

Foreword to Ungrading

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2020

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***Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, edited by Susan D. Blum (West Virginia University Press, 2020)**

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Three concepts emerged independently in different fields: quantum leaps (in particle physics), punctuated equilibrium (in evolutionary biology), and paradigm shifts (in the history of science). All converge on the revelation that change doesn't always take place incrementally. Sometimes things stay pretty much the same for a long time, and then, suddenly – ka-pow! – rapid transformation that seems to come out of nowhere.

This notion is intriguing precisely because it's so counterintuitive. And it's counterintuitive because evolution is a lot more common than revolution in everyday human affairs. Most people, including teachers, don't wake up one morning prepared to adopt radically different practices. And gradual change is fine – as long as we don't underdo it. In other words, the first tentative step we take shouldn't be the

extent of our journey.

I'd like to describe some specific ways that this principle might play out where grading is concerned. In each case, I've taken the liberty of describing a two-step process in order to call attention to the insufficiency of the first step.

1. We start by worrying about grade inflation before gradually coming to realize that the real problem is grades themselves. The trouble isn't that too many students are getting A's but that too many students have been led to believe the primary purpose of schooling is to get A's. Making it more difficult to receive a high grade (in the name of academic rigor or "high standards") not only doesn't solve the underlying problem but makes things worse by ensuring that grades will be even more salient to students.

2. We acknowledge that ranking students or grading them on a curve – in both cases setting them against one another for artificially scarce distinctions, thus rigging the game so that everyone can't succeed – is not only counterproductive for learning but, frankly, immoral. So we make sure that everyone can, in theory, get an A. Only then do we realize that rating, too, is a problem, even if it's less egregious than ranking. We've eliminated the strychnine of competition, but there's more to be done if we're still dispensing the arsenic of extrinsic motivation. Judging students on a relative basis (so that each comes to be viewed as an obstacle to the others' success) compounds the damage done by grades, but it doesn't exhaust the damage done by grades.

3. Step one: After reading the research showing that grading has three predictable effects – less interest in learning, a preference for easier tasks, and shallower thinking – we stop using letters and numbers to rate what students have done and instead use descriptive labels such as "needs improvement," "developing," "meeting/exceeding expectations," "proficient," "mastery." Step two: We realize that these are really just

grades (on a four- or five-point scale) by a different name and that we need to get rid of them, too.

4. First we dispense with ratings in favor of narrative reports. But then we realize that narratives are still monologues. If we prefer dialogue, we have to do more asking than telling. That means engaging in conversations (conferences) with students rather than just firing off comments for them to ponder.

5. Another variation of the preceding progression: If the first step has us moving from grades to (qualitative) feedback, the second is to ask whether what we're *calling* feedback – a term that, strictly speaking, refers to information – is really just a judgment. We may end up deciding that it's impossible or undesirable to completely avoid evaluation in our comments to students, but that's a decision that needs to be defended. We should stop calling it feedback if it's not purely descriptive. And we may want to adjust the ratio of genuine feedback ("Here's what I've noticed...") to judgment ("Here's what I like and dislike about what you've done...") that we're offering.

6. Old-school grading strikes us as creaky and unfair, so we shift to some version of what's called "standards-based" grading – a reasonable first step. But eventually it occurs to us that this solves exactly none of the most serious harms caused by grading. Those harms weren't due to a lack of precision; in fact, more precision in the form of quantified ratings can actually exacerbate the negative effect that grades have on students' intrinsic motivation and depth of understanding. Similarly, there are only limited benefits to assorted other minor changes: True, it's hard to defend giving students zeroes (which can sink their average irrecoverably), or to merely average the marks on multiple assignments to yield a final grade (which ignores improvement), or to factor things like attendance or behavior into grades, or to deny students the chance to rewrite a paper or otherwise bring up a

grade (which implies we're more interested in playing "Gotcha!" than in assessing their best effort). But ultimately these are all peripheral issues. Eventually, perhaps reluctantly, we see the need to move on to step two – eliminating any sort of grading – if we're truly committed to creating a focus on learning.

