Adventures in Ungrading: Sharing Strategies and Experiences

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Alternative Assessment

Student Self-Reflection

Ungrading

Traditional grading has been found to perpetuate inequities, distract from actual learning, assume deficit thinking in students, and foster superficial engagement. Ungrading, a form of alternative assessment, prioritizes student self-reflection and metacognition, reduces instructor bias, enhances intrinsic motivation, reduces stress over grades, and encourages intellectual risk-taking. This paper analyzes an ungrading design and explores the impact ungrading had on students in two courses in a M.S. Educational Technology program. Responses to open-ended questions on an end-ofcourse survey (n=33) were analyzed using inductive coding and resulted in primarily positive evidence regarding learner engagement, performance, mental wellness, learning satisfaction, motivation, reflexivity, and collaboration. This paper offers recommendations based on our own ungrading design and collected data compared to current literature on ungrading in higher education. Traditional grading has been found to be counterproductive in a number of ways. It can perpetuate inequities and distract from actual learning (Kalbarczyk, et al, 2023); discourage self-directed learning (Rapchak, et al, 2023); work as counterproductive to a co-learning experience (Rapchak, et al, 2023); incentivize cheating (Overono & Ditta, 2023); assume deficit thinking in students and absolve educators of responsibility for student failures (Crogman, et al., 2023); lead instructors to settle for superficial engagement (Koehler & Meech, 2022); and diminish student interest in what they're learning, reduce the quality of students' thinking, and function as inconsistent, abstract, & subjective measurements (Kohn, 2011). Ungrading shifts the practice of assessing student learning away from standardized grades and grading and prioritizes student self-reflection and metacognition (Stenson, 2022; Overono & Ditta, 2023; Rosenfeld, 2023); reduces instructor bias (Stenson, 2022); enhances intrinsic motivation (Greenberg, et al., 2023; Stenson, 2022); facilitates an inclusive learning environment (Rapchak, et al, 2023); offers equitable assessment opportunities (von Renesse & Wegner, 2023; Kalbarczyk, et al, 2023); reduces stress over grades and encourages intellectual risk-taking (Overono & Ditta, 2023); focuses on understanding over memorization (Stenson, 2022; Rapchak, et al, 2023; von Renesse & Wegner, 2023); focuses on understanding over memorization (Stenson, 2022; Rapchak, et al, 2023; von Renesse & Wegner, 2023); focuses on understanding over memorization (Stenson, 2022; Rapchak, et al, 2023; von Renesse & Wegner, 2023); and encourages personal growth and development (Crogman, et al., 2023).

Blum (2020) offers the clear message "ungrading is not an all-or-nothing or one-size-fits-all approach but must be sensitive to local contexts and institutional requirements" (Ginsberg, 2021, n.p.). Our goal in designing an ungrading system for our courses was for our students to experience an increase in mental wellness, motivation, engagement, effort, performance satisfaction, collaboration skills, communication skills, self- and peer-assessment skills, and the experience of learning for the sake of learning. The purposes of this paper are 1) to describe the details of our implementation of ungrading and 2) analyze our students' experience of our ungrading design.

Literature Review

A search for research literature on ungrading in higher education courses revealed 29 articles published between 2014 and 2024. Methodologies used included personal reflection or opinion essay (14), qualitative (10), mixed methods (3), quantitative (1), and action research/advocacy (1). Disciplines represented among these articles include education/library (6), computer science/information technology (4), physical sciences (4), social sciences other than education (3), English language arts (3), humanities (2), life sciences (2), engineering (1), mathematics (1), and public health (1). Table 1 features the four main themes were most prevalent this set of literature.

