setting a wide range of topics of which students are expected to prepare only a sub-set. This, after all, is more or less the traditional framework for state-run national examinations in Europe: the French (post-graduate) *agrégation*, for instance; or for many years the secondary-school GCE (General Certificate of Education) "A" and "O"-levels in Britain, for which examination boards would announce a long list of set texts, from which individual schools and teachers would then choose what to teach in their classes; or at undergraduate level, also in the UK, Oxbridge "finals," for which individual students might prepare a very different set of themes in line with either their own choice or that of their supervisor or tutor.¹¹

¹¹ Jon Beasley-Murray has experience both with the GCE (which have since been replaced by the General Certificate of Secondary Education, or GCSE, examinations, though there is a fair amount of continuity between them) and with Cambridge supervisions and finals. He vividly remembers his shock at first seeing a North American campus bookstore, with its piles of books, identical down to the same edition, that would be read by all the students in a course.

Elsewhere, syllabi and what is expected of students tend to be much more regimented—or their regimentation takes a different form—but again, students often have latitude to pursue different options or follow their interests. In North America, that choice is usually exercised at the level of the program, in that students choose which courses they wish to take (within certain parameters, but often including a whole series of “electives”), and they may have fewer options within any one course.¹² We, however, wanted to increase student agency and responsibility week to week, not merely semester to semester.

Our syllabus therefore had sixteen texts on offer, at least one from each decade from the 1910s to the 2010s. Five were originally written in Spanish: two from Spain, two from Chile, and one from Mexico. Five were French: four from metropolitan France, one from Martinique. Two were Portuguese: one each from Brazil and Angola. Two were Italian. One was Catalan, and another Romanian. Ten of the authors were men; six were women. They were all more or less canonical, though several were experimental and/or challenged genre conventions.¹³ All but one were full, unabridged novels, averaging around 200 pages each. We did not expect any individual student to read all of this.

We classified four of these as core texts: two French (by Marcel Proust and by Georges Perec) and two Spanish (in fact, Chilean: María Luisa Bombal and Roberto Bolaño). These four were obligatory, and every student had to read them.¹⁴ Beyond that, the decision

¹² We have found very little written about what we are here calling “flexible pathways” or “choose your own adventure,” though the same allusion to children’s role-playing books comes in the title of Flannery Burke’s description of a course in which students would collectively advocate and then vote for one of two possible syllabi, presenting different approaches to a survey of United States history. In Burke’s course, however, once the election has taken place all students commit to the same syllabus, though he does tell us that he has “considered placing choices throughout a given syllabus that generate a chain of different options later in the semester or allowing students to mix and match various options” (25). Until and unless Burke follows through with such ideas, our approach is probably closest to that outlined by Amy Getty, who again also uses the “choose your own adventure” tagline to explain her decisions in refashioning an American literature survey course in which, on a weekly basis, students in small groups choose different texts and argue for or against them to the rest of the group, which then decides which they will choose to read together. Before coming up with this model, Getty had previously tried a different system rather closer to ours, though in her case this did not work for her or her students. What we do not quite understand is Getty’s question: “How [. . .] could I get through 300 years of American literature in 15 weeks while adding in student agency and choice?” (33). For us, allowing students more agency and choice is precisely what enables us to better approach the (still intractable) problem of “coverage” in a broad survey course. In very different contexts, see also the articles by M. Numan Kanar and by John Stewart and Kathleen Sheppard.

¹³ In future iterations, we would expand the selection of texts still further. We had nothing, or instance, from French North Africa or the Middle East. We would like to add texts from Portugal and Argentina. There was nothing that explicitly thematized LGBTQ+ issues. A text from Asia would be nice.

¹⁴ The choice of these particular books as “core” texts was somewhat arbitrary, but defensible: they display some of the key thematic and stylistic issues that we wanted students to examine (modernism and

was up to them. They could read as much or as little as they wanted. Some weeks there was a choice between two possible texts; some weeks there was not.

*Simplified Syllabus. Obligatory readings in bold.*¹⁵

- week 1: Introductions: "Inventing Romance Studies"
- week 2: Marcel Proust, "Combray" (France, 1913)**
- week 3: Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant* (France, 1926)
- week 4: María Luisa Bombal, *The Shrouded Woman* (Chile, 1938)**
- week 5: Alberto Moravia, *Agostino* (Italy, 1944)
or Carmen Laforet, *Nada* (Spain, 1945)
- week 6: Joseph Zobel, *Black Shack Alley* (Martinique, 1950)
or Françoise Sagan, *Bonjour Tristesse* (France, 1954)
- week 7: Mercè Rodoreda, *The Time of the Doves* (Catalonia, 1962)
or Clarice Lispector, *The Passion According to G. H.* (Brazil, 1964)
- week 8: Georges Perec, *W, or the Memory of Childhood* (France, 1975)**
- week 9: Carlos Fuentes, *The Old Gringo* (Mexico, 1985)
or Norman Manea, *The Trenchcoat* (Romania, 1989)
- week 10: Roberto Bolaño, *Amulet* (Chile, 1999)**
- week 11: Javier Cercas, *Soldiers of Salamis* (Spain, 2001)
- week 12: Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend* (Italy, 2012)
or José Eduardo Agualusa, *The Society of Reluctant Dreamers*
(Angola, 2017)

When two readings were on offer, our original idea was to teach them simultaneously: the same day(s), in the same classroom, we would be coordinating discussions of two very different texts. But the scale of the logistical challenge soon became clear.¹⁶ Moreover, the physical limits of university infrastructure impinged upon our plans: as more students enrolled in the course, we had too many for the room we had been

postmodernism; margin and center; truth and reality; history and politics; point of view and perspective); they were also distributed conveniently through the semester.

