Ungrading: Reflections Through a Feminist Pedagogical Lens

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Acknowledgments We thank the guest editors of this special issue, Drs. Lesley-Ann Gidding and Candice Price, for the opportunity to reflect on our teaching practices. We are also very grateful to our students who have embraced these learning practices, and for whom we strive to keep improving. We acknowledge that this article and the reflections in it are also influenced by our own identities, and in particular, our privilege as white scientists.

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Ungrading: Reflections Through a Feminist Pedagogical Lens

The “ungrading” pedagogical framework (Kohn, 2020) seeks to remove or decentralize grades from the learning process. We have implemented practices that de-emphasize grades with the goal of improved student learning and equity. Here, we reflect on our experiences using ungrading practices in our college-level courses. We further engage with how ungrading speaks to ideas of feminist pedagogy (Brown, 1992; Parry, 1996; Shackelford, 1992). We found that ungrading reduced inequitable classroom power dynamics, increased student participation, and democratized the learning process, which contributes to breaking down systems of oppression in the academic environment.

Perhaps the most direct tool by which teachers hold power over their students is through grades. Grades can have serious consequences for students’ lives: they can influence acceptance to post-graduate programs, determine eligibility for financial aid, and affect academic standing in many institutions, including our own (B.1.d. Satisfactory Academic Progress Policy, n.d.; Eligibility Requirements | Federal Student Aid, n.d.; How High of a College GPA Is Necessary to Get Into Medical School?, n.d.). In traditionally graded courses, the final grade is usually calculated based on graded assessments throughout the semester, leading students to continually feel the effect of this power dynamic. Grades typically don’t take into account variation in student preparation and self-efficacy, which in turn are shaped by cultural forces and stereotypes based on students’ gender and racial identities (Doornkamp et al., 2022; Nollenberger et al., 2016; Quinn, 2020). Moreover, the standards for grading used by US-based professors are typically shaped by their own experience in Western academia, a historically white and male practice (Inoue, 2023). As feminist pedagogy seeks to critique, challenge, and correct mechanisms of patriarchal structures in education by providing new foundations for just educational practices (Brown, 1992), rethinking grades fits squarely within feminist pedagogy, as it disrupts the typical power dynamic between teachers and students. Indeed, early work in STEM feminist pedagogy noted that “as long as grade-getting and grade-giving are part of our endeavor, instructors may indeed find this the most difficult arena in which to establish a feminist pedagogy in their courses” (Shackelford, 1992, p. 574).

We implemented ungrading practices in upper-level biology and computer science courses with fewer than 25 students each. Details differed by course, but our approach to grading was drastically different from a conventionally graded course. On assessments we provided students with descriptive feedback instead of grades, and students met with us individually to discuss their learning progress, culminating in a final meeting where students proposed a final letter grade, justified by a written statement referencing a portfolio of their work. In this way, ungrading reverses the power dynamic of professor as grade-giver and student as grade-getter. We also incorporated multiple rounds of revision to demonstrate learning, regular student reflections, and student-generated personalized learning goals and plans for the course (Appendix 1), which we facilitated by giving students flexibility in course activities. While we were initially interested in ungrading practices to improve learning outcomes for our students, we
found these practices also shifted power dynamics and provided a more democratized and equitable learning for all of our students.

We did initially worry that students would not be motivated without grades. However, for most students, the quality of their work improved - they were more creative, they were more willing to take risks, they were more focused on actually learning the material and the process of learning. By shifting our efforts to feedback and growth of student learning, democratized education increased, and oppressive dynamics dissipated in three major ways. First, student assignment choice allowed them to pursue themes that aligned with their interests and identities. Secondly, there were notable changes in student collaboration versus competition, which led to increased risk-taking and creativity in their problem solving. Thirdly, students noted evolution in their motivation to learn as they approached material from a place of curiosity; they focused not on memorizing but on deepening their understanding. Students consistently reported feeling less stressed in our ungraded courses. As professors, we also found assigning grades in our past courses to be a major source of distress, as associating the myriad possible ways in which students can learn and demonstrate learning and growth to a limited set of numbers or letters can feel reductionist and inequitable.

Some students reported they might have spent more time on the class if it had been graded, but the quality of their engagement made up for any reduction in quantity. Other students had trouble sticking to our suggested deadlines and prioritized other classes or other aspects of their lives. Ungrading allowed us to respect students’ choices of how to allocate their time, to give them flexibility when needed, and to remember that our role should be to coach rather than to police.

