Kristina Meinking, ELON UNIVERSITY, kmeinking@elon.edu
Eric E. Hall, ELON UNIVERSITY, ehall@elon.edu

Enhancing Trust and Embracing Vulnerability in the College Classroom: A Reflection on Ungrading and Co-Creation in Teaching and Learning

ABSTRACT

In this reflective essay, we explore how we and our students experienced trust and opened ourselves up to being vulnerable in two iterations of a course that was built on the pedagogies of ungrading and co-creation in teaching and learning (CCTL). As approaches that fall under the broader umbrella of critical pedagogy, ungrading usually involves an alternative to conventional alphanumeric grading systems, while co-creation in teaching and learning consists of a varied scale of student-and-instructor partnerships in the classroom. The course contexts explored here take ungrading to mean student self-assessment and self-assignment of grades, and our implementation of co-creation focused on significant elements of the course such as expectations, content, assignments, and assessments. We suggest that our combination of these pedagogies exposed the significance of vulnerability to nurturing trust in the college classroom. After an overview of the salient points in the literature on these pedagogies and a discussion of trust and vulnerability, we recollect our own experiences of them in a co-taught second-year honors course. Drawing from our reflections and those expressed in student writing, we observe that we brought a significant level of trust in each other and our students to the course. Further, we note that the processes of sharing authority embedded in both pedagogies significantly deepened that trust while also underscoring, in retrospect, the remarkable degree of vulnerability made accessible to students and instructors alike. Instructors who wish to implement these approaches should be keenly aware of the additional opportunities that trust and vulnerability, as made possible via these pedagogies, offer for building relationships in the classroom and working toward increased inclusivity and equity in the course community.

KEYWORDS

trust, vulnerability, ungrading, co-creation in teaching and learning

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, we reflect on our adoption of ungrading and co-creation in teaching and learning (CCTL) in order to support the development of trust among all course participants. We think of this trust as existing in and across multiple relational spaces: trust between co-instructors, trust between students, and trust between students and instructors (individually and as units). We also reflect on the aspect of vulnerability in our implementation of ungrading and CCTL. Our ruminations on trust and vulnerability as critical yet understudied elements of these pedagogies emerged from our teaching and reflections on a second-year honors seminar. We teach at a mid-sized liberal arts university in the southeast region of the US. “Beauty and the Brain” is an interdisciplinary, co-taught seminar for

second-year honors students. These high-achieving students come from a variety of majors across the university and are part of a cohort of peers with whom they take multiple required courses in the fall of their first year, with options for seminars in the spring of their first year and both second-year semesters. Many of these students have lived or currently live together in on-campus honors housing; some have also taken a short-term study abroad course together in the brief winter semester of their first year. In this essay, we focus on two iterations of the same course, one taught in fall 2018 and the other in spring 2021.

As a narrative reflection of the critical yet under-examined role of trust to these approaches and, importantly, to the students and instructors engaged with them, this essay captures ideas and realizations that arose during and after the two course iterations. We begin with a brief discussion of ungrading and CCTL, both generally and in our implementation of them, and we offer additional context for our courses. We then review some points about trust in the literature on higher education as well as in these pedagogies.

Instructors are often told to "trust students" without much discussion of what that might mean or entail for course participants. We think that this is important to explore because the directive simply to "trust" fails to encourage consideration of all the factors that shape, inform, and help to build that trust. Neglecting to identify and anticipate what, exactly, that trust might require of both instructors and students, particularly our social and psycho-emotional capacities, runs the risk of making assumptions about participants' readiness, willingness, and comfort in both extending and receiving trust and, we argue, in making themselves vulnerable to the course experience. An exploration of themes that emerged from our own reflections and student writing in the course indicates that most members of the course community exhibited characteristics of trust and vulnerability. We posit that at the heart of trust lies an invitation for everyone involved to be vulnerable, and that the pedagogy of vulnerability should be brought into the discourse around instructional methods rooted in critical pedagogy. We seek to make explicit the dependence of trust on vulnerability, and to offer what we have learned from our own experience as a help to those who might consider adopting either (or both) ungrading and CCTL.

REFLECTIVE FRAMEWORKS

We offer some broader information about the pedagogies of ungrading and co-creation in teaching and learning, as well as the role of trust and vulnerability within these approaches.

Ungrading

Ungrading can refer to any method of evaluation and assessment that does not rely, fully or partially, on an alpha-numeric grading scale or system. An instructor might decide to offer some ungraded assignments, an entire ungraded module, a series of ungraded modules, or an entire ungraded course. Alternative methods of ungrading include specifications grading, contract grading, student self-assessment, and many other options. While some institutions do not require that instructors submit alphanumeric grades at the end of the term, most still do; instructors can choose among multiple methods for easing this tension. The decision to adopt ungrading in any form usually involves the recognition that grades are highly problematic constructs, the "biggest and most insidious obstacle to education" and "a thorn in the side of critical pedagogy" (Stommel 2020, 27). Acknowledging the competitive, extrinsically motivated, and fallible nature of grades and the act of grading opens up space for considering alternatives, inviting instructors to consider how they might re-orient assessment processes around student learning, foster a course environment that centers on

collaboration, and create a space for the genuine exchange of feedback and dialogue between students and instructors.

