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# Empowering Your Students' Agency Through Ungrading Practices

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**Key Statement:** Ungrading emphasizes formative feedback over summative judgment, promoting intrinsic motivation and student agency. While implementing ungrading requires effort, the benefit to students and teachers is significant.

**Keywords:** Ungrading, Student Agency, Formative Assessment

## Introduction

Ungrading has become an increasingly appealing alternative to the traditional grading practices of assigned points, percentages, and letter grades. Definitions of *ungrading* can vary—Jesse Stommel (2023) explains that the word ungrading “means raising an eyebrow at grades as a systemic practice, distinct from simply ‘not grading’” (p. 6). Most descriptions of the practice of ungrading focus on using formative feedback rather than summative judgment to guide students along their learning path, and the practice has many advocates in the education field, including Jesse Stommel, Alfie Kohn, and Susan D. Blum.

The use of ungrading practices as alternatives to traditional grading fosters intrinsic motivation, encourages reflection, and enables students to develop a sense of agency for their own learning. Grading for growth is the primary purpose of any assessment so that students learn and improve their knowledge and skills rather than receive a summative score (Talbert, 2023). Kohn (2011) has written that grades cause students to think less deeply, take fewer risks, and lose interest in learning. Ungrading seeks to reverse that process by drawing students into conversations that engage them “as full agents of their own education” (Stommel, 2023, p. 6).



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## Breaking With Grading Tradition

Ungrading methods can range along a wide spectrum, from completely ungraded classes to self- and peer evaluation, portfolios and authentic assessments, minimal grading rubrics, contract and specifications grading, and/or complete/incomplete designations, to name just a few options. Although significant time and effort are needed for instructors to redesign their courses and assignments and provide quality formative feedback, both instructors and students find that the benefits of ungrading practices outweigh the drawbacks. This formative feedback gives students contextual advice for growth and deeper learning (Blum, 2020; Sackstein, 2020). Students feel they can take risks and become more exploratory in their learning since they no longer feel pressured to aim for the exact work needed to pass the course. Motivation becomes intrinsic rather than extrinsic (Blum, 2020).

Intrinsic motivation is bolstered by enabling student agency in the classroom. Choices give students the freedom to “intervene in and influence their learning environments and learning pathways” (Klemenčič, 2017, p. 69). Vaughn (2020, 2021) describes student agency as rooted in three behavioral aspects of engagement: dispositional, motivational, and positional. Dispositional refers to students who act upon their environment in pursuit of their own learning goals, motivational concerns students who display appropriate self-regulatory skills in pursuit of those goals, and positional focuses on how students negotiate and interact in the learning environment to best pursue their learning goals (Vaughn, 2020, 2021; Vaughn et al., 2020). Ungrading and student agency go hand in hand, as Stommel (2020) asserts that “there is no room for student agency to breathe in a system of incessant grading, ranking, and scoring” (p. 27).

## Freedom to Grow

We hope that using ungraded evaluation structures in a classroom might influence students' sense of their own agency for learning, thereby deepening students' engagement, sense of mastery, and autonomy. Grades can create an artificial focal point for students, allowing them to feel as though they are mastering content by filtering out everything except exactly what they need for completing and turning in assignments. The goal of an ungraded learning experience is to shift students' thinking away from using a grade as their goal for a course or a metric for success to thinking critically about what they most need or want from a particular learning experience and how they will achieve that.

When students become agents of their own learning, they play an active role in what and how they learn and tend to show higher levels of intrinsic motivation for learning tasks. Qualitative feedback from students as part of a study we conducted recently has shown the kinds of growth they display to be both insightful and aspirational (Feldstein et al., n.d.). Overall, many students indicate that they found an ungraded class to be an experience that has changed how they conceptualize their learning, even for a single semester. Comments like the following reassure us that our students are indeed capable of developing a meaningful sense of agency for their own learning, even in a relatively short space of time.

“I’ve learned that there is more to achievement than receiving an A. You can receive an A and [still] walk away with little growth.”

“You can take the feedback received, learn from it and make improvements”.

“I was less scared of getting a bad grade and more focused on the content.”

The role of feedback has become central in our courses as we work to decrease the idea that learning is a one-shot opportunity. By allowing multiple submissions and encouraging the use of feedback to refine and deepen content understanding with each attempt, students develop a drive for robust mastery of course goals that supplants the typical pursuit of a particular course grade (usually an A). This shift in perspective moves students from the extrinsic use of grades as a metric of success toward an intrinsic sense of motivation coupled with deeply engaged and authentic learning.

## Liberating Your Grading Practices

Making use of ungrading practices in a classroom does not have to be an all-or-nothing transition. As discussed previously, there are a variety of ideas and techniques that can be used to move in the direction of reduced grading. Start by discussing the idea with your students to find out more about what they think. Does the idea trigger anxiety or dread? Or are they curious and willing to try new things?

Gradually introducing ungrading practices can help alleviate student anxiety and the workload of instructors developing or redesigning their courses. Rather than overhauling whole programs all at once, choose one ungrading practice to introduce into one of your courses. This study chose smaller courses for upper-level undergraduate teacher education students, but ungrading has been successful in courses across disciplines, age groups, levels of education, and sizes. Stommel (2023) has used ungrading in classes of 150 students or more! Choose a course where you want to help students focus on their learning by creating more meaningful assignments with purposeful feedback (Gibbs, 2020). Then, consider collecting some feedback from your students about the experience and using this data to further inform your (un)grading strategies and growth.

With anxious or resistant students, Stommel (2023) points out that it is important to develop trust between instructors and students. He does this by bringing himself “fully into the classroom” and opening up conversations about pedagogy to the students—not just other instructors and administrators (Stommel, 2021). He finds that acknowledging their anxiety, talking students through the assessment process, and sharing the benefits and drawbacks of both traditional grading practices and ungrading practices tends to assuage students' reticence (Stommel, 2023). However, some students may still wish the class followed traditional grading practices. As one student in our study explained: “I know that it [an ungraded classroom] is better because I get feedback this way however, I feel almost hardwired to need some kind of grade ... in order to know how I am actually doing in the class” (Feldstein et al., n.d.). In cases like this, encouraging students to reflect upon their own progress and content mastery can be helpful, and this also reinforces the idea that students can and should be in control of their own engagement with course materials, activities, and expectations.

Asking students to read some of Jesse Stommel's thoughtful blog posts or Alfie Kohn's influential articles can spark a conversation that might help guide next steps. Then, you might start with some ungrading ideas that students may intuitively find more appealing (or less stress-inducing), like specifications grading, peer feedback on selected assignments, or implementing a minimal grading scale. Next, perhaps move toward even less grading by experimenting with reflection papers, self-evaluation, portfolios, or robust use of qualitative feedback, all while reducing reliance on grades, points, and compliance as metrics for content mastery. Finally, encourage students to evaluate their own work, either through reflective writings or assignments or by asking them to produce portfolios of artifacts to support the grade they might give themselves for the end-of-term requirements most educational organizations still rely on.

## Discussion Questions

1. What are some small steps that will reduce reliance on grades for you and your students?
2. As you redesign a particular course to include ungrading exercises/assignments, what constructs within the classroom community would you need to modify to cultivate success with ungrading? How could you make your classroom a safe place to fail, grow, and learn?
3. How might ungrading practices influence the development of critical thinking skills and a deep understanding of subject matter compared with conventional grading practices?

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