



RESEARCH ARTICLE

GRADELESS LEARNING: A PROGRESSIVE ALTERNATIVE TO GRADE-CENTRED EDUCATION

YUSUF JOSIAH

Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

ABSTRACT

This literature review examines gradeless learning as an innovative approach that prioritises intrinsic motivation, deep learning, and holistic development over traditional grading practices. While grades have long been used to measure academic achievement, their impact on student well-being, engagement, and learning outcomes has increasingly sparked critical debate. Gradeless learning also challenges conventional assessment practices by emphasising qualitative feedback, self-reflection, and mastery of content. Rooted in theories such as self-determination and self-efficacy, this approach fosters autonomy, competence, and collaboration among students, reducing stress and enhancing intrinsic motivation. The literature review highlights the benefits of gradeless learning, including improved critical thinking, creativity, and self-efficacy, alongside its capacity to reduce anxiety and promote lifelong learning skills. Gradeless practices such as narrative feedback, portfolio assessments, and pass/fail grading empower learners to focus on growth rather than competition. The paper highlights the need for continued exploration of gradeless learning to refine its implementation and address concerns about its long-term effectiveness across diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: Gradeless learning, gradelessness, ungrading, assessment, alternative assessment

Corresponding Author

Yusuf Josiah

E-mail Address: yojosiah@yahoo.com Telephone Number: +2348022222956

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

Grades are a standard part of our educational assessment process and are employed to serve various purposes such as motivating learners (Anderson, 2018; McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020), simplifying accountability (DeLuca & Braund, 2019), measuring the extent of achievement of learning outcomes (Guberman, 2021), ranking students, and as criteria for classification of qualifications and for placement into various programmes (Tannock, 2017). The use of grades is often presumed to be a reliable means of measuring learner achievement (Allen, 2005; Blum, 2020). This notion often equates good grades with a high level of competence, which is not always the case. Grades have been deeply integrated into the educational system, making us feel as though they have always been here since the beginning of anything education (see Schinske & Tanner, 2014).

While grades have long been entrenched in educational systems, their negative impact on student learning, motivation and well-being has prompted the search for alternative approaches. This paper examines gradeless learning as a transformative response to these challenges. It explores the theoretical foundations that support this approach, highlights its benefits for holistic student development, and emphasises the role of qualitative feedback over numerical grades in fostering intrinsic motivation. Although challenges related to implementing gradeless systems are acknowledged, this review focuses primarily on the potential advantages of this approach in promoting deeper learning and student engagement.

Historical Context of Grading

Criticism of grading systems dates back to the early 20th century, when educators like Ferrer (1913) and Dewey (1913) highlighted their demoralising effects on students, fostering fear, rivalry, and a sense of inadequacy. Over time, scholars such as Butler (1987) and Kohn (1993)



expanded these critiques, emphasising how grading dampens intrinsic motivation, stifles creativity, and negatively impacts student well-being.

In recent years, researchers including Blum (2020), Kjærgaard et al. (2024), and McMorran and Ragupathi (2020) have also echoed these concerns, warning of the unintended consequences of grades on student engagement and learning outcomes. Kohn (2011) argued that grades redirect students' focus from deep learning to performance on easier tasks, which conflicts with the goals of 21st-century education centred on developing critical and sustainable skills (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Dede, 2007; Geisinger, 2016). Additionally, grades have been linked to increased student stress, reduced intrinsic motivation, and a preference for surface learning over meaningful engagement with content (Blum, 2020; Chamberlin et al., 2023). Further critiques suggest that grades encourage ego-involvement, with students perceiving grades as judgements of their character rather than their academic performance (Bremser, 2021; Butler, 1987). This dynamic can particularly harm low achiever, whose repeated exposure to poor grades diminishes self-worth and fosters disengagement (Anderson, 2018). Other identified shortcomings include the lack of meaningful feedback provided by grades and their inability to support long-term growth (Blum, 2020).

