



“It Honestly Made Me Want to Work Harder”: Student Evaluation of Using Ungrading in an Online Asynchronous Course

ABSTRACT

Educators are exploring alternative assessment methods that may better support student learning and development than traditional grades. Ungrading is one such method that de-emphasizes traditional grades and focuses on self-assessment and intrinsic motivation. This process relies heavily on faculty feedback and engagement, which can be particularly challenging in asynchronous online courses where instructor-to-student engagement can be limited. Therefore, this paper examines the implementation of an ungrading assessment scheme in an asynchronous online course. Undergraduate students enrolled across two sections of the same online course with identical course content, engagement, and instructor provided insight for this study. Students completed non-graded content quizzes and completed self-assessment prompts at regular intervals. They also received extensive feedback on written assignments across the semester. Students assigned themselves a final course grade at the end of the semester. To evaluate the experience from the student’s perspective, students completed a survey about their experience in the course once the instructor entered their grade. Quantitative results showed an overall high level of satisfaction with the grading scheme and high levels of confidence in achieving the course learning outcomes. The qualitative responses revealed themes of increased focus on learning, higher levels of intrinsic motivation, and reduced stress. However, students did report some anxiety and uncertainty with assigning their own grades. To ensure success, faculty should focus on clear communication and providing support to alleviate student concerns. Additionally, offering training in metacognition and self-evaluation can empower students to better assess their own performance and adapt to the ungrading process.

KEYWORDS

ungrading, alternative grading, online teaching, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Traditional grading systems in United States higher education rely heavily on extrinsic motivation, which can reduce intrinsic motivation and lead to poorer learning outcomes (Gorges, Schwinger, and Kandler 2013). Such systems can discourage creativity, risk-taking, and critical thinking (Blum and Kohn 2020; Kohn 2013). Grades are also a dominant contributor to the mental health crisis among students (Barbayannis, Bandari, Zheng, Baquerizo, Pecor, and Ming 2022), with grades being cited as the leading cause of student stress and anxiety (Bouchrika 2024; Horowitz and Graf 2019). Finally, grades may not be an accurate way to assess student work, often failing to provide valid or reliable information about student learning (Schinske and Tanner 2014; Cain, Media, Romanelli, and Persky 2022).

In response, educators are exploring alternative assessments, such as “ungrading” (Scharff et al. 2023). This approach de-emphasizes traditional grades and focuses instead on qualitative feedback, self-assessment, and intrinsic motivation (Gorichanaz 2022). With it, educators ask students to take ownership of their own learning by assessing their own performance and assigning their own grade at the end of the course. In such an alternative assessment approach, faculty provide frequent in-depth feedback and offer a wider range of formative assessments. At the same time, students take increased responsibility for their learning and metacognition development (Kessler 2024). This approach represents a shift toward collaborative pedagogy, centered around student learning and creating a course environment that fosters collaboration and dialogue (Meinking and Hall 2024). The course design prioritizes learning for growth and improvement, rather than summative scores for external credit, creating a fundamental shift in teaching and learning (Meinking et al. 2024). This study explored the perception of such a shift by students, providing information on the efficacy and challenges of ungrading from the students’ perspective (Guberman 2021; Hasinoff, Bolyard, DeBay, Dunlap, Mosier, and Pugliano 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

While there are different ways to apply ungrading in the classroom, ungrading fundamentally shifts the focus from extrinsic rewards, such as grades, to intrinsic motivation, encouraging students to engage more deeply with the course material and to self-reflect (Gorichanaz 2022). Extant research suggests a number of additional benefits from using an ungrading approach. For example, when students are not preoccupied with grades, they are more likely to take intellectual risks and engage in creative problem-solving (Stommel 2021). Growing literature highlights that ungrading can reduce anxiety and stress associated with academic performance (Gorichanaz 2022), allowing students to explore ideas more deeply (Blum et al. 2020).

