

Do We Need the Word “Ungrading”?

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I started ungrading in 2001, my first semester as instructor of record. Over the last twenty-three years, I have never put a grade on a piece of student work.

While I’d used the word in workshops and talks as early as 2003, I first explicitly published about “ungrading” in an October 2017 piece titled “Why I Don’t Grade,” where I wrote, “Grades are currency for a capitalist system that reduces teaching and learning to a mere transaction. Grading is a massive co-ordinated effort to take humans out of the educational process.”¹

In that piece, I “withheld the mechanics of ungrading deliberately, because I agree with Alfie Kohn who writes, ‘When the how’s of assessment preoccupy us, they tend to chase the why’s back into the shadows.’”² My own definition of the term has evolved, but I’ve consistently argued that it’s problematic to reduce ungrading to a zeitgeist, a trendy set of decontextualized best practices. There is no neat and tidy thing we can all do tomorrow to obliterate grades. That simply isn’t the system, culture, or labor conditions that many of us work within. Different approaches work for different teachers in different disciplines in different ways at different times. This is why I’ve repeatedly defined ungrading as “raising an eyebrow at grades as a systemic practice, distinct from simply ‘not grading.’ The word is a present participle, an ongoing process, not a static set of practices.”³ Some have suggested that the word “ungrading” is a misnomer, because most students are still getting final grades, but I’d say it’s the exact right word to describe the two key components of my definition: (1) an active and ongoing critique of grades as a system and (2) the decision to do what we can, depending on our labor conditions, to carefully dismantle that system.

I believe part of the role of a teacher is to stand in the gap between institutions and students in order to call out and mitigate harm. There are specific things we can do in our approach to assessment that can have profound effects on our work and on the relationships we develop with students and the relationships students develop with each other. But, ultimately, ungrading is a systemic critique. The problem of conflating ungrading with

“not grading” is that it ignores the precarity of teachers and the labor issues in education, reframing grades as a moral issue, instead of a structural one.

Grading is a mechanism for subjugating students, and also a tool that institutions use to control teachers. However we might try to reinvent them, grades are saturated, sticky with their faults: grades reflect bias,⁴ they do disproportionate harm to marginalized students and teachers,⁵ they don’t communicate coherently, they don’t adequately measure what we value most about learning, and they contribute to a culture of competition in education and to an *over-reliance* on extrinsic motivation that short-circuits intrinsic motivation.⁶ To be clear, the problem is not individual teachers who grade, but the systems and structures that fundamentally distort the goals of assessment and make grades compulsory. The problem is an insidious culture of quantitative and standardized assessment that pits students and teachers against one another—and that compels teachers (especially those of us in contingent positions) to work in ways at odds with our individual teaching philosophies and (often) the mission statements of the institutions where we work.

I don’t think it’s a coincidence that ungrading is so often reduced to a static set of best practices or confused with “not grading”—or, worse, confused with teachers “not doing our jobs”. These are ways to instrumentalize teaching, demean teachers, and devalue the work of teaching. Less than half of higher education teachers get meaningful or significant preparation for the work of teaching as graduate students or as new faculty.⁷ This is a fatal structural flaw. Collaboration between teachers is actively discouraged. Most institutions have no policies in place to support collaborative teaching. This is a fatal structural flaw. Seventy percent of faculty in higher education are contingent or adjunct. This is a fatal structural flaw. The work of all teachers is increasingly precarious, and our ability to carve our own paths through the work is under attack. How do we support struggling students if the bulk of faculty have little structural power to do or advocate for that work? How do we teach from a place of care if our school (and its community) is threatened by a corrupt state government? Or if we are marginalized and not getting necessary support from our institutions? How do we reimagine assessment when grades are so thoroughly baked into our educational systems? How do we reimagine assessment when quantitative and standardized assessment is also weaponized against teachers?

