Episode 88: Asao Inoue

# KL: Katie Linder

# AI: Asao Inoue

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode eighty-eight.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Check out the shows website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On today’s episode, I am joined by Dr. Asao B. Inoue. Professor of inerdisplinary arts and sciences and director of university writing and writing center at University of Washington Tacoma. Asao is a member of the executive board of consul of writing program administrators and the program chair of the 2018 conference of composition and communication. Among his many articles and chapters on writing assessment, race, and racism. His article “Theorizing failure in U.S. writing assessments in research in the teaching of English” won the 2014 CWPA outstanding scholar award. His co-edited collection race and writing assessment in 2012, won the 2014 NCTECCCC outstanding book award for an edited collection. His book “Anti-racist writing assessment ecologies teaching and assessing for a socially just future” from 2015. Won the 2017 NCTECCCC outstanding book award for a monograph and the 2015 CWPA for outstanding book award. In November of 2016, he guest co-edited a special issue of college english on writing assessment for social justice. And is currently finishing a co-edited collection on the same topic. As well as a book on labor based grading contracts as socially just writing assessment.

Thanks so much for joining me on the podcast today Asao!

**AI:** Thank you for having me.

**KL**: So I am very curious on what got you into studying writing assessment and alternative modes of assessment. Part of this is coming from my English major undergraduate background where I did a little bit of stuff in this area. But um tell us a little bit about what got you into this?

**AI**: Sure, well it was most of my work as a teacher of writing. So of course my background also comes from English departments. So I come into writing assessment classroom, whether it is writing assessment or large scale assessment from English studies. Not necessarily although I do use the research of scholarship from education and psychometric theory, I don’t that’s not where I call my institutional home. It’s usually English departments and writing classrooms more specifically. So I was most interested early on in questions around the judgements teachers make on students writing. And of course my own background as a student in public schools, then in college also brought to the forefront of my own experiences the problem of reliability. That’s a sort of psychometric way to say the problems or the questions around different ways to judge the same kinds of texts. It became increasingly clear to me early on in my teaching career that I was being unfair to my students. It wasn’t about providing enough rubrics, discussing the assignment expectations enough it had more to do with the nature of judgement. And how judgment circulated in the classroom and it was a bigger problem than I initially thought it was going to be it is one thing that I think good teacher have to always be actively probing and looking at in their practices. So that’s my initial entry into thinking about writing assessment and classroom assessment it had to do with my own experiences as a student as well as what I experienced as a teacher of writing, and the problems that I saw there.

**KL**: So I am very curious to see if we can offer an example here to people who are maybe not engaged in writing assessment. And the one that immediately comes to mind this is kind of what your research is looking into a little bit. Is I use to work with a lot of faculty who taught writing and were concerned about assessing their international students differently than they assessed students who had English as a first language. This is a common issue I hear coming up so if you are talking about judgment are you thinking about things like that or are their other kinds of issues or scenarios that you see come up frequently were that judgement piece is coming into play?

