

Resisting Meritocracy: Students' Conceptions of Work at a Regional University

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ABSTRACT

Using data from a study on labor-based course contracts, we analyzed 152 student portfolio reflections in an effort to identify the gap between students' lived work experiences and the narrow focus of work in the college literacy classroom. Findings suggest students' definitions of work encompass emotional, academic, professional, and extracurricular labor. Such an expanded definition of work in the college literacy classroom provides insight into how students both resist and advance meritocratic narratives of work.

The notion of work is not new to literacy and writing studies or to college classrooms. Whether exploring working class discourse and pedagogies, institutionalized notions of labor, the ways in which the teaching of composition is often defined as “women’s work,” or the cultural work of the college literacy classroom itself, scholarship has not shied away from framing writing as work. Indeed, rhetoric and composition has consistently imagined itself as the “blue-collar” discipline (Bishop, 1999, p. 35), and literacy has long been linked to emancipatory narratives. As composition and literacy teachers, we recognize the ways values associated with work infiltrate every aspect of what it means to be a teacher and a student in

an increasingly neoliberal institution. We also, however, recognize that in our willingness to contemplate the work-based discourse of the literacy classroom, we run the risk of imposing our own definitions of work on students who bring with them extremely varied histories of work and its values.

Thus, when we introduced a labor-based course contract to basic writing courses at our institution, we were not surprised by how the nature of work and its ties to literacy, writing, and academic success butted against student expectation, instructor comfort, and institutional narratives. We wanted to embrace the ways course contracts provide instructors and students with an alternative means of assessment based on the behaviors and labors

of students rather than relying solely on their written products. Contracts constitute an agreement between the teacher and her students about what actions will result in academic success, and we believed that incorporating this assessment model would shift our attention from student identity to student action.

A number of scholars consider course contracts as a potential means of rethinking classroom assessment in ways that privilege classroom community, instructor and peer feedback, authorial choices, and the work and behaviors of writers and students. Asao Inoue (2012) suggests course contracts are “a fairer grading technology” that “reward[s] effort and labor,” focusing students and instructors on the processes, actions, and behaviors that lead to quality writing (p. 93).ⁱ Similarly, current iterations of course contracts by Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow (2008) work from the hypothesis that certain actions and practices improve writing and that successful students share common learning behaviors, including attendance, assignment timeliness, and responsiveness. As these studies demonstrate, by focusing on behaviors and actions, course contracts reward the behaviors of the moment, not the privileges and opportunities of the past, refocusing and refining assessment, our classrooms, our own goals, and the goals of our students.

Indeed, course contracts seem to be effective because of the transparency they lend when discussing with students the differences between the labor and work of writing and the writing product itself. Although the field does not seem to distinguish between labor and work, there are important differences between the two that structure how we use them in our analysis and thinking. Informed by Hannah Arendt’s (1958) philosophy that an active life is determined by the separate but related functions of labor, work, and action, as well as the differences between the histories and definitions of the terms “labor” and “work” articulated in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we

define labor as physical, emotional, and mental exertion and work as the thing that is done through that physical, emotional and/or mental exertion. Using a meritocratic frame, universities and popular discourse often privilege work, the thing that is done, but ignore or limit definitions of labor, the physical, emotional, and mental exertions necessary to do the work. In this institutional meritocratic frame, meaningful work becomes the reward for the unacknowledged or prescriptive exertions necessary for a college degree.

As one means of shifting the institutional focus from student identities and products, the perceived rewards of the meritocratic frame, to the labors and works of literacy, we collaborated with nine faculty members at our institution (three full-time faculty, four graduate assistants, and two part-time faculty) to implement course contracts as their classroom assessment method.ⁱⁱ Based on our goals for the study—increased student retention, academic success, and a transfer of writing language and concepts—the results of the study were successful.ⁱⁱⁱ However, after we reviewed our data, we also discovered students at our institution had views on “work” that differed from those established in our disciplinary narratives and those articulated in instructors’ course contracts. Our data also suggest that for this population of students the concept of work encompasses more than the literacy acts of the classroom and that the meritocratic nature of the frame we were proposing did not go unnoticed.