We need to start by trusting teachers. Institutions and administrators should not be making critical pedagogical decisions for teachers. Institutions should not *universally* adopt technologies (like learning management systems, where every road leads back to the grade book) or adhere

strictly to models (like Quality Matters) that make critical pedagogical decisions for teachers. We need to start by trusting students. Every dollar we invest in proctoring software, plagiarism detection tools, and other policing technologies needs to be reinvested in student support and faculty development. Ungrading means acknowledging context and the material circumstances of students and teachers, then doing whatever we can to push back against broken systems that feel (but sometimes aren't) immovable.

In most formal education, grades are a (if not *the*) structuring principle of institutions, institutional cultures, and educational technologies. There is no easy switch we can flip to turn off grades. The work of ungrading is to ask questions, have hard conversations, point to the fundamental inequities of grades, push for systemic change, and mitigate or obstruct harm that grading, and grades as a system, do to marginalized students and precarious educators. There are lots of entry points to those conversations.

I've never been attached to the word "ungrading." It has had rhetorical purpose, sparking conversations about the exact things that some find troubling about the word. And it continues to have rhetorical purpose, as those conversations have gotten louder and more imperative. For me, the work of ungrading is to question tacit assumptions/buzzwords and critique harmful labor/learning conditions. The word catalyzes a set of conversations that are increasingly necessary. However, I don't see "ungrading" as a catch all to include every kind of alternative assessment. One word/idea shouldn't be a monolith gobbling up everything around it, especially a word like "ungrading," which is currently being used productively by lots of different people in lots of different ways. Gatekeeping is the single most harmful feature of academia. When ideas congeal into a "movement," "club," or an exclusive "community," lines too often get drawn, people bully each other for status, and already marginalized people end up further marginalized. At this point, what's important to me is the work: teachers and students collaborating to support, defend, and (where necessary) transform education. This isn't "big tent" work. At this point, it's "humongous tent" work.

Here are just a few of the approaches and philosophies that came before and/or sit alongside the current conversation about ungrading: minimal grading,⁸ labor-based grading contracts,⁹ specifications grading,¹⁰ self-reflection,¹¹ and authentic assessment.¹² I think there's strategic value in having these conversations in the same room, but they aren't the same conversation.

These conversations also aren't new. Grades have a history,¹³ even if it's a relatively short one (just over 200 years, and only popularized in the last fifty). Ungrading also has a history, and it's important to not lose touch

with that. It's a field, not just a moment, not a zeitgeist, not just a stack of practices. As long as there have been grades, there have been productive critiques of grades (and the structures that reinforce them):

Virginia Woolf writes in *A Room of One's Own*: "To sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery."¹⁴

bell hooks writes about "continual self-evaluation" both of a student by the student and of a teacher by the teacher.¹⁵

Ruha Benjamin asks, "what are the responsibilities of educators and educational institutions in a context where this is a deliberate campaign to break society, erode mutuality, grind down our ability to care for one another, eat away at any notion of a collective good, and destroy the institutions upon which our society depends?"¹⁶

Asao B. Inoue argues that labor-based grading contracts "avoid many of the harmful and racist consequences of conventional grading ecologies by not using the dominant white discourse as the standard for grades."¹⁷

John and Evelyn Dewey write in *Schools of To-Morrow*: "Unless the mass of workers are to be blind cogs and pinions in the apparatus they employ, they must have some understanding of the physical and social facts behind and ahead of the material and appliances with which they are dealing."¹⁸

We have to look back even as we look forward.

The first step toward ungrading is a series of discussions, ideally together with students, about the history, philosophy, technologies, and practices of grading. The next step is to knock down the barriers that keep teachers and students from working together to actively reimagine how we do assessment in education.

In place of best practices, I prefer good-for-some-people-in-some-contexts practices. In that spirit, I will end with a few ways we might begin this work:

Change how we talk about assessment: Ungrading works best as part of a holistic pedagogical practice. Use words like “ask” or “invite,” rather than “submit” or “required.” Ask students about their expectations for their work, rather than centering our own.

Invite students to a conversation about grades: Ask students how being graded makes them feel, how it affects their motivation. As a group, read and discuss a piece like Alfie Kohn’s “The Case against Grades.”¹⁹

Grade less stuff, grade less often, grade more simply: Create space in our courses for discovery and experimentation. Use grading scales that feel less arbitrary and communicate more clearly to students. Ask students to do work that we don’t “collect.”