Ungrading rests on the theoretical underpinning of inclusive teaching, which applies social justice to the classroom (Owenz 2023). Traditional grading can exacerbate inequalities by rewarding students who are already advantaged due to prior educational opportunities or socioeconomic status (Feldman 2019). Ungrading can help level the playing field by instead focusing on individual growth and learning (Schinske et al. 2014). Additionally, this system reduces the power imbalance between instructors and students, creating a more inclusive, equitable learning environment that values the diverse experiences and potential of each student. Finally, ungrading fosters a growth mindset because it prioritizes feedback and continuous improvement (Blum et al. 2020; Gorichanaz 2022; Clark and Talbert 2023), creating a supportive environment for students who may have been traditionally underserved by the educational system.

However, most academic units in the United States require students to receive grades at the completion of the semester, so complete ungrading is usually not possible within the constraints of an academic institution. Therefore, the ungrading approach involves students in determining their own final grade. This can take various forms, including students assigning their own final grade independently and students and faculty meeting to discuss the most appropriate final grade. Involving students in the grade assignment process has the added benefit of enhancing their metacognitive skills since it requires students to reflect on their own work and progress (Recla 2022). While research is limited, evidence suggests that students grade themselves fairly (Simkin and Stiver 2016) with faculty reporting rare instances of faculty-student disagreement (Stommel 2021).

Despite potential benefits, ungrading is not without its challenges. Concerns include potential grade inflation, the subjectivity of self-assessments, and the higher workload due to the need for faculty to provide increased feedback (DiSalvo and Ross 2022). Additionally, the effectiveness of self-

assessment depends on students' ability to be honest and objective and to have metacognition skills, which means there may be student training required (Brown and Harris 2014; Talbert 2022). Moreover, both students and faculty accustomed to traditional grading may find the philosophical shift and transition to ungrading challenging, potentially leading to stress and anxiety (Kohn 2013; Hasinoff et al. 2024). Additionally, some caution that assigning grades at the very end of the semester is highly susceptible to implicit biases (both on the part of the instructor and the student) (Dyer 2024).

While the body of research using various alternative assessment strategies, such as ungrading, is growing, relatively little research evaluates the use of this scheme in asynchronous online courses. The limited evidence suggests that ungrading can have positive impacts on student learning. Guberman (2021) found that in an asynchronous online history course that used ungrading, students reported high levels of internalized motivation and found value in the reflection process. Students appreciated the autonomy in the class and reported a supportive learning climate. The study did not specifically examine any challenges that students might have felt, though the author acknowledged that initially many students were confused or concerned (Guberman 2021).

Applying ungrading in an online environment may come with unique challenges for both faculty and students, though this is underexplored. For instance, ungrading relies heavily on feedback and engagement from faculty, which can be particularly challenging in asynchronous online courses where instructor-to-student engagement can feel limited. In asynchronous online courses, instructors rely heavily on written feedback, and instructors cannot rely on students' verbal and non-verbal cues (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiago 2017). This places a burden on faculty to provide extensive and clear written feedback, but it also places greater responsibility on the student to review the feedback, incorporate it, and engage in frequent self-reflection. The feedback loop is not successful if students do not take on this responsibility. It is harder to encourage and monitor this process in an asynchronous online environment than in an in-person or synchronous class, where time can be dedicated to reflection and feedback activities. Additionally, all this must happen in an environment that is engaging and forges student/instructor trust, vulnerability, and connection (Meinking et al. 2024). Faculty have reported significant challenges with creating such an online environment (Duncan and Young 2009), and it may be especially difficult in asynchronous courses without non-verbal and verbal cues to supplement the written communication.

This paper, therefore, aims to examine the implementation of an ungrading assessment scheme in an asynchronous online course. Specifically, the research question was: "What is the student experience of using an ungrading system in an online asynchronous course?" Prior to implementing the ungrading assessment, the hypothesis was that students in an asynchronous online course would report a reduction in anxiety and stress due to their learning and would recommend using the scheme in other courses.

METHODOLOGY

Course design

This research employed a case study approach to explore student perceptions of an ungrading scheme used during an online asynchronous course. The case study method enabled an in-depth examination of the specific context and experiences of this group of students, allowing for a rich understanding of the perceived impact of the intervention (ungrading). The course was an online introductory-level gerontology course taught at a large public university in the southeastern United States. Third- and fourth-year students of all majors could take the course; there were no prerequisites. The instructor delivered the course entirely online using one learning management system, and delivery was asynchronous. The instructor taught two sections of the same course in a

short summer semester (four weeks) in 2023 and 2024. The course content and engagement was identical across the sections, with the same instructor.

