

Unnecessary and Unhelpful Edu-speak: How Ungrading Rhetoric Sustains Traditional Grading Practices

Christine Traxler

Woodinville High School, Washington

Before I first heard the term “ungrading”¹ and “going gradeless,”² I had been wrestling for years the ugly and double entendre term “degrading.”³ A few of us in my English department at our suburban high school had read Alfie Kohn and decided to put Kohn’s ideas into practice in connection with the in-vogue “growth mindset” ideas of the time.⁴ While the early attempts were messy, what was problematic was the name of the practice. I recall a long conversation I had with a parent who, once he understood the reasons behind giving narrative feedback instead of letters and numbers (which was where I was in the early stages), desperately wanted to help rebrand the practice.

As Gayle Greene captures in her recent essay on learning outcomes, “The air is abuzz with words like *models and measures...assessment standards...and best practices*.”⁵ Even the movement to push back against grades fails to capture what we hope to do in any classroom: “to think, question, analyze, evaluate, weigh alternatives, tolerate ambiguity” and experience “joy” and “wonder,”⁶ rather than simply rank students for compliance to learning outcomes. To be fair, the bureaucratic behemoth of standardized tests and top-down pressures to “write a report responding to their report” is real.⁷

From a dominant narrative perspective, this “not” or “un” construction with regards to grading implies only that an important accountability tool has been removed. From this perspective, ungrading seems unnecessary, if not damaging, to a practice deemed necessary by most people, and does nothing to actually challenge the dominant practice of ranking students and pitting them against each other for resources.

Rhetorical Dominance

A character in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* writes in his diary, “To oppose something is to maintain it,”⁸ meaning that the

acknowledgement of the thing, the placing of the thing in the dominant position, ensures its existence, if not its sustainability.

By keeping the word “grade” in the rhetoric, as in ungrading, one keeps the enemy alive, so to speak. It acknowledges grading as the dominant practice in the classroom, the one thing that matters as a determinant of economic status, in perpetuity. It allows renegade teachers interested in challenging the capitalist system and unraveling the factory model of education to feel successful in a limited and controlled way.

Yet the word “ungrading” does nothing to stop grading altogether, which may be the insidious purpose of the rhetoric in the first place. By allowing seeming outliers a voice, an outlet for their frustrations, the dominant system continues to function smoothly. Seen through this lens, “ungrading” and terms like “unessay” become a steam valve for the hierarchical system to run effectively.

What we need, says Le Guin’s character, is a different “road,” one that collapses the binary, “breaks the circle,” gets off the (grading) “road” altogether—one that challenges the entire system.⁹ In my district, I am still forced to grade four times per year. I must put a label on every student at each midterm and semester, so I am in fact not “un”-doing anything.

What I am doing is trying to see student learning as unique and individual rather than all about “mastery” of the entire contents of a knowledge or skill set. When we are forced to grade, teachers are forced by the system to assess how close to the “standard” a student is, but if we want to create a different experience in the classroom—one that does not insist all learning must look a particular way or be constructed in a certain manner—grading becomes irrelevant and detrimental to the experience itself. “Opportunity” and “agency” become the key words in giving students time and space to explore without insisting they learn the skills teachers think are important. By not overtly ranking my students throughout the term, I like to think I allow them breathing room to take risks, to have fun, and to push beyond limits they may feel in the system. But am I really successful when I am forced to still give a grade at the end?

Choosing a New Road

The entire public model is inherently the problem, not grading practices per se. Top-down curriculum; lack of choice (and the joy and responsibility that accompany choice); constructivist approaches that appear creative and open-ended during knowledge construction, but ultimately have an end goal determined by teachers; and a profound lack of agency, all contribute to a model that perpetuates obedience, conformity and the dreaded

status quo.¹⁰ The public model also ensures that students are infantilized until they aren't, with no chance to take risks, fail, and pick themselves back up again—before they enter adulthood. Young people spend thirteen years attending to someone else's agenda, and then we wonder why they struggle making decisions for themselves or thinking creatively in the college classroom.

The problem with not addressing the public system of education comprehensively is that we think we can solve the multiple problems of the system by modifying or ameliorating some element of the system, like grading practices. Grading, however, is just one small overt symptom of a capitalist factory model of education.

I'm not saying we shouldn't attempt to ameliorate a system we cannot change overnight. I am saying that we need to chart a clearer mission and a new road to that mission that includes ditching dominant practices, to the extent we can under our contracts, as a way forward toward a completely different model.

I'm also saying that if we continue to react to the system with terms like "ungrading"—which implies that one has only stopped grading—rather than proactively working toward filling the void with a greater mission, we are only advertising the dominant model, not imagining a different cultural imperative altogether.

At the very least, much like how the revolution to erode gender dominance proactively defined the binary (i.e., transgender and cisgender), and thus forced cisgendered people to experience being gendered, what we do in opposition to the current ranking processes should highlight, more specifically, the things we are for.

