

Ungrading: Moving Ahead to Leave Grades Behind

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that grading is the worst part of being a teacher—be it in college, high school, or any other educational setting. And yet, our educational system is by and large constructed on the assumption that a single student, enrolled in a course, must be in want of a grade, by the end of the term.¹

Another truth universally acknowledged by educators is that we truly want our students to learn the subject matter we are teaching. At times, this desire appears to be positive and good: we trade stories of energizing class discussions, brilliantly written essays, the student whose diligence is rewarded by the aha! moment. More often, however, we bemoan the behaviors of students who don't want to learn: they neglect the assigned reading, use unauthorized technology to produce homework assignments, or—worst of all—complain about their grades. Fully self-righteous, we explain that we calculate grades rather than give them, remind students that high marks are based upon whether they meet standards that, given appropriate time, effort, and diligence, any good student may earn. After all, grades demonstrate something about us teachers as well. If too many of our students get A's, we are easy rather than rigorous instructors; if we accept late work, we are not preparing our students for the real world.² We strive to be the teacher students label tough, but fair, from whom an A means something.

Do you recognize yourself in these descriptions? If so, do you feel uncomfortable? I certainly have experienced feelings of frustration and discomfort over my two decades of college teaching. As a graduate instructor, I was flustered when a student demanded a fuller explanation of why I gave him an A- on an essay. As a tenure-track professor, I committed to offering as much feedback on papers as possible in my freshman writing class by creating a 100 point rubric that covered every expectation I had for the papers. Surely, I thought, by showing how points were lost by not properly citing sources or sufficiently analyzing evidence, I would provide the clearest explanations of good writing. Reader, it did not work. Students continued to omit citations even after losing points. I abandoned the rubric, feeling mildly insulted that my hours of meticulous documentation did not offer

my students the aha! moment about citations. Perhaps worst of all was watching students' reactions to seeing the grades on the first essays of the semester: their faces would fall if the grade was lower than they expected. I'd busy myself at the front of the classroom, not making eye contact, somehow feeling like I had betrayed our camaraderie. Class discussions were intellectually stimulating, and I was friendly and encouraging—so how could I then judge them so negatively?

Enter the COVID-19 pandemic. My last in-person class was on March 11, 2020. I had never taught online. I scrambled to learn new tools in Moodle, our course management system. Like many others, I had to supervise my children and their online learning while simultaneously conducting synchronous classes. Some of my students did not have functioning laptops at home, or reliable internet access, or the privacy to discuss sensitive topics on camera. I decided to prioritize accessibility, equity, and kindness over the (already specious) notion of rigor. My decision was reinforced when I discovered academics from all disciplines, from high school teachers to college professors, responding with similar empathy—and with exciting strategies to promote the learning that ultimately all of us wish for our students to experience. I ordered Susan D. Blum's essay collection *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*,³ read essays in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*,⁴ and followed pedagogy threads on Twitter by Jesse Stommel, Lindsay Masland, Cate Denial, Karen Costa, and others. I realized that learning was not fully measured by grades, no matter how carefully I devised my rubrics and calculated the weights of my assignments. For, as Aaron Blackwelder writes, "Assigning grades was the easy way out of doing the actual work of teaching."⁵

The essays in this inaugural "Transformative Teaching" forum explore the radical potential of ungrading to underscore learning in our classes. They explore the *whys* and the *hows* of ungrading. For those readers new to the concepts, the essays by Jesse Stommel, Michelle D. Miller, and Lindsay Masland will explain the possibilities of ungrading through involving students in assessment, increasing their intrinsic motivation to learn, and ending coercion to foreground joy. Laila McCloud and Christine Traxler both offer caveats about ungrading, with McCloud exploring the positionality of teachers of color (and other marginalized identities) who ungrade and Traxler exploring the downsides of using the word "grading" at all, when the holistic educational system must be examined for equity and justice. The final five essays offer specific strategies. Robert Talbert reassures us that ungrading may be used in STEM disciplines, and Grace Pai et. al. remind us

that community college students are a key demographic for these practices. Jason Hendrickson, Sindija Franzetti, and Christina Katopodis all demonstrate specific techniques of ungrading that promote career readiness, self-advocacy, and metacognition skills. Together, these ten essays underscore why we entered education in the first place: not to grade, but to guide our students to learn, to grow, and to flourish. I daresay Jane Austen would approve.

¹ With apologies to Jane Austen, I adjust the famous first lines of *Pride and Prejudice* (New York: Penguin, 1985 [1813]), 51.

² This introduction was completed weeks after it was due. My thanks to Bernard Prusak, editor of *Zeal*, for accepting that working in the “real world” includes offering flexibility and grace.

³ Susan D. Blum, ed., *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2020).

⁴ Examples include: Joshua Eyler, “Grades Are at the Heart of the Mental Health Crisis” *Inside Higher Ed*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/grades-are-center-student-mental-health-crisis>; Michelle D. Miller, “Ungrading Light: 4 Simple Ways to Ease the Spotlight off of Points,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 2, 2022, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/ungrading-light-4-simple-ways-to-ease-the-spotlight-off-points>; Carolina Kuepper-Tetzel, “Increasing Academic Performance Through Mark Withholding,” *The Learning Scientists* (blog), March 19, 2021, <https://www.learningscientists.org/blog/2021/3/19>; James Lang, “Should We Stop Grading Class Participation?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 9, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/should-we-stop-grading-class-participation>; Beckie Supiano, “The Redefining of Rigor,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-redefinition-of-rigor>; and David Buck’s podcast *Let’s Talk! #Ungrading*, <https://ungrading.weebly.com/lets-talk-ungrading>, with episodes featuring Susan Blum, Joshua Eyler, Jesse Stommel, Laura Gibbs, and Cate Denial.

⁵ Aaron Blackwelder, “What Going Gradeless Taught Me about Doing the Actual Work,” in *Ungrading*, 50.