



Ungrading: The Misconceptions, the Research, and the Strategies

SPEAKERS

Emily Dosmar, Tierney King

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. Ungrading seems kind of scary, right? How can we just take away grades? How can you assess students without actually grading their essays, projects or homework? And how do you prepare students who depend on grades to adapt to a new type of grading? So today we're going to cover what ungrading actually is, some of the research behind it, and how it can be brought to any classroom by having an honest conversation with your students. And then we'll take a few minutes to dispel some misconceptions about ungrading, because ungrading doesn't mean you have to completely eliminate grades in all forms from your classroom. Lastly, we'll cover a few ungrading assessment strategies that you can implement into your own course. In this program, What is Ungrading and How Can It Unleash Your Student's Potential? Emily Dosmar explains what ungrading is, and how you can have a conversation about on grading with your students.

Emily Dosmar 01:11

There was a very interesting study where researchers took three groups of students, one group received grades, another group received grades and feedback, and a third group received feedback alone. And what the researchers found was that interest in the course material and overall performance in the course was highest after feedback alone. So the presence of grades even if it was accompanied by feedback seems to undermine student interest and learning in the course. And the researchers postulated that this was because students tend to fixate on the grade that they received and internalize that information, rather than the information provided in the form of feedback that can lead to growth. Research also shows that grades do not track with career success or achievement, that they might seem objective, but they're highly subjective, that they encourage cheating, that they reduce creativity. They promote shallower thinking, and they're inconsistent. So another really interesting study was a group of faculty got together and graded a bunch of English and History papers. And there was a 39% disagreement in the grades between faculty that were assigned to those papers. But then researchers looked at that, and they said, well, English and history are highly subjective fields. Let's let's try this again with something that's very objective like math. And so they took a series of geometry papers written by students, and they assigned different math professors these papers to grade and that 39% disagreement actually increased. So there was an increased amount of inconsistency with those papers when you apply them to math papers. So regardless of the field, grades are highly inconsistent

and subjective based on who was doing the grading. Essentially, grades have three predictable effects. Essentially, students have less interest in learning. They show a preference for easier tasks, and they exhibit shallower thinking. And so overall grades are highly problematic in their traditional form. And so that leads me to a conversation about ungrading. Now, I want to take a moment and I want to dispel some misconceptions about ungrading. Many people think that ungrading means completely eliminating grades in all forms from your classroom. That's not true at all, I still grade my students. And my institution requires that I assign a sub-summary grade at the end of each term. And I still do that. What ungrading is, is an umbrella term that refers to any action that decentralize the authority of a faculty or professor in the classroom. And I think of ungrading as a very strong emphasis on feedback. So in its least pure form, and its most conservative form, if you will, if you are emphasizing feedback and learning from feedback in your classroom, you are using a form of ungrading. So you might be wondering how you can get started with ungrading in your classroom. The first thing that you're going to need to do is you're going to need to get your students on board. And the way that I do this is I show up on the first day of class, and I talk to them about the problems with grades and the benefits of ungrading. And I document all of the literature and research that I can find in my syllabus. And I have a very frank and candid conversation with my students about the problems that I see with grades. And then I employ a free polling software like Mentimeter or Poll Everywhere, and I asked my students a series of questions and as I ask the question, I project the answers up in front of the classroom. So the first thing that I asked them is, Have you ever received a grade in a course that you did not think reflected your knowledge in the course? Everybody responds, most students, if not all students say yes. And then I dig a little deeper. And I say, Have you ever received a grade that was lower than what you thought you deserved? And of course, most people will say yes to this. Then I asked them, Have you ever received a grade in a course that was higher than what you thought you deserved? And a lot of people say yes to this as well. And I say, Okay, let's think about that. Have you ever gotten an A in a course and then maybe a semester later, you know that you could not have gotten an A on the final for that course, so you did not really master that material, as is reflected by an A? A lot of students say yes to this. And then I asked them, Have you ever taken a course where something really excited you where you really wanted to learn something, and you wanted to dig deeper into a topic, but the class was moving quickly, and you didn't have time to dig deep into that topic? A lot of people say yes. And then finally, I asked them about growth. And I say, Have you ever received a grade in a course that did not reflect the growth over the over the period of time that you took that course? So maybe you started out and you struggled, but you worked really hard, and by the end of the course, you really knew that material, but your grade was just an average of all of your work along the way, and so your grade did not reflect your actual knowledge of the course? And most students say yes. And then I asked them, Will you try ungrading with me? And I say to them, I know this is scary. I know this is uncharted territory. But will you give this a chance and trust me, and we will navigate this together. And at the midterm point, perhaps we'll have a check in and see how everybody's feeling about it. And I give the students their first taste of agency and ownership over the course. And that is really a principle of ungrading, giving students an opportunity to have control and have a say in what they learn, how they learn it, and the way that they are assessed in that learning. Most students will say yes, and at that point, you have given students the decision to decide whether or not they are going to continue with ungrading. And then I take one more opportunity to let students give me feedback. So I say, What questions do you still have? What is making you nervous? What is making you uncomfortable? And I

allow anonymous questions and comments about ungrading that I address when it seems appropriate and might be on the spot, it might be later, and it might be something I revisit weeks later.

