



## [Book Review] *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to do Instead)*, edited by Susan D. Blum

### INTRODUCTION

In *Ungrading's* foreword Kohn (2020) writes, “Many have come to realise that (a) grades have been driving much of what happens in classrooms, (b) this is a serious problem, and (c) it doesn't have to be this way” (Kohn 2020, xix). This establishes the impetus for this edited book promoting ungrading, an approach that recognises problems associated with traditional grading and seeks to shift the focus once more on learning. Ungrading has strong alignment with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)—see for instance Guberman (2021) and Gandara and Carter (2021)—as it encourages educators to resist what Warner (2020) describes as “teaching ‘folklore,’ the practices handed down instructor to instructor” (Warner 2020, 207). This book will resonate with SoTL scholars who yearn to promote deep learning and resist doing things (like graded assessments) merely because that is what has always been done.

The fifteen chapters contributed by diverse authors give research-informed insights into their own practices and reflections (see Table 1). As part of an emerging field, Blum (2020b) clearly articulates the significance of these collected conversations: “putting these pieces together produces a picture of what is possible – a picture greater than any individual alone can produce” (Blum 2020b, 2).

**Table 1: Chapter overviews**

Chapter title	Author's context	Chapter description
<i>Introduction: Why ungrade? Why grade?</i>	Higher education; Humanities	Susan D. Blum (2020b) introduces the concept of ungrading and foreshadows the subsequent chapters.
Part I: Foundations and models		
<i>How to ungrade</i>	Higher education; Humanities; Experienced in ungrading	Jesse Stommel (2020) explains his reasons for not grading and shares alternative approaches to assessment.
<i>What going gradeless taught me about doing the “actual work”</i>	School; Humanities; Experienced in ungrading	Aaron Blackwelder (2020) shares his journey from grading to ungrading, and what this changed for him and for his students.
<i>Just one change (just kidding): Ungrading and its necessary accompaniments</i>	Higher education; Humanities	Susan D. Blum (2020c) considers the problems with grading and how ungrading addresses these in her practice.

Chapter title	Author's context	Chapter description
<i>Shifting the grading mindset</i>	School; Humanities; Experienced in ungrading	Starr Sackstein (2020) problematises the language used in assessment and how those choices affect learning.
<i>Grades stifle student learning. Can we learn to teach without grades?</i>	School; Humanities	Arthur Chiaravalli (2020) discusses feedback cycles that promote growth mindset and intrinsic motivation.
Part II: Practices		
<i>Let's talk about grading</i>	Higher education; Humanities; Experienced in ungrading	Laura Gibbs (2020) presents her approach, "all-feedback-no-grades," alongside student comments and her ungrading wish list.
<i>Contract grading and peer review</i>	Higher education; Humanities; Experienced in ungrading	Christina Katopodis and Cathy N. Davidson (2020) make clear why they ungrade and give details on how they implement ungrading.
<i>Critique-driven learning and assessment</i>	Higher education; STEM; Experienced in ungrading	Christopher Riesbeck (2020) explains the "do-review-redo" approach he uses in a programming course. He compares this approach to portfolios and rubrics.
<i>A STEM ungrading case study: A reflection on first-time implementation in Organic Chemistry II</i>	Higher education; STEM; New to ungrading	Clarissa Sorensen-Unruh (2020) reflects on introducing ungrading into one of her classes, including the preparation, implementation, and evaluation.
<i>The point-less classroom: A math teacher's ironic choice in not calculating grades</i>	School; STEM	Gary Chu (2020) explores the systemic issues with grading and recommends "standards-based grading" through a learning-assessment-feedback cycle.
Part III: Reflections		
<i>Grade anarchy in the philosophy classroom</i>	Higher education; Humanities; New to ungrading	Marcus Schultz-Bergin (2020) details his experience with introducing ungrading, including his successes and failures.
<i>Conference musings and the G-word</i>	School; Humanities	Joy Kirr (2020) details her experience introducing ungrading in real-time through blog post entries.
<i>Wile E. Coyote, the hero of ungrading</i>	Higher education; Humanities	John Warner (2020) draws on his experience and considers how ungrading requires resilience and commitment.
<i>Conclusion: Not simple but essential</i>	Higher education; Humanities	Susan D. Blum (2020a) summarises the risks, challenges, and opportunities that ungrading affords.