The same instructor taught this course for two prior years, using traditional grading methods and assessments, and converted the course into an ungrading course in 2023. The instructor adapted the course to ungrading following the framework provided by Stommel (2018). This included orienting the students to the grading scheme and changing the assessments from exam-based to paper/reflection assignments (refer to Table 1 for more details). Students in both sections received a welcome orientation video, introducing them to the ungrading philosophy and explaining the rationale behind this approach (Stommel 2018). Additionally, the professor walked the students through the process and logistics of receiving feedback in the course and assigning their own grade at the end. The professor created the video, and it included the professor's face so that students could establish a human connection with the professor from the very beginning.

Because there are no grades throughout the semester, frequent feedback and instructor check-ins are critical to ungrading (DiSalvo and Ross 2022). Therefore, throughout the semester, students received frequent feedback, which students could use at the end of the semester to reflect on the course, and to help them determine their own grade. The instructor divided the course into modules, with assessment/feedback opportunities at the end of each module (see Table 1 for details). A rubric accompanied each assignment. Though each was specific to an assignment, all rubrics listed the criteria required for meeting or exceeding expectations. In addition to the rubric, students received written feedback on each writing assignment, including whether the paper met or exceeded expectations or needed significant additional work. Students could revise papers if the submission required significant additional work. Otherwise, the instructor expected them to take the feedback provided and apply it to the next paper submission. The instructor generally provided feedback 24–48 hours after submission.

Table 1. Course assessment and feedback details

Assessment	Feedback	Frequency
Knowledge quizzes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online quiz system • Ungraded, with correct answers displayed after submission • Allowed to complete as many times as needed 	At end of each learning module
Self-reflection check-ins	Short personalized feedback from professor	At end of each learning module
Writing assignment (content related)	Rubric along with extensive personalized feedback from professor	At end of each application module

Students also completed auto-assessed content knowledge quizzes (correct/not correct), which they could complete as many times as they wanted until they felt they could answer the questions confidently. Finally, students received four separate self-reflection check-ins staggered throughout the semester. Each included two prompts: 1) Have you learned anything new in this module? and 2) Have you put forth your best effort in this class so far? While there were no right or wrong answers, the instructor expected students to reflect and write for each prompt four times during the semester. The professor provided brief feedback to each self-reflection. The learning management system saved all the papers and feedback so students could easily access the information at the end of the semester to help them reflect on their final grade.

At the end of the semester, students determined their own final grades. The instructor provided instructions on how to do a self-assessment. Students were asked to review the orientation video explaining the ungrading system, their work over the semester, and the feedback from the professor. The instructors also encouraged them to closely review each of their self-reflection check-ins. The learning management system stored all knowledge quizzes, written work, and feedback in folders, allowing the students to get a holistic review of their work in the course. Because this course was based on films and film elements, students submitted their final grade through a video reflection assignment. In this final video, they combined several film elements, reflected on the course, and explained why they assigned themselves the grade. The instructor offered consultation appointments, but no student used these. The syllabus stated that if the instructor disagreed with a grade, they reserved the right to change it, but only after meeting with the student. However, this situation did not occur in either section for this course.

Data collection

After submitting their final grade video reflections, the instructor asked students to complete an anonymous survey evaluating the course grading method. The learning management system sent out the Qualtrics survey link via email and included consent forms approved by the University's Institutional Review Board. Survey data came from two sections of the course, summer 2023 (19 students enrolled) and summer 2024 (24 enrolled).

The survey asked respondents basic demographic questions: age (continuous), gender (male, female, non-binary/third gender, other), race (White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Other), and ethnicity (of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino descent). All demographics were optional to protect the identity of a relatively small class. The survey then asked whether students had previously taken a course using ungrading.

