

"It's About the Journey, Not the Destination"

Graduate Students' Perceptions of Ungrading

Nate Turcotte, Kea McElfresh, & Melissa Rodriguez-Meehan

DOI:10.59668/567.11198

Trauma

Feedback

Ungrading

Grade



In recent years, trauma-informed instructional practices have garnered significant interest among educators, researchers, and instructional designers, particularly as the Covid-19 pandemic ushered to the forefront the harsh realities many students were facing. As educators grapple with these challenges, we focus on a critical feature of a trauma-informed approach, specifically care and care for students' well-being. Current assessment practices that emphasize the role of grades in student learning cause grade-related traumas, including negatively impacting students' mental health and academic motivation. Through in-depth interviews with eight graduate students, this article reports on the students' perceptions of being in a course with grade-free assessments. Analysis reveals students perceived the ungrading process as a stress-free experience compared to their experiences with grades. More specifically, analysis of students' accounts identified that students perceived ungrading to foster collective reflection and feedback, encourage the pursuit of personal and professional interests related to course material, and restore a growth mindset toward assessments and learning, in general. We use this special issue as an opportunity to recognize ungrading as an assessment option in a trauma-informed approach and question how assessment, and instructional practices more broadly, fit within a system of care.

Introduction

Progressive, holistic education, "engaged pedagogy" is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. (hooks, 1994, p. 15, emphasis added)

The Covid-19 pandemic, coupled with racial injustice, disrupted students' educational experiences and continues to do. During this time of trauma, scholars of learning are calling for a reimagining of educational practices, including pedagogical and design approaches that are equitable and justice-oriented (McKinney de Royston & Vossoughi, 2021), and some may even argue centered on care and love (hooks, 1994). McKinney de Royston and Vossoughi (2021) suggest that as society is eager to return to normal:

We must not seek to reestablish what was 'normal' [education]. 'Normal' education flattened learning to individual achievement and competition, and teaching to accountability. 'Normal' education ignored the deep disconnects between academic learning, well-being and the realities of social and political life. (n.p.)

Using McKinney de Royston and Vossoughi's (2021) comments as caution and their call to attend to what is considered "normal," we question how "normal" assessment can often ignore students' learning, well-being, and reality. Briefly, we position the term "normal" assessment in line with forms of assessment that prioritize the use of traditional grades and grading structures, in particular assessments with numerical grades that are supposed to account for students' learning. In many instances, traditional grading practices "treat students like a product, a vessel to be filled with knowledge as opposed to a person who is central to the learning process" (Ferns et al., 2021, 4502). As such, we use this article to introduce the concept of "ungrading" (Blum, 2020; Stommel, 2018) to the instructional design community broadly, as well as scholars and educators interested in trauma-informed instructional practices.

We view ungrading, also referred to as going gradeless or grade-free assessment, in opposition to more traditional assessment practices due to its holistic approach and emphasis on building teacher-student relationships (Blum, 2020; Ferns et al., 2021), and conceptualize it as a possible trauma-informed alternative to "normal" assessment. An ungrading approach to assessment is one that prioritizes narrative feedback. With ungrading, students receive narrative feedback aimed at fostering reflection and a purposeful connection to their learning, instead of numerical grades. The goal is to deemphasize the talk of grades in exchange for dialogic engagement with students' learning and personal and professional needs. As a result, assessments, and teaching and learning practices in general, become relationship oriented. Instead of creating a learning environment focused on points, students are relieved of stressors consisting of grade point average, class ranking, and whether or not they have made the "A" (Chamberlin et al., 2020). As such, this research contributes to a growing area of interest in alternative forms of assessment (Blum, 2020; Feldman, 2019; Sackstein, 2015), and we leverage this special issue as an opportunity to draw connections between ungrading and a trauma-informed approach. More specifically, in this article, we examine graduate students' perceptions of being in an ungraded course, paying particular attention to how they articulate their ungraded experience.

As alternative forms of assessment grow in popularity, researchers have begun to examine students' perceptions of ungrading. In a recent study, Gorichanaz (2022) interviewed students that had experienced multiple courses with him, experiencing both ungrading and more traditional grading systems. During the interview process, Gorichanaz (2022) found that compared to students' graded experiences, students felt that ungrading "de-gamified" their learning experiences, where their learning was less about making a specific grade in exchange for a better understanding of the material. Students also expressed that ungrading provided time to reflect and deepen their learning, creating a space for cyclical feedback and dialogue between students and the instructor. Additionally, students perceived ungrading to encourage a view of learning as a collective endeavor instead of an isolated and comparative event. Further, in an examination of asynchronous online undergraduate students' perceptions of ungrading in an eight-week course, Guberman (2021) found that students associated ungrading with a positive course experience and an increase in intrinsic motivation. However, Guberman (2021) notes that deeper qualitative analysis is needed to understand how students' experiences of ungrading can demonstrate the effectiveness of the approach. As such, we take this as an opportunity to qualitatively add to the literature on students' perceptions of ungrading. Given this interest, we ask the following question:

How do students in an online graduate course perceive their experience of being in a grade-free course?

