UNGRADING: Untangling Grades from Feedback

What is the Intention of 'Ungrading' Courses?

To not engage in any activity that results in placing a formal grade or mark on any piece of student work. There is an increased attention and activity on feedback, checking in and providing meaningful insights to students to help them learn at key times. At the end of the course, student and instructor mutually agree upon a final grade to be submitted to the Registrar's office.

Why Should We Ungrade Courses?

Grading and reporting are NOT essential to the instructional process – according to strong research evidence.

Grades often fail to provide reliable information about student learning (Schinske and Tanner, 2014).

Teachers do not need grades to teach well, and students can learn and do many things quite well – without grades.

Grading is not about enhancing teaching and learning activities (Gusky, 2015).

What is Important to Learning?

Regularly checking on students' learning progress is essential – therefore teachers must provide students with frequent and specific feedback on their learning progress. Feedback must be paired with explicit guidance and direction for students to be connecting with any identified learning difficulties. Checking in with students on their learning is not grading. Remember: Not every piece of student work needs a faculty member's full attention for feedback.

How Do Instructors Regularly Check in On Students' Learning Progress?
Examples of Feedback

If you are going to do away with grading, you still need to give clear criteria and expectations for student learning. You still need to provide students with multiple opportunities for demonstrating their learning – through assignments, activities, projects, presentations, research, portfolios, and other forms of culminating their learning. Providing lots of feedback through a variety of ways is critical for learning.

Feedback = "How did the student do?" + "How can they continue to grow and learn, improve work, enhance skills and knowledge and be successful?"

Refocus your efforts on more feedback (without grades/marks) for students. Include more dialogue with students about why you are not grading to help them see the value in going 'gradeless'.

1. **Grade-free Zones**

   If you are having difficulty going full cold turkey on losing marking and grading, try having the first half of the course without anything graded. Have conversations with your students about what it feels like. Maybe just grade one or two major assignments on your first tries.

2. **Self-assessment**

   Students need to be better self-regulated and metacognitive learners. Incorporate more self-reflection exercises and opportunities for students to write, speak, and demonstrate what they've learned, how they've learned it and what that learning means going forward. Encourage students to develop reflection skills so they are learning how to think about their learning with more depth and breadth.

   Provide them with criteria and details about expectations for an assignment and encourage their self-assessment to be framed around those components. Possibly expect self-assessments on all assignments encouraging them to reflect on what went well, what they are going to do differently next time and what key concepts and learning they uncovered.

3. **Peer Feedback**

   With some training and practice, peers can be valuable providers of feedback.

   Model how this is done and engage students in a conversation of what is valuable feedback versus what is not valuable for the learning process.

   Photo by Mimi Thian on Unsplash

   Set up regular peer feedback sessions around activities and assignments.

4. **Instructor Feedback**

Your feedback can continue to be in the form of rubrics, checklists, comments, and other common forms – you just don't provide a final evaluative grade/mark/judgment. Continue to provide guidance on where the varying levels of importance/weight are in a project or assignment, but you don't need values to rate student work.

Save your fingers in typing and capture feedback with short audio clips. These are time savers but also provide your voice that conveys so much more than written text.

5. **In-Class Consultations**

Plan to touch base with a handful of students each class for 5 minutes while rest of class is working. Prepare students ahead of time with a framework for what they'll bring with them, what they'll demonstrate to you and what kinds of feedback you'll provide.

6. **Process Letters**

Process letters document the learning journey one has taken in a course. They are written by students to describe their learning and work over the semester. Students can include photographs of their work, add voiceovers to a screencast or shoot a short video documenting their learning.

7. **Simplified Scales and Gradations for Assessment**

Create criteria-based checklists or simplified rubrics for students to use when doing assignments and projects. For self, peer and instructor feedback develop simple scales to go along with the criteria. This might be a Yes/NO, 1/2/3, Pass/Fail scale or a Poor, Satisfactory, Good, Exceptional scale. The intent is to have something quick with which students can self-assess and something quick you glance at and provide helpful feedback.

8. **Course Portfolios**

Students build a digital collection of their work over the duration of a course. The course portfolio might be part of a larger program portfolio if you teach in cohort-based programs. A course portfolio might be the only assignment in a course with expectations for sharing a certain number of exemplary pieces of work coupled with self-reflection pieces. The students can present their final portfolios to each other, other audiences and/or you as a way of demonstrating their growth over the course.
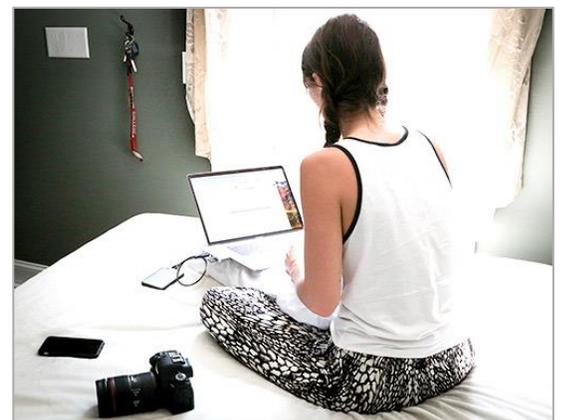
Photo by Dylan Gillis on Unsplash

9. **Other Audiences Provide Feedback**

Maybe you have an assignment that students are doing work for someone other than you/peers. This might be a community project, a presentation to a group of peers from other classes or engagement with experts from the field. Create opportunities for community groups provide feedback to the students. It will be worth so much more than a mark!

