
Reviewed by
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If you have ever battled with the thought of whether your students are really learning in your classroom, then UNgrading is a guidebook for you to reconceptualize your classroom practice. This book affords me the confidence to proceed and trust my students enough to free my teaching from the tyranny of grading. The value of giving out grades or marks has been debated by academics ever since their introduction. This is not a book about the whys, but more about the hows. There is a shift taking place in the multidimensional practices of education right now, and a growing recognition that ‘grades’ are not doing students the justice they used to: an issue that deserves greater attention in professional and academic discourse.

Alfie Kohn’s engaging and entertaining foreword captivates the reader immediately. His human behaviourist approach enables him to reflect as he introduces us to the journeys of the educators involved in producing this book. The chapters have been compiled to share experimentation within the classroom and offer models and evidence of how ‘ungrading’ can look across disciplines and ages. As with grades, this is not a ‘one size fits all’ guide, but a work by a collection of progressive educationalists from varying walks of life who have chosen to challenge the conventional system of grading and have taken that ‘leap of faith’ into the unknown. This is a timely publication which not only provides practical advice but, I’m sure, will stimulate further debate about what we as educators do in the classroom and why.

The book consists of three parts - 1. Foundations and Model, 2. Practices and 3. Reflections. Parts one and two are both split into five chapters, taking us systematically through the necessary thought patterns of a ‘point-less classroom’ (Chu, chapter 10). Each chapter describes the work involved in the author’s choice of freedom and provides encouraging accounts of their successes, and occasional setbacks. It manages to cover all the key points and questions that may arise if you are considering ‘ungrading’. This is not an alternative guide, but it is a serious step in the direction towards guiding students in how master the materials at hand, within the confines of a conventional institution.

Both the strength and weakness of UNgrading is that the models of teaching and assessment shared do not show us ‘what education can be’ or provide a ‘how-to’ guide to a perfect end result, but instead form part of the continuing revolution towards self-knowledge and student-centered learning. Often these testimonials are class-specific and difficult to carry over into classrooms without reworking. Riesbeck, a professor of computer science, offers an especially very heavily software-based critique and there is a STEM case study that at first implies an unfamiliar territory. The fact that this compilation
is cross-disciplinary is fascinating and pragmatic, yet idiosyncratic.

Jesse Stommel opens this stimulating journey by reminding us that “our talk of grading shouldn’t be reduced to our complaining about its continuing necessity” (Stommel, p.40). His 18 years’ experience of no grading shines through as he advises us on many immediately functional alternative approaches that can work with different class sizes and as stand-alone platforms or in combinations. Aaron Blackwelder entertains us with his account of eliminating grades by prompting us to care for each individual student outside of the classroom. Even in a classroom of over hundred students, Blackwelder suggests that listening to the students is worth the effort. In chapter 3, Blum reinforces Blackwelder’s remarks, arguing that students can be treated as adults. She provides us with examples of real questions to use in portfolio conferences, directs us in providing students with goals rather than grades, and points us again to the importance of intrinsic motivation and continual self-assessment in becoming engaged citizens both as teachers and as students. Starr Sackstein builds on the idea of reflection and targets the specific language to use. S/he defines assessment, given in small increments, as feedback that students can turn into specific goals. Words convey the message and Sackstein suggests we give students ‘more of a voice in the process’ of learning and shift away from judgments and compliance to help them activate and internalize the feedback they receive. Arthur Chiarvalli concludes part 1 with a review of his descriptive grading criteria using pedagogies influential to him.

Part 2 provides useful links, appendices, solid models to adapt, reusable critiques and alternative assessments to aid educators in supporting students. This section provides very “real” reviews and acknowledges the time and commitment required in ‘ungrading’. Laura Gibbs, Christina Katopodis, and Cathy N. Davidson, Christopher Riesbeck, Clarissa Sorensen-Unruh and Gary Chu all share what they have learned and do not glamorize ‘ungrading’ as less ‘work’ for teachers. They demonstrate the downside – the lengthy ongoing processes and the constant need to justify it - as well as their upsides – student satisfaction and obvious growth. ‘Ungrading’ requires a lot of metacognition which may create tension and friction for students at first, but this ‘practices’ section illuminates stages within the whole process and offers examples of scaffolding student learning to add to the student-teacher dynamic of creating lifelong learners.

The ‘reflections’ by Marcus Schultz-Bergin, Joy Kirr and John Warner generate more compassion for this ‘grade anarchy’. These submissions embody the essence that we all need to be brave enough to try something new. These end reflections alongside Blum’s conclusion led this reviewer to realize, I want to be an eternal beginner and learner. This book reminds us we are not alone. There are many usable documents and suggestions of phrases to use when talking to students or parents of students about the idea of feedback over formal assessment. Readers will appreciate Blum for putting this engaging compilation together. This revolutionary read is not an instructional manual for the newly graduated teacher. I do, however, believe it should be on every educationalist undergraduate reading list so that this movement towards structural change can continue.

Student and teacher learning can be mutually beneficial. In this post pandemic world, education
and formal assessment are continually challenged, the pressure of which often falls on the educator. If we are to capture, nurture, encourage and expand our students’ enthusiasm for learning then reading *UNgrading* will provide the confidence, motivation and peer reflection required to make the changes necessary to consign the authoritarian classroom, the widespread lethargy and decline of personal skills and esteem, to the past. *UNgrading* promotes a movement of natural achievers and in the longer term, to an expansion of an intrinsically motivated populace. The ungraded classroom may one day be the norm and not the exception.

**References**


**Biodata**

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