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"The most seen I have ever felt": Labour-Based Grading as a pedagogical practice of care

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Abstract

This paper discusses experiments with Labour-Based Grading (LBG) in undergraduate anthropology courses at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington. Since before the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been aware that our teaching was not serving students, especially those from different class backgrounds and historically marginalised communities, and those with learning disabilities or mental health issues. The challenges these students face are compounded by a secondary school education that does not adequately prepare them for university, leaving many feeling uncared for in the classroom. In response, we developed pedagogical practices of care using LBG. We discuss LBG as an assessment method that determines students' grades based on the time and effort they spend on an assignment, instead of more conventional subjective criteria. We reflect on staff and student experiences with LBG to offer it as a model for a future of learning that actualises care in the classroom.

Keywords: assessment, cultural anthropology, higher education, labour-based grading, pedagogy of care,

Introduction

"Have you ever heard of labour-based grading?" Otsuki asked Gibson in July 2020. It was a few weeks before teaching was due to begin for the second term of a year that had been thoroughly disrupted by COVID-19. Three weeks into term one, we had been required to pivot from in-person teaching to online-only instruction when Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern declared a State of National Emergency and Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter: Aotearoa) went into its first period of self-isolation to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Our cultural anthropology classes remained online for the remainder of that term, taught with a mix of synchronous Zoom sessions and asynchronous pre-recorded lectures (often featuring the young children we were each caring for at home during lockdown). Like it did for so many universities worldwide, this had a profound impact on our students, colleagues, institution, and on our learning and teaching praxis. That June

we were preparing our courses for "dual delivery," a format blending face-to-face instruction with online content delivery and engagement. We were discussing the high levels of anxiety our students had been reporting about their studies and how they felt overwhelmed, disconnected, and unable to focus. We were particularly concerned about ongoing issues of access (to the material and technological resources, time, and space necessary for study), engagement (with cohorts and with teaching staff), and mental health that the pandemic and subsequent move to online/blended learning brought into stark relief. Gibson shook her head in the negative in response to Otsuki's question. "Have a look at this," Otsuki continued, sharing Asao B. Inoue's *Labor-based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom* (2019). "Labour-based grading might give us a way to address some of these issues."

Labour-Based Grading (LBG) is a system developed by critical scholars of English writing (Elbow & Danielewicz, 2008; Inoue, 2019). Part of a suite of critical alternative pedagogical practices that seeks to move the focus away from grades and towards intrinsic learning (see Blum, 2020a; Buck, 2020; Stommel, 2021), it has been used in university-level English writing classrooms to create more equitable outcomes for all students, and especially those from non-traditional backgrounds. It is also intended to offer students better support in developing skills in academic writing and critical thinking. In contrast to traditional grading systems, LBG does not assign summative grades based solely on the quality of the final student writing submissions. Instead, it is a formative assessment practice that seeks to make grades an incentive for students to spend sufficient amounts of time on each stage of the writing process. Briefly, LBG assigns letter grades to students based on *the amount of labour* they perform to complete a series of well-defined reading and writing tasks. Labour is measured by word count or time allotted to a task, and the grade rewards students for the time and effort they spend on an assignment rather than the range of subjective measures usually found in assessment criteria. LBG is making its way into secondary and tertiary classes worldwide, although to our knowledge has not been used in tertiary anthropology courses in Aotearoa.

In this paper, we discuss the potential of labour-based grading as a pedagogical practice of care for written assignments in cultural anthropology courses. Care-based pedagogies have become increasingly important during the pandemic, and we join other scholars (Bali, 2020; Burke & Larmar, 2021; Fa'aea, et al., 2021; Mehrota, 2021; Moorhouse & Tiet, 2021) in reflecting on how this informed our learning and teaching. In 2020, Gibson and Otsuki implemented LBG for one assignment in each of their courses: ANTH102 Social and Cultural Diversity, a first-year course with 255 students, and ANTH315 Anthropology for Liberation, a third-year course with 75 students. We also developed a research project to run in tandem with the new assessment practices so we could elicit student and teaching assistant feedback, which Anderson conducted on our behalf. In what follows, we discuss why we decided to implement LBG as a pedagogical practice of care, how we designed it to work in our courses, and reflect on the feedback we received alongside our own experiences. We end with some thoughts about future iterations of labour-based grading in our courses.