As researchers, we problematically assumed students and instructors shared our definition of work and valued it in the same ways we did. As white women in academia who have both resisted and enacted the old adage “work twice as hard to get half as far,” our own values surrounding work influenced our attraction to course contracts in ways we only came to fully articulate through the reflexive process of this study. Moreover, students and instructors in this study brought their own histories of work to course contract

classrooms. Shaped by complicated and exploitative histories with work, students at this regional university know work and labor to be valued differently by race, gender, and class in ways we did not fully account for when we considered labor-based course contracts.

Because these different orientations to work and labor became evident throughout the course of the study, our data do not fully account for how race, gender, and work histories shaped student, instructor, and researcher articulations of work. Thus, we want to begin with what we do not know. Although we can say student articulations of work did not align across race or gender, we do not have clear data on how socio-economics might have shaped how students articulated work. Also, it is important to note that this study's results and our own interpretations of those results are heavily influenced by some of the same identity politics that our initial study attempted to address. Within our study, seven of the instructors were white women, one instructor was a white male, and one was an African-American woman. The racial dynamics at play within college literacy classrooms where the majority of instructors are white and the majority of the students are of color cannot be ignored.^{iv} We came to question and trouble our own definitions of who works, why they work, what work means and how it is valued through the process of this study, and we invite readers on that same journey.

This article explores how students articulated work in course contract classrooms. In the next section of our article, we will provide a brief overview of disciplinary discussions of work, but the exigency for this project stems from the fact that scholarship that gestures toward student views on work seems to rely on limited student data.^v Our study centers on student conceptions of work, to honor their experiences, their views, and the ethical research ideal that claims about students should be supported by ample evidence and

rigorous research. In doing this, we found that students' conceptions of labor and work are holistic, encompassing their entire lived experiences. In order to explore how students are encouraged to view their writing classroom through a lens of work, behaviors, and labor acts in course contract classrooms, we briefly examine the ways work is defined in our disciplinary scholarship prior to analyzing students' articulations of work and how their articulations grapple with meritocratic ideals traditionally associated with work.

A Meritocratic Framework

The enterprise, idea, and attainment of adult literacy and the ideals of meritocracy intertwine in enduring master narratives of higher education. These narratives of upward social mobility drive university enrollment, teacher and student identities, and classroom practices even as research and statistics challenge the accuracy of these narratives. The seductive narratives of meritocracy claim talent and work will be rewarded with educational attainment and that educational attainment will propel students to a higher social class. In these narratives, higher education works to expand opportunity and award merit and success to the talented and the hard working. It is a persuasive narrative, focused on powerful, cultural themes: individualism, merit, equality of opportunity, and social stratification. But, it is also a naive narrative, continually belied by research in education, economics, and sociology, the latest of which claim that while a college education may be necessary to "economic success," alone it cannot overcome the structural inequalities of poverty and racism—no matter how hard one works (Burkhauser et al., 2009; Fiske & Markus, 2012; Piketty & Saez, 2001).

College literacy scholars have explored the power and complexity of meritocratic narratives in students' experiences. Janet Bean (2003), in her oft-cited "Manufacturing

Emotions: Tactical Resistance in the Narratives of Working-Class Students,” frames how working-class students trade working with their “backs” for working with their “brains” as a tactic of survival in changing economic times. Often spurred by their parents’ belief that a college education will propel their children to white-collar work, students in Bean’s study in Akron, Ohio, grappled with the promises of meritocracy and with their families’ blue-collar work histories. Bean portrays the complexity of students’ beliefs in the meritocracy of the university through an analysis of her student, Sarah. During a classroom discussion of an assigned reading critiquing these meritocratic ideals, Sarah emotionally counters the critique’s claims with her experiences as a white, government-assisted, scholarship-winning student who worked hard to earn her spot in the university. Bean acknowledges that it would be easy to dismiss Sarah’s anger as typical “student resistance to cultural critique” (p. 106), but she also suggests we would do better to see her “expression of anger” as what allows her to “occupy conflicting positions within the dominant narrative of upward mobility” (p. 105). Students like Sarah both hold and question the promises of meritocracy in higher education while working towards its end, and those of us who study and teach in college literacy classrooms navigate these same conflicting positions within the dominant narrative.

