- Hi, everyone. Welcome to our panel, "Grading the Ungradable: "Reimagining Assessment in the Creative Writing." I'll say a little bit about what brought us to bring this panel together, and then I'm gonna have each of our panelists today introduce themselves. and talk a little bit about what brings them to this question of grading in creative writing. My name's Erika Luckert. And when I started teaching creative writing, through conversations with my peers, I always just had this sense that creative writing was this ungradable thing. A lot of those informal conversations never really got past that point of just feeling that challenge, and feeling that conflict of this ungradable thing that we were expected to approach in our classrooms. And that started to shift for me actually at AWP in 2019, when Jason and I both attended a panel that talked about grading in creative writing. And I think that, for me, as a teacher, was the push that I needed to start actually doing something different, and reimagining how I would approach grading and assessment in my creative writing classroom. So Jason and I both made some changes to the way that we approached it after that panel. And we started writing an article together, which is eventually gonna come out in the Journal of Creative Writing Studies. But in the process of refining that individual work, we started to think, too, about how our approaches really were linked to us, as individual teachers, and our specific contexts, and pedagogies, and the students that we were serving. And so, the reason that I wanted to bring together this group, is that I wanted to understand how people were grappling with this challenge from a much broader range of perspectives. And so, I reached out to some of the teachers who I most admire in the creative writing world, and I'm really excited to have all of these folks here today to sort of broaden this conversation, and, hopefully, continue the sense of really getting past that feeling of it being ungradable, and thinking about how we can really reimagine our approaches in ways that feel like they serve what we want to accomplish in our classrooms. So I'm wondering if we can start out just with everybody saying who you are. And tell us a little bit about what brings you to this question of creative writing. What sort of contexts you've been grading creative writing in, and what preoccupations bring you to the panel today. Ángel, do you want to start off?

- Thank you, Erika. Hello, everyone. My name is Ángel Garcia, I am an Assistant Professor at University of Illinois Urbana, at Urbana-Champaign. You know, having, having taught several classes, you know, intro to creative writing, intro to poetry, advanced poetry writing, this became a more and more important question to me. Particularly, because I'm asking students to do particular things. Those being, you know, taking some risks, and making themselves vulnerable through their writing, through their poems. And so, it became a real difficult ethical question of, you know, how do I grade what is, you know, very vulnerable and very sensitive, and, you know, probably the first time that many of these students are articulating those, those narratives. And so, you know, it's, it's been a learning process for me, particularly, during this last semester. And so, I'm hoping to, you know, continue the conversation and keep learning.

- Thank you. Jason, do you want to introduce yourself?

- Sure, hi! Yeah, my name's Jason McCormick, and I've been teaching creative writing since 2015 or 2016. I started teaching at Hunter College, was the first time I got to teach an intro to creative writing course. I noticed that students came in with certain expectations of themselves, and I came from a MFA background at The New School, and thought I knew how to approach and grade this. It just got more and more complex, especially, since the idea of grading for an end product is maybe, maybe marginally okay in an MFA program, and it's not the goal when people are just starting out for the first time. Then my perspective really changed when I started teaching creative writing at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. Where I had students with much, much more varied expectations of their education, very different lived experiences from the more traditional student that had, was at Hunter. And I started thinking about how writing works in their lives, and how it can compliment their lived experiences in a way that, you know, maybe isn't about the product, but it is very much about what sort of values they bring into the writing process. And understanding that the way they can demonstrate those values are very different, based on their, their own personal lived experience, and so, how can I meet that, as a professor? And so, that really was how I came to this. And then, of course, as Erika mentioned, at the 2019 AWP Panel, the one thing that I walked away with more tangibly than anything else, is the idea that we grade what we value, or that should be the goal. And I really, I centered a lot of the changes I made to my grading process on the idea of, well, as a creative writer, what do I value? What is valuable to me? So... That's me.

- Thanks, Jason. Jake, do you want to tell us what brings you here?

- Hi, everybody. Thank you, Erika. Thank you, to everyone here. So, for me, well, let me start with an introduction first. My name is Jake, I'm an Assistant Professor here at Diné College in Tsaile, Arizona, which is located on the Navajo Nation. Diné College is one of the first tribally-controlled colleges in the United States, it's a Tribal College and University, or TCU, so there's a whole sort of branch of TCUs across the country. Of really looking at culture, and how did that define education? So, for me, what brought me to this question initially, was just coming into college for the first, coming into an instructor role for the first time. I'm still relatively new to the whole arena of academics, and what does it mean to be a professor? And it's a really interesting sort of chain of events, I feel, because I was able to be introduced to teaching here at Diné College, here on my tribe, within our tribal boundaries, teaching students from my own community. So, I was really interested in the ways that, when I was sort of brought on, right, we were given syllabi, and those syllabi were pretty much already set. And I was really interested in the kind of freedoms I had to re-edit those, those syllabi, and really change the way I approach assess, specifically. Because, here at Diné College, it very much operates the same way as a community college does, you have the large range of student demographics here at Diné College. Even though we are from the same community, they all have very different backgrounds. And it's often the first time that they are in a creative writing class, and often the first time that they know that you can take poetry, or fiction as a, as a discipline, and study it. So, for me, I had to really come to grading student-centered. To remember what it was like for me learning poetry for the first time here in the, on the tribe, here in the reservation, and sort of how do I then grade that? So, for me, I'm really interested in the idea of process over product. Really honoring a student's work that they do behind the poem. So I'm really not interested in grading the actual poem itself. I'm really interested in making sure that I'm assessing a student's process, a student's maneuvering to get to that, to that product.

