UNGRADING
WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO IMPLEMENT IT IN PRACTICE

WHAT IS IT?

Ungrading is an umbrella term for a variety of learning focused evaluation strategies that share an ideology: to reduce the pressure of grades while increasing students' sense of agency in their learning. This ideology aligns with decolonization, equity, diversity and inclusion (DEDI) initiatives in that it works to reduce the power dynamics entrenched in traditional forms of assessment.

Ungrading strategies can be implemented in classes of all sizes and disciplines and have many variations that can be customized to suit the size and level of the course. Completely ungraded classrooms might operate on a pass/fail or credit/no credit basis and allow students to submit work without receiving a numerical or letter grade. Students instead may have the opportunity to self-evaluate, or receive feedback from their peers, and/or their instructor.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

In our current system of grading, evaluation is usually only communicated to the student via a single letter or number grade on their returned assignment. Grades also promote and reinforce a "fixed mindset" in students encouraging them to take fewer risks and choose easier-seeming assignments (Harter, 1978). However, studies show that students demonstrate more improvement in their learning when they receive feedback without a grade compared to just a grade or a grade with feedback (Butler, 1988). With timely and iterative feedback, students can focus less on the pressure of achieving a particular grade and more on their learning over time through the development of metacognitive skills. For these reasons and more, teachers may desire to give up the (seeming) precision of grades for a focus on deeper and more engaged learning in students (Blum, 2020).

HOW CAN INSTRUCTORS IMPLEMENT UNGRADING IN THEIR TEACHING?

For instructors who are interested in implementing ungrading practices in the classroom, consider the following:

1. **Establish course expectations for students via contract grading.** Outline expectations for each grade at the beginning of class, and have students sign a contract for the grade they plan to achieve. Then, if the student meets the contract requirements, they will receive the grade they signed off on. This eliminates unnecessary stress about grades throughout the course and gives more time to focus on learning.

2. **Gradually incorporate a system of minimal grading into your course design.** Try removing grades on a smaller scale by returning assignments without grades for just a few weeks of your course. Similarly, make grades easier to interpret by offering more assignments with fewer gradations such as a pass/fail system. By removing the weight of a numeric grade gives, students are given an opportunity to learn without fear of failure before engaging with higher pressure assignments.

3. **Design assignments with authentic assessment in mind**, and give students grades in a way that aligns with real world applications of their work. For example, instead of accepting many smaller

assignments throughout the year, have students compile their work into a field-specific portfolio that benefits their career and gives you deeper insight into their learning.

4. **Give students opportunities to engage in critical self-assessment.** Ask students to grade their own assignments or overall performance in the course. Additionally, you could ask them for justification of their grading. This gives you a better understanding of their effort, performance, and understanding within the course and allows you to focus on feedback instead of grading. Be clear that you reserve the right to alter grades as the course director but will only do so in consultation with the student.

5. **Provide students with opportunities to explore formative self and peer evaluation.** Make grades more meaningful to students by asking for their feedback on your evaluation tools, such as rubrics, and give students a chance provide self-feedback on their course performance and peer's course performance This also ensures they have a deep understanding of where their grades are coming from.

REFERENCES

Blum, S. (2020). Dr. Susan Blum on "Ungrading": How Rating Students Undermines Learning | HRP. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JJHHCiSgVs

Butler, R. (1988). Enhancing and undermining intrinsic motivation: The effects of task-involving and ego-involving evaluation on interest and performance. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 58(1), 1-14.

Harter, S. (1978). Pleasure Derived from Challenge and the Effects of Receiving Grades on Children's Difficulty Level Choices. *Child Development*, 49, 788-799.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES (Internal)

Anderson, M. (2022). Why I started ungrading and how you can, too!. *Teaching Commons Blog*, https://www.yorku.ca/teachingcommons/2022/12/08/blog-217/

Florentin, V. (2021). Experimenting with Ungrading. *Teaching Commons Blog*, https://www.yorku.ca/teachingcommons/2021/11/12/blog-187/

Florentin, V. (2022) Fifty Shades of Ungrading. *Teaching Commons Blog*, https://www.yorku.ca/teachingcommons/2022/11/17/blog-214/

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES (External)

Explore in 15-30 Minutes

Anderson, M. (2022) Ungrading: when and how I don't grade. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1XBcZiNHu0

Inoue, A. B. (n.d.) Labor-Based Grading Resources. http://asaobinoue.blogspot.com/p/labor-based-grading-contract-resources.html

Stommel, J. (2021). Ungrading: An Introduction. https://www.jessestommel.com/ungrading-an-introduction/

teaching commons
assist
advise
design

Explore in 30-60 minutes

Elbow, P. (1997). Grading Student Writing: Making It Simpler, Fairer, Clearer. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 69, 127-140.

Kilgour, et al. (2020). A plan for the co-construction and collaborative use of rubrics for student learning. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 45(1), 140-153.

Kohn, A. (2011). The Case Against Grades. *Educational Leadership*, https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/case-grades/

Murray, S. (2022). "Beyond Measure: A Nervous Approach to Ungrading." *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjbm58kncxc

Schinske, J. & Tanner, K. (2014). Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently). *CBE - Life Sciences Education*, 13, 159-166.

Explore in 60+ minutes

Blum, S. (2020). *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, West Virginia University Press.

Kohn, A. (1993). *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes*. Houghton Mifflin.

Would you like to learn more?

Contact us at Teaching Commons for additional resources, handouts, applications, courses, workshops, examples, advice, assistance, one-on-one consulting, and everything else related to teaching and learning. We are happy and eager to assist you!

Teaching Commons	Yelin Su	Robert D. Winkler
TC Homepage	BOLD Going Remote	BOLD Institute Open Session

1050 Victor Phillip Dahdaleh (formerly TEL) Building, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3

416.736.2100 ext. 55754

Created by Morgan Anderson, Michael Boni, Valerie Florentin, Tamara Kelly, Gillian Helfield, Carolyn Steele, Andrew Molas, & Robert D. Winkler

teaching commons | assist advise design