At the individual level, college literacy instructors are both gatekeepers and teachers, grade-givers and mentors, and at the disciplinary level, college literacy is both allied with and against the narratives of meritocracy. College literacy instructors and researchers contend with these tensions as we conceptualize and emphasize work in writing studies. We see these tensions play out in disciplinary scholarship devoted to exploring the socio-economic class values of the literacy classroom (Bishop, 1999; Bloom, 1996; Welch, 2011), attempts to locate and theorize work and workers through a Marxist lens

(Horner, 2000; Lu & Horner, 2009), studies on the relationships between literacy and economic success (Brandt, 2001), and analyses of student work as representative of classroom labors (Stewart, 1980; Yancey, 2004). Each of these lines of inquiry contributes to our complex understandings of work in literacy and writing studies, but few if any of these contemplate what students believe to be the work of composition or the works that constitute composition or the composing process. Work and its relationship to literacy becomes even more complex as we begin to contemplate the ways students talk about work in relation to the college literacy classroom.

How Students Frame the Ideas and Promises of Work

Clearly work matters to writing studies, but how and in what forms work matters to students bears more investigation. Conducted at a regional university serving a diverse demographic, including a considerable number of first-generation college students, our study aimed to intervene in student success and retention narratives that framed student identity as a hurdle in success and retention. We wanted to focus on how we might structure writing classrooms to encourage behaviors and values that lead to improved writing and thus chose to implement course contracts in our stretch-model of composition. Our corpus of data includes student portfolios (n=152) from ten sections of our stretch-model of composition in which instructors used course contracts (n=219 students) and six sections in which instructors used traditional grading methods (n=144 students), anonymous student surveys that asked for Likert-style and qualitative feedback related to students’ experiences with assessment in these classes, institutional research data, and faculty syllabi, course contracts, and interview transcripts.

Our quantitative data showed students who were in contract courses were less likely

to fail and less likely to withdraw from the classes, and our qualitative data indicated an appreciation and uptake in the writing concepts—facts that we interpreted to mean that students benefited from thinking through their writing classrooms through a lens of work and labor acts. Indeed, in their survey responses to questions related to how the assessment process helped individual writers, many students expressed relief at the concept of a writing classroom that did not privilege their previous writing experiences but instead valued their specific actions and made explicit ties between those actions and their ability to improve as writers. We were encouraged by these results and interested in exploring how students articulated these ties in their reflection essays that accompanied their course portfolios.

Informed by Thomas Huckin's (2012) contributions to our understandings of critical discourse analysis when he insists that critical discourse analysis "be done in conjunction with a broader contextual analysis, including a consideration of discursive practices, intertextual relations, and sociocultural factors" (p. 157), we began reading students' portfolio reflection essays (n=152) summarizing their experiences in the course.^{vi} Huckin's (1992) methodology for such work involves selecting an initial corpus of texts, reading the texts holistically to identify patterns of interest, questioning these patterns, verifying the patterns, and conducting functional-rhetorical analysis in order to interpret the results (pp. 90-93). In addition, James Paul Gee's (1990) approach to discourse analysis creates spaces for us to think about our students' use of language related to work in conjunction with their actions when it comes to the labors and work of literacy. For Gee, Discourse is "composed of distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading coupled with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing, with other people, and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific

socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognizable activities" (p. 155). Thus, we approached our corpus of data using integrated methods but always with the goal of contemplating how students were discussing and enacting the works and labors of literacy.

Across 152 portfolios, students explicitly mentioned work 597 times, and the ways in which they framed work fell predominantly into four themes: work as justification, work as emotional engagement, work as product, and work and its accompanying attitudes. Students' reflection essays suggested that work is not just the goal but also the ever-present reality of their day-to-day lives. Many are already working outside of school, and most framed their student labors as work. Students conceived of work in broad terms but as a relative good that justified their success. The broad categories students used to define work illustrate how they push against meritocratic narratives. By categorizing emotion, care, and overcoming and wrestling with predispositions as work, students made room for themselves in the university, but they also seemed to both accept and struggle with the idea that the labor acts encouraged by the course contracts were comparable to their other experiences with work.

