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Ungrading Uncovered: How Going Gradeless Can Support Learner Diversity in Higher Education

Shaun Ferns

Technological University Dublin, shaun.ferns@tudublin.ie

Robert Hickey

Technological University Dublin, robert.hickey@tudublin.ie

Helen Williams

Technological University Dublin, helen.williams@tudublin.ie

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Abstract

The awarding of grades or marks to student work is traditionally considered a fundamental feature of assessment. Traditional grades, the awarding of numeric values to student work, date back to the 1600s where Harvard used exit grades to measure and categorize students (Smallwood, 1935). Grades became more widely established in the education sector at the beginning of the twentieth century to deal with increased numbers of students and as a means of communication between educational institutions and third parties, a form of universal measurement.

Although becoming ubiquitous across most educational spectrums in the second half of the twentieth century, there is mounting evidence to suggest that grades are not effective tools for measuring learning. A number of institutions and individual practitioners have moved away from grading in the hope of improving motivation, collaboration and lifelong learning for their students (Brilleslyper, et al., 2012) (White & Fantone, 2014) (Sackstein, 2015) (Beckie, 2019). With calls for a 'Pedagogy of Care' (Bali, 2020) and a decolonising of curriculum (Begum, & Saini, 2019) new approaches are being explored to replace traditional grading practices.,

One alternative approach is "ungrading", in which no letter grades or marks are given to students, has gained momentum. Recent literature (Blum, 2017) (Gibbs, 2019) suggests that ungrading increases motivation reduces stress, enhances independence, helps form new learning habits, makes room for creative work, promotes better communication, and opens up new course design possibilities. Strategies to go gradeless include providing plentiful formative feedback, facilitating peer and self-assessment, teaching students metacognitive skills through reflection, and (if the academic institution requires a final grade) allowing students to grade themselves (Stommel, 2018) (Sackstein, 2015) (Stommel, 2017). The involvement of students as partners in assessment has been shown to enhance motivation, self-critical learning, and performance (Logan, 2009) (Ndoye, 2017) (Panadero & Al-Qassab, 2019).

This paper presents three case studies(action research) based on the delivery of undergraduate modules in an Irish Higher education setting using an 'Ungrading' approach The 3 case studies describe activities that took place during the 2020-2021 academic year, in the midst of the global Covid pandemic. Two of the modules are from the Creative Digital Media BA Programme, (Multimedia Development 1 & Web Development 2) and a module in IT & Professional Development as part of a BSc in Horticulture. Each case study will detail the rationale for choosing ungrading, mechanics for delivery and reflection based on qualitative feedback from the three practitioners and student cohorts. The paper concludes by suggesting strategies for the effective implementation of ungrading in undergraduate classes to support diverse learner needs.

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