Ungrading shares values with critical pedagogy as both call into question an instructor's appraisal of student performance, encourage the examination and re-valuation of the purpose, language, and mechanisms of grading, and bring students themselves into dialogue around both the creation of assignments and the actual assessment of their work. Ungrading is a way of "'grading for growth,' in that the primary purpose of the assessment becomes to help students learn and improve their knowledge and skills, rather than to create a summative score that students use to compare themselves against an external credential" (Kenyon 2022). Ungrading can support student learning, cultivate a more equitable class culture, and empower students (Blum 2020; Clark and Talbert 2023; Meinking and Hall 2022).

Co-creation in teaching and learning

Co-creation in teaching and learning (CCTL) includes any one of a number of approaches that involves students and instructors crafting any element of a course together. Options among the range of CCTL pedagogies include those like the democratic classroom and students-as-partners (SAP), and a central premise of CCTL is that students bring different skills and insights that are equally valid and important to those of their instructors. Student voices become critical to designing an assignment, shaping an inquiry, determining an appropriate assessment, or otherwise sharing in the teaching and learning process. Bovill (2020) describes CCTL as connected to relational pedagogy, which "puts relationships at the heart of teaching and emphasizes that a meaningful connection needs to be established between teacher and students as well as between students and their peers, if effective learning is to take place" (3). CCTL brings in another dimension to this foundation by having "staff and students work collaboratively with one another to create components of curricula and/or pedagogical approaches" (Bovill et al. 2016, 196).

By turning upside down the traditional model, where students are seen as empty vessels into which instructors pour content and where only instructors have the authority to decide, explain, and assess, CCTL also shares tenets with critical pedagogy's urge to make the classroom a more agentic and democratic space of shared ownership. Among the benefits and motivations for embarking upon a CCTL approach to course design and planning are the pedagogy's potential to increase student engagement (with the course, the instructor, and their peers), deepen learning experiences in the course, and diversify the thoughts, opinions, perspectives, and identities of those participating in the teaching and learning process.

Trust

Although many find trust important to the learning process (Archer-Kuhn and MacKinnon 2020; Curzon-Hobson 2010; MacFarlane 2009), it receives little sustained attention in literature on higher education. In exploring definitions of trust that aligned with our understanding and experience of it, we echo the framing of trust shared by Tschannen-Moran (2004); in this model one's willingness to be vulnerable to another is based on an investment of faith that the other is open, reliable, honest, benevolent, and competent (Carless 2012). The emphasis on emotional, relational connection signifies that relationships are central to the learning process in higher education (Felten and Lambert 2020), and that trust is equally central to these relationships and their effectiveness in creating a positive learning environment (Hagenauer 2022). Recently, Felten and colleagues (2023) identified a conceptual framework and suggest that there are "trust moves" that can be used to help faculty build trust with their students.

Those at the forefront of the "ungrading movement" encourage interested adopters to begin their journey from a foundation of trust. In Blum's (2020) book on ungrading, trust is highlighted throughout; in a discussion about different forms of ungrading she notes that "most emphasize that they trust students" (15), or as Stommel (2020) writes about ungrading as a pedagogical approach, "start by trusting students" (28). Similarly, Sorensen-Unruh (2020) states in relation to her use of ungrading, "I trust students" (145). Discussions of trust are threaded throughout the literature on CCTL. Bovill (2020b) discusses the use of co-creation as a relational pedagogy and asserts that trust sits "at the heart of co-creating learning and teaching" (Bovill 2020a, 1031). This is also seen in the work by Advance HE (2016) which presents a conceptual model of student engagement with partnership. In this model, trust is one of the nine values that is important for successful partnership. Trust is foundational to the formation of relationships and ensures that students and faculty will be treated with respect and fairness.

As pedagogies rarely encountered by students, ungrading and CCTL require a different kind of trust, one that is connected to a comfort with taking risks. Trust must be felt on the part of an instructor who makes evidence-based decisions about pedagogy rooted in the scholarship of teaching and learning, between instructors in co-teaching course contexts, between instructors and students (i.e., instructors trusting students), between students and instructors (i.e., students trusting instructors), and between the students and their peers. While instructors can make specific, intentional moves to develop the trust of their students (Felten et al 2023), in the ungraded, CCTL classroom, trust needs to be reciprocal and shared amongst all course participants. This is not to suggest that trust has no place in the more typical classroom, but rather that the qualities of critical pedagogy in which these pedagogies are rooted involves a dismantling of traditional, familiar, and "safe'" frameworks; without the usual policies, motivations, and structures in place, we are asking students (and ourselves) to engage in a different kind of work.

Vulnerability

Opening ourselves to trusting one another in a course community necessitates a series of moves and sometimes subtle changes to the ways both students and instructors approach a course. These reframings can feel uncomfortable because they challenge course participants to let go of assumptions that they might not even realize they held (e.g. around sources of authority in the classroom, student-student and student-instructor relationships, and what course engagement looks like). The importance of vulnerability, in addition to trust in higher education, is becoming increasingly apparent in building relationships between faculty and students (see Abruzzo, Sklar, and McMahon 2019; Archer-Kuhn and MacKinnon 2020; Nienaber, Hofeditz, and Romeike, 2015). When we looked back on our experience of the courses and what we observed in student writing, we found that a connected sense of risk and vulnerability mirrored what we learned from the pedagogy of vulnerability. Brantmeier (2013) describes this as a pedagogy of "taking risks," including "the risks of self-disclosure, risks of change, risks of not knowing, and the risks of failing" (96). While our immediate response to the idea of risk might be one of aversion or avoidance, for Brantmeier and others it is rather an "act of courage" (96). Deeply tied to this vision of vulnerability is the idea of authenticity. Building on the foundation of Dewey, Rogers, and others, Mangione and Norton (2023) assert that "authenticity, in particular, is the most closely related to vulnerability" and that "being authentic . . . has risks for both teacher and student" for the ways in which it calls for transparency around positionality, prompts self-reflection, and elicits self-disclosure (376; see also Christodoulidi 2023).

