

Griffes, K. & Reynolds, C. (2024). The impact of ungrading on student learning and engagement in an ethics in exercise science course: A case study. *Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning*, 5(4), 83-98.

The Impact of Ungrading on Student Learning and Engagement in an Ethics in Exercise Science Course: A Case Study

Katherine Griffes, PhD

Chilton Reynolds, M.A.

Author Note

Katherine Griffes, 0009-0009-2222-5503

Chilton Reynolds, 0009-0000-3100-4192

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose

Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning

Vol 5 Issue 4

Abstract: Systems of higher education have been founded in formal grading structures for several decades. However, recent data has shown that traditional letter grades may not be effective for true student learning and engagement. Pedagogical data shows traditional grading formats are not always effective in evaluating learning. Ungrading is a system of assessment that can provide deeper learning and ins increased student engagement. A case study addresses the question of the impact of ungrading on student learning and engagement. Survey data collected in an exercise science course addressed feelings about ungrading, its impact on learning, and class engagement. Findings supported an increase in engagement in conversations, focus on the learning process, decrease in stress, and an increase in course enjoyment.

Keywords: *Ungrading, Student Assessment, Student Engagement*

Introduction

Formal grading structures have been the cornerstone of higher education for over a century. Recent research suggests that traditional letter grades may not be effective to true student learning and engagement. Pedagogical data has shown that traditional grading formats are not always effective in evaluating student learning or increasing student engagement in the class (Blum, 2020). Students often tend to focus on what it takes to get a good grade or hit a certain standard instead of the actual learning process, which can mean they are not fully engaged or aware of the learning process (Rapchak, Hands, & Hensley, 2023). Grades can often serve as a hindrance to student growth and development, as students may review a grade on a project without reading feedback provided by the instructor (Jarvis, 2020) therefore not getting vital information related to opportunities for improvement. By removing grades from the classroom, students are required to review feedback to gain information about their course progress. Not only are students more engaged with feedback, but the fear of getting a poor grade on an assignment is removed, allowing students an opportunity to take risks and try new approaches to their writing and discussions. The focus is then more heavily placed on what and how the students are growing and learning (Blum, 2020). This purpose of this case study is to provide an overview of the application of an ungrading assessment model in an exercise science

ethics course, discussing implications on student engagement and learning. Further, we will address the question: how do ungrading practices impact student learning and engagement.

A Framework for Ungrading in the Classroom

Ungrading falls under an umbrella term of assessment strategies that move away from traditional grading structures where letter grades or points are assigned based on a standard of student performance (Stommel, 2021). This approach to classroom assessment has become increasingly popular over the past several years, as more evidence has been brought to light around issues related to equity and grading, as well as the importance of the learning process, which can often be hindered by grades (Blum, 2020). To this end, Blum outlines five solutions to help students focus more on learning and creating positive relationships with both the professor and the content.

The first solution addresses decentering grading, which focuses on the goals or outcomes of the class instead of on point breakdowns for grades. Next, Blum suggests building a practice of self-assessment, which requires the students to build self-evaluation skills throughout the semester to articulate why the course content is useful to them. Faculty should then focus on emphasizing the entire portfolio which requires students to see their entire course work collectively as part of the learning process and to de-emphasize the importance of any single assignment. Faculty should prioritize having students develop an individual plan, which requires students to articulate the value of the course and how it connects to each of their lives and experiences. Finally, faculty should conduct portfolio conferences, which requires students to meet individually with the professor to show their learning by comparing work done early in the class with later submissions.

These five recommendations create a framework on which to center student learning and distance the focus on academic performance. This framework can then be used to describe the organization for the ungraded course.

This work grew out of a community of practice on alternative student assessment strategies in the classroom. This group, which was facilitated by the campus faculty center, had been meeting for the previous year, exploring multiple assessment strategies, including ungrading. It was through these conversations that the author and faculty center facilitator keyed in on ungrading for this course. To be clear, while we had explored Blum's work prior to the start of this course and Blum's work was the inspiration for the course's assessment organization, this framework was not used initially to build the course. That happened more organically. It was only after completing the course that we realized the alignment between Blum's 5 suggestions and the structure of the course.