**AI**: Yeah I am thinking of all that for sure so that sort of changes the direction of where we might go that is in terms of thinking about writing assessment in the classroom or multi-legal students or ELL/ELS students. Or whether we are talking about students who don’t necessarily have those language questions but have other ones that have to do with “I think differently come from a different place in society than you do” and therefore “I have a very different set of dispositions to read and value language than you do”. Even though we ostensibly speak and write the same language. English in my case. So the questions that I have certainly be the questions that I have been asked certainly are ones that have to do with multi-lingual students. And I think generally speaking they cover the same kind of ground that is. Primary theory I have been developing over the last ten years or so has been theorizing writing assessment for classroom purposes as an ecology. Not as a discrete set of instruments or a set of rubrics or processes, but all those things and more. Assessment ecology is more than the sum of its parts and that’s because every single element in it is itself a kind of variable that has different/becomes different things and is consubstantial or inter-is if you will. The other elements, so something like a document that a student might write an essay or something like that. Can be seen simultaneously as a part of the ecology or a script a document that is perhaps to think of as the performance what it is we are trying to test or understand is it adequate or not. And then it can also be at some other moments it might even be the same moment usually another moment in which it is the outcome the thing that was learned or not learned. The thing that we might demonstrate “Here’s what we did that semester or that quarter”. Then it can also be a surrogate for the student him or herself that is we often think the judgement of language or the judgement of essays and writing as a judgement of the student its self. My first advice I was given when I first started teaching as a graduate student at Oregon State, was “to judge the paper not the student”. And I think now that is not very good advice, because that is never really the experience of students. Students whether we are trying to do that or not and whether we think that is a fair way to see our judgement on students writing doesn’t make it any less or any more personal for the student when they see those judgments. And sense language is so close to us and so definitional for who we are we people it. I think it is important we keep those sort of conceptual elements in mind. So as an ecology its more than some of its parts writing assessment can be designed that way so we can think about things like the power dynamics that become in the ecology and the parts that we use. That which include the codes and scripts that make judgements and that define those judgments and feedback. As well as the outcomes and products or consequences of the process and so forth. So there is a lot of different elements I use to theorize the assessment as an ecology.

**KL**: Okay so I could talk to you about this for hours I can already tell, we are going to have to be careful here. I am curious I looked at some of your early work and you have talked about grade less writing which I think is fascinating and also somewhat controversial (I am sure to some people ). What do you mean by grade less writing? Talk a little bit about your earlier work on that.

**AI**: So when I started confronting this problem in my own classrooms in the early um maybe 15 or 20 years ago. I thought on the answer is get rid of grades that means I don’t have to grade, because I am the one who has got the problem here. My students are doing this work and I want to acknowledge that give them more agency and power, give them more encouragement while also helping them develop in the ways they can develop at the moment in their educational lives. And I thought grades because all the research in education and elsewhere were showing the negative impact of grades, hurts students and is a barrier to that education. And it also in a classroom setting students didn’t focus on the grades too much and they are not looking at that written discursive stuff the dialogue we might be having or the feedback I might have given or the feedback peers might have given. All they care about is what do I need to do to get the A and etc etc. So I decided first to um my first version of a grade less classroom was to have students collaboratively decide portfolio grades which determined the course grade with me in final conferences at the end of the semester. That was difficult to manage not just the group dynamic of say four students and myself, but it was difficult to justify with ferpa and other things when there is these sort of delicate. Everybody had to be on the same page okay we are going to do this collaborative grading and its still going to be administrated my the professor/ the teacher…me. Which means I still had the final say, so I was still the gate way or the gate keeper if you will in terms of grades. So I moved from that version which really came out of Alfie Kohn good work *Punished by Rewards* I was really thinking about how he was arguing against grading there. I moved from that to thinking about grading contracts and I was really fortunate to have a reviewer of one of the early articles sign his review and give me his phone number and tell me to call him, he was a big name in the field at the time. And he said “You should call me I got an idea for you”, and his name was Peter Elbow and so I did because Peter Elbow wrote this nice long review of my article. And he said try this grading contract, his contract is not the same one I use now. I consider what he had then that he gave me a hybrid contract so part uses one philosophy up to a B and then higher grades than B course grades of B you have to do a more conditional quality based standards based assessment that the teacher controls. I thought that, that was after a while tried that after several years and it worked really well I noticed an immediate change in my classrooms the relationships I have with students the way in which students approached work, excuse me in the class. And their desire and willingness to do that work increased as well as their confidence in their work for writing. All of this things were really important especially in the first year of writing classes. However I felt like there was still this problem with the two different philosophy’s of judging. One was based on all behaviors and labor and the other that was up to the B. And the other was based on quality my standard so it’s still me being the gatekeeper for those who wanted an A. So I changed to a pure labor based grading contract and that’s the stuff that I am doing more now. I have had the labor based grading contract for probably ten years. But I just now finishing a book on that um and so I am most excited about that and theorizing more carefully the way a pure labor based grading contract works in the classroom and how it changes the assessment ecology in their to be for instance anti-racist or other social justice projects, because now we can. Because grades are not attached to the quality of work even though quality is always the center of conversation. We are always talking about how we judge things and what it means and writers have to makes decisions based on those. But they are not forced to see things my way or to see it another way by some other people giving feedback. So that’s kind of how I got started thinking about grading contracts as a way to get rid of grades. So it’s always been about getting rid of grades so now that move to get to thinking about what other possibilities are there for a class room that now has this very different environment or ecology running, circulates very different things than just grades or teacher feedback.

