

**“Grappling with Hard Work”: Empowering Students in the Ungraded Classroom**  
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In a famous convocation address, poet Adrienne Rich claims that independent thinking requires “grappling with hard work” by learning how to respect one’s own capacity and abilities (Rich, 1977). Yet in most higher education classrooms, a student’s ability to explore their own autonomy of learning is upended by the power imbalance. Consider the face-to-face classroom: the registrar or department chair has determined day and time, and sometimes courses or instructors are chosen simply because they fit the schedule. The physical room can be determined by equipment (heavy, immobile desks, tables, or chairs pre-set in rows) or by instructor preference (a large circle or small groups). In online classes, the course content, pace of module release, and modality (asynchronous vs. synchronous) are not determined by students. The syllabus is almost always authored by the institution (policies and rules) as well as the instructor. Most instructors have pre-determined all course details: course objectives, course readings, paper due dates, exam schedules, rubrics, and, of course, grading practices.

Although many educators strive for Friere’s (1970) ideal of liberated thinkers who actively contribute to their own transformation, the instructor's totality of classroom power invites conformity instead. Students are not entrusted with self-determination when it comes to feedback on their work or progress in understanding, and the use of traditional grading methods particularly highlights students’ lack of power when it comes to how their learning is assessed.

One way to foster a more equitable distribution of power in the classroom and promote deeper, meaningful learning is by eliminating traditional grading. This paper examines problems with traditional grading methods, explores the tenets of Mercy that support the modification of traditional grading practices, and describes the experience of “ungrading” in one class during the Spring 2020.

### **Problems with Traditional Grading**

Grading as a long-standing structure has become notoriously inconsistent, inflated, and riddled with bias (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012 as cited in Schinske & Tanner, 2014). Consider the myriad of grading systems students may encounter in a college year: different emphasis on tests, quizzes, homework, projects, extra credit, and the ever-elusive “participation.” One professor may give full credit to homework turned in completed and on time regardless of content; another professor may grade homework according to correct answers. Some tests are timed; other tests are open book. The result is that students navigate seemingly arbitrary rules class-by-class and can be confused by these multiple evaluation methods. Grading variance also undermines colleagues’ confidence in each other. One survey shows that 50% of teachers at the same institution feel that while their own grades are accurate, their colleagues’ grades are not (Feldman, 2019). So not only do students have to navigate complex systems, but instructors also don’t understand or don’t trust how their colleagues implement grades and assessment.

Variation in grading systems is not the only way current grading systems are problematic. Implicit bias, “the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner” (Kirwan Institute, 2015) affects everyone, teachers

included, and this becomes readily apparent when applied to an already flawed grading system. Especially in subjective tasks like grading essays or other written work, implicit bias can impact instructors' evaluation of student achievement and learning. A year-long, nationwide study in the UK shows that "personal feelings" affect evaluation on a regular basis (Henry, 2013). Bias can positively affect students about whom teachers think highly or for whom they have high expectations but can adversely impact students about whom teachers have negative impressions or low expectations.

Most significantly, however, grades put up a significant barrier between students and learning. Grades put the focus on performance (getting the grade) rather than on engagement with concepts. Research shows that grades as feedback negatively impacts students' problem-solving skills and decreases intrinsic motivation (Schinske & Tanner, 2014). In fact, grades reduce quality of learning and can even inhibit it. (Kaplan et al., 2013; Kohn, 2011; Schinske & Tanner, 2014; Supiano, 2019). For students, this often translates to cramming for a test, taking the test, and then promptly forgetting everything the moment the test ends.

Proponents of grading cite increased motivation as an advantage; students are willing to study in order to work for a good grade. But what type of motivation is this? Grade-focused environments produce students who possess primarily extrinsic motivation, and worse, adversarial relationships with instructors and even with peers (when grading is "on a curve"—pitting students against one another). Instructors can be seen insurmountable barriers (who students may have to "fight" for points) in the quest for the ultimate reward of an A grade. Extrinsic motivation weakens intrinsic motivation: the desire to learn and grow in knowledge

and ability. Ironically, students who center themselves around grades rather than learning don't always benefit in academic and psychological strength. One study by Beck et al. (1991) examined motivation and found that students with a "grading orientation" mindset (focused on grades) performed worse in terms of GPA and general psychology testing as opposed to those with a "learning orientation." Thus, if grades alone are not efficient motivators, what about grades combined with constructive feedback?

Butler (1988) found that different types of feedback influence student attitudes and behaviors in substantial ways. Butler's research focused on the effects of evaluative (grades) feedback versus descriptive (comments on a paper) feedback. "Grades and grades plus comments had similar and generally undermining effects on both interest and performance" (Butler, 1988) while comments alone garnered higher levels of involvement and achievement on multiple tasks. Most educators have found this to be true in practice: hours spent writing feedback on papers, only to have students never read the comments because they are so focused on ascertaining their grade. Educators have long bemoaned this scenario, but grading practices themselves—not students—are to blame.