Labour-based grading as a pedagogical practice of care

Grade-related anxiety and stress is a longstanding issue for tertiary students (Blum, 2016, 2017, 2020b; Kohn, 2011; Wesch, 2008). One of the factors contributing to this anxiety in Aotearoa is the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) (Sotardi & Brogt, 2018). The main qualification for secondary school students in Aotearoa, NCEA is a standards-based assessment system that is significantly different from university assessments. The NCEA comprises 80 credits, which students achieve by demonstrating their competence in different subject areas through a mix of internal and external assessment standards. Credits are awarded on a pass/fail basis rather than with the letter grades and percentages most university courses use, and students can resubmit assignments until a pass is obtained. NCEA has been critiqued for its heavy focus on summative assessment and achieving specified standards, which can mean that students and teachers alike conflate learning with assessment. For example, Ormond's analysis of the impact of NCEA on secondary students' history education shows that 'the standards have had a reductive effect on knowledge, narrowing the historical topics selected to address the standards and dis-incentivising engagement with more comprehensive history programmes and "big picture" history' (2019: 160). Taylor makes a similar point in his discussion of knowledge in secondary school geography:

> Since 2002, the implementation of the NCEA qualification has preoccupied geography teachers to the extent that it has become the de facto curriculum. Therefore, the NCEA Achievement Standard data is a reasonable proxy for what is studied in a high-stakes, results driven culture, where what is assessed is what is taught. (2019: 87)

Recognising the disconnect between NCEA and university assessments, in 2007 our university began to investigate the experiences of first year students and develop transition strategies designed to help students navigate university life.[1]

Given the intensity of summative assessment at secondary school, it is no wonder that students at *all* levels, not just first year, are far more likely to ask us questions about outcomes ("How many references do I need to get an A?"; "Is this going to be in the test?"; "Are the readings assessed?"; "Will I lose marks if I go under the word count?") rather than content ("I've read the readings on cultural relativism but I'm not quite sure I understand it; what do you think of this definition I've developed?"). Students care deeply about the grades they receive. We saw LBG as a way to practice an ethic of care (Noddings, 1988) because it acknowledges and responds to students' grade-related anxieties. Explaining exactly what students needed to do to receive an A (outlined in more detail below) allowed us to echo some of the "teach to the assessment" aspects of NCEA, while hopefully alleviating their anxiety about "getting it right" in the final product and

[1] Te Herenga Waka—VUW's *Guide To Undergraduate Study 2022* mentions at least three transition programmes for incoming students: http://www.cad.vuw.ac.nz/wiki/images/3/35/FirstYearExperience.pdf and https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/study/course-planning/publications/guide-to-undergraduate-study/guide-to-undergraduate-study.pdf

encouraging them to care just as deeply about the research and writing skills that we sought to foster.

LBG also appealed to us for its disruptive potential. Scholars across the humanities and social sciences have long sought to restructure tertiary education to better address the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, calling for radical pedagogical strategies that reconfigure understandings of learning and success and lead to improved educational outcomes for students from marginalised and structurally disadvantaged backgrounds (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1996). In anthropology, such strategies often aim to decenter whiteness, critically interrogate intersecting structures of power (in our classrooms and workplaces as well as the discipline), and reconsider the academic content of our courses (e.g. Brodkin, et al., 2011; Buell, et al., 2019; Craven, 2021; Diallo & Friborg, 2021; Durrani, 2019; Gibson, 2017; Harrison, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2019). Less attention has been given to other aspects of the classroom experience, however, which is why we turned ours to assessments.