These widespread concerns have prompted many educators and assessment experts to call for changes in assessment practices. In response, "gradelessness," also known as "ungrading" or "gradeless learning," has emerged as an alternative—advocating for de-emphasising or eliminating traditional grades in favour of approaches that prioritize holistic development, intrinsic motivation, and qualitative feedback (Blum, 2020; Chamberlin et al., 2023; Kjærgaard et al., 2024). As these concerns about the negative effects of grading grow, theories such as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1982) provide a theoretical basis for the potential benefits of gradeless learning. This approach seeks to nurture intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and deep learning, offering a meaningful alternative to traditional grading practices. Indeed, the two cardinal questions that guide the exploration of



gradeless learning's potential as a more effective alternative to conventional grading practices are succinctly presented in the subsection that follow..

Research Questions

This review aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How does gradeless learning differ from traditional grading systems in terms of student outcomes and engagement?
2. What are the key benefits of gradeless learning?

2.0. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF GRADELESS LEARNING

Educational and psychological theories provide the foundation for gradeless learning. Key theories, including Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1982), and the concept of competence (White, 1959), help explain core principles of gradeless learning, such as intrinsic motivation, focus on mastery and understanding, student agency, persistence, and collaboration.

2.1. Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) explores the psychological needs that drive self-motivation and personality development. It emphasises three key needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In a gradeless learning environment, autonomy is promoted by removing the pressure of grades, allowing students to take ownership of their learning. Without the distraction of grades, students can focus on their progress, fostering intrinsic motivation. Gradeless learning supports competence by encouraging students to engage in meaningful learning activities. The absence of traditional grading eliminates the competitive nature of academic performance, promoting collaboration and a sense of community among learners



(Guberman, 2021). The use of rich narrative feedback further supports autonomy and competence, helping students develop a strong belief in their abilities, which in turn enhances their motivation and persistence (Chamberlin et al., 2023; Dosmar & Williams, 2022; Lim, 2024).

By aligning with Self-Determination Theory, gradeless learning creates an environment that nurtures intrinsic motivation, engagement, and well-being, encouraging students to focus on growth rather than external validation through grades. While Self-Determination Theory emphasises the role of autonomy and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation, Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory highlights the importance of students' beliefs in their abilities for overcoming challenges and achieving success.

2.2. Self-Efficacy Theory

Bandura's (1982) Self-Efficacy Theory highlights the role of self-belief in achieving success. It suggests that individuals with higher self-efficacy are more likely to engage in tasks, persevere through challenges, and experience less anxiety. This concept is critical in gradeless learning, where students' belief in their ability to succeed is emphasised over external measures like grades.

Gradeless learning fosters self-efficacy by providing constructive, formative feedback. This feedback helps students recognise their strengths and identify areas for growth, which strengthens their confidence in tackling challenges (Blum, 2020; Chamberlin, 2023). Additionally, the mastery-oriented approach of gradeless learning, which focuses on deep understanding rather than grade performance, further aligns with Self-Efficacy Theory by encouraging students to view challenges as opportunities for growth, rather than threats to their self-esteem. The reduction in anxiety, a key principle of Self-Efficacy Theory, is also evident in gradeless learning environments. By removing multi-level grading, students are less likely to feel



overwhelmed or discouraged, allowing them to approach learning tasks with confidence and determination, ultimately leading to greater engagement and achievement.

3.0. CONCEPTUALIZATION IN GRADELESS LEARNING

3.1. Gradeless Learning: Concept, Perspective and Focus

Although still an evolving concept in higher education, the body of literature on gradeless learning presents the concept as either 'without grading and grades' or 'de-emphasised grades and grading' (Chamberlin et al., 2023; Kjærgaard et al., 2024). Ungrading is an approach to learning assessment that limits the exposure of students to the negative impacts of grades that are associated with the assessment approach, where testing, grading, and grades are highly employed. Gradeless learning, as teaching and learning without grades entirely (Kjærgaard et al., 2024), does not utilise grades. In such a learning environment, students' work is not graded by instructors, and student achievement is not reported using letter grades, but narration or comments. This view of gradelessness is far less popular, as almost all learning institutions worldwide report student achievements in multilevel grades. Very few institutions have embraced or attempted this approach (Blum, 2020).

Gradeless learning as a teaching and learning practice, with 'less grading', uses grades and grading as necessary and only scantily (Chamberlin et al., 2023; Dosmar & Williams, 2022; Stommel, 2020). In such a learning environment, students' work is rarely awarded numerical scores and multilevel (A-F) grading is not used (Chamberlin et al., 2018). Typically, in such a learning environment, the use of multilevel grades is limited to reporting students' achievements in a course or programme (Blum, 2020). At present, this approach appears to be gaining more acceptance, as institutions of higher education continue to examine their assessment practices. The gradeless learning approach challenges the traditional practice of grading, where students' work and their overall achievement in courses are reported using numerical scores or letter grades.



