Sowing Seeds for Success: Equitable Grading in the Information Literacy Classroom

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Hello!

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Agenda

01  Challenges in Traditional Grading

02  Ungrading: An Introduction

03  Ungrading in LIB 150

04  Challenges & Successes

05  Final Considerations

06  Q&A
Who’s in the Room?

Please use the QR code to the left to share the following information with the room:

- Your name
- Your institution and job title
- Your relationship with grading
- What satisfies and dissatisfies you in respect to your current grading practices

https://padlet.com/avaandering/LOEX24
Challenges in Traditional Grading

Where does our current system of grades come from?
What do “grades” communicate?
How do grades intersect with issues of equity in education?
The Rise of the A-F Grading Scale

Gained popularity during the turn to the 20th century with the rise of mass schooling (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012; Feldman, 2019)

In conjunction with 4.0 and 100% system, the dominant grading scale by the 1940s (Schneider & Hutt, 2014)

Marked a movement from grades as internal communication to external communication (Schneider & Hutt, 2014)
By show of hands, have you ever been...

1. Worried that your grading was too subjective?
2. Concerned that your grading wasn’t reflecting the learning and growth of a student (or class of students)?
3. Overwhelmed, irritated, or disheartened by students’ complaints about grades or frequent requests for extra credit opportunities?
4. Worried that your students ignored your feedback?
5. Upset that your students didn’t use your feedback?
6. Worried that your grading disadvantaged some of your students?
Traditional A-F Grading Scale

Challenges in Communication & Motivation

- Failure to accurately communicate student progress (Dressel, 1968; Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012; Feldman, 2019)
- Problem of extrinsic motivation (Beck et al., 1991; Elbow, 1997)
- Negative impact of grades on student performance and interest (Butler, 1988; Pulfrey et al., 2011)
- Leads students to “think less deeply, avoid taking risks, and lose interest in the learning itself” (Kohn, 2006, p. 12)
Traditional A-F Grading Scale

Equity-Related Challenges

- Implicit bias (Rapchak et al., 2023)
- Challenge of the one-size-fits-all approach for students (Gorichanaz, 2022)
  - Diverse backgrounds and experiences
  - Different levels of knowledge of course content
  - Different classroom experiences
- Impact of COVID-19 pandemic
### Equality vs. Equity

<table>
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<tr>
<th>EQUALITY</th>
<th>VS.</th>
<th>EQUITY</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>EQUALITY = SAMENESS</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>GIVING EVERYONE THE SAME THING</strong>&lt;br&gt;It only works if everyone starts from the same place</td>
<td><strong>EQUITY = FAIRNESS</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>ACCESS TO SAME OPPORTUNITIES</strong>&lt;br&gt;We must ensure equity before we can enjoy equality</td>
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(Cornell University ILR School, 2019)
…“opponents and their critiques have never occupied more than the margins of the discussion over grading and they have done little to dislodge formal marking systems. Grading remains a central feature of nearly every student’s school experience.”

(Schneider & Hutt, 2014, p. 202)
Ungrading: An Introduction

What is ungrading?
What is the purpose of ungrading?
What does ungrading look like in action?
Let’s start by tackling a misconception:

Ungrading ≠ no grades*

*at least not usually…
A Flexible Definition of Ungrading

A broader set of assessment strategies and practices that challenge aspects of traditional grading methods (Supiano, 2019; Greenberg et al., 2022)
Key Aspects of Ungrading

An approach that...