Our experience aligns with a more positive framing of vulnerability, as highlighted by Brantmeier and others, and we see the benefits of being vulnerable in a classroom environment as worth the risks one takes along the way.

WHERE WE SAW TRUST AND VULNERABILITY IN OUR COURSES

We offer context for understanding our courses, discuss our integration of ungrading and CCTL, and then share a thematic analysis of student writing focused around trust and vulnerability.

Course context

We teach at a mid-sized liberal arts university in the Southeast region of the US. "Beauty and the Brain" is an interdisciplinary, co-taught seminar for second year honors students. We designed the course together starting in summer 2018; one of the two instructors is in classical studies and the other is in exercise science (with a focus on neuroscience). We taught the course twice: once in fall 2018 and again in spring 2021. At our institution, these seminars are managed by the honors program (as opposed to a discipline or department), and honors students are part of a cohort of high-achieving peers with whom they take multiple required courses in the fall of their first year, with options for seminars in the spring of their first year and both second-year semesters. Many of these students have lived or currently live together in on-campus honors housing; some have also taken a short-term study abroad course together in the brief winter semester of their first year.

The table below highlights similarities and differences between the two iterations; we wish to note that the spring 2021 section was taught in a socially distanced, in-person classroom, with masks, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout this essay we draw upon student voices as captured in the learning charters and process letters as well as in the portfolios, final in-class discussion (transcribed), Google Form survey reflections, and honors-specific course evaluations. Additional information about the learning charters and process letters, and the portfolio can be found in Appendix I. All three assignments involve significant reflective writing and are what we think of as "asynchronous dialogues," in which we comment on, engage with, and build upon what students have shared in their responses to a series of three or four prompts. We coded this qualitative data (i.e. all student reflective writing in the course) to identify themes that emerged from the classes; these themes form the structure for the reflective discussion below. We obtained IRB approval for each instance of the course.

Table 1. Comparison of the two iterations of the course

	Fall 2018	Spring 2021
Ungrading	Full (students self-assess final grade)	Full (students self-assess final grade)
CCTL	Increasing throughout the term	Full CCTL by week 3 (of 15)
Reflective writing	Learning charters (six)	Process letters (four)
Final self-assessment	Portfolio and in-class discussion	Fourth process letter
Students enrolled	23	21

Course pedagogies

In both iterations of the course, we adopted a version of ungrading that excluded alphanumeric grades at any point in the term; students instead received substantial feedback on each assignment, many of which were iterative and thus encouraged students to integrate feedback. Our institution requires that final grades be submitted, so we had our students self-assess their work comprehensively at the end of term. In the 2018 version, students created portfolios that documented their learning and made an evidence-based case for the grade they believed that their work merited. In the 2021 version of the course, students responded to a series of prompts in which they reflected on the ungrading experience, discussed their work and effort over the semester, and gathered artifacts of their learning to make a case for their grade in the course. As we had stated at the start of the term, we honored the self-assessed grades within a half letter mark (i.e. we could shift a student up or down a half letter grade if we felt it necessary).

Both iterations of our course likewise featured versions of CCTL. In the first, the semester was divided into three modules or "movements," each of which scaffolded course content and ways of implementing CCTL as outlined in Bovill and Bulley's "ladder" (2011). In this model, a conventional classroom where instructors make all decisions rests on the bottom rung and one moves "up" the ladder as students take on increasing choice and control in the course curriculum. In our courses, as students made their way up the CCTL "ladder," they became more comfortable sharing ideas and co-creating (with each other, and with us) discrete pieces of the course; by the end students were co-creating and leading class sessions. In the second offering of the course, we introduced CCTL very early, assigned chapters from Bovill (2020b), and dove into a more student-controlled framework by the third week of the term. In retrospect, we see this earlier and more intensive integration of CCTL as indicative of our increased trust of students and willingness to be vulnerable with them after our positive experience with the first iteration in 2018. While we offered the modules as an organizing principle for the semester, students had nearly full control over decisions regarding content, daily course assignments and activities, as well as assessment.

In the discussion below, we highlight how we see elements of trust and vulnerability woven throughout the themes that emerged from our reflections and those shared in student writing from the courses. We note that threads of these reflective pieces are inherently relational: the co-instructors sorting through their trust relationships with one another, for example, and the students discussing their relationships to the course, the instructors, and to one another. Further, we see the transparency of students' responses itself as indicative of their trust and vulnerability. Often the information shared by students was not requested; rather it was a furthering of their thoughts or a supplementary inclusion of detail. The students' willingness and comfort to share in these ways suggests that the course environments were supportive of relational trust and encouraged vulnerability.

