

Chapter 19: Dialogic Assessment Agreements: A New Genre For Building Trust and Mitigating Risk in Online Writing Instruction

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Abstract

In this chapter, authors describe **the implementation of Dialogic Assessment Agreements** as an approach to assessment in online courses across modalities. Specifically, authors provide rhetorical approaches for building trust with students and mitigating risk for faculty who choose to adopt alternative assessment practices in the online writing classroom. In describing their "better practice," this chapter addresses the themes of Assessment and Professional Learning for Online Teachers.

Which Frameworks and Principles Does This Practice Draw Upon?

- **GSOLE OLI Principle 3.5:** Instructors and tutors should commit to regular, iterative processes of course and instructional material design, development, assessment, and revision to ensure that online literacy instruction and student support reflect current effective practices.
- **Borgman and McArdle's PARS framework:** R–Responsive
- **CCCC Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing 12:** Sound writing instruction is assessed through a collaborative effort that focuses on student learning within and beyond a writing course.

Guiding Questions Before You Begin Reading

- How do you work to establish trust with your students in online courses? In particular, what do course materials that foreground trust look like?
- How can our online writing assessment practices reflect our values?
- What risks do you ask students to take in your class? What kinds of risks do you take in your class? How can you craft assignments to make these risks as safe as possible for both you and your students?

Introduction

Throughout my life, I have learned to only go for good enough.

As early as the 2nd grade, I began to realize that my efforts in school would not always be reflected in the grade book. I have unpleasant memories of seeing red slashes across the first letters of my sentences; it felt unbearable for me at the time. Eventually, I got the hang of these skills even before my other classmates. All I got was a “Good Job” from my teacher. What I accomplished was represented the same way as the students who did less than me. **That was the first time I realized that effort would go without reward.**

Ungrading aims to decouple these ideas, instead asking students to consider their own motivations for learning and composing.

In 4th grade, I had an incredible teacher, the kind that you remember for the rest of your life. She was good at teaching and caring for her students and making sure they felt appreciated. She fought her hardest to quell the effects of my past teachers' suffocating inspirations of mediocrity. **Then the grades were passed out. I was given an A for my work. The kid to my left was given an A. The kid to my right was given an A. When everything a student has accomplished can be represented by a single letter, it begins to devalue and obscure the effort that has been provided.** That was the second time I started to realize that if the other kids didn't need to try, neither did I.

When grades are meant to stand-in for a judgement of quality and effort, they take on an outside role in valuing student work, a role that runs counter to learning.

This setup also functions to invite students to compare themselves to their colleagues and view them as competitors.

I discovered that hard work can sometimes cause you to fall behind your peers. If I were to grade my 5th grade teacher by a single letter, I would give her a C. She worked hard to connect with students. **She was really into soap operas and loved to tell us about them. I quickly recognized her love of the dramatic and would try to add as much flair as possible into my writing to hide the inadequacy of my work. Unfortunately, it was effective.** She loved it so much that she had me test out of the class. I no longer had to take her class simply because I wrote about her interests. I was using rhetoric without realizing it. Because I was an exceptional writer, I was punished with missing a year of instruction in one of the areas that I had enjoyed the most. That was the third time that I realized that by working hard, I was putting myself at a disadvantage.

Students learn from instructors' responses to their writing, it's just not always what we're trying to teach them about writing that they learn.

-Samuel Harrison (Class of '26, Middle Tennessee State University)

Figure 19.1: A student reflection on ungrading, an alternative assessment practice, with teacher commentary

The Figure 19.1 excerpt comes from a literacy narrative composed and shared with permission by Samuel Harrison, a student in Kate's first-year composition (FYC) class. The literacy

narrative assignment invited students to consider their own literacy practices and trace the path that had taken them to college. The FYC course itself used a Dialogic Assessment Agreement (DAA), an alternative assessment or “ungrading” practice that emphasizes student engagement with the writing process and assignment completion rather than quantitative measures of the “quality” of final products. The assessment practice we advocate is flexible enough to work across modalities.

Rather than discerning a numerical evaluation of this writing assignment, the DAA allows us instead to turn our focus to wrestle with the ideas Sam poses to us as writing program administrators (WPAs), FYC faculty, and scholars at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU). We are particularly struck by his **lack of trust** in the system of assessment, and his **recognition of the risks** involved in composing. We’re sympathetic to both Sam and his instructors for the many systemic factors that foster this lack of trust and concern with risk, some of which we address in this chapter (these concerns require much more time and thought than one article can address, however).

Sam’s ideas highlight the disconnect between what we often want students to learn about writing through our assessment, and what they actually learn. His descriptions of how traditional grading systems lead to “suffocating inspirations of mediocrity” and the “devalued” and “obscured” measures of effort are not new to us. They are depressingly consistent with what we’ve heard from students over the years, and what we’ve long tried to counter in our classrooms. They echo what we know from scholarship in Writing Studies about grading and feedback practices (Sommers, 1980; Elbow, 1994; Inoue, 2019; Carillo, 2021) and Higher Education Assessment (Kohn, 2018; Blum, 2020), and particularly about the checkered history and impact of literacy sponsors (Brandt, 1998). Students are smart. They quickly differentiate what they need to do to pass a class, and students who can’t do it precisely on the first try are often demoralized and don’t continue to try. Students who can do it on the first try—and their ability to do so is often impacted by socioeconomics—are often not challenged further and don’t continue to try or push themselves. They get the message that by doing “extra” they’ll be separated, as Sam found. This disincentivizes experimentation, risk-taking, and innovation, all of which are ingredients for learning in the online writing classroom.

What we find particularly telling in Sam’s narrative is how the classroom soup of kindness, caring, interest, effort, achievement, and ability being stirred together indiscriminately—and then graded—ultimately communicates the message: do as little as you can to get an A. Affect and assessment are strangely mixed. Sam describes this finding based on academic experiences that he notes as somewhat positive with an “incredible teacher, the kind you remember for the rest of your life” and a teacher that he would give a “C” were he to have to select “a single letter.” Sam’s narrative helps demonstrate how oversimplified, fraught assessments of student learning translate to oversimplified, fraught evaluations of faculty. Faculty, especially women like the teacher Sam mentions above, are often judged on how “nice” they are, and that becomes a lens with which students assess their teaching ability. Testimonies like Sam’s have led us to invite alternative assessment practices across our FYC program at MTSU. At its core, such practices attempt to separate the experience of student learning about and through writing from simplified assessments that value the products of that learning. It seeks to allow the humanness inherent in writing, reading, and assessing to function as a strength rather than a weakness.