- Decenters the instructor in the grading process
- Provides students with greater autonomy
- Encourages students to engage with critical reflection and self-assessment

(Blum, 2020)
Ungrading in Action: Examples

How It Works

- Instructors work with students to develop grade expectations together
- Written contract between student and instructor to outline the work the student will complete (Litterio, 2018)
- Aims to “emphasize activities and behaviors that will lead to learning” (Elbow, 1997, p. 133)
Ungrading in Action: Examples

- Labor-Based Contract
- Standards-Based
- Specifications
- Ungrading

**Grade could include...**
- Completion of assignments
- Completion of assignment drafts
- Assignment revisions
- Meeting specific assignment requirements (e.g., page length, presentation length)
- Attendance in class
- Participation in class
- Leadership in class
Ungrading in Action: Examples

Labor-Based Contract

Standards-Based

Specifications

Ungrading

How It Works

- Instructors look holistically at submitted and in-class work to determine how well students have mastered course content.
- Concentrates on content-mastery by the conclusion of a course (Feldman, 2018).
Ungrading in Action: Examples

**Common Practices**
- Elimination of grading homework, participation, and attendance
- Removal of penalties like late submissions
- Allows for revisions
  (Feldman, 2018; Alex, 2022)
Ungrading in Action: Examples

How It Works

- Grading based on achievement (not ranking) of objectives
- Assignments and/or modules bundled to determine grade (Leslie & Lundblom, 2020)
- “Earn higher grades by jumping more hurdles that show evidence of more learning…and/or jumping higher hurdles that show evidence of more advanced learning” (Nilson, 2014, p. 25)
Ungrading in Action: Examples

Labor-Based Contract

Standards-Based

Specifications

Ungrading

Common Practices

- Assignments graded pass/fail or satisfactory/unsatisfactory
- Provides opportunities to revise work that fails to initially pass
- Detailed instructions explain what constitutes as “passing” assignment
- Bar for success is set with “high yet reachable standards” (Earl, 2022, p. 51)
Ungrading in Action: Examples

How It Works

- Assignments and projects receive feedback without grades attached (Stommel, 2018)
- Students take an active role in reviewing their progress and assigning their own comprehensive grade
  - Narrative of progress
  - Discussion with instructor
  - Instructor often reserves the right to adjust grade (in discussion with student)
Common Aims of Ungrading

- Center course learning objectives
- Encourage reflective thinking
- Provide greater flexibility to students
- Involve students in assessment process
- Increase student agency and motivation
- Increase creativity and risk-taking

IMPROVE EQUITY IN ASSESSMENT AND GRADING
Ungrading in LIB 150

What was the context for this implementation?

Which ungrading method was used?

How was ungrading implemented?
LIB 150: Search Strategies for the Information Age

“Introduction to the exploration and practice of information literacy and library research concepts and skills, with an emphasis on the communication of information in today’s world.”

Logistics:
- 3-credit General Education course
- 24 students: Mostly first or second year
- Multiple sections offered each semester (taught by library faculty)
- Modality: In-person
# Learning Outcomes & Objectives

## Course Objectives

1. Students will be able to navigate print and digital information research tools and use them for both college-level research and lifelong learning.

2. Students will be able to differentiate information formats and quality and be able to apply these to college-level information research assignments.

3. Students will be able to communicate their findings effectively to specific audiences.

## General Education Learning Outcomes

1. Information Literacy

2. Communicating Effectively
Traditional Grading: Original Grading Scale

25%  20%  35%  20%

5 Skills Exercises
- Evaluating Sources
- Research as Inquiry
- Finding & Evaluating Books
- Finding Articles in Databases
- Finding and Evaluating Websites

Database Information Solutions (Group Project)
- Presentation
- Annotated bibliography

Beyond the News Project
- Topic proposal
- Annotated bibliography
- Presentation
- Peer evaluations
- Reflective journal

Attendance & Participation
Traditional Grading: Rubric Example Skills 2: Research as Inquiry
Initial Roll-Out of Specs Grading

- Why specifications grading?
  - Appeal of pass/fail grading
  - Benefit of revisions to student learning
  - More structure than some other ungrading methods
- First specs grading: Fall 2021
Specifications: Rethinking the System

Big Picture
Building grade bundles:
What is the minimal work that can be done to meet all course objectives and learning outcomes?
Which assignments demonstrate basic application of course content? Most complex application?

Alignment
Revising assignments:
What do the students need to do to show they have mastered the content for each assignment?
How can revisions be structured to support student learning?
What does this look like in our LMS (Brightspace)?