The co-teaching context

Learning to be open and vulnerable at appropriate times helps build trust across different relationships within a course. For this to be effective, we would need to create and maintain a positive learning environment, and modeling these values would be important. For the instructors, this course involves teaching from a multidisciplinary perspective; it is impossible to be the expert in everything, therefore, one needs to be vulnerable in front of peers (faculty) and students. When undertaking this endeavor, Hall had minimal experience with ungrading and felt initially vulnerable, but because of a long relationship with Meinking where trust had been built, he was willing to adopt a growth mindset and learn. Similarly, in this type of course, we have to provide an environment that allows students to

be vulnerable with faculty and peers because they most likely have less experience with research in STEM (neuroscience) or the humanities (classics). Ungrading allows students to demonstrate their learning in a way that is individualistic and gets at where they are and allows us, as faculty, to guide them in this learning. Hall felt comfortable with this journey and knew the importance of trust and vulnerability as he had explored this when writing about co-mentored undergraduate research experiences and how this was important especially when mentoring a research team which is not much different than a classroom (see Hall and Ketcham 2022; Ketcham, Hall, and Miller 2017).

We begin with the trust required of co-instructors in a co-teaching course environment. After working with each other for many years prior to this course on grants and other proposals, we had solidified the ideas on which the course was based; however, Hall had little formal experience with co-creation and ungrading, despite many years of teaching, and had concerns about teaching in this way (in other words, he felt vulnerable). Meinking had not adopted CCTL and had just begun venturing into ungrading the previous year; working across disciplines and with a well-respected colleague made her feel vulnerable in ways that she had not yet experienced. In what follows we each reflect on our perceptions of the course design and the course experiences from the perspective of a co-instructor.

Meinking: My path to ungrading and CCTL began in late 2017; by the time Eric and I were designing Beauty and the Brain's first iteration in June 2018, I believed that ungrading and a deeply student-centered, student-owned, and student-self-assessed course structure were the most effective ways to support student learning and to cultivate a course culture that valued community. I recall being hesitant, however, to pitch the idea to Eric, for whom I had always had the highest regard as a teacher. It felt risky to suggest and risky to do: this was our first time co-teaching, it was a brand, new course, and our students, because they were in the honors program, were likely to hold a particularly strong attachment to their grades. I also realize, more so now than then, the jump I was asking Eric to make and the trust I was requesting of him.

Hall: Before our planning of the first iteration of Beauty and the Brain, I was hesitant in teaching an honors course primarily because of the perception of entitlement which sometimes comes from teaching courses to high achieving students and their dependency on grades. However, this was the only mechanism on our campus through which Kristina and I could co-teach a course. We had been working the previous years on the development of this course and when Kristina first suggested the use of CCTL and ungrading I was initially unsure. But I was also curious and wanted to learn more as I was not familiar with the work on ungrading, what this would look like, and how it would be used in a group that is perceived to be more interested in grades than learning. I was somewhat familiar with the work on co-creation and felt much more comfortable with this aspect since this is something I had engaged in for many years through the mentoring of undergraduate research—my students are often the drivers of their learning through selection of their own projects with some guidance from myself. My curiosity in learning more about these pedagogies and willingness to adopt them was only made possible because of Kristina's passion for what she thought was right for this course, but also the trust that we had developed as friends and colleagues over the previous years in our exploration of the course topic.

A collaborative community

We attempted to build on the cohort nature of the group and experiences they had taking classes together. Early during both course iterations, we created projects that required students to work in small groups; these projects included reflective pre- and post-writing about attitudes toward group work and thoughts about collaboration. We also offered a variety of peer collaboration configurations, some of which were random and some of which were chosen by students. In

retrospect, we recognized that we were asking students to build capacity for a trust between themselves and to make themselves open and vulnerable to one another in ways that mirrored the trust that we as co-instructors developed. Students who chose to engage fully with tasks and activities that asked them to reveal perceptions of struggle or insecurity were taking risks that their peers would judge them and form misconceptions about their intelligence, identity, and more. That the students in both iterations were cohorted perhaps enhanced this impression: almost all of them already had some pre-knowledge of the others and had lived or worked with each other in one or a variety of ways.

Several students remarked on the significance of context, namely that they were honors students working with other honors students, a fact which removed many of the perceived barriers to trust and openness that they had experienced in other courses. For many, this type of trust centered on accountability: whereas these high-achieving students often described their role in collaborative work as having to take on the majority of the project (usually to save a grade) or to take charge of the group or otherwise delegate responsibility among its members, they expressed certainty that because they'd be collaborating with honors peers, they could let go of that particular concern. A confidence in other students' motivation to do well or give their best effort also characterized many of these comments.

Overwhelmingly, students expressed a strong preference for working in smaller groups, a proclivity that was often rationalized by the depth or degree of substance that discussion and idea development were afforded when fewer people could say more things. In one student's words, "complex and deep conversations . . . are best had in small groups. I have found that larger groups, even groups bigger than four people, are not conducive to this level of challenging conversation." We hypothesize that students in smaller group settings are more comfortable with and trusting of one another, at least in part because the level of their potential exposure or vulnerability is lower. This trust facilitates a willingness to share, as noticed by one student, "People have good ideas and I have found that people are more expressive of those when we are in smaller groups." Familiarity likewise fosters a willingness to be open: "Once I am more comfortable with a group and its dynamics, I will start voicing my opinions much more," writes one student. The variety and frequency of collaborative and co-creative opportunities in the course may have supported the timely development of students' ease, comfort, and trust with one another.