Table 1

Four main themes with example findings prevalent in this set of literature

Research Theme	Research Findings
Ungrading reduced the anxiety students normally have due to grades.	Reduced stress (Casler-Failing, 2023) decrease in student anxiety (Theobold, 2023) focus on growth and improvement (Stranford, 2024) Pursuit of personal and professional interest (Turcotte et al., 2023)
Ungrading can trigger new anxiety among students used to grading and, therefore, requires an initial adjustment period.	Uncertainty in self-grading (Bailey & Wilkinson, 2023) Didn't know the rules of the ungrading game (Gorichanaz, 2022) Feeling afraid, overwhelmed by choices or vulnerable; realizing ungrading was more meaningful than most traditionally-graded courses; eventually learning to trust the process (Greenberg et al., 2023) Need extra explanation to alleviate skepticism (Kehlenbach, 2023)

	Initial anxiety without the extrinsic motivation of grades or detailed guidance; wonder if they would be "tricked;" value risk-taking and trying something different or creative (Hall & Meinking, 2022)
Ungrading facilitates intellectual risk-taking.	Safety in being wrong and making mistakes (Gorichanaz, 2022) Flexibility, freedom to pursue interests (Kalbarczyk et al., 2023) Intrinsically motivated to learn (Bailey & Wilkinson, 2023)
Ungrading facilitated motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation and a focus on learning for its own sake.	High internalized motivation, low externalized motivation (Guberman, 2021) Focus on learning and reflecting on learning process (Gorichanaz, 2022) Switch from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation (Hasinoff et al., 2024) Learning for the sake of learning (Hall & Meinking, 2022) Statistically significant increases in three MSLQ subscales (Spurlock, 2023) Enthusiasm for feedback from instructor and peers (Turcotte et al., 2023)

Methodology

The two research questions guiding this study were 1) Does the design for ungrading in our courses align with research findings? and 2) What was the learner experience with ungrading in two courses? To answer the first research question, we used the literature review (Table 1) of current ungrading practices in higher education to analyze the ungrading design we developed in 2021. We selected two different courses taught by two different instructors with no overlap in student enrollment and used an end-of-course survey to collect data on their experiences with ungrading. Advanced Technology Integration (Fall 2022, n=18, Dr. Brown) and Library Research Methods and Instruction (Spring 2024, n=15, Dr. Stansberry) are courses in our MS Educational Technology program. Students, primarily P12 teachers, described their ungrading experience and explained how ungrading improved and/or hindered their learning on an end-of-course survey. Responses were analyzed using inductive coding with NVivo software.

Findings

Explanation of our ungrading design

The greatest hurdle for students in an ungrading class is understanding how to assess their own work (Bailey & Wilkinson, 2023; Gorichanaz, 2022). To scaffold this process, we gave the following instructions on how to evaluate their own process and product:

Consider the questions below in terms of this scale: A=Exceptional; B=Above Average; C=Average; D=Below Average; F=Failure

- Did you design and develop projects that you were (or will be) able to use with an authentic audience?
- Did you set challenging goals for yourself and meet them?
- overall learning and growth as a mindful instructor
- To what extent did you take the opportunity to design and develop projects that truly stretched you beyond your comfort zone?
- Have you accomplished work that prior to the beginning of this class you would not have had the capacity to complete?

Table 2 illustrates additional design elements of our ungrading design, references supporting research from Table 1, and provides an example of data from students' end-of-course reflection.

Table 2

Our ungrading design elements with references supporting the design decision, and examples of students' experience related to each design element

