Student Buy-In and "Ungrading" in the Humanities Classroom

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When were your students
most engaged this year?
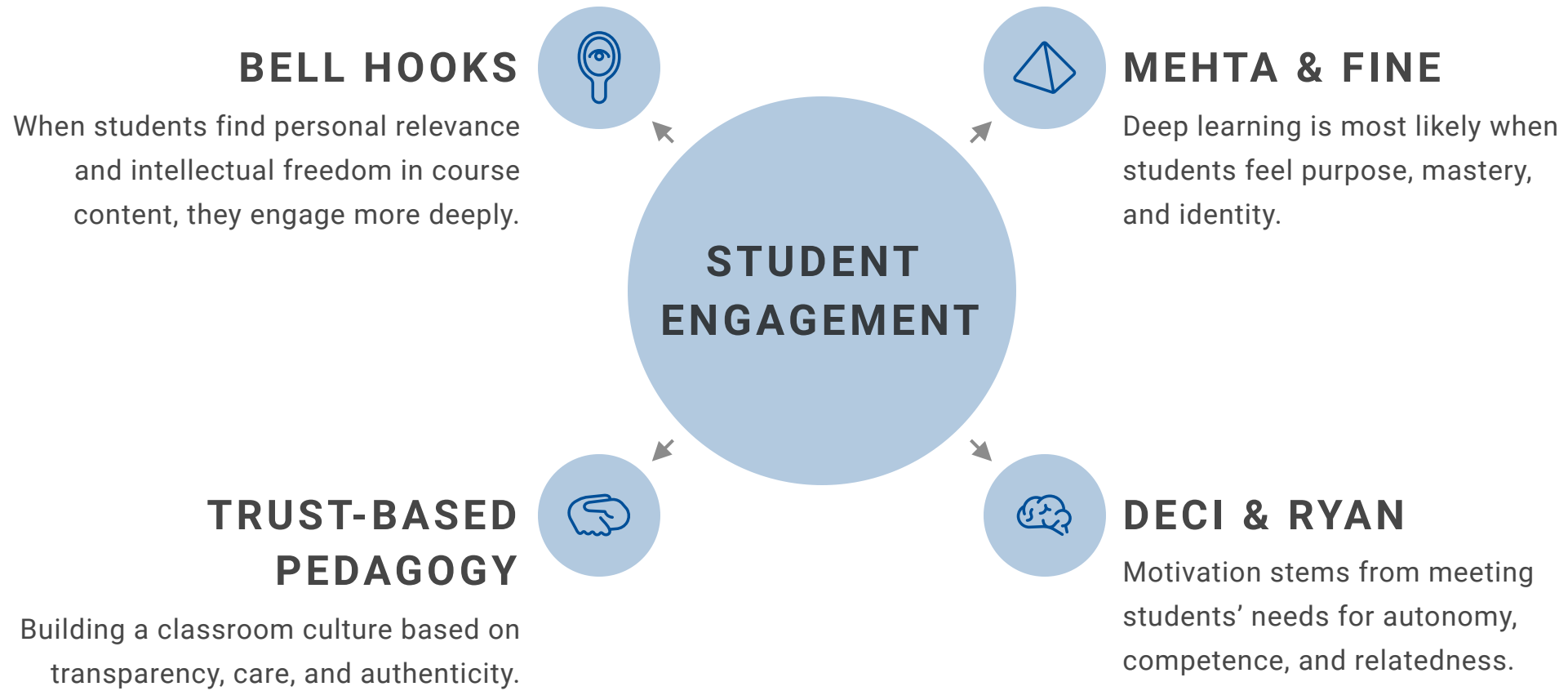
Has AI changed these types of moments?

What do I mean by student "buy-in"?

- **STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

- **INTRINSIC MOTIVATION**

- **EAGERNESS TO GROW AND LEARN**

- **TRUST**

What do the experts say?

BELL HOOKS

When students find personal relevance and intellectual freedom in course content, they engage more deeply.

MEHTA & FINE

Deep learning is most likely when students feel purpose, mastery, and identity.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

TRUST-BASED PEDAGOGY

Building a classroom culture based on transparency, care, and authenticity.

DECI & RYAN

Motivation stems from meeting students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

What's one practice you use (or have seen) that fosters "buy-in"?