Additional Benefits of Ungrading. As the desire to implement ungrading in this course was not based solely on Blum's work, we thought it would be good to share additional inspirations for decentering grading and encouraging students to focus on their learning. As Alfie Kohn points out,

An impressive collection of scholarship in educational psychology has distinguished practices that encourage students to focus on their academic performance from practices that encourage

them to focus on the learning itself. *The more their attention is directed to how well they're doing, the less engaged they tend to be with what they're doing* (Kohn, 2020, xvi).

As reported by Hasinoff and colleagues (2024) upon completion of a large-scale quantitative evaluation of student experiences with ungrading, a large majority of students reported positive responses to ungrading approaches, including feelings that the instructor cared about them, lower levels of stress, an increase in class attention, and an increase in focus on learning. Going beyond the educational component, students reported an increase in enjoyment, interest, engagement, motivation, success, risk, and creativity in their work. Blackwelder (2020) has also reported several benefits of ungrading, including an increase in students' interest in learning and quality of critical thought processes. Ungrading can also increase instructor and student relationships, providing opportunities for feedback, discussion, and collaboration of course content and the learning process (Rapchak et al, 2023).

Additionally, there is an increase in equity that this style of assessment can provide, as traditional grading structures can lead to barriers for success for many students, particularly those from underrepresented or marginalized identities. This includes students of color, low SES students, and students whose first language is not English (Feldman, 2018). Students already overcoming challenges in the modern education system are further impacted by biased or subjective grading practices. Von Bergen (2023) finds the practice of ungrading lends itself well to social justice approaches by creating more equitable classroom assessments, but instructors need to ensure they are doing it right, recognizing their own potential biases that may arise in the ungrading contexts.

Ungrading also provides an opportunity to shift power and control in the classroom, giving students autonomy over their learning and education (Dosmar & Williams, 2022). The traditional grading structure impacts motivation, goal setting, competition and comparison of others, student levels of stress and anxiety around grades, increases a sense of failure, and can impede opportunities to be creative or innovative in student work (Crogman, 2023). By creating classrooms and assessment strategies that focus on support and equity, students will have a better chance of engaging with the material, learning, and finding success in the classroom (Feldman, 2018).

Case Study: Application in an Ethical Considerations in Exercise Science Class

After reviewing the benefits of alternative approaches to grading, I determined that an ungrading approach was an appropriate assessment format for a new course, Ethical Considerations in Exercise Science. This course was newly developed and offered for the first time when the data was collected. The benefits and philosophy around an ungrading assessment strategy aligned with the goals of the course:

1. To increase metacognition, or the process of thinking about the way we think
2. To understand our own identities and intersectionality, and recognize the role our identities and experiences play in the way we view sport and exercise science
3. To engage with critical research on ethical and social justice issues within sport and exercise science.

This was a discussion-based course focusing on student experiences, perceptions, and connecting their views to research in the field. Assessment of learning was based on how students were able to reflect on a variety of topics, consider new information, and challenge their own thoughts and viewpoints. This class met once a week for 2.5 hours, over a span of a 16-week semester. Each week covered a different topic, where students focused their efforts on their prior knowledge of the topic before class, where they learned about the information or why they held specific beliefs, and then dove deep into information and scientific data available on each topic.

The course was divided into two broad sections, including the first half including discussions and prompts facilitated by the instructor, and second half being led by students.

Course Alignment to Blum's Solutions

Decentering grading. During the initial class meeting, I (first author) led an in-depth conversation about ungrading, including the philosophy and rationale behind this assessment style, how this assessment style aligns with my teaching philosophy, how this would benefit student growth and learning, and how the evaluation process would work in the course. This conversation was revisited many times throughout the semester to ensure students felt comfortable with this new process. Even with these conversations, there were still many instances of confusion and concern, as ungrading in college can look vastly different than traditional assessment procedures.

Each week, the course was broken into three sections. Before attending class, students had access to various resources on the weekly topic. While completing these readings, students were tasked with submitting reflections addressing key points from their own lives and experiences, while connecting that with what they read in the articles. These reflections were not graded, instead students received feedback based on rubrics created for the course. Specific prompts can be found in *Appendix A*.