As we read and discussed *Ungrading*, key themes emerged across the chapters: why traditional grading is a problem; the benefits of ungrading; expected challenges with ungrading; beginning and

maintaining ungrading practices; and further exploration beyond this text. We now offer our thoughts on these themes to whet your appetite for *Ungrading*.

## PROBLEMS WITH GRADING

Throughout *Ungrading*, the chapter authors grapple with many downfalls of traditional grading systems, particularly how grades are both unhelpful and harmful.

### **Grades ≠ learning**

A key criticism of traditional grading practices is that grades represent how well a student follows instructions, not what they have learned (Blackwelder 2020; Stommel 2020). Chapter authors reflect that “something about the letter grade causes learning to stop” (Chiaravalli 2020, 83), and that “conventional grading can be an obstacle to real learning” (Katopodis and Davidson 2020, 120).

Moreover, grades focus attention in the wrong direction, for both learners and educators. Undue attention paid to performance results in learners unable to fully engage with what they are doing. As Blum (2020b) declares, grades lead to “a misplaced focus on accumulating points rather than on learning” (Blum 2020b, 3). Likewise, the “bureaucratic dimensions of grades” (Stommel 2020, 33) distracts educators from rich pedagogical discussions.

### **Grades are unfair**

Notions that grades enable objective and scientific measurements of learning are refuted in *Ungrading*. Blum (2020c) argues that “just because there is a number doesn’t mean it is objective” (Blum 2020c, 57), adding to Stommel’s (2020) declaration that “grades...will never be fair” (Stommel 2020, 28). Sackstein (2020), Stommel (2020), and Warner (2020) further problematise the way that traditional systems privilege certain kinds of students, raising social justice issues.

### **Harmful effects of grading**

Throughout the book, the “range of disconcerting effects” (Kohn 2020, xvii) of grades are explored. Several chapter authors decry the ways that grading systems perpetuate mechanistic and capitalistic processes, dehumanising both learners and educators (Blum 2020b; Chu 2020; Stommel 2020). Blackwelder (2020) laments that with a grading approach “the joy of learning had faded from my classroom and my room was more of an assembly line than a flourishing garden” (Blackwelder 2020, 43).

Grading tends to lead learners to view “success and failure as a reflection of themselves” (Blackwelder 2020, 47), making them less likely to take risks that result in deep learning. Grades therefore “send the wrong message about what we value and stifle creativity and curiosity” (Sackstein 2020, 78). Likewise, educators become more compliant as they “don’t feel they can safely explore alternative approaches” (Stommel 2020, 29).

As a form of extrinsic motivation, grades can act as bribes or threats that hamstring deep learning and intrinsic motivation. Chiaravalli (2020) describes how the grade “becomes a false currency that, over time, seems to override students’ intrinsic desire for mastery and personal sense of purpose” (Chiaravalli 2020, 83). Instead, grades encourage strategic performance, corner cutting, and even gaming the system. This approach can be anxiety-inducing for students with short- and long-term effects (Schultz-Bergin 2020).

### **Alternatives to grading**

Dissatisfaction with the traditional system has led many (including us and perhaps you too, dear reader) to consider ungrading. As Blum (2020a) writes:

There is a growing recognition...that the current models of teaching and assessment often fail. They fail to promote learning. They fail to provide useful feedback. They fail to produce joyous cooperative learning. They fail to produce positive relationships among students, or between students and teachers. They fail to meet the needs of diverse students, and they fail to promote equity. (Blum 2020a, 227)

Further, Chu (2020) challenges us to “be willing to acknowledge there is a problem, to recognise we are limiting the extent to which we are creating lifelong learners, to look at our own practices, and to take the first steps in eliminating grades” (Chu 2020, 168). With this in mind, we now explore ungrading through insights offered by the chapter authors.

### **BENEFITS OF UNGRADING**

Ungrading enables teachers and learners to shift focus to the processes of achieving learning rather than grades. Each chapter author details the benefits of de-emphasised grading on their students as well as on themselves, documenting wide-ranging, often long-term benefits towards more equitable learning experiences.