In his book introducing LBG practices, Inoue (2019: 5) notes that tertiary writing classrooms in the United States often position writing styles associated with white middle-class American students (what he terms a "white racial habitus") as the standard against which the performance of all students is measured. Graders of such writing are predisposed, if unconsciously, to assess the quality of students' writing based on a white, neurotypical, able-bodied, middle-class standard. This means students with other forms of social and cultural capital face an inherent disadvantage when their grades are determined only from writing quality. Recognising this disadvantage, such students deprioritise spending time on writing in favour of other classroom tasks over which they perceive a greater sense of control. LBG seeks to unsettle this skewed incentive structure by tying grades directly to the amount of time and effort students put into their writing. In Inoue's classes, students who are less confident in or feel a lack of control over their writing skills, are provided with a strong incentive to spend time on the practice of writing. Anthropology courses, which rely heavily on written assessments, face similar issues. Inspired by the way Inoue, educationalist Alfie Kohn, and anthropologist Susan Blum have troubled grading in their classrooms, we decided to see whether LBG could help us disrupt oppressive norms by removing assessment criteria that reward a white racial habitus. We also saw an opportunity to vex the neoliberal assumption of egalitarianism – '… that both Māori and Pākehā are all born with equal opportunities, despite substantial evidence to negate such a perspective' (Hall, et al., 2018: 110-111) – that dominates universities in Aotearoa. LBG is a pedagogy of care that alters the neoliberal assumption of egalitarianism of opportunities, by emphasising the equal value of students' labour.

Our approach is informed by Indigenous scholarship on tertiary education in Aotearoa. This literature critiques the structural and systemic factors that privilege settler-colonial norms and result in inequities and discrimination against Māori and Pasifika staff and students, and offers effective, evidence-based pedagogies for Māori and Pasifika educational success (e.g., Adds, et al., 2011; Chu, et al., 2013; Hall, 2011; Hall, et al., 2013; Hall, et al., 2018; Mayeda, et al., 2014; Naepi, et al., 2021; Teaiwa, 2005, 2017). From this literature and conversations with colleagues,

we identified four strategies that we could bring into our LBG practice. The first was to frame the assessment as a safe space for students to take risks and make mistakes without having to worry about the effect this would have on their grade. This seemed especially important as we collectively navigated the uncertainty of that first year of pandemic life. The second was to use the frequent and care-full feedback we gave to students on the completion of each task as another opportunity to develop our relationships with them. Many of our students did not attend classes for a range of COVID-related reasons (some were employed as "essential workers" and worked longer hours; some had increased caregiving responsibilities for family members at home; others could not risk their health by coming to campus), so this became a key method of communication with them about their progress. Third, we sought to encourage cohort-bonding by including peer engagement tasks that could be completed in person or online. As well as being an important strategy for Māori and Pasifika student success, encouraging students to support one another and providing opportunities for peer interaction is also characteristic of a pedagogy of care (Noddings, 1988: 223). The fourth strategy involved making sure students knew that although their grade was not determined by the quality of their writing, *their writing still mattered to us*, and we had high expectations that they would grow as writers through this assignment. Overall, we hoped that LBG would demonstrate to our students that we cared about their grade anxieties, the standard of their work, and them as writers.

Labour-based grading in practice

Inoue argues that one important conceptual shift required both of instructors and students in LBG is to become able to think of classroom relationships as an economy; that is, in terms of the value that people in it produce and circulate. In conventional classrooms, grades circulate as a primary unit of exchange (2019: 81): students produce pieces of writing which act as commodities that they exchange for grades. These grades can then be used to acquire other valuable things like entry into a college, a scholarship, or a degree. Insofar as it is the *writing* that is exchanged for grades, conventional grading systems teach students (and instructors) to *care about the written product*. This reflects a neoliberal assumption that equality among students is based in equalising their opportunities. Then, the value of their contribution should be measured by how they maximise the return on their investment in that opportunity, and their grade should reflect the size and quality of that return. In contrast, the objective of LBG is to make students' *labour* rather than their writing the valued commodity. LBG equalises the value placed on the units of labour they devote to their writing, such that their task (and ours) becomes carving out a structure and space that allows them to do that labour. In other words, LBG shifts the locus of value in the classroom so that students and their teachers come to *care about their labour*, and by extension *care for the labourer*.

In our practice, we tried to achieve this by making the economic character of classroom relationships *more explicit* as exchange relationships, and then changing what commodities and values were exchanged in them. The most explicit representation of these relationships is the *grading contract*. Drawing from examples provided by Inoue, we developed our own grading

contracts for major writing assignments in each of our courses. In ANTH315, Gibson created a grading contract for a literature review assignment for which students had to collect and digest literature useful for their final research essay. In Otsuki's ANTH102, the grading contract was written for an article review, in which students had to select a journal article out of the assigned readings to summarise.