Using these prompts, students would write reflections to be submitted for feedback. The reflections served many purposes, with one main purpose to get the students' ideas and thoughts formed so they felt prepared to discuss in class. A secondary purpose was to provide me with some baseline information and direction for how class discussions may go. By understanding the students' current beliefs and background, I could meet the students where they were, using their terministic screens, or the frame of reference to which they were approaching the course information (Hernandez, 2021). Students were given in-depth feedback on these reflections before class, which they read and reviewed before attending class. This feedback was meant to stimulate student thinking, challenge their thoughts, and provide guidance for future reflections. The importance of this process cannot be overstated. By providing students with information so they could come to class well informed, there was a decrease in worry or fear around saying the wrong thing or feeling like they couldn't add to the class conversation. Feedback gave students confidence and validation in what they were thinking, as well as other ideas or ways of looking at their own thoughts. Simply providing a letter or numerical grade would not have provided this benefit. Verbal feedback at the beginning of each class was important as well. By sharing broad comments with the entire group, specifically highlighting common

themes from the reflections or concerns that students had, the students were able to see that they were not the only ones in the class thinking the same thing.

The structure of the class meeting was important to its success. Students sat in a circle that included me, to create a cohesive and safe conversational space where each student could see the other students' faces. Too often, classroom seating is not conducive to discussion-based courses, with all students facing forward. This seating arrangement was vital in creating an open conversational feel for the students. Inclusive strategies were applied to ensure students had a chance to get their voices heard. While the course was small (16 students), class periods started with a small group discussion, in groups of 2-3. This gave students a chance to talk about their reflections in a less potentially intimidating setting and to hear others' thoughts before starting the large group discussion. As many of the topics were sensitive in nature, no student was ever called on without raising their hand first. This policy again lent itself to creating a safe environment, without fear of having to speak on a personal or difficult topic if the student did not want to discuss it. Ungrading played a key role in this system, as students were not penalized for not speaking up or losing points related to participation. We highlighted that listening can be just as important to learning as speaking in a classroom setting. Just as with the reflections, the focus was on understanding the students' beliefs and perspectives and listening to research and information on the topics to expand their understanding of course content.

Following course discussions, students had two days to complete the third portion of the class, the post-class reflection. In this writing assignment, students discuss the process of the class discussion. This is not so much a summary of the class conversation, but a reflection on how they *felt* during the conversation, their reactions to the discussion points or questions brought up, and what these conversations mean in the broader context of sport and society. Students got in-depth feedback from me on these post-reflections, with probing questions, making recommendations for how they could approach reflections in the future.

Building a practice of self-assessment. Initially, rubrics were provided for the weekly pre- and post-class reflections to provide a general framework for writing expectations at the beginning of the semester. However, to provide ownership of class learning to the students, after three weeks of reflections the students provided feedback on the rubric and had an opportunity to make changes to the written reflections based on their experiences with the writing. Throughout the semester, there was also a change in the feedback I was providing, starting out with a more instructional approach focused on growth to a more conversational style of communication. This change was mentioned by a student in the portfolio meetings, where the student identified the change in feedback as comforting and a way to feel more ownership in the writing process.

Student self-evaluation processes were supported throughout the semester as a group, and individually through feedback from me. Rubric updates were completed as a class, through discussions on the importance of written reflections, what students considered to be important as they processed new information, and what type of information should be shared to provide evidence of learning and growth. Often, rubric changes came from previous feedback on reflections, as I would encourage more

detail and information in early reflections. Changes to rubrics were continuous throughout the semester, with discussions taking place every few weeks about the writing and reflecting process.

Ultimately, self-assessment was presented in the final portfolios, as students were required to reflect on their growth and progress over the semester and evaluate their own learning and development.

Emphasizing the entire portfolio. Feedback provided each week was intended to give further guidance on growth and development. Early in the semester, feedback for most students was more generalized, encouraging students to dig deeper into their writing, to move away from summarizing readings and focus more on their thoughts and reactions around the topics they were learning about. As students began to feel more comfortable with this new type of thinking and writing, feedback adjusted to challenge them, asking more probing questions about their responses and encouraging students to think on a more global scale about the topics. Students were also encouraged to make connections between topics, rather than seeing them as unique, but instead to look for systematic patterns. For example, how sexism, racism, and entrepreneurship may all tie together, or considering what the goals and values of sport are based on a broad range of topics.