Other Changes
Increasing flexibility and student agency:
Flipped learning
New in-class activities (some menus of activities)
Updates to assignments and projects
Specifications: Specs Grading Scale

- **D**
  - Database Teach-In
  - 5 Skills Exercises

- **C**
  - 1 Peer Evaluation
  - Myself, the Researcher Essay
  - Database Teach-In
  - 5 Skills Exercises

- **B**
  - 1 Peer Evaluation
  - Myself, the Researcher Essay
  - Database Teach-In
  - 5 Skills Exercises

- **A**
  - Beyond the News Presentation
  - Beyond the News Topic Proposal and Annotated Bibliography
  - Beyond the News Topic Proposal and Annotated Bibliography
  - Myself, the Researcher Essay
  - Database Teach-In
  - 5 Skills Exercises
Specifications:
Rubric Example
Skills 2: Research as Inquiry

To pass this assignment, you must:

- Identify at least 3 major ideas, 3 things you know, and 2 things you want to know more about in the article investigation.
- Create a concept map with a central idea from the article as your major idea, at least 3 main subtopics, and at least 2 concepts for each subtopic.
- Create one open-ended, innovative research question using the ideas from the article as your inspiration.
## Additional Details and Considerations

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<tr>
<th>Revisions/Resubmissions</th>
<th>Attendance and Participation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Unlimited: Allow unlimited resubmission of assignments.</td>
<td>Ungraded (mostly—limit on number of unexcused absences before failing course).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of tokens: Provide students with tokens at the start of the semester that they can use for resubmissions.</td>
<td>Use of tokens: Provide students with tokens at the start of the semester that they can use for unexcused absences.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Extensions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Automatic 24-hour extension if contacted prior to deadline.</td>
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<th>Late Work</th>
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<td>Removed penalties</td>
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Challenges & Successes

What were initial successes I experienced with ungrading?
What barriers did I experience?
How has my use of specifications grading evolved?
Initial Successes

**More Equitable Opportunities to Succeed**
Revising assignments helps students overcome initial barriers or misunderstandings and build the skills they need to succeed.

**Increased Conversations Around Learning**
Students have to engage with instructor feedback in order to strengthen their work.

**Supporting Mental Health**
Opportunities for revision helps students mitigate stress and encourages them to take chances in their work.

**Less Pressure during Grading for Instructor**
The revision process puts the responsibility for improving work on the student rather than requiring the instructor to provide solutions.
Challenges

**Communication**
Do students understand how their grade will be determined? Do they understand how this is designed to support them?

**Rushed Revisions**
What if students don’t take the time to read feedback and revise their work?

**Doing the Bare Minimum**
Will students just do the bare minimum to meet the assignment specifications?

**Flexible Deadlines**
When does flexibility start to have a negative impact on student learning? On students’ mental health?
Making Specifications Work

*How has my use of specifications grading evolved?*

- Communication (a lot of it!)
- Increased student check-ins
- Use of tokens for unexcused absences
- Introduction of more time to work on assignments in class
What if you’re not ready to fully implement ungrading?
Where else can you promote and engage in conversations about ungrading?
Consider allowing revisions on early assignments (or assignments that serve as building blocks)

Convert (or create) some pass/fail assignments, particularly metacognitive assignments

Rethink approaches to grading attendance and participation

Use pass/fail on lower-level assignments and traditional grading on higher-level work
An Advocate for Ungrading: Engaging with Faculty, Librarians, and Academic Units

- Discuss challenges and/or shortcomings of traditional grading with other librarians and faculty
- Share the *what* and *why* of ungrading
- Explain why implementing ungrading methods would be useful to specific contexts
- Find campus partners (WRT program? Center for Teaching and Learning? Other faculty?)
Reflection

How can you apply ungrading to your own work?

- Is there any ungrading method that you can use in your own course?
- Are there ungrading principles you can apply to your assessment?
- Are there faculty or other campus partners you can engage with?

https://padlet.com/avaandering/LOEX24
Q & A

Have more questions?
Contact me at
avaandering@uri.edu
References


References


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Thanks

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