

A Story of Ungrading: Reflections from an Ungraded Classroom

BCcampus FLO Friday

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Acknowledging the land

Shape of the session

- An interactive warm up activity - grab your phones
- Ungrading Basics
- My ungrading story
- Student insights
- Activity - conversation in breakout rooms or quiet thinking time in main room
- Q&A

A warm-up activity

- Go to menti.com
- Enter code: 6406 2484
- Or use this QR code:





**How do
grades make
you feel?**

What is ungrading?

“The word ‘ungrading’ means raising an eyebrow at grades as a systemic practice, distinct from simply ‘not grading.’ The word is a present participle, an ongoing process, not a static set of practices. Ungrading is a systemic critique, a series of conversations ideally drawing students into those conversations with the goal of engaging them as full agents in their own education. For me, there aren’t a discrete set of best practices for ungrading, because different students learn in different ways at different times with different teachers in different disciplines at different institutions. So, the work of teaching, the work of reimagining assessment, is necessarily idiosyncratic.” (p. 6)

Jesse Stommel. 2023. *Undoing the Grade: Why we grade, and how to stop*. Hybrid Pedagogy, Denver, CO.

What is ungrading?

- Ungrading is a critical pedagogical approach that centres students in the learning process.
- It disrupts the status quo and tries to counter the many inequities in higher education.
- It challenges the idea that grades are a valid measure of learning.
- Blum (2020 and 2022) sees *ungrading* as an umbrella term for a variety of approaches and practices:
 - Process letters
 - Portfolios
 - Student self-assessment
 - Peer assessment

Why ungrading?

(from Blum, 2020 and others)

Emphasize intrinsic motivation

Reduce anxiety over grades

Reduce fixation on grades that leads to cheating and other behaviours

Challenge the factory model of education

Avoid ranking and sorting students

**Why did I
adopt
ungrading?**



My teaching context

- **GEOG 433CC: Geography of Selected Regions - Scotland**
 - Upper-level required course
 - 21 students
 - Course explored various topics that were student determined; broad survey course on Geography of Scotland applying geographic concepts
- 4 assessments:
 - Unessay
 - Discussion forum (individual and group components)
 - Weekly activities
 - Video presentation (group project)

My ungrading approach



Each assignment includes a **self-assessment process letter** with guiding questions.



Students proposed a grade for each assignment with rationale and evidence based on a rubric.



Opportunity for students to reflect on the process and product of learning. Engage in discovery of self.




Final course grades assigned in consultation with the student during a final exam consultation.

How did I approach ungrading with students?

- With intention and by establishing trust.
- Shared resources with students to read after I introduced the concept in week 1.
- Conducted an anonymous Q&A session with students in week 2.
- Explained in detail how the grade would be determined.





**What did
the students
think?**

Learning

73% of respondents agree that ungrading enhanced learning in the course.

- “I really like it - I think it takes the focus off the grade and onto the learning. It made me accountable for my work and enhanced the connection between the effort and the grade.”
- *Instructor observation - final grades (A-average) were equivalent to those in previous semesters with grades ranging from a C+ to A+.*

Motivation

64% of respondents agreed that they were motivated to complete assignments even when the instructor was not providing a grade.

- “It does force you to think about your grade & the effort you put into an assignment, rather than doing it & moving on right away.”
- *Instructor observations – Students completed assignments but often left them till the last possible date to submit reducing the usefulness of the feedback provided.*

Anxiety

36% of respondents noted less anxiety but the same % felt more anxious

- “In theory it is great, but in actuality in a system and world that does not operate like this, I felt more anxious about my grades...”
- “...often times students feel grades are set in stone and we do not have a say in them. It can become stressful when a student has put a lot of effort but the teacher is unable to see this because they only see the submitted work...”
- *Instructor observation - Continued conversations around ungrading are key*

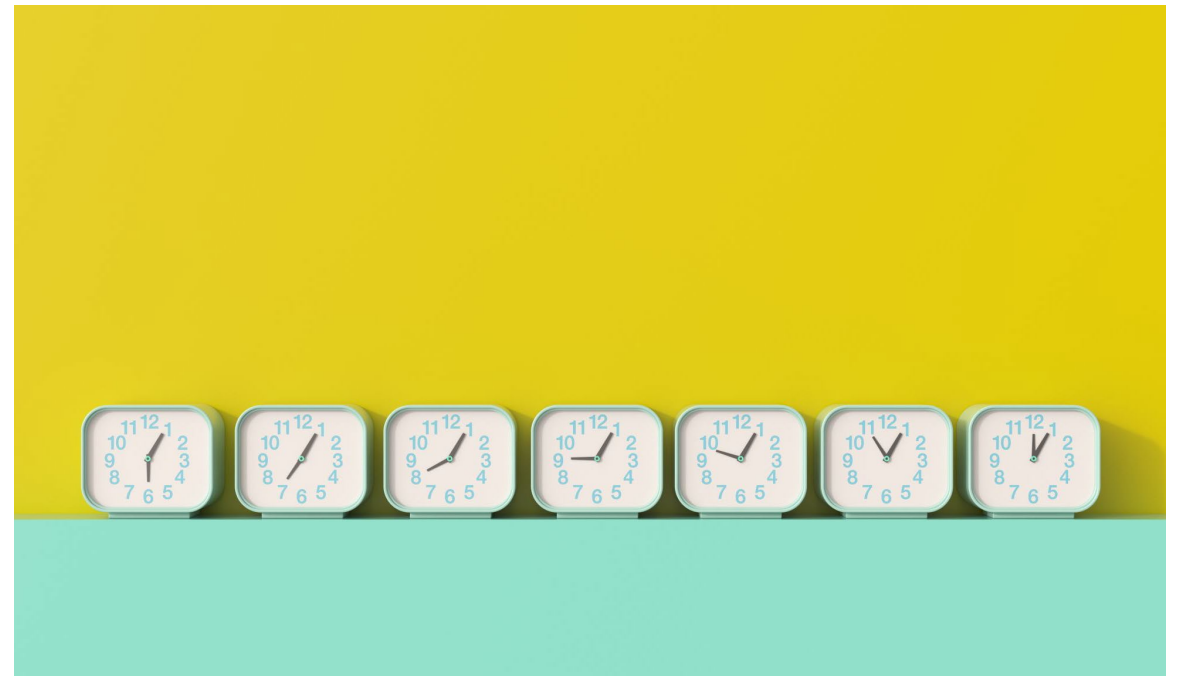
Risk taking

73% of respondents reported strong agreement that ungrading allowed them to try new things.

- “This type of feedback and cooperative learning was mind-blowing and eye opening...the idea of schooling immediately shifted from “What do I need to do to prove I am good enough at this topic” to “How can I showcase my efforts in this topic”. The difference turns learning from a pressured experience into a collaborative, fun and invigorating experience.”
- *Instructor observations - Individual choice in demonstration of learning was impactful.*

What would I do differently next time?

- Continue to talk about ungrading and the self-assessment/feedback process
- Conduct a mid-term check-in
- Reconsider due dates and feedback
- Keep ungrading; but be aware of context





Activity time

- Choose your own adventure:
 - **Option A** – join a breakout room and engage in a conversation on ungrading
 - **Option B** – stay in the main room with your camera off and engage in some quiet personal reflection

Q&A time



Let's stay in touch

- I would love to continue this conversation. You can drop me an email or connect via socials.
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- @clairelhay (X)
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