Yet, we know that alternative assessment is a risk, one that requires trust within writing programs and between students and educators. Especially in online writing classrooms, where there may not be an online anytime learning opportunity to discuss assessment (though even in synchronous interactions, we may think that students understand things that they don’t),

alternative assessment practices may feel too risky for both faculty and students. In what follows, we propose a new classroom genre, a **Dialogic Assessment Agreement (DAA)**, a document that provides four access points to build trust and mitigate risk for alternative assessment practices in online writing classrooms. These access points include an invitation for faculty and students to collaborate on the 1) course description, 2) course objectives, 3) course assignments, and 4) criteria for success in the course. Faculty new to alternative assessment may want to choose only one access point to negotiate or on which to invite feedback. Faculty may also limit what components are negotiable and the kinds of feedback they would like to invite from students to meet their goals for online writing instruction (OWI). Ultimately, there are many ways to customize the DAA to make it consistent with individual faculty needs in OWI.

As a responsive and feminist pedagogical practice, these access points provide faculty readers with a rhetorical approach for building trust through alternative assessment with students and rhetorical structures for mitigating risk for faculty who choose to adopt such practices in the online writing classroom. The TILT-style handout we include in *Figure 19.2* offers access points for students to join the conversation with their online writing educators. **Alternative assessment practices in the online writing classroom are an effort to make consistent our pedagogical values and practices and prioritize learning for students. More personally, it's also an act of self-care and investment in our engagement with students and as feminist scholars.** In writing about trust and risk, we know it is important to recognize our own subjectivities as white women: one in industry, one in a tenured position, and one in a doctoral program. We do not take lightly the invitation for students or faculty to take risks. Instead, we suggest that making trusting spaces in OWI actually reduces risk for both students and faculty. It is important pedagogically to prioritize learning, and simultaneously we prioritize labor safety and equity for faculty. We use these separate but complementary lenses to consider alternative assessment practices in the context of the DAA.

Dialogic Assessment Agreement

Purpose

[Suggested text below; revise to fit your course, program, and institution] This course uses alternative assessment practices (AAP). Specifically, the work that you do in the class, the way it's evaluated, and the way I respond to your work will be collaboratively negotiated. You will not receive A-F grades on your writing projects in this class. Instead, your final grade will be based on the amount and types of work you choose to complete. The purpose of this assessment is to center learning in our class rather than achievement or unnecessary tasks. Failure, messiness, and risk-taking are essential for developing as a writer, and we hope this approach creates space for these experiences in the online writing classroom.

Task

[Suggested text below; revise to fit your course, program, and institution] Your first task is to engage in a Dialogic Assessment Agreement. In the Knowledge section below, I detail my plan for the class using four access points:

1. Course description
2. Course objectives
3. Course assignments
4. Criteria for success

In order to design assessments that meet your needs, I request that you annotate and respond to these access points using the commenting feature in Word or Google Docs. Please share your ideas, requests, and needs. This dialogic exercise is meant to be invitational, to provide space for collaboration, experimentation, and active questioning, which are all components central to effective research and composing practices.

Knowledge

[Suggested text below; revise to fit your course, program, and institution]

Read each course component carefully. Ask questions if you don't understand a concept. If you encounter an unfamiliar term, request a definition (or do some research and provide one!). Give feedback on, respond to, co-author, and customize the course description, course objectives, course assignments, and criteria for success.

Access Point 1: Course Description

[Insert your course description here]

TIP: Consider the intertextuality of course descriptions. Instead of just pasting the course description from your university's catalog, draft your own or borrow from another faculty member. Then, add and change your course description based on the iterations of your DAA.

EXAMPLE: Welcome to ENGL 1010: Expository Writing! English 1010 is the first in a two-semester first-year composition sequence that prepares you with questions and rhetorical awareness to approach the many and varied kinds of writing situations you will encounter in the future. In Expository Writing, you will gain grounded, practical experience with the conventions of academic, professional, public, and community discourse. Together, we will investigate how effective writers write in and beyond college, how compositions are rhetorically constructed, and how specific practices, strategies, and concepts will aid you in becoming a more flexible, adaptive, and skillful communicator at MTSU and beyond. I'm excited to write with you this semester!

Student Task

[Suggested student tasks below; revise to fit your course, program, institution, and LMS constraints/affordances]

Please annotate the above course description, highlighting anything that is confusing, striking anything that is unhelpful, and adding a comment to demonstrate anything that you're particularly interested in or excited about. Finally, to meet your writing needs for the class, what sentence would you add to this course description?

Access Point 2: Course Objectives

[Insert your course objectives here]

TIP: While your program may have required objectives for your course, consider how you might explicate them or help students expand them throughout the DAA process.

EXAMPLE: In ENGL 1010: Expository Writing, students will:

1. **Conduct** primary research; Make appropriate decisions about content, form, and presentation (**Composing Processes**);
2. **Examine** literacies across contexts; Read and analyze various types of text—print, digital, and audio (**Reading**);
3. **Develop** genre awareness and practice genre analysis; Complete writing tasks that require an understanding of the rhetorical situation (**Rhetorical Knowledge**);
4. **Reflect** on literacy in student lives; Develop a theory of writing that can transfer to writing situations in other classes and professions (**Integrative Thinking**);

5. **Learn** about discourse communities; Demonstrate understanding of ethical and primary research practices (**Information Literacy**).

Student Task

[Suggested student tasks below; revise to fit your course, program, institution, and LMS constraints/affordances]

Rate the importance of each course objective to you on a scale from 1-5 (1 being least important, 5 being most important; put NA (not applicable) next to any of the course objectives that don't make sense to you). Add at least one writing-related objective that you have for yourself for the course.

After each objective, note any experiences you have with meeting this course objective or engaging in similar activities. For example, you have likely practiced genre analysis in your daily life if you have used menus to decide on a restaurant. If you haven't completed any work toward these objectives, that's okay—that's the purpose of this class! If you have, however, please let me know so that we can together tailor our work.