This collaboration extended to course content. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the course, it was not surprising that multiple students commented on the value of sharing and learning from the perspectives of their peers in other disciplines. Students noted not just that they learned to think about ideas or material differently, but that specific activities (i.e. interdisciplinary groups charged with teaching the class about an assigned emotion or a guest instructor invited by a student mentee) helped them reframe their understanding of other academic disciplines. One student wrote that they have "learned that artistic disciplines still are backed with science and people from these areas are still scientists in a way," a statement that strikes us as demonstrating remarkable vulnerability in sharing.

In addition to the topic of disciplinary difference, and more prevalent in the responses, was the thread that learning with and from one's peers greatly enhanced learning. Many students drew clear links between the quality of their work (e.g. classroom engagement, peer collaborations, discussions) and their exposure to diverse ways of thinking. As one student noted, "working with other people is necessary for a good quality product because everyone brings different perspectives to the project." Another remarked that "everyone does things a little differently, so being flexible and understanding is important;" we see this as a benefit for the holistic development of the student (i.e. increased empathy) and as connected to our implementation of CCTL. Acknowledgement of how trust

played into these collaborations also emerged from student responses, with one commenting that they "have learned that I can trust other people to do high quality work and to bring in diverse and interesting perspectives to group conversations." Collaboration invites risk and vulnerability: engaging fully with one's collaborators and truly embracing that one's own perceived performance rests on the efforts and talents of others involve loss of a sense of agency and control that can be destabilizing.

Trusting oneself, trusting others, and discovering vulnerability

Perhaps in tandem with the recognition that others' opinions and contributions are critical to the evolution of an idea, question, or project, several students also directly or indirectly remarked that their own voices, thoughts, and roles in the group(s) likewise proved important. As one student shared, "I have realized that my voice and ideas may actually matter in regards to adding to ideas and relationships." Along with this sense of trust in oneself and the value of their role in furthering discourse, we saw an awareness of not going too far or taking up too much dialogic space. One student articulated this in a process-oriented way, writing "I've been a lot more conscious lately of how often I voice my opinions. I don't want to take up more intellectual real estate than I should. This balance can ultimately be incredibly tricky for me as I am almost always checking in with myself to see if I am talking enough, or if I should be talking less." While the student's stated concern is with "taking up too much space," their aim to speak less may take on a different kind of risk, namely that in a course in which oral engagement is highly important; yet, the student was actively quieting their voice.

The framing offered by this student along with other responses suggests to us that students were learning to trust themselves alongside trusting one another and their self-assessments. A student might, for example, trust in their ability to write a cogent essay or contribute to discussion in a meaningful way; they might be less certain of their ability to assess the cogency of the essay or the quality of the contribution. By taking on the new role and framework of the creator of the assessment criteria or the evaluator of the assignment, students tried an entirely new endeavor (thereby finding themselves in a vulnerable space) and made themselves and their own work open to an unfamiliar kind of scrutiny.

In their assessments of CCTL in the course, students frequently mentioned experiencing increasing levels of independence. One remarked that "there was more freedom and autonomy during movement III, so I think it truly embodied Bovill's key argument that shared decision-making, responsibility, and negotiation of learning and teaching is foundational co-creation." Another saw alignment between the pedagogical approach and the course goals, noting that "the implementation of co-creation was a proper way to grant us the freedom to search for our own definition of beauty." As explored above, CCTL necessitates an enhanced trust of the students (on the part of the instructors); given students' relative unfamiliarity with the pedagogy, this trust might be harder to cultivate or students might be more skeptical or unsure of this level of empowerment. Further, as we discuss below through the lens of inclusive pedagogy, students in a CCTL course environment might perceive that the course structure is loose or nearly absent—despite the degree of structure, support, and scaffolding that employing the pedagogy requires. One comment indirectly touches on both of these pieces, stating that "after practicing co-creation methods, we now have a better understanding of how a lack of guidelines is important in giving us the creative freedom to approach our class period in our own engaging way. Ultimately, we, as students, know what to look for in a classroom and what will help us truly learn and grow." By framing their experience of CCTL using language that mirrors the progression from novice understanding to participatory expertise (Bovill and Bulley 2011), this

student's comment underscores their trust in the instructors and themselves, individually and collectively.

Many other students referenced and discussed ideas and visuals from Bovill's work, including the movement ladder (which outlines approaches that are viewed as supporting agency along a spectrum). Students linked what they learned with their experience of the course and with the ideas of trust and freedom in order to direct their own and one another's learning. For example, one student wrote "Bovill discusses relational pedagogy, the concept that a mutual trust needs to be established both between teacher and students and between students and other students in order for co-creation to be successful in a classroom. I feel that throughout the semester, this trust was certainly built between students, and I already had a trust built between myself and Professor Meinking after taking her Making the Grade course." Another student shared that "I felt comfortable setting goals for myself and letting go of the student-teacher pressure relationship. Bovill says that a classroom should have a teacher-student relationship with more freedom and openness, even if it feels unnatural at first. In making my presentation, I felt liberated to take it in the direction that I wanted to take it rather than the direction that I thought the instructors were looking for." This student's comment, echoed by others, captures the sense of agency fostered by a classroom supportive of trust and vulnerability: by releasing themselves of the need to please an instructor or create a presentation that was aimed for external (hierarchical) approval, the student more fully felt ownership of their work.