**KL**: Well we will link this earlier work in the show notes for people who want to take a look, and also to some of the work of Peter Elbow who I followed for a long time when Peter Elbow says to call him of course you do so you can talk to him [Laughs]. We are going to take a brief break when we come back we will hear a little bit more from Asao about writing assessment as anti-racist practice.

[Music plays]

# Segment 2:

**KL**: Asao I was really fascinated to hear about some of your work with writing assessment and anti-racist practice. And I am wondering if you can example a little more about what you mean by that? Because it may not be something that people have thought of before.

**AI**: Yeah the more I studied my own judgement practices and the assessment ecologies in my classrooms and before I was calling it an ecology. I know that there was something wrong with the way that conversational classrooms at least from my experience at least from as a teacher and a student. The way the everything seems to fall out in a very conventional way that is the way racial formations writing programs for instance seemed to fall along certain lines. So I noticed this imperially at Fresno State and at other places I have taught at as well as my current place I am at, it is pretty much a national trend. That is for instance African-American students fail first year writing courses more so than other racial formations. Like white racial formations or even Latin and Latino racial formations. So I wanted to understand better how this what was and why it was and what we might do about it and that is what a teacher either an individual level or a programmatic level how we might do it. That is how we might change this I don’t didn’t think it was the case there is some sort of mass psychosis, mass psychology just keeps a certain group of students from achieving in the same patterns every other group might achieve at. So um anti-racist writing assessment really was my response to my own um what I would consider my own unfair treatment in school. I was on the block I was very quick very quick witted and very I loved to play with language and words. We had lots of language games I have a twin brother and my twin brother and me would play and did we use to write stories with each other to each other all the time. From the fifth grade upwards we did this. We also did this with other friends. And yet in school when I go into my English classrooms and such I was not they were not places I enjoyed very much. They were because in which ways judgment circulated in those classrooms. And the way in which I was judged and I wasn’t judged well that is I didn’t get that great of grades in English and I was a very good student. In the sense that I tried very hard I studied and I did well in other courses and so forth. So I wanted to find a way to make this to change this and I felt like we have to in our current society racism is the standard. It is the default setting for every structure that we have in our society social structure, economic structure, etc. We just aren’t calling them that in education, in class room, in pedagogy theres a saying because they are parts of or they share in that larger society. And so because of that we inherent all of this all these racist structures. So the only way to combat that is explicitly not be unfair. So that’s um so I want to find the way structures in a classroom in assessment ecology explicitly was not unfair. Because the default is things are unfair, already. So that’s not the normal default setting for most teachers mostly because rightfully so we want if everyone works hard and do what is asked of them then they should be able to succeed. And therefore the default setting is everything is fair until somebody makes it unfair. But that isn’t the way I see structures in our society, they are unfair, and we have to try and figure out a way to make them not unfair. So that’s thinking about anti-racism, um for me, and way to do that is change power dynamics. Who judges, how they judge, what those judgements mean, and how they’re circulated. The other way is to get rid of hierarchies, and the best way to get rid of hierarchies is through grades. Get rid of grades. It doesn’t mean you can’t grade, it just means we have to think of better ways to grade. Better ways to use standards. Um I don’t like standards very much, because I think they are too deductive and too prescripted. They say, “We already know what good writing is, we’re going to tell all of our students what it is, and they’re going to have to match it.” And that really tends to, as all of the research has shown, really tends to alienate and exclude groups of students, because of where they’re from and what languages they come into the school speaking and writing. Which means, you’re pretty much punished for who you are and where you come from, not what you’re able to do in the classroom. I would rather – I felt that one system was a labor based one. That everyone has hours in the day, we might not have the same amount – there’s other problems with this system that I’ve developed. Other problems like some students work and some students don’t. That puts all the working students with these other demands on their time that puts them at a disadvantage, for sure. But the disadvantage that we get rid of or that we reduce greatly is the disadvantage of the single, white, middle-class standard on language. And it’s not that we can’t, or shouldn’t use it as a teacher, that’s the only thing that you know. That’s your discourse, right? Doesn’t mean you can’t use it to judge student performances, you have to, that’s the biases, but now you know those are simply your biases and you’re not using them as some sort of blunt instrument to pummel students who do not come from those same sources of backgrounds. But instead we find ways to grow the English language that is a resident or circulates in academia in ways that include more dialects in ways of speaking and writing. So that- that’s what I’m try to do in this work. And one way to do that is to focus on labor and not quality – so called quality. Even though quality is the center of conversations, right? So it’s not that we have no standards what-so-ever in our class rooms. Of course we do. But what I found, students are willing to work harder and achieve – they do achieve more, when you stop ranking them on a system that says everyone needs to be this, you need to be this kind of a student, talk in these kinds of ways, and talk in these kinds of ways. They’re much more willing to say, “Do I want to do that?” Those that want to can strive toward that area. Those who want to do something hybrid or something different, will strive in other ways and will be equally valued. Just like in the real world, where we have different ways that people talk, and speak, and communicate. Everyone gets along just fine.