Access Point 3: Course Assignments

[Insert your course assignments here]

TIP: Describe your course assignments with as much or as little detail as you deem necessary. We recognize that online anytime writing classes may require more written explication while hybrid classes may require less because portions will be explained during in-person and/or Zoom class meetings.

EXAMPLE: ENGL 1010 includes Invention Assignments and Writing Projects. Invention Assignments are the daily writing opportunities that introduce you to the thinking and practices necessary to compose the major Writing Projects. As you read each assignment description, try to envision where you might begin (invention), how you might start the writing project (drafting), what kinds of feedback you might like from your instructor and peers (editing, revision), and who might be interested in reading your writing (publication).

Major Writing Project #1: Multimodal Literacy Narrative Project

Reflect on your own literacy development. For this project, you will write a literacy narrative that connects a literacy event in your past with your literacy present.

- **Invention Assignment 1:** Audio-essay Introduction
- **Invention Assignment 2:** Literacy Collage
- **Invention Assignment 3:** Origin Story

Major Writing Project #2: Literacy Profile and Discourse Analysis Project

Examine the literacy development of others; this may extend beyond alphabetic literacy. For this project, you will interview a fellow student, record the interview, and analyze the transcript to craft a literacy portrait.

- **Invention Assignment 1:** Peer Interview and Transcription
- **Invention Assignment 2:** Literacy Profile Tableau
- **Invention Assignment 3:** Interview Proposal

Major Writing Project #3: Genre in the Community Project

Select a genre in your community that is interesting or important to you. Analyze the genre such that you're familiar with its exigency, conventions, and deviations. Then compose a genre analysis project and develop an exemplary version of this genre to demonstrate your understanding.

- **Invention Assignment 1:** Genre Scavenger Hunt
- **Invention Assignment 2:** Genre Reading Found Poem
- **Invention Assignment 3:** Genre Map

Major Writing Project #4: Reflection Presentation Project

The final Ignite reflection asks you to examine your progress as a writer over the semester, and it will take the form of a highly-stylized, five-minute, fast-paced PowerPoint presentation, titled Ignite. The reflection should address your progress over the semester, questions about writing you've answered, questions about writing that you still have, and your developing theory of writing.

- **Invention Assignment 1:** Self-Analysis
- **Invention Assignment 2:** ePortfolio Construction
- **Invention Assignment 3:** Reflection Letter

Student Task

[Suggested student tasks below; revise to fit your course, program, institution, and LMS constraints/affordances]

Using the descriptions above, you can make an informed choice about how much work you are able to and want to complete this semester and the final grades associated with that choice.

Please put an emoji response next to each project description. Select which invention assignments you plan to do, and include any requests for additions, deletions, or revisions. If you aren't sure where to begin, or if emojis don't seem like an adequate response type for you, consider answering these questions:

- What obstacles do you think you might face in executing the projects?
- What are some strategies you might use for working through those obstacles?
- What are your motives and goals for completing the assignments?

Access Point 4: Criteria for Success

[Insert your criteria for success here]

TIP: We recognize that there are many approaches to ungrading and your criteria for success in your course and/or program may differ from our example. No matter your approach, be honest and clear with your students about what is needed to succeed in your course based on the course description, course objectives, and course assignments.

EXAMPLE: To pass the course all students must complete polished drafts of the major Writing Projects.

- To earn an A in the course, students must also complete at least 90% of invention assignments and 2 project revisions.
- To earn a B in the course, students must also complete at least 80% of invention assignments and 1 project revision.
- To earn a C in the course, students must also complete at least 70% of invention assignments.
- Students who don't complete the work as noted will not pass the course.

Student Task

[Suggested student tasks below; revise to fit your course, program, institution, and LMS constraints/affordances]

After reading the criteria for success in this class, consider: What will success look like for you this semester? Consider both the grade you hope to earn based on the criteria noted above, and your personal and professional writing goals. Flash forward to the end of the semester and write a paragraph about what you will have done, thought, and experienced over the course of

the semester if all goes well. Be creative and boundless. Don't be afraid to propose changes or think about new ways of completing the Invention Assignments and Writing Projects described above. I'll follow up on your ideas, requests, and needs with audio feedback, and you can follow up with your comments. I'll gather your ideas and that of your classmates and upload the completed DAA to which we can all refer during the semester.

Scholarship, Theories, and Principles That Guide Our Approach

In designing our DAA, we are particularly influenced by our feminist reading of [GSOLE's Online Learning Principle 3](#): "Instructors and tutors should commit to regular, iterative processes of course and instructional material design, development, assessment, and revision to ensure that online literacy instruction and student support reflect current effective practices." We suggest that this iterative process of assessment and developing course materials should take place not just between program developers, administrators, and faculty, but also between faculty and students. Distributing decision-making and centering students in OWI can be particularly difficult because of the intractable nature of our learning management systems and the pedagogies baked into its structures. Yet, we suggest that such pedagogies, based on a current-traditional (CTR) perception of writing and a behavior manipulation model of interacting with students, often run counter to best practices in OWI, particularly around assessment (for more on the relationship between OWI and CTR see Depew, Fishman, Romberger, and Ruetenik, 2006).

As an alternative assessment practice, ungrading offers an opportunity for the "unlearning" necessary for effective teaching in OWI (Stuckey & Wilson, Chapter 18 in this volume). Stuckey and Wilson suggest that "ungrading" invites an opportunity for rethinking problematic structures and practices that are ingrained in the OWI classroom and reified in the learning management system (LMS). We're primarily concerned with the ways that OWI and the LMS ossify assessment structures through gradebooks, dropboxes, and graded opportunities throughout course-shells, but our concern certainly plays out in the affordances of other tools that foster student interaction. Online educators are likely familiar with the traditional gradebooks that attach a rubric and specific points to every element of student writing. The LMS makes it harder, for instance, to simply give credit for assignments, to comment on multiple student texts in the same space, for students to read and comment informally on each other's work, and to invite student comments in response to feedback. Of course it's possible to do these things, but these behaviors are not the ones for which the LMS is built. LMS ideology is particularly visible for educators when they try to depart from CTR teaching practice. Since the online writing classroom is a shared learning space between faculty and students, a more democratic and dialogic approach to online writing instruction—one that focuses less on the structure of the LMS and more on the experiences of learning occurring within it—is a necessary next step for online writing scholarship and practice. Such work is risky, yet it provides inroads for building trust with students; such trust is necessary for students to take risks in their writing and to subsequently learn about themselves and rhetorical structures in the writing process. Further, if we concentrate our efforts on demonstrating effective learning in OWI, we can more effectively invite LMS structures that afford this learning.

