

My first time ungrading: Approach used and reflections

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My First Time Ungrading: Approach Used and Reflections

A few months ago, I began devouring information about ungrading with a fervent appetite. I started with the book *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What To Do Instead)*, edited by Susan Blum, and listened to just about every podcast where she was interviewed about this topic. I then read other books she recommended, like *Wad-Ja-Get: The Grading Game in American Education* by Howard Kirschenbaum and *Punished By Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, and Praise* by Alfie Kohn. Recently, I have become much more dialed in to the ungrading movement by reading articles from [Teachers Going Gradeless](#) and conversing with educators on Twitter and Facebook who are coming up with all kinds of innovative ways to ungrade, or take the focus off of grades so students can concentrate on learning.

Over the summer, I taught an online course in a Master of Education program and did not assign grades. I was given permission to experiment with this ungrading approach by my chair and it was a good test group because the class was very small, only five students. The following describes the teaching approach used, student survey results and comments, and my reflections.

Teaching Approach

To prepare students for the ungrading approach used, I met with each student individually over Zoom and explained the process to them. This also allowed us to get to know each other before the class officially started. I sent out an announcement with [a video](#) I made that explained my rationale for ungrading. In the announcement, I also included [this video](#) by Zoe Bee and [this summary research on grades](#) by Alfie Kohn. I invited students to share their thoughts on ungrading during their first meeting with me, in a [Getting to Know You Survey](#) I adapted from [Pacansky-Brock](#), and in the class introductory discussion forum. Some students were uncertain about this approach because they had always been graded in school and were unsure how the experience would go. Others were intrigued by the idea and thought the rationale made sense; and a couple of students were really excited about it. All the students in the class were K-12 teachers, or preparing to become teachers, so they could relate to the uneasiness that comes with grading students and were keenly aware of many of the problematic issues with grading, like ensuring equity and fairness. I have to admit that I, too, was a bit nervous about trying this ungrading approach. Would students still do the assignments if they are not graded? Would students take this course seriously? I am happy, and relieved, to report that every student did all the assignments and fully participated in the course. And the course had a substantial workload: three assignments and three threaded discussions per week. The course is four weeks long, so it is pretty condensed and intense. I used an “all feedback, no grades” approach, where I provided video and written comments to students on their assignments. In addition, I met with each student one-on-one each week to go over the feedback and give them an opportunity to ask questions or clarify confusion. I also gave students a [weekly survey](#) that invites them to reflect on what they are learning and to give me feedback on the course. I ask students what is working well for them in the course and what can be changed to better support their learning.

One thing I didn't plan for but that I've heard others, such as [Stommel \(2017\)](#), talk about when you start ungrading is realizing that this is just the first step in rethinking your entire pedagogy. Grades are about control, forcing students to do assignments in certain ways by following

instructions, what Kohn (1995) calls “doing to” students (para. 10). So, what happens when grades are out of the picture? I find myself looking to universal design (CAST, 2021) to give students more agency to customize assignments based on their goals and interests. For example, one of the assignments in the course is a research paper where students compare instructional design models. I encouraged students to discuss how they could potentially apply the models in their own teaching context, even though that was not part of the original assignment instructions. But I know from experience as a student, and scholar, that research is only useful if you can use it or apply it in some way. Otherwise, it’s just abstract “nice to know” theory and is not very meaningful. Without grades, I found myself focused on what parts of the course are authentically engaging to students and what intrinsically motivates them. I really wanted the coursework to be meaningful and engaging to students and so the assignments became more flexible. Giving students voice, choice, and a say over their own learning was key to creating the conditions for learning and motivation to thrive. Even if teachers are required to give grades, I think thinking about what would authentically motivate or engage students to take part in the class if grades were not there to “force” students to do the work is a useful exercise. Even working within the confines of the school system, we can subvert some of the harmful effects of grading, an extrinsic motivator, by harnessing the power of intrinsic motivation.

Online courses like the one I teach have already been completely built by an instructional designer and subject matter expert before students or I are enrolled into it. All the assignments, rubrics, discussion prompts, and course materials are populated into the Learning Management System; I understand intimately how this works because I am an instructional designer for a different university where I work with subject matter experts to design online courses. In my meetings with students, I let them know that the assignments are customizable and that they are encouraged to explore topics and design projects that meet their learning needs and goals within the overall topic of the course, which, actually, is instructional design.

In my view, a learner-centered education is a collaborative design, or as Kohn (1995) calls it: “working with” rather than “doing to” students (para. 10). This is in part what ungrading means as well: giving control to learners and dismantling the traditional teacher-student hierarchy that tends to pit students and teachers against each other as adversaries rather than partners.

In terms of giving students a final grade, which is required by my university, I also see this as a collaborative activity, where students should be given more ownership over their own assessment and evaluation. Students gave themselves a final grade based on how they thought they did in meeting the learning outcomes of the course. This was a conversation with me where students not only discussed their own assessment but also what they learned and their main takeaways from the course. Students were also invited to provide their final reflections via a survey.

