

Episode 12: Asao B. Inoue

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers, talking and writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, I talk with Asao B. Inoue. Asao is a dear, dear friend of mine. I just so happened to apply to graduate school over 2,000 miles away from home and Asao just so happened to be there. He's been a father-like figure to me. He's been a mentor. He's been a supporter and encourager. And he's done so much for me. I'll always be thankful for him and his family. To me, he is family. He's a phenomenal teacher, a great writer, and an even better person.

Asao B. Inoue is the Associate Dean of the College of Integrative Sciences and Arts at Arizona State University. His research focuses on antiracist and social justice theory and practices in writing assessments. He is the 2019 Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and has been a past member of the CCCC Executive Committee, and the Executive Board of the Council of Writing Program Administrators. His co-edited collection, *Race and Writing Assessment* (2012), won the 2014 NCTE/CCCC Outstanding Book Award for an edited collection. His book, *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies* (2015) won the 2017 NCTE/CCCC Outstanding Book Award for a monograph and the 2015 CWPA Outstanding Book Award.

In this episode, we talk about writing assessment, whether labor is a more equitable measure than traditional classroom assessment standards and students' perception on labor-based grading contracts.

Asao, thank you so much for joining us.

SW: I want to start by talking about writing assessment. I'm trying to think about how to put this in a way that makes sense for those unfamiliar with your work and even those unfamiliar with using alternative grading methods. So maybe the easiest way to say this is you use a different grading system. You disassociate yourself with traditional assessment practices because, in short, you find them problematic because it focuses on judging language and writing based on quality, which you say reproduces white language supremacy because those standards have historical roots, that privilege whiteness. I'm hoping maybe we could begin by you talking about what led you to question traditional assessment practices and how you came to value labor in assessment.

AI: Yeah, and I think what we're talking about of course, is a classroom assessment. So that's typically yoked to grades and a grading system that's hierarchical, that's point based, that usually judges every student by the same standard or by the same metric and then strings them onto a linear line and says, you are better than this person or you get 10, you get 20, et cetera.

I started rethinking classroom assessment by critiquing or having problems with the products of a system that's hierarchical and that puts everyone on the same line, so to speak. I found that there was no way, and again, in the initial years I don't think I had this language yet, but I can see now

that I was realizing or feeling as a teacher that my system, no matter how I crafted assignments or rubrics or collaborated with my students to talk about, or my feedback and the grading system, there was no way to account for how much labor they did. And in any classroom, no matter what, every student is going to labor differently and it's going to have different amounts of labor and different kinds or quality of labor, that is what they do when you ask them to write an essay or to produce an outline or to read something and respond to it.

And to me, I found when I really sit down and think about it, the labor of the classroom is really the engine for learning. It's what students take away. It's the experiential thing that they remember. It's a bodily thing that they have. And I wanted to find a system that would agree better with what I think most literacy and writing teachers understand about the practice of writing, which is it takes time, it takes labor, where ultimately when we give an assignment, for instance, we're asking students to spend time and to labor. I thought, "Why should I try to grade a product of that just because that's all I have to grade?" I think there might be other things we can establish grades from and that could be labor. So for me the problematic part of the system was that there are a diverse range of students in a classroom, in any classroom and they come to labor differently. I think conventional grading systems don't match up very well.

SW: Asao, so maybe you could talk about what you feel like doesn't match up as well or doesn't align with the values you were seeking. Maybe you could share what you found to be problematic in traditional language standards or traditional assessment practices?

AI: At least in the contemporary university setting, they were created around the late 19th century and in that time there was really only one demographic going to college. That's white males in the United States, and again, we're talking the United States. But we're talking about United States university system that was migrated from Europe, the German university system, which again, one group of homogenous kinds of students and so it's easier to do because they're all having similar backgrounds. All we have to do is look at some of the histories, the really good histories written in our field about the origins of literacy assessments that get students into college. I'm thinking about the origins of the SAT, for instance, what were they looking for at the turn of the century? They were looking for students who had read the kind of books that those Harvard and Yale college professors had read and felt were important to know.