¹⁵ The two changes we would immediately make to this syllabus would be to add texts for weeks 3 and 11: Roberto Arlt's *Mad Toy* for week 3, as a non-European (Argentine) instance of avant-garde modernism; and Assia Djebar for week 11, as a woman writer in French from the Arab world (Algeria).

¹⁶ In the end, we did do this once, in the final week of the semester, by which time the Teaching Assistants felt comfortable managing an entire class session on their own: we secured a second, smaller, classroom and held two discussions in parallel, on separate floors of the same building.

assigned (which had a limit of 72). Though the first few weeks of the semester were online (via Zoom), at some point we expected to return to in-person instruction. We therefore asked for a bigger room, but there were none available except in lecture-theater format, which would have made small-group discussions difficult if not impossible. We suggested that students could stand or sit on the floor, but were told that fire regulations prohibited exceeding the intended capacity of the space allocated to us. So we realized that we would have to experiment also with attendance policy.

We had two weekly slots, on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. On weeks in which we were teaching two texts, some students would come on the Tuesday, others on the Thursday, depending on the text they had read. On other weeks, students were welcome but not obliged to attend both class sessions: they could come to just one or the other. Except for the very first class of the semester (which was on Zoom) and the very last (and we would cross that bridge when we came to it), at no point would all the students be in the same place at the same time. In any given week, then, some students were reading and discussing (say) a novel originally written in Catalan; others were reading a novel from Brazil; and still others were sitting out that week altogether. Periodically, everybody would be reading the same text, but even then we would have one constituency on the Tuesday and another on the Thursday.¹⁷ The composition of the class was constantly changing, day to day and week to week.

This aspect of the course was the most difficult, but also the most surprising and the most rewarding. It was most difficult because, frankly, we significantly increased our workload: much of the time it was as though we were teaching two courses, and on material that was almost entirely new to us. Then there was the fact that we could never be entirely sure as to what any particular group of students had read or what discussions they had participated in: we were constantly engaged in a juggling act. But the results were enlightening and enriching for students and teachers alike.

We began preparing for the course the previous summer, sketching out a syllabus and a list of texts. We had not read most of the books before assigning them, and had only

¹⁷ We invited students to come to both class sessions when the same text was being taught, and ensured that the two sessions would be sufficiently different to make it worth their while. But very few students took up that offer. They much preferred turning up once, rather than twice, a week.

taught two—Fuentes and Cercas—previously. Much of the summer was therefore spent researching, identifying, locating, and then reading potential texts that would fit within an evolving framework. Some of our choices were novels we had long wanted to read for ourselves—Proust and Ferrante, for instance. In other cases, we sought advice from colleagues: “What’s a good avant-garde prose fiction from the 1920s?”; “Who’s an interesting mid-century French woman writer?”; “What’s a teachable Catalan text?”; “Who are notable twentieth-century Romanian writers?”; “What about contemporary literature from Lusophone Africa?”; and so on. Moving outside our set routines and comfort zones, we read voraciously, at the same time pondering what kind of Romance Studies emerged from all this.¹⁸ It was not clear what tied these diverse readings together, beyond the contingencies of linguistic history, the fact that they were originally written in more or less related languages. It became clear that one purpose of the course should be to interrogate the category within which it was set. We drafted an introductory lecture, inveighing against the chimera of a “Romance World.”

The Autumn was spent writing and revising lectures, even as we continued to read and refine the list of texts. We did due diligence in terms of secondary and critical readings, though on the whole these did not surface in the lectures, which were envisaged as short, exemplary but far from exhaustive, readings of the texts on their own terms. The aim was to produce a written script on each text of around 2,000 words, which would later be made into a video for upload and publication. The lectures were loosely associated, in both form and content, but each had to stand on its own in that students would not be progressing from one to another, but rather picking their own ways through the material. Again, there was much consultation with colleagues, with drafts exchanged and revised.¹⁹ Another theme emerged, in addition to the “excess” that had marked the project from the outset: betrayal, in the double sense of infidelity and revelation. We were betraying Romance Studies: turning against it, but also sketching out its true potential. Romance Studies would itself be defined by betrayal, its languages and cultures bastard offspring of the Classics, its literature a “minor literature” that defies bureaucratic reason.

¹⁸ Jon Beasley-Murray was responsible here, as Teaching Assistants for the course had yet to be assigned.

¹⁹ Tim Beasley-Murray (Jon’s brother, who teaches “European Thought and Culture” at University College, London) became a key interlocutor. It was in the Autumn also that Jennifer Nagtegaal became part of the teaching team. Patricio Robles joined later, shortly before the start of the semester, as the number of enrolled students continued to rise.