- Thank you, Jake. And Michelle, do you want to talk, tell us a little bit about where you're coming from in this question?

- Sure. I actually just finished my PhD at the University of Houston in Literature and Creative Writing, so I was teaching there for the past four years. And at the same time I was also teaching creative writing at the, at HSPVA, which is our High School for Visual and Performing Arts. But, prior to that, most of my work with creative writing had been more in facilitating community-based workshops, or doing creative writing workshops in settings that were much less structured. So sometimes you have students who were there one week, and not the next. Or students who, you know, maybe come for a few sessions, and then never come back again. That's just the nature of doing community-based workshops. And so, in doing that, I really had to rethink the model of workshop as a whole. And so, I think that when I came to these more structured environments, like at HSPVA, like at UH, I took a lot of what I had done in rethinking the workshop environment at the community setting, and figured out ways of doing that in these structured settings, where I did have to grade. And as somebody who identifies as a person of color, who also is neurodivergent, I think about grading a lot, and I think about the ways that it reinforces so much of what I fundamentally don't believe in. And so, I've always been really interested in this question of grading across the board. And right now, very, very specifically about what it means to try to put some sort of value judgment on something so subjective. And so, for several years, I've kind of been rethinking just how we teach creative writing, and grading. It is such a huge part of that, especially, for high schoolers, who, as a few people have mentioned, are just sort of getting into what poetry can be, what creative writing can be. And to sort of cut them down at the beginning, in the ways that we do, can be really, really detrimental. I think that's what brings me to a lot of these same questions that all of you have discussed.

- Thank you. And I think that's sort of a perfect segue into the first question that I want to pose to the room, which is, you know, what are these grading practices, traditional or normative ways of assessing creative writing that you, as teachers, have tried to resist, or move away from, or leave behind in some form? Michelle, you talked about how some of them can feel damaging, right? And, Jake, you talked about those syllabi that were handed to you, that you then started to edit different things. What are the, what are the pieces of sort of more normal grading that you have tried to move from, and why? What's motivated that? Anyone can jump in who has a place to get us started.

- Well, I definitely think that, if there is something positive, in terms of, you know, the pandemic semester, or the pandemic semesters that we've had, you know, it's highlighted the, you know, just maybe absurdity of grading particular things, right? Asking students to participate in a traditional way, when they're not learning in the traditional way, right? You know, asking students to be present, right, in a way that they, they don't feel comfortable being present, right, because they're, you know, they're on the spot now. And I think, similarly, you know, expecting students to be there when they're dealing with all levels of crises in their life, right? And so, I think two of the easiest things that I've been able to eliminate, but also think extensively about, is participation and attendance, right? Those are two kind of cornerstones of grading creative writing. Because we, we lean on those, because, it's difficult to grade creative writing, right, so we need some criteria. And, you know, I found it particularly in these pandemic semesters, you know, irrelevant, and not important, and trying to supplement that in ways that, you know, are foundational, and based in conversation, right? So rather than, you know, you know, chastising a student, marking them absent, right, checking in with them more, and engaging in a dialogue, so that we're, you know, meeting each other where we can meet each other. You know, having a discussion of what's going on, rather than, you know, again, docking them for those, you know, those, those criteria. That's something easily that I've been able to eliminate, no question about it.

- I can jump in here. So, for me, one of the things, in addition to participation and attendance, I definitely took a look at that, sort of those course policies, as well, but the main thing I did, was take a look at the sort of late, the syllabi language of late assignments. Because, when I got my syllabi, it just said, you know, I do, I do not accept late assignments, and that was just passed down to me from the former professors, who were teaching that class. So one of the first things I did was get rid of that, initially, even before the pandemic, because, I was, I was very much interested, again, becoming student-centered. And so, now that we are independent next semester, I then sort of figured out ways to sort of language due dates. So really talking about process again, really, really honing in on a student's, students' work that they do, and honoring that. So whenever there is a student that's late with a particular assignment, instead of, you know, talking points, or not accepting the assignment, instead, what I do, is I reach out to them and sort of ask questions about, "Are there any hangups with the assignment? "Are there any sort of life circumstances "that are happening right now?" And, generally, that leads to a longer discussion about the student's challenges that they're experiencing, which could then impact other, other classes, and their overall performance within the semester. So I feel like that's a really rewarding thing for me, is being able to reach out to students individually, to say, just sort of checking on them. So I think the late assignments was one of the first things that I eliminated for me, as a new, as a new professor here.