Students also saw a benefit to the pedagogy's ability to foster the potential for meaningful connections and relationships. "In this movement," wrote one student, "we specifically took advantage of these principles by forming deeper connections with our peers through preparation of our student-led classes as well as building our own teaching and learning structure." Another reflects that "I liked it though because by the end of the semester, we all felt comfortable in the class and had built trust and good relationships with each other and with the professors, which made it easier to make decisions about how to lead class than it was at the very beginning of the semester when we did something similar with the emotions. These relationships between students and teachers was another important aspect of co-creation emphasized by Bovill that I think we did a good job of achieving by Movement III." While the cohort identity certainly contributed to the students' willingness to establish and build upon their trust of one another, these comments capture the thread of relationship- and connection-based elements in the course that played a significant role in supporting and validating that trust.

REFLECTIONS

Through our reflection on our experience and student writing from the courses, we better understand the importance of building trust in a classroom of ungrading and CCTL. Our thematic analysis of students' reflections especially captures the significance of vulnerability both to developing and to maintaining that trust; without vulnerability, trust runs the risk of being performative. We acknowledge that our positionality as tenured, established instructors who teach at an institution that strongly supports evidence-based pedagogical innovation, granted us the freedom, real and perceived, to try new things. We recognize that not everyone teaches in this same context or positionality and wonder about the feasibility of a brand-new instructor embarking on the combined ungrading and CCTL journey. Our caution arises not from any instructor's capability but rather from the intangible factors like experience, knowledge of institutional context, and familiarity with the student body that help a more seasoned instructor to take what feel like pedagogical leaps. Stommel (2020) among others also point out that concern over students taking advantage, everyone wanting an "A," and graduate school preparation around teaching and assessment affect an instructor's

willingness to trust students and therefore to dive into the world of alternative pedagogies, specifically ungrading or CCTL. We find ourselves where we started: a certain baseline of trust in our students remains the foundational component of ungrading and CCTL processes. To employ both approaches in comprehensive ways, we suggest a level of trust and vulnerability that can feel extraordinarily unfamiliar, destabilizing, and daunting—but also liberating, productively challenging, and thrilling.

In closing, we offer a few comments and takeaways from our experience; we also consider how we might improve our integration of these pedagogies with the aim of cultivating trust and deepening vulnerability in a more intentional manner. All of these emerge from an overarching reorientation in our awareness and thinking about this work as we turned our attention to questions of trust in retrospect of having taught the courses. We already knew, for example, that our commitment to the degree with which we implemented both ungrading and CCTL intensified between course iteration one (F 2018) and course iteration two (S 2021). In analyzing that move, we suspect that we chose to enhance the course's integration of CCTL because we had already seen students succeed with it and had worked with the pedagogy in our own, individual classes. An increased confidence in ourselves as instructors who use ungrading and CCTL, and as co-instructors who worked well together, surely informed our decision; in other words, we had deepened our trust and comfort in being open and vulnerable to one another and in the challenges and opportunities that these pedagogies offered. While we each worked with ungrading and CCTL in many or all of our classes before and after these courses, the element of co-teaching intensified our awareness of the role that trust and vulnerability played in the course environment. Realization of how cultivating trust and vulnerability are critical to these pedagogies has shaped how we approach course design, transparency and dialogue with students. It has made us more mindful of the leaps we're asking students (and ourselves) to take.

This heightened sense of trust extended to the course and our students: having taught the course once we knew it in a way that we could not have when simply planning it, and having found the ungrading and CCTL pedagogies supportive of student learning enabled us to trust our students more as well. Although each course and group of students will always be different, the positive feedback and, most significantly, the trust that our students offered to us opened up more room for us to venture into newer, less familiar pedagogical spaces. Much like our students, we learned that trying something new, namely being open, honest, transparent, vulnerable, and communicative, could deeply support our holistic wellbeing and a community's learning.

During our time teaching this course and implementing ungrading and CCTL, we also became aware of how these pedagogies can be more inclusive for students, e.g. through the creation of a classroom environment that values learning and gives students different ways to interact with faculty members and demonstrate their learning. This inclusion comes from students and faculty members building trust and being vulnerable with one another and coincides with emerging discussions about how ungrading (Mowreader 2023; Smith 2022) and CCTL can promote equity for students (de Bie et al. 2021). Similarly, we believe there is a strong connection between ungrading, CCTL, and the work of inclusive pedagogies (Addy et al. 2021; Hogan and Sathy 2022) with trust and vulnerability as central components to how these approaches and considerations are integrated and implemented.

In recollecting and reflecting on these courses, we have come to see trust as an idea that has been under-theorized and insufficiently discussed in the scholarship on higher education, although we are encouraged by new models for understanding that are beginning to emerge. The relative absence of discussions of trust in the literature on two popular approaches under the critical pedagogy umbrella, ungrading and CCTL, strikes us as particularly problematic. Our exploration of

our own relational trust along with qualitative analysis of student writing in two iterations of our course suggests that both students and instructors build and strengthen trust in the ungrading and CCTL course context, and that the nature of this trust also invites risk and vulnerability from all involved. While both trust and vulnerability can be encouraged in a conventional classroom, we posit that the facets of these pedagogies most clearly aligned with critical pedagogy also encourage significant inter-relational trust and inspire participants to be vulnerable.

