

Teaching and Educational Commentary

The Implementation of Non-explicit Grading

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Abstract

Teaching faculty across institutions find themselves entrenched in the same challenges as the pre-COVID-19 world. However, research and anecdotal evidence point to enhanced traditional challenges along with new ones altogether. Finding ways to encourage academic curiosity and the true value of genuine student learning have never been more difficult. To address this challenge, five mid-career faculty evaluated Blum's (2020) book, *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, over a series of four seminars. The book revealed that applications of ungraded teaching methodologies must fit within a formally graded framework. The book also offered positive results along with the challenges of implementation and other outcomes. This teaching commentary is a report of the seminars and provides different suggestions to incorporate the positive aspects of the ungraded classroom into a traditional graded environment.

1 Introduction

In the summer of 2023, five faculty members of the same Agricultural Economics Department met to discuss the book *Ungrading*. The motivation behind the summer seminar was to address student learning outcomes, as all five faculty have large teaching loads and are passionate about economics education. Teaching in an applied economics department at a large research institution has challenges, which have been augmented by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021; Rashid and Yadav 2020). Teaching economics has always been a challenge, and different methodologies to address the challenge have been well-documented (Picault 2019). Adding the unknown outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic provided additional motivation to explore grading methodologies that could help head off issues related to constrained student learning and mental health challenges arising from students equating grades with their self-worth (Godfrey 2022). In summary, our group's motivation was general in nature—to reinvigorate teaching and learning in our department.

The primary learning outcome for all majors in the Agricultural Economics Department is, *To Understand and apply economic and business principles along with analytical methods to practical issues and problems in food, agriculture, business, community vitality, and natural resources*. As an applied program with theoretical/liberal arts underpinnings, the department strives to illustrate the places where theory and practical decisions merge. At the introductory level that may be understanding how actual consumer behavior illustrates the law of demand. Examples get more specific in intermediate courses, for example, the application of the implicit cost of capital (opportunity cost) being explicitly stated on an enterprise budget. The advanced courses in the department assume that theory is fully learned and provides a framework for decision making in industry-specific areas such as risk management.

More than ever, we believe students are focused on processes and point-gathering, instead of learning actual content and critical thinking. We are not alone. Sterlitz et al. (2020) identify that the distance learning required during the pandemic was a detractor from student's critical thinking ability. Barrett-Fox et al. (2020) posit that faculty members' collective desire to find a teaching atmosphere

similar to the pre-pandemic period will not be possible, and that we must find new ways to promote critical thinking. Finally, Lv et al. (2022) provide empirical proof that variations in student learning during the pandemic have produced heterogeneous effects with regards to critical thinking.

Our group and the faculty in our department want our graduates to have the skills necessary to drive welfare-maximizing decisions, not just for themselves, but the entire agricultural complex. The summer seminar started questioning what role grades had in student motivation, specifically with regard to achieving the aforementioned student learning outcome. Prior to the summer seminar/reading group, a buzz among the undergraduate faculty began to reveal that students were not meeting department-wide learning objectives. This was corroborated by the department's formal assessment of capstone courses.

A survey of educational research motivated the faculty to address the interaction between student learning, assessment, grades, motivation, and self-worth. The group zeroed in on grades as the factor to consider, for multiple reasons. As Lin (2009) points out, teaching quality is (obviously) a driver of student learning outcomes, but a conflict of interest arises when midterm grades or perceived grades are the main determinant of whether students give faculty positive performance evaluations; and those evaluations are utilized in faculty evaluations. This conflict of interest increasingly puts faculty in compromised positions.

The group believes that the pandemic has caused grades to become even more important to high school students. So much so, that they may have become the predominant way that students define positive educational self-worth. In the group's opinion, the selection bias that occurs during the transition from high school to college leaves colleges with classrooms full of "A" students. Each faculty member in the group has encountered a sharp uptick in students who define *any* grade lower than an "A" as a failure. In addition, many students focus more on the transactional nature of the educational system. They do exactly what is necessary to get an "A" rather than explore the subject, make mistakes, and learn. Despite this, our group believes that, there is still a direct relationship between grades and learning, given an effective mix of summative and formative assessment.

Even a discussion of standardized testing leads to concern. Although the number of perfect (or near perfect) ACT scores has grown exponentially in the last 20 years, the collegiate performance of these "high achievers" does not seem obvious. Allensworth and Clark (2020) help to explain the apparent paradox; while ACT used to be a better predictor of success, grade point average (GPA) has supplanted ACT (or SAT) as a better indicator of college performance. Bowers (as cited in Allensworth and Clark 2020) assert that GPA is the result of more factors that determine college success than ACT. Our group surmises that individual outcomes, such as ACT score or course grades, have collectively supplanted the overall goal of education; students strive to achieve performance indicators instead of actual learning.¹

This observation about grades leads the group to ask, "Can we adopt 'Ungrading' strategies to develop real learning, change students' mindset about success, and improve overall outcomes?" Ultimately, the group found that many of the strategies discussed in *Ungrading* may not be practical, but the spirit of "ungrading" is worth exploring and implementing on an incremental basis.

