Ungrading
by Emily O. Gravett

One of the topics suggested in last year's Teaching Toolbox assessment survey (thank you again to those of you who filled it out!) was the increasingly popular practice of "ungrading." We've offered some CFI programs in the past on this topic, based primarily on blog posts by University of Denver faculty member Jesse Stommel, like "Ungrading: An Introduction," "How to Ungrade," and "Ungrading: an FAQ," as well as in his new book, which compiles many of these posts. (There are also other books available now.) But a Toolbox never hurts too!

Ungrading is an ongoing process, a diverse set of practices, a philosophy, even a point of resistance. While the term has "stubbornly resisted definition" and may even be a misnomer, and while it has been operationalized in lots of different ways (with at least one educator even claiming everyone is doing it wrong!), the basic gist is to de-emphasize, or even eliminate entirely, conventional grades and grading practices, and to focus more on learning, feedback, reflection, growth, and intrinsic motivation. Basically, Stommel's position on ungrading boils down to: "if you're a teacher and you hate grading, stop doing it."

Of course, Stommel understands that most of us have to submit student grades at the end of the semester to our institutions. But, he writes, "I would argue teachers grade in many more situations than grading is useful and/or actually required by institutions." He wonders:

- Who is assessment for? How does this question force us to rethink how institutions structure their systems for evaluation?
- What's the difference between grading and feedback? To what extent should teachers be readers of student work (as opposed to evaluators)?
- Why do we grade? How does it feel to be graded? What do we want grading to do (or not do) in our classes (for students or teachers)?
- What would happen if we didn't grade? What would be the benefits? What issues would this raise for students and/or teachers?

While "there's no right way to ungrade," there are some commonly used approaches, such as "grade-free zones," self-assessment, contract grading, portfolios, and peer assessment, each of which Stommel details in his blog posts. I myself have been inspired to experiment with ungrading, specifically around students' "participation grade." I decided to try out the self-assessment route.

I have a firm belief that students should be the ones doing most of the work in my courses, not me. I also believe in treating students as the adults they are (they're not "kids," as much as we talk about them this way) and helping them to understand their role and responsibility in their own education. It's not something happening TO them; it's something they are doing

for themselves. So it made sense to me, philosophically, to shift some of the responsibility of grading onto the students. I hoped it would reduce or even eliminate grade grubbing. And I thought it might free up some of my time.

As background, in my small courses, students are expected to come prepared to class every day, having completed the homework, and be ready/willing to engage—with the material, with me, with their peers. Nowadays, I call this portion of their course grade "Attendance and Engagement," not "participation," because "participation" implies something more narrow than what I'm aiming for. There are lots of ways to participate; they don't all involve answering my questions, Q&A-style, out loud in front of the whole group. Students can complete quick-writes, respond to anonymous polls, share what they think with a partner or small group, contribute to a Google doc, take notes on our discussion, do the extra reading I assign in class, read a quotation out loud from the projector, or ask a question. I want to think expansively (a principle of [Universal Design for Learning](#)) about the various ways students can demonstrate their preparation and presence; "engagement," as a term, captures this better for me.

So, a few semesters ago, I decided to start having students give themselves their own "Attendance and Engagement" grade, as a form of "ungrading." Crucially, I have always [co-created with students community norms](#) and criteria for attendance and engagement. It is an activity we do in-class early on in the semester and revisit over time. So there are standards for behavior that are known, early on, and that we've all decided on together (e.g., show up on time, bring the homework, use people's names, "LOUD BAGS OF CHIPS BANNED"—these sorts of things). Now, instead of me "giving" them a grade for this part of the course, they have to reflect ([an important academic, and life, skill](#)) and then justify the grade they think they have earned, based on these shared standards.

To explain this part of their course grade, I write in the syllabus and on Canvas (excerpted):

> You will then use these community-created expectations to give yourself an attendance and engagement grade at the end of the semester, justified by a reflection letter you write. (Of course, I reserve the right to adjust this grade if it is wildly out of whack from my records/observations, but this is rare.)

The first two semesters I did the "Attendance and Engagement" grade this way, it worked like a charm. Students were honest about how they had done in the class. Some of them gave themselves C's. Those grades were deserved. In just a few cases, I adjusted grades upward because students (women, mostly) were underselling themselves. (Stommel has noticed this gendered trend too.) I felt inspired and started to consider other ways to hand off the work of "grading" to the actual learners in my classroom.

So how did it go last fall? Readers, it was a disaster. I had students who had missed WEEKS of class arguing that they deserved A's. I had students pleading with me for leniency, to take other assignments into consideration when "giving" them their grades (me "giving" them a grade is the exact opposite of how this assignment is supposed to function!). I had to write comments in Canvas that said things like:

> I appreciate your desire to advocate for yourself, but a B, or even C, would be an inappropriate and unfair grade for your "Attendance and Engagement" in this class. See our list of expectations here [link to community norms]. All of these norms are predicated on actually being in class reliably and engaging with the community during class time (and, if unable to attend, communicating about it). You missed, according to my records, # weeks of this course…. This isn't passing performance….

These were students who I had reached out to. These were students who knew their attendance and engagement was, and would be, an issue. I had sent many, many emails, making direct reference to the standards we had set together and to the effects that their performance would need to have on the grade they gave themselves at the end. These emails weren't framed, primarily, in punitive or shaming ways—though I certainly recognize they could have been received as such. Rather, I tried to express concern, to offer help and support, and to remind students that they and the rest of us were missing out when they didn't attend and contribute to our communal learning environment.

Despite this disaster, I am trying it again this semester, this time in my upper-level Religion and Disability class. Teaching is an experiment and usually I can't try something once or even a few times and conclusively determine if it's a success or a flop. I think ungrading is a good idea. But even good ideas don't always yield impressive results. Even good ideas aren't foolproof, every time, in every context. Sometimes our teaching strategies work great, sometimes they don't. We can try and reflect and try again. We shall see what happens next with my great ungrading experiment….

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To offer feedback about this Toolbox or any others, please contact Emily Gravett (graveteo@jmu.edu). We always appreciate a conversation with context for feedback. For additional information about the CFI's Teaching Toolboxes, including PDFs of past emails, please visit our webpage.