To set the stage for ungrading as a trauma-informed approach, we discuss how the Covid-19 pandemic brought scenes of student trauma to the forefront and initiated discussions of how our educational systems need to change to better

suit learners in the following section. We frame the “pandemic pause” as an opportunity to address many of the challenges students face, in particular, the effect of grades on students’ mental health and well-being. Then, given the concerns of grading practices, we theorize how treating assessment as part of a system of care can better support students learning in times of trauma and can help to avoid retraumatization.

Covid-19 and Trauma

At the time this research was initiated, the Covid-19 pandemic was widespread, burdening students with a new form of trauma they were unequipped to deal with (Imad, 2021). In response, trauma-informed instructional practices are a growing interest among educators and educational researchers (Carello & Butler, 2014, 2015; Crosby et al., 2018; Minahan, 2019). So, as educators and designers, we must consider how these practices can be implemented in teaching and learning contexts.

Following Alvarez (2017), we view trauma as the fixed-term or “ongoing physical, social, and/ or psychological strain, which may disrupt a student’s everyday thoughts, feelings, and practices” (p. 54; see also, Hanover Research, 2019). Schools and classrooms are often sites where trauma can come to the forefront, and as educators, researchers, and designers, we must recognize how trauma can be caused by one’s environment and impact learning. One pedagogical strategy central to dealing with trauma is to refocus pedagogical practices on students’ well-being (Imad, 2021).

To frame ungrading as a practice that supports students’ well-being, and more generally as assessment in a system of care, we briefly discuss how “normal” assessment—assessment that prioritizes numerical ranking and quantification—further mental health and academic concerns. Then, we examine literature that explores the negative effects of grades and discuss how assessment, as part of a system of care, is critical to a trauma-informed approach. As such, we use this space to explore how ungrading fosters both a trauma-informed approach and one that centers on students’ needs and lived experiences.

Concerns about Mental Health and Stress

Even before the pandemic, grading practices and the effects of grades were a concern for educators and educational researchers (Kohn, 1999; Stommel, 2018). Of these concerns, two of the primary concerns have revolved around how grades affect students’ academic motivation and mental health (Chamberlin et al., 2020). For instance, Chamberlin et al., (2020) mixed-methods study exposed that students whose assessment was narrative-based experienced increased academic performance, while comparatively, students who received only grades as part of their assessments were likely to feel “anxiety, a sense of hopelessness, social comparison, as well as a fear of failure” (p. 11). Moreover, Chamberlin and colleagues’ (2020) research continues to support the notion that feedback is more effective for intrinsic motivation than grades by themselves. These outcomes are also well documented among medical students and have resulted in medical school programs forgoing grades for narrative-based approaches like pass-fail. For instance, Seligman and colleagues’ (2021) research with pre-med students found that medical students perceived the shift to a pass/fail system coupled with formative feedback from numerical-based assessment positively, especially in terms of student well-being. Even more, Seligman et al. (2021) suggest that in addition to significant increases in intrinsic motivation, formative feedback facilitated heightened engagement in their clinical experiences and patient care practices. Similarly, Lam et al. (2017) identified that instructors’ feedback on students’ work improved students’ intrinsic motivation and led to students’ increased engagement in learning activities outside of the course. So, why not just pair feedback with grades, since formative feedback is a well-known strategy for supporting students learning (Ruiz-Primo & Brookhart, 2018)? Our justification lies in Butler’s (1988) research that indicates that when formative feedback is accompanied by the presence of a grade, the feedback is often disregarded (Chamberlin et al., 2020).

While research continues to point to the mental health concerns associated with grades (Bejarano & Soderling, 2021; Brännlund et al., 2017), medical programs and schools are increasingly shifting to qualitative-based assessment. Indeed, according to a recent questionnaire conducted by the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC, 2021), the grading systems used in medical school have transitioned overwhelmingly to narrative-based assessments (e.g.,

pass-fail, honors-pass-fail), a shift that has been prompted by the stress and anxiety associated with grades (Seligman et al., 2021). This transition in medical school programs begs the question, what about the rest of higher education?

The effects of grades continue to wreak havoc on students no matter their academic interests or programs, and should be of serious concern (Burke, 2020; Eyler, 2022). According to Eyler (2022), rates of anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation have spiked dramatically in recent years, and academic stress tied to grades is the leading cause of this escalation. The pandemic has only exacerbated this problem, and as a result, students across the U.S. are advocating for a change in grading structures (Burke, 2020), and requesting a reimagining of what is considered “normal” assessment. As educators aware of these findings, we present ungrading as a possible solution.