- I can jump in, as well, and sort of expand on, on some of what I was saying. I currently teach at a private secondary school. And so, I think that, in a weirdly similar way, the flexibility that teaching at private schools allows has allowed me to develop a lot of grading practices that may or may not be kosher at a public school. And some of those are being much more, so much more lenient about the ways that students are able to achieve a potential class objective, potential objective for an assignment. Recognizing that students are at different levels, in terms of their relationship with something like poetry. Some students are coming from environments where they write a lot of poetry at their school, or their middle school, and they're very used to it, and they're very sophisticated readers of poetry, and know how to write it, and know that it doesn't have to rhyme, or look a certain way. And then I have other students who just have only ever read like a Dickinson poem, maybe. And so, recognizing that there are things that they may not know. And they may not know them for any number of reasons. But the reality is, they may not know what a metaphor is. That's just the truth. And recognizing that, instead of being like, "Why don't you know this?" Explaining to them what it is, and then moving on. And so, I think that one of the things that I've really tried to do, is to meet students where they are with their relationship to a particular genre. And in doing that, yes, maybe giving a little bit of leniency to a student that I know for a fact has never worked with a poem, or written a poem before, versus a student who I know writes all the time. And that's something that may or may not be something that I could do at a different institution. But I really do try to have a more individualized approach to how I work with students on what they're doing. And late policies come into that, as well. I'm, you know, I'm very good about extensions. So, for me, I very strongly believe that if a student comes to me and says, "Hey, can I please have a little bit more time," they're taking that extra effort. And so, really thinking about as much as possible, 'cause it's not possible in every environment, but thinking about having a relationship with each individual student that's reflected in the way that you're assessing their work, I think, has really been helpful for me. But I know that, again, if you have 80 students at a different school, it may not be as easy to do something like that. I think that's been helpful for me, right now.

- Yeah. I heard a lot of good things, that I think kind of, for me, my experience in teaching creative writing, early on, before the pandemic, was sort of pushing at the edges of what was, what could I get away with, and what could I not get away with, right? Trying to figure out where those boundaries for each institution was. And I think that's a really important question when we start talking about, you know, what do we do when we're grading this, is that sometimes we are hemmed in by expectations of our departments, expectations of, you know, the college we're in, so not all of the answers are going to connect. But one of the things I discovered is, it was first the attendance policy, I had a, a mentor who pulled me aside and said, "Oh, I haven't taken attendance for years. "I am not interested in spending the time or effort "in doing that, when there are more important things. "More methods of care that I can, I can offer students, "instead of a disciplinary, you should not miss class, "sort of approach." And when she said that, I went, "Oh my gosh, "that's so true, I'm gonna try that." There was a attendance policy in our department, but nobody ever checked, so, I just stopped doing it. And then, as Ángel pointed out, when the pandemic hit, things became very clarified, very clear, right? That this wasn't ever the important part of a student's learning experience. That there were other points of contact that were actually much more important. And allowing a student the freedom to choose those points of contact, to giving them access to multiple ways of accessing us, the students will show up to class, and they may not be there, they may be somewhere else. Michelle, you had talked about being neurodivergent, I'm also neurodivergent. And I remember, I was either not involved in class, which meant I wasn't there in my seat, or I had to be super-involved in the conversation, and talk all the time, otherwise, I would float off, I would be somewhere else. And grappling with that experience, as a student, and then taking that into the experience of being a teacher, makes you rethink, well, where are the value points? 'Cause, when I was talking in class, it wasn't 'cause I had value to provide, it was 'cause I needed to be there. So how do you provide that value to students in an individual way, that meets their needs? And I think I was grappling with that a long time ago. The other thing with late assignments is, when I was teaching students at BMCC, who were adults, right, who had responsibility for family, who had two or three jobs, who, you know, the demands of the classroom were sort of minor, in comparison to the other things. And how egotistical it was of me to stand in front and say, "No, this is where your life is." You know? It took away from their ability to be creative. It took them away from their ability to be writers. Because, instead, they were just people following my rules. And then, the other thing that I wanted to touch on... Oh, no, my iPad went to sleep. I think the other thing that, it was very common, because, my educational experience was very extended. I started college in 1997, and then I dropped out for a while, and I came back late in life. And so, when I took creative writing in the late nineties, everything was based around you write something to appease your professor. You have to write in their style, their preferences. And I went to a rural college in, in Northern Colorado. A very white-centric population, but, there's still that, that colonizing aspect of you must write to what is set before you. And then, when I was teaching at BMCC, the roles were reversed, right? I'm a, I'm a white professor standing in front of a very diverse classroom. And for me to say, "No, my priorities are your priorities," would be colonizing. It would be, it would be discriminatory. And so, my question became, well, how can I pass on new exposures, new ideas to them in a way that opens up their own experience, instead of pushing mine in its entirety, you know? And so, that was one of the things I was really trying to adjust is, the professor is the source of all knowledge. I thought that was an important shift.