Next, respondents completed a set of questions asking them about their experience with the course in general over the semester. Students rated on a 5-point Likert Scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree, with an option of not sure/prefer not to answer) the following statements: 1) The amount of feedback I received in this class was appropriate; 2) My work in this class was valued by the instructor; 3) I am proud of the work I produced in this class; 4) I was motivated to learn new content in this class; 5) I completed each assignment to the best of my ability; 6) I consistently completed all the work required for each module; 7) The rigor in this class was appropriate; and 8) I was anxious about my final grade in this class.

Next, the survey asked students a series of questions about the ungrading process specifically, including: 1) Was the process of assigning yourself a grade clear (yes/no/not sure)?; 2) How confident are you in the grade you assigned yourself in this class? (not at all/somewhat/very/not sure); and 3) How satisfied were you with the ungrading scheme used in this class (5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with an option of not sure/prefer not to answer)? The survey also asked if students would recommend ungrading for other classes (yes, maybe, no, not sure).

To capture whether the course met the learning objectives the survey asked students to rate their confidence in the mastery of the six core course learning objectives: 1) Examine the need to be self-aware of judgments and stereotypes about aging; 2) Apply aging concepts and theories to modern film; 3) Analyze the factors that influence aging in society; 4) Analyze and critique film for aging content; 5) Articulate the complex issues that surround care of older adults; and 6) Define and describe basic aging concepts and theories. Each was measured on a 5-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with an option of not sure/prefer not to answer.

Finally, each student had an opportunity to reflect more with two optional open-answer questions at the end of the survey. The final two questions were: “What did you like/not like about the ungrading scheme?” and “Do you have any suggestions?”. Students could write as much or as little as they wanted in the qualitative space.

Analysis

The researcher collected data from course sections in the summers of 2023 and 2024. Eighteen students responded for each section, which was a response rate of 95% for 2023 and 75% for 2024. The researcher compared demographics (sex, race, ethnicity) across sections using Pearson’s chi-square tests, and the two sections were not statistically different based on these factors. The researcher then combined the two datasets across sections and ran descriptive statistics for the quantitative data using SPSS v. 28. The researcher combined text (qualitative) responses across sections and categorized them using content analysis. This involved an iterative process of reading, coding, and categorizing the responses to identify recurring patterns and themes. They assigned codes inductively, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data rather than being imposed a priori, aligning with an exploratory qualitative methodological approach aimed at capturing students’ perceptions in their own words.

RESULTS

Combined, there were 36 total responses from the two sections. The researcher removed one person who did not respond to any prompts, leaving an analytic sample of 35. The sample was two-thirds (66.7%) female and one-third male, with an age range between 20–30 (mean 21.3, SD 2.2). Respondents were 82% White, 6% Black or African American, 12% Asian, and 12% identified as Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino. The survey kept demographic questions at a minimum, and they were optional in order to protect students’ identity in relatively small classes. The two sections were not statistically significantly different across gender, age, race, or ethnicity. For a majority (89%) of the class, this was their first experience with ungrading.

Overall, students reported favorable views of their experience with the course and the grading scheme. When asked how satisfied they were with ungrading, 71.4% of students were extremely satisfied, 17.1% were somewhat satisfied, and 11.4% were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied. No student reported being unsatisfied with the ungrading scheme. Less than two-thirds (62.5%) said they would recommend the grading scheme for other courses, while 37.5% said they would “maybe” recommend it (three respondents did not answer this question) (see Figure 1).

Table 2 breaks down students’ responses to components of the ungrading experience. A majority (91.7%) of respondents strongly agreed that they were proud of the work they produced in the class, and most (94.5%) either strongly or somewhat agreed that they completed all the work required for each module. Most (91.7%) of the class either strongly or somewhat agreed that the rigor of the class was appropriate, that they were proud of the work that they produced in their class, and that they completed each assignment to the best of their ability. About 86% of students reported that the amount of feedback received was appropriate, while 5.6% somewhat disagreed, and 5.6% were neutral on the amount of feedback.