**KL:** So when you are setting up this kind of research where you have explicit goals around change, and wanting to make change, tell me what that research looks like - in terms of how you’re trying to learn about this, and maybe test somethings out to see how they work. Can you tell us a little more about what research looks like for you?

**AI:** Yeah, I’ll give you an example. So at Fresno State we had a fairly large writing program, so the – and quite diverse. So it’s a historically Hispanic serving institution, so the primary racial formations that I wanted to look at and understand better in that writing program were of course African American students. There were a very small number at that school and in the writing program, so it’s very difficult to get those numbers just because of the logistics of it. Um our Latinic students, who were primarily Mexican American, and our Hmong students, who were a vision of the Asian students on that campus. Um and so we had a portfolio system and it was a directed self-placement with a two-tract system, so you could chose, either take a year long stretch sequence, or a single course- single semester system. Both fulfill your writing requirement for the university, it’s just you decide, do you want to take a longer route, or do you want to do it in one semester? Eventually 50/50. 50% of the students took the course, 50% took the stretch. Um it was – so what we wanted to find out was whether – how well this was working, and one way we did that was looked at grade distribution and failure rates. Um so I wanted to understand, if we were constructing failure at different lengths than we had before where everyone had – you were either placed into it, or you were not and you had to take a remedial class somewhere else, because the state of California doesn’t do remediation, so you had to go to a community college. Or, so we also wanted to find out – we also wanted to find out retention rates, but that was a separate study that another office did which also had some really interesting findings. So what we did was, or what I did, was I looked at the distribution of failure before and after, and the nature of that failure. So the nature of failure in the labor based contract system was, that if you failed the course it would have primarily due to one of two things. You either didn’t do the work, like you didn’t do the work required for you to meet the B expectation of the contract, or you were absent and therefore didn’t do the labor because you were absent. In the conventional system it usually had to do with quality, and or absences, etcetera. So what we found out was, sure enough there was less failure and failure was evenly distributed in terms of the distributions for reach racial formation in there, and it improved remarkably or dramatically with in the Hmong population for sure. I couldn’t tell – it was inconclusive among the African population, because we didn’t have enough numbers in our data set. So what our – this confirms to me that labor based systems have a better shot at equalizing the learning conditions so that there wasn’t a higher percentage, say for instance Latino or Latina students failing than white students or any other group. It was about the same in terms of numbers and distributions. So that’s one way that we looked at – and I was mostly trying to find out, is there – does this have this sort of social justice affect? And I think what we found out there is that it does. And this matched – these finding also matched my own, um, my own internal numbers of my classes, which I’ve been doing this, up to that point, ten or fifteen or so years, so I had my own numbers from my classes that I had taught. So I knew who was failing, who didn’t and so forth. So it also turns out that using labor based learning contracts program wide, didn’t change our grade distributions that much. In the sense that is the general – when you look at it from a far – they didn’t change from what our English department normally had, from what most departments in the humanities and social sciences at Fresno State had either, the only ones that were dramatically different were Honors College, business, and math. They had conventional bell curves. Every other department at the university had slopes with more A’s and B’s, and fewer C’s, even fewer D’s and almost no F’s and such. They were just slopped down in that direction – and that’s what we still had. We just had more B’s.

