

Ungrading as an Alternative Assessment Method in Higher Education: A Comprehensive Review and Analysis

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Grades or no grades? Traditional assessment methods, predominantly reliant on letter or number grades, have faced criticism for their impact on teaching and learning (Kohn, 2013). Some scholars have argued that rating and ranking students and their efforts obstructs genuine learning experiences (Kohn, 2013). Glasser (1986) also posited that grades do not reflect real-world expectations and that schools only settle for less by focusing on grades to assess student learning. There are also concerns that grades only communicate students' achievements but do not authentically measure what they can do (Kohn & Blum 2020, p.28). Nilson (2015) noted that student anxiety and depression have many sources, but “academics” is the first place among all of them. This stress he argues, gives rise to “grade-grubbing”, which translates into students’ frequently protesting their grades and pressuring faculty to provide them with more points, even when unjustified. This can cause an unhealthy learning environment because students will be pitted against their teachers and peers (Kohn & Blum 2020, p.28). Kohn and Blum (2020) argued that traditional grading systems can create an atmosphere of fear of failure, where students are more concerned about the consequences of a low grade than about genuine learning. Schinske and Tanner (2014) argued that traditional assessment practices do not address equity and inclusion. Traditional grading practices can exacerbate existing inequalities, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds may face additional challenges in meeting grading criteria (McCulloch & Cowan, 2018). I grew up in a village with no electricity or access to the internet, but I had to compete with my peers in the cities who had access to everything in common examinations. Traditional assessment uses the one-size-fits-all approach in these cases (Trilling & Fadel, 2009) which is naturally unfair to the disadvantaged.

In response to these criticisms, some researchers have explored alternative forms of assessments seeking to decolonize traditional evaluative practices (Kohn, 2013; Stommel, 2018). Among these alternatives, ungrading, which focuses on holistic, feedback-oriented assessment methods, is emerging as the predominant approach (Kohn & Blum 2020; Butler & Nisan, 1986; Williams, 2020). In this paper, I provide a review and analysis of ungrading as an alternative assessment approach in higher education and advocate for continued research and dialogue regarding its implementation. This study draws on existing literature by combining peer-reviewed articles, books, case studies, and empirical studies on ungrading. Drawing from recent research by Jesse Stommel (2018), this review also discusses practical strategies for implementing ungrading in higher education such as contract grading, feedback-centered assessments, minimal grading, peer assessment, and self-assessment.

This study seeks to review ungrading as an alternative assessment approach in higher education and its impact on teaching and learning (Kohn & Blum, 2020; Glasser, 1986; Kohn, 2013). Furthermore, this study advocates for continued research and dialogue surrounding ungrading as a transformative assessment practice in higher education institutions. As educators engage in an ongoing discussion on ungrading, they contribute to the evolution of educational practices prioritizing student agency, authentic assessment, and equitable learning experiences (Butler & Nisan, 1986).

Methodology

This study is a literature review that integrates a reflexive thematic analysis by exploring two forms of autoethnography – personal narratives and reflexive analysis – to relate my lived experiences and identify the theoretical claims and key themes within ungrading as an alternative assessment methodology.

According to Ridley (2012), a literature review helps researchers situate their studies within a broader scholarly conversation by examining the existing literature on their topic. By reviewing relevant studies, researchers can identify gaps, controversies, or unanswered questions in the field, which helps justify the need for research by critically evaluating and synthesizing existing research findings. By analyzing the strengths and limitations of previous studies, researchers can identify patterns, inconsistencies, or gaps in the literature, which inform the direction of their research (Green et al., 2006). Autoethnography, a qualitative research method that highlights personal narratives and reflexivity, allows researchers to explore their lived experiences within a research phenomenon (Ellis et al., 2011). Personal narrative involves recounting lived experiences, emotions, and perceptions and providing insight into the researcher's subjective reality. Researchers can contextualize their experiences by sharing personal stories and connecting them to broader sociocultural phenomena. Reflexive analysis involves critical self-reflection on the researcher's positionality, biases, and assumptions throughout the research process (Anderson, 2006).