While written feedback can be useful, verbal feedback, both large group and individual, can give students an opportunity to ask clarifying questions about expectations or ways to improve. At the beginning of class, I would summarize some common themes or broad comments that applied to many students. Individual meetings were also held for students who seemed to be struggling to apply feedback. These meetings were extremely valuable, as each student learns differently, and having the chance to discuss one-on-one about expectations or challenges that students were facing allowed for unique needs to be met. This approach also led to more equitable opportunities for growth, as not all students were at the same level of understanding or comprehension at the beginning of the course.

Students develop an individual plan. Student individual plan development was implemented in multiple ways throughout the course, but most specifically through reflections and class discussions. The course was designed to encourage students to connect content to their own lives, broader societal constructs and their peers' experiences. This was made possible through class discussions, written reflections, and self-awareness of their own values and biases. Unggrading practices assisted with this process, as students learned to value the reflective process rather than complete assignments for specific grades or points.

Student ownership of class content was expanded in the second half of the course, when students worked in groups to take over as class discussion facilitators. Small groups selected ethical or social justice topics of interest that related to sport or exercise science, and created a course plan, providing readings, resources and videos for their peers to use as educational tools. Student leaders were tasked with leading the course discussions and providing feedback through the entire course.

This structure allowed students to take ownership not only of course content, but of course structure during the class period where they took on the role of facilitators. Student facilitators had access to

peers' pre-reflections and assigned feedback badges to the submissions. These pre-reflection submissions were used to guide and inform potential discussion topics during the facilitation session, giving insights into peers' terministic screens and backgrounds. By viewing the written reflections of peers, student facilitators could see beyond their own scope and perspective and better understand the course topics on a broader scale.

Conducting portfolio conferences. For this class, assessment was based on continued growth and improvement in critical thought and metacognition for writing assignments, classroom attendance and participation, leading a class discussion, and an end of semester portfolio.

The final assessment artifact for the course was the end of semester portfolio that students created, based on their growth and progress, to use as evidence for their final grade. Students were provided with a rubric that they helped modify, based on what they believed was the best way to demonstrate their learning. This approach of mid-semester and end-of-semester assessment reviews aligns with Dosmar and William's (2022) assessment structure, as well as strategies utilized by Rapchak, Hands, & Hensley (2023). Specific prompts can be found in *Appendix B*.

Students signed up for individual meetings with me, to share and discuss their portfolios and discuss the learning process. These conversations were informal, giving students a chance to discuss and expand on their self-assessments in the portfolios. During these final meetings, students assigned themselves a grade that they felt aligned with their growth and learning throughout the semester. It was interesting that some of the students who demonstrated the most growth and engagement had the most difficult time saying that they had earned an 'A' in the course. Students saw this as being overly bragging or undeserving, highlighting small mistakes they had made early on as reasons why they couldn't say they earned an 'A'. This again highlights the negative impact that grades can have on learning; if students are only looking for perfection, they are not willing to take risks to grow (Chiaravalli, 2020). I continued to enforce the idea that perfection is not the goal, and is never a realistic approach to critical thinking, but that the focus is on improvement. This shift in viewing education as an opportunity for growth is very important for continued development of critical thinking and is unfortunately an idea that is lost on many students (Blum, 2020).

Next steps. The structure of the course clearly aligned with Blum's (2020) five suggestions, which provide a clear opportunity to evaluate this model's effectiveness in a specific course setting. The following table presents examples of how suggestions were implemented in the course.

Table 1
Aligning Blum's Ungrading Framework with Course Strategies

Blum's Five Suggestions	Alignment with Work in Course
ecentering Grading Consistent conversations with students	ecentering Grading Consistent conversations with students
throughout the semester about the importance of feedback and growth in the learning	throughout the semester about the importance of feedback and growth in the learning

process	process
Practice of Self-Assessment Students were involved in the development	Practice of Self-Assessment Students were involved in the development

Methods

Following the five recommendations from Blum (2020), a comprehensive overview of the student experience was implemented and analyzed. The results presented below tie into our overarching inquiry question of: What is the impact of ungrading on student learning and engagement? This question was answered throughout the span of the 16-week course: *Ethical Considerations in Exercise Science*. Data was collected from students using anonymous, short answer surveys at mid-semester and again at the end of the course, after content was completed but prior to meeting for their final portfolio discussions. Questions in these surveys addressed the students' overall feelings about ungrading, how ungrading may impact their learning and class engagement, and any comments they have for me. The survey was intentionally left broad to prevent instructor bias or response guiding. IRB approval was granted for the collection of data by the institution.

