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Ungrading Across the Disciplines: Reflections of a Professional Learning Community

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Holdyn G. Morrow is a Psychology major and Veterans Studies minor at Eastern Kentucky University. Her research interests include cognitive neuroscience, post-traumatic stress disorder, and traumatic brain injury. She aspires to someday work with military veterans in addressing "the invisible wounds of war."

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Ungrading Across the Disciplines: Reflections of a Professional Learning Community

Travis L. Martin, Matthew P. Winslow, Michelle A. Grempe, Stacey J. Korson, Gaby Bedetti, Ellen McMahan, David Stumbo, Elaina Short, and Holdyn Morrow

Eastern Kentucky University

A group of interdisciplinary scholars formed a Professional Learning Community (PLC) in the spring 2020 semester. Their topic of consideration was “ungrading,” defined by the group as any pedagogical practice that moves a student’s focus away from grades and toward learning and growth. This essay provides an account of each instructor’s experience as a member of the PLC, highlighting both practical and theoretical considerations for instructors interested in incorporating ungrading in their courses. It also provides perspectives of students who experienced ungraded approaches first-hand.

Introduction

In a 2017 article for *Inside Higher Ed*, Susan D. Blum wrote about an ungraded class, reflecting, “I wanted students to believe that this education is for them, not for me.” She further expanded upon this concept in her book *“I Love Learning; I Hate School”: An Anthropology of College* (2017), the central text used in our PLC. Blum argues that the power dynamics of our current education system are detrimental to learning, and discusses “implications for practice” in ungrading. Many other scholars have also explored this concept. Supiano (2019) refers to grades as “currency,” building upon Blum to further explain how they can impede learning. Kohn (2011), an early pioneer in the field, drew upon largely ignored research from the 1980s and 90s conducted by educational psychologists, showing how grading distracts students from meaningful, intrinsically motivated learning. Stommel (2020) emerged as something of a “star” in the area of ungrading, fighting to make students equal partners in the process of learning.

Using the works of these writers as a foundation, the educator-scholars represented in this paper formed a Professional Learning Community (PLC) to explore the possibilities of using ungrading in their classes. They come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds: Communication, Curriculum & Instruction,

English, Exercise & Sport Science, Psychology, Safety, Security & Emergency Management, and Veterans Studies. “Ungrading” meant different things to different members of the PLC. It emerged on a scale, ranging from emphasizing evaluative feedback and the opportunity to revise and resubmit, to a single ungraded assignment in a graded class, to “gradeless” classrooms where students proposed their own grades. The instructors were, alternately, *actively* using ungraded approaches, *planning* to use ungraded approaches, or *considering* ungrading within the context of their discipline. It was a mix of advocates and skeptics. Each member of the PLC shared a common desire to improve student learning experiences by harnessing the power of intrinsic motivation.

Matthew P. Winslow: Offerings > Commands

Do you believe students benefit from your courses?

Do your students value those benefits?

Do your students believe that they can obtain those benefits?

If you answered ‘yes’ to these questions, why do you need requirements in your courses?

Could you teach your course without any requirements?

These are the questions that I imagine asking colleagues before talking with them about ungrading. Ungrading is not really about deciding to stop putting grades or scores on student work. Rather, ungrading forces instructors and students to interrogate the reasons they are taking a course. By the time students get to higher education they have learned the ‘game of school,’ in which tasks are completed to check off a box, grades are bestowed on them in some mysterious fashion, and failure is a personal disaster. Students take courses because they have to, and courses are burdens to be endured.

Ungrading asks us to consider how we might design our courses so that students will engage with them instead of paying attention to social media, binge watching, or sleeping? Scholarship and personal experience should convince us that required readings, plagiarism software, attendance policies, and formulas for calculating a final grade are not up to this challenge. Psychologists have been telling us about the supremacy of intrinsic motivation for decades. Why then do we almost instinctively rely on requirements and threats to motivate our students?

I now think of my courses as offerings: here is a peek into a world you did not know existed, the ideas and/or skills that you can get from our course, and the best ways I know of for you to get these ideas/skills. My job is to convince students that these ideas or skills are worth their time and effort, and that they really can get them if they do the things I have set up for them. And if they really do want these things, they will do whatever they have to do to get them.