10. **Student-Created Feedback Tools**

     Engage students in designing the criteria and expectations for quality in their learning. The act of building a simple or single-point rubric is a demonstration of learning and will have more meaning for students.

11. **Individual Learning Plans**

     Encourage students to look inwards at their areas of strength and areas for further learning and develop their own learning plan for the course. Meet with the students a couple of times throughout the semester to see how they are going. Ask students to provide evidence of their learning journey experiences along with reflective discussion about their learning.

12. **Metacognitive/Self-Regulated Learning Activities**

     Engage students in a variety of activities that has them developing good metacognition. When students have better metacognition – understanding of how they learn - they are better able to self-regulate and learn independently.

     Through this process, they come to rely on their own internal feedback mechanisms and adapt, regulate, and adjust strategies given circumstances.

     Share strategies such as: Dual Coding, Spaced Practice, Retrieval Practice, Elaboration, Interleaving and Concrete Examples (info at: https://learnanywhere.opened.ca/learning-strategies/)

13. **Instructor Meetings**

     Schedule 10-minute student meetings mid-way through the term. In preparation for the meeting, have each consider their performance thus far in the course. Ask them to come with examples about their successes and where they need more work. The student starts the conversation.

     The instructor probes and prompts the student further for a short, but rich discussion. The outcome might be some next steps for the student to take or something the instructor needs to add to the class. This meeting also allows the instructor to share feedback on the student's work and ask questions.

> *"I can't think of a more meaningless, superficial, cynical way to evaluate learning."*
> Cathy N. Davidson
>
> *The work of teaching shouldn't be reduced to the mechanical act of grading or marking. Our talk of grading shouldn't be reduced to our complaining about the continuing necessity of it.*
>
> *If you're a teacher and you hate grading, **stop doing it**.*
>
> J. Stommel, 2018

Assessment: Reconfiguring Focus to More Assessment AS Learning

Traditional Assessment Focus

Reconfigured Assessment Focus
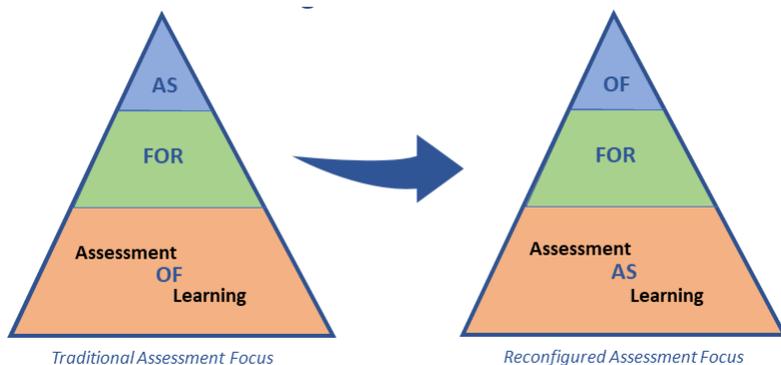
To help with where feedback fits into the scope of all assessment activity, the following chart outlines differences and similarities. The focus for educators should be on 'assessment **AS** learning' to build self-regulated and independent learners who have agency/responsibility for their own learning – rather than depending on grades, marks or values assigned by a teacher.

More Details: Earl, L. Assessment as Learning: Using Classroom Assessment to Maximize Student Learning. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2003

	Assessment OF Learning	Assessment FOR Learning	Assessment AS Learning
Definition	Assessment **OF** learning is the use of a task or an activity to measure, record and report on a student's level of achievement regarding specific learning expectations.	Assessment **FOR** learning is the ongoing assessment that allows a teacher to monitor students on a day-to-day basis and modify their teaching based on what students need to be successful.	Assessment **AS** learning allows students the opportunity to monitor and critically reflect on their learning and make decisions about learning strategies – which ones to use and why use them.
Done By	Teacher	Both Teacher and Student	Student
When Done	At end of a task, unit, module, mid-way through a term/semester etc.	Daily/weekly during the learning experience	Daily during the learning experience
Rationale	These strategies are meant to determine if students have met curriculum outcomes or goals of programs, to provide evidence to parents, educators, students and sometimes outside groups (e.g., employers, other educational institutions).	Teachers use assessment as an investigative tool to uncover preconceptions, gaps, prior knowledge, and the connections students are making or not making. This is about giving students feedback and advice on how to improve their learning.	Teachers assist students in undertaking assessment as learning activities through modelling and teaching them the skills. Assessment provides feedback to peers and to self about how the learning process is going. Assessment as learning helps students take on more responsibility for their own learning.
Goals	To obtain evidence of student learning so that a final grade or mark (or formal statement of student learning) in a course is supported. Assessment of learning becomes public and results in statements about how students are learning – and often contributes to pivotal decisions that may affect students' futures	Teachers make use of clear learning intentions, criteria, rich questioning, and feedback to support learning while it is in process. This type of assessment provides students with timely, specific feedback so they can adjust their learning and teachers can adjust their teaching BEFORE summative assessments. Teachers also use assessment for learning to enhance students' motivation and engagement in learning.	Assessment as learning assists in developing students' metacognitive and self-regulation skills to become lifelong learners. These tasks offer students the chance to set their own personal goals, monitor their own learning, ask questions and advocate for growth opportunities. Assessment as learning encourages greater reflection and focus on the student's journey of growing and learning during a course, program or experience.
Examples	tests, exams, quizzes, assignments, projects	assignment feedback, consultations, communications, informal quizzes/tests	self and peer assessments, self-reflection, questioning – through portfolios, consultations, critiques

