

Arendt describes the nature of labor: “The process [life process] can continue only provided that no worldly durability and stability is permitted to interfere, only as long as all worldly things, all end products of the production process, are fed back into it at an ever-increasing speed” (Human Condition 256). In other words, laboring is inclined only toward endlessness and impermanence, as is the biological system after which it is modeled. Its opposite, work or fabrication, implies the creation of something lasting; that which is “lasting” is not aligned with the life process, for Arendt, as the life process only proceeds into decay and, thus, the ongoing biological process itself. These categories never function as neatly separate; as humans, we constantly possess the potential to engage in each aspect of the human condition. While it is important to explore how these aspects of Arendt’s theoretical model overlap and blur with others as new teachers experiment and struggle, I am also interested in considering what happens when we explore some facet of new teaching in a more isolated way. That is, what do grading and classroom management look like as labor? What features of these classroom tasks are fed endlessly into a kind of cyclical process? How does this kind of pedagogical laboring shape a new teacher’s perception of what it means to teach writing? How does it shape his or her understanding of the field of composition studies? And where might there be potential for new teachers to see tangible products or lasting rewards for their efforts, for labor to become something more enduring?

Cyclical, dangerously consumptive grading is linked closely to issues of “classroom management”—a term I use hesitantly, as this idea of “management” suggests a particularly authoritative classroom—and thinking through and beyond Arendt on such issues uncovers essential considerations. When we apply Arendt to these

concepts, we are challenged to think about laboring in two somewhat opposing directions. On the one hand, we can understand labor much as Arendt wishes us to: we must feed into the system endlessly, as our efforts are sufficient only for mere sustenance and thus immediately lost. However, alternately, we might think more centrally about new graduate students behaving as laborers while simultaneously generating some tangible rewards that only others—those outside their immediate experience, such as university administrators and even students—can see and reap. Tess’s allowance of endless revisions and conferences and her toying with the idea that she could tell students in conferences if their papers were passing or not were merely sufficient, from her vantage point, for preventing yet another rebellion or total “shut down” of the flow of the course. She was running in a grading wheel: interest in what these papers looked like was not mentioned, nor did she note how the writing of individual students might evolve conceptually, structurally, or linguistically over the course of multiple grading, conferencing, and revising sessions.

But students did, in fact, take a kind of tangible reward away from Tess’s labor that she did not seem to register: abundant feed-back, opportunities for multiple revisions, and even multiple grades. Tess did not seem to accumulate these benefits, as she was endlessly dedicated to helping students to get the grades they wanted so that they did not overturn her classroom again.