At our university, online course authorship is set up to be designed by one individual, and the resulting shell must be adopted by all faculty who teach the course. This is problematic for courses such as composition, which—since this course is a requirement for general education—are taught by dozens of different faculty members. We all have shared course objectives, textbooks, and rhetorical purposes for our writing assignments, but each instructor has their own approach. We value this autonomy in the face-to-face classroom and suggest that it brings out the best in both faculty and students in the online classroom as well. If there is only one version of the course shell, authored by only one instructor, it doesn't give faculty the opportunity to

personalize their course in the ways that make them most effective and that respond to the group of students in the course. We've tried to address this by developing a Faculty Learning Community to collaboratively author our course shells, gathering input, and distributing labor amongst many of the faculty who will be teaching our online courses (following Michelle Stuckey's model). This approach respects the university policy of developing one master course-shell, but it draws on the pedagogies and experiences of multiple educators. We suggest a similar deviation from the LMS' invitation when it comes to student assessment in the course.

Theories of Alternative Assessment

For decades, scholars in Writing Studies have identified the subjectivity and inequity of numerical and/or standardized writing assessment. Grade data is limited in its ability to offer an "objective" assessment of student ability. Further, increasing data suggest that assessments, both on a larger scale in regard to standardized test scores, and on a smaller scale in the context of classrooms, tell us more about a student's identity markers, including race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, rather than student talent, potential, or most importantly, academic growth (Scott-Clayton, 2018; Elsesser, 2019; Hubler, 2020). As these concerns have been amplified by the pandemic—and its attendant, unequal impact on working-class and marginalized students—many traditional and long-used assessment methods, like the SAT, ACT, and Accuplacer, are slowly being dislodged or included as only one measure amongst others in assessing student preparation for college and various coursework. In fact, a recent study found that high school GPA (even though it is an imperfect measure) is four times a better predictor of college success than standardized tests, and standardized test scores alone are not an accurate predictor of success in postsecondary education (Scott-Clayton, 2018).

In terms of the classroom, Michelle Cowan (2020) traces contract grading, a relatively popular alternative assessment practice, to high school classrooms in the early 1920s. Contract grading took off in Writing Studies in the 1960s, with scholars like Peter Elbow arguing that such assessment allows faculty to evaluate student writing, an effective practice, rather than "ranking" students, a practice that—he argues and provides extensive support for—runs counter to learning (1969). Asao Inoue's (2019) construction of "labor-based contracts" were adopted by many individuals and entire programs in the last few years, though Inoue has since reconceived his own practice (Inoue, 2021), and other scholars have noted inequities in valuing classroom labor. Most recently, Ellen C. Carillo (2021) has suggested the use of "engagement-based grading contracts," which she argues are more dynamic than labor-based contracts (p.56). Carillo's critique comes from a Disability Studies perspective, arguing that "One's willingness to labor is not always accompanied by one's ability to do so" (p.13) and "We do not want to put students experiencing anxiety and depression—whether long-term or temporarily—at a disadvantage by creating a standard of labor that excludes them" (p. 28). Another concern is Jennifer Pettit's consideration of the economic perspective of classroom labor. She notes that "financial obstacles...impact economically self-supporting students' ability to complete work, particularly reflective assignments that require a greater investment of time and critical thought."

Of course, as Michelle Cowan (2020) notes, "In reality, no single ideal grading contract exists" (p. 2), and most scholars do not recommend that faculty adopt their own idiosyncratic contracts wholesale. They must, necessarily, be a locally customized document. Further, we suggest adopting "agreements" with students rather than "contracts" because we think this language is more appropriate for educational documents and we know the consequences of living our metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1981). Faculty often talk about the syllabus as a "contract"—it's not. Contracts are drawn up for goods to be sold, and for services to be given and subsequently paid, a construct that further emphasizes a transactional or container model (Friere, 1972) for

education. Further, Jennifer Pettit notes how this language “speaks directly to the purpose of education within liberal capitalism. Historically, the application of contractualism to the labor market was a post-emancipation, nineteenth-century innovation. However, a racially inclusive philosophical perspective on the inseparability of economic and political freedom was transformed by conservative jurists into a fictive state of equality between workers and their corporate employers.” For these reasons, we resist these business and legal metaphors for the classroom and offer the DAA as a transformative space to dynamically negotiate work and attendant assessment in the classroom.

We argue that faculty should strategically practice alternative assessment as anti-racist, intersectional, and inclusive, and adopting a DAA invites this orientation. It is access-oriented, recognizing that all learners will bring different experiences, identities, dis/abilities, and expectations to the OWI classroom, and, coincidentally, as Rachel Donegan notes, making classroom projects “more accessible has some amazing rhetorical benefits for [students] as [...writers] and designer[s]” (2022). Inherent in the design of the DAA is the valuing of the different experiences, language practices, abilities, and subjectivities (e.g., working three part-time jobs in addition to being a full-time student) that impact learning. Because linguistic practices are central to all writing classrooms, we’re particularly attentive to how difference manifests in the written products students complete in our OWI classrooms. DAAs invite students to claim their differences as strengths and craft assessments to best meet their individual needs.

One of the core theories of alternative assessment, like our approach to the DAA, is radically trusting students (Lynch, B. T. and Alberti, S., 2010; Moore, P., 2014). For us, this means strategically democratizing the responsibility of work in the online writing classroom by decentralizing the role of the teacher and emphasizing the responsibility students have over their own learning—an idea that is easy to get behind in theory, but difficult to put into practice. Elsewhere, we’ve theorized Radical Trust as a pedagogical orientation toward the classroom, an “invitation, a purposeful feminist rupture, a mindful and strategic choice to orient to a recurrent kairotic opening: the beginning of a semester,” its opportunity for newness and starting over (Pantelides, 2021). Using the DAA is a Radical Trust practice, and trust, broadly, is central to the work of alternative assessment. The DAA demonstrates a trust in students to make choices for themselves and to do the work of writing, not because they’re being manipulated to do so through the relative carrot or stick of a numerical grade, but because they’re engaged in the learning process and they choose to do work in the class that aligns with their own pedagogical needs, goals, and interests.