Ungrading Design Element	Example of Students' Experience
Required individual student conferences with the instructor at the beginning and end of course. (Hall & Meinking, 2022, 2022; Kehlenbach, 2023)	"I loved the feedback I received. I felt it was always in a timely manner. I felt heard." "I should have taken better advantage of the office hours and conferenced about my ideas."
Each module begins with instructor presenting multimedia content, resources, and support. (Turcotte et al., 2023)	"I first thought about what I wanted to learn, what I needed to learn to fully understand the topic, and considered how I would teach it to students and colleagues. That learning influenced my products."
Students plan their process to design and develop and authentic product. (Kalbarczyk et al., 2023; Spurlock, 2023)	"I have learned to appreciate the ungrading pedagogy because it focuses more on growth and learning than performance." "I felt like I was doing the work to make myself proud and prove to myself that I can do it and that I understood the information. I felt like I worked a little harder sometimes."
Students post products with reflection and assign themselves a grade for both their process and product. (Stranford, 2024)	"Ungrading was helpful for me because it made me more reflective of and on my own work." "I was able to think about what I needed to do to transform my learning, and not what I assumed the professor wanted."
Students provide peer review/critique for classmates. (Turcotte et al., 2023)	 "Feedback from other students was very helpful and I liked that." "I would like more feedback on the product or maybe a rubric." "I really appreciate all of the feedback to see if I was thinking along the same lines as you."
Students discuss final course grade individually in conference with instructor. Instructor reserves the right to increase a grade but will not decrease it. (Spurlock, 2023; Hasinoff et al., 2024)	"I was hesitant on giving myself an A, but when I look back and see what all I have done, how much I have learned, and yes, I do believe I earned an A for this class." "I would like to say a B-, but my conscience tells me that isn't a true reflection. As much as I hate to say that I earned this grade, I earned it. I think a C is fair." "Ungrading made me REALLY have to think about how much effort I put into my assignments."

Student Perceptions of Ungrading

While most students were overwhelmingly positive about their ungrading learning experience, a few had negative experiences, noting they would "prefer a grading scale," "rubrics to meet the instructor's expectations," or knowing "what the requirements were and as long as I met them I knew what my grade would be." A few others had mixed feelings of "still not [being] used to it," "still taking it all in; it was difficult in the beginning," and "wondering if I were doing 'enough' for a master's level course." Table 3 aligns students' experiences with our goals for ungrading.

Table 3

Evidence of meeting our goals for ungrading

Goals for Ungrading	Example of Students' Experience
Increase in mental wellness	"In graded courses it is hard for me to separate the grades from my worth" "I didn't have a fear of working toward a grade; I could just be creative." "Ungrading took a weight off my shoulders. I could just try/play/reflect on what I did!"
Motivation	"I think having the ungraded course stretched me not only to work on projects that were actually beneficial to me in my current situation but also pushed me to try even harder." "I was not trying to adjust my product for a specific box and instead used the content from the module to create something useful for my own learning and professional needs."
Engagement	"Although we made products for each module, this class is so much about the journey, the learning process." "Allowed all learners to grow, and for some to really stretch themselves."
Effort	"I did lots of work and put lots of effort and time into the products I made. I'm proud of them."
Performance satisfaction	"Ungrading made me keep trying to impress myself!" "I did cool and unique things. I made all my work my own – I owned the projects and process and applied them to my work."
Collaboration and communication skills	"I have learned so much from my peers!" "I really like having time to reflect on my own work and interacting with other students."
Self- and peer-assessment skills	"The ungrading process helps me think about if I am happy with my own work. How I personally think I did on each and every assignment."
Learning for the sake of learning	"I did feel way less pressure to learn and I felt my old love of learning coming back!" "I also am able to take the feedback and improve my product instead of focusing on the grade attached to the product."

Discussion & Conclusions

Preliminary findings from this study conform to themes emerging from recent literature on the practice of ungrading. Ungrading has the potential to lessen students' performance anxiety, leaving them free to set challenging goals for themselves and prioritize learning. Our findings also emphasize the importance of careful planning and scaffolding from the instructor. Ungrading is not a simple shift of the grading task from the instructor to the student. Rather, it is a realignment of the entire process of course design that makes the student an integral part of the evaluation process and offers them the opportunity to engage in reflective learning processes and the freedom to take intellectual risks in a relaxing, fun, and non-pressured environment.

We found ungrading to be extremely effective with authentic learning, project-based courses. We believe design should include guidance on "how to grade" in alignment with specific course goals and objectives, a thorough introduction to ungrading philosophy and the exact process the instructor is following, many opportunities for student/instructor communication, and scaffolding for peer feedback and critiques.

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