Assessment as a System of Care

Not surprisingly, the last two years have brought about increased interest and discussion of alternative and more holistic forms of teaching and learning practices, including assessment methods (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2020). Indeed, as the pandemic hit, higher education witnessed universities across the country enact policies that removed grades from their classrooms (Basken, 2020; Burke, 2020), providing a moment to imagine new educational futures. Considering the effects the pandemic has burdened students with, Veletsianos and Houlden (2020) call for “radical flexibility” and an “educational environment in which the people participating and supporting education are understood to be and thus treated as holistic beings” (p. 857). Embedded in Veletsianos and Houlden’s sentiment is, as educators, researchers, and designers, we must be cognizant of the challenges and injustices students face and adopt pedagogical methods supporting students in their time of need. Inspired by this, we sketch out a possible future, one where assessment prioritizes care and well-being—assessment as a system of care.

Framing ungrading as trauma-informed practice, we are reminded of the literature that has explored teaching and learning practices, and education more generally, as a system of care. Nel Noddings (1988), for instance, inspires thoughtful dialogue around the role of care in education. Noddings (1988) reminds us that relationships are fundamental to an ethic of care, suggesting that “to shape such persons, teachers need not only intellectual capacity, but also a fund of knowledge about the particular persons with whom they are working” (p. 221). As such, the dialogic nature of ungrading espouses personal relationships with students and a commitment to recognizing their interests, histories, and experiences. This commitment is one that trauma-informed approaches are built on, and so, as students’ trauma continues to impact their learning, educators must be prepared to deal with these challenges and recognize their responsibility in mitigating the effects of trauma (Crosby et al., 2018). These traumas cannot be ignored either, as they are central to teaching. Alvarez (2017), for instance, documented the practices of an educator who responded to their students’ needs after a recent shooting in their community and found that as students’ traumatic experiences permeated the boundaries of classroom walls, the act of teaching is a part of a system of care. This demands the question: how do our assessment practices contribute to this system?

Imad (2021) argues that to meet students’ needs, educational practices must center on care and well-being as part of a framework for trauma-informed practices. Ingrained in these principles is a recognition that learning is a relational endeavor and process that requires educators to be empathic of students’ social realities. To develop these relationships, Ferns and colleagues (2021) suggest a care-focused approach requires personal knowledge along with sharing and empathizing with students. Meyers et al. (2019) define teacher empathy as the “degree to which instructors work to deeply understand students’ personal and social situations, feel caring and concern in response to students’ positive and negative emotions, and communicate their understanding and caring to students through their behavior” (p. 161). As such, a pedagogical approach that centers on care and well-being must include a willingness to embrace students’ needs and lived experiences. Indeed, Meyers and colleagues (2019) argue cultivating empathetic relationships with students is critical for developing high-quality student-teacher relationships and learning (p. 160). Further, Douglas (2020) advocates “we teach, assess, and refine so that ultimately, we have lesson plans that anyone can teach that will cover exactly the outcomes we want to address and yield uniform results in learning. But learning is never uniform” (p. 58). As such, what practices might educators enable to reflect the lack of uniform in learners’ realities? In that spirit, we present ungrading as an alternative to the “norm” and “uniform” that is positioned within a system of care by accounting for students’ needs, histories, and realities.

Method

Research Context and Course Design

This research took place at a large university in the southeastern United States. Graduate student participants included in this research were students in a graduate-level online Introduction to Educational Technology course taught by the first author in the fall of 2021. In total, 13 students were enrolled in the course, with eight willing to participate in interviews about their experience. Of the eight students, each of these individuals came with a range of educational experiences. For instance, some students had recently completed their undergraduate degrees and had moved directly into a graduate degree program, while others were more established in their careers. Moreover, out of the eight students who were interviewed, six had careers in PK-12 educational settings as classroom teachers or teacher assistants, one student was a graphic designer, and one student worked as a designer and trainer in IT cybersecurity. Significantly, given the diversity in the background of students, many came into the course with a range of educational experiences and beliefs about the function and purpose of grading practices.

To prepare students for the ungrading process, they were introduced to a range of resources at the beginning of the course, including Stommel's (2018) ungrading guide and Kohn's (1999) review of grading practices. As we navigated the course together, we used these articles as foundational readings for understanding the purpose and goals of ungrading. In addition to these readings, the first author developed a grading philosophy that was made public to students and served as a discussion piece, and started the semester with a virtual class session where he further elaborated on the grade-free approach, how it would work in their course, and provided students an opportunity to ask clarifying questions. Notably, before this course, not a single student had experienced a grade-free course or had heard of ungrading.