Data Sources

The data source for this study draws upon existing literature that examines the theoretical foundations, practical implementations, and impact of ungrading as an alternative assessment methodology in high educational institutions. I also aim to integrate personal reflections, narratives, and lived experiences as a student in Ghana, the United States, and Canada, into the study.

Literature Review

In recent years, ungrading has increasingly emerged as a dominant alternative assessment methodology focused on intrinsic motivation, creating equitable learning environments, and encouraging deeper engagement. Ungrading prioritizes qualitative feedback, self-assessment, collaborative learning, and student agency over standardized measures of student performance. This literature review explores the theoretical framework, historical context, theoretical foundations, empirical evidence, benefits, challenges, limitations, and methodologies for implementing ungrading as an alternative assessment practice in higher education.

Theoretical Framework

Traditional assessment methods, mostly centered on number or letter grades and standardized testing, foster a competitive environment where students are pitted against each other for success (Stommel, 2018). This competitive atmosphere can promote individualism, as students may focus on outperforming their peers rather than collaborating or engaging deeply with the course material (Kohn, 2011). Grading as a concept does not promote diversity and

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sharing of ideas because students see their peers as threats to their success rather than their learning partners (Stommel, 2018)

Furthermore, traditional assessment methods often prioritize rote memorization and regurgitation of facts over critical thinking and creativity (Brown, 2019). Students may feel pressured to conform to narrow definitions of success defined by test scores or grades, which can stifle their ability to think critically and independently (Shor & Freire, 1987). This reminds me of a practice in Ghana known as “chew, pour, and forget.” (Takyi et al., 2021). In this practice, students memorize definitions and formulas to enable them to pass their examinations and then immediately forget them after having regurgitated them for their examinations. I recall how I learned Basic Design and Technology at basic school. I was made to draw and label tables, chairs, and blocks instead of being taught how to put pieces of wood together to produce them. I learned how to prepare my favorite meal by memorizing the process and stages from my textbook but not through practice. As Tedla (2023) argued, this practice does not prepare learners for daily responsibilities and life challenges. This would have been an opportunity to learn basic technical and life skills that can be applied at home, but everything was based on theory, and I forgot all that learned in the end.

Alternative assessment approaches such as ungrading, prioritize diversity, critical thinking, collaboration, and engagement (Toulouse, 2016). Focusing on qualitative feedback, self-assessment, and process-oriented evaluation, these approaches encourage students to think critically about their learning and to engage in collaborative learning experiences. Rather than viewing education as a competitive pursuit, alternative assessment approaches promote a more inclusive and collaborative learning environment, where students are encouraged to explore diverse perspectives, question assumptions, and work together towards common goals (Nilson, 2015).

Historical Context of Grading

The grading system is believed to have emerged in the early 19th century when assessment was based on a simple pass-or-fail assessment methodology (Schinske & Tanner, 2014). According to Kohn (2011), this evolution has emerged because of the increasing emphasis on standardization and comparability in education. However, this system has been criticized for its tendency to demotivate students, promote surface-level learning, and perpetuate disparities (Kohn, 2013).

Theoretical Foundations of Ungrading

Deci and Ryan (1985), argued that ungrading is rooted in intrinsic motivation and constructivist theories of learning. These theories emphasize that learning is driven by internal factors such as curiosity, motivation, and interest. Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory posits that intrinsic motivation thrives where external controls such as grades are not emphasized. The proponents of this theory propose that individuals are more likely to willingly engage in tasks driven by internal desires rather than external rewards, judgments, or punishments. Ungrading encourages students to take ownership of their learning, take risks, engage deeply with course materials, and develop a deeper understanding of concepts through reflection and application (Blum, 2020). This proves that ungrading does not only challenge traditional grading practices but also advocates for meaningful and effective learning experiences for students (Kohn, 2013; Kohn & Blum, 2020).

