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"Students Feel More Dignified": Alternative Grading and Self-Assessment in Online Courses

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Abstract
Judging, marking, and ranking students is a common practice in higher education, though the pervasive dependence upon grades to dictate a student's success or failure has come under increased scrutiny. While "ungrading" and alternative grading practices are endorsed by progressive educators, there are few systematic, empirical studies of student responses to nontraditional grading. This study analyzed student reports of the benefits, challenges, and suggested improvements for "ungrading" using peer and self-assessment in two fourth-year undergraduate courses (n=87). Student responses were overwhelmingly positive; notable positive effects of ungrading include increased motivation, decreased stress, and improved connection with peers. Challenges included being too self-critical and needing the guidance of a rubric for a gauge of where students stand in the course. Implications of this study include suggestions for freedom from the restriction, stress, and competition associated with grades, and the potential to move toward a postsecondary experience characterized by authenticity and intrinsic motivation.

Keywords: alternative grading, ungrading, self-assessment, peer-assessment

Introduction

There has been a seemingly unending series of "pivots" to and from online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the first of which occurred in 2020. As classrooms emptied in favour of online delivery, many colleges and universities invited students to achieve their first pandemic-semester grades via a pass-fail scale. This accommodation gave space to students who experienced challenges including their own or loved ones' illness, tech challenges, issues with educators who were unfamiliar with online teaching, and/or struggling to achieve a grade that they would have found acceptable had learning conditions remained stable (Zimmerman, 2020). While some students would have chosen to take a pass instead of a B because a dreaded 80 would stain their GPA, others chose to receive a pass rather than a C because they were able to coast by with little stress or worry added to their challenging day-to-day. As it turns out, this invitation was indicative of a growing movement toward rethinking grades in the context of personal, social, economic, health, or emotional challenges as more courses shifted to online or blended delivery.

Yet the history of marks, grades, report cards, and grade point average calculations have been a mainstay in the academic experience at all levels–even as early as primary school. These highly loaded letters and numbers are powerful in determining a student's future: they more or less dictate entry into postsecondary programs, scholarships, designations such as Dean's or President's List, and even potential professional or employment opportunities. The grading scale exerts so much power that when students receive extensive comments from an instructor alongside a grade, they largely disregard the instructor's comments, and focus almost entirely on the grade (Butler & Nisan, 1986; Butler, 1987, 1988). Intense focus on results of an assignment can even have physiological effects: grades are such a pervasive source of stress that they have been shown to increase students' long- and short-term cortisol levels (Lee et al, 2018). I sought to rethink and disrupt this traditional, restrictive thinking associated with assessment in the postsecondary environment.

Grades ≠ Learning

Grades hold a long and storied history (Durm, 1993). Despite their centuries-long tradition, there are notable problems with the practice of ranking students and assigning a numerical value to their work (Morris, 2021). Putting it bluntly, Kohn (2013) suggests that assigning a grade to learning is akin to bombing for peace.

One of the most significant problems with grading is that students often receive a mark and indicators on a rubric so that they are "informed" of where their work falls in accordance with an instructor's stated expectations. While this practice is a start in communication between the student and instructor, it does not mean that students are able to understand where and what they missed in their learning, or what they did well. Importantly, this static, gridlike information does not provide direction toward how a student can improve (Weaver, 2006).

Grades also risk adherence to conformity. Even though grades can be an incentive to pay close attention to instructions, rubrics, and guidelines, they do not often permit students to be creative or risk trying something new. If a student thinks that they could submit work that is different (but better) than something that the rubric demands, they are often penalized (Schinske & Tanner, 2014).

Further, grading can promote competition rather than collaboration. Oftentimes, students are collectively graded on a curve, whereby "not too many" students can achieve high grades. This practice pits students against students as well as emphasizes the power differential between

students and instructors (Feldman, 2019, 2020; Stommel, 2020, p. 28). Similarly, traditional grading can reinforce legacy grading by means of practices such as "gifting" a grade to a student who is expected to perform at a particular level (Merelman, 1973). While gifting or assuming grades is decidedly out of fashion, such practices have left scars in the traditional education system. One common example is that students often believe that they are "given" a grade rather than "achieving" one.

Now What?

An increasingly large group of instructors are therefore moving toward revising grading schemes, adopting alt-grading, or "ungrading." Kohn's (2020) work suggests that forgoing grades is part of a systemic overhaul in which instructors can and must reconsider curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and control. As an increasing number of courses are now adopted in online environments and are therefore revised to suit the digital environment, instructors have the opportunity to concurrently reconsider grading strategies. The COVID-19 pandemic thrust instructors head-on and quickly into the "rethinking" mode. The need to address illness, tech challenges, and general disruption of "life" spurred many faculty to reconsider the notion that grades are a punishment for not getting something right.