As expected, students were initially uneasy about the approach as it conflicted with their past educational experiences as well as with many of the practices the current teachers were utilizing in their classrooms. Moreover, some students were worried about receiving credit from the university and their workplace for taking the course. So, it was explained to students that similar to any other college course, they would receive a grade at the end of the semester, however, how that grade was determined would be a bit different. Indeed, instead of every assignment in the course having points associated with it, activities submitted were marked either "complete" or "incomplete," and accompanied by narrative feedback. Leveraging Canvas for the course made this design feature easy to organize and maintain for both the students and the instructor. The only assignments that had points associated with them were a series of three "process letters" and the capstone project for the course which was required to have a grade by the program and college. However, Canvas allowed the instructor to provide a grade on the student's course capstone projects and not have it count for this course grade, while still providing the program and college with the required data.

A core feature of the ungrading approach is the "process letters" that students write periodically throughout the semester. These letters serve as opportunities for students to engage in self-reflection and are designed to have students engage and discuss their learning in-depth. At the end of each process letter, students are asked to provide themselves with a grade (0-100) that serves as a conversation starter between them and the instructor. Essentially, as students discuss and reflect on their learning, they develop a detailed rationale for their grade while remaining focused on their learning and not just completing an activity to earn points.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research followed a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2014) bound by graduate students enrolled in the ungraded and online Introduction to Educational Technology course. This study was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board of Research in the fall of 2021. Upon approval, the instructor informed the students that he would be conducting interviews after the semester to not interfere with their course experience or influence their perception and participation in the course in any way.

Once the semester was completed and grades had been submitted to the university, the instructor reached out to the students to solicit their involvement in the research. All 13 students enrolled in the course consented to have their

course artifacts (e.g., process letters) included in the study. However, our primary form of data collection was semi-structured interviews with eight students. These semi-structured interviews with students focused on their perceptions of being ungraded, including how they perceived ungrading to affect their learning. In many cases, students used their previous experiences with grades to contextualize how they felt about being in a grade-free course.

The recorded interviews took place on Zoom and ranged from 20 to 50 minutes. During the interviews, the research team took fieldnotes that were referred back to when analyzing the transcripts. Each interview was transcribed using an automation transcription service and then manually corrected by members of the research team. Next, the team analyzed the interviews, which included multiple rounds of iterative open coding, where interviews were first individually analyzed and then reviewed and discussed as a group (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After generating initial codes, the team met and discussed their codes, leading to a consensus on codes. Immediately, we recognized that students perceived ungrading as a break from the stressful and often anxiety-causing environment created by grades. As we further analyzed how students perceived this effect, we found three themes. Students perceived ungrading to: foster and encourage deep collective reflection and feedback; promote the pursuit of personal and professional interests related to course material; restore a growth mindset toward assessment and learning in general. Additionally, we used the artifacts students created for the class, including students' process letters to support our interpretation of their perceptions.

Findings

In the following, we report on the themes that emerged from our interviews with students. During our interviews, students spoke at great length about the concerning effects grades have had on their mental health and well-being. Recognizing ungrading as a stress-free endeavor and as an overarching theme, our analysis identifies how students perceived and experienced such a system.

Emphasizing Process over Product

Students perceived ungrading to be an approach that shifted learning and assessment from an isolated effort to a collective and reflective endeavor, more concerned about the process of what and how students learned than getting a specific grade. Specifically, we examine how ungrading encouraged deep student reflection, positioned learning as a collective endeavor, and resulted in students who are practicing teachers reflecting on their assessment practices. Similar to Gorichanaz's (2022) finding that students perceived ungrading to de-gamify the learning process, students' concerns about grades were often exchanged for excitement about reflection in our interviews.

Given the importance of narrative feedback to the ungrading approach, the instructor's feedback, in many cases, drove reflection. Lois [pseudonym], a current high school teacher, spoke to us about how this experience was much different from her experiences as both a teacher and student. Lois noted being in a gradeless class shifted her mindset from focusing on what she got as a grade on every assignment to what the feedback is, stating that "you are really thirsting for that [feedback]" because "even when you do almost everything correctly, there's still always room for improvement [in understanding]." As we talked with Lois about her desire for feedback, it was clear the feedback she received from her instructor drove her to consider alternative viewpoints and reflect on her understanding. Similarly, Nadia, a middle school teacher, suggested being ungraded lent itself to reflection opportunities, unlike previous experiences in graded courses where "I had to force myself to go back over the material . . . And if I had gotten an A on it, I never would have looked at the assignment again."