- Yeah, one of the things that I'm hearing a lot from you all is, you know, the sense of trying to figure out what you can and can't do, right, within, within the institutional structures where you are. Within, you know, the, the personal context that you occupy, too, as a writer, as a teacher, with whatever your position of authority is. And what I'm hearing, too, is that, you know, you find these places to release control of something, of a guideline, or of a method of assessment, or to push back against it. And, a lot of time, a lot of occasions, it sounds like that's opening up sort of occasions for care, or for conversation with your students. I wonder if anyone has, having heard sort of from everybody now, if anyone wants to build on things that they heard others talk about, in terms of this thinking about what it means to release those, some of those traditional grading practices, or to step, step back and reflect on them?

- You know, I think, funny enough, I think that the more of us who sort of are just coming through our educational experiences, are now being put in positions, you know, in professorships, or in these positions where we are in charge of these classes, I think that we'll see a sort of overhaul change of the way that creative writing is taught. I think that we're in a very transitional moment right now that has been hugely exacerbated by the past year. And so, a lot of what we've thought about is whether or not some of these normative practices that we have on our syllabus that are just standard should even be normal, at all, that we just have on our syllabus. And I know that, for myself, I've had to really go back and look at some of the rules that I have had in prior classes, for prior syllabi that I've developed. And I think having a very, very critical eye about what I'm doing in this context of COVID has made me have a more critical eye about what I'm doing, in general, like it's really made me think about my pedagogy, and what certain things mean. And like everyone's saying, how much emphasis I'm placing on these things, and stopping for a second, being like, why am I so caught up in this person being in class, or not? Like, why am I so fixated on that? Does it have more to do with me, and wanting them to hear what I have to say? Or does it have more to do with me being concerned? And really having to do those mini conversations with myself. But I think that it has made me such a better teacher. Because, it has made me so much more compassionate toward every single student. And so, one of the things that I, I am curious to see, is what the creative writing teaching landscape will look like over the next few years. Because I think so many people who do teach creative writing have had these sort of shifting experiences of their pedagogies, because of this past year. I am actually weirdly optimistic about how creative writing and teaching will look, moving forward. Because, of all of this stuff, as awful as it's been.

- Here at Diné College... Our college, again, is a TCU, Tribally-Controlled College. So our college is sort of rooted in, in our sort of a Diné philosophy, and I feel like compassion is a big part of that. So, thank you, Michelle, for bringing that up. I think, when I was going through, at least my undergraduate and graduate years, sometimes compassion can be forgotten a little bit, especially, when you're in a workshop class, right? The idea of, you know, tearing, tearing a poem apart, right? And really going through that workshop model, I feel like... Though, very, for me, at least, and this is just my personal preference and opinion, I love going through those types of workshops where, you know, they're absolutely reckless and ruthless with my poetry, because I like that type of effort and, and sort of in-depth look. But for me as, when I, when I started teaching poetry at Diné College, I've really had to sort of put a rein on that, because, that's, that's not necessarily my student's preference, right? They may, they may prefer a different method, in terms of their workshop model. So I, again, I really had to learn how to be student-centered first, and really had to learn how to be a poetry teacher. I feel like a lot of discussion that's happening right now in social media, especially, Twitter, right, is there is, there's beginning to, there's beginning to...something's happening, right? Kind of like this, oh, there's nationwide reflections going on right now about our past poetry teachers, and the ways that we may somehow recycle some of that violence a little bit. So, for me, compassion has been a huge thing, and sort of reentering into the classroom. And really, again, grounding, specifically, my classroom here at Diné College within our community, within our philosophy, and within our values. And it's something that's really interesting that needed to be done. And so, it happened that right now I'm having the question of why it wasn't done before. Because, we are at Diné College, a lot of transfers here know our philosophy, but they're still sort of recycling the traditional Western construct of a classroom. And so, right now, I'm sort of going through those motions of, okay, well now we have to redefine the entire college, it seems like. So, luckily, those conversations are beginning to happen here at college, especially, now that we are in the pandemic, and with the vaccine on, hopefully, the horizon, right, and sort of some, coming back to some normalcy. I'm really interested in the future of Diné College and, and sort of redefining and reentering compassion.

- I think one of the interesting things we're talking about is like our ability to let go of these things that have been passed on to us over and over and over again. But one of the interesting things that I also found myself running into, is running up against the expectations of students over and over again, which kind of went one of two directions, right? Where, on one hand, the expectations of the student was, it is the final product, it is the, you know, I need the A. Here's like the best product that I'm doing, and I'm going to set these astronomical expectations on myself. And it's not driven by the idea of creativity or process, it's driven by, I must succeed in this class. And then, I think I was also battling for a while against the fear that, oh, no, what if I'm offering a class that's an easy A? Oh, no, what if I'm, you know, and like... I suddenly was very a, I was afraid that students would show up in my classroom, because they knew they would pass it. And I don't know why that was a fear that I had. That was something that I definitely had to take a step back and go, why is that the thing I'm concerned about? Is there a way that I can still make this a challenge, but a different kind of challenge? Not a...you know, I want everybody to be on a C curve, or whatever, but a different kind of challenge, of introspection, of creativity, of process, of practice, of the way you bring writing into your life. Is there a way I can make that a challenge, and not so much the end result, or you need to check X amount of boxes? So that was one point of resistance that I, I really found, was thinking about student expectations when they walk into my classroom, not just mine. And that's it.

