

A Point-less Class: Ungrading in a Graduate Leadership Course

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Introduction

Thoughtless compliance, arbitrary deadlines, anxiety, grade grubbing, point-chasing. We hoped to avoid these and other grade-related phenomena when developing a graduate distance-based team and organizational leadership course at Oregon State University during the summer of 2021. We envisioned a course that emphasized metacognition, application, peer support, and intrinsic motivation as opposed to a learning environment where students chased deadlines, pandered to instructor ideologies, and cut corners in the name of point accumulation. Our search for pedagogical practices that would achieve this vision led us to the concept of *ungrading*, a movement in education that emphasizes student self-evaluation, formative feedback from the instructor, peer feedback, and dialogue with students about their learning progress (Kohn, 2011; Kohn & Blum, 2020; Ungrading Pedagogy, n.d.). Ungrading can foster healthy self-esteem in students, create more engaged and responsible students, increase metacognition, reduce grade-related anxieties, and lessen the negative effects of classroom power dynamics (Sackstein, 2015; Kohn & Blum, 2020). Instructors may use ungrading to different degrees, ranging from implementing more self-assessment in assignments to removing letter grades or point values altogether (Sackstein, 2015; Ungrading Pedagogy, n.d.). At Oregon State University, we chose to develop a course in which there were zero points, yet students received, through self-evaluation, a letter grade at the end of the term.

How it Works

We included ungrading elements through all aspects of the course, including how and when students completed work, their interactions with peers and instructors, feedback methods, and assessment. Similar to other courses, students completed weekly discussions. Their assignments included a menu of weekly application activities, called “To Try Activities” and a discussion space to share the results and impacts of their To Try Activity implementation. Students were asked to complete seven of the 40+ offered To Try activities by the end of the term. For the culminating project, students worked in small groups to create a contextualized primer on team leadership. We provided clear instructions and expectations along with descriptions of how we conceptualized rigor for all coursework. Most submissions were “graded” complete/incomplete. Written feedback on course submissions was largely conversational, yet also offered evaluative feedback when necessary to reiterate submission expectations (e.g., reminding students to cite the text when appropriate.). We asked students to complete a midterm and end-of-term self-assessment to evaluate their progress in the course. Both self-assessments asked students to reflect on their learning journey, identify coursework they were especially proud of, the degree to which they met the course expectations (e.g., completed all discussions), and what letter grade they earned.

Results to Date/Implications

The course was offered during spring 2022 and included ten students pursuing various graduate degrees. Students submitted coursework prior to the suggested deadline 99.2% of the time on all assignments. Five students assigned themselves a “B” on the midterm self-assessment and five assigned themselves an “A”. All students assigned themselves an “A” on the end-of-term self-assessment and we agreed with their determinations given the evidence they provided and their work throughout the term. We received overwhelmingly positive feedback from students about the course design and grading philosophy from informal comments and their end-of-term reflections. They appreciated the flexible deadlines, the menu of application activities, and the opportunity to reflect on their learning. One student commented, “I think the flexibility in the course and the ability to engage with each other and apply the material to real-life experiences...has been really nice. I feel like I am constantly doing homework for this class but it takes the form of thinking critically about situations and analyzing my work teams and environments instead of un-helpful “busy” work.” Another student reflected, “I worked hard to be proud of everything that I produced in this course and because of it feel confident in the grade that I will request. I am thankful for this opportunity to have this grading philosophy because it has reminded me what education is really about, if I am truly absorbing the information for the sake of my own learning and growth, and I believe that I am.”

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Implementing ungrading required a paradigm shift for course designers, instructors, and students. We realized that a lot of our communication with and feedback to students was centered around a grade (e.g., why points were deducted). Adjusting to more conversational feedback was a challenge. Ungrading was also an adjustment for students, specifically the open due dates. We recommend anyone wishing to implement ungrading clearly communicate expectations on the grading philosophy as a whole as well as for each assignment. We found posting written and video explanations of the grading philosophy effective. We also encouraged students to connect with us if they felt the policy induced more anxiety or if they were ever worried about their progress in the course. Unless you plan to develop a course from scratch, we recommend small, incremental changes to incorporate ungrading. It is important to remember, however, that ungrading doesn't mean “anything goes”, rigor is lost, or all students get an “A”. Rather, it is a rethinking of how we assign value to student learning and the student's participation in that process. We will continue to use ungrading in this leadership course.

Cost/Resources Needed

As ungrading is pedagogical, cost and resources are minimal. For this project, we received a \$5,000 grant from the university to develop the course. Our department chair also offered two faculty several weeks of summer salary support to develop the curriculum. Resources and ideas from ungrading came from websites and books checked out from the university library.

References

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