

Keeping Receipts: Thoughts on Ungrading from a Black Woman Professor

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I'll be honest...this makes me a little nervous."

This student's statement was one of many responses I received as I explained my learning assessment philosophy to the class. For many students, this is the first time that they have had a professor who does not provide grades for individual assignments. I shared that my approach to grading was based on my experiences as a student and now faculty member. When I was a graduate student, I always looked at the letter grade I received first, then the feedback. As a faculty member, I have witnessed the same behavior in some of my students. More important, I noticed that the level of satisfaction with the grade influenced if the student incorporated my feedback into future assignments. My observation led me to believe that removing the grade would help students focus on developing their ability to critically engage with the course material and demonstrate their learning in a variety of formats. Ungrading has presented an opportunity for us to reimagine a higher education practice that acts as a barrier for many students.

However, the discourse around ungrading as a liberatory pedagogical practice has ignored the ways that white supremacy and whiteness impact its implementation. I enter this conversation as a Black woman professor who uses ungrading, and I want to note my experience with its limitations. I must admit that my learning assessment philosophy also makes *me* a little nervous. As a Black woman professor, engaging in ungrading requires two things. First, it requires a level of trust between me and my students. Second, it requires me to keep detailed records of how my students learn throughout the course, which I call "receipts." I keep receipts because of how whiteness monitors my productivity as a Black professor. These receipts become a necessity because I am a Black ciswoman in academic spaces where my intellectual and physical presence is a surprise. As Haynes and colleagues assert,¹ we cannot separate Black faculty from our bodies. We also cannot separate grading from the institutional structures that reward it. For Black faculty like myself who identify as critical pedagogues, there is a tension between institutional expectations of our bodies and our

desire to create learning environments that affirm the full complexity of the students we teach.

Operationalizing White Supremacy and Whiteness

Before I go any further, it is important to define how I understand white supremacy and whiteness. The analogy that I often use with my students is that white supremacy is the car and whiteness is the gas the car needs to move. Anyone can put gas in the car. White racial dominance (the car) requires ongoing engagement via policies and practices (the gas) that perpetuate that dominance.² I believe that higher education in the U.S. enacts policies and practices that perpetuate whiteness such as grading. Grading serves as a gatekeeping mechanism within higher education. As a Black woman professor, I am a disruption to whiteness in the classroom for multiple reasons, and my decision to remove grades is one tangible example.

Ungrading in Graduate Classrooms

Engaging in a conversation about grading practices makes sense as I teach in a higher education and student affairs (HESA) graduate preparation program. More specifically, I teach graduate students who are interested in how colleges and universities work to support the learners and communities they serve. In my classes, we have talked about how grades serve as markers of competence and effort within higher education institutional structures. Within higher education, we use grades to decide which students can participate in leadership opportunities, receive scholarships, and even be granted work opportunities such as internships and assistantships. Removing grades from the classroom presents a challenge when other areas of the institution use grades as currency.

An important part of being a professor is to develop a relationship with our students. Students are first introduced to my expectations of this relationship through the syllabus. This document typically includes a litany of policies to manage communication between me and my students. I have found that many students are drawn to three areas of my syllabi: how their learning will be assessed (assignments), how their learning will be evaluated (grades), and what information they must consume (course materials). Throughout the semester, although I spend a great deal of time affirming the students' ability to meet the expectations of the course, the fact that I do not provide a letter or number grade after each assignment is a challenge for them. Many of my students have never had an instructor who takes this approach, so there is an initial hesitancy about whether it will work. And to

be honest, I am not always sure that it will. In my experience, for ungrading to work, students must trust me as an instructor. Beyond knowing I have a doctorate in their field of study and bring several years of full-time professional experience, students must trust that I know what I am doing.³ They have to trust that they will learn something in my course without having a letter or number grade as a symbol of competence.

Keeping Receipts

In Black culture, saying that you have receipts is another way of saying you have evidence that an incident occurred. As a Black woman in academia, I have always felt the need to keep receipts of my work, especially my teaching. In my status as a pre-tenure professor at a teaching-intensive institution, course evaluation serves as one—and possibly the most significant—marker of my effectiveness in the classroom. While scholars have documented how teaching evaluations are not good indicators of teaching effectiveness, they remain the preferred method used by institutions.⁴ In theory, course evaluations should be a tool for students to describe how they were actively engaged in the learning environment created with the instructor. However, my experiences demonstrate that the grades a student receives influence their responses to course evaluations. The relationship between student grades and my path to tenure became precarious when I eliminated individual grades. Hence I keep receipts in the following ways: having students engage in peer review of their work, providing detailed feedback, and using course engagement reflections.