Once the course began, we had no idea which texts students would pick. We provided them with brief (two- to four-line) descriptions of each book, to guide their choices: “*Bonjour Tristesse*. Short and, again, easy. [. . .] It’s about being a sulky teenager, love affairs, and revenge.”; “*The Passion According to G. H.*. Almost certainly the most difficult book on the list. [. . .] It’s about race, class, and cockroaches.”²⁰ We expected students to gravitate en masse to the shorter, easier novels. But this did not happen: many of them chose the texts that we had identified as longer and more challenging.²¹

We also worried that the course would come to feel disjointed as students shuffled in and out, each following their own path or (as we came to see it) “choosing their own adventure.” Would they feel isolated and disengaged? But this did not happen. In fact, the course generated a strong sense of community.²² If anything, the different pathways or streams began to stray or overflow, merging or bleeding into each other. The course was difficult to teach, in part because we could not assume anything of any student: we knew that they had all read the same four core texts, but they may well not have been part of the same discussions on those texts (and each discussion was, again, quite different). Nothing could be taken for granted—but then we probably take too much for granted of students, and it is good to be shaken from that habit. Instead, collectively the entire student body had amassed an immense archive, of which each student was a singular part (none of them chose exactly the same pathway as any other), but within which they found countless commonalities and resonances. As the semester progressed, in every class session we found this amazing and enlightening.

Students began to trace diverse and unanticipated connections between the texts they had read. Some commented on blogs about texts that they had not themselves read. In class, they spelled out those connections to other students who had not followed the same

²⁰ See <https://rmst202.arts.ubc.ca/which-texts/>.

²¹ Fewer students (15) chose to read Joseph Zobel’s *Black Shack Alley* than any other text, but it was up against Françoise Sagan’s shorter and manifestly easier—and for most students, more relatable—*Bonjour Tristesse* (chosen by 53 of them). Other weeks, the split was more equal: e.g. 36 chose Carlos Fuentes’s *The Old Gringo* while 29 chose Norman Manea’s *The Trenchcoat*. It will be apparent that the different numbers made for some fairly small classes, and others that were much larger. Either way, however, we ran them all as seminars, with both small- and large-group discussion.

²² Asked in the final Exit Survey “Did you feel a sense of community in this class?” 50% strongly agreed (“a lot of community”) and 39% moderately agreed; only 6% disagreed. One student added in a comment: “only class that i made new friends in!”

pathway.²³ New themes and patterns came to the fore—memory, violence, childhood, trauma—some of which we anticipated, but which students now saw in books that at first sight were quite distinct from each other. The same surprises of recognition and difference hit the students, too. As one said in a concluding blog post: “I was incredibly skeptical of how on Earth these books could share similarities when they are all so different in origin. It was really interesting to begin to make connections between them all, even the ones I didn't understand too well.” In another’s words: “I truly enjoyed this class so much because it felt like when I was reading, it was by choice! [. . .] I felt like I chose books which I was passionate about the topics but I feel like the books ended up surprising me. This was a pleasant surprise as it challenged me to think about concepts that I don’t know much about.” At times, students asked if we had planned this all out, to which we had to respond: no, *they* were the ones who were making sense of and imposing different forms of order on all this variety. *We had challenged them to invent Romance Studies, and they were indeed constructing a field of study, with all its intertextual connections and overlaps.* This field’s coherence may have been fragile and ephemeral—a product of this particular course—but it would not have existed at all without their insights as a collective, a multitude thinking together.

Student Contracts: Handing Over Control of the Grade

“This grading system was FANTASTIC.”

—Student, response on Exit Survey

We wanted students to read as much as possible, and to be rewarded for doing so. Yet, because most of them were taking this course for a requirement, we also wanted to make it possible for them to do the minimum and still pass. We wanted the decision about the grade to be in their hands. We therefore used a contract grading system, for which their grade was determined almost entirely according to the effort that they put in.

As we have said, we set the students four core, obligatory texts: Proust, Bombal, Perec, and Bolaño; two French, two Spanish (Latin American); classics of modernism and

²³ In the final class, for instance, when we debated which had been the best book of the semester, some students had to defend books that they had not read, but instead based on their classmates’ comments and conversation, working with them as they compared their own judgments of those texts they had read.

postmodernism; none of them particularly easy. If they read these, they had done enough to pass the class. They proved that they read them by writing 400-500 word blog posts about each. Along with introductory and concluding blog posts the first and last weeks of the semester (for a total written contribution of 2,400-3,000 words), comments on other students' reflections, and attendance at four class sessions at which these texts would be discussed (plus the first and final weeks), they would earn a passing grade, even if they chose not to do anything else. In fact, every student would have to do all this as a minimum, if they were to earn at least a C.

If students wanted to earn a higher grade, they had to read (and write) more. For each extra book they read (and so for each extra blog post, set of comments, and class attendance), their grade would rise an extra notch: five books would net them a C+; six books, a B-; seven books, a B; and so on all the way to A+, for which they would be reading, and writing about, a book every week.

