

# Ungrade To Learn

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Ungrading is an umbrella term that refers to a variety of approaches to decenter grades and to center learning. The goal of this paper is to discuss ungrading methods as a way to foster learning. To accomplish this, the paper provides a brief historical overview of grading, offers a critical view of grading practices, and discusses some approaches to ungrading that might be explored by faculty.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

pedagogy; students; teaching faculty

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS

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## INTRODUCTION

In order to foster good instruction and learning, it is important to reflect on and question our basic assumptions and practices. Grading is one of the practices, and there is increased, recent interest among faculty at all levels of education to reflect and question the need for this practice (Blum & Kohn, 2020). This recent attention has led to perhaps more faculty to move away from grading and toward a multitude of approaches that are broadly referred to as *ungrading*. My goal with this paper is to provide a brief historical overview of grading, highlight some of the issues raised with grading, especially its impact on learning and on inclusiveness, and discuss some of the approaches to ungrading that have been developed and adopted by faculty. In my talk, I will also address some of what I have learned using ungrading practices in five distinct undergraduate and graduate courses in two programs.

## BRIEF HISTORY OF GRADING

According to Durm (1993), assigning grades to student work, at least in the U.S., began in the late 18th century, and may have been motivated by a desire to standardize and classify student evaluations. Various systems were first adopted by the Ivy Leagues in the late 19th century. These systems encompassed percentage, point, and letter-based classifications, and were the first to mark students as having passed, failed, or somewhere in between. In 1897, Mount Holyoke appears to be the first college to apply the letter grade scheme that many of us use today. However, this type of scheme did not receive widespread attention until the 1940s and a large proportion of primary, secondary schools, and colleges had not adopted this system until the

1970s or '80s (Schinske & Tanner, 2014).

## **APPARENT PURPOSE OF GRADING**

Although the explicit purpose of grading is to provide feedback to students about their scholastic achievement, there are other systemic reasons that support the status quo. That is, although adopting grading schemes may have been driven by a desire to establish a systematic, reliable method of evaluation, grading standards were also meant to establish a standardized communication system of evaluation between and among colleges and universities. Schinske & Tanner (2014) note that grading may have pedagogical origins and motivations, but it has largely taken on organizational and bureaucratic purposes.

## **CONCERNS WITH GRADING**

Of particular concern with grading, especially with *norm-referenced* grading schemes (i.e., grading on a curve), is that it encourages a belief that grades ought to be normally distributed based on the natural aptitude of students. These grading schemes thus attempt to measure inherent ability rather than learning. However, these assumptions and practices are problematic, and it has long been shown that effective teaching and better learning strategies can result in better learning outcomes for all students, regardless of their natural abilities. In short, it is the responsibility of the instructor to adopt effective, multiple instructional strategies for the learners in a classroom (Bloom, 1968).

Grading schemes also encourage competitive classroom environments and incentivize students to focus on grades over learning. Cooperative-based learning environments, rather than competitive or individualistic-based ones, lead to higher achievement, better retention, increased ability to apply knowledge and to problem solve (Johnson et al., 1985). Therefore, an ungrading approach that provides thorough and qualitative feedback, and explicit, well designed goals (Koehler & Meech, 2022), is more congruent in cooperative environments.

Furthermore, grades may not effectively produce the desired outcome: that is, to foster learning. This is especially true when compared to other types of feedback that emphasize qualitative comments on student work. Butler & Nisan (1986) showed that when students receive grades, they tend to ignore comments, and that students who receive comments alone tend to outperform students who receive grades or students who receive no feedback. These results have been corroborated more recently in other domains (Bullock et al., 2021). Qualitative feedback may also reduce instructional bias, which is believed to cause grading disparity between under represented minorities (URM) and non-URM (Low et al., 2019).

## **UNGRADING APPROACHES**

Ungrading is an umbrella term for multiple approaches to decenter grades and to center learning through qualitative feedback and increased student participation in their own assessments. One problem with ungrading is that instructors are still required to submit grades to their registrars at the end of a term or semester. Working within such systems has meant that

various faculty have devised strategies for providing final grades. For example, Stommel (2020) uses directed and open student self-evaluation methods and process letters that require students to reflect on their work, and then asks students to provide their own final grade based on those reflections and their work. Peer-evaluation and self-evaluation, especially guided through rubrics or predefined questions, can also build meta-cognitive skills and offer tools for self-correction (Schinske & Tanner, 2014). Gibbs (2020) uses an “all-feedback-no-grades” approach. They write that they “call my approach *all-feedback-no-grades*, which is to say that I put no grades on student work; instead, I give my students feedback, lots of feedback” (p. 92). Katopodis & Davidson (2020) start each term with a contract that outlines the work involved to reach a specific grade at the end of the semester. In this scenario, students decide how much work they want to accomplish for the semester to meet the conditions for a specific letter grade.

## CONCLUSION

The primary responsibility of the instructor is to foster student learning. Whether grading or ungrading, it is important to reflect on our practices and whether those practices match our responsibility. In this paper, I have presented several types of ungrading practices that faculty have already adopted. The central argument is that grades may detract from learning. In my own courses, I have adopted the approach used by Gibbs (2020), the *all-feedback-no-grades* approach, but with some differences that are largely dictated by the type of course and by student level. In my experience, this has led to increased interaction and discussions with students.

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