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Experimenting with Ungrading

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Recently a colleague shared with me the concept of “ungrading,” written about eloquently in a couple of blog posts by writing instructor Jesse Strommel. You can find Strommel’s posts here and here. (I highly recommend his blog, in general, as well as his @jessifer twitter account.) Strommel asks us to consider why we grade, what we want grading to do, what letter grades really mean, how grades and feedback relate (if they do), and what would happen if we didn’t grade. As the name “ungrading” suggests, this approach can encourage or empower instructors to grade less or even not at all.

Here are some complaints about grading that I’ve heard (from colleagues, students, and the literature) and shared over the years, which make the idea of ungrading appealing to me:

- We get so easily behind on grading
- We don’t grade fast enough for students’ taste
- Grading takes up so much of our time
- Grading feels like a joyless, soul-sucking burden
- Grading has nothing to do with why we became teachers
- The burdens of grading limit us in the kinds of assignments we think we can give, especially in large classes (and especially without TAs)
- Grading often pits students against each other (e.g., when they are graded on a curve)
- Grading is used to gatekeep

- Grading is a measurement, which is subject to error, and can have a huge impact on students
- Grading does not always measure what we intend (e.g., we intend to measure learning, but we instead measure test-taking skills, which students may or may not have acquired from our course)
- Students disagree with and complain about our grades
- Grade grubbing
- The standards or criteria are not always clear, which then makes it difficult to know what grade to assign
- Students don't know how to understand or interpret our grades
- Some students don't seem to care when they get a low grade; others care too much about a slightly-less-than-perfect grade
- The grades, and any accompanying feedback, aren't always reviewed by students
- Grading doesn't necessarily yield improvement from one assignment to the next
- Grades can be arbitrary, discriminatory, and unfair
- Grades become an extrinsic motivation that detracts from the real focus of the course experience—learning

So, Strommel says, "If you're a teacher and you hate grading, stop doing it." What a freeing idea!

Strommel has stopped grading entirely in his classes (though obviously he still has to submit a final grade for each student at the end of the semester, as he, and I bet most of us, are required to do by our institutions). It took him many years to arrive at this point, a journey he describes in his blog, and it's a change I wouldn't recommend anyone making all at once. There are ways, however, that we can dip our toes into the ungrading waters and find out how it goes, both for us and our students. Strommel offers several suggestions in his blog, including self-assessment, portfolios, authentic assessment, and peer assessment.

I am trying the self-assessment route this semester in my Religion and Pop Culture class, with students' attendance and engagement grade. This is a small, upper-level course (enrolling majors and nonmajors) and I always lead it like a seminar, expecting students to learn just as much from each other as they may from me. If they're not there, prepared, and ready to engage, a heck of a lot of learning is just not going to happen. This is why it's always felt important to me to attach some kind of percentage to this part of the course. Yet grading attendance and engagement has also always felt problematic to me, given its reliance on attendance, which, especially during the pandemic, has seemed inflexible and even inhumane. I also hate getting into the business of having to decide what an excused vs. unexcused absence is (e.g., I don't want to be looking at doctor's notes or deciding whether going to your brother's wedding is excusable). Ungrading has the potential to accomplish my goals while alleviating my problems with this part of the course.

Here is how I am describing, excerpted, the expectations for "Attendance and Engagement" this semester on my syllabus (which will be worth 10% of their grade):

Reliable attendance and active engagement will be crucial to our learning community. Students can learn just as much from each other as they can from any professor, in a well-designed class. We will decide together what we expect from one another in terms of attendance and engagement by co-creating a set of “community norms” that will guide our time together; it won’t just mean talking a lot! You will then use these community-created expectations to give yourself an attendance and engagement grade at the end of the semester, justified by a reflection letter you will write to me.

This is an experiment for me. I think it’s really important to question, experiment, reflect, and iterate as teachers (this is the heart of the scholarship of teaching and learning or “SoTL”). So I do have some questions that I will be looking to answer at the end of the semester:

- Will there be any patterned differences in the grades among the students (e.g., will the male students grade themselves higher)? If so, what am I going to do about that, for this class and in the future, if I continue to ungrade?
- Will I need to change any grades, up or down? If so, how many? If so, will this defeat the purpose of ungrading?
- Will attendance be different (worse, I’m assuming) in this class than my others? This may be difficult to tell, because we’re still in the pandemic and a lot of students are out right now for health reasons. I also typically experience absences throughout the semester anyway.
- Will the reflections that students write be any good? (What do I mean by “good” anyway?) Will I need to have taught them how to write good reflections? I’m not planning on devoting class time to doing so—and also not intending to grade (!) the reflections—but this is how they are going to justify their grade, so this may matter to me.
- Instead of alleviating anxiety for students, will ungrading provoke or exacerbate it? (Students often don’t handle such open-ended assignments or responsibilities well.) This is certainly not what they need right now!
- What did I and my students think about this approach? Were there other unintended benefits or drawbacks, for them or for me? How will I decide whether to continue this kind of assessment?

I’m looking forward to finding out how this experiment in ungrading unfolds.

<https://wabash.center/2022/05/experimenting-with-ungrading/>