

Rewarding Effort: Labour-Based Grading Contract

~ Dr Pritha Chakrabarti

What if we were to assess students not based on their performance in relation to their classmates, but in relation to the growth they have shown in the span of an academic year? Sounds idealistic? At a time when our assessment process is bound by institutional requirements of written examinations spread across the year, this might seem far-fetched. However, there is a possibility where, as teachers, we can create a safe corner for our students where their efforts are rewarded, rather than their merit.

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In 2019, Asao B. Inoue, outlined a framework of a labour-based grading contract in the context of a writing classroom in his book, **Labour-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom**. In his work, Asao points out the inherent inequality in a diverse classroom where students from different backgrounds come with different levels of social and cultural exposure to prior knowledge (*habitus*) leading to an unequal start at the very outset of a course, which can in turn affect the results of standardized assessment techniques. Rather than rightfully reflecting what students have learnt in the class, such assessment methods often hide the existing inequality of exposure that students bring to the classroom. Add to that the differential access of students to time and resources, parental support as well as their diverse cognitive structures, and the final grades seldom do justice in mapping the learning outcome of a student. In this article, I will try to expand upon some of the ways in which such inequity can be countered through labour-based grading contracts in lieu of standardized class tests or quizzes in order to shift focus to

the learning process from what has been learnt, so as to map the learning outcome of a student, rather than the learning outcome of a course.

What is a labour-based grading contract? At its very basic level, Inoue (2019) defines a labour-based grading contract as:

...a set of social agreements with the entire class about how final course grades will be determined for everyone.

These agreements are articulated in a contract, a document, that is negotiated at the beginning of the term or semester, then re-examined at midpoint to make sure it is still fair enough for

everyone...Everyone promises to meet the contract's stipulations, and the teacher promises to administer the contract in the spirit it has been negotiated.



In other words, as a “social agreement” a contract such as this awards agency to the students to not only be a passive recipient of grades in exchange for whatever the teacher asks of them as work for a class, but to be active negotiators to determine what is in the collective best interest of the entire class. For example, if a class were to complete a certain number of worksheets during a term, they could negotiate upon the number of questions in a worksheet, or, the number of worksheets they need to complete to get a desired grade. As a contract put forth before the class, and at a school level, possibly even shared with parents, at the beginning of the term, this would ensure that there is a common minimum understanding from all the stakeholders regarding what amount of work would fetch a particular grade, thus ensuring transparency among all. Rather than awarding students grades for the quality of their work (which is often predetermined by the student's graded privilege), such quantification can help a student determine in advance the grade they want to aim at and complete all the work that is required of them to achieve that grade. However, it is important to note that Inoue's proposal is aimed at writing classes at college level. So how can one borrow the basic framework and adapt to a middle-school classroom?

One of the few things a subject teacher can control in terms of assessment pattern in an Indian middle-school classroom, is probably the percentage of the grades reserved for class-tests (which often come as a surprise!) or mock-quiz. It is not unheard of that the students suffer from an immense psychological burden to always be on their toes regarding such assessment methods. Parents complain quite consistently about the incessant nature of such assessment tools and how that overlooks the possibility of a bad day in the life of a child or of their parents. This is

where Inoue's grading ecology can become a handy method to reduce the pressure on



both the children and their parents, while acknowledging that not every child experiences the same kind of home environment that supports such proactive learning. A case in point could be the use of worksheets to inculcate a culture of self-learning among Class 6 students of History. For example, the prescribed textbook

Landmark (Book 6) by Oxford University Press lists out 12 units

under the subject. These twelve units would likely be taught across the academic year, with regular class tests to ensure that the students are reading and learning which entail 20% of the final grade. Instead, we can think of a labour-based contract to be produced at the beginning of the term where the students are provided with worksheets to be completed at home or in class for each of these units with 5-10 questions each, depending on what the students negotiate. Now how would a labour-based contract agreement look like? Please see Table 1 for a basic grading contract that borrows heavily from Inoue:

Table 1: Grade-Breakdown in a standard grading contract

Grade	No. of Missed Assignments	No. of Late Assignments	No. of Incomplete Assignments	No. of Ignored Assignments
A (above 90%)	1	1	1	1
B (75-90%)	2	2	2	2
C (60-75%)	3	3	3	3
D (45-60%)	4	4	4	4
E (Below 45%)	5	5	5	5