Figure 1. Student feedback on their experience with ungrading, in percent

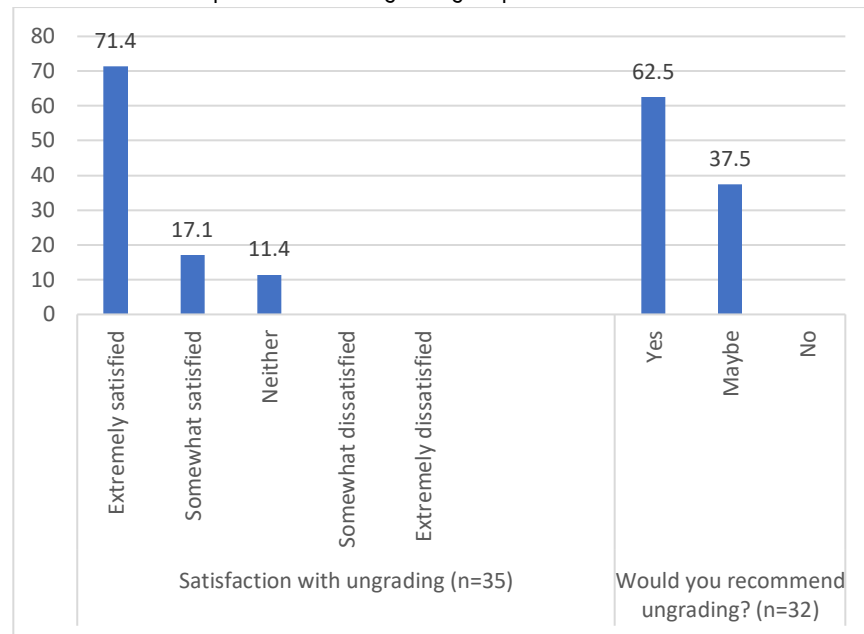
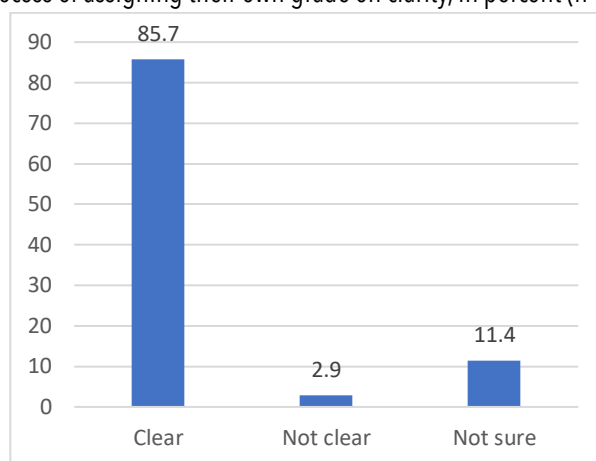


Table 2. Student experiences with the ungrading course framework, responses to "Please indicate how Much you agree or disagree with the following statements", numbers in percent (n=35)

Prompt	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Not sure/prefer not to answer
My work in this class was valued by the instructor	91.7		5.6			
I consistently completed all the work required for each module	91.7	2.8				2.8
The rigor of this class was appropriate.	88.9	2.8	2.8	2.8		2.8
I am proud of the work that I produced in this class.	88.9	2.8				2.8
I completed each assignment to the best of my ability.	86.1	5.6				5.6
The amount of feedback I received was appropriate.	72.2	13.9	5.6	5.6		
I was motivated to learn new content in this class.	80.6	11.1				2.8
I was anxious about my final grade in this class.	22.2	11.1	11.1	19.4	33.3	2.8
I am confident in my own grade assignment.	85.7	14.3				

Finally, when asked about whether they felt anxious about their final grade in the course, a little over half (52.7%) said they somewhat disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “I was anxious about my final grade in this class”, and one-third of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed. Students were extremely (85.7%) or somewhat (14.3%) confident in the grade they assigned themselves; no one reported a lack of confidence in their self-assigned grade. Additionally, students reflected on the process of assigning their own grade (clear, unsure, not clear). A majority (85.7%) of students said the process of assigning a grade was clear, 2.9% said it was not clear, and 11.4% weren’t sure if the process was clear or not (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Student rating the process of assigning their own grade on clarity, in percent (n=35)



One outcome measure of course effectiveness is mastery of learning objectives. The survey asked students about their own level of confidence on the six core learning objectives of the course (Likert scale, ranging from very confident to not at all confident). Table 3 shows the results. A majority of students reported being either somewhat or very confident in each of the course objectives, and no student reported being not very or not at all confident. The lowest confidence came from defining and describing basic aging concepts and theories, and the highest from self-reflection (examining the need to be self-aware of judgments and stereotypes about aging).