Following the collection of the surveys, I reviewed comments and organized responses into broad themes related to the topics presented. Findings generally supported an increase in engagement in class conversations, focus on the process of learning material, decrease in stress throughout the class, and an increase in enjoyment of the course overall.

Impact on engagement and learning. Using ungrading as a pedagogical assessment had an overall positive impact on student learning and engagement. Throughout the course, student feedback was collected to compare this course structure to a traditional classroom structure.

One key factor that stood out was the impact that grades can have on stress and anxiety in students, which can get in the way of learning and engaging in class concepts and discussions. Addressing this, one student stated,

I enjoy ungrading. I feel as if it reduces stress and allows me to freely express how I feel. I also have been able to increase how deep I go during my papers due to the lack of fear of a bad grade. (Student)

By taking away the fear of a poor grade, students felt more comfortable challenging themselves and their own learning. This worry and concern about grades were reiterated by another student, claiming *"I think the ungrading made me enjoy the class more. I like the ungrading because I don't have to worry about anything. I'm able to absorb the information."* (Student). These comments highlight the negative impact traditional assessments can have on student learning, as students cannot connect with information due to their focus and attention being more on points and outcomes than on the process of learning.

Another important feature of the ungrading approach is the level of comfort that students felt in the classroom. If formal grades are adding stress to students, they may not feel as safe to be open and engage in the classroom, as the focus may be on intense note taking and memorization, a consequence of standard grading practices noted by Crogman et al (2023), when the student is worried about finding the right answer as opposed to considering a variety of responses. One student highlighted this concept, stating, *"This assessment style made class feel a bit more free and laid back compared to a class where a grade would solely depend on your work and nothing else."*

By removing traditional grades and focusing solely on feedback for growth, students saw more value in completing the assignments each week and dedicated more time and energy to the course. One student claimed, *"Ungrading made me want to focus on improvement each week rather than just submitting something for a grade."* This idea was substantiated by another student, saying, *"It helped me listen in class more instead of simply going in order to get the info needed to complete assignments."* Students were also able to recognize the importance of growth and improvement of their work, saying, *"I really like [ungrading]. I think the point of school is to grow skills needed in life and grades put too much emphasis on memorization. No grades gives students the chance to focus on this growth mindset."* Continuing with this idea, another student believed, *"It was nice to see our grades be based upon something other than just the work we turn in. Progress based learning actually encourages students to strive to be better instead of just doing work to do work."*

Some students did identify some concerns or limitations with ungrading. While grades can be a great cause of stress, they can also serve as a motivator for students to complete their work. Without a formal grade being assigned to each assignment, work may be considered optional or less of a priority than traditionally graded work. As one student mentioned, *"At some points it made me allow myself to do sub par work knowing it wasn't going to be graded. Like if I had a lot of work for a week, I would simply spend less time on this assignment."* Another student reported concerns around the lack of information being provided in an ungrading system regarding final grades, as can be easily seen in traditional classes. For example, a student said, *"I like it but I also don't because I don't really know where I stand grade wise"*. Both comments identify the challenge that professors using ungrading may face after students experiencing years of traditional grading, where points and grades are the primary motivator for learning as opposed to feedback and self-reflection and the lack of grades as a source of information can lead to confusion or ambiguity (McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020). Some mistrust in the process was also evident, with one student stating, *"I like the fact that it is less intimidating, but then it also is slightly unmotivating because I cannot see what my grade is at now or what [the professor's] influence on my grade will be."*

What We Learned

Pilot testing a new course using a new assessment plan (ungrading) was a learning experience for both students and me. First and foremost, we learned the importance of communicating expectations for the students, and getting buy-in. If students are concerned about, or lack trust in the ungrading process, they may experience more stress about the course, which was not the goal of ungrading in this setting (Blinne, 2021). Continued conversations about the assessment process, highlighting the

impact of growth and application of feedback over points and grades is key to easing student concerns and giving them the freedom to challenge themselves.

As many students highlighted, the value and benefit of feedback was key to growth and learning. When presenting the idea of ungrading, one conversation point was the impact of grades over learning, and how students tend to ignore feedback and focus only on grades. By providing in-depth, detailed, and consistent feedback about opportunities to grow, students could apply what they were hearing in written and verbal feedback. For example, one student stated, *"I think I had much more development in this class using the ungrading approach because I actually looked at feedback and learned from my mistakes."* If the only information students have about their progress is through feedback, highlighting strengths as well as specific areas for growth and improvement, students would be more likely to take steps toward improvement, rather than simply checking for a grade and moving on (Crogman et al, 2023).