In recent years, I have come to rely more on the practice of peer review. Students submit their assignments before class time and bring a copy to class. Using the instructions on the syllabus, students review each other's work. After they have read their peer's paper and made comments, I expect them to engage in a conversation about their observations. The peer review process also exposes students to the challenges of grading. Everyone was given the same assignment but will interpret the assignment in different ways based upon their own ways of knowing, thinking, and being. In my courses, I want to honor students' positionalities as they wrestle with the questions I ask of them. Students therefore witness the diversity of ways that their peers approached the same assignment and learn that grades are incapable of fully capturing that diversity.

With ungrading, I have had to think carefully about using my comments and suggestions to students' papers as a marker of progress. When I am reading a student's work, I need to make sure that my comments focus

not just on how well they met the technical expectations, but how they articulate their ideas in response to the assignment prompt. I need to provide comments that help move their ideas along. This type of feedback requires a great deal of time and attention. But this feedback also serves as a receipt for future assignments. I share with students that I am looking for how their writing and thinking strengthen and grow over time. I make it clear that I am not critiquing whether I agree with their arguments, unless their arguments are inaccurate or promote violence against a group of people. I often refer back to my comments on later assignments to draw connections to how a student is progressing with the course materials.

I use a course engagement reflection assignment as another receipt, where students assess the amount of time and energy they put into engaging with the course materials and assignments. For example, I ask students to provide a detailed reflection about whether they completed the course readings and how their understanding of what they read influenced their ability to engage with the course. The last prompt of the assignment asks students to give themselves a letter grade and explain why they feel they have earned that grade. This part of the assignment is the most interesting because it provides the student with an opportunity to reflect on the course objectives and their learning throughout the term.

An Opportunity to Freedom Dream

Ungrading fell into my lap. I initially saw this practice as a way to remove a barrier between me and my students. I noticed that my students were more focused on earning a particular grade because of the rewards associated with it. Their focus on grades makes sense to me, but I also felt it stifled the possibilities I want to create in my courses. I do believe in the transformative potential of ungrading. I also believe that this practice warrants additional consideration of the labor associated with it, particularly for Black women faculty. Black faculty are often celebrated for our innovative pedagogical skills; however, the implementation of these skills come with a cost that cannot be overlooked or misunderstood.

Filmmaker and activist Tourmaline introduced me to the concept of freedom dreaming. She writes, “freedom dreams are born when we face harsh conditions not with despair, but with the deep knowledge that these conditions will change—that a world filled with softness and beauty and care is not only possible, but inevitable.”⁵ She goes on to offer three questions that those interested in freedom dreaming should consider: “What does the dominant culture have that we want? What does the dominant culture have that we don’t want? What do we have that we want to keep?” I would like to

extend these questions to Black faculty and administrators who are interested in reimagining their learning assessment practices. Tourmaline's questions encourage faculty and administrators to engage in critical reflection about common practices within our classrooms. However, there should be a cycle of reflection and action if we want to move higher education forward. Ungrading introduces another disruption and allows us to freedom dream with our students.

¹ Chayla Haynes, Leonard Taylor, Steve D. Mobley, and Jasmine Haywood, "Existing and Resisting: The Pedagogical Realities of Black, Critical Men and Women Faculty," *The Journal of Higher Education* 91/5 (2020): 698–721.

² Zeus Leonardo, "The Color of Supremacy: Beyond the Discourse of 'White Privilege,'" *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36/2 (2004): 137–152.

³ Chavella T. Pittman, "Evaluating the Teaching Effectiveness of Black Women Faculty," *Journal of Negro Education* 90/4 (2021): 442–456.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Tourmaline, "Filmmaker and Activist Tourmaline on How to Freedom Dream," *Vogue*, July 2, 2020, <https://www.vogue.com/article/filmmaker-and-activist-tourmaline-on-how-to-freedom-dream>.