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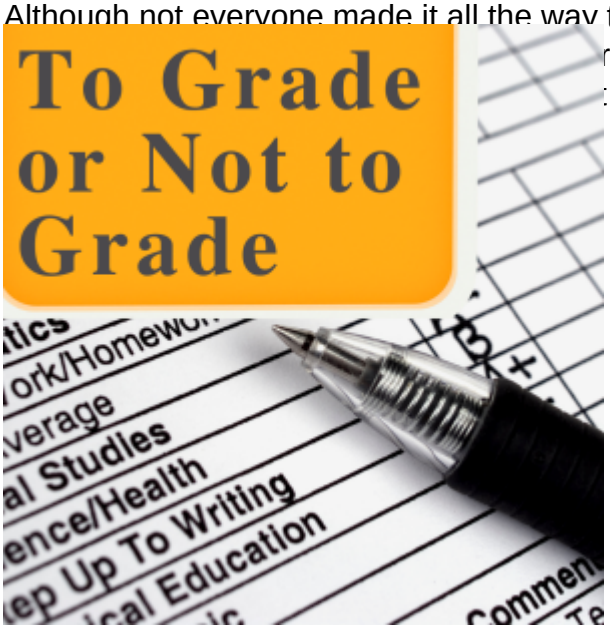
Ungrading: A Round Robin Discussion [1]

June 11, 2021 by Lainie Hoffman | Office of Digital Education [2]

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One of the adjustments for our team in working remotely is that we have fewer impromptu conversations about current trends or topics in higher education. As part of a move to reconnect and promote scholarly discourse beyond our day-to-day work, several team members decided to participate in a mini bookclub to read and discuss *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, edited by Susan D. Blum.

Although not everyone made it all the way through the book, we were able to meet for some re our thoughts and perspectives on the concept of in mind, we'd love to hear your thoughts as well!



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Image by Lainie Hoffman|University of Colorado

What is this concept of ungrading? What do you see as its core aspects or practices?

Lainie: Ungrading as a term is pretty straightforward - it just means not using a grading scheme and/or evaluative system. There is then the implication that students are receiving narrative feedback from an instructor, peers, or other people in the position to give meaningful, growth-oriented commentary. In practice, as seen through examples in the book as well as the stories passed by word of mouth, there's quite a bit of variability in terms of what this might actually entail in an individual course - all courses given as examples do still require a final grade, though. It would be interesting to hear more about the practice of

ungrading from a system that doesn't use them at all; I've not had an opportunity to talk to colleagues at an institution without grades.

Jessica: Some of the practices that most resonated with me involve student self-evaluation/assessment and reflection, feedback in lieu of letter/number grades, and scaffolded assignments with opportunities for revision.

What problems with grading do you feel ungrading does a good job of addressing/resolving?

Lynée: I like ungrading's potential to intentionally shift focus from the end product (grade) to the process. Progress and iteration aren't fixed points on a timeline, just like our performance, whether it's personal or professional in nature.

Jessica: Lynée, this also makes me think of how, as much as some folks would like it to be otherwise, learning is actually really messy and subjective. It would be much easier if there were steps and a checklist and everyone moved through a course learning the same things in the same way, but that's just not how it works. I think that ungrading can create some space for that messiness, some opportunity for experimentation and personalization that can make the process more meaningful.

Classes that engage in ungrading ultimately have to report final grades (and, therefore, ultimately have to engage in grading at some level.) How does that complicate the process of ungrading? How, if at all, can we mediate that tension between what we want to do in a course, and what is required of us from our institutions?

Jessica: The fact that grading has to take place at some level tells me that the expectation that ungrading is a zero sum game is not feasible for everyone. That is, adopting ungrading wholesale is tough (if not impossible) so perhaps a better approach is a pragmatic one: instead of making the whole class ungraded, maybe we can think about specific concepts or practices relating to ungrading that we can reasonably integrate into our course design, facilitation, and teaching. What resonates with us? What feels scalable, and appropriate for our classes? When is ungrading kind, and when is it unduly stressful?

Lainie: Your final question really speaks to me here, Jessica, especially considering some of our discussion of our own life examples where students were confused by the ungrading approach used by the instructor. If we're going with the research showing that students generally show more growth with narrative (coaching?) feedback alone, that seems like the element to hone in relation to each assignment. But if the course still requires a grade or proof of growth for other audiences or other evaluative feedback, is it at all useful to the student to take the stance that all grades are an unnecessary evil? To tell our students that they just shouldn't care about grades, even though the world around them does? I think our attitudes have to remain a little more open than that - our courses don't exist in a vacuum, nor do our students!

Ungrading practices may lead to better pedagogical outcomes and also require more work from the instructor. How can we make time and space in our classes to 'ungrade' for the benefit of our students, but without burning ourselves out?

Lynée: Be strategic about how you provide feedback: harness the power of peer and self assessment (which requires modeling) in addition to deciding which assessments will best

benefit from an ungrading approach.

Lainie: In a perfect world, we could customize the size of the course in proportion to the complexity of coaching and feedback our students need. It's really hard to give 50 students meaningful feedback in a timely manner! There were a few examples in the book of specific strategies that different instructors used - building feedback banks seemed to be a popular theme. I also see where scaffolded assignments can also help manage the level of intensity while being beneficial to building student knowledge and confidence. Just as students are building up their experience over time, you have the opportunity to build feedback up over time, addressing work in smaller increments and spreading out the workload a bit more.

At one point in the book, it is mentioned that comparing a graded and ungraded version of the same class would be impossible because the philosophy of each approach is too different. Do you agree with that? Why or why not?

Lainie: I understand why, if you believe in something, you might be loathe to return to another practice. But even if there are ungraders out there who just can't fathom grading students ever again, I'm pretty confident that it would be possible to find some ungrading-curious folks. A subset of people with cautious interest would be able to run graded/ungraded sections alongside each other and might really benefit from being able to compare strategies more directly with their own student audience and subject matter.

So would you say there is a place for both grading and ungrading? Or do you think people need to choose one or the other in the long run?

Lynée: Totally [a place for both]! This opportunity for balance makes me think back to my work with the Palliative Care program on the Anschutz Medical Campus. There were aspects that were easy (and necessary!) to grade in a traditional manner, such as opioid conversions. Concepts that were less easy to grade traditionally included treating a patient and identifying needs beyond their medical diagnosis, i.e. not suffering physically but spiritually. I do think that if you aren't one to fully embrace ungrading, there are still excellent practices and principles to augment your current feedback and grading approaches.

What makes for a successful 'ungraded' course?

Jessica: One question I had consistently as I read the book was “What is the instructor’s role within an ungrading approach?” That is, there was a lot of discussion about assessment and progress (which is what the book is about! This is not a criticism, necessarily) but not really how the content of the course was conveyed to students. It got me thinking about how I’ve seen constructivist/active learning interpreted as just kind of giving students a worksheet and hoping they’ll figure things out on their own. As Lainie mentions above, there are so many opportunities for students to be confused by ungrading so it’s important for the instructor to be proactive in making sure the approach is coherent and consistent. Practically, I think this means having clear instructions for peer reviews and self-assessments, including outlining specifically what each student’s role is going to be and what good progress looks like. Lynée refers to the importance of modelling above, which is a great tool for setting expectations. Giving feedback is not just about letting students know how they are progressing in class and where they can improve, it’s also a way to build confidence in the ungrading process by assuring students that they are participating “correctly.” Within this ungrading paradigm, we can’t focus on assessment separate from pedagogy; the instructor still has to be intentional about how they convey information in engaging and meaningful ways.

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