What purpose would a grade or score from me serve in such a course? Feedback, guidance, suggestions, encouragement, these are the coins of this realm. Now we are collaborators, and it's not only possible but likely that I will benefit from the joint effort as much as the students will. Without the fear of failure or evaluation, students take risks. Without rigid guidelines, students are guided by meaningfulness. If you want to change your students for the rest of their lives (and you really should) then you have to shift the power and responsibility in your courses entirely to the students. Final grades are the things I care about the least in my courses. Everything else in my course is so much more important to me, and to my students.

When was the last time anyone used the word meaningful to describe your courses? Ungrading only works if students value what your course offers. If you're tired of students working their way through your courses like they are doing their taxes, try ungrading. And start with those first five questions.

Holdyn Morrow: Ungrading in The Classroom: A Personal Account

I experienced ungrading during my first semester at EKU. In an intro-level Psychology course, my professor, Dr. Matthew Winslow, explained a technique that consisted of lenient due dates, letting students work at their own pace, and developing a grade proposal based on a combination of external factors and grading averages.

The class was given a choice. Unsurprisingly, most thought it lenient—an “easy A.” I was not one of these students. In fact, I opposed the method; “How would students be held accountable? Would our work be a true representation of our abilities?” We voted, ungrading passed, and I got to experience it firsthand.

I was surprised by ungrading. I enjoyed the topics that I selected for myself. I was able to express concerns regarding my personal life and how they impacted my performance. Some students have stressful schedules; I was among these students. I was taking the maximum number of hours allowed by the school while working a fulltime job. Ungrading allows for a college student to work on multiple

aspects of their lives: jobs and studying and personal lives are all parts of natural development.

Ungrading, as I experienced it, should be discussed more. It helps students to excel by allowing them to work and learn at their own pace. Today, I have experienced ungrading in a number of courses. In each case, I felt like personal accountability was reinforced. I put the time in when it was available. I didn't berate myself for my shortcomings. And, with this positive approach to learning, I truly explored my capabilities and developed time-management skills. I hope more professors will consider ungrading as a way to help students thrive in what can be an unforgiving system.

Michelle A. Grempp: Finding Contract Grading

As a long-time teacher and now professor in the field of deaf education, my philosophy of teaching is grounded in a "teaching to mastery" mindset. In other words, it is my responsibility to ensure that learning is happening in a classroom and to take whatever steps are needed to help a student be successful. Guided by this mindset, I have historically attempted to deemphasize grading as much as possible. Rather than taking off lots of points for late work which discourages some students from submitting at all, I accept late submissions, provide constructive feedback, and allow revisions on almost all assignments.

Early on, I discovered that student input and opinions would be important in making any change to the time-honored grading system. I selected my Assessment and Methods for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing course and asked for student input on ways to "ungrade" an ongoing and traditionally high point value assignment. Students were each tasked with completing separate parts of a larger group project each week, with the next step requiring completion of a previous part by a classmate. In the first few weeks of the course it became apparent that not all students were meeting expectations in their weekly contributions so I decided to ask my students whether or not they would like to turn this into an ungraded assignment, to which the response was a resounding, "No!" I was a bit disappointed, but not discouraged. It was about this time that I attended a webinar on ungrading and listened to the perspectives of students and more experienced ungraders in the field and discovered that there might be a middle of the road solution for me—contract grading. Curious to learn more, I sought out the recommended article by Elbow and Danielewicz (2008). As indicated in their introduction, the purpose of a grading contract is to replace the teacher-driven scoring system with one that places students in control. While many versions of

contract grading are possible, the one that I find most appealing outlines specific requirements for earning a grade of B. Higher grades can be earned for extremely high quality work or when feedback is utilized and substantially improved revisions are made. Likewise, a lower grade is earned when requirements for a grade of B are not met.