Structurally, the grading contracts for both courses were very similar. Each assignment was divided into smaller tasks which had to be completed for roughly weekly deadlines. These tasks were then designated as Major and Minor tasks. Major tasks were those that made up the backbone of the assignments, and students were required to complete all of them to receive a passing grade. In contrast, students could skip or miss one or two of the Minor tasks and still pass. For example, one Major task in ANTH315 was to submit a complete 2000-word literature review by the due date; a Minor task asked students to spend 25 minutes describing the search strategy they used to source information and then uploading it (in written, illustrated, or verbal form) to Blackboard to create a shared resource for the class. Our purpose with these tasks was not to coerce students into doing what we want – a practice Kohn (2020: xviii) critiques – but, as Gibson explained to her class, to acknowledge "all of the labour that goes into creating a literature review (finding relevant resources; critically reading/viewing/listening to them; thinking; talking with classmates and teachers; synthesising information; drafting and revising), which is not necessarily visible" in the final product.

The grading contracts contained tables, which showed students what grades they would receive for the number of Major and Minor tasks they completed. In ANTH315, a student who completed all three Major tasks and three out of five Minor tasks would receive a C (57%), while someone who did all Major tasks and all five Minor tasks would receive an A (87%). Importantly, these grades depended on whether a sufficient number of each task was completed; the quality of the written product did not affect students' grades at all. Instead, each task came with a projected amount of *labour time* that we expected would be required to complete the task, and each task instructed students to spend only the recommended time. For instance, in ANTH102 one of the Minor tasks was to send a self-introduction e-mail to Otsuki. The task directed students to spend five minutes thinking about answers before writing, and 20 minutes on writing the e-mail. Despite specifying these times, we made it clear to students that we were not tracking their time use and that the actual time they spent on a task would not affect their grade. We assigned concrete completion times to each task in order to encourage students to focus on the process of doing a task, rather than its result.

In addition to Major and Minor tasks, our grading contracts included Supplementary tasks. These were bonus tasks that students could complete to raise their grade by one step (e.g. raise an A to an A+.) These tasks were designed to foster interactions among students and give them the opportunity to make contributions to the class as a whole. We decided to encourage peer interaction through Supplementary tasks (as well as having peer review as a Minor task in both grading contracts) to signal that while this is something we value, we also understand that such engagement is not necessarily the preferred learning style for all students. One task that proved

popular was for students to nominate a classmate who had provided them with helpful feedback on their work. Another was to prepare a slide reviewing a key idea from the lectures to share with the entire class. Students also began proposing their own Supplementary tasks: one ANTH102 student received the extra points, and much appreciation from her classmates, by audio recording herself reading one of the assigned articles and sharing it with the class. By completing up to four of these tasks, a student could raise their mark on the assignment a full letter grade.

As we planned to implement LBG, we began anticipating potential questions and concerns that students might have. We expected strong opposition from students who would resist the idea that a grade was not determined by the quality of their writing. We addressed this in part by using LBG for only one major assignment in each course. Another concern we expected was about workload: the sheer number of tasks and the many small deadlines could appear daunting to students accustomed to two or three deadlines each term. One way we tried to assuage students' workload concerns was to refer to our university's own credit standards. At Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, a typical course is worth 20 points, and each point corresponds to 10 hours of work (for a total of 200 hours over the 12-week course), both inside and outside of class time. Our assignment descriptions presented the total hours of work we projected the tasks to take in order to show that while the time required might *feel* higher than other assignments, it nevertheless corresponded to a significant but reasonable percentage of the total time students were expected to use.