Students indicated at the start of the semester which books they would read (therefore also which blog posts they would write, and for which weeks they would comment on other blogs and attend class discussions), and so which grade they expected to receive. They signed and dated this contract, which was then counter-signed, dated, and returned to them by the professor.²⁴ They then had one chance, just before midterm, to amend this contract, for instance by reducing the number of books for which they had contracted, if they felt they had bitten off more than they could chew, or by increasing them if they now felt more confident or had more time than expected, or simply by changing the titles they had chosen, swapping one or more for another.²⁵ Otherwise, they were to stick to the contract. If they did not do so, i.e. if they broke their contract, the maximum grade they could receive would be two notches below that contracted—a B+ if they had contracted for an A, a B- if they had contracted for a B+, and so on. There was a midterm and a final exam, but they only help determine either a) the precise percentage grade a student would receive within the band for which they had contracted (at our university, an A is between 85 and 89%, for instance, and we have to indicate a percentage mark) or b) their

²⁴ The contract template is attached as an appendix to this article.

²⁵ 25 students took the opportunity to amend their contracts, but there was no particular pattern: eight reduced the number of books (and so the grade) for which they had originally contracted; seven increased the number (for a higher grade); and ten simply swapped the books around.

final grade, subject to the new ceiling, in the event that they broke their contract. At UBC, all first- and second-year (100- and 200-level) classes have to include a final exam; but there is nothing to say it has to be obligatory. In effect, we made the exams optional.²⁶ We guaranteed that they would receive the grade for which they had contracted, so long as they completed all the elements of their contract. But none of those individual elements were graded: we did not distinguish between a "satisfactory" and an "unsatisfactory" blog post, so long as it was of the required length and published in time; likewise, we did not differentiate between "satisfactory" and "unsatisfactory" blog comments or class attendance. Either they did them, or they did not.

We were inspired by scholars and teachers such as Peter Elbow and Cathy Davidson, who have advocated for rethinking the ways in which students are assessed. As we progressed, and now as we reflect back, we have also learned from others such as Susan Blum, Asao Inoue, Alfie Kohn, and Jesse Stommel, who have pioneered what is sometimes termed "ungrading." But our approach to and implementation of contract grading are different from any models we have seen. First, there is no qualitative evaluation, as there is for instance for Elbow, whose method is a hybrid of contract grading and traditional evaluation.²⁷ Second, nor do we ask students to evaluate their

²⁶ Even when it came to percentage grades within a band, we told students that the exams would be unlikely to make much difference. A student who had contracted for an A+, for instance, would be very unlikely to receive more than the minimum percentage within that band (which at UBC ranges from 90-100%; so they would almost certainly receive a 90), unless their performance on the exam were superlative. Conversely, a student who had contracted for a low grade (e.g. a C or C+, 60-63% and 64-67% respectively) would most likely receive the highest grade within that band, unless their exam performance were truly unsatisfactory. So the exam would make most difference for those who contracted for "middling" grades—B+ or A-, say—and even then, it would only be a matter of a few percentage points either way.

We nonetheless encouraged students to take the midterm, as insurance in case they went on to break their contracts, though in the event 18 (out of 76) elected not to do so. For those who took the exam, we provided feedback and a "grade" (expressed as - -, -, o, +, or ++) to indicate whether they were "approaching," "meeting," or "exceeding" expectations. For students who later broke their contracts, we returned to their midterms and gave them a percentage grade. Approaching the final exam, we determined each student's grade if they were to decide not to take it. In fact, only 10 (out of 76) did take it, most of whom had broken their contracts previously. The exam ended on a Monday at 2:30pm. Thanks in part to the fact that those writing it finished early, we were done with grading by 2:35pm.

In the event, decisions about precise percentage grades were based as much on other aspects—quality and originality of blog posts; quality and enthusiasm of class participation, for instance—as on exam performances. Again, however, in every case it was a matter of a couple of percentage points in one direction or the other, though we did not take these decisions lightly.

²⁷ "Why the hybridity?" Elbow asks rhetorically. "It is the blunt compromise I make because I am teaching in an institution committed to grades" (95). But it is not at all clear that this follows. We have nothing in principle against hybrid assessment, but it is not *required* by the institutional framework.

own work and assign a grade accordingly, as do for instance Kohn and Stommel.²⁸ Third, unlike with Davidson, it is not that students do different kinds of work to achieve a higher grade; they merely do more of the same.²⁹ Fourth and finally, though what we came up with is closest to Inoue's "labor-based contract grading," our students choose individual contracts (rather than abiding by a collective contract, negotiated with the class as a whole), and we ask for much less self-reflection on their own work and labor practices.³⁰ Again, either they do what is required to fulfill their contract, or they do not.

We have no grand philosophical or political statement as to why we chose our particular system.³¹ We chose not to evaluate the blog posts because we wanted this to be low-stakes writing, in which students should feel free to try out ideas, exercise their imaginations, and not be bound by what they thought was expected of a literary analysis. If anything, we wanted to upend their assumptions as to what literary analysis looks like. We wanted them to unlearn pernicious habits inherited (mostly) from high school, which inhibit their reading, turning literary reading above all into an exercise charged with anxiety.

Many students wrote in their introductory blog posts that they did not consider themselves "readers," or that they used to read, but no longer did so. This provoked a discussion about how, when, and why they did read, and how it made them feel. We

²⁸ Kohn argues against grades in their entirety, but suggests that where "teachers [are] required to submit a final grade, there's no requirement for them to decide unilaterally what that grade will be. Thus, students can be invited to participate in that process either as a negotiation (such that the teacher has the final say) or by simply permitting students to grade themselves." Stommel reports that "At the end of the term, every institution where I've worked has required me to issue a final grade for students. So, I ask the students to grade themselves. I wish I didn't have to do this. [. . .] But I have found that asking students to give themselves a grade also makes the why and how of grades a valuable subject of the conversations we have."