Why would they think it's important to know? Not because it offered them some way to think or whatever. It offered them certain dispositions in life, certain ways to be distinguished as a human being. We can have all the social critiques we want of that, but ultimately when you're grading student performances, literacy performances, based on something like that or that rather based on here's what I think the quality of that is and I'm going to rank it. You're doing a similar thing is what they did before, which is you're saying how close are you to me, the teacher and my background? I don't think most of the time when I walk into a classroom that my students come remotely from the places that I came from and from the kinds of background that I came from. A few do, but most of them don't and that's good for them and good for me.

It's that we need to find ways that grading systems that help us get away from just simply reproducing ourselves. I think problematic is the right word. I'm thinking about [Paulo] Freire's notion of a problematic that which is it's both social and it's idiosyncratic, meaning it's of the

individual. It's a system that is problematic because it's necessarily part of my biases. I make judgments based and my grades based on my biases. But it's also where do I get those from? Where are the boundaries and limits that give me those, the history? It's the social aspects of my life in history and in education and in my classrooms that I gather from that give me the boundaries to let me make certain kinds of judgments and have certain kinds of biases. It's truly problematic. I like to replace problematic or put a slash over that and say problematic is also a paradox. It's both and it's often these things. Yeah, that's true. It's also not true. Or there's elements of those things that are good or bad or in this given situation. It's probabilistic, if you will.

SW: I would love for you to talk more about labor and why labor is so important to your classroom assessment model. In part, it's because you connect labor to fairness. In Labor-Based Grading Contracts you write, "Trying not to be unfair is the only way one can ensure equitable and inclusive practices and inherently unfair systems." So here we see you mentioning how traditional assessment systems are inherently unfair. They are exclusive. They disadvantage students of color. You offer, then, labor-based grading contracts as a way to do antiracist work in the writing classroom or to do social justice work through assessment. Do you mind talking more about labor based grading contracts and could you talk about how you feel labor is a more equitable measure?

AI: Yeah, I should say first that labor-based grading contracts are a version of what a lot of folks know of as grading contracts that Ira Shor and Peter Elbow and others in Great Britain before them were using in, they were in Great Britain, they were using them in secondary education, but also lots of different disciplines had used portfolio systems. They might have graded them, but they also used essentially labor based type system.

Let me say my labor based system was an evolution, and not all contracts are the same. When we look at the research on how effective or what do students say about grading contracts, Spidell and Thelin's (2006) early study on that several years back, maybe 10 or so, 12 years ago, had some ambiguous things to say...students were very ambiguous about it, but they never described exactly what that contract was. What was the ecology that was set up in the classroom?

So what are they really responding to? My argument is that is it likely they're not responding to a pure labor based system? They're responding to a system that tried to do both. It's what Elbow and I call a hybrid system, a hybrid contract, which is up to a B, it's based on labor and after that it's based on judgements of quality. In mine, labor based grading contracts, I just went straight all labor. It's all based. So if you want, the more work you do in the class, the more time you spend on the labor of the course, the higher your grade. This still is a problematic.

The problematic just shifts. It shifts away from the politics of language and the politics of identity in the ways that we've talked about it in literacy circles to the politics of economics and how much time do I have and am I a working student or am I a mother and a student? How much time do I have to spend on this class? It doesn't levitate me or the classroom from having a system that is still problematic in some way. But I think it does offer in more cases, there's more individual cases, a fairer system to work from. Labor-based grading contracts takes the one thing that I know everyone can offer in the classroom or at least that we can try to agree upon, which is

how much time do we feel is appropriate for the B? That's the default for us. And then how much more do we think will require to get a higher grade than that? Then we determine all those things and then we renegotiate at mid point because we've had six or 10 weeks or whatever it is to live in the contract for awhile, see how it works on us, see how we work with it, and then make another decision. My question is after we reflect upon our experiences of it and that midpoint is very simple, is this contract still fair enough for all of us? And if it's not what needs to change? Then that's then set in stone at that point and we write out the rest of the semester.