#### **Benefits to students**

Ungrading approaches can be useful for encouraging students to participate actively in their own learning, including creating an atmosphere where the value of critical self-evaluation can be modelled and guided. Chapter authors, using varied approaches to de-emphasise grading, report many instances of increased student autonomy coinciding with increased motivation. Schultz-Bergin’s (2020) facilitation of ungraded and personally meaningful debates prompt students to initiate self-directed research and achieve beyond expectations. Without fear of failure or performing badly, Schultz-Bergin (2020) observes students adopting a more reflective lens aligned to self-improvement and personal aspirations. Chiaravalli (2020) similarly notes that without the distraction of grades, students had “greater awareness and ownership of their learning” (Chiaravalli 2020, 87). As Stommel (2020) argues, “students themselves are the best experts in their own learning” (Stommel 2020, 29), so it makes sense to support them in achieving their own learning goals.

Ungrading is reported to encourage creativity through alternative assessment designs such as problem-based learning or open-ended assignments (Gibbs 2020). Schultz-Bergin (2020) notes students responded more bravely in activities such as public speaking or leading discussion, especially when these present opportunities for self-improvement rather than judgement. Blackwelder (2020) also observes increased student motivation as they discovered value in the content. Without the pressure of grading, students show greater willingness to be adventurous.

Enhanced reflective practice is an essential aspect of ungrading, with students needing orchestrated moments to do so (Blum 2020c; Chu 2020). Katopodis and Davidson (2020) advocate for a culture of self-determination and critical self-reflection, leading to confident learners, who understand the value of feedback and know how to act upon it. They, along with Gibbs (2020), notice that as

competitiveness lessened, students become active in helping others through giving and receiving feedback in structured and responsible ways. This opens doors to self-discovery, and more broadly, to shared responsibility for community building and collective action. Schultz-Bergin (2020) adds that deep engagement fosters an honesty within students themselves.

Another significant benefit arising from emphasis on the learning process is that learning becomes more equitable. Chu (2020) points out that ungrading is one means by which “we, as educators, can address the issue of inequitable grading practices” (Chu 2020, 164). Without the pressures and anxiety associated with traditional assessments, students—regardless of background—can turn their attention to joy in learning, and teachers can return to “educating...students, not ranking them” (Blum 2020b, 5).

### **Benefits to educators**

The benefits to educators are championed by each chapter author, especially when they can fully “own” their pedagogical approaches (Stommel 2020). Warner (2020) adds that ungrading has changed his attitude towards tasks such as responding to student writing, transforming it as “a vital part of your pedagogy, not the bitter pill you must swallow” (Warner 2020, 213).

Chapter authors describe more meaningful trust relationships with students (Blum 2020c; Stommel 2020); more worthwhile discussions with students (Riesbeck 2020); becoming more attuned to students’ needs (Blackwelder 2020); more meaningful roles other than assessor or grade-giver (Sackstein 2020); becoming a “genuine reader of student work” (Stommel 2020, 38); or perceiving “failure” differently so that “mistakes” take on new meaning, encouraging risk-taking and growth (Blum 2020c).

The mutual benefits of ungrading are summarised by Gibbs (2020) as reducing stress for both students and teachers, helping students form new learning habits beyond doing the bare minimum, making room for creative work and risk-taking, promoting better communication through feedback discussions, and opening up new course design possibilities. Warner (2020) sings the praises of not grading, stating that “ungrading my courses was one of the most important steps I’ve ever taken. It was liberating in all senses of the word” (Warner 2020, 216). However, while the benefits discussed in *Ungrading* are inspirational, all chapter authors acknowledge that applying ungrading is not without challenges.

## **CHALLENGES OF UNGRADING**

Challenges identified in *Ungrading* include increased workload, limited resources, and scepticism. Neoliberal thinking of “sorting, ranking, competition, branding” (Blum 2020b, 16) permeates educational conversations (whether acknowledged or implicit) and is the broader context in which these challenges are examined.

### **Increased workload**

All chapter authors admit that ungrading requires more work than traditional grading methods. Stommel (2020) reflects that “ungrading begins with each of us asking hard questions” (Stommel 2020, 40), a process Blackwelder (2020) experienced as “test[ing] my creativity and patience...[as] I was forced to rethink what went on in my class” (Blackwelder 2020, 51). Even the simplest ungrading attempts require a shift in curricula and pedagogy, requiring more detailed preparation and lengthy

communication, especially at first. This prospect presents a significant challenge for interested educators, with many accepting it as the cost of “teaching in a way that was consistent with my values” (Warner 2020, 216).