2 Background

The university the group works at is a traditional Research I institution in the Midwest. The specific department is fortunate to have multiple faculty members with large teaching appointments. These appointments are not viewed as secondary, reflecting the seriousness the department places on educational outcomes at the undergraduate and graduate levels. All faculty in the seminar have undergraduate appointments, teach multiple courses, and are committed to student success. The department offers three majors (Agricultural Economics, Agribusiness, and Natural Resources and

¹ For brevity, we have excluded any conversation about the shift from liberal arts education to applied education, which is certainly useful and/or pertinent to this commentary.

Environmental Economics), as well as multiple concentrations. Most of the students in the department pursue careers in farming, ranching, agribusiness, or positions within the food complex. Traditionally, the culture of the overarching college dictates the majority of students seek an applied educational experience.

The department has little/no grading criteria, especially once a course has been established. In the spirit of academic freedom, it is up to the instructor of record to devise grading criteria. Campus-wide, the traditional 90/80/70/60 grading scale (with pluses and minuses) informally prevails. The campus follows a final exam schedule whereby instructors are given a two-hour time slot to give a final assessment. Also in the spirit of academic freedom, there is little intervention between administrators and instructors. In general, the university, college, and department are very traditional. There is little difference between the evaluation methodologies that currently prevail and those that the faculty encountered as students 20–25 years ago. Although there is strong evidence of flexibility and freedom in the classroom, the pragmatic reality of the university is that grades will be given in a traditional format in a timely manner.

The group discussed the evolution of grading criteria in their own classes over the course of the past decade. It was almost unanimous that an emphasis on participatory grading, second chances, and a de-emphasis on large exams was necessary to maintain enrollment competitiveness within the college and university. Still, with a heightened amount of leniency, grade distributions have not substantially changed, nor has the level of student concern with regard to grades.

Grades are a simple topic that have many layers of complexity in practice. Lipnevich et al. (2020) tackle this topic and find a wide variety in practices between colleges, universities, and different academic disciplines. Even among our faculty group, variation occurs that is the result of class size. The issues Lipnevich et al. (2020) attempt to explain are largely related to grade inflation and grade validity in U.S. institutes of higher education. Lipnevich et al. (2020) identify three grading criteria in the syllabi across their sample: process, progress, and product. The authors note that all three grading criteria can effectively evaluate learning, but that the emphasis on one over the other two is discipline-specific.

Our group's focus is on learning outcomes only. Instead of evaluating best practices from a standpoint of the university or department, our goal is to explore how grades can be de-emphasized, eliminated in part, or reframed to motivate learning.

To this end, all faculty (not just those with teaching appointments) were invited to attend a summer series (seminars) to discuss the contents of the book *Ungrading*, and how to reflect on the impact of traditional grading methodologies within our classes and how we could change to positively impact learning.

3 Seminar Notes

The faculty included in the review met four times throughout the summer of 2023. The contents of *Ungrading* were divided and discussed over the meetings. The meetings were structured in the same manner as in the book. The first meeting discussed the underlying theory of ungrading, the second meeting covered implementation of the ungrading strategies, the third meeting discussed the authors' reflections, and the fourth meeting concluded with the group's plans for the following term. By summer's end, the following two themes emerged.

1. Student expectations have changed over time. Despite having diverse backgrounds, teaching styles, and areas of expertise, group members agree that student concerns over satisfactory grades have increased over the past ten years. Through various evidence (student emails for example), the group noted that students are having an increasingly difficult time dealing with marks (80–90 percent, specifically) that instructors would often associate with success. The

group also hypothesized that an increased use of participatory grading schemes contributes to anxiety around traditional summative assessment practices utilized in our courses.

2. True “ungrading” is not possible in the traditional educational system of a large Research I institution. Throughout the book, various authors presented alternative formats to traditional grading. The consensus of faculty was that many of the strategies would only work in smaller classes. Many of the alternative grading formats in *Ungrading* involved rounds of student and peer evaluation that were time intense in both preparation and execution. These strategies can promote students to take ownership of their educational outcomes, which the faculty agreed were positive outcomes. Still, the group surmised some level of subjective-formal assessment must occur if only to ensure the students did not feel unmoored in a grade-less class. Thus, each group member concluded that a goal would be to employ modified versions of the grading schemes and assignments presented throughout the book.

When the seminar ended, each of the participants was invigorated to face the challenge of teaching in the fall. The group’s heightened excitement regarding teaching led to concluding the seminar with informal presentations of ungrading-inspired changes for the upcoming semesters. The next section outlines individual action plans for the fall semester.

