The Dialectic Transformation of Teaching and Learning in Community Colleges through Ungrading

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Abstract: As five Andrew J. Mellon Transformative Learning in the Humanities Faculty Fellows in the City University of New York, we capture in this essay the dialectical experience of ungrading our community college courses with our students. Drawing on case examples of implementing ungrading in a range of courses and a thematic analysis of our students' reflection submissions of being ungraded, we argue that ungrading is an effective pedagogical tool for debunking a deficits-based, outcomes-focused perspective that is pervasive in studies on and of community college students. Through various ways of building student agency, self-reflection, and feedback into our courses, we find that ungrading increases student metacognition and motivation while decreasing anxiety and stress. Despite the overwhelmingly positive experiences of ungrading that our students shared, we conclude with challenges and contradictions with which we continue to grapple.

Although community colleges have increasingly shifted their focus away from industrial education and a strictly vocational mission,[1] stereotypes of community colleges being oriented more around career and technical education are still pervasive.[2] Few people realize that community colleges play a prominent role in liberal arts education in the

United States. A recent study found that, contrary to the death knell for liberal arts and humanities education that popular media has sounded,[3] the number of humanities and liberal arts degrees awarded at public institutions has risen since 2000 if two-year colleges are considered.[4] Data from the National Center for Education Statistics also shows that the majority of the one million Associate's degrees conferred in 2019-20 were in the liberal arts and sciences, general studies, and humanities.[5] Liberal arts degrees are thus the vibrant heart of many community colleges, which play the vital role of being feeders to four-year colleges.[6]

Against this backdrop, faculty and students in community colleges face unique challenges when it comes to teaching and learning. On the teaching side, community college faculty must meet the needs of demographically diverse student populations while carrying heavy teaching loads averaging to five 3-hour courses per semester.[7] Despite being founded as teaching institutions, community college faculty are also increasingly engaging in more service and research,[8] often with inadequate resources and institutional support.[9] Community college faculty have been found to derive their greatest satisfaction from teaching,[10] but these additional pressures detract attention from their students and instruction.

On the learning side, community college students face barriers such as being historically marginalized, having to attend school part-time because of work, falling into lower socioeconomic brackets, having family responsibilities, and being commuter students.[11] These demanding individual life circumstances are compounded by systemically dire outcomes like low persistence rates and less than half of students earning a two-year college degree within six years of enrollment.[12] This has spurred: (1) policy recommendations to address issues of community college students being less motivated to persist in school, more disconnected from their coursework, and less able to see a clear pathway to a career,[13] and (2) an outgrowth of literature examining the effects of programs designed to train community college students to self-regulate and reflect on their learning or "content mastery."[14]

We argue, however, that such perceptions of community college students are rooted in a deficit model that disempowers students. Even when attributed to structural issues, narratives of community college students being less motivated or in need of self-regulation training not only create and perpetuate a stigma that the majority of community college students are lacking in skills necessary for success, they also cast community college students at large as problems to be solved through programs and interventions.

Wanting to debunk this deficit perspective of community college students, we sought a different approach to teaching and student learning—one that does not depart from a compensatory premise that our students

are deficient. We chose to "ungrade" our courses in order to shift the focus of student learning to be on the process rather than evaluative outcomes. Ungrading is a student-centered pedagogical approach that has been shown to empower and support diverse learners.[16] We aimed to de-center our role in assessing students, to engage them more in their own learning process, and ultimately to strengthen the faculty-student relationship.[17] We also wanted to move away from viewing learning as a sole responsibility of the learner to emphasize, instead, teaching and learning as a social and collaborative process of interactionally constructing knowledge within the learning community of a class.[18]

The CUNY Context

Across the almost 92,000 community college students enrolled at the City University of New York (CUNY) in 2019, 67 percent of students were Black or Hispanic/Latinx, 42 percent spoke a native language other than English, and 65 percent were first-generation college students.[19] Roughly 71 percent of these community college students reported annual household incomes of less than $30,000 in 2016.[20] While the one-year persistence rate for the fall 2019 cohort was 62 percent, this dropped to 44 percent by two years.[21] In seeking ways to connect the potential benefits of ungrading to our specific student population, we found from our own experiences, as well as results from the Surveys of Entering Student Engagement (2019), that students reported relatively lower frequencies of engaging in effective learning strategies like discussing an assignment or grade with an instructor, preparing at least two drafts of an assignment before turning it in, and receiving prompt feedback on their performance.[22] Considering the wide variation in how ungrading can be enacted, we attempted to use ungrading to address these shortcomings by grounding our courses in promoting students' agency, embedding continuous opportunities for self-reflection and revision, and prioritizing feedback over content achievement.

In this forum, Jesse Stommel calls for educators to begin ungrading by "invit[ing] students to a conversation about grades."[23] It is important to note that, based on conversations with students at the beginning of the semester, some of us opted to maintain some traditional structures and language around grading, such as using scores to alleviate the anxieties of students who wanted a more quantified approach to assessment. Stommel defines ungrading as an "active and ongoing critique of grades as a system, and the decision to do what we can, depending on our labor conditions, to carefully dismantle that system."[24] As faculty within the largest urban university in the United States, we aimed to create avenues for dialogue and

reciprocal exploration with our students, but recognized this as an ongoing process of doing "what we can" within the institutional and societal confines in which we exist.

Case Examples

We share the following case examples, which cover a range of disciplines and course modalities, on how we implemented ungrading.

