Ungrading: The Joys of Doing Everything Wrong

Lindsay C. Masland

Appalachian State University

It was the end of a summer session, and I was working with an undergraduate student who had fallen behind on their work for my class. In the course of our email back-and-forth, it became clear that this student was going through a lot: financial complications, family difficulties, and identity issues, all in the middle of a mental health crisis. I immediately shifted my approach. This student didn't need a plan to get the work done; they needed a different kind of support altogether. While we were figuring out the right course of action, the student remarked, "I know we've been all online but out of my four semesters here, you have been the most communicative, helpful, and concerned/empathetic professor I have had. And I don't want that to sound hyperbolic, I genuinely mean it. I've had professors ignore emails for entire months."

You might assume that I loved this comment, but I did not. Truth be told, I was half-assing that course, in the way that a summer elective in the middle of a pandemic demands. To learn that my slipshod teaching—which I already felt a private shame about—was the *best* this student had experienced sent me over the edge. So, I immediately took to Twitter and announced, "Since trying to hunt down folks that are causing student trauma probably won't end well, I'm taking a different tack. I've been a minimal grader, but guess who is going FULL UNGRADING!? I was waiting till I figured it out more but there is too much harm to counteract to wait."

I admit this doesn't make sense. Deciding to ungrade my courses would do nothing for the struggling student nearly done with the current course. It would not affect the other instructors my student had that session—those who were refusing to consider an incomplete grade for them. And yet, in that moment of fire and rage, it seemed like the next right thing. I was already teaching in a very student-centered, evidence-informed way. I offered lots of choice, structure, and feedback. I was using "yet/not yet" rubrics with transparently designed assignments, many of which could be resubmitted. Objectively, I was not causing pedagogical harm. But I realized that continuing to use grades, even though they did not function as weapons in my own class, served as an implicit endorsement of their utility. Sure, I

had the safety on, and I had the grades stored in a locked cabinet, but at some point, I realized that I needed to turn those things into the authorities. I realized that having grades at all made me complicit.

Before I get carried away, I should probably share my definition of "ungrading." For me, ungrading is a *philosophy* of assessment that seeks to decenter grades (i.e., letters or numbers) in the learning process.¹ There are many specific pedagogical practices that can be labeled as reflective of a commitment to this philosophy, but I believe that ungrading cannot and should not be reduced to a set of instructional moves. For example, I engage in a pedagogical *practice* I call collaborative grading. In this practice, I never place a grade on any single piece of student work, but I collaborate with each of my students to determine a reasonable course grade for their entire body of work. I do not call this practice in isolation "ungrading," though, as I think ungrading is about trying to *unlearn* untested and/or problematic assumptions about grading.

Because grades *feel like* they've always been here (they have not²), it seems odd to question their utility. Nearly all of us who are teaching these days came up through a system in which work products were assessed with letters or numbers, and those letters or numbers were combined to say something about us to ourselves and other people. For many of us in academia, that "something" was that we were the competent and worthy ones—our GPAs said so! And because grades "worked for us," it seems sensible that we continue their use. However, once I started to look into the research on this topic,³ I realized that grades have big "because I said so" energy. Just like the parent who is unable to provide a parenting rationale to an inquiring child, our current reliance on grades seems to be less about the evidence of their utility and more about the desire to maintain our authority, lest the whole system fall apart.

Letting the system fall apart is exactly where joy enters into the equation. The first time I tried a pedagogical practice reflective of the un-grading philosophy, I was floored by my students' reactions to it. Although I was ostensibly the leader of that first ungrading experiment, it was the student response that led me to realize that ungrading was the exact system-directed middle finger I was looking for. Students told me they worked harder in my class than their other (graded) ones that semester. Some were irate to discover that learning could happen without grades—to realize that the 12+ year educational experiment to which they had been subjected had used grades as a tool of coercion and shame, something it apparently didn't need to use in the first place. One student noted that our class felt like an apprenticeship—that instead of exerting intellectual energy to determine the precise hoops they were expected to jump through, they could devote all their

focus to learning *with* me instead of *for* me. Isn't this the exact reason many of us get into teaching at all?!

