What is Ungrading and Why Am I Using It?

I began teaching high school English and Social Sciences in 1999 and moved into higher education (college) a few years later. From the start, I was frustrated by the difficulties in translating my student demonstrations of learning and development into points and grades. But I made a valiant effort and have developed a number of sophisticated quantitative device to do so over the years. Then in 2020, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I became acquainted with a movement to do things differently—it goes by various terms, but I like "ungrading" best. Since then, I've been on a quest to transform my courses.

In short, ungrading is the name of various efforts faculty employ to encourage authentic learning, create a more student-centric learning environment, and help students become lifelong learners. I am implementing ungrading in this class because I want to do just that. I want to focus on being a <u>teacher</u>, rather than a *grader*. I want to help my students focus on developing the skills and work ethic they want and need for their future lives as employees and citizens, rather than having them laser-focused on grades that have dubious value. Studies of grading over the past 100 years repeatedly demonstrate that <u>grades do not provide any real substantive benefit</u> to anyone aside from *making it easier to quantitatively rank students.* So what does have value? Study after study shows that feedback–not grades, and not feedback with points or grades associated with them–<u>feedback alone</u>, helps provide students with meaningful and valuable educational experiences, skills, and tools. (For evidence of these last two points, please see *[Ungrading](#)* (Blum, 2020) and "[Deficiencies of Traditional Grading Systems and Recommendations for the Future](#)" (Cain, Medina, Romanelli, and Persky; 2022) to name just two.)

Of course, the academic system we find ourselves in (Miramar College, the SDCCD, many four-year universities, etc.) requires that students be given grades at the end of

every course they take. These grades are supposed to be based on how well students meet the specified outcomes outlined for each course. These outcomes are based on formal course outlines the State of California requires each course to follow. At the local level, colleges then create their own Student Learning Outcomes to reflect these outlines. In my course, these are called Skill-Based Outcomes. There is also an often unwritten expectation that students will show up and actively engage in these classes as well as complete assignments to help them develop the skills outlined, usually by a deadline—what I call Work-Based Outcomes. At the beginning, middle, and end of the course, I ask each of my students to reflect on their goals and/or performance regarding these outcomes. I will meet with students at the middle and end of the semester to discuss their reflections. The official grade that each student receives in the course will be based on these reflections and discussions, with primacy given to the student's self-evaluation and the most current evidence of their achievements.

To help inform these self-reflections and individual meetings with me, a number of assignments will also be assessed using feedback mechanisms (aka rubrics) that measure the student's mastery over specific skill and work based outcomes. In addition to my feedback, students will be asked to use these rubrics to assess their own performance as well. Based on these assessments, students can see a visual, color-coded overview of their performance in meeting the course's skill and work-based outcomes. These assignments, rubrics, outcomes, and more are all available through our course's Canvas shell (in the "Ungrading: An Overview" Canvas Page, under the "Grades" menu, and in the "Learning Mastery Gradebook" submenu found there). If, after reading this, you'd like to meet to discuss it further, please let me know.

Sincerest regards,

Pablo Martin