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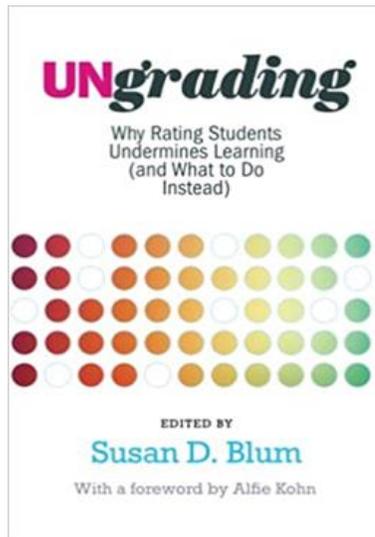
Blum, S. (Ed.) (2020). *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)*. West Virginia University Press.

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When the value and the cost of education are at the forefront of our conversations about education, Susan Blum and colleagues reintroduce a revolutionary approach to rethink how we learn, assess our student's learning, and practice our teaching. The "ungrading" approach is positioned within the progressive education practices movement—and it isn't new. The detrimental impact of grades on learning has been written about since the 1970s and 1980s with books like *Making Sense of College Grades* (Milton et al., 1986) and *Writing Without Teachers* (Elbow, 1973). Alfie Kohn, who has also extensively challenged educational systems practices in grading (1999, 2004, 2015), writes the foreword for Blum's edited volume, *Ungrading*. Here Kohn notes:



The writers you are about to meet draw on research, common sense, examples set by other educators, and their own experimentation to point the way to moving away from grades. They have sometimes engaged in tough introspection about what they've been doing for years, and you may well resonate with their doubts, their hesitations, their epiphanies. Many have come to realize that (a) grades have been driving much of what happens in their classrooms, (b) this is a serious problem, and (c) it doesn't have to be that way. (p. xv)

Part of James Lang's Teaching and Learning in Higher Education series, *Ungrading* is divided into three sections—Foundation and Models, Practices, and Reflections. Each chapter examines contributing authors' experience and practices with eliminating grades or the process of ungrading. Editor Susan Blum, a professor of anthropology at the University of Notre Dame, has published numerous edited volumes, monographs, and articles on her areas of expertise, including cultural anthropology, language, and higher education. For this collection, Blum is joined by other prominent experts in the scholarship of teaching and learning such as Jesse Stommel and John Warner. The chapters are written in essay or blogpost format with easy, conversational styles.

Blum approaches the topic of ungrading with an astute anthropological lens to understand the history and culture around grades and grading. She argues that grades have “inconsistent meaning” (p. 10), and “detrimental side effects, unintended consequences, and perverse incentives” (p. 12) abound within the system of grading. Blum addresses how the COVID-19 global pandemic brought many of these issues to light—and we cannot ignore what we now know to be true. Other authors in this collection agree. Chiaravalli argues grades “stifle student learning” (p. 82). In explaining why he doesn't grade, Stommel asserts, “Grades are not a good incentive. They incentivize the wrong stuff: the product over the process, what the teacher thinks over what the student thinks” (p. 28). In his chapter, Blackwelder directly confronts the problems with grades by paraphrasing Kohn's (1999) findings:

- Grades tend to reduce students' interest in learning.
- Grades tend to reduce students' preference for challenging tasks.
- Grades tend to reduce the quality of students' thinking.
- Grades are valid, reliable, or objective.
- Grades distort the curriculum.
- Grades waste a lot of time.
- Grades encourage cheating.
- Grades spoil relationships. (p. 48)

A witness to these findings in his classroom, Blackwelder notes that he lost focus in his teaching and was no longer someone the students wanted to listen to. In his words, “I was no longer a teacher. I was a gatekeeper” (p. 44). His relationship with students deteriorated into dependence on points in a gradebook. Initially, he sought to make his courses more rigorous so that no student could earn 100%. He also focused on what his colleagues and administration thought of him, rather than what the students learned. Once he realized this, he knew he needed to make some major changes. Following up on Blackwelder's desire to change, contributing author Gibbs explains several benefits of going “gradeless” (p. 98). For example, he asserts “ungrading reduces stress, ungrading makes room for creative work, and ungrading promotes better communication” (pp. 98-100).

As a faculty member at a university who has taught courses at the undergraduate and doctoral level, I agree that the grading system is broken and that there must be a better way. For many educators, the main obstacle lies in how we create incremental or monumental change in the current educational system. In particular, how might we execute and implement these strategies in the classroom or online within our individual institution's organizational cultures?

