Learning Conferences as a Humanizing Evaluation Practice[1]

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> If we prefer dialogue, we have to do more asking than telling. That means engaging in conversations (conferences) with students rather than firing off comments for them to ponder. — Alfie Kohn, "Foreword," *Ungrading*

I explored an approach to ungrading in my one-year pedagogical development project, "Setting Your Own Goals: Co-Created Assessment Model to Enhance the Learning of English Specialist Teacher Students," at Uppsala University, Sweden. The overall aim was to encourage active student participation in developing the course. More specifically, the students in my Literature & Society course co-created the various aspects of assessment, including the individual assignments and rubrics for assessment.[2] Although the plan was to create an assessment model, I soon realized that genuine student involvement is a continuous process rather than an end product.[3] To further our student-centered and empowering pedagogy practice, we implemented end-of-course learning conferences. During the conferences, I encouraged the students to reflect on their learning journeys; at the end, we agreed on a final grade. I expected the learning conferences to cultivate students' metacognitive skills and self-knowledge; I did not foresee the conferences' humanizing effect. The practice of ungrading described in this essay was intuitive, and the changes we made to the course were not radical, but, as the comments from the anonymous student course evaluations show, those changes made a significant difference.

Teaching Future Teachers

The students taking the "Literature & Society" course were future high school teachers of English. The class size varied from semester to semester, from nine to seventeen students. We met once a week for a two-hour seminar over an eight-week period. There was a lot of content to cover during each seminar: reading and analyzing one literary text per class meeting (often a long and complex text like Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*), learning an array of literary terms and theoretical concepts,

as well as exploring possible approaches to using the literary texts in an English as a second language classroom. Despite the high-density content, the course offered a unique opportunity for critical metacognitive reflection on pedagogy. After all, I was working with preservice teachers; several were in their final (fourth) year of education. The priority in their education had been given to subject knowledge and learning science, not self-reflection. However, the significance of teachers acquiring self-knowledge cannot be underestimated: as Parker J. Palmer points out in *The Courage to Teach*, self-awareness is "as crucial to good teaching as knowing [one's] students and [one's] subject."[4] Together we created an opportunity to reflect critically on our teaching/learning practices and thereby to gain valuable self-knowledge.

Setting Your Own Goals

Teaching, I believe, is a balancing act between the institutional requirements of higher education and the uniqueness of individual students' intellectual journeys that neither begin nor end at university. One of the official goals for the teacher training program is for students to be able to "demonstrate the ability to identify their need for additional knowledge and develop their competence in pedagogical work."[5] To support the students as they work towards the goal of life-long learning, I follow María del Carmen Salazar's advice to actively "listen to [my] students and build on their knowledge and experience in order to engage in contextualized, dynamic, and personalized educational approaches that further the goals of humanization and social transformation."[6] One approach that we tested at the start of the course was to discuss our individual learning goals and identify the support we would need to work towards them.

In the past, my usual practice had been to begin a course by going through the syllabus, explaining the learning goals, assignments, grading criteria, rules for attendance, and so forth. Thus, my introductory classes often turned into a broadcasting type of teaching with a brief Q&A at the end. In the "Literature & Society" course, I posted the syllabus onto the course's Canvas page. To encourage active student participation in the course from the very start, we spent the forty-five-minute introductory class engaging in a dialogue about active participation and setting personal learning goals. In preparation for the class, the students received some guiding questions. I urged the students to write down the answers to the questions and bring them to class. Together we created a worksheet on active participation and goal setting that I then used in subsequent semesters.

The first set of questions focused on students' experiences with and expectations of active participation in class:

- What does active participation look, sound, and feel like to you?
- Can you remember a class in which participation was easy? Why was it easy? How were you asked to participate?
- Can you remember a class in which participating was a struggle? Why was it a struggle? How were you asked to participate?
- What forms of participation do you think will allow you to participate in every class in this course?
- What support do you think you need from your peers and your instructor to participate actively in this course?