Finally, we expected some students to be puzzled about the purpose of so radically changing such a well-established part of teaching. When we introduced the assignments to students, we addressed these concerns in detailed assignment descriptions which explained our rationale in accessible terms. We also integrated discussion of the system into lecture content. For example, one of the first concepts we discuss in ANTH102 is ethnocentrism. To introduce LBG, Otsuki began from a concrete ethnographic example of ethnocentrism in writing practices and its consequences from anthropologist Kevin Lewis O'Neill. In a 2013 article on American evangelical charities operating in Guatemala City, O'Neill describes how potential sponsors of children living in gang-dominated areas of the city evaluate the moral character of children and their potential to be "saved" through the letters they write. Via a discussion of Emily Post and the performance of American morals through the art of letter writing, O'Neill shows how children coached to write in the ways that reflect potential sponsors' sense of moral character can receive vast amounts of support and access to opportunities, while those who do not are left behind. The lecture then turns to a discussion of the ethnocentrism of academic essays, and how they often end up being judged not for the quality of their arguments or the writer's grasp of the material, but for the way that they are written. Otsuki points out that courses like ANTH102 are often designed to encourage students to produce 'academic bullshit' (Frankfurt, 2005; Smagorinsky, et al., 2010), where those who know the rules of the game are much better able to write an essay that conforms to expectations of "good" or "appropriate" writing than students who have not read or written academic essays before coming to university. This "bullshit" is rewarded when academic staff, who think we are skilled at detecting it, are instead predisposed to believing that

students who write sincere-sounding essays know what they are talking about and should thus earn a high grade. We try to show that essays and the way they are graded embody culturally-specific norms about quality and character that advantage some students, but disadvantage many others. This is when the students are introduced to LBG, as a concrete strategy for countering the ethnocentrism embodied in the traditional essay.

As discussed above, we stressed to students that we would not ignore the quality and clarity of their writing. In fact, we and our teaching assistants devoted considerable time to providing individual written and verbal feedback on students' writing at many points during the assignments. Students also had opportunities to share their writing with each other and receive feedback. We made clear, however, that their *grades* would not depend on their writing, as long as their tasks were completed on time and in the spirit in which we gave them. They were receiving grades not for pieces of writing, but for the time and labour they put into them. It was a new kind of exchange relationship between instructors and students, codified in a clear contract, which was defined primarily in terms of our status as fellow learners, rather than as producers and consumers of alienable content.

Responses and reflections

To elicit the feedback and reflections on LBG from both courses, we conducted a survey and four focus groups – two for ANTH102; one for ANTH315; and a joint focus group for the teaching assistants of both courses.[2] Safely and effectively gathering the perspectives of students and teaching assistants on their LBG experiences required a considered and thoughtful approach within both elements of the research. As with any research involving current students and employees, we needed to consider ethical issues such as power imbalances, pressure to participate, discomfort with participation, and concern about the impact of their potential feedback or non-participation. This was relatively straightforward to mitigate in the survey element of the research design, which involved an anonymous Qualtrics survey that all students in ANTH102 and ANTH315 were invited via Blackboard to complete before the end of the term. We accessed the survey data once grade entry for both courses had been completed.

Despite our initial concerns about student resistance to LBG, our survey showed that the great majority of them felt positive about their experiences. Of the 44 participants, 35 students (79.5%) responded that they felt the assessments had fairly measured their efforts in the course. The same number felt "Extremely" or "Somewhat Positive" about doing labour-based assessments in the future. (1 was neutral; 4 were "Somewhat negative.") These sentiments are consistent with those that students expressed in the standard course evaluations they completed as well as in emails to us. In 2021, we were contacted by staff members from other faculties within the university who wanted to discuss LBG, at the recommendation of students who had taken our classes.

[2] 44 students from both ANTH102 and ANTH315 completed the survey (from a combined potential pool of 330), and 10 people (students and teaching assistants) participated in the focus groups.

Interestingly, this enthusiasm for LBG did not directly translate into better student performance in every case. Our initial comparison of completion rates in these two courses across multiple years shows that the inclusion of a labour-based assessment does not significantly change the percentage of students who pass. Neither do labour-based assessments seem to improve completion rates on individual assessments. For example, completion rates for the Article Review assignment in ANTH102 did not vary significantly between labour-based and conventionally graded versions. One confounding factor is that at present we can only make these comparisons between years when numerous pandemic related changes were also taking place. It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions, except perhaps that LBG does not negatively affect student completion rates, even during periods of extreme disruption in students' lives. The biggest differences are in grade distributions. The distribution of grades among those students who completed the assignments was noticeably skewed towards higher grades in labour-based assignments.