Ungrading aims to make students focus less or completely away from grading to real learning (e.g., Blum, 2020, Kohn, 1999; O'Connor & Lessing, 2017). It seeks to challenge the fallacy of grades (e.g., Gray & Bunte, 2022; Kohn, 2011; Schultz-Bergin, 2020) and eliminate their negative impact on student learning as much as possible. Approaches that replace grading in ungrading—such as rich narrative feedback, pass/fail grading, portfolios of student learning, written reflections, and the like—are not employed to judge learners' worth. Instead, they are used to challenge and encourage learners to reflect deeply on their learning, appreciate the value of learning tasks, and channel their cognitive faculties and emotions toward deep learning (Blum, 2020; Chamberlin et al., 2018; Guberman, 2021). These approaches are intended to help shape and develop learners' creative and critical thinking capacities. In fact, assessment practices in a gradeless learning environment are not intended to be judgmental but positively motivational—fostering genuine, deep learning. Instructors demonstrate a willingness to provide learners with opportunities to revise tasks multiple times, offering constructive feedback to reflect on progress made, milestones achieved, and the skills that still need to be mastered or developed. Students take on opportunities to work on tasks several times to improve their learning and skills. In summary, every assessment activity is aimed at supporting learners' growth in gradeless learning.

Gradeless learning aims to motivate students by emphasising the intrinsic benefits and values derived from the learning process itself. By implementing ungrading practices—such as narrative feedback and reflective writing (e.g., Dosmar & Williams, 2022; Stommel, 2020)—students are encouraged to engage more deeply with their learning tasks and reflect meaningfully on their experiences. This shift in focus allows students to develop intrinsic motivation, as they begin to value the content and the learning process for their own merits (Chamberlin et al., 2018). Additionally, the gradeless approach redefines the teaching and learning dynamic, alleviating the anxiety often associated with fear of failure and the detrimental impact of a single poor grade on students' academic records (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2011; Schinske & Tanner, 2014). Constructive



narrative feedback plays a critical role in this process, guiding learners towards meaningful engagement and helping them appreciate the relevance of their education in relation to their courses, programmes, future careers, and life in general. This supportive environment empowers students to make educational choices based on the perceived value of learning, rather than out of fear. Research indicates that students often weigh the costs of enrolling in courses; for example, they may avoid courses where they estimate a low likelihood of achieving an A grade—especially if they believe those courses significantly impact their cumulative grade (Chamberlin et al., 2023).

In contrast, a gradeless learning environment significantly reduces anxiety related to grades. As a result, students feel more confident enrolling in courses they recognise as valuable for their learning and success. They can approach these subjects with assurance, invest their efforts meaningfully, incorporate feedback into their work, and take pride in their achievements. This newfound confidence encourages them to pursue educational choices and learning activities recommended to them, further enriching their academic experiences.

There is a strong focus on competence rather than good grades in ungrading. Because students would prioritise getting a good grade (Boud & Falchikov, 2007), in a learning environment that emphasises grades, their actions are largely determined by the grade, including what they choose to value or ignore. The fear of poor grades not only influences students' educational choices and learning activities (Chamberlin et al., 2023; Farias et al., 2010), but also how they use their study time. By removing the terror of grades, students can focus their attention on learning what matters and how it matters, making the mastery of content a common focus in gradeless learning. Students spend their time and resources to attain competence, seeking to understand how their knowledge is applied in problem-solving.

Dosmar and Williams (2022) observed that ungrading practices contribute to the development of student agency, self-efficacy, and lifelong learning. By reducing the emphasis on marks, ungrading diminishes students' competitive spirit. Consequently, students often become more



cooperative and engage more in collaborative learning. In addition, interactions between instructors and students tend to increase in gradeless learning settings.