As Kohn so aptly lists in his paradigm-shifting essay about de-grading, grades "reduce...thinking," "distort...the curriculum," "spoil... relationships," and "encourage cheating."¹¹ They sell a seemingly objective veneer of legitimacy (a numbers-don't-lie mythmaking) that forces kids to focus on the points in the game, rather than learning something meaningful from the journey. Grades rank young people and lie about a young person's worth. They drive young people into anxiety, panic attacks, and depression. They are used by unimaginative parents to punish or reward their children.

Unfortunately, the word "grade" does not evoke these negative connotations for the majority of families in America. Good grades get their kids into college. Bad grades burden families.

A Rhetorical Shift away from “Grading”

Luckily, we can look to the Sudbury model of education for ideas about rebranding the practice of grading and of public education more broadly. The Sudbury model is the antithesis of the public model in all major ways.¹²

The Sudbury model, as described by the Hudson Valley Sudbury School, begins with the following observation about “responsibility”:

The fundamental difference between a Sudbury school and any other type of school is the student’s level of responsibility. In a Sudbury school the students are solely responsible for their education, their learning methods, their evaluation and their environment.

In a public school, the state takes responsibility for most aspects of a student’s education including curriculum and evaluation. The student is left with little responsibility except to learn what is taught, how it is taught, in the environment in which it is taught and then to reiterate it back at evaluation time.¹³

It is difficult to argue with the mission of creating responsible students. Even more, naming what we hope to achieve may be a better rhetorical tactic.

“Responsibility,” and how much a student is expected to have, may be the place to start rebranding practices currently titled “grading” or “ungrading.” Traditional grading might be called Reduced Student Responsibility, whereas Sudbury practices might be considered Full Student Responsibility. If our goal is a freer, more democratic, and more responsible student, we must consider how our own practices (evaluation, curriculum choice, etc.) challenge the dominant system and hence contribute to students practicing responsibility and experiencing agency.

Conclusion

Not everyone is ready to go full Sudbury, even though the evidence—both anecdotal and observed—reveals a remarkable model much needed in a country verging on authoritarianism.¹⁴

But there is much to learn from other models—roads not away from or back to the dominant model practices, but completely different altogether.

As George Orwell concludes in “Politics and the English Language,” when you are thinking abstractly and attempting to find the right word, “the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you.”¹⁵ The dominant rhetorical term “grading” rushes in to fill the language vacuum because it is what we know.

What we need to do, Orwell continues, is “to put off using words as long as possible and get one’s meanings as clear as one can through pictures and sensations. Afterward one can choose—not simply *accept*—the phrases that will best cover the meaning.”¹⁶ I urge educators to imagine and picture what education is for, what we hope for our students, and who we know our students to be: lovers of learning and seekers of justice. Let us picture what an ideal future looks like and examine our educational practices to make sure they match.

Let us create a rhetoric that is not defined by the dominant practices, but one that is flexible and dynamic, value-driven and concrete, one that describes an alternative educational model.

Let us be fully ANTI-grading (and hence, as bell hooks likes to say, anti-“imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarch[al]”¹⁷ education) in our rhetoric. We can do so much better than “ungrading,” “unessay,” and “going gradeless.”

¹ Susan D. Blum, ed. *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (And What to Do Instead)* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2020).

² Aaron Blackwelder, *Teachers Going Gradeless*, <https://www.teachersgoinggradeless.com/>.

³ Alfie Kohn, “From Degrading to De-Grading,” <https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/degrading-de-grading/>.

⁴ C. S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Random House, 2006).

⁵ Gayle Greene, “The Terrible Tedium of ‘Learning Outcomes,’” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 4, 2023.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (New York: Ace Trade Edition, 2000 [1969]), 151.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ C. R. Traxler, “The Most Democratic School of Them All: Why the Sudbury Model of Education Should be Taken Seriously,” *Schools: Studies in Education* 12 (2015): 271–296.

¹¹ Alfie Kohn, “From Degrading to De-Grading.”

¹² C. R. Traxler, “The Most Democratic School of Them All.”

¹³ “The Sudbury Model of Education: The Responsibility Spectrum,” *Hudson Valley Sudbury School*, 2022, <https://hvsudburyschool.com/the-sudbury-model-of-education/#:~:text=In%20a%20Sudbury%20school%20the,education%20including%20curriculum%20and%20evaluation>.

¹⁴ See Peter Gray, G. Riley, and K. Curry-Knight, “Former Students’ Evaluations of Experiences at a Democratic School: Roles of the Democratic Processes, Staff and the Community of Students,” *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives* 10/2 (2021): 4–25, and Daniel Greenberg, Mimsi Sadofsky, and Jason Lempke, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (Framingham, MA: The Sudbury Valley School Press, 2005).

¹⁵ George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” in *The Norton Reader: An Anthology of Nonfiction Prose*, ed. Jerome Beaty et al., 10th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000 [1946]), 583.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ bell hooks, “Understanding Patriarchy,” in *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*, (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 17.