Students were also invited (via Blackboard and through in-class announcements) to take part in qualitative, semi-structured focus groups, to discuss their LBG experiences. Because we were conducting research with students while they were taking part in our courses, and with teaching assistants while they were employed by the university, we decided to employ an independent research assistant to coordinate the focus groups. This is when Anderson joined our project and became part of the "we" writing this paper. Anderson, an experienced qualitative researcher external to the Cultural Anthropology programme, conducted the focus groups, managed the administration of consent forms, and transcribed all focus group recordings. Information about the research survey and the focus groups was distributed to all enrolled students and our teaching assistants, and those interested in participating were directed to Anderson to arrange participation. The identities of the students participating in the focus groups were confidential to Anderson and were not revealed to the primary researchers. Although the identities of teaching assistants were known to Gibson and Otsuki, by the nature of their positions, focus group transcripts were anonymised and the identities of these participants were also confidential to Anderson. This qualitative data was submitted to Gibson and Otsuki after the grade entry for both courses had been completed.

Due to the risks and disruptions posed by COVID-19, all focus groups were facilitated via Zoom. Students' capacity and availability to participate in this kind of research was likely compromised to a significant extent by factors exacerbated by the pandemic, including working hours, childcare commitments, and health issues. As one student explained:

> … people who are like time-poor, who also probably wouldn't participate in this like focus group for the exact same reason, it would probably be good to like, I don't know how you would reach out to them, but like take them into account.

For those who opted in, Anderson arranged the Zoom focus groups at times convenient for the students and teaching assistants involved. Facilitating the focus groups via Zoom was not

ideal, as it meant that students did not have the opportunity to engage in important and otherwise rich elements of kanohi ki te kanohi (in person; face to face[3]) qualitative research participation. For example, Anderson would normally begin a focus group with kai (a shared meal) and whakawhanaungatanga (the process of establishing relationships and connections), after which the information about the research would be shared, and the conversation around the research questions would begin. Without this valuable face-to-face element, and with the added stresses present in the lives of many students that prevented them from participating, the focus groups took a different shape, and likely had a different demographic as a result. Just as the pandemic provided the backdrop for LBG as a pedagogical practice of care, it also shaped how focus groups were conducted and the results of this shift, thus affecting the nature of the research we were able to produce.

Nevertheless, the focus groups were a success. The enthusiasm of several participants for the kaupapa (purpose; initiative) of LBG was clear during the setup of the focus groups, as multiple students were Zooming from very limited private space (e.g., their cars), were in-between childcare and work commitments, and yet still made time to share their reflections and experiences to contribute to the further development of LBG practice. Themes that emerged from the focus groups and survey responses included equity, improvements to learning, and challenges associated with communication and accessibility.

As noted above, we expected that traditionally high-achieving students would have some concerns about LBG. During the focus groups, it became evident that the initial scepticism held by such students was allayed as they came to value the processes they were learning about, and the improvement it made to their research and writing skills. We were interested to note that equity featured in a range of student reflections, with traditionally high-achieving students commenting on the value of LBG for marginalised groups within the classroom:

> I liked that I felt like it could be more equal for people who haven't had the same opportunities as me. (Focus Group 1 participant)

> I feel like it really aligned with justice for me, which is important. Coming from a background where I fit quite well into academia but a lot of people around me don't, it's nice to see. (Focus Group 2 participant)

Comments about equity were also frequently mentioned in the survey responses, many of which were long and thoughtful. For example, in response to the question, "What did you like about labour-based grading?" one student wrote:

> Basically, the shift from the focus on whether my work would be perceived as 'smart' to the realisation that it would just be judged based purely on my labour changed the way I was

[3] All translations of words in te reo Māori sourced from Te Aka Māori Dictionary at https://maoridictionary.co.nz

> able to interact and engage with the course. It moved me away from scarcity learning and into wholehearted learning. Labour-based grading took away the fear, academic insecurity and pressure that I often feel, it allowed me to approach readings with a better mindset than just scanning for what I interpret the lecturer will want me to understand and not paying attention to the rest. It also allowed me to prioritise other courses, life events, work some weeks and participate more fully in this course other weeks without feeling like I was getting lost or falling behind. As a minority student, this is the most seen I have ever felt at VUW.

The prioritisation of *learning* over grades was appreciated by students who participated in the focus groups. These students expressed their frustration with the subjectivity of traditional grading practices across courses and disciplines and praised the design of LBG for its systematic and transparent nature. This selection of comments from different Focus Group 2 participants is illustrative:

> For me, immediately with the lack of pressure to produce bullshit, really was just so much more… it felt like something I was choosing to do, instead of something I had to do, which made a huge difference for me.