In general, the students' interest in reflection was not just felt by the current educators in the course though. Denise, a designer and trainer, suggested the lack of grades paired with increased feedback allowed her to "just really focus more on reflecting on what I had learned during the course." However, more importantly, these moments of reflection were not just isolated incidents, rather they were cyclical events Denise engaged in throughout the semester. For example, while discussing her experience writing the process letters, Denise stated:

It was a really nice way to build upon our knowledge . . . I found myself in the subsequent letter that I had written, going back to prior ones to do a deeper reflection and review of what I had already compiled and seeing how my viewpoint had shifted.

As we interviewed students, it became clear that part of students' reflective processes included ensuring they were meeting their own learning needs. This endeavor, helped students recognize shifts in their learning, and as Denise mentioned, placed students in a position to be responsive to their learning needs. As a result, Barrett, a graphic designer, stated:

[Being ungraded] was like looking in the mirror. 'Hey, you can step it up here.' Or 'hey, you can improve here.' Or, 'hey you need to read more or you need to study, or you need to spend more time in this area.'

Significantly, reflection was not just isolated to the process letters. Kris, a current high school teacher, suggested the reflection and feedback cycles that accompanied each assessment positioned his learning as a collective endeavor with the teacher. In comparison to getting comments on previous work where the emphasis was on what they had done wrong, Kris framed the feedback he received as "not telling us what to do. But you're getting us to engage with each other, and you're facilitating that navigation . . . like connecting the dots." Nested in Kris' response is that the feedback he received motivated reflection and encouraged him to make "connections" between class topics. Moreover, Kris positions this process as a collective endeavor that has cascading effects on students' learning practices. Lois, for example, suggests the emphasis on feedback encouraged her to provide feedback to her classmates in a way that would spark reflection. Specifically, Lois discussed her participation in asynchronous class discussions, stating "it was funny because I was waiting for somebody else's response like I was waiting for a sparring partner. I was waiting for someone to challenge what I was [writing] or for them to ask me about [my response]." For Lois, the emphasis on feedback promoted reflective processes she wanted to engage in with her fellow students.

Additionally, for the current and pre-service educators in the course, being ungraded led students to reflect on their assessment practices. Lois, for example, recognized how grading affected her students, recalling a situation with one of her students where they asked matter-of-factly "what is the least amount of work I can do to get a C?" This experience greatly contradicted many of the feelings Lois was having with ungrading, stating "this is my fault! I have done this to them" pointing to the lack of care her students have about their learning. Although Barrett's role in formal schooling practices is less prominent, he questioned the role of grades, asking "who's benefiting from [normal] assessment?!" suggesting it is not the learners. Nadia added:

I see firsthand as a teacher, kids that chase the 'A.' They're doing everything you're asking; you're giving them the A but they don't know the material. And, they don't understand the concepts because they're not taking the time to learn the concepts. They're taking the time to do whatever you want them to do by jumping through hoops.

Following Relevant Interests

Students perceived ungrading as providing them with more opportunities to make connections to their personal and professional interests. As students reflected on their experience of being ungraded, they suggested that not having to deal with the pressure associated with grades, reduced their anxiety related to participating in class activities. As a result, in some cases, students felt this lack of stress encouraged them to engage further with course topics related to their personal and professional interests.

Olivia, a pre-service educator, felt that being in a grade-free course encouraged her to participate and learn in ways that were much different from her previous class experiences:

I definitely noticed myself doing my assignments slightly differently . . . But, overall, I think it changed for me [comparing her experience to a graded course she was taking concurrently] because I did a lot more research. Like [in addition to] the resources I was provided within each module or even with the ideas provided by my peers in the class, I still went out of my way during my free time to read more about it [the

course topics] because once you're in college you get to dwindle down what you really want to learn and now that I'm in the education field, it's something I'm passionate about. And so, it was almost like a weight off my shoulders to know that 'okay grading isn't a huge priority in this course. I definitely did my assignments a bit differently, and I involved myself more in the content that was provided versus just doing the assignment and calling it a day.'

For Olivia, removing grades provided her with the space to pursue course topics in greater detail and at her own pace. She then went on to reveal "I ended up reading new resources and looking through new ideas and stuff like that and so I think, again, the focus is on your learning!" As such, Olivia's interest encouraged two forms of deeper participation in the course: searching out additional resources; and engaging in course content to understand it deeply instead of for a grade. Similarly, Denise perceived not being graded as an opportunity "to be more focused on the task at hand and do some deeper exploration into other topics that were closely aligned, but we're more suited for what I do professionally."