Inoue (2015) has argued persuasively for labor-based grading contracts, claiming "we can all labor" (p. 89). Inoue's definition of labor encompasses "reading, writing, and judging," the work of the college literacy classroom (p. 115). Based on the premise that "labor is a more equitable and fair measure. Everyone has 24 hours in every day" (p. 93), Inoue addresses students' lives outside the classroom in an endnote:

I realize that many students work outside of school, take care of family members, and have other constraints on their time, so not all students have the same amount of free time. These limitations can be negotiated with each class since they will be different for each class. (p. 304)

The students in this study named their professional or personal lives and responsibilities as given and expected parts of their workloads. Students' course reflections, in other words, extended the definition of work beyond reading, writing, and judgment. By reclassifying these "constraints" and "limitations" as part of how students understand and experience work, we might more fully understand student experiences of labor and work in the college literacy classroom (p. 304).

Documenting the work of the college literacy classroom, students detailed how they had fulfilled the contract through work as part of their reflective essays framing their portfolios. Our composition program uses portfolio assessment measures, and all students are asked to write reflection essays that explain the ways they believe they have met the learning outcomes for the class. Individual teachers may instruct students to emphasize different elements of their class and writing experiences, and they may suggest differing approaches to the essay, from personal letters to third-person reflections. All students, however, are encouraged to provide evidence from their experiences and their writing to illustrate how they have met the expectations of the course.

Work as Justification

In providing evidence of meeting the expectations of the course, many students used work as a justification. In fact, 64% of students in the study used work as a justification for their performance in the course (n=97). Of those who use work as a justification, 56% (n=54) documented work within the class and the scope of the contract, while 44% (n=43), documented other forms of work, including outside employment, familial obligations, emotional work, and the intellectual work of evaluating their previous literacy experiences and predispositions. And it is important to note while students clearly ranked some forms of work as more important than others, when reflecting on

their actions, they rarely distinguished between the work of the contract and these other forms of labor. A number of students aligned their work efforts for the class with the contract. One student provided the following details of her work:

In fulfilling the contract, I have attended every class except two I believe. I have been prepared to class except two times, one being at the beginning at the semester. With my projects, I always turned them in on time that you requested for. Also, during class while you would have a PowerPoint up on the board, I would take notes and I have my drafts for proof. [. . .] When you allowed us to do peer work shopping. I offered my thoughtful feedback on their assignments. I also fulfilled the contract by not using my phone during class, revising my essays as needed most of the time, and using office hours.

This student offers her timeliness, notetaking, and work with peers as evidence of her success in the class. Other students pointed to the completion of assignments and readings: "I have successfully done all my work, ranging from readings to writing assignments and being active in class and to also giving peer reviews." Clearly, for a significant number of students, the contract and the labor acts it established provided a comprehensive definition of work. These students aligned their labors with those established by their course contracts and recognized the acts themselves as successful acts that warranted recognition.

Others justified their experiences and expectations for the class based on struggles that involved the expanded definitions of work noted earlier. Their struggles to read, to attend class, and to juggle university life and outside employment and/or family obligations equated to labor, and they measured it as work related to the class. These hidden labors were not included in the course contract, and by the measure of the contract many of these students had not completed the

required work of the course. However, students argued that the emotional and material labors they completed to make it to the end of the semester should count as part of their work for the course. We almost read these justifications as excuses or even subtle manipulations, and while that argument could be made, we believe that argument misses an important gap between student and faculty conceptions of work. One student articulates this gap well in her differentiation between the “strongest work” and the process: “I believe that I rightfully deserve to receive an A in this course. I have put a lot of effort into this class, and even though I did not have the strongest work, this course was meant to teach us about the process.” And, for this student, the process was coming to understand how the work of the literacy classroom—reading, writing, and judgment—rested on behaviors like timeliness, participation, and the willingness to struggle: “My most important quality of this semester was trying to succeed at things that I struggle with previously.” The idea of struggle, over whatever barrier, was coded as work for students, and that work did not always result in the work of the reading, writing, and judgment, but it was a significant factor in students’ estimation of their success in the course. In addition, comments such as these suggest many students believe that struggles and attempts to approximate behaviors should be defined as successful labor acts. The student quoted above does not claim that she was successful, only that she was “trying.” Course contract assessment measures posit that these efforts will result in successful products, so it is interesting that the student emphasizes her struggles but does not seem to recognize the struggles as leading to a product the institution would consider successful.