SOME SUGGESTIONS

Instructors who wish to adopt ungrading or CCTL would benefit from attentiveness to matters of trust and vulnerability beginning early in the course design process. Much of what we already know about the qualities of good teaching can inform how instructors approach designing and teaching a course that is created and implemented with the aim of fostering a vulnerable, trusting community. Taking care to be transparent in all course documents and communication, for example, offers a starting point, as does evaluating one's own assumptions as well as anticipating those that students might bring to a course. Likewise, instructors' intentionality in building trusting relationships with students and creating a course culture that welcomes and validates vulnerability are critical. Sutherland, Forsyth, and Felten's "Trust Moves" (2024) provide useful guidance for how these planning pieces find counterparts in the lived reality of the course experience.

Diligent care to examining the roles of trust and vulnerability in crafting and teaching a course can support instructors' efforts to foster meaningful relationships in the classroom and to build collaborative communities of engaged learners. This is particularly important when designing a course that seeks to reflect and uphold tenets of critical pedagogy, especially those that encourage students to critically examine existing power structures and foster student agency. Transparency around not just course components and mechanisms but also the terminology of vulnerability is similarly beneficial: as others have pointed out, "vulnerability" might conjure for students' associations with weakness and diminished power (Behari-Leak et al. 2019, Kasturi et al 2021)—ideas inherently contradictory to the critical pedagogy framework of which ungrading and CCTL are a part.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Kristina Meinking (USA) is professor of classical studies and the inaugural Trustee Chair for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching at Elon University. Her SoTL interests include ungrading, co-creation, assessment, and the purpose of higher education.

Eric Hall (USA) is a professor of exercise science and director of the undergraduate research program at Elon University. He is interested in co-creation and mentorship in undergraduate research, as well as assessment of high impact practices.

ETHICS

Research was deemed exempt by the Elon University ethics review board.

REFERENCES

Abruzzo, Dane, David P. Sklar, and Graham T. McMahon. 2019. "Improving Trust Between Learners and Teachers in Medicine" *Academic Medicine* 94 (2): 147–50. https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000002514.

Addy M., Tracie, Derek Dube, Khadijah A. Mitchell, and Mallory E. SoRelle. 2021. *What Inclusive Instructors Do: Principles and Practices for Excellence in College Teaching*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Archer-Kuhn, Beth, and Stacey MacKinnon. 2020. “Inquiry-Based Learning in Higher Education: A Pedagogy of Trust.” *Journal of Education and Training Studies* 8 (9): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v8i9.4929.
Behari-Leak, Kasturi, Svea Josephy, Mary-Anne Potts, Gift Muresherwa, Jaimie Corbishley, Tammy-Anne Petersen, and Borges Gove. 2019. “Using Vulnerability as a Decolonial Catalyst to Re-cast the Teacher as Human(e).” *Teaching in Higher Education* 26 (4): 557–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2019.1661376.
Blum, Susan D. 2020. Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines *Learning (and What to Do Instead)*. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press.
Bovill, Catherine. 2020a. “Co-Creation in Learning and Teaching: The Case for a Whole-Class Approach in Higher Education.” *Higher Education* 79: 1023–37. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00453-w.
Bovill, Catherine. 2020b. *Co-Creating Learning and Teaching: Towards Relational Pedagogy in Higher Education*. Essex, UK: Critical Publishing.
Bovill, Catherine, and Catherine J. Bulley. 2011. “A Model of Active Student Participation in Curriculum Design: Exploring Desirability and Possibility.” In *Improving Student Learning (18) Global Theories and Local Practices: Institutional, Disciplinary and Cultural Variations*, edited by C Rust, 176–88. Oxford: The Oxford Centre for Staff and Educational Development.
Bovill, Catherine, Alison Cook-Sather, Peter Felten, L. Millard, and N. Moore-Cherry. 2016. “Addressing Potential Challenges in Co-Creating Learning and Teaching: Overcoming Resistance, Navigating Institutional Norms and Ensuring Inclusivity in Student–Staff Partnerships.” *Higher Education* 71 (2): 195–208. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9896-4.
Brantmeier, Edward J. 2013. “Pedagogy of Vulnerability: Definitions, Assumptions, and Applications.” in *Re-Envisioning Higher Education: Embodied Pathways to Wisdom and Social Transformation, 95-106.* Information Age Publishing.
Bron, Jeroen, and Wiel Veugelers. 2014. “Why We Need to Involve Our Students in Curriculum Design: Five Arguments for Student Voice.” *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue* 16 (1): 125–39.
Carless, David. 2012. “Trust and Its Role in Facilitating Dialogic Feedback.” In *Feedback in Higher and Professional Education*, 90–103. Routledge.
Christodoulidi, Fevronia. 2023. “A Pedagogy of Vlnerability: Its Relevance to Diversity Teaching and ‘Humanising’ Higher Education.” *Equity in Education and Society:* 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/27526461231185834.
Clark, David, and Robert Talbert. 2023. *Grading for Growth: A Guide to Alternative Grading Practices That Promote Authentic Learning and Student Engagement in Higher Education*. New York: Routledge.
Curzon-Hobson, Aidan. 2002. “A Pedagogy of Trust in Higher Learning.” *Teaching in Higher Education* 7 (3): 265–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510220144770.
Dale, Michael and Elizabeth M. Frye. 2009. “Vulnerability and Love of Learning as Necessities for Wise Teacher Education.” *Journal of Teacher Education* 60 (2):123–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487108329276.
Danielewicz, Jane, and Peter Elbow. 2009. “A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching.” *College Composition and Communication* 61 (2): 244–68. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40593442.
De Bie, Alise, Elizabeth Marquis, Alison Cook-Sather, and Leslie Patricia Luqueno. 2021. *Promoting Equity and Justice Through Pedagogical Partnership*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
Felten, Peter, Rachel Forsyth, and Kathryn A. Sutherland. 2023. “Building Trust in the Classroom: A Conceptual Model for Teachers, Scholars, and Academic Developers in Higher Education.” *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* 11. https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.11.20.
Felten, Peter, and Leo M. Lambert. 2020. *Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Hagenauer, Gerda, Franziska Muehlbacher, and Mishela Ivanova. 2023. “‘It’s Where Learning and Teaching Begins—Is This Relationship’—Insights on the Teacher-Student Relationship at University from the Teachers’ Perspective.” *Higher Education* 85 (4): 819–35. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00867-z.
Healy, Mick, and Ruth Healy. 2016. *Essential Frameworks for Enhancing Student Success: Student Engagement through Partnership*. York, UK: Higher Education Academy. https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/essential-frameworks-enhancing-student-success-student-engagement-through-partnership.
Hogan, Kelly A., and Viji Sathy. 2022. *Inclusive Teaching: Strategies for Promoting Equity in the College Classroom*. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press.