Table 3. Proportion of students reporting level of confidence in achieving core course learning objectives (n=35)

Learning objective	Very confident	Somewhat confident	Neither confident or not confident
Examine the need to be self-aware of judgements and stereotypes about aging	91.4	5.7	2.9
Apply aging concepts and theories to modern film	85.7	11.4	2.9
Analyze the factors that influence aging in society	85.7	11.4	2.9
Analyze and critique film for aging content*	85.3	11.8	2.9
Articulate the complex issues that surround care of older adults	77.1	20.0	2.9

Define and describe basic aging concepts and theories	62.9	34.3	2.9
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*one missing response, percentages based on n=34

Finally, students reflected on the semester and to provide a text response to their experience with the ungrading scheme used in this course. Qualitative analyses found several themes in the responses. Overall, students positively received the ungrading intervention, with many students valuing the reduced stress, increased autonomy, and enhanced focus on learning. However, the transition to this novel system came with some challenges, particularly in terms of uncertainty and perceived lack of structure. Additionally, students emphasized that the success of ungrading may depend on the nature of the course content and discipline.

Theme: Reduced pressure on grades/increased focus on learning

Many students reported that the ungrading system significantly alleviated the pressure and anxiety typically associated with traditional grading. Without the constant concern of achieving high numerical scores or letter grades, students directed their attention more fully toward understanding course material. This shift enabled deeper engagement with the content, and several students explicitly mentioned a greater enjoyment in learning for its own sake rather than as a means to a grade, as demonstrated in student responses:

- “In my opinion, the ungrading style helped me enjoy and truly learn the concepts.”
- “. . . providing students the opportunity to learn with less anxiety and stress provides better experiences and retention of materials.”
- “I liked that I was able to look for feedback rather than a number as my grade.”
- “I like the idea, because it helps as a student to focus more on the content than the grade.”
- “I liked that the emphasis placed on students is not on class performance but on learning new material and enjoying it.”
- “I liked enjoying the content without stressing too much about an individual grade. I also loved all the feedback that I received; I believe it helped me improve on the next assignments.”
- “I like that the emphasis placed on success is based on understanding and engagement rather than performance.”

Theme: Increased intrinsic motivation/autonomy

Students also highlighted how the ungrading approach gave them a stronger sense of autonomy over their learning process. The freedom to reflect on their own progress, rather than being externally evaluated by rigid standards, fostered a more meaningful connection with the coursework. For some, this increased their intrinsic motivation to engage deeply and produce high-quality work, not because they were being judged, but because they wanted to do well for themselves. Students shared:

- “Knowing that I would assess myself for my grade made me personally more motivated to learn and do well rather than have assignments graded sort of arbitrarily.”
- “It made me more motivated to learn about the information.”
- “. . . It honestly made me want to work harder since I knew I’d have to defend the grade I assigned myself.”
- “It gives the student so much more autonomy.”

- “I liked the fact that I was able to calculate my own grade, knowing the amount of effort and thought that I put into each assignment.”
- “It seemed like you were allowed more freedom to explore and apply concepts.”
- “I liked that how hard you work, does pay off.”
- “The lack of extreme restriction motivated me to do my best and I strongly believe that the fewer strict rubric requirements gave me fewer ‘bare minimum’ standards to meet and rather than focusing on the areas I was required to discuss I could focus on the details that stood out to me while still having a structure to fall back on.”