The "ungrading" or "alt-grading" movement invites instructors to consider how students can accurately, creatively, and powerfully demonstrate their mastery of course concepts in ways that suit their personal expression and circumstances. This rethinking also invites cultivation of a fair and equitable space to practice and to submit course related materials. Instructors, too, can benefit from having a more thorough understanding of how students have learned and grown (or not!) under their direction and support.

Methodology

In Winter 2021, I designed two fourth-year classes so that all student assignments were assessed by both myself and at least one peer (a fellow student in the course). There was a total of 87 students between both classes. One course was online all semester, while the other began f2f and shifted online due to pandemic restrictions. For each assignment, peer assessors and I offered extensive feedback on the submission, but no letter or number grades were provided. At the end of the term, students submitted to me a full, summative self-assessment of their collective body of work through the semester. Students responded via a GoogleForm asynchronously at the conclusion of the course.

The university requires that all students receive a letter grade at the end of term, no matter the assessment method throughout term. Thus, all students submitted to me a statement regarding what letter grade they believe they earned for the semester and why. Students were invited to submit any relevant information regarding personal circumstances affecting their performance throughout the semester.

Students were invited to reflect upon and outline the *benefits* and *challenges* of this "ungrading" practice, and were also invited to submit *suggestions for improvement* of this practice. All 87 students across both courses participated in providing this feedback. Responses were coded by myself and a trained colleague, and were discussed until inter-rater reliability reached 100%.

Results

Students reported overwhelming support and appreciation for the alternative grading practices in both courses. Results for each student comments about benefits, challenges, and suggestions for improvement are outlined below.

Benefits

There were 8 coding categories that emerged from the data pertaining to benefits:

- Lower stress levels
- Helpful feedback (n=41)
- Agency (empowerment, trust of professor, responsibility, self-worth)
- Focus on learning (growth mindset, not competing, integrity, authenticity, reflection, quality of work)
- Reframing of grades (grades do not define you)
- Increased Community (peers and prof)
- Intrinsic Motivation
- Accountability/Integrity

Challenges

- Self-criticism/Too hard on myself
- Accuracy of grades (what constitutes an A, B, C, etc.)

Suggestions

- Need more formative assessments through the term
- Rubrics (still helpful, even if vague)

Discussion and Conclusion

The overwhelming tenor of student comments was positive. In particular, students reported appreciation for the opportunity to self-assess and to connect with peers. Given that both classes were concluded online, and that strict "social distancing" measures were in place at this time, students particularly appreciated the opportunity to connect with their colleagues in context of peer assessment. They reported that detailed feedback from the instructor and their peers was meaningful, particularly because it was far more detailed than a simple checkmark on a rubric, and was standalone rather than being qualified by a grade.

Specifically, students appreciated the freedom from the stress and anxiety of grades. Instead of a hyperfocus on what grade they "got," students reported an increase in ownership of their work, because it felt more authentic and honest, for they did not feel constrained by the notion of competition or the boundaries of a rubric. In short, students felt as if they trusted their colleagues and the instructor, which resulted in increased motivation to consider, construct, and submit work that felt more sincere.

Some students reported that ungrading was difficult to get used to at first, because they had become conditioned to expect external judgement. Some felt as if they needed a more concrete "gauge" pertaining to their progress and performance. Similarly, given that there were no rubrics presented throughout the term, students expressed a need for more specific parameters or suggestions so that they had validation that they were "on track" to a successful final grade.

Given that no students in either course had any experience with self-assessment, peer assessment, or ungrading, some expressed that they were fearful that they were too hard on themselves when completing their final self-assessment. "I'm my own worst critic" was a common refrain. Being too hash with their own self-assessment was a challenge for some students.

Suggestions for improvements to the ungrading process include more formative assessments – sometimes with grades, or at least a suggested grade or hypothetical points – so that students have an idea where they may be able to reasonably suggest their grade later in the term. I will certainly teach ungraded classes again, though in subsequent iterations, I will offer rubrics, to which students may or may not wish to adhere. This may help students who are highly critical of themselves to consider their strengths and weaknesses so that they can more confidently consider an appropriate grade for their transcript.

Overall, the alternative grading practices in these courses were highly promising and students expressed overwhelming appreciation and approval of self and peer assessment practices. These changes can lead the charge in addressing the systemic changes needed in higher education such that students feel seen, honoured, and are able to grow with authenticity throughout their postsecondary studies.

Author's Contributions

SL conducted the data collection and analysis for this paper.

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Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was obtained through the Ontario Tech Research Ethics Board on February 5, 2023.

Conflict of Interest

The authors do not declare any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data for this project cannot be made public because it is part of student reflection. Authors may grant access to the data upon reasonable request.

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