Empirical Evidence on Ungrading

Research on ungrading is still emerging, but preliminary studies suggest there are numerous benefits associated with this approach. Susan Blum (2020) conducted research that revealed how ungraded practices correlate with heightened levels of student engagement, elevated quality of work, and enhanced self-efficacy. The results suggest that when students are freed from the constraints of traditional grading systems, they become more interested in their learning process and produce quality work due to their focus on understanding and mastery rather than performance.

Furthermore, Jesse Stommel, a key advocate for ungrading and whose research influenced my interest in this topic, has been teaching for over 20 years without grading his students. He focuses on providing corrective feedback rather than assigning number or letter grades to their work. I had different learning experiences in courses I enrolled in at the University of Victoria that did not emphasize grades as opposed to those that emphasized grades. I was anxious about doing assignments and presentations for graded courses for the fear of making mistakes that may affect my grade. In ungraded courses, I was not afraid to explore ideas because I knew I would not be punished for making a mistake. Mistakes were seen as opportunities to improve.

These studies and experiences provide empirical evidence for the positive outcomes associated with ungrading, shedding light on its potential to transform the experiences of both students and educators. By emphasizing intrinsic motivation, mastery-based learning, and a shift away from grade-centric goals, ungrading holds promise for cultivating a more meaningful and fulfilling learning environment and learning experiences.

Benefits of Ungrading

Alternative assessment methods in higher education enhance the quality of teaching and learning by promoting deeper understanding, fostering diverse skill development, and creating more inclusive and engaging learning environments (Khon 2013). Research suggests that ungrading offers several potential benefits for both students and educators (Kohn 2013; Stommel 2018). These include:

- deeper learning, with less pressure on grades, students engage in meaningful learning experiences, explore complex topics, and take intellectual risks (Brown, 2019);
- increased motivation, focusing on intrinsic motivation and autonomy, ungrading reduces anxiety and mental trauma associated with learning and encourages students to learn without fear of punishment or judgment (Butler & Nisan, 1986);
- equity and inclusivity, ungrading can help reduce disparities among students by providing more equitable assessment practices that recognize diverse forms of knowledge and expression (Schinske & Tanner, 2014);
- authentic assessment, by emphasizing real-world applications and process-oriented feedback, ungrading promotes assessments that align learning with professional expectations and experiences (Glasser, 1986).

Ungrading can help create a learning environment that encourages risk-taking, critical thinking, and intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1985; Kohn, 2011). By limiting the focus on grades, students engage deeply with the learning material and develop a growth mindset (Kohn & Blum, 2020). Additionally, ungrading can help mitigate the negative effects of traditional grading on students' well-being and stress levels associated with anxiety (Kohn & Blum, 2020).

Challenges and Limitations of Ungrading

Despite its potential benefits, implementing ungrading poses significant challenges, particularly regarding its alignment with institutional demands and the need for a mindset shift among educators and students. Schinske and Tanner (2014) underscored concerns regarding its scalability and applicability across various disciplines and class sizes.

Ungrading requires a shift from traditional grading practices deeply rooted in educational institutions. Schinske and Tanner (2014) noted that this shift requires a fundamental change in mindset for both educators and students. Educators must reconceptualize their role as evaluators of student work to readers and facilitators of learning and growth (Kohn, 2023). Students must redefine their understanding of success and achievement beyond numerical or letter grades (Kohn & Blum, 2020).

Moreover, implementing ungrading must align with institutional policies and accreditation requirements, which often prioritize standardized grading practices. This tension between innovative assessment approaches and institutional regulations can hinder the adoption of ungraded methodologies in schools. Educational institutions may be reluctant to reconsider established grading norms because of concerns about accountability, consistency, and external expectations (Schinske & Tanner, 2014).

Transitioning to ungrading requires comprehensive support structures and professional development initiatives to equip educators with the necessary skills and resources. Ongoing communication and collaboration among stakeholders are crucial for addressing concerns and fostering buy-ins for the new approach. Schinske and Tanner (2014) emphasized that successful implementation of ungrading necessitates a collective effort to overcome challenges and realize its potential benefits.