Depending on the discussions and negotiations in a class, one can also try to reach a consensus upon the numbers mentioned in each column depending upon what the majority of the class wants. After negotiations the final grading contract could look something like this:

Table 2: Revised Grade-Breakdown Agreement

Grade	No. of Missed Assignments	No. of Late Assignments	No. of Incomplete Assignments	No. of Ignored Assignments
A (above 90%)	0	1	0	0
B (75-90%)	1	2	1	0
C (60-75%)	2	2	2	1
D (45-60%)	3-4	3	3	2-3
E (Below 45%)	5-6	4	4	4-5



As per Table 2, a student who has turned in all the completed assignments but has been consistently late in turning in 4 or more assignments, would not be awarded A but would get a B (80%). Similarly, a student who has turned in all assignments in time but have left 3 assignments incomplete, would get an 85% or grade B. A teacher can further expand upon the incomplete nature of the assignments by mentioning different grading criteria for students depending on the number of questions they opt for in a worksheet. It is thus important to define each of these criteria clearly in the grading contract, after discussion with the students in class.

The final definitions could look something like this:

Missed Assignment is when the student fails to submit within 48 hours of the deadline. This is after informing the teacher well in advance, and with justifiable reasons, their failure to submit the assignment. It could be due to ill health, or family emergency, workload or, even poor mental health which prevents a student from completing an assignment. However, the student acknowledging the fact that they are not putting in the required labour and respecting the teacher and the rest of the peers who are doing the same work, is an act of integrity that needs to be appreciated by the teacher.

Late Assignment is when the student misses the deadline, but turns in the work within 48 hours of the deadline after informing the teacher with suitable reasons for submitting the work late. While it is justifiable that a student could be late in submitting a few assignments, a consistent tardiness would affect their overall grade as per the grade-breakdown agreement.

Incomplete Assignment is where the student has only partially completed the worksheet assigned in class. This will vary depending on the type of worksheet you are using. Here, for example, the sample worksheet has three objective and two subjective questions. Among the 5 questions, if the student completes question 1-3 (objective), and leaves out the subjective answers for questions 4-5, the assignment would be considered incomplete. However, the student has the option of missing 1 out of questions 1-3, in case the student is unable to find the answer to the question. It is mandatory to attempt the subjective questions 4 and 5 and meet the stipulated word limit mentioned in the worksheet.

Ignored Assignment involves such cases where the student has neither turned in the work within the stipulated time nor has informed the teacher in advance about missing work.

So, what are some of the basic understandings of a labour-based contract? The idea is that a student is awarded grades not on the basis of what they have learnt, but the amount of labour they are putting in the process of learning. Since most of the assessment at the school level happens in a way that awards grades based on what the

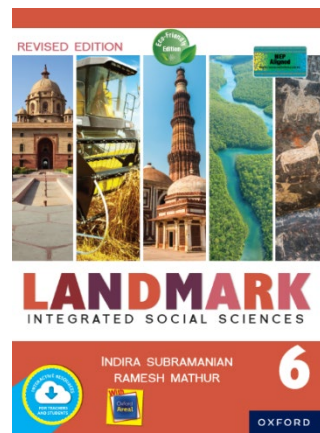
student has learnt, setting aside a small portion of marks for labour-based assessment can help us focus on how that learning takes place. It is not unknown to us that our diverse classroom has students with different reading speed, different levels of comprehension, different skill sets, etc., which, as discussed earlier, are dependent on a student's cognitive makeup, socio-economic background, home environment, cultural exposure, and various other factors. Moving from a framework of what the student has learnt to how much effort the student has put to learn, goes a long way in mapping individual student growth across the term/year as well as producing an inclusive and equitable classroom experience. While this framework has often invited criticism from high achieving students, this could be a way to help students focus on individual growth rather than assessing themselves with respect to others. Thus, a labour-based grading contract can be the key to reward labour over merit, effort over exposure and growth over consistency as a step towards achieving the learning outcome of each student, rather than that of a lesson or a course.