With the limited time we have, life is so damn short, we've only got so much time on this earth. I am so thankful that over the years I've been able to cultivate a stance in the classroom and classrooms that continually challenge me. I've said it for years. To make a system fair, there's no magic to it like it's a certain method or it's a certain practice. It's all about participation. The more one participates in the system, the fairer they will feel that system is. Fairness doesn't exist in objective systems. There are no objective systems. There are only subjective ones.

Fairness isn't really about equality in a system. It's a feeling that we have as people who exist within systems. My job is to help everyone feel that it is fair and I think that is the best we can, most honest way we can approach it. I think when we value each other's labor in that very real way, do this work, you get this grade, no matter what I think of it, no matter what your causing, just respond, try to respond to us in some way. Be meaningful in your response.

SW: What does a labor-based grading contract do for writing teachers? What values is embedded within the labor-based contracts that would make us want to pick this up and make us want to use this in the writing classroom?

AI: It certainly does one thing that I think all writing teachers want to accomplish in their writing classroom, and that is it doesn't punish students for embodying the literacies that they are, that they come from. It doesn't say how you have languaged up to this point is not right, is bad, is inappropriate, whatever. I think those are the wrong messages that we want to send.

As human beings, like [Kenneth] Burke has talked about, has said, we are symbol using, symbol misusing animals and because we are that thing, that there's very much often what most supremely defines us as language users, symbol users. I think we forget that when we were really young, when we were babies, when we were toddlers, language was a fun enterprise, but when we get to high school and get to college, often times it becomes this thing that was so stigmatized and so punished for doing things wrong and you can't play around with it and you can't do any of the things that come natural to us I think as human beings, that it becomes this thing we stay away from, that you have these negative associations with. And that all of that comes from grading based on quality and it's really based on a particular standard, a standard that is not natural or inherent to any group outside of academia.

That's the group that these students are trying to get into and try to work around and work in. A lot of students aren't trying to be academics so why do I want to reproduce that? I want to reproduce language users that use language, that love using language and can play with it and can be critical about it. But that doesn't mean they got to be academics. It just means that they're going to do it in a different way for us for their own uses. And that's what I care most about.

Part of my job in my classes has to be helping them re-acclimate to a labor-based system because English studies and English classrooms, we give a lot of lip service to this, I think, in different ways, we might not say labor but we care what they do and what they're reading and how they're writing. But when it comes down to it, if we're still grading them on the products using a particular standard, then they're going to get another message that's going to conflict and they may not know how to deal or understand that conflict, that paradox.

SW: I think naturally when we're talking about critiquing traditional systems, then there's going to be some questions and rightfully so. The tradition is what we know, what we operate from, what proceeded us, what we inherited. For some of us we might have graded or assessed writing the same ways for the last 25 to 30 years and we might feel comfortable assessing and assigning letter grades. For others, we might be curious about alternative assessments. We might be uncomfortable assigning letter grades to student writing. Now all of this is us thinking about us and our mindset or our thoughts as teachers. I'm really curious about students and their perception on using grading contracts. How often do you receive resistance from students or how often are students uncomfortable using a different system and what do you do about that? I mean I'm thinking about positionality and how real or authentic negotiation can really be the first week of class between teachers and students. What resistance do you receive and what do you do when a student says I prefer letter grades?

AI: That's a really good question, and it's an important one to be ready for, for someone who's new to labor based grading contracts or even just grading contracts, period, even if you're using a hybrid model, more like an elbow model. I'm at a point in my teaching life where I don't get a lot of resistance and it could be my age, it could be how I comport myself, it be how passionate I am about this particular thing because it obviously is my research, it is my scholarship and then I walk into the classroom and I have so much passion for it. They could just be overwhelmed by that. And that can very easily happen given who I know I am and who I know they are, as you suggested. That opening couple of weeks is still, they're getting to know me. I'm getting to know them. They're 18 or 19, if we're talking about a first year writing class. They are certainly are not going to immediately feel like I am authorized to be able to ask questions about this professor's stuff.