Course Context and Lesson: The Dialogic Assessment Agreement (DAA): A Space for Thinking, Discussing, and Negotiating Alternative Assessment Practices in Online Writing Instruction

Because alternative assessment can initially feel risky for both students and faculty in online writing courses, we offer the DAA as an interactive, ungraded, liminal space to negotiate the course structures, build trust with students, and mitigate risk for faculty, especially those with a contingent status (~75% of the professoriate). Specifically, we offer a sample DAA—created for MTSU’s first composition course in our two-course sequence—as a starting place for students and faculty to contextualize and apply the theories and practices of alternative assessment. The DAA is instructive for both students and faculty, as it provides an infrastructure for discussing four access points for alternative assessment in online writing instruction: course description, course objectives, course assignments, and criteria for success.

The access points in our DAA serve to build trust and knowledge between faculty and students and offer a starting point for faculty interested in alternative assessment practices in the online writing classroom. Rather than focusing on the transactional components of the LMS, our access points create opportunities for **redistributing agency**, allowing students to make choices about their personal goals, identities, and language practices. Students should be able to make choices (with guidance) about what they need to learn and compose in an online writing classroom.

Under each access point, we address how faculty might use the DAA as a space for **building trust** among students and faculty through open discussion, iterative design, and democratic negotiation of assessment criteria, as well as how this document can be used for **mitigating risk** for online writing faculty who find alternative assessment practices to be unfamiliar and risky. Initially, these orientations may seem like conflicting ways of looking at teaching materials. Rhetorical approaches to building trust are largely pedagogical and somewhat idealistic, whereas approaches for mitigating risk are largely logistical and sometimes cynical. We do not try to reconcile this apparent disconnect because it reflects the internal struggle that so many OWI faculty have: wanting to teach our values but recognizing that such work makes us vulnerable in the face of increasingly fragile labor conditions. Thus, in addressing both trust and risk in the context of alternative assessment, we offer arguments for improving the learning opportunities for students while simultaneously recognizing the precarity intrinsic for so many writing faculty. And yet, as you adopt alternative assessment practices, you might note how establishing trust in the classroom actually reduces risk. Of course, not all students will love alternative assessment practices, and not all of them will embrace the class, but by inviting conversation around these four access points across the semester, there is less opportunity for the misunderstandings and miscommunications that often bubble up at the end of the semester and put contingent faculty at risk in terms of their labor opportunities.

As a new genre, the DAA is intended to capture student attention and invite trust in alternative assessment practices from the beginning of the course. Students are so familiar with academic genres (e.g., syllabi, assignment sheets) and the associated grade expectations (e.g., rubric, checklists) that, as one of our recent writing center workshops noted, students only look for the grading expectations and often disregard the rest of the syllabus. A DAA is intended as a deviation to introductory course materials, an attempt to capture student attention and invite them into a different relationship to their writing and with their faculty and classmates than they might have had in previous courses. Given this exigency, we purposely ask students and faculty to engage with the access points, further explained below, in playful ways that vary and purposefully deviate from more common ways of engaging with introductory course materials. For instance, we ask students to rank course objectives, respond with emojis, and write creatively about time travel. The DAA provides documented evidence of an iterative effort to make space for play, dialogue, and negotiation with the online writing classroom.

Access Point 1: Course Descriptions

A course description is a conflicted institutionalized genre that, in part, functions as a public-facing description of a course's primary content, degree plan orientation, inter-institutional transferability, and regional accreditation. Yet, course descriptions are also student-facing, perhaps the most conventional component of a course syllabus. In most of the institutions where we have taught, the course descriptions we circulate on our teaching materials to students go beyond the brief, transactional statements disseminated in course catalogs and departmental websites. These are often the course descriptions from the syllabi offered to us by administrators, university committees, or WPAs. And, in our roles as WPAs, we've often adapted

our own course descriptions from other programs in which we've taught. Thus, they're interesting intertextual glosses of a semester, an archival amalgamation of instructors over time and their interactions with students. For online writing courses that count toward general education credits (most online writing courses!), some degree of uniformity is expected, but the DAA offers a space for coordinated deviance.

In the context of the DAA, course descriptions provide an opportunity for students and faculty to define and discuss the focus of a course. Yet, though they're the first thing on the page in most syllabi, many students (and faculty) don't necessarily read them. They're the kind of conventions that hide in plain sight because they might not be important to us, and/or students don't need them to take the class. The placement of the course description at the top of the DAA is meant to breathe into it new life and invite an opportunity for students and faculty to see the course description as a meaningful description in and of itself.

Building Trust in the Work of the Course

As a first step in building trust with students around alternative assessment practices, the DAA is rhetorically structured for students to collaboratively author the course documents alongside us. In our example, we ask students to add a sentence to our existing course description that will help the course meet their individual needs. Upon receiving all responses, whether structured in online real-time or online anytime learning, or whether they're recorded individually or in a collaborative document, we suggest sharing the extended course description with the class. Such a simple rhetorical approach immediately demonstrates the inclusive, co-constructed nature of the class, characteristics that alternative assessment practices invite. Their words become a fundamental component of how you articulate the work of the class, and make inroads toward assuring that the class will meet individual student needs. This is a starting place in building trust for alternative assessment practices, personal investment and engagement by students, and student perception of the worth of the class more broadly.

Mitigating Risk

Since many online writing courses are taught by graduate students or contingent faculty, WPAs have a responsibility to mitigate the risk associated with adopting alternative assessment practices in an online writing classroom. The course description offers a rhetorical structure to begin conversations about alternative assessment practices and processes.

Further, online writing classes can become less risky for faculty when students really engage with the purpose of the class through co-authoring the course description. The DAA offers an opportunity for students and faculty to co-construct the course. Such an orientation mitigates risk because students are actively involved in the iterative development of an institutional structure.