²⁹ A sample syllabus from a course taught by Davidson can be found in Katopodis and Davidson's "Contract Grading and Peer Review."

³⁰ Nor are we much persuaded by Inoue's argument (developed in *Labor-Based Grading Contracts*) that there is something particularly anti-racist about contract grading. But it may be closer to the "rational pedagogy" for which Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron argue in *The Inheritors* and in *Reproduction*, in that its transparency and explicitness may militate against the mystified conversion of cultural into academic capital. But note Bourdieu and Passeron's many provisos about the "Utopian" nature of the quest to rationalize pedagogy (*Reproduction* 53), not least at the conclusion to *The Inheritors*, where they observe that "a truly rational pedagogy [. . .] would not be able to become a reality unless all the conditions for a democratization of the recruitment of teachers and pupils were fulfilled, the first of which would be the setting up of a rational pedagogy" (76).

³¹ But there is surely a connection between questioning current grading practices (and indeed also a commitment to open education) and the critique of meritocracy popularized recently by, among others, Michael Sandel (in *The Tyranny of Merit*) and Thomas Piketty (in *Capital and Ideology*), but seldom better articulated than in its first formulation, in Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. It is surprising that there is not more discussion of "merit" in this broader sense in a book such as Blum's collection, *Ungrading*.

pointed out that they read all the time—whether text messages or TikToks or road signs or menus. But faced with Literature (with a capital “L”), they felt that they were always missing meaning that lay “behind” or “between” the lines, for which they were lacking some kind of secret key that they placed under the rubric of “symbolism” or “context” or whatever else high school literature classes had instilled in them was the correct code to unlock a text’s “hidden” meaning. By contrast, we encouraged them to look at the words on the page, and, inspired by Proust (or by Proust’s narrator’s account of his mother reading to him as a child), to be “unfaithful” readers, betraying the text where necessary (*Swann’s Way* 41). We wanted them to recover that childlike excitement about stories and narrative. Hence we were happy not to judge their reflections on what they read. And as one student put it in their concluding blog post: “I am not a reader in any way nor do I 100% commit to a lot of the courses I take (I will admit that). But not once did I find myself dreading this course. I love how judgement free it is and just how free it is in general. [. . .] I love how open our lovely TA’s and Professor are about the reality of sometimes not understanding a book, and accepting that that’s okay.” If grades inhibit student reading, we were prepared to do away with them. And the more they read, the more they were going to learn, and the better prepared they would be for the future. We could not promise them the 10,000 hours of practice that Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers* famously touts as “the story of success.” But perhaps we could re-instill a habit of regular reading.

We did not abandon grades entirely: students still received a grade on their transcript at the end of the semester. But we endeavored to make smarter use of them, less as an instrument of judgment and more as a goal to which students could realistically aim. We promised not an “easy A,” but an achievable A: they would know exactly what was required to get a high grade; there would be no mystery; everything was transparent and open. The grades were not curved: they did not have to outperform others to do well; in theory, everyone could opt for an A or even an A+. And if they elected to aim for a lower grade, there would be no shame or judgment. They simply had to contract for a grade of their choice, knowing (as we of course did not) what other commitments or pressures on their time and attention they might have. And then they had to stick with it.

We were surprised at how many students contracted for an A+: almost half the class. We expected more to contract for a lower grade, because they were taking this course for a requirement, and they knew they could expect intensive reading of often difficult texts,

even though they told us they were out of practice reading any kind of literature. Yet over the first few weeks of the semester, we found ourselves counter-signing contracts guaranteeing dozens of students the maximum grade possible.

*Grades: Contracted and Final*³²

Grades	Contracted		Final	
A+	34	45%	33	43%
A	15	20%	13	17%
A-	11	14%	11	14%
B+	4	5%	5	7%
B	8	11%	5	7%
B-	1	1%	1	1%
C+	1	1%	4	5%
C	2	3%	3	4%
F			1	1%
Totals:	76	100%	76	100%

The number of students who contracted for an A+ made us uneasy.³³ When the midterm window came, during which they could amend their contracts, we suggested it might be more strategic to contract for a lower grade: after all, if they broke their contract, the highest grade they could get would be an A-. We told them they could contract for a more

³² Final grades are lower than the contracted grades, as the nature of the contract was that nobody could get a higher grade than that for which they had contracted. The course average, in percentage terms, was just under 83%. (To be precise, it was 82.73%.)

Also in the end we allowed a fair amount of leeway when determining whether or not they fulfilled their contracts: we did of course permit absences or late work when students had a genuine excuse (there were some COVID cases and close contacts, for instance); but we also decided, without announcing this in advance, that we would forgive one breach of the contract's terms without any consequences; and we were generous in our assessment of the number of comments on fellow classmates' blogs, which for technical reasons were sometimes not published or were unsigned. Had we been more hardline, there would have been more broken contracts. In the end, 10 out of 76 broke their contracts; one student failed to meet the minimum course requirements.

³³ Indeed, for much of the semester we were asking ourselves: when will this all go wrong?

achievable A, and be sure of getting that. But the vast majority stuck it out. And most of them—all but one—kept to their contract, and were rewarded with an A+. By contrast, for instance, of the eight who contracted for a B, almost half went on to break their contracts and therefore to receive no more than a C+. *Those who contracted for a higher grade were more motivated to succeed and ultimately more engaged with the course and the course material.*³⁴ They did better also because they put in more work and more effort. They learned more than other students.