4 Classroom Policy Changes

The three faculty members scheduled to teach in the fall were inspired to utilize the seminar outcomes to make immediate changes in the classroom. Two instructors made informal changes to already-established learning activities, and a third made larger changes that de-emphasized summative grading. All three felt the changes they made were part of a positive fall classroom experience.

One of the most specific insights presented at the end of our time together was that students did not read feedback if it followed a grade. One faculty member who only teaches upper-level courses made a change to address this issue. In the past, this faculty member gave students the opportunity to resubmit work, giving both a grade and feedback. For the fall, early drafts and submissions would only be given feedback, no grade. Without a grade to motivate revisions, the students were motivated to make corrections related to learning outcomes, not to simply improve their grade.

In a similar vein, another faculty member was able to look back at previously used “ungrading” activities and see how valuable they were. This inspired the faculty member to increase the use of these activities. A specific activity utilized a cash flow analysis that included both a quantitative component (calculating cash flow) and a qualitative component (an essay question regarding importance of the sources and uses of cash). Typically, students had done well on the quantitative portion only. To rectify this, the essay question could be resubmitted following initial feedback sans grade. Anecdotally, this strategy has been positive, resulting in vigorous classroom discussion on the importance of cash management in agribusiness.

The third instructor of the group implementing changes made broader policy revisions, some of which were geared toward a more empathetic course design for the reasons outlined in Saucier et al. (2022). Attendance and group work was encouraged through the use of daily quizzes, which accounted for 70 percent of the course grade. Students could attempt the quizzes once on their own and once in groups. At any point during the quiz, students could ask for help (from other groups or the instructor). By design, the majority of the class scored more than 90 percent on these activities, and over a quarter of the class received full (100 percent) credit. This grading scheme minimized the impact of the two traditional exams, whereby students often received much lower scores. Student responses to year-end course surveys indicated this was a positive change. The majority of students felt the exams gave them

useful feedback, but their overall grade was more indicative of their performance and mastery of the course.

While the student responses to these changes did provide positive feedback, the third instructor noted the obvious tradeoff of including more non-graded participatory activities. This instructor felt a significant group of students utilized the grading scheme to meet a goal grade and actually discouraged critical thinking; in the instructor's words, "they had a B in the bag." Clearly, there is no policy that does not have some sort of tradeoff.

The most informal changes discussed by the group was the realization that students needed to be reminded about the purpose of college on a daily basis—For example, informing students that daily activities in specific classes lead to overall learning in each course, and that the composition of learning in courses lead to a degree. The degree, we believe, has little value if it is not the culmination of 120 credit hours of learning. Our pragmatic classroom changes feel productive. However, they are not a panacea and may create additional challenges.

5 Institutional Challenges

As noted previously, teaching without grades is not practical, especially at large institutions with a rigid expectation of submitting traditional grades. One instructor in the group who teaches large classes noted the sheer number of student questions, concerns, and complaints in a highly structured course; the ambiguity that would result from eliminating grades or adding layers of grading and subjectivity could be an insurmountable hurdle.

The group's university, like many others, requires grades. Instructors have several points throughout the semester whereby grades must be entered. Athletes, graduating seniors, and other special groups have additional requirements. Even if instructors could work around the grading guidelines, the highly grade-centric culture of the university would provide a constant source of resistance.

The other challenge the group noted is the validity of grades and the use of assigned grades by other entities. As Allen (2005) points out, the grade assigned informs later entities about the student's ability to perform. If ungrading activities result in rewarding students for attendance, attitude, helpfulness, or just their classroom demeanor, we will have failed our responsibility to inform future entities.

6 Conclusion

Without exception, the group felt the activity was a worthwhile endeavor. Prior to any formal engagement on the matter, each group member already took their teaching role seriously. The seminar provided an explicit setting for faculty who teach in sequence to address a common problem and work together toward solutions. While the group was in agreement that ungrading activities are a useful pedagogy to consider and/or implement, students crave grades. With that desire in mind, the group has decided to utilize grading in a way that is more informative to students. The challenge will continue to be convincing students that C to A- grades are not failures, but instead reflective of student outcomes. Collectively, the group believes the spirit of ungrading will contribute to meeting this challenge.

Given that participation in the group was voluntary, there was clear selection bias. While the group participants were professionally familiar with each other, the experience was a motivator for future collaboration. This unintended consequence of the summer series offers immense promise. Group members have since engaged in voluntary peer review and have been discussing empathetic course management (see Saucier et al. 2022 for an excellent discussion on the topic). Initially, the group viewed the aftermath of COVID-19 teaching and learning from the student perspective only. Ironically, the group discovered that instructors had to learn how to re-engage as well and are excited about our new group dynamic.

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