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UnGrading, Supporting our Students Through a Pedagogy of Care

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Abstract

The awarding of grades or marks to student work is traditionally considered a fundamental feature of assessment. Grades became more widely established in the twentieth century becoming ubiquitous across most educational institutions. There is increasing evidence to suggest that grades are not effective tools for promoting or measuring learning. One alternative approach for promoting and measuring learning is "Ungrading," in which no letter grades or marks are given to students. Instead, they are replaced with formative feedback provided through strategies such as individual feedback, peer review and self-assessment. An Ungrading approach promises increased learner motivation, a reduction in stress, and enhanced learner independence. It also helps to develop an improved teacher/learner relationship and opens up new course design possibilities. This paper presents a background to traditional grading policies to set a context. It continues with an introduction to the topic of Ungrading with a brief explanation and rationale for its selection. We ask the question, can Ungrading support a new pedagogy of care for the future of online education? The paper concludes by suggesting strategies for the effective implementation of Ungrading in undergraduate classes to support diverse learner needs.

1. Introduction

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 [1]. Grades became more widely established in education 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, meeting the needs of the learners and supporting lifelong learning for their students [2] [3]. With growing calls for a 'Pedagogy of Care' [4] 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. A more holistic approach which aims to build a closer student teacher relationship by concentrating on conversation and discussion as opposed to grades. Recent literature [5] suggests that Ungrading increases motivation reduces stress, enhances independence, helps form new learning habits, makes room for creative work, promotes better communication, and opens new course design possibilities. Strategies to apply Ungrading include providing plentiful formative feedback, facilitating peer and self-assessment, teaching students' metacognitive skills through reflection, and (to facilitate academic institution requirements for a final grade) allowing students to grade themselves [3] [7]. The involvement of students as partners in assessment has been shown to enhance motivation, self-critical learning, and performance [8].

2. Grades

2.1. Defining grading

To evaluate new approaches to assessment in the context of learning it is first important to agree on a definition of grading. The Cambridge English dictionary defines grading as "the process of judging the quality of a product, substance, or organisation, or the performance of an employee". This seems to suggest a more terminal judgment which might be better applied to a final product as opposed to a person. Collins's dictionary defines grading as "the act of classifying something on a scale by quality, rank, size, or progression". This definition is favourable as it mentions progression, implying continued improvement or improving while moving forward.

2.2. Grading, what's the point

Traditional grades in university have been around for hundreds of years, initially in the form of exit grades to measure and categorise students [1]. Some thought that this created too much tension for and amongst students and faculty and even acted as a distraction from the learning [9]. From the initial introduction of grades in different forms there has been criticism, debates amongst academics and between academics and administration around grading policies [10]. Many administrators are accused of only being concerned about the numbers and what grade a student has achieved. It is argued that administration was the major reason for the introduction of grading practices [11].

Grading alone can treat people more like products of a system and less like human beings who have feelings and emotions. Phrases like an "A" student or "C" student can be disingenuous to the student as a person. Many suggest that in a holistic approach a student should be measured against their own goals, with a view to growing and improving themselves (criterion-referenced assessment) [12]. In addition, they propose that student grading should be focusing on the learner and less on the grading, with the end point being learning, enlightenment or improvement for the student [7].

These debates informed with a critical reflection on enabling policies and focus on diversifying the curriculum has led to a momentum in considering alternative approaches to assessment. An additional major consideration has been the move away from the learner producing a product, to an evaluation of the learners' process. Also, the inclusion of more collaborative teaching practices for example active learning strategies [13].

There has been some noted opposition to the provision of a "grading" option based on the belief that this would develop a "norm-referenced mindset". For example, ranking of students which could undermine the criterion-referenced judgment about whether the learning outcomes specified as essential for "passing" have been achieved. In addition, they believe that the educationally undesirable effects of grading are so common and so significant that assessment policy should prohibit "grading" in all cases.