The core of gradeless learning is to move away from the heavy reliance on numeric scores and multilevel grading commonly used by instructors. Instead, it advocates more comprehensive and interactive methods that engage learners in assessment tasks and document their progress and engagement (Tannock, 2007). The approach encourages the use of assessment methods that promote quality learning (O'Connor & Lessing, 2017). This shift highlights the essential connection between assessment and learning (see Gulikers et al., 2004). As a result, greater value is placed on the benefits of learning assessment rather than on its grading function, thereby promoting meaningful and deep learning. Ultimately, this approach reduces the need for the judgmental value of assessments.

Because grading plays a less central role in gradeless learning, the emphasis in assessment shifts from merely auditing student performance (See Wiggins, 1998) to actively supporting students' educational journeys. This shift aims to help students develop intrinsic motivation and succeed by fostering growth. In ungrading, assessment methods are designed to empower students to make educational choices that promote autonomy, nurture deep and meaningful learning, and achieve mastery and competence. Instead of relying on traditional multilevel grades, instructors typically de-emphasise grading in favour of providing qualitative narrative feedback (Chamberlin et al., 2023; Dosmar & Williams, 2022). These assessments are inherently formative, offering a holistic view of students' progress while enriching their overall learning experience.

Building on this, many researchers have reported the use of pass/fail grading in gradeless learning environments (e.g., Chamberlin et al., 2023; McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020; White & Fantone, 2010; Spring et al., 2011). Rather than employing a range of quantitative scores, this approach often utilises a binary system—such as 1 or 0, satisfactory or unsatisfactory—accompanied by detailed narrative feedback. When students receive an "unsatisfactory" remark,



they are encouraged to revise their work using the feedback provided. This process, which allows for multiple revisions, fosters substantial learning and skill development (Freimuth, 1970). Feedback plays a pivotal role in this system, requiring instructors to offer detailed qualitative insights to guide improvement. Research shows that pass/fail grading encourages self-regulated learning (White & Fantone, 2010) and enhances students' psychological well-being (Spring et al., 2011). Pass/fail assessment is widely adopted in nursing programmes (Melrose, 2017) and is considered particularly effective for clinical training (Oermann et al., 2009).

Narrative feedback as an assessment approach is commonly utilised in a gradeless learning environment. In this approach, the instructor may or may not assign a grade to the student's work (Butler, 1988; Chamberlin et al., 2023). However, they are required to provide detailed, constructive, and supportive feedback, highlighting the student's progress, the strengths of their work, areas needing improvement, and possible suggestions for how to proceed moving forward. When narrative feedback is accompanied by grades, its positive impact on the student's experience may be diminished, as the grade can divert attention away from the competence-enhancing benefits of the feedback (Butler, 1988; Chamberlin et al., 2023; Kohn, 1999; Pulfrey et al., 2011).

Portfolio descriptive evaluations of learners' progress (Bremser, 2021), self-assessment and deep reflection (Stommel, 2020; Supiano, 2019), grading (Potts, 2010), and peer assessment contracts have all been used in gradeless learning environments. These methods are employed with little to no emphasis on traditional grading. Research has shown that they contribute significantly to learners' development by fostering deep reflection and metacognition (Kearney, 2013; Rivers, 2001). Portfolio descriptive evaluations, in particular, involve prompting students to reflect deeply on a task, activity, experience, or their learning journey in a thoughtful and meaningful way.

4.0. THE BENEFITS OF GRADELESS LEARNING



Gradeless learning offers several key benefits, some grounded in theory and others supported by empirical research. One of the most notable advantages is the reduction of stress associated with traditional grading systems, which often foster unhealthy competition and reliance on extrinsic motivation (Chamberlin et al., 2023; Dewey, 1903; Guberman, 2021). By eliminating the focus on grades, gradeless learning encourages students to engage in learning for its own sake, fostering intrinsic motivation and a deeper connection with the material (Butler, 1987; Chamberlin et al., 2023; Kohn, 2011).