Student ability is often classified as academic ability, but in their justifications related to work, students were clear that their ability to do coursework was rooted in physical and material concerns. The work of the classroom takes time, money, and health.

Consider the chain effect this student describes: “I believe I deserve a B because I have followed through with all of my assignments and completed them to the best of my ability. At first I didn't have any money to print out all those papers because I had no income, then I acquired a job so I could and that sort interfered with me being on time because of how late I got off but I tried.” Different instructors require different behaviors for preparation; some asked that students bring copies of drafts or readings to class. The financial and material demands of course requirements led to a job which led to a loss of sleep which led to a struggle to attend class, and every instructor’s contract included attendance as an expected behavior. Struggles and efforts in this instance involve more than just attempts to perform required acts of labor; they are a precarious balance of labor acts moored in acts necessary to remain in school at all.

Work as Emotional Engagement

Students also coded “care” and feelings as work: “My participation in the class shows how much I care about the course and how seriously try to show the behaviors beyond what is expected of me.” Another student also specifically coded his care as participation in the community of the class:

I try to answer the question that are being asked from [my instructor] and read and interact with my fellow classmates in the class when we are paired up in groups to show that my grade in the class really matters. I always try to come up with questions to ask [my instructor] on a particular assignment to show that I care about the assignment.

Completing readings and responses to those readings were typically labor acts noted in contracts, but, for students, these types of acts were also linked to feelings and emotions. One student noted, “I feel my participation should be an A+ because I always found myself having to put my feelings into class so

I can get something of importance out of class. I completed every reading log and every reading because that shows my teacher I am fully engaged and committed to the class.” Demonstrating care required the work of collaboration, reading, and participation, but it also required emotional labor and a willingness to acknowledge feelings. Students characterized their care as college literacy work acts.

This emphasis on care and feelings is also evident in one of the specific struggles noted by students (n=45): how the habits and predispositions students brought to the work of reading hindered or aided their work and performance in the class. We highlight students’ struggle with the work of reading because student’s explanations of this struggle encompassed additional aspects of the hidden work of their lives’ outside of the classroom, the predispositions and feelings they brought to the task, and their justifications of their experiences. Slightly more students (n=26) cited the work of reading as beneficial work than those who framed reading as a struggle (n=19). Those who framed reading as work that benefited their class performance often cited it as the work of preparation and participation. For example, one student wrote “Little things such as reading the articles or essays for homework has help me to become better at writing, and it has also shown that I am willing to do whatever it takes to be ready to participate in class.” Reading was seen as an investment in the class and a demonstration of caring. The student’s statement “to do whatever it takes” demonstrates his uptake of a meritocratic narrative. What might be seen by an instructor as a course requirement was coded by the student as work that would deem him worthy of opportunity.

For those who framed reading as struggle, they battled emotion, judgment, and exhaustion. The following student cited her love of reading, her judgment of the readings, and her inability to complete the reading all in the same paragraph:

During this course, I did not read every assignment during this course. I started to get tired of the stories we were reading. I love to read and it honestly depends on if I am interested in the topic I am reading. The stories in the books were not interesting at all. The stories I did read, were okay stories but they were not good enough for me to finish. I do not know what else to say about the stories we have read in class.

The equation of the textbook and its model essays with stories and her focus on interest suggest this student brought previous experiences with and purposes for reading (enjoyment and pleasure) to the task of reading rhetorically in the college literacy classroom. These past predispositions towards reading can also be seen influencing another student’s reading patterns:

Honestly when we were given a reading assignment seven times out of ten, I either did not read it or just skimmed thru it to see what it was about. Not only was it your class I did not read in, but it was also high school English and other classes that assigned reading that I did not read. I really hate to read stuff that do not interest me, but when we were given reading that I was interested in, I read them and you could tell because the response logs were well thought out and put together. When it was time to discuss in class, sometimes I could not participate because I didn't read and that was not smart.