Here are the students’ final course reflections from the Survey:

Final Course Reflections

Let me know your final thoughts, reflections, and feedback regarding this course. Thank you for your time!

1. What was the most engaging part of this course and why? 5 responses

The weekly meetings with you, the professor. Your detailed feedback on assignments was absolutely helpful and incredible but hearing it and getting in depth with you about the specifics made it phenomenal!

I found myself engaged with most assignments. I was surprised by my engagement with the essay (an endeavor that I usually hate). I think that being allowed to put myself and my personal experiences into the essay really upped my engagement level.

Being able to apply all learning and assignments to my future teaching job. I felt like all assignments were relevant. I did not feel that any of the assignments were a waste of time.

The weekly Zoom meetings with Prof. Leslie because I felt that we accomplished a lot during these meetings. It was very nice to have an open dialogue with my professor rather than just looking at a rubric. I felt I gained more clear, precise feedback that helped me get engaged in the work I was completing throughout the course.

I believe that I engaged most with the performance gap course or project the most. It was fun to create a course from scratch on a real life issue that I feel my school is facing.

2. What are you most proud of doing or learning in this course? 5 responses

My whole website course. That, and I actually learned. I feel like I can actually take away stuff that helps me sound and feel "scholarly".

I'm proud of my website and (though not part of the class), [sic] I'm happy that I have a game plan for backward design for next year. It calmed me a bit regarding my school districts [sic] major grade policy change.

I am the most proud of building my website. I spent a lot of time planning the website and creating the Why Learn Music video as well as the Composer Research Instruction video. In this class, I was able to continue to build on my website [sic] so it now has all the components that I was envisioning for it.

I am very proud of my paper as well as my project. Both could have used some more fine tuning, but I believe I progressed each week and showed significant improvement. Prof. Leslie helped me change my paper from free writing to academic writing [sic] and the things I learned I will keep with me forever. While working on my project, Prof. Leslie provided me with a new perspective and great ideas to ponder.

Learning the proper name for my style of instructional design, and like I said [sic] the actual creation of a course based on a performance gap I feel is going to be an issue this upcoming year.

3. What did you think about the ungrading approach used? How did it go for you? 5 responses

LOVED IT! Loved it before, this emphasized my love even more. It helped me when I was having my mini anxiety attacks and stressing out that you were open and flexible to hearing my feedback regarding my own grade. I actually tried harder than I would've if I had gotten a number/letter score.

I didn't hate it. It just didn't impact my work ethic a ton. I did like that it made assignments meaningful to me. I also liked the one-on-one meetings to gauge my progress.

It took away a lot of stress when doing the assignments. I wasn't worried about doing the assignments perfectly. Typically, in my grad school classes, I get overwhelmed with the amount of assignments to be done.

I loved the ungrading approach to this course! I think Prof. Leslie is a fantastic teacher that puts her students first above all else. The feedback that I received from her on a weekly basis aided in my academic growth beyond what I had expected.

Loved it! It really allowed me to stress less, [sic] and concentrate more on the learning instead.

4. How can this course be improved? 5 responses

I honestly can't think of a way. It was made easy, I learned SO much, and I wish I can take this professor for every course. This was my favorite course taken both during my Bachelor's [sic] and now, [sic] Master's [sic]. Thank you!

I have zero suggestions right now.

Maybe an additional discussion board in Week 4 to get more feedback on our websites and papers before submitting them on Sunday of Week 4.

After putting some thought into this question, I could not think of anything that could be improved. I thought the course was very well organized and included very substantial information. Prof. Leslie also made this class fun and engaging which motivated me to be a better student. Rather than completing an assignment or writing a paper because I am required to, her teaching style and different strategies made me want to dive deeper into my assignments and paper. Her teaching strategies gave me a sense of ownership over my learning process and for that [sic] I am very thankful.

I honestly can not [sic] really think of anything that I would add or take away. It was constructed beautifully.

5. Feel free to use this space to provide any additional feedback for me. Thank you! 5 responses

Thank you so much for everything! You were approachable, helpful, and to be honest...felt like a real person. I didn't feel like I had to prove myself to you in order to earn my grade, instead I felt like I was trying to impress/prove things to myself. You're incredible, seriously. I followed you on Twitter! Hopefully you can see my journey as an educator with my little's [sic].

I really enjoyed this class.

Appreciated how each major assignment, like the paper and project [sic] had weekly milestones to get feedback along the way before turning in the final product. I really enjoyed this course!

Words cannot express how much respect I have for Prof. Leslie. She is an amazing teacher that goes beyond what is required of her on a daily basis. She truly cares for her students [sic] and it is shown in the research and hard work she dedicates to her job. Thank you Prof. Leslie!!!

Professor Heather Leslie was amazing! She not only showed genuine care and intrigue, but provided very well thought [sic] feedback that not only provided a direction for me, but also made me feel a sense of care about my own work. She is definitely one of the best professor's [sic] I have had, and I look forward to cross paths [sic] with her in the future!