While ungrading holds promise for promoting equitable and student-centered assessment practices, its implementation faces challenges. Addressing concerns related to scalability, institutional alignment, and mindset shifts is essential to effectively integrate ungrading into diverse educational contexts. However, the historical background of grading suggests that grades were invented (Kohn, 2013). This offers the hope that they can equally be un-invented. However, this requires time, collective effort, and a significant change in the mindsets of students, parents, educators, and policymakers.

Implementing Ungrading

Ungrading is grounded in assessment methodologies focused on promoting student-centered learning and authentic assessment. These principles include feedback, self-assessment and reflection, encouraging a growth mindset, and contract grading.

Feedback

Feedback emphasizes constructive feedback that focuses on areas for improvement rather than assigning numerical or letter grades. Hattie and Timperley (2007) emphasized that effective feedback provides students with clear and specific information about their work, highlighting what they have done well, and where they need to improve. Zimmerman and Yohon (2002) proposes that timely and specific feedback enhances students' self-regulatory skills by helping them identify areas for improvement and develop strategies to achieve their learning goals. Feedback has been helpful in my graduate studies. It has made me think critically about my

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learning and work, as my instructors took an interest in my work and pointed out areas that needed improvement. However, it feels different when feedback comes with a grade. I am always tempted to focus on the grade rather than feedback. Feedback suggests that there is no end to learning, but grades signal the end of the learning process. I recall how I learned about the photovoice methodology in one of my courses at the University of Victoria. There was a significant improvement between my first and last annotated articles. This was because of the feedback received from the instructor. A grade could not have replaced the significant progress that I made in my learning and understanding of this methodology. This contrasted with what I experienced in Ghana during my undergraduate studies. Throughout my entire four years at the university, I never received any feedback for the assignments, tests, or exams I wrote. I only saw my grades. There was no explanation for why such grades were given. I got similar grades each semester because I did not know what I was doing right, or wrong, or where I needed to improve.

Self-assessment and Reflection

This involves encouraging students to evaluate their learning progress and fostering metacognitive skills. This approach allows students to critically reflect on their learning and identify their weaknesses and strengths. This will help them to adopt practical strategies to improve their learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Encouraging a Growth Mindset

Cultivating a growth mindset involves emphasizing effort, perseverance, and learning from mistakes rather than fixed abilities or performance. Deci and Ryan (1985) suggest that supportive and autonomy-supportive feedback fosters intrinsic motivation by satisfying individuals' basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Students feel the urge to do more or to improve when they feel that their efforts are being noticed and appreciated than when they are judged or criticized for the mistakes they make.

Contract Grading

This is an approach in which students are awarded the same grade at the end of a course, say, A- or A for every student (Stommel, 2018). However, the instructor allows students to undertake extension projects if they want higher grades than the common grade. Interested students negotiate terms of extension with the instructor. This not only focuses on attaining a higher grade, but it is also an opportunity to further research and broaden knowledge in an area of interest.

Conclusion

Ungrading represents a promising alternative to traditional grading in higher education, with the potential to foster a more engaging, equitable, and effective learning environment. However, its implementation requires careful consideration of the methodological, institutional, and cultural factors. Further research is needed to explore the long-term impacts of ungrading and to identify the best practices for its adoption across diverse educational contexts. The comparison between the traditional and alternative assessment methods underscores the

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importance of rethinking our assessment approaches. By adopting alternative approaches that prioritize diversity, critical thinking, collaboration, and engagement, educators can create more equitable and enriched student learning experiences (Brown, 2019). Implementing ungraded practices requires a collective effort, but individual efforts have been significant in decolonizing teaching and learning (Ferguson, 2013; Stommel, 2018). Therefore, there is a need for continued research and dialogue regarding ungrading as a transformative assessment practice in higher education institutions. By critically examining its theoretical frameworks, practical applications, and implications, educators can be empowered to make informed decisions regarding embracing ungrading as an alternative assessment strategy in assessing student learning.

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