Armed with this new knowledge, I went back to my students and described this slightly different approach to nongrading. The idea of a minimum level of performance appealed to them, and we worked together as a group to create a rubric which would serve as a sort of contract for the long term assignment in the course. One key thing that emerged was that due dates suddenly took a back seat to the quality of work submitted. In fact, rather than grades being assigned for each step along the way, the students proposed that only the final product should be evaluated. By working cooperatively with my students to establish the grading system, they seemed empowered, not only in determining their own grade, but also in ensuring that other students were being graded fairly as well. As I prepare for a new semester, I intend to implement contract grading in one of my courses. I am optimistic that students will appreciate this new level of control over their grades and that their contributions will result more from intrinsic motivation than from the need to conform to a unilaterally imposed set of requirements.

Stacey J. Korson: Starting Small

As a third year doctoral student, I had my first exposure to ungrading when a professor walked into the classroom and declared, “Everyone has an A. Now let’s focus on learning.” This experience was pivotal in my thinking as an educator for several reasons. First, there was an immediate sense of relief among the doctoral students, it freed us up to be vulnerable, to take risks, and to try new ways of thinking, researching, and communicating. In addition, in my years in the classroom it never failed that I had students who advocated vehemently for minimal points that had been deducted on an assignment, or received emails at the end of the semester requesting to do or redo an assignment in order to raise their final grade. Students (myself included) had become so focused on the grade, that the actual learning outcomes had taken a backseat.

After joining the PLC, I began the transition to ungrading with just one assignment in a junior-level course by having a conversation with my students, as Stommel (2020) suggested. During this conversation I shared with my students about the PLC, the importance of the skills and knowledge they would develop in the course, and my desire that they learn the content to be highly-qualified teachers. The

ungrading approaches I chose to apply, as I started small, were no grades until the “final grade” and choice assignments.

No grades until the “final grade” meant that throughout the semester students received full credit for their submissions if they submitted an attempt at each assignment. On my end, this required me to let go of the control that grading sometimes provides. I had to trust that the students were invested in their preservice teacher education program and would thoughtfully consider the feedback provided on the small assignments. For the students it required that they trust that the feedback I provided would be the same criteria I would use to score their final assignments and that I would allow them to resubmit.

At the end of the semester I asked the students for their thoughts on ungrading. While students commented that they were “skeptical” and “unsure” at the beginning (mostly due to concerns about trust), they found ungrading to be a positive experience. Additionally, students commented on the fact that the ungrading approach allowed them to truly focus on the content. One student wrote, “I focused more on the content and less on whether or not what I was turning in would get me a good grade.” Finally, students appreciated the choice they were given in the assignments, adding that this element enabled them to “feel like we had more control and ownership of our learning.”

Next semester, rather than small steps, I’m taking a giant leap into ungrading with contract grading and grade proposals in all my undergraduate courses. I’m trusting that my students will leap (and learn) with me.

Gaby Bedetti: Contract Grading

Ungrading in my classes over the decades has varied according to the pedagogy of the times. In spring 2020, however, I chose to use a modified ungrading system in my core courses for first-year students. I invited students to choose their level of investment in the course.

For an honors seminar called Comedy as an Artistic Approach, my co-teacher and I adopted contract grading. [Assignments were credited as 100/0](#). In other words, if students made a good faith effort to do them, they received full credit (100) and if not, they received a 0. Hannah Tanner, a student in the course who participated in a Zoom meeting with our PLC, stated that she liked the flexibility in our comedy course because, as she explained, everyone has a different sense of humor. However, she found a drawback in the fact that students were credited the same, regardless of the amount of effort they invested in the course.

For my First-Year Writing Program courses at EKU, I followed the syllabus suggested by the First-Year Writing Committee. According to the sample syllabus, all major assignments are graded according to a [rubric based on level of proficiency](#). However, low-stakes assignments are credited as 100/0. Despite the fact that the low-stakes assignments built up to the four major assignments, many students found it challenging to make a consistent good faith effort on the low-stakes tasks.

I plan to make three tweaks to the above courses. (1) To credit classmates' effort in these student-centered courses, I will have all class members complete a confidential [distribution of effort survey](#) at the end of the semester. I will ask students to consider each classmate's level of contribution to their learning in the course. (2) In the first-year writing course, I will limit low-stakes tasks to two per week. (3) In the first-year writing course, I will drop the lowest three scores on low-stakes tasks.