Theme: Stress/uncertainty

Despite these benefits, not all students responded positively. A minority expressed discomfort with the ambiguity and lack of structure inherent in the ungrading system. This was especially true for those who were more accustomed to traditional grading, who found it difficult to gauge where they stood in the class or what was expected of them. Students reflected:

- “I enjoyed [it] but it put more stress into it for me. I am hard on myself but also want to do well. It put me in quite the predicament, trying [to] be harsh with myself, but also wanting a high grade.”
- “[I was] confused about how much my opinion matters.”
- “I wasn’t exactly sure how I would give myself a grade at the beginning of the course.”
- “I felt a little unsure through the class, but that was just due to the fact I haven’t encountered this type of grading before.”

Theme: Perceived applicability

There was also a recurring theme around the perceived suitability of ungrading for different academic subjects. While many students appreciated the approach in this particular course, several felt it might not translate well to more quantitative or standardized subjects like mathematics or the natural sciences. In contrast, students perceived ungrading as a better fit for courses emphasizing critical thinking, discussion, and interpretation—such as those in the humanities or social sciences. Students shared:

- “It really depends on which class. For more math heavy classes, I would rather have standard grading.”
- “I think it is appropriate for certain course [sic] and not for others. Some courses are extremely vital and students must know the material to be successful (anatomy in medical school) and others, learning is the main goal.”
- “I had a positive experience, but it might be hard to apply in courses in something like mathematics.”
- “I feel like this ungrading scheme works for some classes, but maybe not all. I liked the feedback I received, but I think I would prefer a grading option for classes like math or science just because I would like to see how correctly I know how to generate the answers.”

Summary of results

This paper explores the application of an ungrading scheme in two sections of an online asynchronous undergraduate course in the United States by surveying the students at the end of the semester about their experience. First, via the quantitative survey, the majority of students reported overall satisfaction with the grading scheme. A majority noted that the instructor valued their work

and that they felt proud of the work that they produced. Students reported feeling motivated to learn new content. The qualitative themes echo these findings, with students noting increased autonomy and intrinsic motivation. Additionally, students reported in qualitative responses that they felt reduced stress and less pressure to work toward a grade; instead they focused on mastery of the content. Several students noted that they enjoyed the content more because they were not stressed or focused on grades. However, about one-third of the class strongly or somewhat agreed that they were anxious about their final grade, which is supported by the qualitative theme suggesting increased anxiety/uncertainty with the grading scheme.

DISCUSSION

These findings echo the extant literature, showing that generally, alternative grading schemes reduce stress and increase autonomy and motivation to learn (Blum et al. 2020; Clark et al. 2023; Gorichanaz 2022; Guberman 2021; Hasinoff et al. 2024; Kesler 2024). As others have noted (Kohn 2013), some students found the transition to ungrading challenging, which is reflected in the increased anxiety/uncertainty theme. It is likely that students have not learned the required metacognition skills to accurately assess their own level of understanding (Stanton, Sebesta, and Dunlosky 2021). Such metacognitive monitoring is difficult, and even professionals show flawed self-assessment (Miller and Geraci 2011). However, training in metacognitive monitoring could assist students in learning skills to increase their ability and comfort with assessing their own learning and performance (Miller et al. 2011; Stanton, et al. 2021).

A surprising theme in the qualitative survey responses was that students thought this assessment method would be more suited for subjects within the social sciences and humanities. This is despite research showing that science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) classes have successfully implemented a range of alternative grading methods (Blum et al. 2020). Similarly, despite high satisfaction with the current course, only 62.5% of students in the course said they would recommend the grading scheme for other courses. It is possible that since this was a new grading concept for most of the class, students struggled to imagine the application in other courses, especially in a course outside of the social sciences or humanities.

No matter the grading approach, faculty at the end of the course want to ensure their students achieve mastery of the course learning objectives. This case study found that, overall, students felt confident in achieving the course's overarching learning outcomes. In particular, students reported a very high level of confidence at the end of the course in the self-reflection learning outcomes (such as "examine the need to be self-aware of judgments and stereotypes about aging"). Students were least confident in the relatively lower-level learning objectives of defining and describing basic concepts and theories. The modules that addressed this "define and describe" learning objective took place during the very beginning of the course, so it could be that students struggled to recall this information. However, it is also possible that ungrading may be particularly useful in meeting reflective learning objectives. Additional research is needed to examine this hypothesis.