The second part of the book addresses these issues and dives into the practical how-to of ungrading. Authors share their own experiences reassessing the use of grades and implementing new approaches and creative strategies. Throughout the chapters, the authors suggest step-by-step guides and sample assignments of peer review, self-evaluation, contract grading, and one-on-one conferences as options for implementing ungrading practices. Peer evaluation (p. 119) is allowing fellow students to evaluate participation, effort, and performance of classmates. Self-evaluation (p. 119) requires the student to consider their preparation, listening, and participation. Contract grading (p. 108) involves teachers providing a detailed explanation for what is expected to earn each grade, and then students work toward the grade they plan to achieve. In their chapter, Katopodis and Davidson explain that contract grading focuses on the work, not the student. One-on-one conferences are suggested by Kirr as an option to meet and discuss feedback and student work as part of a comprehensive ungrading process each semester.

An examination of ungrading from the perspective of equity in the classroom is one strength of the book. Blum argues that “grades fail to meet the needs of diverse students and fail to promote equity” (p. 227). Several contributors focus on the detrimental effects of ranking students and how grades are demotivating. Stommel notes that educators often focus on “efficiency over the needs of individual learners” (p. 32). In terms of equity, Stommel is clear to point out the educational systems of quantification and performance privilege certain students and disadvantage others; grades are not fair. He asserts we must think critically about our expectations, biases, approaches, and assumptions and the impact these factors may have on our students. He says, “We don't prepare our students for a world of potential oppression by oppressing them” (p. 34). His answer to the inequitable outcomes is ungrading through student self-evaluation about “their learning and how learning happens.” Similarly, in their chapter, Katopodis and Davidson explain that equity in education aims to support and promote student success, creativity, and achievement rather than ranking and standardization.

I identified several key takeaways from this book. First, the research shows grading has a detrimental impact on student's learning. We know that students often focus on the minimum requirements, rubrics, and word counts—and miss the point. Next, small changes to assessment activities can have a significant impact. Many of the authors did not outright do away with

grades initially; they changed parts of the assignments or parts of the assessments to move toward ungrading as a pedagogical tool. Finally, the key to this work is *trust*, a concept emphasized by multiple authors in this text. The work of ungrading in our pedagogical practice starts with trusting students. If we don't trust students, ungrading is unlikely to work. Blum admits relinquishing control is hard, and it is also essential to consider what students think about ungrading. The authors note some students may experience fear, confusion, and skepticism about eliminating grades, mostly because grading and ranking are all they have ever known.

In my own teaching, I approach the students from a place of trust, expecting them to do the work and focus on the learning outcome, rather than the score. Although grades are required in my program, I am seeking ways to have deeper conversations in our department about these concepts and ideals and look for ways to focus on student learning in our practices and policies. Some ways I have been able to practice ungrading techniques such as peer reviews and reflections in my teaching. I currently teach in a doctoral program and view the dissertation process as an experience in ungrading. I provide extensive feedback about their research questions, methodology, data collection, and implications. I appreciate the opportunity to give thoughtful, helpful, and critical feedback without a numerical value attached. I am also interested in exploring contract grading and self-evaluation as future strategies.

Despite support for the principles of ungrading and clear evidence of the negative impact grades may have on learning, difficulties abound in changing a complicated system founded on grades. For the skeptic, it may seem impossible to make this type of change. Yet this book includes case studies from STEM courses like organic chemistry and math that document the possibility of ungrading if instructors are open to the strategy and willing to invest in learning based on something other than grades. In the ungrading case study in Chapter 9, Sorensen-Unrah implemented ungrading in class exercises and exams using “critical and helpful” feedback. Students received 100 points for completed work and 0 points for missing work. In this chapter, the author also shares detailed descriptions of her assignments, syllabi, and rationale.

The concept of ungrading can be unsettling, but also rewarding. This is not a book for an instructor or teacher who just wants to update their syllabus and be done. Stommel points out that “spending less time on grading doesn't mean less time on assessment” (p. 36). Scholars continue to point out ungrading does not have a universal application or one-size-fits-all approach (Eyler, 2021; Stommel, 2021). We each must consider how ungrading could work in our classes, on our campuses, and with our students.

K-12 and college and university educators alike may find the suggestions and commentary offered in this volume applicable. For college faculty, this

book would be an excellent choice for faculty development programming or a summer book club where faculty are designing their courses and their syllabi. For K-12 teachers, the book could be used as part of professional development or team discussions within and across disciplines. Pre-service teachers and teacher educators could find value in this book as a text in courses on assessment and student learning. Critical conversations about how students learn, how we teach, and how we assess learning can broaden the discourse and challenge our ways. For ungrading to be possible, educational leaders, program directors, and deans need to give power to their professors and instructors to see the benefits of this approach and allow freedom and flexibility to move toward the goals of student learning and success.

Ungrading not only encourages us to rethink grades and systems of grading; it provides a model for exploring new ways of doing the work of teaching and learning. This book is engaging and exciting because it inspires us to think differently and offers an opportunity to reimagine teaching and the foundations of learning – without barriers – for ourselves and our students.

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About the Reviewer

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