In short, revisiting ungrading with my PLC colleagues has led to a combination of elements in a student's final grade in the course. In the honors seminar, the final grade will be a function of number of assignments completed (80%) and classmates' appraisal of a student's effort (20%). In the first-year writing course, the final grade will be a function of my evaluation of the student's performance on the four major assignments (80%), the number of low-stakes tasks the student chooses to complete (10%), and the class's appraisal of the student's effort in the course (10%). Ultimately, I respect an individual's decision regarding the amount of time and effort they choose or are able to invest in my course.

Ellen McMahan: Adapting to the World Around Us

The course Adapted Physical Activity has been offered in the Exercise Sport Science department at Eastern Kentucky University to students who are training to become fitness professionals, educators, therapists, and community builders. As we continue to offer programming and fitness experiences to a variety of populations, it has become increasingly clear that not only do participants with other abilities learn and interact differently, so do students who are learning new material. For this reason, and with the distinct intention to awaken intrinsic motivation, the focus of my course was to teach material with a lens of "what would you, the student, like to learn?" and then to apply it in service hours to our community.

Removing the pressure of earning a grade allowed students to select research topics that encouraged more depth, personal creativity, and reflection. Knowing there would be no right or wrong answer, but only feedback, created opportunities for students to become the teacher and truly develop their gifts and talents. Feedback from a few students is included here:

“We have made it this far with having “normal” classes that you show up to, listen, and take an exam. We are reaching the end of our college career and we have been challenged to take matters into our own hands and it is up to us how much we want to be successful. We get out what we put in.”

“The pride we get from participating in discussions and completing assignments in an ungraded course will inspire us to branch out in confidence to pursue knowledge in more strenuous courses.”

“In our class if you complete a small assignment well and receive praise for that, we will be motivated to complete larger more complex assignments. I also feel that by removing grades from our classroom, we stop judging ourselves based on a grade and look more to complete the work in our own personal way.”

My ungraded approach was used with seniors, highlighting those who are ready for leadership positions and giving more timid students an opportunity to showcase their strengths. Partnerships were built as students began to trust the process of learning without fear of a grade.

David Stumbo: Exploring STEM-related Applications

The buzz around *ungrading* was familiar to me from journal headlines and a few pieces on public radio programs. I’d never experienced it directly, but the concept sounded magical; suggesting a little-known secret passage to reach a higher realm of learning. I went into the PLC very open-minded and was exposed to a wealth of information, ideas, and experiences through interactions with my colleagues.

Yet it seemed difficult to find a good fit for ungrading within the parameters of my content area of occupational safety and health (OSH). OSH is an applied technical field with a very broad scope. For my students to go on to be effective professionally post-graduation, a *lot* of basic content must be covered and (hopefully) absorbed. That translates into a substantial time spent on the lower end of Bloom’s taxonomy; learning and recalling factual information, understanding important concepts, and applying what has been learned. I was

not able to immediately identify an application for ungrading amidst the need to evaluate, via quantitative assessments, that my students were learning the key elements of the OSH subject world.

This is not to say that the potential does not exist, nor that I don't wish to further explore applications for ungrading. I had tentative plans to introduce the concept to students within the parameters of a short research project. The basic idea for the exercise would be to allow students to select a topic of interest to them, research it, and prepare a report on their findings. I would then review their reports and provide constructive feedback, focusing on areas they had overlooked or which lacked sufficient depth. After a re-write, I would again review the report and discuss it with each student individually, to ensure that he/she had reached a level that I would consider sufficient. The work would be ungraded, with the thought that those students not motivated intrinsically by the content would be motivated extrinsically, from having to sit down and discuss their report with me. Unfortunately, by this point in the semester, the pandemic hit and classes had to be translated to online delivery. It didn't seem wise to undertake an experiment under the circumstances. However, I do plan to resume, and experiment with ungrading in the upcoming term.