Ask students to reflect on their own learning: Even if we change nothing else about how we grade, we need to ask students when and how they learn. Ask what barriers they face. Listen. And believe the answers.

We need to stop having conversations about the future of education without students in the room.²⁰ This means students have to be drivers of the conversations we have in education about assessment, grades, and ungrading.

¹ Jesse Stommel, “Why I Don’t Grade,” *Jesse Stommel* (blog), October 26, 2017, <https://www.jessestommel.com/why-i-dont-grade/>.

² Alfie Kohn, “The Trouble with Rubrics,” *English Journal* 95/4 (March 2006), <https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/trouble-rubrics/>.

³ Jesse Stommel, “Ungrading: An Introduction,” *Jesse Stommel* (blog), June 11, 2021, <https://www.jessestommel.com/ungrading-an-introduction/>.

⁴ John M. Malouff and Einar B. Thorsteinsson, “Bias in Grading: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental Research Findings,” *Australian Journal of Education* 60/3 (August 26, 2016): 245–256, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944116664618>.

⁵ See Jesse Stommel, “Grades Are Dehumanizing; Ungrading Is No Simple Solution,” *Jesse Stommel* (blog), June 2, 2021, <https://www.jessestommel.com/grades-are-dehumanizing-ungrading-is-no-simple-solution/>, and Soraya Chemaly, “All Teachers Should Be Trained to Overcome Their Hidden Biases,” *Time*, February 12, 2015, <https://time.com/3705454/teachers-biases-girls-education/>.

⁶ Alfie Kohn, “The Risks of Rewards,” Alfie Kohn (blog), December 1994, <https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/risks-rewards/>.

⁷ Jesse Stommel, “The Human Work of Higher Education Pedagogy,” *AAUP* (Winter 2020), https://www.aaup.org/article/human-work-higher-education-pedagogy#.Y_5A-j3MK3B.

⁸ Peter Elbow, “Grading Student Writing: Making It Simpler, Fairer, Clearer,” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 69 (Spring 1997): 127–140, <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.6911>.

⁹ Asao B. Inoue, *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*, 2nd ed. (Denver: University Press of Colorado, 2022), <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/labor/>.

¹⁰ Linda Burzotta Nilson, *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2015).

¹¹ Jesse Stommel, “Ungrading: An FAQ,” *Jesse Stommel* (blog), February 6, 2020, <https://www.jessestommel.com/ungrading-an-faq/>.

¹² Peter Elbow and Kathleen Blake Yancey, “On the Nature of Holistic Scoring: An Inquiry Composed on Email,” *Assessing Writing* 1/1 (1994): 91–107, [https://doi.org/10.1016/1075-2935\(94\)90006-x](https://doi.org/10.1016/1075-2935(94)90006-x).

¹³ Jeffrey Schinske and Kimberly Tanner, “Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently),” *CBE-Life Sciences Education* 13/2 (October 13, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.cbe-14-03-0054>.

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2001), 125.

¹⁵ bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 17.

¹⁶ Ruha Benjamin, “A Foreword to Critical Digital Pedagogy,” *Hybrid Pedagogy* (blog), August 4, 2020, <https://hybridpedagogy.org/a-foreword-to-critical-digital-pedagogy/>.

¹⁷ Asao B. Inoue, “Workshop Handout–Labor-Based Grading Contracts” (self-pub., Google Docs), <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1q2KIqTBSIQRpxt5w-vBw-EvIm3jEfmIs0ixBrTIZtqEdU/edit>.

¹⁸ John Dewey and Evelyn Dewey, *Schools of To-Morrow* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1915), 246, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/48906/pg48906-images.html>.

¹⁹ Alfie Kohn, “The Case against Grades.” *Alfie Kohn* (blog), November 2011. <https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/case-grades/>.

²⁰ Stommel, “The Human Work of Higher Education Pedagogy.”