- Just to echo that, thank you all, for, you know, these, these points. You know, Michelle, I, you make me think of reminding myself, right, in terms of what is important to me, and constantly asking those questions, particularly, this semester, right? And I think the compassion that we afford to students should also be applied to ourselves in, you know, asking myself, why do I care about this? Why am I upset? Why am I frustrated, right? And reminding myself, you know, the same thing that I want my students to have. And, unfortunately, so much of that, just thinking about students is based on trauma, right? Not wanting to replicate that, not wanting to replicate that awful experience we've had in a workshop, where someone says, I don't get this, or I don't understand this, or, you know, they're, you know, racism rears its ugly head, right? Sexism, um, rears its ugly head. But particularly as, as an instructor, too, you know, thinking about the ways in which I've been molded to think about teaching, and think about grading, right? Which are also very harmful. And so, I think the compassion goes both ways. It's important for us to, to have that for ourselves as, you know, for me, as I continue to grow, and continue to experience what will be another very challenging semester.

- I so appreciate how you're pointing to the difficulty of that, too, right? The difficulty of making these changes for ourselves, and for our students. Because, we're working within systems that do have so much power, and can feel so entrenched and important. I know that, for myself, as a teacher, one of the things that feels most energizing to me, or that feels, or that gives me the courage to do that difficult work of stepping past those old practices or, or the courage to try something new in some, in an area that feels risky, like grading, is hearing what my peers are doing, right? Like hearing specifically, like, what do you do instead. And I think that we're sort of drifting in that direction already. But I'm wondering if we can sort of turn our attention even more directly to that question of, what are the things that you do do that support what you value, as teachers? That sort of energize that type of care, and that build that even into your grading practices, which, as we've talked about, can do a lot of harm in different ways. So what, what do you do in your classrooms? Can you share a little bit to inspire us?

- I can start. So here, for me, one of the things I was really interested in, was the idea of bringing students into the conversation about their own grades. So it's very similar to that sort of concept of ungrading, and sort of really beginning a way to quantify process. 'Cause, again, because of the pandemic, I wasn't there with my students weekly, I wasn't able to see them sort of grow, I was only able to see their products. Which, for me, was very frustrating, because I like seeing a student's growth in the classroom. And I don't, and I don't necessarily simply like it represented on some type of piece, on a piece of paper. So, for me, I was thinking about how then do I go into the process? And so, for me, it was creating self-assessment forms. Where they're able to grade themselves, able to talk about their poems, they're able to also talk about any circumstances that sort of impacted them finishing that particular assignment. And I did sort of go with them down their journeys, in terms of getting assignments done. And, for me, because, when I'm thinking about the whole traditional sort of normal process of, oh, they submit assignments for a grade, right, for me, that's really, has a, has a lineage with the colonial process, right, of, of the, like the American dream, right, you work hard, you get the reward. And, of course, that, in itself, is a very, a violent process to sort of teach students, right, is that, you know, they have to dominate, right, in order to, to get this particular A, A grade. So, for me, I was really interested in learning about their lives, and learning about their process, and things they had to do. So, for instance, when it was really sort of interesting, sort of listening and reading their stories in these self-assessments, because I would hear things like, "Oh, I had to find a babysitter, or I had to go into store, "so I was able to finish my assignment this week." So, for me, it's, it's, it's a, it's sort of a glimpse into their lives, as well. And so, I use that as sort of a discussion point. And so, after they submit their self-assessments, I then meet with them one-on-one, and it sort of creates dialogue for us. So I get to go through their questions with them. I get to talk about their poetry one-on-one. And then, at that point in time, we get to the discussion of their grade, and sort of ask questions about what do you think you deserve, based on your process? And then sort of give me their answer, and then I sort of mirror saying, "Well, this is what I think you deserve, "so let's come to a consensus about your grade." And that's the, ultimately, that's the grade I assign them. So it's really, it's really delivering on the sort of contractual obligation of the college, right? So students pay their tuition for, for this particular class, and in return they get this particular knowledge, and they also get a grade. So, for me, that was a way of, of bystepping the normal grading process, and really entering compassion and the community into the grading process.