Limitations/future research

Students self-reported all data in this study, which was consistent with the self-assessment style of the course and met the exploratory nature of the study. However, self-report comes with potential bias, including social desirability and motivation to answer thoughtfully. The results should be interpreted with this in mind. This was a small cross-sectional case study, and so the author could not draw causal or generalizable conclusions. Because there was no control group, it was impossible to compare students' learning experiences using an ungrading approach to a course with traditional

grades. Additionally, it is not clear if the online nature of the course impacted the experience since no traditional in-person classroom control group existed. Future research should explore this topic using larger sample sizes and with comparison cohorts. Larger sample sizes will also allow for analyses by group, exploring whether characteristics such as gender, race, or ethnicity play a factor in the experience of ungrading. This type of analysis was not possible with this study's small sample size.

While this study was exploratory, future research should also consider pre- and post-test design to gain additional insights into the expectations and shifts in experiences across the semester. This could be particularly important when examining anxiety and would allow for the evaluation of tools and techniques to mitigate such anxiety. Finally, more in-depth qualitative analyses would have allowed for a more complete understanding of the experience for students. While this course was fully asynchronous with no synchronous sessions, future studies should consider offering students virtual synchronous focus group opportunities.

Implications and conclusions

Student evaluations suggest that the ungrading system offered many benefits in this online undergraduate course, especially in reducing stress, facilitating a greater focus on learning, and increasing student autonomy and intrinsic learning. However, some felt uncertain and anxious about this new approach. These results echo findings in implementing ungrading for in-person courses (Kesler 2024), suggesting that the challenges are not unique to a specific teaching modality. However, addressing these challenges may differ for online courses where there is no in-person communication.

Findings from this case study suggests that the instructor should communicate throughout the semester about the grading scheme, not just during an orientation at the beginning as the instructor did for this course. The already built-in self-reflection check-ins would be a good opportunity to reiterate the goals and potential benefits of the grading scheme since students are already reflecting on their learning. It could also be useful to review the process of grade assignment at these check-ins, as the process itself likely caused the most anxiety. This could include a simple visual infographic to describe the process of grade assignment and a document with frequently asked questions.

Finally, the process of a student accurately assessing their own learning and their level of understanding, or metacognition, can be difficult for students; offering specific training in this skill could be useful. This training may be offered at multiple points of the semester so that students are more prepared to self-assess at the end. At regular check-in times, the instructor could provide students with reflection prompts to practice this type of self-assessment. Specific prompts could include: 1) "What was the most challenging topic in this module and how did you approach overcoming this challenge?"; 2) "What strategies did you find most effective for learning and retaining information in this module?"; or 3) "Think about some of the feedback you received on the previous assignment. How did you use it to improve?"

For the ungrading scheme to be successful, clear communication and support are key to easing anxiety and uncertainty. While this advice would apply to other course delivery modes, including in-person and hybrid, such communication and support may be particularly challenging in asynchronous online courses. Therefore, instructors should provide a clear orientation to the ungrading method upfront as well as robust feedback to support students in their self-assessments throughout the semester. While feedback in asynchronous online courses is most easily delivered through written feedback, instructors should consider additional ways to connect with students, including providing video feedback, process infographics, frequently asked questions documents, and offering optional virtual check-in meetings.

Students in this study expressed a high level of satisfaction with the ungrading approach, with the majority indicating they would recommend it for other courses. They perceived the course as maintaining appropriate rigor and took pride in their work. Qualitative feedback revealed themes of enhanced focus on learning, increased intrinsic motivation, and reduced stress. However, some students experienced anxiety and uncertainty when tasked with assigning their own grades. To promote success, faculty should prioritize clear communication, offer ample support, and address student concerns.

These findings may encourage faculty to shift toward assessments that foster deeper engagement and a more holistic approach to student development. As educational institutions invest in more inclusive, learner-centered practices, ungrading could serve as a valuable tool for promoting critical thinking and self-directed growth.

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ETHICS

The University of Georgia's ethical review board approved this research.

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