Karakose, Turgut. 2021. “The Impact of the COVID-19 Epidemic on Higher Education: Opportunities and Implications for Policy and Practice.” *Educational Process: International Journal* 10 (1): 7–12. http://dx.doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2021.101.1.

Kenyon, Amy. 2022. “What Is Ungrading?” *Duke Learning Innovation* (blog). https://learninginnovation.duke.edu/blog/2022/09/what-is-ungrading/.

Macfarlane, Bruce. 2009. “A Leap of Faith: The Role of Trust in Higher Education Teaching.” *Nagoya Journal of Higher Education* 9 (14): 221–38.

Mangionge, Daniela and Lin Norton. 2020. “Problematising the Notion of ‘the Excellent Teacher’: Daring to be Vulnerable in Higher Education.” *Teaching in Higher Education: Critical Perspectives* 28 (2):373–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1812565.

Meinking, Kristina A., and Eric E. Hall. 2020. “Co-Creation in the Classroom: Challenge, Community, and Collaboration.” *College Teaching* 68 (4): 189–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2020.1786349.

Meinking, Kristina, and Eric E Hall. 2022. “Letting Go of Grades: Creating an Environment of Autonomy and a Focus on Learning for High Achieving Students.” *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* 10. https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.10.21.

Mowreader, Ashley. 2023. “Ungrading as a Form of Access, Equality in the Classroom.” *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/academic-life/2023/04/11/ungrading- form-access-equality-classroom.

Nienaber, Ann-Marie, Marcel Hofeditz, and Philipp Daniel Romeike. 2015. “Vulnerability and Trust in Leader-Follower Relationships.” *Personnel Review* 44 (4): 567–91. https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-09-2013-0162.

Oyler, Celia and Joe Becker. 1997. “Teaching Beyond the Progressive–Traditional Dichotomy: Sharing Authority and Sharing Vulnerability.” *Curriculum Inquiry* 27: 453–67. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1179973.

Shor, Ira. 1997. *When Students Have Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/W/bo3631380.html.

Smith, Jaci. 2022. “Ungrading and Equity: Does It Support Minoritized Students?” *Every Learner Everywhere*. https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/blog/ungrading-and-equity-does-it-support-minoritized-students/.

Sorensen-Unruh, Clarissa. 2020. “A STEM Ungrading Case Study: A Reflection on First-Time Implementation in Organic Chemistry II.” In *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, edited by Susan D. Blum, 140–60. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press.

Stommel, Jesse. 2020. “How to Ungrade.” In *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, edited by Susan D. Blum, 25–41. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press.

Sutherland, Kathryn A., Rachel Forsyth, and Peter Felten. 2024. “Expressions of Trust: How University STEM Teachers Describe the Role of Trust in Their Teaching”. Teaching and Learning Inquiry 12 (August):1–15. https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.12.22

Tschannen-Moran, Megan. 2004. *Trust Matters: Leadership for Successful Schools*. Jossey-Bass.

APPENDIX

Descriptions of reflective writing assignments

	Learning charters (2018)	Process letters (2021)	Portfolio (2018)
Brief description	Reflective documents in which students respond to a series of prompts, set goals, engage with instructors' comments.	Reflective documents in which students respond to a series of prompts, set goals, engage with instructors' comments.	Final course product in which students reflect on course learning, progress on goals and objectives, and give evidence in support of their claims.
Frequency	Six total interspersed throughout the semester.	Four total interspersed throughout the semester.	End of term but scaffolded throughout latter half and draft reviewed by instructors.
Feedback	Instructors make comments, ask questions, offer a paragraph of overall discussion (no grade).	Instructors make comments, ask questions, offer a paragraph of overall discussion (no grade).	Instructors offered substantial feedback on the drafts, dedicated class time to discussion, co-assessed the final products.