Tierney King 07:23

So now that you know about ungrading, and how to have a conversation with your students, how can you start to implement it into your own course? In this program, *What are Seven Ways to Assess Students in an Ungraded Classroom?*, Emily Dosmar offers specific strategies you can think about implementing for your next course.

Emily Dosmar 07:42

If you decide to implement ungrading in your classroom, you do not have to jettison the Gradebook at all. I recommend a couple of different approaches depending on the type of class that you teach. One of the approaches that I use with my gradebook is the binary grading system. And you can do this a couple of different ways. So with the binary grading system, you can take a specs grading type approach. And this is where you do a lot of the work associated with grading upfront. With specs grading, you communicate your students the specifications required to earn a C, B, or an A on an assignment. The way that I marry this idea to ungrading is I set very clear Pass/Fail requirements for each one of my assignments. So a passing assignment will include the following items, and I'm very clear about those. And then if it does not meet those specifications, it needs to be resubmitted. And I use this approach a lot in my freshman level Introduction to Programming course, because it's very easy to verify that code either does work or doesn't work, or it meets the specifications or doesn't meet the specifications. And to use this in your gradebook, you can actually modify grade books in many learning management systems to have words instead of numbers, and so you can say things like, pass or fail. Because the word fail is harsh and not really in the spirit of ungrading, you can also modify the words to say something like "meet specifications" or "meets expectations," and "does not yet meet expectations or specifications." The idea here being that you are communicating to the student that there is room to grow and hope that they will grow. You can also go with a very simple zero or one. In my freshman level programming class, I assign students with a zero or a one. A zero if their code does not meet expectations or specifications. And one if it does, and I allow them to continuously resubmit until it does meet specifications. I'm also really clear with them that the feedback that I give them that might accompany zero should include information that was not already available to them, or that was not obvious to them. So if I'm just restating the expectations of the assignment, then I don't think a lot of learning is occurring. And we need to have a conversation about the way that they're using the tools already available to them. An important feature of ungrading is that students have the opportunity to revise their work based on feedback and learn and grow from that feedback. Oftentimes, gradebook systems have a resubmit button. So you can open up a dropbox or reopen a dropbox for a student after they've received written feedback for their work. And so I use my gradebook as an opportunity to indicate to a student that revised work will be accepted. I allow my students in my Introduction to Programming class repeated submissions until they get their code to work. You don't always have to give unlimited submissions because the volume of work for you will increase drastically when you do that. So some people will assign tokens to their students. And you can assign anywhere from one to three to 10 to 100 tokens that allow students to revise their work, so you redeem a token for an opportunity at a revision. Another system that I have found effective is that students have to do things to earn tokens. In a lab class that I teach, students can earn those resubmission tokens by doing things

that I want them to do anyway, like cleaning up their lab space, or staying in lab after they've completed their experiments to analyze their data or undergoing a peer review process. And so they have to be careful with how often they try to redeem those tokens because they've worked hard to earn them. Students tend to like the use of the gradebook, because it allows them to track their progress in a course, and it gives a snapshot of how they're doing. And so if your fear with ungrading is that you will lose the opportunity for a student to see how they're doing in a course, you can look to other methods to do that. I like the fillable pie chart. So that is where you give your students a blank pie chart that has the general breakdowns for the weight of different categories of assignments in your course. And if you know the individual assignments, that's even better. And you have the students, as they complete those assignments, fill in with a color, how they did and how they felt about each assignment. For example, if you have a quiz category in your course, and you have 10 quizzes, even if you're not giving a grade with those quizzes, after students complete each quiz, they can color in with a color. Let's say green is a high understanding, and a red is a very poor understanding or poor performance, they color and the little piece of the pie that represents that quiz. I've had students get really creative with this. And you can give them the freedom to fill it in how they wish that maybe they filled in red initially, but then they've revised that work based on feedback or they've reviewed the assignment next to their notes, and now they understand it better. So then they add in little green dots throughout or little yellow dots is their knowledge in that area improves. And so they are able to create a diagram a visual picture of their performance in the course that then they can look at throughout the course and see not only how much progress they've made towards completion, but they have a color picture for how they're doing that they've come up with. Another thing that I've done is implemented a tracking spreadsheet. So students will have a spreadsheet of all of the assignments that they create for a course, they fill in that spreadsheet as they complete those assignments with a note on their performance and understanding of that content, and then some additional notes, and I've had students get very creative with those spreadsheets. Overall, when you are seeking assessment strategies for your ungraded classroom, the key is ample opportunity for redemption and revision of work. Students learn best when they are free to learn from their mistakes, incorporate feedback, and revise their work in a safe environments.

Tierney King 13:30

Whether you're driving to work, or you just need a 15-minute think session, we hope the Faculty Focus Live podcast will inspire your teaching, and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode description.