"Imagine There's No Grading…"

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"…it's easy if you try." In fact, it is not easy for me to imagine no grading. But I'm trying, colleagues. I'm trying really hard.

I'm not talking about being finished with this spring term's grading, though that would be nice, too. When I say, "Imagine there's no grading," I mean imagine learning without grades. Okay, wait—don't go anywhere! How about, imagine learning with fewer grades. Or finally: imagine a learning environment that is designed to encourage learners (and instructors) to focus more on learning, and less on grades. When we put this imagination into practice, we are Ungrading.

I'm not doing away with grades and grading. I have invested decades into discovering and sharing grading practices that are more equitable, more just, less biased, and more accurate than many of the grading practices I learned from my own instructors. However, these very discoveries have led me into practices that many describe as ungrading: more formative evaluation and less summative evaluation; peer learning via peer review; more narrative and collaborative evaluation processes; and more openness to surprising demonstrations of learning.

This unpredictability of learning is one of two experiences that, today, urgently persuade me to consider more committal practices in Ungrading. Put simply: Learners *come from everywhere* and *are going everywhere.* Learners *come from everywhere,* and therefore, I have very little

idea what prior experiences and insights they are pouring into the learning that they mix. ("Constructivism" is a theory of learning holding that learners construct understanding by integrating new information with prior knowledge.) If learners come from everywhere (and bring anything), then how can I be confident in one-size-fits-all grading strategies that presuppose that I already know what "learning" will look like? What is more, learners *are going everywhere,* and therefore, I have very little idea what an application of learning might look like in their imagined present or future contexts. If learners are going everywhere (and might need anything), then how can I be confident that I already know what a successful application of learning should look like?

This is to say: do my evaluation processes have ears? Are they open to challenge? Do they invite surprise?

The second experience that today urgently persuades me to evaluate grading more critically is my experience of trustworthiness in learners. This is not a new experience of course, but is fresh on my mind, in part because of a new experience, and in part because of fresh reflection on a frequent experience.

This spring, I taught a class that my institution designates as Pass/Fail. Learners responded weekly to a pair of prompts calling on them to engage the readings of the week in particular ways. The rubric for these weekly prompts was unchanging through the semester, and learners got the hang of it all quite early. At that point, I wondered whether student submissions would become minimum-effort, "paint by numbers" exercises in tedium, but things proved otherwise: overwhelmingly, learners engaged the course materials in authentic, often risk-taking ways that showed more than the necessary commitment of time and attention. This was true not only for the habitual overachievers, but also for those learners who had had the most trouble getting the hang of things early in the term.

The prior semester, I taught my usual Intro course in my subject matter (Hebrew Bible/Old Testament). This was where I encountered a by-now-familiar phenomenon: the learners became *more* enthusiastically engaged with the material in the *last* weeks of the term, once (as an intentional result of course design) most student's final grades were more or less established. Learners would go on to take low-stakes, short assignments and stretch their creativity, taking provisional ideas out for a spin and testing their own limits freely. Countless times I have reflected, "It's amazing what's possible once they feel like their grades are more or less set..." without considering what an indictment that is against the basic presupposition that grading is necessary to coerce performance. Why in the world am I not doing all I can to create those liberating conditions as early in the term as possible? Why am I not doing more to get grades out of the way of learning?

This summer, I am once again taking my aspirations as an instructor to the notion of Ungrading. Discover more about Ungrading by reading Susan D. Blum (ed.), *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead),* Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University (2020). Find active, up-to-date, practice-based discussions about Ungrading

by searching Twitter for the hashtag #ungrading.

https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2022/06/imagine-theres-no-grading/