3. Ungrading

3.1. What is Ungrading?

Ungrading is when student assessments receive no letter grades or marks. The focus is solely on the students learning which is progressed through feedback, discussion and negotiation on completed work. This is usually with a view to the student improving and resubmitting their work as part of the process. To satisfy academic institutional requirements a final grade can be arrived at either completely by the learner (self-assessment) or in consultation with the lecturer. Occasionally the self-assessment is complimented with a form of peer-assessment/feedback. In practice Ungrading may very well be more of a philosophical approach as much as an actual practice [4]. Phrases like all-feedback-no-grades or contract grading and task-based learning with a focus on learning (the latter two of which use setting out clear tasks for the students to achieve specific grades) is how [6] broadly describes the approach. It is a student-centred approach to learning and assessment which encourages cocreating and co-assessment between the teacher and the learner.

3.2. Characteristics of Ungrading

- An emphasis on feedback. Conversational feedback through dialogue back and forth between student and lecturer or student and student is used. Examples, descriptions and discussions are utilised to progress the learning cycle to a satisfactory conclusion for all parties [14].

- A focus on competence, a drive for excellence. The will to perpetually improve and to keep on learning as opposed to achieving a single goal and then stopping. The learning is not capped.

- Self-paced, learners set the speed. Some may move fast, some slow but all will achieve their required level of learning that suits the individual.

- The opportunity to re-do work based on feedback received. Again, developing the will and having the opportunity to strive for improvement through re-submitting work is given to students to maximise their level of learning.

- Student choice in curriculum.

- A supportive learning community. Learning together, through and from one another. Lecturer and student and peer to peer.

4. A different approach, reasons for Ungrading

Why move away from the tradition of grading at university? Many students have described the feeling of stress and lack of motivation when submitting work for assessment. They have

highlighted that traditional grading practices can treat students like a product, a vessel to be filled with knowledge as opposed to a person who is central to the learning process [15]. Many educators believe that a learner's focus on grades may distract from the process of learning and tends to overemphasize the product, as opposed to the development of the learner. There are many advocates for Ungrading currently practicing in the field of education. For example, several third level institutions have decided to drop the grades in favour of their students learning [16]. It is by no means an easy step trying to move away from our institutionalised or traditional grading in higher education. [3] recommends several practical alternatives to grading which focus more on the student as a reflective practitioner, fuelled through personalised feedback.

[17] showed how grades promote fear of failure subsequently demotivating students' willingness to learn. Similarly [5] argues that "grades encourage a fear of risk taking" which would seem to be the opposite to what we would like our students to do, and certainly in college as part of the learning process. [5] also goes on to say that "grades are the quintessential form of extrinsic motivation". Which will stop as soon as the grade is received. This is backed up by [18] research into intrinsic motivation which showed that feedback is more effective for continued motivation and that grades may only act as a distraction from learning.

It is often argued that effective assessment should be authentic, but what kind of authentic real-life situation is based on grades? [2] highlights the importance of intrinsic motivation for lifelong learning, which should be a continued requirement and goal for any profession. They also found in their study with medical students that eliminating grades not only improves attitude and intrinsic motivation but supports collaboration which relieves stress for students. A recent study carried out at the National University of Singapore by [19] found students identified that implementing no grades had a positive effect on student's mental wellbeing and helped reduce stress levels.

5. Ungrading within 3rd level

Although there are many advocates for Ungrading, it is not necessarily the answer to all our problems, and it would be naive to think that this one approach could fix the myriad of issues in education. A number of institutions and practitioners have moved away from grading in the hope of improving motivation, collaboration and lifelong learning for their students [2] [3] [5]. Considering recent publications such as "The great university con" where [20] outlines the rather large problem being caused by grade inflation, it would appear that

something needs to be done. Introducing Ungrading could facilitate a move away from grade inflation with the focus firmly on feedback, as argued by [16]. The medical profession embraced Ungrading a long time ago [21] although some have taken a step backwards [22]. What is most relevant for educators, policy makers and students is that these types of discussions are happening and that we keep on trying to move in the right direction.

