Book Review:

Blum, S.D. (Ed). (2020). Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to do Instead). West Virginia University Press

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For more than 50 years, writing researchers have been compiling an evidence-base which has investigated strategies, both effective and ineffective, for guiding student writing. Years of research evidence have shown that drilling grammar and grading a final text as a product are ineffective in facilitating writing improvement. Iterative and dialogic feedback are effective; however, the pervasive stronghold of traditional modes of evaluation have meant there has been little general uptake of this knowledge. One barrier to moving forward is the systemic structures of academia itself – especially its insistence on metrics-based grading systems as the established form of evaluation. *Ungrading* hopes to be the book that shifts the paradigm on grading systems in higher education.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and all it has taught us about inequities in student experience, has shown us this is the time for such a shift. *Ungrading* is an edited volume, relatively inexpensive for self-purchase – as of the writing of this review, it is listed on Amazon.ca for $30.64 CAD – and offers a "baker's dozen" worth of chapters from proponents of ungrading, written in the casual voice of blogs. Many of the included authors in the volume have large social media followings and their experiential testimonies succeed at convincing the reader that grading is a hindrance to student learning. *Ungrading's* biggest success, however, is in how it moves beyond the theoretical discussion of *why* we need ungrading and shows us *how* to enact a practice of ungrading.

What is ungrading? Ungrading is a method of providing feedback on student assignments without an instructor ranking students against each other or some other institutional norm. Essentially, ungrading is a method of giving a grade to a student without actually giving a grade. The contributors to *Ungrading* (plus a forward written by Alfie Kohn) are veterans to the practice (e.g. Susan Blum, Cathy Davidson/Christina Katopodis, Laura Gibbs, Jessie Stommel) and newbies (e.g. Joy Kirr, Marcus

Schultz-Bergen). It is a practice that fits naturally with writing focused courses (Aaron Blackwelder, Arthur Chiaravalli, Starr Sackstein, John Warner) but STEM subject teachers have also found ways to implement ungrading practices (Gary Chu, Christopher Riesback, Clarissa Sorensen-Unruh). Ungrading works in large and small student groups, although Katopodis and Davidson say, "size may matter" (p. 107). As a faculty member who routinely faces large classes in a nursing program, I can attest to the fact that certain ungrading practices (e.g. individual grading conference interviews) would be difficult to manage logistically with 60-100 students or more. Nevertheless, many principles of ungrading can be modified to suit large student group environments. Ungrading can also be effectively implemented in higher education (eight chapters are dedicated to discussing this) but can also be used in secondary education (five chapters discuss how). All of the contributors to the volume are ostensibly still beholden to "the system" and thus are required to submit final course grades – they've simply found a way to avoid traditional rating systems. As the volume sets out to argue, many contexts can successfully use ungrading, though there is no one-size-fits all prescription for how to ungrade. The strength of this book is in the number of concrete examples provided that show readers how they too might enact ungrading, though it remains up to the reader to take the potpourri of options that fall under the umbrella of ungrading and decide for themselves what will work in their individual classrooms.

Because *Discourse and Writing* targets an audience of writing scholars and researchers, the aspects of *Ungrading* that align most closely to the issues of writing pedagogy will be the primary focus of this review. Writing heavy environments are the perfect context for employing ungrading because it is multifaceted, received subjectively, employs scaffolded pedagogical methods when taught well, and improves with revision practices. The book is divided into 3 sections:

> **Part I** – **Foundations and Models.** These chapters address why grading is arbitrary and harmful, how it increases inequities in the classroom, the limited research available supporting ungrading interventions, and what is known about why traditional pedagogies of assignment management don't work. (Contributors: Jesse Stommel, Aaron Blackwelder, Susan D. Blum, Starr Sackstein, Arthur Chiaravalli)
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> **Part II – Practices**. Here both seasoned and inexperienced ungraders from a variety of disciplines describe their ungrading practices, successes and failings, and what they would change. The practices in each of these chapters are described in enough detail to be replicable, many with reprinted assignment guidelines and instruction, spreadsheets for tracking, and examples of

student responses (good and bad) to their practices. (Contributors: Laura Gibbs, Christina Katopodis and Cathy N. Davidson, Christopher Riesbeck, Clarissa Sorensen-Unrah, Gary Chu)

Part III – Reflections. These chapters combine the practical with reflection and retrospectives on a single classroom, a live real-time class-by-class blog of how ungrading unfolded for one teacher, and a career retrospective of discomfort with traditional grading. (Contributors: Marcus Schultz-Bergin, Joy Kirr, John Warner, Susan D. Blum).