Additional Student Comments on Ungrading from the final discussion forum:

One thing I really loved about this course was the ungrading approach. I was eager to see how the class would unfold at the beginning, but after experiencing this concept for the last four weeks, I come to the conclusion that I really enjoyed it. In most classes, teachers and professors will offer minimal feedback on assignments and papers because it is necessary. This does not make it feel authentic at times [sic] which leaves me still wondering if I met the requirements or needed more focus on certain aspects. With the concept of ungrading, I felt as though the feedback was extensive and very authentic since that was the main source [of] information on whether we were succeeding or not.

I agree that often times with traditional grading, students are assigned a grade but do not get any or adequate feedback on what they did well and what could be improved. I did feel that the feedback received for this class was a lot more detailed than feedback I have received in many of my other classes.

Un-grading was amazing but I agree that it may have been that amazing because of how extensive Professor Leslie's feedback was...if a teacher was not so detailed, it may not work out as well.

I also have to agree that the ungrading process was definitely exciting. I felt that the course was more about the learning process and less about the grade. I definitely still worked incredibly hard on everything still, and the feedback was definitely something that made my quality of work better I have to agree. Like you, in my past classes, the feedback is very minimum [sic]. In this class, I truly felt like I was being guided to what could be my best work. The conversations with the Professor were extensive and once again were so genuine that I wanted to do better.

Another thing that I took away from this course was the concept of un-grading. While initially it took some getting used to, ultimately, I did feel like I was less anxious completing and turning in assignments for this class. I would be interested to look more into how to implement un-grading in an elementary setting and studies done in elementary schools to see the effect on students [sic] academic progress and mental well-being. I also liked being able to meet with the professor one-on-one [sic] and it reminded me that I want to make sure that in addition to addressing each student individually daily, I want to meet with each student individually in a more formal setting, periodically, to talk about interests, academics, and more to build those relationships.

I enjoyed learning about Kemps' model of design and fell even more in love with un-grading. I actually do something very similar in my class (elementary). I taught 3rd grade last year and the entire year did not give number/letter grades. Instead, I would meet with students for a quick 1-2 minutes letting them know what I noticed, I'd leave comments, I'd ask for whole-class feedback and adjust from there. For the tests that were online and automatically scored and gave a number grade, I would tell the students that it was merely a number to let them know if they were ready to move on or not; if their number seemed to tell them they needed more help I would add in more "fun" lessons to reinforce content before moving on. My students really enjoyed this because they were able to edit their work and learn from it because of the feedback. I'll be trying it again with my incoming 1st graders but as of now, I don't plan on going the traditional grading route ever.

I think ungrading in elementary should almost be common practice. I think it would take a lot of the pressure off of students which is so needed at that level. It should really be about fixing gaps, learning how to read, fundamentals of content, and improving student abilities and challenging when necessary. So many fundamentals are taught in elementary school that they'll be lost without. If they don't leave elementary school with those skills, it is going to be incredibly difficult to pick up later on. Ranking students is not good for mental health.

My Reflections

As a student, I never questioned grades. Grades teach you not to question. And yet, many say the purpose of education is to prepare students to think critically and creatively, to be changemakers. But to prepare students to think critically and creatively, and to be agents of change, they need to learn to ask questions. They need to challenge the status quo, not just be passive cogs in the machine. Educators can prime students for this task through practicing critical pedagogy and engaging students in the questioning of systems and structures that perpetuate injustice, inequity, and dehumanization, including those that exist in schools and classrooms that are a microcosm of a hyper-competitive, individualistic, capitalistic society schools prepare students for. As an educator, I have to ask myself: Am I seeking to prepare students for the world as it is? Or am I seeking to prepare students for the world as it should be? I understand the appeal of grades from an administrative perspective. They are simple and everyone understands them. But they are also a relic of the factory model of schooling that no longer serves the needs of a diverse society that requires complex critical thinking, collaboration, problem-solving, and creativity. None of these skills can be cultivated using outdated behaviorist methods. The aims of education have drastically changed over the past decades, from one of exclusion to one of inclusion, and mass education where students today are vastly different from the students colleges were originally designed for, namely, upper class white males. Yet, the structures to serve college students today are still largely the same, albeit with greater investment in retention initiatives. But education as a sorting machine, with grades being the mechanism for ranking and sorting, is at odds with education that seeks to serve everyone. So, this conversation around grades isn't just a logistical one but also a philosophical one that comes back to the purpose of education, the mission of the university, and how to align the systems, structures, and pedagogies with that mission.

As an educator, my intent is to show students genuine care for them as people, each with a brilliant mind, who are on their own learning journeys and need unconditional support, not the detached judgement that often accompanies grades. A classroom, whether online or in-person, is

a space that should feel emotionally safe to encourage intellectual risk taking and community-building, and grades undermine that. My goal is to create a safe and stimulating environment for my students, so they can be free to learn, what hooks (1994) refers to as education as the practice of freedom. And it looks like these students learned this in the ungraded pilot test course.

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