> [I] read more, and more intently, or, like the way that they recommended to read, like reading just once through and then, as like a first reading and then going back and spending time on the bits that you've kind of highlighted or want to, you know, engage with on a deeper level.

> The supplementary tasks … helped to deepen understanding or just put more time into reflecting on course content.

We took this to indicate that students recognised our care for them as learners and writers. As the 2020 teaching term progressed, we noticed that the new exchange relationship facilitated by LBG contributed to increased email communication with our students, who were keen to meet with us to discuss their work. For our part, we enjoyed being able to see the way that students developed and refined their writing through this assignment. We also observed an increase in the number of students who continued to contact us after the courses were over, seeking advice about career opportunities or asking for further reading recommendations. We considered this an indication that we had gone some way toward our goal of improving our relationships with students.

Teaching assistants were pleasantly surprised by the positive effect that LBG had on how prepared students were in advance of lectures and tutorials, as this comment indicates:

> I feel like most students, because they had to engage with it, were actually doing the work and reaching you know, minimum thresholds … For example ⋯ being present in tutorials, actual engagement with the material and having read the readings. That is, like, really rare, you don't get anyone turning up having read the readings.

Greater preparation facilitated by LBG meant that more students participated in class discussions, and teaching assistants observed that students seemed to be more deeply engaged as learners and members of the class as a collective:

> I just really liked the level of engagement from students, just to actually have students that are not crickets[4] was just kind of nice. They're having to read readings before they turn up like, that I found is really, really helpful because students can be awkward because they just don't want to talk. They don't want to talk to each other, they don't want to answer questions at all. So that was, you know, really cool because that got people engaged with the material, and people were actually excited to engage with material."

Near the end of each of the focus groups, participants were asked if there was anything about LBG that they would change in the future. Much of their feedback here concerned the way LBG was communicated and accessed:

> With the way that we were presented the assignment, we were given a printed-out sheet with everything on it. I think that was a bit overwhelming, and maybe if it was presented a bit more like, just, even like the same amount of work and stuff, but being given you know, a more kind of outline to begin with, and then having the specifics of it online or … I don't know, it's just that being given pages and pages, it was like oh crap!

> The way that the assignment was presented in like all these little tasks. Gibson really did explain like what was going to happen, but it looked really daunting.

Otsuki and Gibson had discussed this in developing the assignment instructions and ended up providing students in both ANTH102 and ANTH315 with a 13-page document of single-spaced text. While a little concerned at the length of the information sheets, we wanted to provide students with detailed information about their assignments and thought the documents would become useful resources. We soon discovered that many students did not read the assignment information sheets in full – perhaps overwhelmed by so much text which, on top of new assignment rules to learn, can lead to anxiety for neurodivergent students (Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020) – and instead emailed us with questions. Accordingly, we dedicated a considerable amount of lecture time to discussing the LBG assignments, reminding students of upcoming tasks and

[4] "Crickets" is a term used to refer to students who do not respond to a teaching assistant's questions or discussion prompts and instead sit in silence.

providing opportunities within class time for students to work on their assignments. We also added a four-day grace period to each task so that students did not have to contact us to request an extension.

The teaching assistants identified this issue in their focus group, as they too had experienced an increase in enquiries. They also commented that Blackboard – a learning management system widely disliked by students for its static, unintuitive interface – hindered effective communication about the mechanics of LBG to students:

> I could tell from yeah what they were saying verbally, and through the emails, that they were finding it really hard to navigate. And actually, yeah, understand what was expected of them without having to go back and refer to it all the time, and even me too, you know, there's all of these things, yeah, which, it's potentially not compatible with a platform like Blackboard.