Access Point 2: Course Objectives

Perhaps more than course descriptions, course objectives are often not the choice of the educator and are mandated by the department, institution, or its governing body. Faculty are trained to work backward from course objectives, scaffolding the work of the class throughout the semester such that students complete the course having learned these objectives. In the DAA example we provide, we invite students to rank the ways in which they value the course objectives, share whether they've had experience with any of the course objectives, and author a course objective that meets their particular writing needs. As with all of these recommendations, if offering a numerical ranking of the course objectives is not in line with your pedagogy, we invite you to adopt a different method of response. We purposefully selected playful, non-discursive ways for students to interact with the DAA in order to demonstrate our

efforts at deviation and interest in play as a purposeful strategy for student engagement. In other words, the specific ways that students interact with and respond to the DAA are less important than the fact of their engagement and their impression of these invitations as “new” and worthy of attention. Because students are used to being prompted to answer reflective discussion questions, we intentionally chose to ask students to respond in multimodal, extra-textual ways.

Building Trust in Student Writing Expertise

Many students in online writing classes, particularly first-year writing courses, have had extensive experience with research and writing processes, albeit in different contexts. Inviting explicit discussion of what students know in the Dialogic Assessment values their expertise and provides insight into prior writing experiences. This rhetorical approach shares power and demonstrates trust in students, a method that, for instance, diagnostic essays do not. Lastly, we ask students to share a course objective related to their particular needs for the course. Instead of adding these course objectives as additional work for the instructor, such objectives may become the work of individual students, ensuring that they take on responsibility for accomplishing their personal objectives and perhaps taking on leadership of these objectives for other students. We suggest that this dialogic work with the course objectives provides space for both students and faculty to build engagement and identification with the course objectives, and, further, build trust in the systems of the course. And, as we recommend with the course description, after receiving responses, share the complete list of shared course objectives alongside the official course objectives to demonstrate trust in student input and their co-authoring of the work. Perhaps most importantly, inviting students to consider their relationship to the course objectives allows faculty understanding of the rich writing experiences students bring to the classroom and concentrated information about their individual goals.

Mitigating Risk

The DAA offers a space for students and faculty to negotiate and converse about the learning objectives for an online writing course not just as a programmatic construct, but as actionable. This process mitigates risk for faculty by minimizing opportunities to misunderstand students, make assumptions about them, or spend course time in a way that runs counter to our own goals for their learning. Many classroom difficulties stem from students feeling misunderstood, unsupported, or undervalued. Articulating what they know about themselves as writers and what they need from the course ultimately asks students to take responsibility for their strengths and honestly address necessary spaces for growth. And when growth is measured through reflective, rhetorical approaches to alternative assessment practices like the DAA, the online writing classroom is refocused on transformational learning activities emplaced in rhetoric and dialogue rather than technologically mediated, transactional interactions within an LMS (Stone & Austin, 2020).

Access Point 3: Course Assignments

Another familiar convention of many syllabi, descriptions of course assignments allow students to preview the ways in which the course objectives will be carried out. Of course, these brief descriptions only provide limited information to students, but sharing both the formal writing projects and the invention work that is intended to scaffold the formal projects offers an opportunity for preliminary engagement. Yet, course assignments differ from course descriptions and objectives in that they are traditionally the work of students in classrooms. This is where student input may be particularly helpful and work to both build trust and mitigate risk. Even the best-planned classes may overlook particular skills or content that students may need to successfully complete a formal project. Or, aspects of a formal project that may seem straightforward or low stakes to an instructor may need significant additional detail or may be

anxiety-inducing for students. Inviting responses to—and suggestions for—these projects helps demonstrate the relationship between invention assignments (also referred to as brainstorming, scaffolding, and formative assessments) and formal writing projects to students, and it provides opportunities to refresh your course and provide new and innovative ways to scaffold writing. In the example that we provide, we list the invention assignments that are meant to scaffold the learning necessary to complete the formal writing projects alongside each other. We ask students to react to each proposed assignment by inserting emojis, planning which assignments they want to complete, and composing questions to help build their understanding of the work. We hope that by listing invention assignments and formal projects alongside each other, both students and faculty will see these writing opportunities as inextricably linked.

Building Trust in Writing as a Learning Opportunity

Inviting dialogic response around course assignments builds trust around composing processes in the class from the outset of the semester and emphasizes learning as focal. Further, incorporating recommendations from students helps build trust in the content of the course as well as the methods of instruction. Consistent deviation in the work around the course description, course objectives, and the course assignments provides a foundation for alternative assessment that culminates in the final access point, course assessments.

Mitigating Risk

Pedagogical risk is arguably higher in online and hybrid learning spaces because there are more opportunities to be misunderstood. A writer's tone can be misread; news posts can be missed; even the tiniest technical glitch can seem to throw the entire class off course. Perhaps the highest perceived risk for graduate students, contingent faculty, and tenured/tenure track faculty who are reluctant to try alternative assessment practices is the fear of introducing additional, unconventional barriers to learning. While it can seem intimidating to adopt an alternative assessment practice in the online writing classroom, the DAA offers an opportunity to negotiate the rhetorical structures that guide the course iteratively at the outset of the course. The DAA can be revisited throughout the course as a strategic exercise to (re)focus the course user experience of the students (Borgman & McArdle, 2019, p. 71). After all, students are the central users of our online writing courses (Stone, 2021b, p. 322), and if we increase their agency through strategic and iterative activities like the DAA, major writing assignments become less focused on risk mitigation (e.g., bad grades for students and bad course evaluations for faculty) and more focused on learning activities and writing processes.

Access Point 4: Criteria for Success in the Course

In this access point, we explicitly address course assessment. In our example, we offer a simple grading system based on completion as well as an invitation for students to define what success might look like in the class in ways that go beyond numerical grades. In particular, this is an important space to invite students to consider the affective component of class—the experiences, orientations, and knowledge-building they hope to create and reflect upon during the course of the semester. Hopefully, the DAA will make inroads in drawing student attention to the many varied and complex components that might constitute “success” in a classroom—a loaded term that we hope students will spend time working through as they collaborate with us in this particular access point. We recognize that, as our peer reviewer Jennifer Pettit rightly posits, “a holistic consideration of individual engagement and capacity often conflicts in practice with baseline standards determined by the class.” Thus, for the DAA to function as we intend, as “a non-punitive method of assessment that accommodates difference,” faculty must recognize and discuss the continuum of “success” that students might consider for your class. For instance, the DAA allows for student success to be earning an A in the course, or completing

the minimum work required in the course while juggling caregiving, or focusing on learning rather than obsessing over grades on a non-hierarchical continuum. We urge educators to resist the discourse that associates “even minimal grading standards based on work completion [as] a meritocratic conception of equality” (Jennifer Pettit).