Still, we were concerned. In most of our courses, we award few if any A+ grades: usually, we award none. And though neither our department nor the Faculty of Arts or the university prescribe a quota for grade distribution, they have in the past promulgated a guideline that no more than 75% grades could be in the A and B range, and that A grades should be between 5 and 25% of the total grades distributed. Our grading tends to be lower than the average, but we were once called in by a Head of Department to explain why a class had higher grades than normal. In practice, there is immense variation: looking at the data available to us for UBC, for instance in the academic year 2019-2020, there are plenty of courses in which over a quarter of the class earned an A+, and whose average percentage grade was often higher than ours.³⁵ There are courses in which over half the class, sometimes much more than half the class, receive an A+.³⁶ We even find at least one in which everyone got an A+.³⁷ And yet there are also many courses that have a

³⁴ Whether they were motivated by the grade itself or by other factors is, of course, hard to determine (and may even be unclear to the students themselves). Robb Lindgren and Rudy McDaniel, in a discussion of their own implementation of a flexible syllabus, stress that agency spurs motivation: "People are more driven to achieve the agendas they set for themselves. Feelings of agency will often lead people to work harder and to persevere when confronted with challenges" (346). Similarly, based on their experience and analysis of an online course in Australia, Ryan Jopp and Jay Cohen conclude that "greater involvement of students in their own learning through the provision of assessment choice, can reduce anxiety and increase confidence, and lead to increased student engagement and improved student satisfaction overall" (17). These were surely factors also in our course.

³⁵ A few examples show the range of such courses: APSC 450, "Professional Engineering Practice"; ASIA 315, "Japan from Feudal to Modern State"; LASO 204, "Introduction to Law and Society"; PHIL 333, "Biomedical Ethics"; POLI 360, "Security Studies"; PSYC 365, "Cognitive Neuroscience."

³⁶ E.g. FRST 201, "Forest Ecology"; GEOG 352, "Urbanization in the Global South"; KIN 232, "Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Health"; PHYS 229, "Intermediate Experimental Physics II"; PUNJ 101, "Introductory Punjabi"; RHSC 420, "Elements of Neuroanatomy and Neurophysiology"; RUSS 101, "Basic Russian"; SPPH 400, "Statistics for Health Research."

³⁷ ISCI 311, "The Size of Things."

grade distribution with which we are more familiar.³⁸ Across the university, inconsistency is the norm. No wonder grades are perceived as arbitrary... they are!

Even so, we wondered if we should not have offered an A+ as an option. Perhaps the most eloquent argument against this came from a student in our focus group:

To be very honest, if you guys didn't offer an A+ I feel like that would have been absolute bullshit, because then it just becomes like other courses where the A+ is some kind of illusion where you can never reach 100%, which I think is utter BS. But I like the transparency, and I picked a lot of the books and I picked my grade because of the subject matter and not because of the grade that I wanted. I looked at all the books and I chose the ones that I felt I was interested in, and it just so happened to be an A, and I feel like that's the way that ratings should be a lot more of the time, so I think this is a good system and it's fair and it's transparent, which is unlike a lot of other courses.³⁹

It was eye-opening to see how disillusioned and even angry the students in the focus group were about contemporary higher education. In the words of another: "I believe that the entire way that we structure education right now is based on vapid, frivolous... it feels as though nobody learns anything, because it's structured around exams, midterms, finals [. . .]. I think experimenting with it is inherently valuable because of how rigid and shitty I think the current structure is." Some of this frustration may be the result of their experience over the past couple of years during COVID. But the pandemic has merely revealed problems that were festering under the surface.

Did students get the same grades as they would have done under a more traditional system of evaluation? No. But nor should we expect them to. If we change the system of evaluation, it should not be simply to replicate the results of the system we have replaced. Here, most students did better than they would have done otherwise. (Some surely did worse.) We worried we may have been going too easy on them, but that feeling is a legacy of our own habituation to seeing grades as much as punishment as reward. Students reported that they worked at least as hard, and generally harder, than in comparable

³⁸ Good luck trying to get an A+ in History, for instance!

³⁹ The full focus group transcript is at <https://rmst202.arts.ubc.ca/focus-group/>.

courses. The fear (expressed to us by colleagues) is that, if we do not judge the quality of student work, they will "take advantage" and spend little time on it, turning in sub-standard material. But this did not happen.⁴⁰ As one blog comment put it, contract grading "strangely encouraged me to put my best work forward. Reverse psychology perhaps..." Students in our course read and wrote a lot (up to sixteen novels, and 5,200-6,500 words of commentary and reflection). And they very much felt they learned an immense amount, in conditions freed from the stress of grade uncertainty.