6. Why Ungrading now?

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020+ forced a seismic shift in teaching and learning. In the post-pandemic learning environment educators are re-examining best practices and a pedagogy of care is increasingly understood as fundamental to student success. This may involve a change in the teacher/learner relationship where a focus shifts to providing support both for the learner as a person and their academic performance. Though this idea of 'pedagogy of care' has been evident prior to the pandemic [7], the shift to, emergency remote learning in an online mode provided many examples of the successful approaches that place the student and their needs at the core, Ungrading at times being included as an element of this overall approach. Bali [23] sets out four key characteristics of a 'pedagogy of care' approach.

- Care requires personal knowledge of people - To have and show you 'care' you need to know about the learner, empathy is key in this regard.

- Care requires sharing and empathy with others different from ourselves - We must share ourselves to help develop a community built on diversity. This can be a challenge for all involved, how much should we share and what remains private. A learning community needs to navigate these questions and find solutions that work for them. As the goal is to develop a community, traditional power structures will be challenged.

- Care requires choosing the most appropriate response in the context at hand - responses will change depending on the learning community and how well developed it is, as well as considering cultural and societal norms.

On a serious note, there are many who might disagree about utilising a 'pedagogy of care' approach citing that it is not an academic role to provide pastoral care. However, this does not mean we can, or should ignore it. Ungrading can play a part in building a pedagogy of care within the learning space, whether this is in person or online. Bringing the focus away from the grading and

clearly onto the student can create a sense of personalised learning for both student and teacher. As John C Maxwell said, "students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care". Once the student realises that the student/teacher relationship will be centred on their own learning, and not on them being judged, a more caring connection can be established.

7. Lessons learned and suggestions for the future

Ungrading is not something you should just jump straight into. It takes time to plan and organise. You must be able to clearly lay out your Ungrading plan for your students well in advance. This seemingly radical idea may very well appear alien to your students and the rationale behind its use will need to be explained [4]. Depending on the method you decide to use for your Ungrading, initially you may not need to call it Ungrading. It might be simpler to explain to your students that their grades will be agreed between both of you, near the end of the semester jointly, based on the work they complete during the term [12]. Telling your students not to focus on their grades can be frightening as they may have spent most of their educational lives thinking about the importance of grades. Initially students can feel a sense of uncertainty about this method of teaching, and therefore you will need to explain it in a very clear and straightforward way for them. Once you let them know that their grades will not be negatively affected through using this method of assessment it should put their minds at ease.

Making any radical changes to your teaching practice can be daunting. It takes time to change how we do things, but the most important thing is to begin trying. Small adjustments or sampling can quite often be the best way to introduce new methods or ideas. We would recommend picking a topic or subject that you or your students find taxing or unpopular and try implementing your new strategies with these. When teachers or students dislike a topic, they usually focus on the quickest way to get through it. This also makes them think "what is the minimum grade or mark I need to achieve to complete this?". With the focus off the grades and marks the students can concentrate on the learning. Using an unpopular topic to introduce Ungrading can alleviate apprehension the student may have, as difficult or unlikeable topics can often generate stress about achieving the required grade. So, taking the grading issue away can be beneficial [7].

8. Conclusion

As part of a pedagogy of care, Ungrading can play an important role in creating a culture of confident intellectual discovery. The benefits for students are clear, but for educators unfamiliar with the practice, Ungrading may appear radical and challenging to implement. Academic freedom at third level can allow limitless scope for educators, hampered only by their own experience, understanding and willingness to try out new things. Although in most circumstances a grade is still required by any institution to conform to current practice, if what's best for the student is our focus, such as providing effective feedback, then maybe Ungrading might be the answer. Different subjects, topics and disciplines may require different approaches when it comes to grading or Ungrading, but how will anything improve if teachers are not willing to try new things? Although the concept of Ungrading may seem radical, even a small step in the right direction may make a difference.

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