**KL**: So you mentioned the challenge of the demographics of who is involved in your study, and being able to ask very specific questions about, for example, certain racial groups. Are there other challenges to doing this kind of work, and asking these kinds of questions, and focusing in on this particular practice?

**AI:** Yeah. I think sometimes there’s a challenge of perspective. And some people think that if we pay attention to and label race in population, then it’s racist. That somehow that that perpetuates the problem. I firmly believe that that is not the case, that you can’t know a problem unless you can label it, and we know that this is a problem in every other sector in our lives and in our society. So therefor, why would we imagine that it wouldn’t be the case in schools? And in fact, I think there is too much evidence to show that it is the case, so we should be looking at this. And sometimes that perception of, “Oh this is racist research”, or “to ask what racial identification is” is somehow racist itself, um is a careful conversation that we have to try to have. But I’m willing to have those conversations and I think they’re important to have especially in writing classes where race, and identity, and ethnicity and gender are all important aspects of language use, and language perception. That is how we judge language. So when we’re sitting around in our writing groups, in a class, those dynamics of power and language effect the judgements that get circulated in that writing group, even if it’s not for me. So these are questions that have to come up, I think, I f we’re really going to understand not just what people think of what’s writing, but also where the sources of those values come from. Then I think writers have a different way of understanding, “Okay, I’ve got all of these different judgements on my draft, now what do I do?” So I, I firmly believe that good feedback to students in their writing, whether it’s from a teacher or from students, doesn’t tell a writer what to do. It’s going to tell them about the reading experience of the reader, and say, well here’s how I experienced your draft and why I experienced it this way. Here are my expectations. Here’s where you met them, here’s where you didn’t meet my expectations. But that doesn’t mean do this. I don’t know what your next step is as a writer. You know your motives and you know your goals. You have to make that decision. Especially with – you get a variety of uneven landscape of evaluations from different peers and so forth. And that would be the case when we move outside of one class, not matter what that class is, and into the larger ecology of educational journals of students. Where one professor judges one way, and another professor has different values and dispositions on the language and expectations, etcetera. So this is a micro version of the macro thing that I want students to be able to understand. The other aspect of this, is that I over the last four or five years, I’ve used discussions of whiteness and white language privilege. That’s a term that I have come up around my class about white skin privilege. So there’s certain kinds of obviously dominant discourses in the academy that are attached to historically, white middle class populations, because those are the populations that created and used it first. Um it doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s bad or wrong to adhere to or use a dominant light of discourse, it just means that I want my students to understand where that’s coming from, where that comes from, and how we see the history of that. And that’s how it gets worked out in our classroom. So we look at a fuse of things around whiteness and about white habits; that’s habits of language. And so we’re trying to translate those things. It doesn’t always work very well, but I think it’s still important in the problematizing that students needs to do of their language practices and judgement.