After reading student reflections like those above, it was clear that I could never go back to a world in which individual pieces of student work were assigned letter or number grades. It was also clear that many people thought I was doing things *wrong*. In the remaining paragraphs, I'll elaborate on four groups with objections to ungrading, and the path to joy I've forged through this sometimes reasonable and sometimes ridiculous soup of "wrongness."

The first set of naysayers likes to proclaim that ungraders are just trying to shirk their academic responsibilities through a sanctioned way to do less.4 I've never met a teacher who says that ungrading is less work, but I've met many who say it's more enjoyable work. That assessing student work could be enjoyable is yet another shock to the traditional academic sensibility—college is supposed to hurt both teachers and students, it seems. These folks also love to toss around rigor and accountability rhetoric. From my perspective, though, ungrading is orthogonal to academic rigor. Is it true that students report less perceived difficulty in an ungraded course because all of their intellectual effort is conserved for the actual task of learning, instead of splitting that effort between learning and contending with a teacher's unnecessary pedagogical barriers? Yes. Have I observed the quality of work in my ungraded classes to increase in comparison to the graded versions of those classes? Also yes. So, I guess "being wrong" through my commitment to ungrading translates to greater learning and empowerment in my courses. There is joy in being wrong.

I will admit that I expected this sort of rejection from the academic traditionalists. This rejection is somewhat the point of the whole endeavor. What I didn't expect, though, were the calls that came from inside the house. In fall 2022, *Times Higher Education* published a piece titled, "The problem with ungrading? Everyone's doing it wrong. In author argued that ungrading had become a sensationalized pedagogical fad and that, save for a few teachers, most were insufficient practitioners of the philosophy (i.e., not progressive enough). My name was not listed among the do-gooders, and my knee-jerk response was defensive. I thought I had found a community of people where I could safely experiment with breaking academic rules. Like most hegemonies, academia does not reward rule-breakers, and now even the rule-breakers were potentially proclaiming that I wasn't disobedient enough. Fortunately, I didn't get too carried away with this line of concern—although I do enjoy the community, I'm not ungrading for the community. I'm ungrading for the student who said, "If every teacher was

like you, school would be a way better place." I'm ungrading because ungrading has enabled more joy than any other pedagogical philosophy I've considered. Once again, there is joy in being wrong.

There's another way in which ungrading can be wrong that I think deserves perhaps more thoughtful consideration than the previous two. Student-centered approaches are supposed to celebrate and support the diversity of student identities and experiences in our courses. Proclaiming that ungrading is the only way or the best way does not feel like that sort of celebration or support. This became particularly salient when considering Karen Costa's piece, "Systems Aren't Scary," which argues that some un-grading approaches could be particularly problematic for neurodiverse students. Costa notes that many neurodivergent individuals rely on systems to structure their lives for success and that grades—and the extrinsic moti-vation spurred by grades—might serve as one such system. Furthermore, if you have 12+ years of conditioning in a graded system, suddenly removing the grade signposts, even in a well-designed course, is likely to be de-stabilizing. As Costa argues, this destabilization could be particularly problematic for the neurodivergent student. Being "wrong" feels less joyful here.