We acknowledge the difficulty in asking students to propose a grade for themselves at the end of the term after abandoning grades for the semester. For example, we had several instances of students proposing a grade that we felt undervalued their performance. Some students focused on minor negative aspects of their work or were socialized to be more humble about their accomplishments. In these cases, we stepped in to encourage students to focus on their successes and to propose a higher grade. To ameliorate some of these effects, final grade conversations encouraged all of our students to focus on process and progress throughout the semester (Appendix 1). However, as long as our institutions require that we assign a grade, issues with grades and equity will continue to surface.

We have found ungrading works well in upper-level elective courses where students self-select into courses with topics of interest and have developed their metacognitive abilities (although even for these students, there were challenges, see Appendix 2). In our introductory classes, we modify these practices to de-emphasize grades and encourage student agency, while retaining the structure that fixed deadlines, points, or grades can provide. We have both implemented effort-based grading techniques to balance some of these concerns in more introductory courses. Other research has focused on the benefits (Inoue, 2023; Mena & Stevenson, 2022) and challenges (Carillo, 2021; Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020) of implementing labor-based practices in the classroom, another alternative assessment practice.
Our ungrading practice shifts the dynamics of power from teacher-dictated grades to student-assessed progress on learning with instructor feedback. It fosters creativity, both in how students approach their work and how they choose to express their knowledge (Appendix 1). It gives students agency by allowing students to set challenging but achievable goals based on their initial knowledge and experience and to choose creative ways to engage in topics that center themselves and their identities. While impossible to fully counteract the inequities of grades when institutions require a grade at the end of the semester, we feel there has been the start of a rethinking of the role of grades in academia, especially since the COVID pandemic when students were sent home mid-semester, and inequities in student experiences were laid bare. We are hopeful that implementation of pedagogical practices that identify and disrupt classroom inequities, like ungrading, will result in systemic changes to support students’ learning from a place of agency and power, rather than a place of stress and fear.

**References**


Mena, J. A., & Stevenson, J. R. (2022). The promise of labor-based grading contracts for


Appendix 1

Sample Learning Plan Prompts:

**Kimmel Example:**

In addition to the basic content learning goals I have provided, decide on several additional goals for yourself for this course. To do this, think about what you are personally hoping to get out of this course and out of your college experience more generally. Here are some examples to get you thinking: be more comfortable asking questions, become a better listener in group work, be able to explain [core class concept] to your cousin, and so on. These goals can be technical and topical for this course or more general life goals that you hope to work towards. Please include at least one goal that is related to becoming better at collaborating with others.

With your goals in mind, and after looking through the syllabus to see the structure of assignments and assessments in the course, please think about what specific processes you intend to implement to work towards your goals. I have provided suggested processes to help you work towards the content goals. Please add several personalized process goals that you think will be helpful for you (for example: revise every quiz at least once or work at least 10 hours a week on this class) to achieve your learning goals.

**Eggleston Example:**

To aid in your progress this semester, you will create a Learning Plan. This will help you navigate both the course and your own personal learning goals for the term, determine a realistic timeframe for completing your work, and reflect on the ways in which you want to engage with your peers. This should be a written document and should take a form that is useful for you to refer back. It will be a living document, with edits and updates as you progress through the semester.

**Student Responsibilities:**

- Review the syllabus and course assignments in detail. Consider the course learning goals, assignment primers, calendar, readings, etc.
- For each course goal, describe the ways in which the course materials and work will aid in your development of those goals.
- Propose your own personal goals for this course this semester. What do you aim to achieve in this class? Propose a plan for how you'll get there.
- Make sure you include at least one goal associated with the group work you will engage in with your peers. In what way(s) do you plan to contribute to group work? What are some skills you can improve upon working in teams with your peers?
- Develop and outline a detailed schedule that allows you to meet these goals with the course schedule, assignments, and deadlines in mind. The more detail you include now
the better! The CTLR offers many wonderful supports in terms of Time Management. I find their Semester Planner quite useful, under the "Planners" subheading.

- Sign-up during office hours or schedule an alternative time meeting with Erin to discuss and begin implementing your plan.
- Throughout the semester incorporate feedback from Erin and your peers to improve your writing and work toward achieving your learning plan goals.