**KL:** Well, Asao, I think your work is so valuable and so interesting. All the different facets and the complexities that you’re really drawing out of this thing that many of us are probably doing in terms of assessing writing and maybe not thinking of it from these angles. So I want to thank you so much for coming on this show and sharing about your work.

**AI:** Thank you for having me! I appreciate the time.

**KL:** Thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week’s episode of Research in Action. I’m Katie Linder, and we’ll be back next week with another episode.

# Show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor’s guide for incorporating the episode into your courses, can be found at the show’s website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast).

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# Bonus Clip:

**KL:** In this bonus clip for Episode 88 of the “Research in Action” podcast, Dr. Asao B. Inoue discusses the relationship between language and race – take a listen.

Asao, a lot of what we’ve been talking about is really kind of the relationship between language and race, and this is a topic that I think is challenging for some people. I’m wondering if you could speak to that a little bit in terms of maybe how people have responded to your work or how to take that into account as you work in these areas.

**AI:** Yeah, uh for sure. I think that those farther away from my field, English studies,I think often in the academy for instance are often more jarred by that. By my connecting explicitly, especially in the judgement practices we have in classrooms which are supposed to be sacred and objective, or neutral. We’re just talking about clear language use – or effective language use. And I’m saying. Effective and clear language use is already racialized, and therefore when we’re doing that reading in the classroom – reading papers from students or expecting certain things from them, that that is a racialized practice and we’re not conscious of that, and we can easily perceptualize the racism that we see out within the world by uneven or unfair or racial arrangements that happen throughout our judgements of writing or judgements of language in the classrooms. Even when we don’t want to. Even when we are well intentioned, good people. I believe the vast majority of academics in universities or colleges throughout the country are good-willed and mean well. They don’t want to do harm to their students. However, I think most of that harm is still done despite are better intentions. So when I think of racism, for instance, in the academy and the classroom, it has nothing to do with intentions. It has nothing to do with what somebody feels or thinks about other people. It has more to do with the ecologies that we construct and design, whether on purpose or purposefully, or whether we do it at a default because that’s the way we were trained – that’s the way that we experienced courses when we were in school. And I think actually most – many folks, many academics, aren’t trained explicitly in how to evaluate and grade writing or work in their field, and I don’t know if many of them are even trained in designing courses, and designing learning environments that can help change the learning demographics of students, and the changing context of which students work within the academy today. They are not the same as they were even when I was going to school. My students work under very different conditions. And it’s not just different language conditions and different people in the room, that’s changing, but it’s also the conditions under which they go to school, work, take care of families, PTSD and lots of veterans – I happen to be on a campus that’s very close to a big military base. So we have lots of veterans as well as people returning to school and so forth from that military context, and many that will describe themselves as having PTSD, and in fact school is part of that regime of getting better or dealing with that. So I think there’s a lot of social dimensions, race being one of them, gender another one of course, sexuality another one, and we – one that could explore and should explore if it’s applicable or appropriate to that classroom setting and the ways that students are ready and willing to do it. Um I push a bit. Race is a thing that I want folks to look at in my classroom because it’s such an uncomfortable topic. It makes people uneasy – especially when we’re talking about language, which again is supposed to be neutral, and it’s just supposed to be about language, it’s not – we’re not talking about where people come from, that is what language is. Language travels with people, and therefore language comes from people, and when our hold one standard up, you are holding up one group of people and saying, “They talk, and speak, and write the best.” And if we’re not conscious of that I think we can rehearse the old racisms that we’ve seen over and over again, and I’m not willing to do that anymore, and it doesn’t mean that we’re, I am always going to be successful, it doesn’t mean that anyone is always going to be successful, but I do think that being more purposeful about it gives us a better chance to change those structures in the classroom.

**KL:** Thanks for sharing that!

 **AI:** Yeah!

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 88 of the “Research in Action” podcast with Dr. Asao B. Inoue discussing the relationship between language and race – thanks for listening!

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