For other students, the removal of grades allowed them to feel like they could put their personal touch on the course. Ester, an elementary teacher, perceived her experience as an opportunity to be more engaged in the course, especially during asynchronous class discussions. Throughout the course, Ester went out of her way to engage as many of her peers as possible in class discussions because she was interested in their perspectives and work. Ester suggested how students interacted in this course conflicted with her previous experiences, recalling that "nobody's thinking about 'Oh if I have to do something, it's because I have to answer two peers, or it's because it's for a grade.'" Similarly, Lois found discussions without grades allowed her to add her personality to the class activity. Comparing her previous course experiences, and her interests in ungrading, she went on to say "Yeah, but I also didn't want to sacrifice my own creativity. I didn't want to sacrifice my out-of-the-box thinking, and I think it [ungrading] allowed that out-of-the-box thinking to shine more!"

Opportunities for Growth and Healing

Students perceived ungrading to be an opportunity for growth. Specifically, we share how students, particularly non-native English-speaking students, viewed ungrading to be less biased than their previous experiences with grades. As a result, we share how ungrading encouraged students to view class material as an opportunity for learning and not just assignments to complete.

As students who had never experienced being in a gradeless course, or a course deemphasizing the role of grades for that matter, they had been conditioned to think about grades and grading practices in a specific way, namely as extrinsic motivation and ranking. As revealed throughout our findings, grades, for many, were the source of various traumas related to stress, pressure, and anxiety that inhibited their learning. In addition to these perceived ill effects, several students mentioned ungrading seemed to overcome bias in grading practices. Kris, a non-native English speaker, shared that he felt graded assessments were often biased against him and his knowledge. Similarly, Ester, another non-native English speaker, spoke at great length about how she had often been marked lower compared to her English-speaking peers on writing assessments. She believed this to be the case not because she did not understand or demonstrate her knowledge of the content, but because she had trouble demonstrating the nuances of the English language. Considering these challenges, Ester expressed excitement for ungrading and Kris positioned it as creating a more "inclusive environment," where their experience was "much more honest" in terms of how students are assessed and how that assessment takes shape.

In addition to being more transparent for students, the release of pressure associated with getting a grade resulted in an opportunity for students to focus on their learning. Denise, spoke directly to this point in her interview, sharing:

It was a lot easier to just focus on the assignment and not be so tied up with what grade am I actually going to get, which alleviated a lot of anxiety . . . It was not putting so much pressure on myself to make a, you know, to make a grade or make sure that I am getting a grade. I really focused more on, just my overall grasp of the material and I think that was apparent in the way that I submitted my assignments. It's not that I didn't care—You know it's not that I didn't care about what I was submitting but I didn't [have to] care about getting graded. And so, I was able to just truly provide my take on what I was learning and not

thinking about like, 'Okay, how is this going to be perceived as, you know—Have I hit every checkpoint on a rubric that I needed to in order to get all the points that I could possibly get?' So, it allowed me to just really focus more on reflecting on what I had learned during the course.

For Denise, as well as for many other students, the removal of grades provided a sense of freedom. Significantly, this freedom did not result in taking advantage of the situation. Instead, as was exemplified by Denise's work, it led to greater effort on assignments and trying to deeply understand the material.

Similar to Denise, students saw ungraded assessments as an opportunity to grow their understanding. Lois, for instance, perceived the ungrading process to "feel like there was less pressure involved and it was more about what I needed. It was more about my own journey, instead of my own destination." Furthermore, Olivia, discussed how her experiences with grades have forced her to treat assessments in specific ways stating "I think that it really exemplifies how much grading is ingrained in the way we think about school and education," and thanks to the grade-free experience:

I have a larger growth-mindset because [I know] it's not going to count against me if I'm trying—And if I want to learn more and it's known that I want to learn more, versus a teacher simply going to put a number on it and that's it, you're done.

Olivia, both simply and eloquently, articulates her greatest perceived benefit of ungrading—it encouraged her to approach her learning and assessment with a growth mindset. More specifically, Olivia saw ungrading as an opportunity to further develop her learning and understanding of the material (Dweck, 2015), not just to cover it once and move on to the next topic. Similar to her peers' exploration of course content, Olivia viewed her learning as cyclical and as a process that could vary in depth depending on her interest. In this manner, students were focused more on the process of learning, often associated with a growth mindset (Dweck, 2015), than fixating on an end result.

Discussion

This article reported online graduate students' perceptions of being in a grade-free course. Similar to Gorichanaz (2022) and Guberman (2021), our students' previous experiences with ungrading and grades encouraged reflection of past trauma, from stress associated with an overt focus on ranking to anxiety and feelings of persecution associated with the way students expressed their ideas in writing assignments. However, as shown in our findings, students perceived ungrading to be a positive shift away from "normal" assessment and a more appropriate means for supporting their learning. Moreover, due to the holistic nature of ungrading, students: (1) desired to engage in feedback and reflection cycles, as was the case with Lois, Nadia, and Barrett; (2) tie their course learning to their professional and personal contexts, both inside and out of education, like Olivia and Denise; and, (3) complete assessments without the fear of making a mistake that would lose them points, similar to Kris, Ester, and Denise.