### **Mercy Values**

The hallmarks of a Mercy education include "regard for the dignity of the person; academic excellence and life-long learning; education of the whole person: body, mind, and spirit; and ... promotion of compassion and justice towards those with less" (Stevens, 2004). Grading, however, takes away the intrinsic joy of learning and replaces it with a system that turns learning into a competition filled with rules, cheating, penalties, and rankings. "Winning"

involves beating the system and doing the minimum required to get the desired grade or even just to pass. Grading as an educational construct does not promote dignity or learning, nor invite compassion in education.

Rather, traditional grading norms are part of an oppressive power structure that strips students of agency and unnecessarily burdens educators. Farley (2006) argues that “no institution of higher education can be justified if its structures ... are unjust—which is to say, if they are unsuited to the pursuit of wisdom or respect for human dignity.” More and more educators and even institutions are examining grading as an unjust structure, particularly when it comes to non-White students.

In the fall of 2020, the San Diego Unified School District found that “just 7% of failing marks went to White students” while Black, Hispanic, Native American, and disabled students made up much larger percentages of failing grades that did not correspond to their relative populations (Rivas, 2020). A multitude of research confirms that bias exists and influences grading (Malouff & Thorsteinsson, 2016). Internalized racism is sustained through the inequities that exist in traditional educational structures like grading. Although there are procedures that can mitigate the effects of bias, the power of an unjust structure combined with the indignities that structure elicits suggests that the structure (grading) has no place in a Mercy education.

To be sure, one struggles to find grading methods that dignify the entire human being. Grades can be motivators when students are doing well, but often have the opposite effect when students struggle. Instructors rail against “grade-grubbing” students and bemoan the inevitable pleas for extra credit at the conclusion of a grading term, but who placed the

students in this dehumanizing situation in the first place? Power, bias, indignity—all these upset the balance of what education strives to be. This imbalance asks, “How to bend toward justice and democracy with grading?” (Pippin, 2014). This was the question I started to ask myself after over 20 years as an educator.

### **Ungrading in Practice**

Educators have been grappling with grading since the formation of the concept, and a multitude of practices and theories abound. Schinske and Tanner (2014) describe a history of grading that sets the foundation for exploring alternatives. Many faculty in higher education, especially contingent faculty, are given department- or university-wide guidelines about grading or even specific rubrics to which every assignment must conform. But too often, educators utilize the methods in which they themselves were assessed without questioning the efficacy or even legitimacy of these practices.

I was once one of these educators. Although I felt progressive when offering students choices with writing topics, structures, and text selections in courses, I graded in the same way I was taught: rubrics. I would create detailed levels of categories and evaluative levels that (I thought at the time) would somehow convey transparency, rigor, and fairness to student writers. I spent hours on feedback, thinking that this would not only confirm the fairness of my evaluation, but help students grow as writers. But because this feedback was placed next to a grade, it was mostly ignored (Jackson & Marks, 2016; Lipnevich & Smith, 2008).

In graduate school, I studied Peter Elbow’s pedagogy of writing. Elbow (1997), champions the “democraticization” of writing, questions traditional writing assessment, and

asserts, “I would rather put my effort into trying to figure out which activities will lead to learning than into trying to measure the exact quality of the final product students turn in.” I returned to Elbow along with Paolo Friere and Alfie Kohn when starting to question my own grading practices. Teaching at a Mercy institution and delving deeply into the Catholic Intellectual Tradition as well as focusing on justice also spurred me to take transformative action with how I assessed students.

It is misguided to think of ungrading as forgoing assessment. Rather, evaluation becomes a conversation, a tool for growth and learning rather than for reward and punishment. Ungrading, by putting students in a position of power in their own assessment, allows educators to work with students in helping them “claim” rather than “receive” an education (Rich, 1977).

An abundance of ungrading methods abound, from standards-based evaluation to contract grading to pass/fail assessments. In Spring 2020, I decided to eliminate grading on individual assignments entirely and replace it with narrative feedback, peer consultations, and one-on-one progress conferences. I dove directly into the deep end of ungrading practice in hospitable waters: my EN 149: The Composition of Happiness course.

### **Course Background**

Carlow University’s “Contemplation & Action” courses are designed to introduce first-year undergraduate students to the heritage of the Sisters of Mercy through understanding the concepts of mercy, justice, and action. These courses do so with multiple disciplinary lenses but are united by common readings and a “Small Act of Service” project. Characteristic of a C&A

course is the exploration of personal ethic, responsibility, and diverse perspectives in an effort to contribute to a more just and merciful world. Ungrading is a practice that fulfills these objectives by pursuing personal responsibility and just action in the classroom.

As a course within the English Department, EN 149 requires students to engage in close reading, effective writing, and critical thinking about the topic of happiness. Within the Carlow Compass curriculum, EN 149 challenges students to reflect and act by engaging in the Small Act of Service Project and common readings. In Spring 2020, the syllabus provided this course description along with a section on “evaluation”:

While you will get a final grade at the end of the semester, individual assignments will not be graded. Rather, we will have multiple conversations, both orally and in writing, about your learning and progress. You will also be reflecting carefully on your own work and the work of your peers. The intention here is to help you focus on reading, writing, and learning, as opposed to working for a grade. If you feel concerned about this practice, I encourage you to meet with me to discuss your progress in the course to date. If you join the discussions, do the readings, and complete the assignments, you should not be worried about your grade (modified from Stommel, 2017).