Although this student clearly understands how reading benefits his learning in the class, his “hate” for reading materials in which he is not interested and his high school habits perpetuated his struggle. Other students cited plain exhaustion in avoiding the reading, “I can personally tell you that I didn't read all of the readings assigned. I won't make any excuses to why I didn't read them but through

six hours of practice I am just exhausted.” This student suggests her extracurricular responsibilities are exhausting work that leads to difficulties completing her academic work. Having been found worthy of merit as an athlete, the student apportions her work and effort accordingly, choosing the ballfield over the classroom.

Work as Product

In addition to complicating our understandings of work via justifications and hidden definitions of work, students also discussed work as the product of their labors (n=48). When the field discusses student work as product, it celebrates and interrogates individual student samples as part of a corpus, and some students’ discussion of work products mirrored this focus on individual accomplishment (Yancey, 2004). In the following student’s reflection, he focuses on his competence won through effort: “My confidence as a writer has increased. I now know I can write and compose good work if I try.” However, the focus on the individual did not always solely celebrate accomplishment. Sometimes, it demonstrated how a focus on the individual writer produces meritocratic systems of reward and punishment in the college literacy classroom: “I now believe that I have the ability to write papers for college level classes without being punished for my poor writing skills.” This student’s reflection on her competence belies the reason for that competence: fear of punishment. Although the student now believes her abilities can help her escape that punishment, the motivation behind gaining those abilities stems from an understanding of writing ability as a good that is rewarded or punished.

In addition, while some students framed worked products in meritocratic terms, other students wrote about work products as collaborative efforts and means of self-assessment. Collaborative work products were the result of “talking to my peers about our work and what we could do to make it better,” “the help of [my instructor],”

“catch[ing] the audience’s attention,” and “including different sources.” Students framed work products as the result of collaborations between students, students and instructors, and interactions with texts and audiences. So, while strands of students’ reflections suggested an understanding of work in the meritocratic frame, other strands, such as those that focus on work products as collaborative and intertextual, push back against meritocratic notions of work and the individual and provide a more nuanced portrait of work as layered and communicative. And while many would agree that this is a healthier perspective of work, it is not one that aligns with the individualized notions of work associated with meritocratic ideals.

Work and its Accompanying Attitudes

Students’ work naturally engendered pride and disappointment. Although a small number of students noted these types of feelings (n=30, 20%), we explore them in further depth here because we believe how these students articulated “feelings” as a by-product of work instead of what they put into work is an important distinction. About half of the students whose conceptualizations of work noted a by-product of feelings framed work as positive, beneficial, and rewarding, and these types of reflections align more closely with the meritocratic and individual nature of the course contract and with the typical narrative trope of literacy and success. In fact, the reward of one student’s work surpassed his expectations:

While in this class as a college freshman, I have been able to see my work fulfill before my own eyes. The projects that I have produced this semester have made me very proud of what I have accomplished and created. The fact that I have been able to take small ideas and make them into something much bigger has challenged me in many ways.

For another, work proved beneficial: “Since English is not my first language, I figured I

would have to work twice as hard to be able to have good grades in this class. Last semester, being my first was, very hard and exhausting to me. . . . Today, I can proudly say my writing process have improved in ways I didn't even think were possible when I came to this country." These are the types of reflections we expected would be most common throughout students' reflections, as they more closely resemble the takeaway most instructors felt students gain from the contract experience: work equals success, success equals pride.

It is interesting, then, that the other half of students who discussed feelings as a byproduct of work reflected on more negative emotions. For some students, those motivations arose from a need to avoid negative emotions; as one student writes, "According to my overall performance of this class based off of projects, revisions, writing skills, etc., I would characterize my performance as exemplary because I always pushed that extra mile when it came to my writing so I could not have regrets and doubts about the work that I have turned in." The student works to avoid "regrets and doubts," negative emotions, perhaps framed by the idea of the meritocracy, the idea that if he works hard enough, just a little more, he will make it.