- I want to jump in real quick, because, you had mentioned some of my favorite words, in that. When we started working on this grading process that Erika and I thought about, after the AWP panel last time in 2019, the idea of values really stuck with us, and like what are important values for us, as writers, and how can we bring those into the beginning writing classrooms? The creative writing intro classrooms. Because, I think that's the part that isn't clear, right? I think a lot of students come into creative writing with the belief, the mythical belief of the creative genius, right? The person who sits down and turns out the perfect poem. And, like, how do you resist that? How do you show a student, no, there are series of values that you bring into your writing life. Ways of connecting with your art, ways of connecting with your community, ways of connecting with your professional responsibility, as a writer. And knowing that those will look different for every single person. That there's no way that... I mean, we've got five writers in this room, four poets, and me. And... You know? Just, all of our processes are gonna look very different. But when we talk about, like, community is important for us. The way we connect with our fellow writers. The way we support our friends, when they're trying to come up with the next poem, or the next, you know, what does that look like, and how can I show that to my students? How can they learn to embody these things? And so, what we created was a, a pretty flexible rubric, where we had values that we thought were important, that were more thematic. Ideas like community, ideas like professionalism. And then we thought about, well, here's our practices. Here's the way that we bring proof to the pudding, that we actually follow through for our community. And we, you know, I started telling my students about the way that I was doing it, as a form of modeling, and asked them to reflect on ways that they were involved. And it didn't have to be the writing community, it could be their, their neighborhood, where they lived. The stories that they collect when they're walking down the street, you know? All of these things form our writing identities. And so, the process was, is that students would collect these things. We'd brainstorm a set of practices, demonstrable things they could do, that they could provide proof. You know, I recorded a conversation with my grandmother, or something along those lines, right? And then, they would use that as their proof of grade. They would set their own terms, of this is what I would like to do over the course of this semester. And at the end of the semester, we would go through and say, "Okay, which of these did you meet? "Which of these did you not, and why?" And I think that last question, Jake, that you pointed out, too, understanding where the failures had happened is as important as the successes. Failing is so important to learn from. And a positive experience, if you're doing it right. That was something that I did get brought up on, that sometimes failure is so beautiful, and so important. Yeah, so that's what I tried to bring into our, into our grading process.

- Something that I've, I've been doing for the past several years, is I just don't give letter grades anymore, until the end of the semester, right? Just based on university expectations. Allowing students to think about and formulate the criteria by which they're going to be assessed, right? And so, the very quick way to do this in the workshop, in and of itself, is having students, before each poem, write an intention statement, right? What do they want to accomplish with this poem? How are they doing that, right? What kind of tools are they using? What elements of craft are they using? To be able to, you know, guide that conversation. So rather than, you know, we've all seen this, a student, you know, gets a little greedy, and they want to, they want to transform a person's poem, and saying, "Oh, it should be about this." Or, "It's really, you know, you're missing this element." We just constantly go back to that criteria, right, in terms of what the poet wanted to be able to accomplish with this poem. And then, you know, in a larger aspect, I'm having students do this about their work, too, right? So in the beginning of the semester, and at the end of the semester they're writing a statement of poetic intention, and political intervention, right? So thinking, you know, poetically, you know, what am I doing, what are, what are my poems trying to accomplish? And then finding the place in the world too, right? So what are they doing politically, right? What conversations are they engaging in, in terms of resisting, you know, certain elements of their experience, right? Accepting others, asking critical questions about where they would fit on the bookshelf, right? Which is, you know, hopefully, getting them thinking about the book, right? If that's something they want to do. You know, it's... And why I've eliminated letter grades, it's because, as I mentioned before, risk and vulnerability are something that, you know, I want to encourage students to be able to do, you know, in their own narratives of speaking about the, the particular experiences that they've had. But, also, just in, you know, what would happen if you did not write a center-aligned poem, right? Like what-what, that's a risk, right? Because, that's what you assume a poem is. And so, thinking about risk and vulnerability, right? Like, I cannot dock them, if they didn't write a metaphor, and include a metaphor in that book, right? And so, you know, they lay out the terms that, by which they want to be evaluated, and I try to match that in conversation, right, in office hours, if they want additional feedback. I think the conversation, just like in workshop, right, it's much more fruitful than the letter grade.

