

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

Haley Q. Traini, Kelsey J. Joseph, and Jonathan J. Velez

108 Strand Ag Hall

Oregon State University

Corvallis, OR 97331

541-737-2661

[Haley.Traini@oregonstate.edu](mailto:Haley.Traini@oregonstate.edu)

[KJ.Joseph@oregonstate.edu](mailto:KJ.Joseph@oregonstate.edu)

[Jonathan.Velez@oregonstate.edu](mailto:Jonathan.Velez@oregonstate.edu)

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### **Introduction**

Thoughtless compliance, arbitrary deadlines, anxiety, grade grubbing, point chasing. We, the instructional designers, aimed to avoid these and other grade-related behaviors when developing a graduate distance-based team and organizational leadership course at Oregon State University (OSU) 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 power dynamics in the classroom (Kohn & Blum, 2020; Sackstein, 2015). 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 OSU, 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 assessments. Similar to other courses, students completed weekly discussions. Their assignments included a menu of weekly application activities called “To Try Activities”. These activities were exercises related to the content of the week that encouraged the application of learning. We also created a discussion space to share the results and impacts of their To Try Activity implementation. We asked students 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” as 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 believed they earned. For each submitted assignment, we communicated that their final grade was negotiated; if we did not agree with the student’s self-evaluation, we could offer an alternative grade and/or begin a conversation with the student about their learning.

### **Results to Date/Implications**

The course was offered during the spring of 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. 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. Students appreciated the flexible deadlines, the menu of application activities, and the opportunity to reflect on their learning. One student commented, “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 unhelpful “busy” work.” Another student reflected, “I am thankful for 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 much of our communication with and feedback to students was centered on a grade (e.g., why points were deducted). Adjusting to feedback that is more conversational 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. This might include self-evaluative elements, moving to a “complete/incomplete” format, or incorporating more student choice into assignments. It is important to remember, however, that ungrading does not 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 as well as explore ungrading practices in other leadership courses at OSU.

### **Cost/Resources Needed**

As ungrading is pedagogical, cost and resources are minimal. However, 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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