It would be an oversell to proclaim that I've figured this bit out, but my current line of thinking is as follows. I believe that since we made grades up, we can unmake them. There's nothing about the shape or sound of the letter "A" that makes it inherently reinforcing. It is a successful reinforcer because we imbued it with that power. Also, I'm not questioning whether the carrot and stick of grading have been effective in shaping academic behaviors, nor whether some students might experience grades as supportive. I'm wondering: Might there be other, better carrots? And I'm not talking about waiting for students to magically discover "intrinsic motivation." Not only is this ableist, but it's not the silver bullet we assume it is. We forget that even feedback like, "This paragraph is strong because it uses persuasive language to articulate your thesis" still counts as an extrinsic motivator. I guess I'm asking, do we really believe that grades are a better motivator than that? And even if we have evidence that grades are the ideal motivator for some students, are we comfortable inviting the subtle coercion of grades in our teaching? How do we sit in the discomfort that grades both help some students and reinforce some potentially problematic ideologies? Personally, I don't want any part of my pedagogy to be about coercion, even if the coercion is "for their own good." I'd rather structure my courses with "loving systems" to make it easier to fall into patterns of learning and mastery than to prod students from behind with a weapon of coercion and shame. I think it's a stretch to argue that our current system of grades approximates anything close to a loving system. I think there may be other, more joyful ways, but I may be wrong.

One last reasonable criticism to trouble the ungrading waters: it seems unlikely that ungrading will "work" for every possible teacher. Part of the need for a diverse pedagogical toolbox is not only to serve the needs of a diverse student body, but because not every tool works in every hand. I'm a tenured professor with a leadership role in a teaching-focused state institution. I'm queer, married, and a parent. I look younger than I am. I also perform feminine gender well, including providing the empathy and care that students expect to come from my body. Some of these identities make things easier for me and some make things harder, but on balance, not putting grades on assignments makes me seem cool to my students. Grading is a rule I can break because I have a pretty wide margin to break rules. Were I in a different body, though, ungrading might make me seem incompetent in the eyes of my students or colleagues. For some teachers, ungrading is a type of wrong that could have serious emotional, profes-sional, and financial consequences. (Compare Laila McCloud's contribution to this forum.) Not every teacher can safely cede power through acts of dis-rupting hegemonic assumptions, and this is a type of "wrong" we must reckon with. But just because it isn't safe for all teachers doesn't mean that those with relative safety should sit idly by. If you have the margin to disrupt and you choose not to, you are complicit in upholding and reproducing the system. So that's why I am happy to be wrong here, even if it means that not everyone can do this sort of wrong—yet.

This has been my journey so far as an ungrader. A journey of *unlearning* so many things I assumed to be true. It's also been a journey of *learning* that I'm going to be all types of wrong to all types of people. But in the end, it feels like that wrong is arcing in right direction. And that is a type of wrong I can feel joy about.

¹ This definition is informed by the work of Jesse Stommel and Jessica Zeller.

² Asao B. Inoue, "Where Does Grading Come From?" *Asao B. Inoue's Infrequent Words* (blog), May 31, 2021, http://asaobinoue.blogspot.com/2021/05/where-doesgrading-come-from.html.

³ Susan M. Brookhart et al., "A Century of Grading Research: Meaning and Value in the Most Common Educational Measure," *Review of Educational Research* 86/4 (2016): 803–848.

⁴ Although ungrading is not necessarily a way to do less, if you are interested in intentional resistance through doing less, I recommend Jenny Odell, *How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (New York: Melville House, 2020), as well as Tricia Hersey, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* (New York: Hachette, 2022).

⁵ The "house" I am referencing here is the community of ungrading enthusiasts. Josh Eyler has also used this idiom in his work, although the "house" he references is more akin to academia/teaching as a whole.

⁶ Sean Michael Morris, "The Problem with Ungrading? Everyone's Doing It Wrong," *Times Higher Education*, October 21, 2022, https://www.timeshigher-education.com/campus/problem-ungrading-everyones-doing-it-wrong.

⁷ In response to Morris, a group of fellow "bad ungraders" authored this piece: "Why There Isn't One 'Right Way' to Practise Ungrading," *Times Higher Education*, December 2, 2022, https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/-whythere-isnt-one-right-way-practise-ungrading.

⁸ Karen Costa, "Systems Aren't Scary," *Medium*, October 31, 2022, https://karenraycosta.medium.com/systems-arent-scary-e55d8ac63bc7.

⁹ Ibid.