Students expressed dissatisfaction with Blackboard in their focus groups:

> Blackboard doesn't keep track of [the assignment] properly. Yeah, so it was confusing as to what I had done, what had been marked, and what got me what. (Focus Group 2 participant)

> One thing I always think whenever we do groupwork on Blackboard, I always think that we should not use Blackboard for that. The Discussion Board is just the worst thing in the whole world to use. I hate it. So maybe like another platform that's more sort of open, because then like, you could see everyone else, yeah, I don't know. Blackboard Discussion Board is just awful. (Focus Group 1 participant)

Our own experience of using Blackboard to communicate information and keep track of completed tasks leads us to agree that it is not a useful platform for managing LBG. While Blackboard includes some features that allow communication among students, its dated design is oriented towards one-off assignments completed by individual students. Practically speaking, we had to employ numerous strategies that worked against the grain of the platform to be able to offer smaller tasks which have a complex relation to a student's final grade. Having to create and manage multiple non-assessed assignment submission links using what we consider to be *uncaring infrastructure* significantly increased our workload as well as that of our teaching assistants. Indeed, when one of our colleagues sought our advice about using LBG in 2020, we advised her against it unless she could get increased teaching and administrative support. Also, while Blackboard has screen reader functionality, the feedback we received from students with learning disabilities and visual impairments suggested that they also felt uncared for in this online learning environment.

We value the constructive feedback provided through focus groups and surveys and have used it to refine LBG assignments in subsequent courses. At the time of writing (February 2022),

Gibson is preparing to teach ANTH101 Foundations of Society and Culture and will use LBG for one assignment. One major change is that she has reduced the number of Main tasks from eight to four (and removed minor tasks altogether), taking on board Kryger and Zimmerman's point that LBG 'could do more to consider the additional labour that neurodivergent students are often required to complete to perform in these normative ways' (2020: 7). She has also more firmly connected some optional Supplementary tasks with the Main tasks in order to provide students with opportunities to revise, resubmit, and reflect on their work based on feedback they receive. Unfortunately, the assignment information sheet is still long (12 pages, although it now begins with a short assignment overview as suggested by one of the participants) and we are still required to use Blackboard. To mitigate this, Gibson is planning to make a series of short instructional videos to accompany the written information on Blackboard, and to use a dedicated Discord server for student discussions.

Concluding thoughts

We had hoped that introducing LBG to our classes would allow us to respond to the challenges we knew our students were dealing with. These included issues that predated and were amplified by the global pandemic (such as grade anxiety) and new issues that arose as we adjusted to the changes necessitated by COVID-19. Overall, we believe that LBG contributed to a classroom environment where students felt "seen," where they could share writing drafts with us and each other without fear of negative judgement, and that we cared about both their writing and them as writers. We also take the increased communication from students as an indicator of improved relationships. It can be hard for students to ask lecturers for help as they don't want to risk being perceived as lazy or worse. For us, receiving an email that says "I don't understand and I don't know how to put it into words" is far better than having students feel alone and uncared for, and just as valuable as an email containing a thoughtful question about lecture content. Perhaps one of the most gratifying aspects of LBG for Gibson was reading the many emails she received for an optional Supplementary task, where students were invited to nominate a classmate who had helped them with their assignment (e.g., as peer reviewer) for a 5% grade bump. In these emails, students described how much they valued the support they received from their classmates, and completing this optional task allowed them to demonstrate care for one another's labour and grades.

We are continuing to experiment with LBG as a pedagogical practice of care. While it does not fix all of the issues we seek to address, it does unsettle some of them for a moment by offering us a way to care about student anxieties and attend to the often unseen effort that students put into their assignments during a period of uncertainty and change. Emphasising the value of students' labour rather than the quality of their writing in assessments opened up space for classroom conversations about ethnocentrism and the "white racial habitus" that is embedded in traditional grading practices. LBG did not necessarily lead to improved course completion rates, but it did make a noticeable difference to the level of student engagement with readings and tutorial discussions, and to their willingness to name and critique the neoliberal assumption of

egalitarianism and settler-colonial norms that underpin many aspects of the student experience at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington. While allowing us to challenge some structural dimensions of university teaching, our experiments also revealed some technological obstacles, namely the uncaring infrastructure that is Blackboard, where we can focus some of our future interventions. Perhaps most of all, this work emphasised the need for us to creatively engage with the conditions of our own teaching so that we can address the challenges that students face, which the usual ways of working risk leaving unseen.

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Jordan Anderson recently completed her PhD in Criminology at the Institute of Criminology at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Her doctoral research focused on risk and dangerousness in modern society. Jordan is passionate about teaching, and about ensuring equitable and accessible learning opportunities for all students.

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