Consistent feedback was necessary for this course, as students were being asked to think and write differently than they had in other classes. This was a challenge for many students, as I was more interested in their thoughts and reactions than in simply restating what they had read. By removing grades from the course and focusing on feedback, students had the freedom to express their thoughts, and try out this new approach to learning, in a lower stakes setting. For example, one student recognized, *"I enjoy ungrading. I feel as if it reduces stress and allows me to freely express how I feel. I also have been able to increase how deep I go during my papers due to the lack of fear of a bad grade."*

As the semester went on, the feedback students were given changed. Detailed and specific feedback was provided each week, and as the students grew in their writing and reflections, the feedback adjusted with their growth. There was never a point in the course where students 'hit the target' or 'met a standard', but as they improved, they were pushed to grow to the next level. This allowed for growth throughout the entire semester, and was noted by a student, *"I think since I was more focused on improvement, I think it kept me focused on learning and understanding the content rather than just the grade."*

The end-of-semester portfolio, where students reviewed their work and growth throughout the semester, seemed to be the most impactful assignment for the students. Many students expressed high levels of surprise in the changes they saw throughout the class in the way they wrote, the way they asked questions, and in their overall thought processes. Several even expressed levels of embarrassment at the quality of their earlier reflections. This reaction brought to the forefront that students are often not focused on their own growth throughout the semester and giving them an opportunity to reflect on how far they have come over a 16-week period was a powerful experience for them to consider their learning through summative and formative approaches, as also noted by Davis (2023). To be able to see for themselves the improvement in their writing showed students the value of an ungraded course.

Future Suggestions

While the current structure of the course was extremely successful in engaging students and improving critical thinking and learning through an ungraded course, we make recommendations for future updates or adjustments. During the end-of-semester portfolio discussions, some students mentioned a slight mistrust that they would assign themselves their own grade. While the assessment and evaluation procedures were included in the syllabus and discussed in class multiple times, there was some hesitancy that this would be enforced. Trust between student and instructor, and minimizing the power imbalance between the two positions, is vital for success in an ungraded course (Blinne, 2021). Therefore, signing an assessment policy contract with the students may be useful to reinforce the ungrading structure.

While the students enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to lead class sessions, it was clear that some students were not properly prepared to provide useful and developmental-focused feedback to their peers while reviewing pre-reflections. Students commented that the pre-defined 'badges' were useful, but they had difficulty supplementing those with their own comments or thoughts. Providing guidance through discussion or readings on what effective feedback looks like, or how to clarify thoughts for peers, would be beneficial for the students and those receiving feedback.

Finally, making some technology adjustments to better reflect the effort students gave to these assignments would boost morale and motivation. Following the ungrading style, there were no numbers or points assigned to the reflections, but a zero was listed in the gradebook, along with written feedback. For students, spending large quantities of time to read, reflect, and write their assignments, only to see a zero in the gradebook, led to feeling disheartened or less motivated. Even though students recognized that 'zero' was just a place filler, the psychological impact of seeing a zero left a negative feeling for the students. As mentioned by one student, *"It was very stressful at first because we are taught to just focus on grades so the fact that everything was zero was stressful."* Working with digital gradebook designers to include another form of completion notation, such as a check mark, may address this challenge.

Key Considerations and Future Application

We want to highlight the following considerations for instructors who are considering ungrading as an assessment strategy in the classroom in order to increase student engagement and learning.

It is important to recognize that using alternative assessments like ungrading requires a lot of intentionality. Not all courses align well with this approach and the assessment process should be embedded as the course is designed, rather than an afterthought. Courses that require a certification exam at the end, or that focus on specific definitions and concrete topics, require less reflection and more rote memorization may align better with a traditional assessment strategy. The instructor's philosophy and course design also play a key role in the success of ungrading. Without clear expectations and structures around final grade reporting, such as a portfolio to demonstrate growth, instructors may see grade inflation.

We also recognize the ungrading requires trust from the students, with clear communication and transparency throughout the process so the students understand the goals and purposes of the assessment process. Without trust in the process, student apprehension about grading policies may increase as there is less of an opportunity to formally track course progress.

