Early Career

Ungrading

Bianca Thompson

It was two days before the fall 2020 semester was set to begin. Like everyone else, I was unclear about how the semester was going to go. What was hybrid supposed to look like? What if a student got COVID? What if I did? I was all set to teach the content of my courses (even if I was unsure how much I would get to cover), and prepared to do my usual assessment with essentially standard grading practices.

The pandemic has had the effect of causing many of us to reassess our standard practices. For me this manifested as reconsidering this assessment style, which I really felt wasn’t communicating to students that learning is more important than grades.

Like all of us, students have certain goals in mind, and they often see their courses as obstacles on the path, and instructors as gatekeepers. It seemed to me that every conversation with a student involved points and scores. And I have been guilty of getting snarky in response—when they ask “Is this going to be on the test?”, I sometimes have replied “It is now.” But of course snappish responses are not long-term solutions. Assessments had evolved to be the worst part of teaching for me. Should I keep doing what I was doing because my students and I were used to that, or could I try something really different?

In a talk at a department retreat, my colleague Spencer Bagley introduced our department to ungrading, a different way to approach the problem of assessing students. There are many explanations on what ungrading is (for example: https://ungrading.net/), but for the uninitiated, ungrading gives students a strong voice in the classroom on what matters and what doesn’t, helping them to develop the metacognition skill of understanding when they know that they’ve learned something. Key to the philosophy is grading as self-grading, and I push back if I think their assessment is inaccurate (e.g., overly harsh or too relaxed).

I convinced my students that their major project was very important and was a tool to demonstrate their understanding, and that reading the book showed they were making an effort to understand the material. So in the end, the grading scheme did not end up being too different from how I had been carving up their grades previously, but my students and I felt much more heard through this process. Things had turned out okay, I think in large part because it was Fall 2020 so my students were open to new pedagogical tools. Nothing disastrous had happened because of ungrading, and so I was feeling brave enough to commit all my future classes to this method.

After experimenting since that first time, I can make some recommendations about implementing the practice:

- Buy-in: Students can be scared about changes like new grading schemes, so student buy-in is key. To facilitate this, I spend a substantial part of the first day describing ungrading, explaining why I do it, how it benefits students, and how students will implement it.
- Check-in: I have 3 written/oral check-ins with my students over the semester. In these, they tell me how they are feeling about the course as a whole. I share what I think they can be doing differently. These conversations serve to catch students before they drown or burn out.
- Communication: I am clear on what I consider low-stakes and high-stakes assignments and what that means for time management and their rubric. Students write a lot of statements in their rubric like “shows really good understanding” or “put in a lot of effort,” so it’s important for me to be clear on what I consider “good understanding” and “a lot of effort.”
- Reframing: In the beginning students understand ungrading as self-grading, and I push back if I think their assessment is inaccurate (e.g., overly harsh or too relaxed). I remind them that in fact their ungrade is determined

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through a conversation. Their voice is important as they can tell me about things I don’t see, but I am the expert in the room so I can help them see where they need improvement.

- Short meetings with students: I meet with students for 15–20 minutes before they turn in their final grade assessment. During these conversations we discuss what I see at this point, where I hope their project will end up, and how they should frame their final assessment in order to achieve the grade they are aiming for. I also use it as an opportunity to have students explain concepts to me that I know they struggled with.

- Feedback and revision: Giving students good feedback on their work and opportunities to reflect on what they’ve learned is key to their growth and ability to take risks. Students who are afraid of math become much less afraid if they know they can try again and aren’t punished for making mistakes. The reflection component is key to making revisions worthwhile for the students and for me.

- Managing expectations: I remind students that we aren’t haggling for a grade and that we are using evidence from the course to determine their final grade.

A recent review is fairly characteristic of the change in attitudes among students since I have made the change to ungrading:

I came into this class thinking that math is just difficult and doesn’t matter and all it does is make me feel bad about myself because I can never seem to understand it. I never thought that math, and linear algebra especially, could be that relevant so I guess going into the class with that perception made me not care as much as I should have (hence some missing assignments and the struggle to reach deadlines)…But I’m really happy to say that I was 100% wrong and my perception of linear algebra changed completely throughout the course of this semester and I think that can be seen in the ways that I started participating more and putting more effort into my homework. I went from not turning in the homework at the beginning of the semester to getting an [A] grade on almost all of them.

I feel that ungrading has addressed a number of issues around diversity and inequality. Traditionally successful students are often those who had the course before (leaving out those without that privilege). Students who said that before they felt uncomfortable in a math course spoke of feeling heard and allowed to make mistakes and try again, rather than giving up. By and large, my students of color and first-generation students have told me the benefits and confidence they gained from this method of assessment. Ungrading has given me the framework to support these students and I’m seeing more variation among those who are successful.

As much as I love ungrading, I recognize that it would be difficult to scale up. My courses are small. Because of this, I can offer my students revisions on everything without worrying about how much time it will take. I can meet with all my students individually several times in the semester; I don’t know if I could do that with larger classes. But, even though this method is probably more time consuming, it is also not time wasted, and it delivers on its promise to be inclusive.

If implementing the full version of ungrading seems insurmountable, choose a piece of it that could work for you. One entry point could be to let students have a say on how a project grade is decided or which topics are covered. You might consider what assignments or exams would allow for revision and reflection. We want to reach the goal of all of our students knowing that they belong, and ungrading can lead to more students having a less stressful experience.

Credits

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