Building Trust in Assessment as a Learning Practice

One of the primary goals of alternative assessment is to focus on learning rather than ranking or using grades to motivate certain behaviors. As the anecdote that begins this article demonstrates, traditional grading often motivates students to “only go for good enough.” By using a DAA, we attempt to decouple the moral evaluations that are often attached to grades from the recognition of work completed. In this assessment structure, students may choose to earn Cs because that is what they’re interested in, or that is what they have time for, and the instructor’s perception of that choice has no bearing on the grade ultimately earned. This opens up space for students and faculty to trust their interactions and support without a grade looming over that interaction. Subsequent OWI classroom interaction may resemble the kinds of interactions we find in writing centers in which the interest in helping build better writers, not just better papers is the Stephen North mantra foundational for much of the sub-discipline (North, 1984). Alternative assessment allows writing pedagogy to be consistent in ways that traditional grading disrupts. Contract grading is well-established in Writing Studies, and is addressed at length in this volume (see DePew & Matheson, 2022; Stuckey & Wilson, 2022; Bowers & Smith Daniel, 2022), but, of course, choose the method of alternative assessment that is most appropriate to your classroom.

Just as importantly, we find the opportunity for students and faculty to rethink and account for what “success” in a class looks like to be particularly generative. If simply getting an A in a class translates to success, that does not tell us much about what the course offered, what course objectives the student accomplished, and what course assignments they took on and in which ways. We hope that by inviting students to think about success more broadly, particularly as it aligns with the other access points (e.g., course description, course objectives, course assignments), they may adopt a learning-focused orientation to OWI, one that trust allows.

Mitigating Risk

As a rhetorical, dialogic, and negotiated approach to alternative assessment, the DAA takes the surprise out of assessment. Surprise and lack of transparency are often central to student complaints and critical student evaluations. The DAA mitigates risk for faculty by generating discussion about assessment at the beginning of the semester rather than at the end. Of course, most faculty introduce their grading at the beginning of the semester, but the DAA asks students to respond and make meaningful relationships between the access points, particularly as they relate to their own “success” in the course. Thus, the DAA fosters transparent discussion and awareness around work completed, and students are in charge of the final grade they earn.

Reflection on Practice

As a new genre for online writing classrooms, the DAA invites students to think of the course as potentially different from their other coursework. Capturing student attention in a divergent way, using the rhetorical negotiations that occur throughout the DAA, provides an opening for a potential reorientation of students’ and faculty’s conception of OWI and assessment.

Assessment is often the loadstone for OWI classes. In it, we can glean faculty values and beliefs about writing, and it is often what students look to first to understand how they need to navigate a course. By wading into the alternative assessment practice waters, faculty can match

their pedagogical values and practices. Such assessment operationalizes best practices in OWI classrooms, not undercutting—for instance, invitations to experiment, to take risks, or to fail in our writing attempts. Instead, alternative assessment practices allow us to develop dialogic relationships with students about their work without assigning a final numerical assessment and thus closing down the conversations. Certainly, work becomes due and must be turned in, but the conversation that alternative assessment invites fundamentally changes the relationship between students and faculty that arises around compositions. For instance, you might assign due dates for formal projects but note, as we do, that extensions will always be granted upon request. The purpose of such invitations is to remain in communication and collaboration with students during their writing processes.

Yet, alternative assessment often makes both students and faculty uncomfortable, and students may complain that they don't have enough clarity or detail. We hope that the DAA is an intervention in such concerns, but it will likely not alleviate all student anxieties since students are familiar with numerical assessments of the subjective quality of their work. One of the purposes of alternative assessment is to not give students quite as much specificity when it comes to the kind of product they must develop. Instead, we draw student attention to the course objectives the assignment is to meet, the rhetorical situation in which they're composing, and the potential choices they must make. Alternative assessment asks students to take more responsibility for their decision-making. To put a finer point on it, by the end of a semester in a class that uses a DAA, we would hope that faculty should receive fewer inquiries about how many sentences should be in a paragraph and which headers they should use. Alternative assessment recognizes writing as fully rhetorical and requires students to make choices that faculty often make for them when the focus is the product rather than the rhetorical decision-making process. Yet, at the beginning of the semester, as students acclimate to alternative assessment, they may need more support than faculty may be accustomed to, and faculty may need to be more patient in repeating the methods of assessment. Because alternative assessment has ripple effects throughout the curriculum, and students may not have the footing they might expect in a traditionally graded classroom, they may have more questions and may initially be unsure. They will need support and encouragement to take the risks necessary to build their writing abilities. The purpose of the DAA is to offer a textual touchstone for these negotiations.

Alternative assessment is disruptive and problematizes classroom language practices, assumptions of the product as primary in the OWI classroom, and numerical grades as associated with those products. Because so much of the things that assessment usually stabilizes are destabilized by alternative assessment, classroom kairos becomes more important than ever to build trust with students and create an inclusive digital classroom space. Specifically, it's important (as possible) to respond quickly to student compositions. Quick responses to students' work will demonstrate to them that you will grade in the alternative assessment method that you've described. Even if you tell students that you will grade in a particular way, that might not mean much until you do it, and they still may not trust you until you've demonstrated this approach multiple times. You might also initially hear more requests for clarification from students. And remember—for invention assignments that cannot be revised, there is no need to provide individual feedback on every item. In traditionally graded classrooms, it's essential that students know exactly what is asked of them because their ability to do well rests on how well they can match the expectations of the faculty member. Certainly, there is use in being able to meet specific requirements, but alternative assessment instead allows for the problem solving, critical thinking, and risk-taking necessary to learn how to develop writing skills that are required in OWI classrooms, and product precision is not usually the focus.