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Lesson Plan: Labour-Based Grading Contract

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As discussed in the main article, *Rewarding Effort: Labour-Based Grading Contract*, the basis for labour-based assessment for a Standard 6 classroom could be a series of 12 worksheets designed for each unit listed under the History section of **Landmark** Book 6.



Given below is a sample worksheet.

Lesson Name: Preparatory Worksheet for Chapter 1, “[What, How and When](#)” from **Landmark** Book 6.

Lesson Outcome: To engage students in the reading of the text, to enable comprehension, summarization of key points and to implore them to engage their creative and analytical abilities.

Sample instruction you may give to your students:

Complete the following worksheet while referring to the chapter, “What, How and When” from **Landmark** Book 6. While you are free to refer to your chapter when answering this worksheet, you are expected to write the answers in your own words. If the answer is not readily available in your coursebook, such as the answer to the last question, please feel free to discuss with your friends and consult your family. Make sure that you thank them at the end of the worksheet under the acknowledgement section! And don’t forget to stick to the word/sentence limit, as and where mentioned.

[You can complete the first four questions in class and write the last one as homework.]

XYZ School
Landmark Book 6 – Worksheet
Chapter 1: When, Where and How

Questions:

1. Who is an archaeologist? (Answer in your own words in 1-2 sentences).

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2. List below as many types of sources for writing history as you can find in the chapter. I have started off the list for you:

- *fossils*

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3. What is the meaning of BC and AD? What is “Before Common Era”? (Answer in your own words in 1-2 sentences)

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4. What do you think is the relation of geography to history? Please read your chapter closely and think about this. Do not be afraid to speculate but find something in your chapter that will help you answer the question! (Answer in your own words in 50-100 words)

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5. Oral history comprising folk tales can be used as historical sources. Every region in India has its own share of folk tales/poems. Can you think of any in a language other than English? Does the tale/poem tell you anything about your region's history? Feel free to talk to your friends and family to find out more. Now, answer the following questions:

- i. Please write down the folk tale/poem from your region that has helped you understand your regional history. You can write it in English or any regional language, as per your preference.

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- ii. Now write two sentences in English mentioning how this story helped you understand history better.

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Acknowledgement: I want to thank

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Student Learning Outcome:

1. This kind of worksheet helps build a culture of self-study where the students learn to engage with the text without worrying about grades.
2. The questions have been framed in a way that aims at exploring comprehension, summary, creative and analytical skills of the students. While the first three questions are objective in nature, the last two require the students to think.
3. Such worksheets need not be tested for quality but would be reflective of the labour the student is putting in the course while engaging with a particular chapter.

Visit the **Online Teacher Training** programme website at (www.onlineteachertraining.in) for training modules on history.



Learning History through Images



Developing a Sense of Chronology



Teaching History through Role Play

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Entente



Pronunciation: [ahn-tahnt] / [an'tant; *French* ɑ̃'tɑ̃t]

Meaning: An arrangement or understanding between two or more nations agreeing to follow a particular policy regarding affairs of international concern. Simply put, *entente* stands for the alliance of parties to such an understanding.

Origin and additional information: The word originated between 1830–45; In modern French, the word stands for “understanding”. In old French, it means “intention”, noun use of feminine of *entent*, past participle of *entendre*.

Word section: An *entente* is a type of treaty¹ or military alliance in which the signatories promise to consult each other or to co-operate in the event of a political or military crisis. One of the famous uses of *entente* is the “Triple Entente” drawing from the French meaning of friendship, understanding, and agreement. It comes to describe the informal political understanding entered upon by the Russian empire, the French Third Republic², the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland along with Romania.

¹ A typical instrument of international relations that is defined by the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969) as an “agreement concluded between States in written form and governed by international law...” [<https://www.britannica.com/topic/international-agreement>]

² The system of governance adopted in France from September 4, 1870, after the collapse of the Second French Empire during the Franco-Prussian War. It continued until July 10, 1940, after the defeat of France in World War II that led to the formation of the Vichy government.

Usage:

1. “Liber and his colleague Dahn were at that time among the staunchest supporters of the policy of the *Entente* in Russia.”

(Source: [The Myth of the Jewish Menace in World Affairs](#) by Lucien Wolf)

2. “There had long been rumors of an *entente* between Archduke and Kaiser, but this!”

(Source: [The Secret Witness](#) by George Gibbs)