Other students noted how the lack of work and effort on their parts or the lack of improvement from work they did complete inspired negative feelings. One student grappled with allowing herself to choose the "easy" path and the resulting humiliation: "However, once again, right near the end of the semester it just became so easy to not bring in my work. It was not only humiliating to not have my work finished, but it was also annoying because while other students were capable of working on their work, I was just starting mine." The course contract's expectation of timely work means the student will either do the reading, writing, and judgement labors of the college literacy classroom or complete the emotional labor of

not meeting those expectations. In the case of this student, "easy" became an emotionally-laden task of catch-up and frustration. These notes of frustration were sounded often. One student noted, "I failed that course because of my writing skills was not good as a whole. . . . [I] studied and stood up all night writing papers for and still failed," and another student reflected, "It seems to me that even when I try, I'm not really that good in topic sentences, but this semester I believe that I have improved a tad in formulating them." And while we might simply classify feelings such as these as the annoying after effects of avoiding work or as normal feelings of disappointment, we argue that these types of feelings are significant to understanding the emotional labors of work and that students are attempting to explain the ways in which the feelings and emotions elicited by work are also of significance and a type of work in themselves. Indeed, as Julie Lindquist (2004) argues "affective responses function as work," and the "burdens of emotional engagement are unevenly distributed in scenes of literacy learning" (p. 188).

Conclusion

Work for both students and instructors in the college literacy classroom "always involves a vision of the present inextricably tied to a vision of the future" (Branch, 2007, p. 214). We would add that the past, our pasts, both disciplinary and personal, also shape what counts as work, how we work, what we value as work, and often the outcomes of that work. Thus, when we consider student conceptualizations of and reflections on work and literacy, we begin to see the limits of a narrow definition of work that consists only of literacy acts. Students' conceptions of emotional labor, extracurricular work, and the material and social realities of work expand the meritocratic narrative to encompass their lived lives. And while the field of writing studies, with its theoretically informed notions of work, of workers, and of work spaces,

provides nuanced explorations of these work/literacy relationships, student experiences and understandings of work clearly demand that we continue to evaluate and expand our understandings of work in the literacy classroom.

These evaluations and understandings must stem from students' expertise on their own lives, experience we can only know through listening. Choosing course contract methods of assessment requires faculty to more fully interrogate our labor-based assessment methods in order to ensure our contracts are representative of students' lives. We must consider the possibility that students

view their work processes through a broader lens that encompasses their everyday lives, not just literacy work acts. We have to contemplate the more social definitions of work projects that students might forward and accept a more collaborative notion of what constitutes such products. And, as Lindquist (2004) notes, we must make "room for the products of students' emotional labor in scenes of literacy instruction" (p. 189). In doing so, we can build classrooms and assessment structures that take into account a more varied and nuanced understanding of work and labor.

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Notes

ⁱ Asao Inoue's early work with course contracts (2012) used a contract similar to Elbow and Danielwicz's contract. These contracts award students a "B" based on completing specific labors and behaviors. Grades of an "A" are achieved through judgments of quality. Inoue's later work (2015, 2019), published after this study, awards grades solely based on labors and behaviors. In his new contract, students wishing to achieve an A must complete more reading, writing, and thinking.

ⁱⁱ This study received IRB approval from our institution.

ⁱⁱⁱ Our measures for success included retention rates, pass rates, and grade distributions. In contract courses (N=219 students), 10% of students withdrew from or failed the class, whereas in non-contract courses (N=144 students), almost 18% of students withdrew from or failed the class. In addition, grade distribution data suggested the contracts did not lead to grade inflation among passing students.

^{iv} Enrollment data at the institution provides racial demographic data for first-year, first-time students as follows: 62.7% White and 26.1% Black/African American. 2013 state census data lists the same population demographics as 57.5% and 37.4%. Enrollment in the stretch composition courses, however, flips this ratio, with a consistent average of 62% Black/African American students and 23% White students.

^v See, for example, Jeff Smith's (1997) "Students' Goals, Gatekeeping, and Some Questions of Ethics."

^{vi} The study entailed multiple levels of consent. Students could participate at the level of the survey and choose not to have their writing included in the study, hence the larger numbers of participation at the survey level.