Ungrading can require an additional level of effort from the instructor. Good, in-depth, and useful feedback is time consuming, but is worth it in the long run. Students will recognize the effort put into the feedback and value the information being shared.

It is important for the success of the course and assisting in the trust development process that instructors make sure they fully buy into the process. Ungrading means giving up some authority in the class and giving ownership of learning to the students. This can be difficult, but when students sense your buy in, they are more likely to buy in as well.

One final piece to remember is that ungrading works! By taking the focus away from grades and highlighting growth and development, as well as clear application of feedback, students will engage with the content at a deeper level, thanks to the removal of some of the stress and pressure that often goes hand in hand with grades.

Overall, ungrading in a discussion-based ethics course in exercise science provided ample opportunities for students to become more engaged with the material, with their peers, and to take risks in their written and verbal work. Findings aligned closely with prior results around engagement, enjoyment, risk, creativity, stress, and motivation (Hasinoff et al, 2024). As one student said, '*I really like ungrading and it has changed my outlook on college and schoolwork.*' Without the grades holding students back, they utilized feedback and focused on continued growth rather than simply working to hit one standard and becoming complacent in their work, as referenced by Blackwelder (2020) and Stommel (2021). The unique nature of this course was an ideal setting for alternative assessments like ungrading and created a more inclusive and equitable classroom environment.

References

- Blackwelder, A. (2020). What going gradeless taught me about doing the “actual work”. S. D. Blum’s (Ed) *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)*. West Virginia University Press.
- Blinne, K.C., editor (2021). *Grading justice: Teacher-activists approaches to assessment*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Blum, S., editor (2020). *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do Instead)*. Morgantown, West Virginia University Press.
- Chiaravalli, A. (2020). Grades stifle student learning. Can we learn to teach without grades? S. D. Blum’s (Ed) *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)* West Virginia University Press.

- Crogman, H.T., Eshun, K.O., Jackson, M., Trebeau-Crogman, M.A., Joseph, E., Warner, L.C., & Erenso, D.B. (2023) Ungrading: The case for abandoning institutionalized assessment protocols and improving pedagogical strategies. *Education Sciences*. 13.
- Davis, H.T. (2023). Ungrading: Self-assessment, effort, and motivation. *Composition Studies*, 51(2) 143-147.
- Dosmar, E. & Williams, J. (2022). Ungrading assessment practices. *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*. 31(5).
- Feldman, J. (2018) Grading for Equity: *What it is, why it matters, and how it can transform schools and classrooms*; Corwin Press: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Hasinoff, A.A., Bolyard, W., DeBay, D., Dunlap, J.C., Mosier, A.C., & Pugliano, E. (2024). Success was actually having learned: University student perceptions of ungrading. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*. 12.
- Jarvis, C.L. (2020). Testing and 'ungrading' approach. *Features: Undergraduate education*.
- Kohn, A. (2020). Forward. In *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)*, (Ed) Susan Blum, xiii–xx. West Virginia University Press.
- McMorran, C. & Ragupathi, K. (2020). The promise and pitfalls of gradeless learning: Responses to an alternative approach to grading. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 44(7) 925-938.
- Rapchak, M., Hands, A.S., & Hensley, M.K. (2023). Moving toward equity: Experiences with ungrading. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 64(1).
- Stommel, J. (2023.) *Undoing the grade: Why we grade, and how to stop*. Denver, CO. Hybrid Pedagogy Inc.

Appendices

Appendix A: Pre-Reflection Rubrics (content in italics represents adjustments made by students).

EXSC3250

Weekly Reflection

Pre- and Post-Reflections

Due Saturday (Pre) and Wednesday (Post)

Each week, you will submit a 2-part critique / reflection on the topic being discussed.