Deciding to embrace ungrading usually begins from a deep place of discomfort with how traditional grading systems have created a student mindset that focuses more on the final grade than the learning that is supposed to emerge from the activity assigned (Gibbs, Kohn, Warner). Often these discomforts emerge as a result of feeling unsettled with enacting "teaching folklore" to manage students. Teaching folklores are practices learned from our own past teachers and the colleagues around us, which through a process of self-discovery, we find no longer align with our personal beliefs (Warner). As Kohn identifies in his forward, ungrading should cause educators to question our teaching practices, our curriculums, the value of particular assessment practices, and our own ability to give up power and control in the classroom. Ungrading also requires an educator to recognize the flaws in current grading systems and change our own mindsets (Sackstein). For example, an A grade cannot distinguish between the student who came with high knowledge, did little work, and gained little new learning, and the student who came with low knowledge, did a lot of work, and made great strides (Blum). Two C grades don't indicate if a student is low on knowledge or low on sleep (Gibbs).

Ungrading changes the conversations faculty have with students who will learn to think differently in ungrading environments. Traditional systems have socialized them to "game the system" (Chu, Blum). Ungrading will force students to tap into their intrinsic motivations instead of focusing on gaining points using as little effort as possible (Blum). In an ungraded classroom, assignments can be negotiated (Stommel) and deadline free/flexible (Riesbeck, Schultz-Bergin). Ungrading gurus acknowledge that their methods will generally produce final grade rosters of mostly As. They will not claim that an A means all students have equal knowledge or that they have mastered every micro-factual mentioned in a course; an A grade probably never meant that in traditional systems either. Worries that students will not have earned the grade they receive are unfounded, because that worry assumes that traditional grades equate with knowledge and learning (Schultz-Bergen). Ungrading grades are designed to reflect gains to student learning. The benefits include pedagogies that build classroom community (Blum, Katopodis and Davidson), increase motivation and interest in the

subject matter (Stommel), increase risk taking (Blum) and creativity (Gibbs, Schultz-Bergen), and likely reduce cheating (Blum, Blackwelder, Warner).

Ungrading gurus will not claim ungrading saves time. It does not (Kirr). Ungrading shifts time from reading a pile of mediocre papers at the end of the term to more meaningful use of time scaffolding the writing throughout the term. This makes the reading of student work a more pleasurable experience (Warner). The work of ungrading can be distributed. Not all components of an assignment need to be scrutinized by the teacher. Some can be given credit simply for being completed (contract grading) others can be assessed via peer review. While traditional grading assumes learning is finished, ungrading recognizes that proficiency in writing has no terminal endpoint (Warner). Ungrading will test your creativity (Kohn) and, as a result, novice ungraders tend to design processes that feel too complex (Sorenson-Unrah). These are cautions, all well described by *Ungrading* authors.

Ungrading can stimulate your outrage at "the system," but its greatest strength is in providing usable strategies for implementing ungrading practices while still meeting the requirements of the institution. Educators will hand in grades that may seem traditional, but were arrived at by non-traditional means. Some ungrading strategies that can be specifically used in writing evaluation include but are not limited to:

1. Providing qualitative feedback on written work without a score (All).
2. Grading Conferences – conversations with students to negotiate their own final grade. This strategy is often used in combination with written reflections and/or portfolios. The teacher always reserves the right to raise or lower the final grade suggested by the student or require them to submit additional work to be granted the grade they self-assign (Blum, Kohn, Stommel, Chiaravalli, Schultz-Bergin).
3. Contract grading – giving automatic full points for completing an intermediary step in an assignment (Blum, Katopodis and Davidson, Stommel)
4. Shadow grading – a student or a peer decides on the grade through self or peer assessment, but the faculty member provides the qualitative feedback and scores the work in the background for comparison with student or peer self-assessments (Sorensen-Unrah).
5. Portfolios – Rather than grading each individual component, the student presents a portfolio of the progression of their work with reflections on their knowledge gains. Portfolios assess the entire experience rather than a snapshot of time. (Blum, Stommel, Chiaravalli).

6. Peer assessment – involving classmates in providing feedback and/or scoring (Katopidis and Davidson, Stommel).

7. Student reflections on learning – this strategy usually accompanies other strategies such as portfolios, grading conferences, and contract grading (All).

8. Opportunities for revision and repeated drafting (All)

The authors of *Ungrading* say maintaining traditional grading, *because that's how we've always done it*, is no longer tenable. There is ample evidence that traditional grading damages learning and motivation and contributes to inequities in the classroom. *Ungrading* is an easy read and simulates your teaching imagination. The methods described are adaptable and versatile in application. Virtually any strategy that results in the teacher not being the one to give the grade or the rating, can be considered an ungrading practice. One flaw of ungrading is it remains an anecdotal practice, mostly untested by formal research methods. The research evidence given that traditional grading is ineffective is not assurance that new methods are better, but the testimonies are promising. Implementing a practice of ungrading also requires a faculty with the guts to thumb their nose at traditional systems. Not all academic departments will tolerate or condone straying from the traditional path. Regardless of these cautions, ungrading remains a revolutionary idea that bears self-reflection and further examination.

Reference

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