In many ways, grades created very traumatic experiences for a couple of students included in this research. One deeply troubling experience was shared by Ester while discussing how she felt some grading practices were biased against non-native English speakers. Ester shared that in her previous online courses, she would go back through the discussions and compare what she had written to what her peers had written. Frequently, she found that the theme of her posts were similar to her peers, and were often completed in greater detail. However, she typically received a lower grade, with points taken off for grammar and syntax. Although being able to communicate and write at a high-level is important, especially in graduate programs, we argue that the nature of traditional assessment completely ignores what ungrading champions, namely Ester's reality and learning of the content matter.

As interest in trauma-informed instructional approaches in educational settings garner more interest, ungrading is just one approach to assessment that prioritizes student well-being. We do not intend to position ungrading as the only approach to assessment that prioritizes student learning, but we do leverage our understanding of the ungrading practice to question how other forms of assessment can prioritize student learning and well-being. Even more, how might the intentions of ungrading, specifically its relational nature inspire pedagogical approaches more broadly? We

suggest that ungrading prompts an audit of educators' and designers' assumptions about assessment and assessment practices to uncover the implicit biases they might promote.

Conclusion

We began this article by sharing our concerns with assessment practices that prioritize grades over learning, suggesting that these assessment practices ignore the reality of students and the potential trauma grades reproduce. Thinking through how the pandemic has affected students, we queried, what would happen if assessment was pursued as part of a system of care. We suggest given the impact grades have on students' mental health and well-being, and educational experiences in general, encouraging approaches that deemphasize the presence of grades in students' academic endeavors are needed. Based on students' perceptions of ungrading in this article, we have positioned the ungrading method as one that leverages care for students and their learning, and can promote trauma-informed teaching practices by minimizing the stressful and anxiety-inducing effect grades manifest. Moreover, the intentionality of care in ungrading practices only furthers the alignment with trauma-informed teaching (Minahan, 2019). We find it most interesting given the context in which students were enrolled in this course and this study—amid a global pandemic—not a single interview participant discussed the hardships they were facing. Instead, their perceptions focused on how ungrading made them feel free, excited, and engaged in their learning.

Furthermore, ungrading is just one element in a system of care. As such, how might different forms of pedagogy, learning environments, and instructional design contribute to this system? It is unrealistic, at this moment in time, to expect grades to disappear in education entirely. However, we hope that this article and research encourages thoughtful discourse of where and when grades are necessary or even not needed.

References

- Alvarez, A. (2017). "Seeing their eyes in the rearview mirror": Identifying and responding to students' challenging experiences. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 50(1), 53–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2016.1250686>
- Association of American Medical Colleges (2021). *Grading systems used in medical school programs*. <https://www.aamc.org/data-reports/curriculum-reports/interactive-data/grading-systems-used-medical-school-programs>
- Basken, P. (2020, April 6). *US colleges adopt pass-fail rules, stirring wider reform*. Times Higher Education. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/us-colleges-adopt-pass-fail-rules-stirring-wider-reform>
- Bejarano, C. A., & Soderling, S. (2021). Against grading: Feminist studies beyond the neoliberal university. *Feminist Formations*, 33(2), 208–232. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2021.0032>
- Blum, S. (2020). *Ungrading: why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)*. West Virginia University Press.
- Brännlund, A., Strandh, M., & Nilsson, K. (2017). Mental-health and educational achievement: The link between poor mental-health and upper secondary school completion and grades. *Journal of Mental Health*, 26(4), 318–325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2017.1294739>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Burke, L. (2020, March 19). *#PassFailNation*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/03/19/colleges-go-passfail-address-coronavirus>