Ultimately, our core recommendation for alternative assessment practices in the classroom, regardless of which access points you adopt, or whether or not you adopt the DAA, is to tell students what you're going to do based on their input, then show that you will do what you say. Say it; show it; say it; show it—and repeat ad nauseum. In particular, to build trust with students and mitigate risk for faculty we recommend that you consider using the DAA to negotiate the work of the class on the first day of the semester, then return to the terms of the agreement mid-semester to invite any necessary adjustments, and then re-examine the DAA as a class as the semester ends. At the end of the semester you may want to require fewer assignments if added environmental stressors impacted the work of the class as a whole, as we all experienced in the spring of 2020, or you may want to add a course objective that was met but not noted at the outset. Some educators, particularly those new to the OWI classroom, may worry that providing this kind of flexibility and inviting such questioning may undercut their classroom ethos. We understand this concern and have felt it ourselves. Certainly, we can't tell anyone how to feel in the classroom, but we would suggest that a classroom built around the trust and respect that develops in interaction with students and in which the person “in charge” acknowledges their own humanity and fallibility has a good chance of being a transformative rather than transactional space (Stone, 2021a), one that fosters learning. We also hope that the DAA offers a structure for taking risks that may ease the discomfort for both students and faculty for whom deviation to traditional grading feels particularly vulnerable. *Figure 19.2* below offers a potential timeline of what labor associated with alternative assessment practices might look like across a semester.

DAA Labor Across a Semester



Figure 19.2: In this timeline, the left side of the diagram describes three times during the semester to talk to students about alternative assessment. On the right side of the diagram there are three different opportunities to show students what alternative assessment may look like in the OWI classroom.

Conclusion

Alternative assessment invites students and faculty to rethink what information we need to know and share at the beginning of the semester, and our iteration of alternative assessment—the Dialogic Assessment Agreement—is offered as a tool to negotiate this information together such that we can demonstrate to students that their ideas, experiences, and identities are central to the functioning of the course. Most importantly, this invitation demonstrates that students are necessary co-authors of the learning, which will be co-constructed in documents and in experiences across the semester. Ultimately, the DAA is a demonstration of our own commitments to antiracist, feminist pedagogy and our awareness of how the products of our pedagogy can constrain or afford the kind of equitable practice and redistributive agency for students in OWI that we value.

Alternative assessment generally deemphasizes the product, so if you are teaching a class in which what the product looks like is of primary importance (e.g. professional materials developed for an institutional partner in a technical communication course), the DAA practice may not be the best approach. Make sure that there is a consistent relationship between the course assignment and the course assessment. Also, be patient with both your students and yourself. Even if you're interested in alternative assessment, it may take a few semesters for it to make sense or feel comfortable: it's a significant change. One rule of thumb is to ensure that the assessment truly matches the expectations you have for the assignment. For example, you may want to be open to different approaches by students to your particular assignment, but you may actually have something pretty specific in mind. If so, have a rubric that matches this. Be honest with yourself. If the thinking and student responsibility responding to the given rhetorical situation of the assignment is your focus, then a completion grade or final reflection may be most appropriate (the grading to which our example DAA refers does not use rubrics, but instead provides written and audio feedback, and completion grades on assigned work). Further, if you're implementing alternative assessment practices, the purpose of feedback changes. In traditional grading frameworks, the purpose of feedback is often primarily to explain the numerical assessment. With alternative assessment, the purpose of feedback is to engage in dialogue around the composition or to make recommendations for revision. It is about building trust rather than functioning as a defense mechanism.

The dialogue that happens in and around the DAA can be used for faculty training and as a vehicle for student attention to the learning. Using the DAA to negotiate the terms of the class creates an opportunity for every composition class to be different based on who is in the class. It offers a kairotic opportunity at the beginning of the semester and a foundation for deviation from traditional OWI interactions. The use of the DAA means that things will always be new at the beginning of a semester: it creates a space to negotiate new knowledge together, new opportunities for learning. In some ways, the DAA invites an orientation of surprise to confront reluctance and lack of engagement that we often see in the required courses that are the bread and butter for so many of us in OWI.

Of course, newness is a risk, and for faculty carrying a load of four or five classes per semester, the idea of newness in each class may seem like a liability rather than an appealing goal. To this very realistic concern we submit the following: adopting alternative assessment does not mean expanding the things that faculty need to be in charge of. Instead, it's intended to spread the work of the class such that students see themselves as important members of the community, members that are equally responsible for their learning. As with all changes to a classroom, we

must always be attentive to labor. Changes must be doable and realistic to become lasting components of our course design.

Further, alternative assessment values student expertise, but it does not suggest that anything goes, and the DAA does not mean that you necessarily share in the decision-making of the course design equally with students. Faculty have expertise in the content area as well as OWI course design. Instead, the DAA invites collaboration at different access points for the course to invite student expertise on their own experiences to strengthen the course plan, tailor assignments, and customize the assessment such that it meets their needs and invites them to engage in the learning process.

Students and faculty come to a classroom with lived experiences and “learning baggage.” We hope that the DAA can serve as an invitation to leave such bags at the doorway, to unlearn practices that run counter to learning, and instead invite the humanness and creativity inherent in our coursework to thrive, to be the center of our work. Certainly these are lofty goals for one little genre, but we hope that the DAA might provide inroads for building trust and mitigating risk, two steps toward learning and engagement in OWI.

Moving Better Practices Across Modalities

- **In-Person, Real-Time Learning:** In this context, you might invite students to work in groups to fill out the DAA collaboratively, or students might use different color pens and stickers to take advantage of the physical text.
- **Online, Real-Time Learning:** In this context, the DAA can function as an in-class assignment and invitation for discussion via break out groups, a Zoom whiteboard, Jamboard, Padlet, or other digital collaborative workspace.
- **Online, Any Time Learning:** In this context, students can use the “insert comment” feature, print out the document for annotation and subsequent uploading, or “handwrite” on the document with a digital pencil. Asynchronous collaboration is still possible via Jamboard, Padlet, a shared Google doc, or Perusall.
- **Hybrid Learning:** Any of the above are possible. Consider the tools available at your institution and the modalities in which students will likely compose to make choices about how you would like students to respond to the various access points. Consider the constraints and affordances of the available tools within your local context as you think through how to adopt or adapt the DAA. In any context, the DAA can be a stand-alone document, an addendum to the syllabus, or an assignment prompting discussion and reflection.

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