Even those who broke their contract thanked us. As one put it: "I had a tough time with attending online classes in general over the past few years. It is very unique at UBC to have a TA email you about missing class and I am very happy that it happened because it was a reminder I needed, and I thoroughly enjoyed the class [as] a result. I'm ok with taking that adjusted grade, I just wanted to say thank you to you and the teaching team for caring, or else that grade would probably be much lower!" Asked on the final survey whether they wished more of their classes used contract grading, 89% said "yes" and 11% said "it depends on the class"; none said "no."⁴¹ Our goal should not be student satisfaction, whatever the neoliberal mantra tells us. It should be to encourage thought and to produce concepts, which may sometimes cause discomfort, unsettling students and teachers alike. But we should still listen to students, and trust them.⁴² Part of that must involve relinquishing some of the power of the grade.

⁴⁰ Surveyed during week ten, a large majority (72%) of students felt they were doing the same amount (49%) or more (23%) work than they would be doing in equivalent classes. Only 28% said they were doing less. A majority (59%) of students felt they were doing the same amount (47%) or more (12%) work than they would expect for their contracted grade. 41% said they were doing less. A large majority (71%) of students thought they were doing the same quality (24%) or better (48%) work than they would be doing in equivalent classes. Only 29% thought they were doing worse quality work. See <https://rmst202.arts.ubc.ca/workload-engagement-survey/>.

⁴¹ See <https://rmst202.arts.ubc.ca/final-survey-results/>. Elsewhere, Taylor Lucas also provides a very positive endorsement in "A Student Perspective on Contract Grading": "I encourage professors to consider contract grading in their courses because it enforces student independence and allows them to learn from mistakes. [. . .] So many students, including myself, focus on the destination (the grade) rather than the journey (the act of learning). In my experience, unilateral grading not only allowed me to truly experience the journey of learning, but it taught me how to appreciate it in other classes as well" (14).

⁴² In Asao Inoue's words: "We always have to trust our students at some level. [. . .] My default is to trust them until there's some clear reason for me not to trust them" (qtd. in Faye and Melzer, "Assessment is the Engine of Learning" 8).

Fugitive Study: Building Joyful Affects

"It helped me progress at my own pace, and also it helped me build habits, it really did [. . .] it helped me instill habits, which I hope that I can apply to other courses that have that assigned readings in the future."

—Student, in focus group

We wanted to change the ways in which students thought about literature. More, we wanted to change how they *felt* about literature. Another running theme throughout the course was the observation that reading is not simply an abstruse cognitive activity, abstracted from the physical world around us. It is also affective: it moves us; we read with our entire body, and with the bodies with which we are in contact. *If anything, this contact was more important than the contracts that otherwise structured the course.*⁴³ Hence for instance our video lectures all include a drink pairing—tea with Proust, rum with Joseph Zobel, vodka with Norman Manea, and so on—which is a bit of a gimmick, but a serious gimmick. It enables a quick reading of some aspect of the text (the madeleine scene in "Combray," the sugar plantation in *Black Shack Alley*, the awkward dinner party in *The Trenchcoat*), allows for some material history of the objects that litter both these books and our lives, and also makes us think about our own habits of consumption.

Similarly, we had a playlist of music with which we opened each class session—"The Boys of Summer" for Alberto Moravia's *Agostino*, "Suspiros de España" for Javier Cercas's *Soldiers of Salamis*, and "Datemi un martello" for Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*, for instance.⁴⁴ We did not always comment on the musical selection; sometimes it was simply a mood enhancer. But reading and thinking are also about mood: we wanted to shift the tone from the anxiety with which students initially associated both reading and study, to enhance instead their sense of confidence and empowerment. We wanted to facilitate encounters that lead to what the marrano Dutch philosopher Benedict de Spinoza (another of our touchstones) terms "joyful passions" (see *Ethics* III, P17). As a student put it in a blog post: "The first day we were welcomed with music and little did I know every class we would be welcomed with music. Not only that, but everyone being

⁴³ On the tension between contact and contract, see Jon Beasley-Murray's *Posthegemony*.

⁴⁴ From Ella Fitzgerald to the Style Council, via Inti Illimani and others, listen to the playlist here: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLOSP13zdyx3lcBKImXrp8oZeHh3uDRC_4.

individually welcomed with a hello at the start of class is something I have not seen before, and it makes me really happy." If they could associate literature with joy, they might reshape their habits of reading.

Not that we did not seek to challenge students. Indeed, we chose difficult texts and stressed the need to confront the difficulty that literature always poses for us. If we sought joy, it was often the "difficult joy" of Clarice Lispector's *The Passion of G.H.* After all, from the outset we set students quite the challenge: to invent the entire field and discipline of Romance Studies. Not that they necessarily achieved this, but it was what we were collectively working towards. Rather than imbibing a pre-given canon of knowledge, we encouraged students (and ourselves) to construct habits of study oriented towards the future: a "study for" a work that is still to come. In the open, picking their own pathways, and taking control of their grade, students rose to that challenge. They did better than we could have imagined.

Would we do all this again? Absolutely. Our approach was not without its challenges, for us as well as for the students. While the end-of-semester grading was quick and easy, overall it was more work for us than other courses we have taught: we had to read and prepare much more; however prepared we were, we could never quite anticipate what the following week would bring; the course was constantly in flux as its braided streams or pathways came together or diverged; we spent a lot of time simply recording whether students had fulfilled the various elements of their contract (and reminding them when there seemed to be lapses).⁴⁵ But it was also more rewarding in almost every way.