- Butler, R. (1988). Enhancing and undermining intrinsic motivation: The effects of task-involving and ego-involving evaluation on interest and performance. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 58(1), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8279.1988.tb00874.x>
- Carello, J., & Butler, L. D. (2014). Potentially perilous pedagogies: Teaching trauma is not the same as trauma-informed teaching. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 15(2), 153-168 <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2014.867571>
- Carello, J., & Butler, L. D. (2015). Practicing what we teach: Trauma-informed educational practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 35(3), 262-278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2015.1030059>
- Chamberlin, K., Yasué, M., & Chiang, I. C. A. (2018). *The impact of grades on student motivation*. Active Learning in Higher Education. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787418819728>
- Crosby, S. D., Howell, P., & Thomas, S. (2018). Social justice education through trauma-informed teaching. *Middle School Journal*, 49(4), 15–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2018.1488470>
- Dweck, C. (2015, September 22). Carol Dweck revisits the 'growth mindset'. *Education Week*, 35(5), 20-25. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-carol-dweck-revisits-the-growth-mindset/2015/09>
- Eyler, J. (2022, March 7). *Grades are at the center of the student mental health crisis*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/grades-are-center-student-mental-health-crisis>
- Feldman, J. (2019). *Grading for equity: What it is, why it matters, and how it can transform schools and classrooms*. Corwin.
- Ferns, S., Hickey, R., & Williams, H. (2021). Ungrading, supporting our students through a pedagogy of care. *International Journal for Cross-Disciplinary Subjects in Education*, 12(2), 4500-4504. <https://doi.org/10.20533/ijcdse.2042.6364.2021.0550>
- Gorichanaz, T. (2022). *"It made me feel like it was okay to be wrong": Student experiences with ungrading*. *Active Learning in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14697874221093640>
- Guberman, D. (2021). Student Perceptions of an Online Ungraded Course. *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*, 9(1), 86–98. <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearningu.9.1.8>
- Hanover Research. (2019). *Best Practices for Trauma-Informed Instruction*. <https://www.hanoverresearch.com/insights-blog/k-12-trauma-informed-resources-for-coping-with-tragedy-loss/?org=k-12-education>
- Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Imad, M. (2021). Transcending adversity: Trauma-informed educational development. *To Improve the Academy: A Journal of Educational Development*, 39(3). <https://doi.org/10.3998/tia.17063888.0039.301>
- Kohn, A. (1999). *From degrading to de-grading*. High School Magazine. <https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/degrading-de-grading/>
- Lam, B-H., Wing-yi, R., & Yang, M. (2017). Formative feedback as a global facilitator: Impact on intrinsic motivation and positive affect. In S. C. Kong, T-L, Wong, M. Yang, C. F. Chow, & K. H. Tse (Eds.), *Emerging practices in scholarship of learning and teaching in a digital era* (pp. 265-288). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-3344-5_17
- McKinney de Royston, M., & Vossoughi, S. (2021, January 18). *Fixating on pandemic "learning loss" undermines the need to transform education*. Truthout. <https://truthout.org/articles/fixating-on-pandemic-learning-loss-undermines-the-need-to-transform-education/>

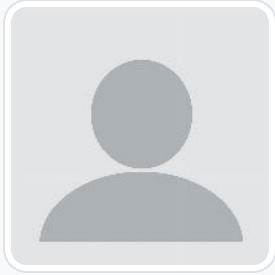
- Meyers, S., Rowell, K., Wells, M., & Smith, B. C. (2019). Teacher empathy: A model of empathy for teaching for student success. *College Teaching*, 67(3), 160–168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2019.1579699>
- Minahan, J. (2019). Trauma-informed teaching strategies. *Educational Leadership*, 77(2), 30-35. <https://canicollege.com/trauma-informed-teaching-strategies/>
- Noddings, N. (1988). An ethic of caring and its implications for instructional arrangements. *American Journal of Education*, 96(2), 215–230. <https://doi.org/10.1086/443894>
- Sackstein, S. (2015). Hacking assessment: 10 ways to go gradeless in a traditional grades school. Times 10 Publications.
- Seligman, L., Abdullahi, A., Teherani, A., & Hauer, K. E. (2021). From grading to assessment for learning: A qualitative study of student perceptions surrounding elimination of core clerkship grades and enhanced formative feedback. *Teaching and Learning in Medicine*, 33(3), 314–325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10401334.2020.1847654>
- Stommel, J. (2018, March 11). *How to ungrade*. Jesse Stommel. <https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/>
- Veletsianos, G., & Houlden, S. (2020). Radical flexibility and relationality as responses to education in times of crisis. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2(3), 849-862. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00196-3>
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). SAGE.



Nate Turcotte

Florida Gulf Coast University

Nate Turcotte is an Assistant Professor of Learning, Design and Innovation at Florida Gulf Coast University. His research explores teaching and learning across formal and informal technology-rich settings.



Kea McElfresh

Florida Gulf Coast University

Kea McElfresh is a seventeen-year veteran educator and will be graduating from FGCU in May this year with her Master's in Educational Technology. Kea is inspired by the findings she and her colleagues are discovering with their research on Ungrading.



Melissa Rodriguez-Meehan

Melissa Rodriguez-Meehan is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood/Elementary Education. As a former elementary school teacher, she is passionate about building relationships with students and creating positive learning environments. Her research focuses on student-centered pedagogical approaches, play-based learning, and incorporating student voice and choice in K-12 and higher education settings.



This content is provided to you freely by EdTech Books.

Access it online or download it at https://edtechbooks.org/jaid_12_1/its_about_the_journe.