### **Limited resources**

Additional demands presented by ungrading may be managed with resources such as time, training, and courage, the same resources that seem in steady decline in academia. Blum (2020a) is clear that ungrading is not “a time-saving approach” (Blum 2020a, 219) and that finding the time required is “the very hardest dimension” (Blum 2020c, 61), alongside relinquishing control. Warner (2020) describes the ungrading journey as “a leap of faith, [with] no guarantee that after the leap, you won’t go splat” (Warner 2020, 208). This positions ungrading as a high-risk activity in many educational contexts, where limited resources can render pedagogical innovations as indulgent luxuries. Blum (2020a) acknowledges that “only certain teachers feel themselves secure enough professionally to take these risks” (Blum 2020a, 220). With further casualisation across all levels of education, this will only further compound what Gibbs (2020) describes as a “climate of fear” (Gibbs 2020, 101).

### **Scepticism**

In the face of tension between workload and resources, the adoption of ungrading was sometimes met with scepticism from students, parents, colleagues, and their own institutions. Chapter authors note perceptions of ungrading educators as “not doing their job” (Schultz-Bergin 2020, 174), of ungrading leading to a “watered down curriculum” (Chu 2020, 164), or that it perpetuates “subjective” assessment methods (Chu 2020, 167). Katopodis and Davidson (2020) make clear that ungrading “is not about cutting corners – not for us, not for them” (Katopodis and Davidson 2020, 108). Nevertheless, as Warner (2020) reflects: “Depending on where you teach, the culture in which you work, it is possible you will be looked on as a fool” (Warner 2020, 209).

## **STRATEGIES OF UNGRADING**

The challenges of ungrading are varied and could be viewed as barriers to implementing changes to learning and teaching. However, the chapter authors offer a suite of strategies to mitigate these challenges.

### **Starting small**

Changing everything at once may be overwhelming, so chapter authors emphasise small steps initially. Sorensen-Unruh (2020) first applied ungrading by adjusting the existing assessment schedule, and reports enhancements to student learning. To fulfil the institutional requirement for a letter grade, Chu (2020) combines ungrading strategies with existing and alternative grading practices. This approach accommodates student input and removes the “authoritarian status of the teacher that grades naturally add” (Chu 2020, 67), a technique in line with the student-centred “contract grading” technique that Katopodis and Davidson (2020) describe. Starting small is a strategy that can be helpful in mitigating others’ concerns and in reducing pressure on the educator.

### Working together

The chapter authors highlight the need to draw on others (including teaching teams, colleagues, and students) in the design, delivery, and refinement of ungrading pedagogy. Sackstein (2020) highlights the need to reach a clear consensus among teaching teams, ensuring that all members are “sending the same message and promoting a similar ideal” (Sackstein 2020, 80). Blum (2020c) suggests using low stakes exercises to introduce ungrading to sceptical colleagues or supervisors. Many chapter authors also align ungrading to their students’ needs. For example, Katopodis and Davidson (2020) apply peer review and contract grading in response to their students’ need for a “documentable... credentialed form of credit for learning attainments” (Katopodis and Davidson 2020, 106). Student-designed rubrics or portfolios capture the power of clear communication and collaboration with students, highlighting their pivotal role in successful ungrading (Sorensen-Unruh 2020). TLI readers will undoubtedly see links to SoTL concepts such as Students as Partners (SaP) within these strategies.

### Being reflective

In addition to reflective activities acting as popular ungrading tasks for students, they similarly provide educators with the means to develop their own approach to ungrading. Blum (2020b) recognises “variation in the routes, the reasons, the contexts” (Blum 2020b, 2) to ungrading, borne from “a personal and sometimes emotional journey” (Blum 2020b, 15). Kirr (2020) uses blog posts to document her journey with ungrading, with these forming the basis of her chapter. Similarly, Gibbs’ (2020) documentation of her ungrading journey, and its successes, help her to defend her work. Each chapter is inherently reflective in nature and highlights links between reflective practice and ungrading.

### FURTHER EXPLORATION

This book presents a candid and informative foundational text for the ungrading movement. As this community grows, it follows that further publications and research will be disseminated in this area. This has already begun, such as Guberman’s (2021) article in *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* examining ungrading in a fully online elective course in higher education, and Gandara and Carter’s (2021) workshop at an *International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL)* conference exploring why and how to try ungrading. To recognise the limitations of *Ungrading* and provide future directions in this field, we have drawn upon Felten’s (2013) principles of good practice in SoTL: “(1) inquiry into student learning, (2) grounded in context, (3) methodologically sound, (4) conducted in partnership with students, and (5) appropriately public” (Felten 2013, 121). *Ungrading* addresses these principles adequately for a foundational text, although we note some opportunities for further exploration.