When teaching was moved online due to the Covid-19 crisis, discussions regarding student engagement and participation exploded. Frequently, technology was blamed for the lack of student engagement in an online teaching environment. However, as Siân Bayne et al. note in *The Manifesto for Teaching Online,* "it might be argued that anyone who sits more than three rows back in a 500-seat lecture hall is a 'distant learner.'" [7] Whether a student's camera was on or off during a class became a measurement of engagement. As we moved teaching back to campus, there was a sense that, once we returned to a physical classroom, student engagement would just happen, as if the physical classroom itself, rather than the work we do, has some inherent capacity to engage students.

What worked for my students during and after the Covid crisis was a continuous dialogue about active participation. As a result of individual reflections and our conversations during the introductory class, the students came up with an array of practices for meaningful engagement. Some decided to have pre-seminar discussion groups, while others created a collaborative Google document for note-taking before, during, and after class.

Once we had explored active participation, the students had an opportunity to discuss their personal goals. The second set of prompts encouraged students to tap into their own potential as well as identify their aspirations and needs for support:

- What would you want to take away from this course?
- What knowledge do you want to obtain?
- What skills do you want to cultivate?
- What do you need to do to achieve your personal learning goals?

- How can your peers and your instructor support you in achieving your personal learning goals?
- How will you evaluate whether you have achieved your individual learning goals?

Following the initial discussion during the introductory seminar, the students went on to create an agreement outlining their expectations of our learning community. Further, together they designed various assignments that would allow them to cultivate and evaluate their personal learning goals. The assignments included teaching/learning activities,[8] lesson plan designs, podcasts, dramatizations of texts, literary analysis essays, and many more. The end-of-course learning conference was an occasion to reflect on and celebrate the self-knowledge the students had gained and the course work they had done.

Learning Conferences

Like so many of my colleagues, I resent grading for the labor and energy it takes away from doing the meaningful work of teaching to *learn.* Rather than spending the allocated hours on reading/listening to and commenting on students' assignments, I decided to have a one-on-one conversation with every one of my students about their learning experience during the course. Most conferences lasted about 20 minutes, while some were as long as 40 minutes.[9] I did not standardize the length of the conferences because I believe that teaching should always aim for equity, and some students needed more time to do the work of reflecting on their learning. Taking the time to listen to each student also acknowledged that some are more comfortable talking through rather than writing down their self-reflections.

There was a general structure for the learning conference: reflections on the course, preparation, participation, and the individual assignments. The students began by sharing their experience of the course as a whole, including what worked and what they thought we should have done differently. Their responses provided valuable feedback for further course development. This was followed by the students reflecting on their preparation and participation. I was surprised and touched by the students' honesty, as some of them admitted not reading all of the texts or spending not much time in the group discussions before the seminars. Rather than looking for excuses, students reflected on how they managed their time during the course—what worked and what they would do differently the next time. For instance, one student noted how starting to read earlier would allow them to finish the reading and have the time to reflect on what they had read. Next we discussed their assignments. Prior to the conference, I had asked the students to annotate their

own work, an activity inspired by Matthew M. Johnson.[10] Guided by their own annotations, the students commented on the development of their thinking and writing processes. Lastly, based on the grading criteria we had collectively created earlier in the course, we agreed on a final grade.[11]