"Ungrading"

> Being able to assess how you are doing, rather than solely basing your grade on numerical scores is easily the most important skill I have picked up in this class. It has allowed me to understand the specific areas in which I need to improve, as well as the ways I can tackle said obstacles. By using the grade reflections to organize where a student may see themselves, one can only get a better understanding for their work in the class and how they can perform at a higher level.

> It took a lot of the pressure off in discussions and writings, leaving me better able to focus on content and not just posturing to get an A.

> A very common view on campus is that people with conservative opinions that are seen as controversial will receive bad grades because some teachers fail to see the logic or perspectives behind their points. Since I could focus my grade on self reflection, I didn't feel like I had to hold anything back or worry about what you might think of my views.

> "I found the gradeless approach to teaching to be more helpful than actually assessing based on statistics. To put it simply, this style of teaching emphasized learning over how one necessarily scored, which helped encourage me to be more engaged with my work and truly develop my self-awareness and self-reflection skills. Seeing how my junior year has actually felt less stressful than expected, I believe this class reshaped how I approach academics altogether and has allowed me to be more productive."

How does this connect to student buy-in?

AUTONOMY

Ungrading invites students into co-creating their learning through self-assessment, choice, and reflection. Students feel ownership over their progress, not just compliance with expectations.

TRUST

Removing or deemphasizing grades shifts the classroom dynamic from surveillance to collaboration. Students are more likely to engage when they feel respected and trusted as learners.

GROWTH

Ungrading emphasizes feedback, revision, and reflection over point accumulation. This creates space for intellectual risk-taking and authentic investment in learning.

Models of "Ungrading"

PORTFOLIO-BASED ASSESSMENT

Final evaluations are based on a curated body of student work with reflection on growth.

CONTRACT GRADING

Students agree to complete a certain volume and quality of work to earn a predetermined grade.

FEEDBACK-ONLY

Students receive only qualitative feedback throughout a unit or course—no scores or grades until final evaluation (if at all).

SELF-ASSESSMENT WITH FEEDBACK

Students regularly reflect on their own learning and assign themselves grades (formally or informally), often accompanied by teacher feedback.

THESE PRACTICES DON'T LOWER STANDARDS—THEY RAISE ENGAGEMENT AND CENTER LEARNING.

Reflection Examples

- **ENGAGEMENT REFLECTION**

- **MIDTERM GRADE REFLECTION**

- **FINAL GRADE REFLECTION**

What if you just want to dip your toes?

- **ENGAGEMENT REFLECTIONS**
  Creates constant dialogue with students, helping them to set ungraded goals regarding habits of learning. Also allows for students to be vulnerable in sharing outside factors that may be impact their in-class performance.

- **TRY FEEDBACK-ONLY GRADING FOR ONE ASSESSMENT**
  Consider providing feedback only on a major assessment each term. Students could then revise based on that feedback and then reflect and maybe even self-assess.

- **GRADE A UNIT BASED ON A PORTFOLIO OF LEARNING**
  Instead of grading each individual assignment, have students collect work across a unit or term. At the end, they can submit a curated portfolio with a reflective cover letter and the portfolio could be evaluated on the whole.

Resources

SUSAN D. BLUM (EDITOR), *UNGRADING: WHY RATING STUDENTS UNDERMINES LEARNING (AND WHAT TO DO INSTEAD)*

Blum's Ungrading gathers educators who show that removing grades fosters deeper learning, trust, and student responsibility.

ALFIE KOHN, "THE CASE AGAINST GRADES"

Kohn argues that traditional grading motivation and learning, making the case that replacing grades with authentic feedback and student-centered assessment is essential for fostering genuine intellectual engagement.

JESSE STOMMEL, *UNDOING THE GRADE: WHY WE GRADE, AND HOW TO STOP*

Stommel argues that grading distorts learning and trust, and calls for collaborative, compassionate assessment rooted in student agency.

UNGRADING: UNTANGLING GRADES FROM FEEDBACK

This PDF has a lot of great ideas and options for deemphasizing grades as well as a more robust resource list.

CURATED RESOURCE LIST MAHA BALI & COLLEAGUES

Great opportunities to see how various teachers are implementing various forms and levels of ungrading.

Questions?