7. We begin by accepting the idea that a "growth mindset" is desirable, and we set about helping students to see the role of effort in determining success. The next step, though, is to realize that this whole framework has the effect of blaming individuals for lacking the correct attitude or orientation – and, consequently, of shifting our focus away from systemic barriers. An emphasis on defective mindsets (or a tendency to accuse students of being insufficiently motivated) conveniently lets us off the hook. It's popular for the same reason that we may be tempted to believe that the problem is grade-grubbing students rather than grade-giving instructors and institutions.

8. It occurs (or is suggested) to us that, even though we're required to turn in a final grade for students, we're not required to decide unilaterally what that grade will be. So we stop using grades as bribes or threats. We meet with students individually and ask them to propose a course grade for themselves, while reserving the right to decide whether to accept their suggestions. This is an excellent first step...on the path to relinquishing veto power. Ultimately, ungrading – eliminating the control-based function of grades, with all of its attendant harms – means that, as long as the noxious institutional requirement to submit a final grade remains in place, whatever grade each student decides on is the grade we turn in, period.

9. Clarity begins at home, as the old saying almost has it. We start by understanding what's going on in our own classroom and act accordingly; that's logical because it's where we enjoy at least a measure of autonomy. We eliminate grades on

individual assignments, do what we can so that the prospect of final grades remains as invisible as possible for as long as possible, and allow students to choose those final grades. But the second step – which is actually a long, hard, uphill climb, and is no less urgent for its difficulty – is to look *beyond* our own classrooms, to stop seeing that noxious institutional requirement as a fact of life like the weather and start seeing it as a policy that can be questioned and ultimately reversed. So we press administrators for the right to offer our courses only on a pass/fail basis. (It's remarkable how many educators who understand the destructive effects of grades have never even attempted this.) Simultaneously, we organize and mobilize our colleagues to work for the abolition of letter and number grades altogether. That may mean setting up a faculty-student committee to investigate how other schools have gone grade-free and to explore better ways to report information about students' progress. Classroom ungrading is, let's remember, just a stopgap measure, an attempt to minimize the damaging effects of the final grade. And individual courses taken pass/fail may seem less consequential than graded courses to students who have been socialized to think that grades matter more than learning. What happens in our classrooms is the low-hanging fruit, but that fruit isn't enough for a full meal. By all means, pick it – and then go get some ladders.

*

The various two-step advances that I've been describing are meant to get us closer to wiping out grades once and for all. But this daunting goal is itself part of an even more ambitious journey. Because much has been written elsewhere about these topics – and also because this is, after all, only a foreword, not a book in itself – I will briefly describe only two dimensions of that journey.

First, 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 that their attention is directed to how well they're doing, the less engaged they tend to be with what they're doing.* In fact, getting students to keep taking their temperature, so to speak, has a range of disconcerting effects – on intellectual development, curiosity, risk-taking, psychological health, and relationships with fellow learners.¹

This body of research is either unknown to, or overlooked by, even some critics of grades, who embrace alternative evaluation strategies that do nothing to ameliorate – and may even exacerbate – a preoccupation with performance at the expense of learning. Rubrics are a case in point: They just offer a wider variety of (standardized) criteria for judging students. Even if we have the good sense to strip them of numerical ratings, a critical first step to detoxifying them, rubrics are all about evaluation. They offer umpteen different axes along which to make students think about their performance – often at the cost of becoming less immersed in what they're doing.

The same is true of any system that assigns points to students for completing various tasks to the instructor's satisfaction – an extrinsic inducement (a doggie biscuit, so to speak) if ever there was one. And it's also true of replacements for traditional grading such as peer-evaluation and self-evaluation: These are, again, important first steps to the extent that they shift the power dynamic in the classroom. But ideally we want to do be careful not to overdo *any* evaluation lest students become too focused on whether they're measuring up and thus are less *caught* up in intellectual discovery. (Again, empirical research attests to the fact that these two things tend to pull in opposite directions, even if we'd like to believe otherwise.)

The first challenge, then, is that getting rid of grades isn't

enough if our classrooms are still more about performance than learning. The second challenge is this: While it isn't easy to figure out how to assess learning in a way that's constructive, or at least not destructive, it's even more challenging to create a curriculum that's worth learning. As one contributor to this volume (Aaron Blackwelder) remarks, "Assigning grades was the easy way out of doing the 'actual work' of teaching...When I eliminated grades it tested my creativity and patience. I was forced to rethink what went on in my class." And that, presumably, is when the real work began.

To create a culture of vibrant intellectual discovery, getting rid of grades is necessary but far from sufficient.