Small Changes Can Make a Radical Difference

The comments in the anonymous course evaluation show that students clearly understood the larger purpose of the learning conferences. For instance, in response to the questions, "How did you feel about your grading talk? Was the grading talk a valuable learning moment for you? Why?" one student's response shows initial hesitation that gave way to meaningful reflection about the learning journey: "I think it was. I didn't think it was going to be but I think it was valuable to reflect on my own learning. I really understood what I had learnt and what I should have paid more attention to." Of course, unlearning traditional modes of instruction and evaluation takes time, and one student found the grading conference uncomfortable and preferred for me to set the grade. On the other hand, another student's comment made me realize the significance of the work we did and the changes we implemented: "Yes, it was valuable, because I got a chance to explain myself about my relation to the work I produced, my own expectations of it, and my general experience of the course. I felt like I was given space and an opportunity to be a person in the talk and not merely just a learner or a student." The words "merely just a learner or a student" shocked me. I had a hard time wrapping my head around the possibility that students might think that there is a difference between being a person and being a learner. I am glad that this student felt that they were "given a space and an opportunity" to be a person, but I also began to wonder how our teaching practices have created this disturbing distinction. As our collaborative approach to assessment shows, ungrading in the form of a conversation about learning and teaching is one small but significant step towards a humanizing pedagogy. Ungrading, my students taught me, is about caring deeply for each other—treating each other like fellow intellectuals and human beings.

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[1] I borrow the term "learning conferences" from Marcus Schultz-Begin, "Grade Anarchy in the Philosophy Classroom," in *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, ed. Susan D. Blum (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2020), 173–187.

[2] My pedagogical development project focused on assessment only because that is the area where I felt there were meaningful opportunities for co-creating. In Sweden, several aspects of a course, such as reading lists and overall learning

outcomes, are decided beforehand and have to be approved by the department board. The instructions for the examination, however, are often very broad and open to interpretation. For instance, the syllabus states that in the "Literature & Society" course the examination should take the form of oral and written assignments, leaving ample opportunities for co-creating the various aspects of assessment.

[3] My thinking about and practice of active student participation is inspired by Sanna Barrineau, Alexis Engström, and Ulrike Schnaas, *An Active Student Participation Companion* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2019).

[4] Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 3.

[5] My translation from "Syllabus for Upper Secondary School Teacher Education Programme," Uppsala University, https://www.uu.se/utbildning/utbildningar/selma/utbplan/?pKod=UGY2Y&lasar=23%2F24.

[6] María del Carmen Salazar, "A Humanizing Pedagogy: Reinventing the Principles and Practice of Education as a Journey Toward Liberation," *Review of Research in Education* 37/1 (March 2013): 127.

[7] Siân Bayne et al., *The Manifesto for Teaching Online* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 135.

[8] The students designed and tested a teaching/learning activity during a seminar and received valuable feedback from their peers.

[9] If longer conversations with students are not possible, Susan D. Blum offers an alternative approach. Blum offers several worksheets to guide students' self-reflection prior to 5-minute conversation with the teacher. For more detail, see Blum, "Just One Change (Just Kidding): Ungrading and its Necessary Accompaniments," in *Ungrading*, 65–73. Another approach may be a combination of reflective essays and shorter learning conferences as described by Marcus Schultz-Begin, "Grade Anarchy in the Philosophy Classroom," in *Ungrading*, 173–187.

[10] Matthew M. Johnson, "Annotated by the Author: Why Having Students Annotate Their Own Writing Is My New Favorite Writing Instruction Tool," https://matthewmjohnson.com/2021/02/12/annotated-by-the-author-why-having-students-annotate-their-own-writing-is-my-new-favorite-writing-instruction-tool/.

[11] In Sweden, legally the teachers must set the grades, but learning conferences disrupt traditional teacher-student power relations, offering an alternative evaluation approach that empowers students, acknowledges their agency and cultivates their metacognitive skills. There are a number of ways in which teachers can hand some of "the responsibility of grading over to students." Alternative grading practices include self-assessment, contract grading and peer badging, and student-defined evaluation criteria. For a more detailed description of these practices, see Jesse Stommel, "How to Ungrade," in *Ungrading*, 25–41; Blum, "Just One Change (Just Kidding): Ungrading and its Necessary Accompaniments," in *Ungrading*, 53–73; Cathy Davidson and Christina Katopodis,

"Grades—Ugh!" in *The New College Classroom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 222–244; Cathy N. Davidson and Christina Katopodis, "Contract Grading and Peer Review," in *Ungrading*, 105–122; and Felicia Rose Chavez, *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).