Ungrading as a Tool to Combat Students’ Fear of Failure

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“I can’t do this. I am going to fail,” said Brandon, a first-year student I was teaching in an undergraduate course when he received the details of the first class assignment. Brandon was experiencing the all-too-common fear of failure. However, this class utilized ungrading, and by creating a safe place for exploration and creativity, Brandon was able to be successful. In this critical commentary, I present ungrading as a feminist pedagogical praxis (Furgerson, 2023) that can help combat students’ fear of failure.

**Fear of Failure**

Fear of failure is “the motive to avoid failure in achievement contexts where one's performance is evaluated” (Sagar & Jowett, 2015, 4). Individuals with high levels of fear of failure may avoid engaging in achievement-related tasks (Elliot & Sheldon, 1997) because failure is a roadblock to achieving one’s goals (Conroy et al., 2002). People with high levels of fear of failure may see failure as threatening and believe that failure will be followed by adverse consequences; “the stronger the belief, the stronger the fear will be” (Sagar & Jowett, 2015, 4). Fear of failure is a psychological stronghold that, for students who experience it, prevents them from achieving their goals.

There are a variety of behaviors correlated with the fear of failure, including perfectionism and academic procrastination (Sudirman et al., 2023), negative self-efficacy and imposter syndrome (Nelson et al., 2019), and academic cheating (Mih & Mih, 2016). Students who fear failure may experience more feelings of shame and embarrassment (Bartels & Herman, 2011) as well as negative health effects such as eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, and headache disorders (Bartels & Ryan, 2013). “The fear of failure is my main source of anxiety around school. The thought of trying your best and still not being good enough is terrifying,”
writes one of my undergraduate students. The fear of failure is a palpable threat to student success.

### Ungrading

Ungrading, and similar concepts, contract or labor-based grading (Inoue, 2019), provide a salve to the sting of the fear of failure. I use ungrading as a catch-all term for the philosophy and praxis of removing letter or numerical grades in the classroom as the primary means for providing students feedback on their course progress and learning. Traditional grading systems, Kohn noted (1999), reduce students’ interest in learning, reduce students’ preference for challenging tasks, and reduce the quality of students’ thinking.

Ungrading is radical because it challenges hegemonic structures that stifle creativity, critical thinking, and equity (Kohn & Blum, 2020). When students know exactly what they need to do to get the points or grades they desire, they often do that much and no more. Students have been conditioned to “give the teachers what they want” in order to get the grade. Ungrading allows students and instructors to work in tandem – a partnership that maximizes growth for both parties. I have found that by embracing ungrading, my philosophy on teaching, my outlook on students, and my pedagogical practices have all changed. For me, ungrading has implications for the areas of equity and ethos. I discuss these each in turn, as well as how they impact students’ fear of failure.

### Equity

A primary concern for educators should be making education more equitable for all of our students. Stereotype threat can impact not only students’ ability to learn but also their academic performance, and instructors’ implicit biases may impact the ways students are graded and the types of feedback instructors provide (Poe, 2017). The academy has not yet
“meaningfully addressed the perniciousness and ubiquity of structural racism” embedded in our pedagogical practices (Condon & Young, 2017, p. 4). Ungrading is one practice that leads us closer to equity. By reconceptualizing how grades should work, we can move away from traditional grading structures that often reify racist, classist, and ableist ideologies.

While most educators still must assign a letter grade to every student at the close of each semester, ungrading conceptualizes grades in ways counter to traditional methods. For instance, in a labor-based grading system, a student might earn a higher grade for a paper they wrote and thoughtfully revised twice than a student who wrote and submitted a paper that was never revised, despite the fact the latter paper may be closer to what traditionally might be described as a “good” paper. In this example, the student’s grade is attached to how much work, progress, and labor the student invested in the course, understanding that all students have room and potential for growth.

Ungrading also allows instructors to develop grading policies that are devoid of judgment. Not every student wants or strives for an “A.” At my institution, we have a large percentage of non-traditional students—students with children or students with one or more jobs outside of school. A student may be managing many responsibilities and have limited time or mental energy to commit to any specific class. In a class with a grade contract, for example, this student may contract for a grade of “C” and feel good about knowing exactly what they need to do to get the grade they desire—a grade that matches the amount of time and energy they are able to invest. In this way, a grade of “C” is not devalued because it is a failure to earn an “A;” it is simply a reflection of the individual student’s needs. Developing more equitable teaching practices is one way instructors can help to combat students’ fear of failure.
Ethos

Ungrading is an important part of my teacherly ethos. I want my classroom to be a safe place for students to explore, make mistakes, and take risks. “Helping students take risks … depends more on teacher ethos than on any other single variable” (Gregory, 2001, p. 76). Ungrading is an ethos of care and compassion that fosters a collaborative classroom community that frees students to take risks.

Ungrading “consciously and visibly empowers students to prioritize the collaborative learning process” (Furgerson, 2023, 2). With ungrading, the students and I are part of a community of learners – all learning from one another. In this capacity, teaching serves as a “catalyst that calls everyone to become more and more engaged, to become active participants in learning” (hooks, 1994, p. 11).

Ungrading encourages instructors to provide strong and useful feedback on student work rather than a letter/number grade. Students get detailed feedback about their work as they progress toward meeting the learning objectives of the assignment and course. The constant nit-picking over points and percentages has created students who are fearful of not giving their instructor exactly what they want, fearful of taking risks, and are fearful of losing points, of being graded down, of not getting an “A.” Students commented that ungrading helped them “not to fear a bad grade,” that it “made [them] less stressed,” and that they did not experience the “imminent sense of doom” they had felt in other classes with regard to their grades.

By ungrading, we can help students reframe failure as a process of discovery. In doing so, failure becomes a necessary, expected, and even embraced part of learning. Ungrading is a practice committed to equity, rooted in feminist ideals, and when used with an ethics of care, it can help to combat students’ fear of failure.
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