Critics of traditional grading systems argue that grades hinder the development of essential competencies such as collaboration, critical thinking, and resilience (Dewey, 1903; Tannock, 2017). Gradeless learning creates a less stressful environment where students are encouraged to take academic risks and engage in deeper learning experiences (Chamberlin et al., 2023). Furthermore, it promotes self-regulation, collaboration, and continuous skill development—skills crucial for lifelong learning and career success (White & Fantone, 2010; Spring et al., 2011). As education evolves to meet the demands of an unpredictable future, gradeless learning better prepares students for a world where traditional grading systems may not align with future needs (Tannock, 2017). For example, the 21st-century emphasis on collaborative skills—often stifled in grade-focused learning environments—is better supported by gradeless practices that remove competitive spirits and foster a sense of community (Chamberlin et al., 2023; Guberman, 2021). The removal of multilevel grading systems has also been found to promote student autonomy (Chamberlin et al., 2023). Gradeless learning also supports students in their academic transitions. For instance, McMorran and Ragupathi (2020) found that implementing gradeless learning at the beginning of a student's freshman year helps reduce initial academic pressures, facilitating smoother transitions into university life.

Additionally, studies have demonstrated that gradeless learning reduces stress and anxiety, while improving students' attitudes and behaviours toward learning (Chamberlin et al., 2023; McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020). Despite these benefits, some studies have highlighted potential



challenges. For example, Kjærgaard et al. (2024) found that while gradeless learning increased student motivation, it also led to reduced engagement with deeper learning strategies, raising questions about its long-term effectiveness. Nevertheless, gradeless learning has been reported to foster self-efficacy and student agency, further supporting its potential as an educational alternative (Dosmar & Williams, 2022). In summary, gradeless learning offers numerous benefits, including reduced stress, enhanced intrinsic motivation, and the development of essential skills like collaboration, self-regulation, and resilience. It fosters academic risk-taking, smoother educational transitions, and better preparation for future challenges. While some concerns about its long-term effectiveness remain, its ability to promote self-efficacy, student agency, and a sense of community highlights its potential as a transformative approach to education.

5.0. CONCLUSION

Numerous studies have examined the implementation of gradeless learning across various educational contexts, often reporting positive impacts on student learning and well-being. However, some research presents mixed or even contradictory findings. McMorran et al. (2017) found that while gradeless learning reduced stress associated with traditional grading, it also introduced new anxieties related to the absence of grades. Similarly, McMorran and Ragupathi (2020) raised concerns from both students and faculty, noting that the lack of grades could diminish motivation and encourage poor study habits. Faculty observed negative behaviours, such as increased tardiness, absenteeism, and a decline in overall student engagement and learning attitudes, ultimately compromising the quality of education.

Kjærgaard et al. (2024) further echoed these concerns, finding no significant reduction in stress or increase in well-being among students in a gradeless learning environment, contradicting McMorran and Ragupathi's findings. They pointed out that while some studies suggest gradeless learning improves student outcomes, others report mixed or negative effects. Conversely,



Guberman (2021) emphasised the autonomy that gradeless learning practices provide, which supports personalised learning. This autonomy allows students to integrate their unique personalities into their work and draw on diverse knowledge and experiences.

In a perspective, Guberman further identified meaningful feedback and the freedom to shape their own learning as key contributors to positive educational experiences. The study found that flexible grading criteria motivated students to pursue research based on personal interests, exceed expectations, and enhance their information literacy skills. Importantly, students frequently noted the value of the reflection process, finding it more beneficial than traditional feedback tied to specific assignments. They regarded reflection as essential for cultivating a deeper connection with the course and for assessing their progress.

Reported discrepancies such as these signal the presence of uncertainties and areas that require further exploration. This is particularly crucial as gradeless learning, an evolving educational practice, continues to develop. There is the need to address the question regarding the long-term effectiveness of gradeless learning and its impact on student motivation and learning outcomes (McMorran et al., 2017; McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020). Additionally, many educators remain unfamiliar with gradeless practices (McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020), and there is a significant gap in understanding student learning experiences—especially how perceptions evolve over time and how students adapt to unfamiliar grading structures (Guberman, 2021). Addressing these gaps is crucial for fostering broader acceptance and the successful implementation of gradeless learning across higher education.

Given the evolving nature of gradeless learning, instructors must critically assess and adapt their approaches to effectively meet students' needs. This involves engaging with ongoing research, considering feedback from students and other educators, and continuously refining assessment strategies to provide meaningful learning experiences. The long-term success of gradeless education relies on balancing flexibility with accountability, ensuring it serves both learners and educators in ways that promote deep, sustained engagement with the material.



Competing Interest

The author has declared that no conflicting interest exist in this paper

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