Would we recommend this approach for other courses? Yes and no. This combination of strategies seemed especially suitable for this course, a lower-level literature survey of a field of study that has still to be defined or determined. It may not serve so well in (say) an upper-level seminar, or in a language course, or in another discipline. On the other hand, we will not know until we—or you—have tried! Moreover, as is evident, we did not stick to any one system: we mixed and matched ideas and techniques from many different sources. Others will want to do the same. Keeping faith with the ideals of openness, flexibility, and student-centered choice may well take different shapes and

⁴⁵ If there is one philosophical or political aspect to the experiment that gives us pause, it is that we found ourselves surveilling—and surveying—the students much more than we anticipated.

forms in other contexts and situations. The point, however, is to take the risk (in fact, much less of a risk than it appears) of experimentation and innovation: to break old habits and come up with something new.

On the final day of the course, the only session in the whole semester in which everyone was all together in person, we played music ("Walls Come Tumbling Down") and handed out drinks (Inca Kola, Perrier, and Colombiana). We debated which had been the best book of the semester—the winner by far, according to the students, was María Luisa Bombal's *The Shrouded Woman*. We also asked students to write possible definitions of Romance Studies on the whiteboards. (The best definition? "It is what we want it to be...") And then we headed outside, to the patio beside which we had been teaching and learning all semester, the other side of the wall of windows that had separated us from the outside. In the open, we took our masks off for a collective photograph. It was not that we had left the pandemic entirely behind us, but (call us Romantics) we felt that we were coming out stronger, thanks to what we had learned. We had escaped the classroom at last.

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Appendix: Contract Grading Rubric

RMST 202: Romance Studies, Modernism to the Present
Spring 2022 Grading Contract

This course uses “contract grading.” This means that you choose in advance the work you will do, and receive a relevant grade so long as you fulfil that contract.

The four texts you *have* to read in order to pass this class are those by Proust, Bombal, Perec, and Bolaño. If you do not read these four, you will not pass the class. If you do, you will pass. All the other texts are optional, but your grade will rise the more that you read. How do you show that you have read a text? You write and publish a blog post of reaction and response to it, of 400-500 words, and comment on two blogs posts written by your classmates.

You will also write an introductory blogpost (in week one), and a concluding blogpost (in week 12), reflecting on what you have learned.

The more books that you read (and so blogposts and comments that you write), the higher your grade will be, as follows:

Number of texts read / blogposts written	Percentage Grade	Final Letter Grade
4 (Proust, Bombal, Perec, and Bolaño) / 6	60-63	C
5 (the basic four plus one) / 7	64-67	C+
6 (the basic four plus two) / 8	68-71	B-
7 (the basic four plus three) / 9	72-75	B
8 (the basic four plus four) / 10	76-79	B+
9 (the basic four plus five) / 11	80-84	A-
10 (the basic four plus six) / 12	85-89	A
11 (the basic four plus seven) / 13	90-100	A+

You can choose which books you read and write on (after the basic four). Some weeks you have more than one option. You tell me in advance how many and which books you plan to read. This is your contract. In return, if you fulfil that contract, I guarantee you the appropriate grade.

Over the semester, you are allowed to make one, and only one, revision of your contract (changing the choice of books, or the number of books, to get a higher or a lower grade). No changes are permitted after week six (February 17).

You also need to attend class for at least as many weeks as the number of books you are reading. So for instance, if you choose to read eight books (for a B), you will need to attend class for eight weeks, plus the introductory and concluding weeks. The only exception is for students who are contracting for an A+: they are allowed one week’s free absence, just as if they were only contracting for an A.

There will be a short midterm and final exam. These will be used to determine your final grade within the parameters determined by the number of texts you have read. The midterm and final exam may also be used to determine your grade if you fail to fulfil your contract.

RMST 202: Romance Studies, Modernism to the Present

Spring 2022 Grading Contract

Check the boxes below to signify which books you plan to read, meaning that you will write blog posts and comments and come to class on the relevant weeks. (The required texts and weeks are already checked for you.) Some weeks you have to choose between two possibilities. At the bottom of each column, put the total number of boxes you have checked.

week	text	blogpost	comments	class
1	Introductions	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2	Marcel Proust, "Combray"	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<i>January 18: Contract due</i>				
3	Louis Aragon, <i>Paris Peasant</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	María Luisa Bombal, <i>The Shrouded Woman</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
5	Alberto Moravia, <i>Agostino</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<i>or</i> Carmen Laforet, <i>Nada</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	Joseph Zobel, <i>Black Shack Alley</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<i>or</i> Françoise Sagan, <i>Bonjour Tristesse</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>February 17: Last date to make changes to your contract</i>				
7	Mercè Rodoreda, <i>The Time of the Doves</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<i>or</i> Clarice Lispector, <i>The Passion According to G. H.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	Georges Perec, <i>W, or the Memory of Childhood</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
9	Carlos Fuentes, <i>The Old Gringo</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<i>or</i> Norman Manea, <i>The Trenchcoat</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	Roberto Bolaño, <i>Amulet</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
11	Javier Cercas, <i>Soldiers of Salamis</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12	Elena Ferrante, <i>My Brilliant Friend</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<i>or</i> José Eduardo Agualusa, <i>The Society of Reluctant Dreamers</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12	Conclusions	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Totals:		_____	_____	_____

Your name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

On the basis of the above, you will receive a grade of: _____

Signed by Professor Jon Beasley-Murray: _____

Date: _____