There are unclear connections between the contributions collated in *Ungrading* and the extant literature, which could have positioned ungrading more explicitly alongside other educational areas of inquiry. For instance, Students as Partners or students as change agents are alluded to throughout *Ungrading* but without explicit links to key literature in the field. In explaining why *Ungrading* is “not precisely a how-to book” (Blum 2020b, 14–15), Blum (2020b) presents ungrading as an inherently diverse umbrella term built of individualised, pragmatic and nondogmatic techniques. *Ungrading* aligns these with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and other student-centred lenses, with clear roots within principles of educational psychology and sociology. The literature cited within *Ungrading*

includes decades-old sociology texts, recent social media posts, and peer-reviewed articles from an eclectic mix of areas. Thus, the literature provided by each author provides a candid insight into how they perceive the nature of ungrading. This approach could be seen as an expression of the broadly humanistic ethos of ungrading, as well as a reflection of the current lack of traditional, peer-reviewed literature clearly aligned to the emerging field of ungrading. However, this boundless, individualised approach to literature in *Ungrading* could leave enthusiastic newcomers without a clear sense of how ungrading sits within their prior knowledge of SoTL. Additionally, while *Ungrading's* use of vignettes lends powerful narratives to the process of ungrading, the teaching contexts are not clearly identified. This makes it difficult for readers to determine how applicable the strategies may be to their own contexts, particularly when informal methods of gathering students' reactions or feedback were used by chapter authors. As such, the absence of a strong grounding in local or theoretical context within *Ungrading* presents readers with multiple challenges that should be considered in future work.

This need for generalisability must be balanced by an acknowledgement of the rich, reflective insights *Ungrading* provides through its use of qualitative, self-authored vignettes. Future work could also incorporate quantitative research to evidence positive impacts of ungrading across multiple contexts and augmenting these with rich qualitative data, which Guberman (2021) incorporated on a small scale to understand various aspects of students' perceptions of ungrading. Such research will aid in wide-scale buy-in to the approach over multiple disciplines, particularly within those whose epistemologies align less clearly with ungrading. Future research will ideally provide insights into which ungrading strategies carry the largest impacts for various student groups, and thus help to manage the challenges of limited resources and scepticism identified in *Ungrading*. There also exists a need for further qualitative research from students' perspectives, which would lend vital insights into the true impacts of ungrading on student learning.

A principle clearly met by *Ungrading* is that of being appropriately public, both in terms of physical and lingual accessibility. The text provides a light, conversational entry to ungrading embedded in the stories of honest, reflective educators. The text is also relatively short and includes many useful appendices for readers desiring more details. We acknowledge that the inclusion of literature, contextual details, and quantitative data advocated for above may have jeopardised the accessibility of this text. Thus, in all, this text achieved the most pressing need for this area of inquiry: a foundational text that inspires others to adopt a pedagogical strategy that can be a transformative experience for those who are able to take on its challenges.

## CONCLUSION

This book brings together a collection of diverse educators who have been brave enough to change how they approach and assess learning. By removing grading from the focus of learning in some or all aspects of their classrooms, these authors show how learning and teaching experiences improved, changed, and evolved. They operated with differing levels of autonomy and navigated varied institutional requirements. Each demonstrated how de-emphasised attention on grades, replaced with a focus on learning, redirected their time, energy, and creativity towards how they could best support students to learn. The authors share their successes and failures and emphasise the benefits of ungrading, such as dramatic increases in motivation, creativity, and risk-taking. This includes turning "failure" into opportunities for deeper learning, which is often where transformative learning occurs which endures beyond the classroom.



*Ungrading* is a foundational text that challenges us to reflect on the purpose of grading and what it achieves. Many of the chapter authors present their own struggles or dissatisfaction with grading. Many are convinced that grading bears little relation to actual learning. None of the authors pretend that ungrading and changing practices is simple, especially at first. But all agree it is worth it.

We finish with a counterchallenge posed throughout Gibbs' (2020) chapter: Why not ungrade? Susan D. Blum's (2020d) edited book *Ungrading* is the perfect place to start.

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