- Yeah, I would say that my approaches are really similar to what I've heard here, as well, where there is a lot of kind of metacognitive work that they do, where they think a lot about what they're writing, and how they're writing it, what assumptions they're bringing to what they've written. And I actually find that, as a question, to really help rein in some of that cultural insensitivity that might come up. Where I ask them to think about assumptions that they're making about a certain group of people, a certain thing in the work that they're doing. I also think very consciously about the language I use to craft prompts, and the language I use to craft any sort of assessment. There is a very big difference between saying, what's working in this poem, versus what is this poem about? And sometimes I think we tend to conflate those kinds of questions, and I think that it muddies up what we really want from those students. Because, for me, I'm really interested in a student looking at another student's piece of poetry and saying, "What is this about? "What do I think it's about, what does it remind me of?" And something that's a little bit closer to rate a response, or surface reading, which I think there's an assumption that it takes the rigor out of a literary analysis, and it doesn't. I think that it's actually one of the best ways to create a more equal environment in a workshop, is to say, what am I seeing in this, regardless of what I know. And so, I really try my best to approach it using activities and prompts that are very conscious in the wording. And it produces an entirely different result. I teach this, and talk about this a lot, when we think about workshop guidelines. So I sort of say, you know, there is a difference between saying, "I don't like this," versus "I don't quite understand what's happening." And I'm very big on allowing the writer to speak. And I know that that's very much like anti-workshop structure, from what we've learned. But I don't, I'm very much a person who doesn't see the point in belaboring whether or not a period is supposed to be somewhere, when the writer can just say, "It's a typo." Right? I like to think of these things as way more collaborative. And so, in doing so, I like for it to feel like a collaborative effort we're all partaking in, to make this poem do what the writer wants it to do. And so, all of my activities, I'm very conscious of exactly what the goal is for them, and exactly how I'm wording that, so that we can together achieve that intended result, whatever that result is, for what that student wants for that piece. And that's gonna depend on what that student wants for that piece. And so, it's, but it really is very similar, in that I have them think a lot about what they're writing, how they're writing, and how they're reading the writing of other people. And so, having them say, "Okay, well, you don't understand "this particular line." Is there a set of cultural, are there a set of cultural markers you just don't understand, because, you're not a part of that culture? And if you don't, that may not be an edit that person needs to make. That may just be a moment where you do not know something that's a part of this poem. And when we think a lot about what Jake is saying, about community environments, it's okay if you don't understand every single line in someone's poem, because, guess what? Not every single poem is written for you. And I think that gets into these conversations about colonization of language, and these conversations about the hierarchies we place on a kind of language, or a kind of image that appears in a poem. So, yeah, I like to do more things that have them thinking about their own work, versus workshops, where it's like editing, and things like that. But, again, it depends on the student and the setting.

- Yeah.

- I really like when you say by... I think we focus a lot on creation, and I think that putting a big emphasis on reception of work for students can be so, so, so important. And like, that's another thing that can be difficult to quantify in the teaching experience, you know? I don't know if I have good answers for that one. I know that, you know, Erika turned me on to the idea of, why are you teaching all dead poets? Like, there are great living poets. Can we teach some of those in your classroom, and talk about where poetry is at in the here and now? And-

- I like to read those poems in my class all the time. All the time

- Me too. But, like, when we, when we turn students on to the fact that writing is alive, it is happening, it is changing, and our conceptions of how it's being received are also changing, I think that's a really important thing. And I think that's something that I don't know how to grade. I think I can model it better than I can grade it. But I'm not sure, yeah, that's a sticky one for me, I don't know.

- I think that one of the things that's interesting, that I'm hearing sort of emerge, is that a lot of what these interventions that you're each making in your classrooms, and these things that you're thinking through, both are a matter of, like Michelle said, finding really specific language. And I think, Jake, earlier you talked about languaging too, right, finding the language that will guide us and our students to make these shifts? And part of that, I guess, for me, sometimes has to do with trusting it, too, right? Like, how do you find that language that will help you and your students trust this departure from what they're used to in grading? Which is really challenging, and it's one of the reasons that I turn so often to other teachers around me. I want to mention, that each of you has these brilliant ideas, and that they're gonna be available in our event outline, so that you can actually see that, that languaging, and that careful wording of how we build these departures from what might feel like more normal grading practices. But then I'm thinking, too, about how all of these feel to me like creative ways of bringing other parts of writing onto the page, so that we can value it, and assess it, and grade it, right? Pieces that you wouldn't normally see on the page, right, like a writer's intentions? Where Ángel's asking, asking his students to put those intentions into words. Or Jake, like the experiences that get in the way of your completing a piece of work, right? Like needing to find childcare. You know, or, or Jason, sort of these parts of process that, you know, you don't get grades for showing up to somebody else's poetry reading, but, that's part of the work. You know, and Michelle, I think that part of the ways that you're thinking about how to craft these conversations in your classroom, right, in ways that will support that, too. These intangible things that are really hard to put grades on. But that also, hearing you talk, they resonate with me as some of the most important parts of the things that we care most about in our teaching. I wonder if anyone has sort of last thoughts that they want to raise for the group, as we wind down this conversation?