I do have to help them be resistant and I think that's really important. It's not just important that they understand the reasons for why I'm doing this and why I think it's a good idea and why I want to try to offer something, a new kind of environment for this literacy classroom. But I want them to understand or I want them to be able to feel okay with saying I don't understand like this. I still feel uncomfortable about this.

Here's what I do, and maybe this will help you see some of the resistance. Because I will say it's probably been a good 10 years or more since I've had gotten the really hard question, like, I don't like this. This is not, I'd really rather have grades. I just don't get that very much.

Now it could also be that I have for the last 15 or more years, I've taught in institutions that are deeply working class, mostly students of color and mostly students who, by the institution's standards, entrance standards, have been designated as "remedial". Meaning they don't speak the dominant English or most of them don't use that dominant English and don't write it for the most

part. So because of that, most students that I've had come into the classroom kind of warmed up to this idea when I tell them, "Hey, I'm not going to judge you on the quality. We're going to talk about that. We're going to deal with it. We're going to work on it. We're going to make some goals for ourselves and then, but I'm not going to, your progress in this class will not be determined by that, by how I think you've done in that respect. But nevertheless you will still accomplish the goals you want to accomplish in this class if you're willing to work."

Now what I do in the first couple of weeks of class to help reveal some resistances or questions about the contract and to understand the contract system better is we look at a little bit of it, a few excerpts and a few short pieces on contracts and my philosophy that I have behind it, which really boil down to four or five different statements that we can dig into and think about or reflect upon. It has to do with the things we've been talking about really.

When we start doing that and we reflect on our own, or at least when I asked my students to do this, this is when our daily dialogs in that first week or two bring up a few questions or concerns like, well does that mean my A is worth less because anybody can get an A? What I typically what I'll ask students to do is turn that kind of a question around and ask what are you assuming here in this system about that other system? Why are you judging this assessment system, this grading system, against the conventional grading system, simply because it's traditional and conventional? Because we've always done it that way? Have we not found in history that there are lots of systems and things, assumptions that we've made throughout time that we've come to find out were not the best ones to make now when times and people have changed?

I want it so we talk through, well, oh maybe it's because I've always done well in grading systems that graded me on quality and it means that I can work not quite as hard. So actually I'm doing less labor for a higher grade because my product that I produce in a classroom like this has always been valued more. I know that system. Oh, so it's not really that you don't think that this system is a good one, it's that you haven't worked in one like this before and you're afraid about how much work you might have to do. That's a different sort of problem to tackle.

That's the kind of stuff that I might get, but most, like I said, most of the time we're pretty good about ... Now I have one other secret weapon that I used with this and I know Shane, I know you know it. I also ask them to do a little bit of reading and a little bit of like a couple of short videos that we watch sometimes together, sometimes on our own, and we do some reflecting on this, around mindfulness practices and such. I yoke with my contract a charter for compassion that we talk about and we develop the last set of things.

It's amazing how when you frame a classroom and the grading practices around compassion, we're going to be compassionate to one another. We're going to try to work for the other person in the room. I'm not going to work for myself. I've got 29 other people in this room working for me. I don't need to work so hard in that respect. They're going to help me. When I'm doing something wrong, they're going to help me. They're going to give me feedback, et cetera. Or I'm going to try to go out of my way to help them.

When we frame the classroom and the assessment practice that way, it's amazing what kind of birth we'll give each other and how much generosity they'll give me. My students are always

incredibly generous and I make sure I thank them for it. I make sure I tell them that I am grateful for their generosity and their willingness to have a little bit of faith in me and my system and this classroom that they don't know a lot about yet.

SW: Thanks, Asao. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.