How to Submit a Grade in a Gradeless Course?

Submitting a letter grade is a common requirement for post-secondary educators teaching in colleges and universities. It is often unavoidable because the system still relies on grades for calculating GPAs that are tied to grants, scholarships, and admissions to future studies – as well - other courses/instructors are still using grades. Often using a Pass/Fail (Credit/No Credit) designation for a course removes the course from being calculated in the overall GPA and may cause additional complications for students. So, the million-dollar question:

QUESTION: So how do you submit a final grade in a gradeless or ungraded course?

ANSWER: Ask the students to suggest a final grade – with evidence!

Well, it isn't that simple, but it does mean you have to plan for this activity from the start of class. So, create a chart outlining the criteria and demonstrations of learning that form the course (e.g., assignments, projects, quizzes, professional learning components, portfolio pieces etc.). Explain each component and its relative emphasis/importance in terms of learning so students know where to focus more/less.

Look at your course and sketch out a narrative of what the intentions and big ideas are for learning. What do you want students to show you in terms of their progress? In terms of the discipline and the level/year of the course, what should students strive to understand, apply, do, think, reflect upon etc. How would you describe what you look for in actions, behaviours, writing, speaking, language, analysis, evaluation, creativity in terms of student learning at three (or four) progress points - **not yet meeting expectations**, **meeting expectations** and **exceeding expectations**? (or similar language that conveys these intentions). If you can create a description for students at these points of learning for your course, you provide students a clear idea of their learning journey. These descriptions relate to grades for discussion at the end of the course.

Ask the students mid-point in the course to temporarily assign themselves a grade and provide a justification for it. The reflective portion of this activity will be valuable.

At the end of the course, ask the students to assign themselves a grade (A, B, C etc.) and provide justification for that grade. Have the students hand in their self-evaluation and rationale. Discuss with the students in short consultations. Let students know at the beginning of the course you have the right to make any adjustments to course grades – but you may find that students provide fair evaluations of their work.

Next Steps?

1. Learn from the readings, research, and stories in the Ungrading book or the Teach Anywhere website
2. Chat with a colleague about separating grades from feedback. How could you do together?
3. Try unmarking/ungrading just ONE assignment as a first step!

Ask your students to support you on this journey. They may surprise you in how helpful they can be!

…although teachers may be required to submit a final grade, there's no requirement for them to decide unilaterally what that grade will be. Thus, students can be invited to participate in that process either as a negotiation (such that the teacher has the final say) or by simply permitting students to grade themselves. If people find that idea alarming, it's probably because they realize it creates a more democratic classroom, one in which teachers must create a pedagogy and a curriculum that will truly engage students rather than allow teachers to coerce them into doing whatever they're told.

In fact, negative reactions to this proposal ("It's unrealistic!") point up how grades function as a mechanism for controlling students rather than as a necessary or constructive way to report information about their performance. (Kohn, 2011)

Readings, Research and Reflections on Ungrading Movement
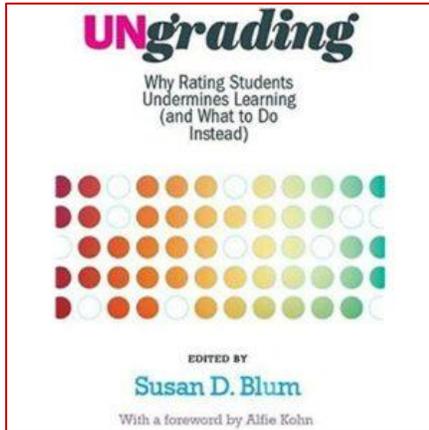
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"Because I put myself outside of the grading loop, I can focus all my efforts on feedback and encouragement -- on teaching, not grading."

~ Laura Gibbs, "(Un)Grading: It Can Be Done in College"

J. Stommel, Why I Don't Grade
https://www.jessestommel.com/why-i-dont-grade/