Civic Engagement in a Global Society, hybrid

Students in this first-year seminar engaged in completing self-assessments, reflecting on peer and instructor feedback in learning journal entries, creating their own rubrics, and electing their major semester assignment. Students discussed as a class what makes for a quality assignment submission, which informed the rubric categories and weights they developed. They also deliberated and chose their major course assignment (e.g., one course section chose to create a social change artifact while another chose an in-class debate of a social movement). The course culminated in end-of-semester, one-on-one grade conferences where each student had ten minutes to receive final course feedback, share key takeaways from the course, and discuss what course grade they should receive, which in some cases helped to increase their final course grade.

Global Contemporary Art, asynchronous

Focusing on contemporary art dealing with homelessness, students did their midterm ungrading project based on consultation with the instructor. They deepened their understanding of homelessness by attending recorded artists' and activist talks asynchronously, discussing the topic with their peers, and writing eight group reflection papers. Their midterm project became the basis for their final report.

Human Services Fieldwork and Integrative Seminar, hybrid

In this course, students submitted ten written, audio, video, or visual art reflections about their experiences at their internships. On the first day of class, students worked collaboratively to create their own evaluative criteria connected to the purpose of these reflections. Students used these criteria to assess their own reflections, while also receiving weekly faculty feedback on their process and their progress.

Introduction to U.S. Government & Politics, asynchronous

In this "choose your own adventure" course, students were provided a list of adventures that included activities such as developing and implementing a 10-minute lesson, creating an original meme and writing an explanatory essay, and more traditional activities like weekly quizzes. Students were invited to choose a set of adventures that appealed to them, to create a study plan for the semester, to keep a weekly journal reflecting on their learning and progress, and to submit self-assessments on each completed adventure. Students received extensive feedback on these journals, which helped guide their evaluations; however, the final grade students received was composed entirely of their own self-assessments.[25]

Social Psychology, hybrid

The original grading policy for this course was revised, and an interactive feedback and reflection process was implemented for all class assignments and activities. This included weekly reading responses; in-class activities and asynchronous reflections; and a scaffolded research project that consisted of the first part of a paper, a class workshop, and a work-in-progress project presentation that students presented before they submitted the final paper. Students were "softly evaluated": instead of using a letter or number grade, reading responses were assessed, for example, as *Excellent*, *Satisfactory*, or *Unsatisfactory*. Students received extensive feedback before revising and resubmitting the assignment. This approach was applied to all assignments. In this way, the evaluation of all activities served as opportunities for individual and/or peer feedback and revisions and shifted focus away from summative assessments to learning as a process.

Students' Experience of Ungrading

To understand our students' experience of ungrading, we created a reflection form consisting of both quantitative and qualitative questions that were completed by fifty-two students across our five courses. Overall, participating students responded very positively to their experiences of ungrading.[26] Our thematic analysis of students' responses revealed three prevalent themes around metacognition, motivation, and anxiety/stress.

Students appreciated that ungrading facilitated more meaningful engagement and reflections on their work and learning. According to their reflections, ungrading practices made them cognizant of learning as a process

that involves self-reflection, critical feedback, and revisions. Students recognized that, while such practices required their input, self-discipline, and responsibility, they also provided them with freedom and joy, as well as control over their learning, and facilitated their growth and development. As one student put it, "it gives students a choice…based [on] our creative process of how we got to where we have gotten and what did we learn, rather then [sic] simply getting the 'right' answer. Most important, it encourages creativity, growth, and reflection…."

Learning gained a new meaning for many as they felt more connected to their work, became more interested in learning, and felt more motivated. Notably, some students also shared that ungrading decreased the pressure, stress, and anxiety they usually experience when evaluated by conventional methods. As one student summarized, "Being ungraded makes me feel interested, it peeks [sic] my interest. It also keeps me motivated. I also feel no pressure. It allows me to go back and reflect on my work, it holds me accountable."

Our Reflection

We argue it is even more critical in the community college context, which often prioritizes skills and workforce development over progressive pedagogy, to empower students by giving them control over what and how they learn. It was rewarding to see that, when ungrading is undergirded by a philosophy viewing teaching and learning as a collaborative process, students recognized it as a liberating and agentic practice. But we would be remiss not to mention that, despite students' overwhelmingly positive experiences of ungrading, it did not come without resistance and challenges. Some students expressed reservations and initial confusion about the method, as they felt uncertain about their final course grade, or they believed it was the faculty's responsibility to grade. Such feedback underscores the importance of repeated discussions with students (and ourselves) about what ungrading is, its purpose, and how to "unlearn" traditional practices.

We view these examples of ungrading and student responses as just the beginning of the process of transforming our teaching. As educators, we all look for transformation within our students, but this experience brought about a paradigm shift in how we teach and relate to our students. Although we came in believing we were practicing student-centered, collaborative pedagogy, ungrading allowed us to position students as authors of their own knowledge construction. We may still determine the contours of the content they learn, but they are the key drivers of how they learn and its applica-

tions. Finally, implementing ungrading allowed us to reflect on our own hidden biases towards our students, such as being impressed by how engaged and reflective they were about their learning process. We look forward to continuing to push our pedagogy toward letting go and entrusting our students to redefine community college learning environments as spaces where they have agency in their learning trajectories.

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professor reserved the right to alter grades submitted by students, this power was only exercised a handful of times, and in those instances it was to add points where students evaluated themselves too harshly.

[26] For instance, 75 percent of responding students agreed that ungrading helped them to reflect on their learning process and grow as a learner; 67 percent felt that ungrading motivated them to engage more deeply in the course assignment/activity; and 73 percent expressed that they felt more empowered and responsible for their own learning with an ungraded approach.