The first part will be submitted prior to class, and should include, but not be limited to, the following points:

Pre-Reflection Expectations

- What you already know / believe about the topic (your stance)
 - *Why do you think you feel or believe what you do?*
 - *If you don't know much about the topic, why do you think that is?*
- Where you learned about the topic (your influences)
 - *How have your experiences or education impacted your views?*
- Key points from the readings that you agree with or substantiate your beliefs (validating information)
 - Include specific examples from AT LEAST 3 of the articles, explaining how these fit into your view on the topic
 - *How does it feel to read about these topics*

- *Why does what you are reading align with your views*
 - *How do these readings connect to your own experiences*
- Key points from the readings that you disagree with or had not heard / thought about before (expanding perspectives)
 - Include specific examples from AT LEAST 2 of the articles, explaining how these are in conflict with your perspective
 - *Why do these readings conflict with your perspective / why have you not heard these perspectives before?*
 - *What does it feel like to read things that go against your beliefs or are new? Why does it feel that way?*
- *Based on the readings, what big picture questions should we be asking about these topics?*

This section will show that you have done the readings and have reflected on the topic before class discussions. Reflections need to be a minimum of TWO PAGES long and use the headings mentioned above, to help you organize your thoughts and ensure you are covering all material.

*****Part 1 submissions are due Sunday at midnight each week *****

Post-Reflection Submission Expectations

The second part will be submitted after class discussions, and should include, but not be limited to, the following points:

- How you expressed your views verbally (what did you talk about)
 - *How did it feel to share your feelings?*
 - *If you didn't share, why not? What did it feel like?*
- How other students expressed their views verbally (what did they talk about)
 - Provide 3 SPECIFIC EXAMPLES from class
 - *What did it feel like, or what was your internal reaction, to hearing others talk?*
 - *Where do you think they got their information or experiences from, or what do you think informed their beliefs?*
- What surprised you in the discussion
 - *What did it feel like to hear something surprising?*
 - *What was your internal reaction or dialogue? Why do you think you responded the way you did?*
- How you felt hearing your ideas challenged, and how you responded
 - *What thoughts did you have hearing your ideas challenged?*
 - *Why did you respond the way you did?*
- What things are you considering that you had not considered prior to the conversation
 - This does NOT mean that you changed your view, but rather do you see other ways of looking at the topic discussed
 - *Why do you think you are responding the way you are to new ideas?*
 - *What about your previous experiences may lead you to feel this way?*

This section will show that you have paid attention to and participated in the class discussion. Reflections need to be a minimum of TWO PAGES long and use the headings mentioned above; to help you organize your thoughts and ensure you are covering all material.

*****Part 2 submissions are due Wednesday at midnight each week*****

Appendix B: Final Portfolio Rubric (content in italics were added by students).

FINAL PORTFOLIO for EXSC3250

Prior to your meeting with me to discuss your grade for this class, please organize and prepare the following information:

- Data on attendance, assignment submissions, meeting deadlines
- If class or assignments were missed, was there prior communication and what was done to make up for that work
- Specific, concrete examples (copy and paste from writing and blackboard submissions) of feedback that was given on BOTH pre and post reflections (identify them separately) and demonstrations (copy and paste from your submissions) of how that feedback was applied CONTINUOUSLY throughout the semester.
 - This should include written summaries highlighting your growth.
- You may want to have multiple samples here showing continued growth, as each week you may have improved something and then I challenged you to improve in another area.
 - I want to see long-term growth over the entire semester
- *Evidence could relate to depth of reflection, length of reflection, and time and effort dedicated to the reflections.*
- *Examples of changes in your attitude or approach to class concepts*
- Evidence of growth in your verbal participation in class discussions
- Outliers in your performance (written or verbal) and why those may have occurred
- What areas did you NOT improve in, and why do you think that was the case
- A summary of how YOU think you have grown and changed, in the way you prepared, the way you think about topics, the way you view the world in general
- What is different now from week 1 in the way you are approaching class content, both in class and in the world (you will need to write up a separate document on this, not something you have already submitted)
- Based on the evidence you have put together, what grade do you believe you earned this semester?

Compile this information in a clear and organized manner (portfolio-style) and bring it to our one-on-one meeting. Schedule your meeting time via the calendar on Blackboard

PLEASE NOTE: Your grade for this course is determined by your view on your own growth and development. However, that growth MUST be demonstrated through factual data and information provided in this portfolio. Failure to provide evidence in this portfolio that aligns with the grade you assign yourself may result in the instructor overriding the grade.

About the Authors

Katherine Griffes, Assistant Professor, State University of New York, Oneonta.
katherine.griffes@oneonta.edu

Chilton Reynolds, Director, Faculty Center for Teaching, Learning and Scholarship, State University of
New York, Oneonta. chilton.reynolds@oneonta.edu