- Yeah, I just wanted to echo again Michelle's comment about, about the overhaul, or sort of this reckoning that's beginning to happen. I think it definitely is something that's important that's going on right now, and I would definitely, you know, slightly request, or ask of our viewers here, to sort of begin that process for themselves, of really looking at their classrooms, and looking at the grading processes, and trying to reimagine it, or redefine it. Because, I think, at this juncture, right, we have more freedoms, I feel like, now. Given that the pandemic has sort of illustrated the ways the university and the college structures are failing a lot of us, actually. Right? They're designed for us, not designed to be sustainable, for some reason. And so, now, it's sort of our jobs, right, as instructors, as leaders of classrooms, to create that sensibility. And so, for me, I'm really interested in, again, the future, right, the futures of our programs, our writing programs, specifically. And I feel like creative writing is the perfect sort of discipline for all of this to happen, right? So even if it's not a creative writing program, or creative writing department, right? How can other fields sort of look into what we're doing, and sort of then reimagine their STEM classrooms, or their business classrooms, or their math classrooms, right? I think creative writing has that potential, and the opportunity. That's why I love poetry so much, is it, 'cause it, it forces us to reimagine, it forces us to redefine, it forces us to question ourselves. And I feel like the, the trope of the, of the all-knowledge, all-knowing professor, right, is beginning to disappear a little bit. 'Cause I'm really upfront with my students in saying, "I'm not, I don't know everything about poetry." But we're gonna learn together, right? We're gonna learn together in this semester, and we're gonna find new things about poetry, and we're gonna find new things about creative writing. And I feel like it brings it, the power imbalance, I feel like it sort of evens it out a little bit, where I'm there with my students in a community, rather than a classroom.

- I wanted to jump on really quickly, 'cause I love what you said, Jake. And, Jason, earlier you mentioned, you know, you don't know everything. And that's really important, for me to be able to kind of, you know, I ask students to lean into the uncertainty, right, lean into the challenge of writing a poem? If they're afraid of something, leaning into that. And, you know, it's, it's listening to my own advice, when it comes to teaching, right? Leaning into that uncertainty, experimenting with the, with the course and the grade breakdown, right? Experimenting, because, I'm not gonna have it all figured out in one semester. And, you know, hopefully, I'm continuing to teach, and work with wonderful students. But, you know, it's important to me, it behooves me, right, to lean into that, too. And that's something that I'm trying to do more and more, you know? And I think, finally, right, it's a conversation that we're having here. But I think there is the element of mystery to teaching, right? Even within creative writing. And so, you know, initiating those conversations, asking the questions that I'm curious about, because, I often don't, you know? It's time constraints, whatever it may be, I make excuses. And so, I'm good at excuses, right? And so, you know, I just want to move away from that, and lean into that vulnerability, as well, and ask those questions, and engage in these conversations that, you know, I'm definitely going to learn from.

- I think, for me, one of the things that I want to also resound off of what you're saying, Ángel, I think we also have to realize that it is a gift, and it is a privilege to make ourselves vulnerable, as writers, as students, as teachers. And not every teacher is in a position to make themselves vulnerable. We also live in a, in an economy where so many creative writing teachers are adjuncts, and they may not have a job, if they don't follow the rules. And so, you have to really be careful when you try to reinvent the wheel completely. But, at the same time, take the good risks for the sake of your students, you know? I think one of the interesting things for this semester was, I found a lot of professors tried very hard to make it work, no matter what. And a lot of teachers thought, oh, it's a throwaway semester. It doesn't really count in the same way, as every other one. And I think the answer was somewhere in between. That it wasn't a throwaway semester, and that some of the students connected to their education in a way that they never had before. In this very strange, very, you know, spur of the moment sort of environment. I think that one of the most important things that I think the culture of teaching should take away from this semester, is that it's so important to trust students. That there's been efforts to, like, you know, the software that spies on students, as they're taking tests, and everything else. I'm like, what's the value of that, versus what's the value of trusting a student when they say, "I really can't be here right now. "I really can't do the work you're asking me to do. "I want to, it is valuable to me. "It's something I want in my life. "But there are other things." And the vulnerability of us to say, "You know what, "that's okay." Because, if it is valuable to you, you're gonna come back to it. So I think that's the biggest thing for me is, whatever your pedagogy, find a way to trust students. That, for me, is a big deal.

- Yeah, I would just... And, for myself, on, in every moment as a teacher thinking, is this the way I've always done this? And do I still believe in doing it this way? And it's okay, if you believed something for your pedagogy three years ago, and you don't believe it anymore. Or it doesn't, it doesn't work that way anymore. It's okay, to change what you think is supposed to be the structure of something. And I've had to tell myself that in every moment, and so, it's just my biggest encouragement. And I am for instructors at all levels to think about this, as you're planning. Is this how I've always done this? Do I need to do this this way? If not, that opens it up to so many other potential opportunities, and experiences for you and your students, so, that's my biggest thing.

- I think that's such a wonderful note to close on, because, I think, too, that one of the ways to, to have those questions posed to yourself, right, is this is the way I've always done this, are there, are there other ways that I could be doing it, is conversations like this. And I want to invite anyone who's watching this to continue the conversation with us beyond the space of this, these screens. And to find us on Twitter. And ask questions, and talk openly about the assumptions that we're making in grading our classrooms. Breakdown how you grade your creative writing classrooms. I think, that by having these conversations, we can make more space, so that we can all sort of collectively reimagine a lot of different options. So I hope that you'll join us, to continue this conversation. Until then, I want to say, thank you, so much to Jason, Ángel, Jake and Michelle. It's been so wonderful to hear you talk about your teaching, and how you approach these immense challenges. So thank you, very much, and I'm looking forward to continuing teaching in this world, with you all.

- Bye.