

Shifting the Focus from Grades to Reflection

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ABSTRACT

What are grades for? In this interactive session, attendees will reflect on this overarching question. We will discuss our evolving practices regarding learning assessment, which can be broadly described as a shift from assigning student grades to encouraging student self-reflection. This session responds to currents across higher education, many of which were redoubled by the coronavirus pandemic: from metacognition in the classroom, to contemplative pedagogy, to “ungrading,” and beyond. Throughout the session, we will share assignments, rubrics, policies, etc., offering attendees concrete takeaways to enrich their own teaching practices.

Background: Educators may be surprised to learn that before the mid-19th century, universities kept no records of grades, though sometimes medals were awarded to outstanding individuals. Grades emerged in the late-19th century largely to coordinate the movement of students between institutions. Around this same time, research on intellectual ability appeared to show that levels of aptitude in a population conformed to a bell curve, and so experts argued that grade distributions should be synchronized likewise.

When attached to an assignment, grades are associated with feedback and may take two forms: *evaluative* (usually a letter or numerical score) and *descriptive* (constructive commentary). As all educators in the ALISE community know first-hand, good descriptive feedback requires concentration and emotional intelligence, and can significantly increase workload on faculty. But research has *not* conclusively shown that either evaluative or descriptive feedback reliably improve student performance on assignments. Students may be uninterested, for example, or find it difficult to act upon.

Over the decades, research has shown that grades tend to diminish students’ interest in whatever they’re learning. Grades create a preference for the easiest possible task, in which students do only what is necessary for a favorable grade and avoid intellectual risks. A grade-oriented environment is also associated with increased levels of cheating, and a fear of failure and student anxiety and distress.

Against this backdrop, educators across all subjects and institutional levels have been experimenting with alternatives to the conventional approach, often broadly put under the umbrella of “ungrading.” The book *Hacking Assessment: 10 Ways to Go Gradeless in a Traditional Grades School* pointed the way, and the recent book *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)* reflects on the realities of doing away

with grades in contexts big and small. Though full ungrading is far from standard as of yet, alternative strategies include: designing “grade-free” or “minimally-graded” assignments; training students in self-assessment; and centering peer feedback. Moreover, many university programs have adopted emergency-response pass/fail systems during the pandemic, offering another possible route for shifting the focus away from traditional grades.

Given how much has changed in recent decades, we invite the ALISE community to question the validity and utility of the traditional grading system for LIS education. LIS programs are meant to prepare students to lead the information profession by constantly making the most ethical and appropriate judgements at personal, institutional, and social levels. Is it reasonable to expect an antiquated model for evaluation to help our students achieve such lofty aims? This panel will bring attendees together in a lively conversation about alternative visions of assessment and their capacity to transform LIS education for a more resilient future.

Agenda: The following is a tentative outline of the session. The agenda may change slightly to accommodate the online nature of the panel.

- Tim Gorichanaz will welcome attendees and introduce the session (2 mins)
- Panelists will briefly introduce themselves (3 mins)
- Tim Gorichanaz will lead the group through an activity to spark reflection and discussion on the essential purposes of grades, following the “[Nine Whys](#)” process designed by Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless (15 mins)
- Jenna Hartel will contextualize the discussion thus far by presenting on the history and development of the grading system in higher education, including emerging alternative possibilities (10 mins)
- Panelists will each give a 5-minute presentation sharing an alternative assessment they have used in their classes, with a focus on concrete materials attendees can adapt in their own teaching; a brief Q&A may follow each presentation (20 mins)
- Denise Agosto will lead the group through an activity to reveal the actions, however small, that all attendees can do immediately to make their grading more meaningful for students, following the “[15% Solutions](#)” process designed by Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless (20 mins)
- Panel-moderated Q&A session with the remaining time (20 mins)

Panelists: Tim Gorichanaz, PhD, is Assistant Teaching Professor at Drexel University. He teaches broadly in the LIS program and other areas at both graduate and undergraduate levels. He has implemented both minimal-grading and grade-free models in all of his classes.

Denise E. Agosto, PhD, is Professor in the College of Computing & Informatics at Drexel University and the Director of the Master’s of Science in Information program. She teaches courses in social aspects of information systems, information literacy, qualitative research methods, and public library services. She is moving away from highly prescriptive assignments to give students increased agency in designing their own coursework and ways of representing their learning.

Jenna Hartel, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto. She embraces contemplative pedagogy in her classrooms and likewise employs alternative approaches to assignments and grading. Dr. Hartel allows students to submit *creative deliverables* such as drawing, poetry, sculpture, and even dance. Dr. Hartel won the 2016 Library Journal/ALISE *Excellence in Teaching Award*.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

pedagogy; standards; students.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

assessment; reflection; metacognition; evaluation; grading.