Elaina Short: A Personal Account of Ungrading

I was first introduced to gradeless classrooms when taking Introduction to Veteran Studies at EKU. Honestly, I did not know what Veterans Studies was and did not want to be in the class. So, when my professor explained that the class was "ungraded" I was even more confused. We're taught using grades from the very first day of school, so at first it was difficult for our class to understand the concept of a gradeless classroom. We soon grew to love the idea.

We completed assignments and received written or verbal feedback, providing us with a way to learn what we did right and what we did wrong. A letter grade only tells you if the assignment is good or bad. It does not tell you *how* to make improvements. The letter grade is often final, meaning you don't even get the *opportunity* to improve.

Gradeless classrooms encourage you to go above and beyond when learning. For example, we had "SLO Assignments" based entirely on the student learning outcomes on the syllabus. We were allowed to learn anyway we wanted; we just had to demonstrate what we learned. I joined different Facebook groups for veterans and conducted surveys about their return home experiences. I watched

helmet footage of servicemembers in battle to understand the stressful situations they face. I even ate an MRE, or “Meal, Ready to Eat.”

Graded systems lock students into answering the same questions and coming up with the same answers. A gradeless classroom is uncomfortable at first, but it was very beneficial to me. I looked forward to going to class every week and I loved that I was able to learn any way I wanted.

At the end of the semester we were told to choose the grade we felt we had earned. We had to explain in detail and use evidence from our work showing why we deserved this grade. I know many professors and will hear this and think, “Students will just say they deserve an A and it will devolve into an issue of subjective opinions.” That was not my experience. Most students were honest because the proposal process is honest. I would argue that many students were harder on themselves than any professor would have been, because they cared about their growth.

Travis L. Martin: Grade Proposals and Intrinsic Motivation

Veterans Studies examines the identities, cultures, and experiences of military veterans. Students may pursue a Veterans Studies Minor or University-level Certificate after completing VTS 200 Introduction to Veterans Studies. This course fulfills EKU’s General Education “Diversity” requirement. As such, students come from a variety of majors and backgrounds. Some take the course because they need the “gen ed” credit. Others take it because they are intrinsically motivated to learn about veterans for personal or professional reasons.

My first use of ungrading in the course relied on grade proposal packets administered at midterm and finals week, choice of assignments, and continually teaching the students to recognize the transferable skills they gained from assignments. The grade proposal was inspired by Susan Blum’s work. Students rated their levels of participation in areas directly connected to intrinsic motivation: participation in discussions, percentage of optional readings and viewings completed, and overall engagement with the class. I asked them to consider external factors like global pandemics or lack of resources. Most of the proposal required examples of how they met each of the course’s five student learning outcomes. The evidence of their mastering this content knowledge came from the work they submitted.

Assignments were given a score of one or zero (this is really the only option with our Learning Management System). Students were provided with evaluative

feedback in all cases, but those assigned zeroes were asked to revise and resubmit their work. The only “mandatory” assignment was an oral history recording. So long as they did this and could reasonably justify their grade using evidence from their work, the grade they proposed was the grade they received.

No, the students did not all give themselves A’s. It would have been relatively easy, in retrospect, to “game” the syllabus and only do the oral history project and one or two assignments--just enough to have something to write about in the proposal packet. But it didn’t happen. Most students completed “optional” assignments every week. Again, a good deal of the students took the course as a requirement. But when given the opportunity (and when taught that it *was*, in fact, *an opportunity*) to engage in learning driven by intrinsic motivation, they surprised me again and again. Here is what one anonymous student said in an evaluation of the course:

“I felt very back and forth on the no grades system throughout this semester. But ultimately, I feel like it really forced me to take responsibility for myself and my actions and helped me to prioritize what was important to me. On days where I had other pressing matters, I didn’t have to worry much about getting the work done because it was not technically a grade, and on the other hand I knew I needed to do as much work as possible so I could show myself and you that I deserve the grade that I want. I think it really shows, especially the underclassmen, what the real world is like. For example, I graduate next week, as crazy as that sounds, but my job is not going to grade me.”

I would like to say “I radically engaged in the act of respecting my students.” I gave them the benefit of the doubt. I trusted that they wanted to learn. I ignored the programming that taught me students only want to do the bare minimum. I believed in my students’ abilities and they gave me their trust in return.

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