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Ungrading as Feminist Praxis

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When I began teaching in 2010, I dutifully adopted the grading practices I was conditioned to accept as normal and was carefully trained to provide in a fair and consistent manner. Over time, I grew increasingly skeptical of grades as the objective assessment measures we made them out to be. Kohn's (1999) essay "From Degrading to De-Grading" validated my skepticism; Kohn argued that grades reduce students' interest in learning, their preference for challenging tasks, and the quality of student's thinking. Reading the transformative work of bell hooks further engendered my disenchantment with traditional modes of assessment. hooks acknowledges (1994), "A more flexible grading process must go hand in hand with a transformed classroom" (p. 157). Accordingly, I have transitioned to a mode of "ungrading," where final grades are generated via a collaborative dialogue with the student informed by a guided self-assessment of their work and progress in the course. On each assignment, students receive detailed feedback in a variety of modalities (written annotations, rubrics, oral comments, and conferences) which are used to inform their self-assessment. This essay positions ungrading—a process of grading facilitated by thoughtful feedback, compassion, and self-assessment—as feminist praxis, and explores its potential to further transform our classrooms.

Initially, by refusing to place value on traditional letter or number grades, ungrading seeks to disrupt existing power dynamics. Bejarano and Soderling (2021) argue, "grading serves as a disciplinary mechanism within the university" (p. 209) for both students and faculty. While many within the academy praise standardized rubrics and rigid grading schema for their universality, feminist scholars reject the very notion that these are admirable goals. Bejarano and Soderling continue, "we spend much of our time in the classroom teaching students... about the unjust power structures that shape the lives of people across the world, yet we reify one of those very structures by grading our students" (p. 210). Although I am required to assign students a

final letter grade, it is now determined in consultation with students based on a holistic assessment of their progress rather than the mere accumulation of points. One student explained, “This system taught me that I was more than a number and that actually learning something is far more important than acing the class.” Whereas traditional grades reduce a student’s value to supposedly objective measures, ungrading empowers students to determine their self-worth outside of the academy’s existing hierarchies predicated on grades.

Adopting a flexible approach to grading also decenters the teacher as the sole vestige of power in the classroom. Scapp (2003), in conversation with hooks, argues “In traditional terms [grading] *is* the source of power in the successful classroom” (p. 153). Traditional assessments score work based on adherence to fixed objectives and perceived quality of execution as evaluated solely by the instructor, creating what hooks (2003) identifies as “an adversarial relationship” (p. 130) between students and teachers. Ungrading, however, invites students to actively participate in the evaluation process. hooks (2010) explains:

I work to teach students how to evaluate their own progress so that they are not working to please me to get good grades. They are empowered by working in a manner where they recognize their responsibility and accountability for the grade they receive. That empowerment reinforces healthy self-esteem (p. 125).

Ungrading thus consciously and visibly empowers students to prioritize the collaborative learning process rather than merely accept the outcome determined by the instructor. One student noted:

Instead of turning in what I thought you wanted to hear/what would get me a good grade, I was able to branch out and be more creative with my work... I find it super beneficial

for students because they are able to learn instead of focusing on completing assignments in a way that would ensure a passing grade.

By centering student voices, ungrading transforms students and teachers from adversaries to collaborators.

Feedback and dialogue are the bedrock of ungrading, as they facilitate genuine conversations between teacher and student. Removing grades from assignments uniquely facilitates dialogue by necessitating engagement with feedback. One student explained, "If I'm okay with what I got, I don't really see a point in reading the feedback because clearly I kinda knew what I was doing." Without an obvious grade, students *actually* read and made sense of my comments. For what seemed like the first time, students acknowledged, responded to, and even asked follow-up questions about my feedback. These conversations were informative for both of us—helping me understand patterns in student work which illuminated needed instructional adjustments and helping them better understand assignment expectations and their current level of competency. hooks (2010) elaborates, "Learning and talking together, we break with the notion that our experience of gaining knowledge is private, individualistic, and competitive. By choosing and fostering dialogue, we engage mutually in a learning partnership" (p. 43). These conversations reinforce the value of co-creating the learning experience, which is instrumental in the transformed classroom.

In addition to assignment specific conversations, engaging in self-assessment dialogues enable instructors to fully enact hooks' love ethic with students by creating a space to identify both esteem-able effort and opportunities for continued learning. hooks (2010) explains, "calling attention to strengths a student may possess and encouraging [them] to work from that foundation can provide the necessary confidence that is the key to building healthy self-esteem"

(p. 125). Part of this is accomplished in the framing of the assessment—asking students which assignments they were most/least *proud* of rather than which ones were their best/worst—removes the competitive lens implicit with traditional grades and reinforces the values of resilience and self-esteem. Most importantly, determining the student’s current standing in the course is just a fraction of what these meetings seek to accomplish. By approaching assessment as a holistic measure of the student’s effort and progress, these dialogues provide a nonjudgmental space for students to vocalize the barriers they face and how their needs can better be met in the classroom.

Admittedly, my experience with ungrading is limited to a specific context—30 person courses taught by a tenure-track faculty in a supportive department. Implementing ungrading in a large lecture format, a social sciences course, or as contingent faculty will undoubtedly present a slew of challenges this piece cannot fully address. Regardless of the unique ways you enact “ungrading,” what remains constant is a commitment to eliminating the competitive and disempowered environment of the classroom by implementing assignments and assessments that foster dialogue, build student self-esteem, and acknowledge the individual needs and abilities of students rather than measuring them against predetermined standards. Since elementary school, our students have been told that grades are the sole determinate of their success and worth in the education system. We must reject this fallacy. We must liberate our classrooms from the stranglehold of traditional grades. We must tell our students they are worth so much more than a number.

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