* We need to grapple with *curriculum* (what we're teaching): If a disproportionate amount of time is devoted to memorizing facts, we can get only so far by abolishing grades.

* We need to grapple with *pedagogy* (how we're teaching): Are we still lecturing – which, as the writer George Leonard observed, is the "best way to get information from teacher's notebook to student's notebook without touching the student's mind"?

* We need to grapple with *assessment*: If we're using tests, a deeply flawed way of evaluating students that has been abandoned by many thoughtful educators in favor of more authentic and informative types of assessment, then that raises the question Why bother to get rid of a defective method of reporting achievement (like grades) if we're still using a defective method of assessing achievement (like tests)?

* We need to grapple with issues of *control* – whether decisions about these and other issues are made *for* students or *with* them. (Consider that many instructors still prepare a detailed syllabus: a week-by-week summary, along with a list

of rules and threats, whose tone often resembles “something that might be handed to a prisoner on the first day of incarceration” and whose very specificity signals that we don’t care who these particular students are – what they know, what they need, what interests them – because the course has already been prepared.)²

When high school or university teachers protest that it’s unrealistic to get rid of grades because, without them, students wouldn’t do the reading or even show up, these teachers are, on one level, offering evidence about the harm that grades have already done to these kids. (So why in the world would we compound the damage by continuing to employ what we know crushes intrinsic motivation?) On another level, though, they may be unwittingly raising questions about their own teaching. If my curriculum and pedagogy aren’t sufficiently engaging, is that an argument to rely on grades to coerce students into doing what I want? Or should I gulp and ask some serious questions about the quality of my curriculum and pedagogy? Moreover, as another contributor to this volume (Marcus Schultz-Bergin) points out, even if it’s true that grades might induce some students to do more “work,” that doesn’t mean they will have learned more.

The first few times I was invited to speak about grades and other issues to college faculties, I prepared by diving into the arguments and research I had already used when writing to K-12 educators in order to see what was relevant. The answer, I quickly concluded, was: just about everything. That’s true partly because much of the research (notably on the effects of grading) has been conducted on college students as well as younger children – with essentially the same results. Indeed, some research has focused specifically on older students and demonstrated a strong inverse relationship between a learning orientation and a grade orientation. Other studies, meanwhile, show that undergraduate and graduate grade-point averages are lousy predictors of just about any postgraduate outcomes³ –

further reason to eliminate final course grades as an institutional feature.

Many of the chapters in this book offer even more compelling evidence that the case against grades applies across ages and across disciplines. Their authors draw on research, common sense, examples set by other educators, and their own experimentation to point the way to moving away from grades. They have sometimes engaged in tough introspection about what they've been doing for years, and you may well resonate with their doubts, their hesitations, their epiphanies. Many have come to realize that (a) grades have been driving much of what happens in their classrooms, (b) this is a serious problem, and (c) it doesn't have to be that way. Each contributor describes a somewhat different journey; at least one of them may offer a model that you decide to follow – one step at a time.

NOTES

1. I review some of this research in my book *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999), chapter 2.

2. The quotation is from an article called "Death to the Syllabus!" by Mano Singham, published in *Liberal Education*, vol. 93, no. 4, Fall 2007. Of course an enormous amount has been written about pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and decision-making issues in higher education – and the importance of challenging traditional assumptions and practices in each of these areas. I'll mention only two sources here: Donald Finkel, *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* (Heinemann, 2000), and Maryellen Weimer, *Learner-Centered Teaching*, 2nd ed. (Jossey-Bass, 2013). I reviewed the case against lecturing, and described projects to create alternatives, in a 2017 essay called "Don't Lecture Me!"

3. For example, see Ohmer Milton, Howard R. Pollio, and James

A. Eison, *Making Sense of College Grades* (Jossey-Bass, 1986). Meanwhile, a review of 35 studies revealed that academic indicators (grades and tests) from college accounted for less than 3 percent of the variance in eventual occupational performance as judged by income, job effectiveness ratings, and job satisfaction. Moreover, these indicators had no predictive power whatsoever for M.D.s and Ph.D.s. (See Gordon E. Samson et al., "Academic and Occupational Performance: A Quantitative Synthesis," *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1984: 311-21.) Other studies have found similar null effects in the careers of lawyers and doctors.

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