Sample Reflection Prompts:

**Kimmel Example:**
Read over your most recent prior reflection to help you compare where you are now to where you were previously. Then, please write a couple of sentences (up to a paragraph) about each of the following topics. The three topics can be intermingled in your reflection, since these experiences are often overlapping. You do not need to answer every question but should answer the ones that feel the most relevant.

- **Process:** Reflect on your learning process this week. Were you able to achieve your process goals? What went well and why? What did not go well and why? How will this week's process inform how you will engage with the process next week?
- **Goals:** Reflect on your progress towards your learning plan goals. What have you learned? What are you still struggling with? How will your progress towards your goals inform your process for next week?
- **Group Work:** What did you do in group work this week to actively engage each member of your group? What could you have done to better engage with each member and to make sure each member had the space to contribute and learn? What do you plan to do in the future to make group work a more productive learning experience for each person in your group? Was there anything you found particularly valuable or frustrating about group work this week? If someone in your group is doing a particularly good job facilitating group work, consider letting them know. If someone in your group is creating an environment in which it is challenging to learn, please let me know.

**Eggleston Example:**

As with any process, self-reflection aids in personal growth and learning. Based upon your Learning Plan (LP), please take some time to reflect on your progress at this midpoint in the semester. Please reflect on the goals you outlined in your LP, the steps you’ve taken to make progress on them, what you think is working well, and what you think you can improve upon in the second half of the term. Additionally, if there are any other highlights or challenges you want to discuss feel free to do so. Erin will respond to this post so make sure you check back for input!
Sample Student Generated Learning and Process Goals:

- Improve my ability to formulate questions when challenged by a problem
- Be braver about speaking up in the whole class (not just in small groups)
- Give room for the ideas of others during group work, even when I think I have a working solution.
- Become more comfortable using mathematical notation.
- Improve my ability to connect technical ideas with more high-level political ideas and real-world implications.
- Give myself grace. Learning takes time, and I have to accept that, while also spending time to give myself the best chance to understand the material.
- Start assignments and studying early, so I can really learn the material, not just memorize it.
- Gain confidence in understanding the methods required to answer a certain research question, so I can start to think about a possible thesis for my senior year.
- Create a collaborative, inclusive, and engaging team ethic with my lab partner(s) and teammates in the Student Journal Club.
- Stay updated with the news of biology by reading weekly news online (the Scientist, etc.).
- Take a moment after every class to formulate more precise questions.
- Try to explain what I have learned in the class to my parents when I talk to them each week.
- Find two popular articles on this topic and share with family and friends and discuss with them.

Sample Final Self-Evaluation Prior to Grade Conference:

**Kimmel Example**
Copy and paste your learning AND process goals here. For each goal, create a sub-bullet where you should provide evidence from your reflections, quizzes, exams, and/or other relevant work about your progress towards achieving that goal. Please also mention if there are things you could have done to better achieve the goal.

Based on the progress you've described above, please propose a grade for yourself and briefly explain your choice of grade.

**Eggleston Example**

This is the self-evaluation that accompanies your final Learning Portfolio* for our final learning conference of the semester. Please take time to reflect on your goals, your achievements, any bumps along the way, and what you are proud of accomplishing this term. Include as many specifics and details as possible. As we have discussed, this is the only component of the
semester where a grade becomes necessary. I will evaluate your Learning Portfolio and this reflection, and then in conversation, you will determine the appropriate grade for your semester's worth of work.

* A Google folder students upload drafts, final products, and any other contributions they consider in their reflections on learning in this course. They were encouraged to add things over the course of the semester so that it wasn’t stressful to pull everything together at the end of the term.

Appendix 2

Examples of student reflections on ungraded courses

On the benefits of ungrading:

- “I was able to explore my own interests… and this [exploration] improved my learning.”
- “We were able to truly cooperate without worrying about competition with our peers… we had to collaborate like scientists do.”
- “I think if [ungrading] was not in place, I would have been scared off early in the class and not have explored the topics quite as fully as I did when I was less worried about number grades.”

On the challenges of ungrading:

- “Getting good grades lets me feel reassured that I am doing well and on the right track, and not having that sometimes left space for me to bully myself for not working hard enough.”
- “As a pre-med [student] the concern of GPA always looms over my head… I still find myself thinking about the course grade. I am trying to give my best effort but I’m not sure if my learning portfolio is enough.”