Gamified ungrading: Playing with andragogy and feminist instructional design

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Gamified ungrading: Playing with andragogy and feminist instructional design

How does one play with power structures in graduate level education courses? The directions to that game might be endless but worth exploring. Scanning my curricular design in my *Literacy for Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Learners* helped me understand how mentoring and co-reflection resets the playing field of the game of life to allow all players to engage in anti-authoritarian rules (Strand, 2021). This commentary explores how gamification and ungrading support a feminist instructional design lens through de-centering adult interpretations and habits of colonial educational structures—not only for them as learners but also as current and future leaders. Understanding and sharing the outcomes of a gamified ungrading experience creates hope for converging a student-centered curriculum towards equity to support all learners (i.e., adults and children at all intersections) and not only for those who know how to play the game.

At a basic level, gamification asks the individual learner to acknowledge the completion of stated outcomes. I aligned the course activities to support the required standards for EPPs (Educator Preparation Programs). Gamification is goal-centered, involves feedback loops (from self, peer, and facilitator) for growth, and is an effective course design (Dicheva, 2015; Keene, n.d.; McTighe & Willis, 2019). Completion differs from mere competition. Instead, the goal is for the participant/learner to focus on strategies of learning through a game.

Ungrading can fall under the definition of grading reform and be part of equitable grading practices yet often has a negative connotation related to lowered expectations (Austin, 2022). Ungrading can support assessment practices that fall under traditional, weighted, or holistic practices and also aligns with the transformation of one's practice (Blum, 2021; hooks, 1994;
Stommel, 2021), ultimately supporting improved and effective instructional design to humanize one’s curriculum (Austin, 2022; Chavez, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1994).

Like gamification, the practice of ungrading is rooted in liberation (Blum, 2020; Stommel, 2021). It encourages students to reflect on their learning process and progress, which flows seamlessly into gamifying. Ungrading acknowledges our humanity and the diversity of experiences among learners. The instructor provides feedback, resources, and challenges along the way to guide learners toward defined learning outcomes/goals. hooks (1994) believed understanding a term or possessing/owning it (e.g., ungrading, gamification) does not automatically bring it into being or praxis. In implementing these, I wanted my learners to think about the effort they put forth to gain knowledge. We considered the skills around how they extend new learning beyond the four walls of our classroom or beyond the screen.

Why gamify and ungrade? I want to say, why not, but it was to innovate with the intention of disrupting the paradigms of education at all levels of learning. A movement to gamification and ungrading is not an end game to disrupting systematic oppression in education alone. It is yet another design mechanism to enhance inclusivity, choice, and encouragement to become more of a meta-educator. By this I mean, one who is teaching teachers. I considered how I facilitate, model, mentor, reflect, and respond to my own learners’ movement beyond our time together and into the K-12 classroom (Boutelier, 2022). Through these cycles, I have come to organically (and out of necessity and best practices) layer andragogy (i.e., adult learning theory, see Knowles et al., 2015) into my pedagogical design.

The use of gamification drew my interest from a digital and physical perspective. Using reflexivity in cyclical feedback loops also models a form of play through metacognition (Boutelier, 2022). My interest in ungrading comes from a multitude of experiences, literature,
and an equity lens through humanizing and de-colonizing the classroom all the while supporting an ethics of care (Freire, 2007; Gilligan, 2014; hooks, 1994; Noddings, 2013). In addition, these frameworks align with culturally relevant pedagogical strategies, text choice, authentic assessment, and UDL (Universal Design for Learning).

All activities were gamified and listed in the “gameboard” (visit bit.ly/SheetsGameEx, remix as you see fit). The activities varied in choice of text (e.g., reading Young Adult, middle grades, picture books), presenting in various modes (e.g., in person, digitally, in groups), and participating in fieldwork across diverse settings. The gamified goal was to earn 15 “checks” through the semester, and the ungrading goal was to reflect and connect their learning to the objectives. The course gameboard acted as a learning center where my learners interacted with content, peers, and the facilitator, which from an effective digital design perspective was its own Learning Management System (LMS).

As expected, there was pushback to both strategies. We unpacked why consuming information was easier than applying and how this perpetuates a lack of independent learning across education. As a class, we delved into the realities of how ungrading looks different in all classrooms and that it does not neglect self-accountability or self-assessment (for the learner or educator).

By designing and playing this way, I took a risk and had the ability to move away from a constricting point system to one of transparency (Chavez, 2021). The “gameboard” acted as a scaffold or gradual release into accepting ungrading—or at least the consideration of how this might look in each of my graduate learners’ classrooms. Together we participated in discovery, confidence building, and vulnerability.

Gamification was interpreted differently through pedagogical and learner experience.
Calling an LMS a gameboard might not be equivalent to gamifying for some. It was difficult to break decades of grading and traditional course design, yet my adult learners pushed my thinking and assumptions. Thankfully, when given reason, research, and purpose for using gamification and ungrading to adult learners, the experience led to deeper, critical evaluation—and participation in the process (Knowles, 2015).

This graduate literacy course design had implications beyond my department—starting conversations around our campus. Colleagues are asking me questions, while students are challenging and questioning their education in higher education. An ongoing shift toward equitable grading still includes critiques around learner autonomy, ownership, extra credit, homework, self-assessment, and increased reflection. It is important to understand authenticity, showing evidence of learners’ goals, desired results, and objectives while prioritizing the relational ethics of care in education.

Along with some of the final reflections and evidence-building, my learners and my experience were growth-focused. Many think ungrading is anti- or non-assessment, but that is not true. It is a way of assessing authentic application-based learning through reflection and multiple means for a deeper transfer of learning. Ultimately, it is a shift in thinking. Gamification and ungrading will continue to be part of my instructional design as its intentions are transformative in mentoring my graduate learners’ experience.
References

Austin, J. (2022, August 6) Ungrading and Saviorism.
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