I did not mention the gradeless aspect of class on the first day. I asked students to read the syllabus and come with questions for day two of class. Interestingly, no one asked questions about grading, which made me think they either didn't read the syllabus or didn't understand the untraditional evaluation policy. I decided I had to address this directly. I pulled up the paragraph and put it on the screen. I asked students to read and explain to me what the policy on grading is. One student tentatively raised a hand and offered, There...are no grades? I



confirmed that there were no grades for this class except for the final grade that we would determine together. Again, I was surprised that there wasn't any follow-up. I offered that I expected assignments to be on time and for the other policies to be followed. Students would engage in regular self-reflection, a mid-semester assessment (Appendix A) and a final Concluding Reflection (Appendix B) that would help them determine their own final grade at the end of the semester. Individual assignments would receive feedback, but not grades.

### **In Practice**

An early course assignment was a written reflection on an article. The reflections were submitted electronically via our Learning Management System (LMS). When submitting assignments this way, the LMS requires grades (a number of points per assignment). I used a 0 or 1: 0 if the assignment was not turned in, 1 if it was. All 18 students turned in the first assignment on time, and I gave descriptive feedback within four days for each student (two class periods). Some students commented on my feedback using the comment feature available in our LMS, but most did not. But since this was the only assignment in the LMS "gradebook" and everyone received a 1, the LMS calculated everyone's average to be 100% (the feature could not be turned off in our LMS).

For the next assignment, an essay, I decided to use a 0-1-2 scale. I explained that:

- 0 = not submitted or completely unacceptable
- 1 = acceptable, but revision is recommended (although not required)
- 2 = satisfactory—meets or exceeds all expectations of the assignment

I decided to do this because I wanted those students who could benefit from revision to really engage in the process. For this assignment, I also asked students to reflect on their learning in

the course so far, and their impressions of the ungraded classroom. I was surprised to learn that 8 out of 18 students expressed some anxiety about the “gradeless” aspect of class. Often this was due to strict GPA requirements of their major, but for some it was also because they didn’t know where they “stood” in the class. My modification of the 0-1-2 scale didn’t help matters, because now if a student scored a 1 (acceptable, but revision recommended) the LMS scored this as 50%.

I told students to ignore the “grades” in the LMS because I was just using it to track their submissions and give them a clearer idea about revision. I encouraged them to read my feedback and to talk to me if they were unsure about their progress in class. In writing and verbally, I communicated with the students who expressed the highest levels of anxiety about the lack of grades. We discussed their work, their progress, their effort, and their class engagement. After these discussions, students indicated they felt more comfortable with the gradeless aspect of class. Although there were still one or two students who expressed confusion about evaluation even at the end of the course, this is not entirely surprising given students’ life-long experience with grades as a core part of schooling.

I scheduled in-person mid-semester conferences at the 7-week mark of the semester. Students prepared a mid-semester reflection (see Appendix A) in preparation for our 15-minute conference. In the reflection, they analyzed their learning so far, identified what was going well and what presented challenges, and set learning goals for the remainder of the semester. I also asked students to specifically reflect on ungrading. Some comments included:

- *Even though the class is “gradeless,” this word does not take away its importance or academic value it presents. I often find myself thinking about the topics in class a lot more than the classes falling under my major because I find this information astounding. It is very complex, and I feel as though the gradeless*

*nature has made me much more open to expressing myself both in class and in my writings. In my opinion, this class is much more enjoyable because I am not afraid to be wrong, pressure is not placed on tests, and I can instead spend my time outside of the classroom focusing on happiness practices, motivating myself, and learning how to become a more joyful human being.*

- *My learning in class has expanded beyond my belief. Before this class, I was only taught how to memorize, ace a test, or do well on state exams. The insight that you have brought to your classroom has taught me how to think on my own and to do it to genuinely better myself and my life. ... Some of my future goals for learning include to become a better writer and to be able to think outside the box and not just depend on the material that I had to learn for a grade.*

### **COVID-19 Pivot**

I did not know that the mid-semester conferences would be the last time I would see my students face-to-face. Like many universities in March 2020, Carlow suspended all in-person activity, and learning went online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the transitions for both students and faculty were jarring and traumatic, our EN 149 class was uniquely placed to better navigate the disruption because we didn't have the stress of how instructional changes would affect grades. Because we were focused on overall learning and individual progress all along, we were able to proceed, albeit differently, with intellectual discovery and growth.

In fact, most students conveyed gratitude that among the various sources of stress in their lives, worrying about their EN 149 grade was not one of them. While many students admitted that overall learning diminished after the online transition (in all courses, not just EN 149), 17 out of 18 students remarked on their final evaluations that gradeless learning was a positive experience for them, allowing them to focus on course content and progress towards goals rather than grades. Their final Concluding Reflections (Appendix B) were rigorous reviews of their work, learning, and progress throughout the course. On the Concluding Reflection,

students gave themselves a grade and justified it with evidence. The 18 students gave themselves a range of grades from 80% (B-) to 95% (A). During our final one-on-one conferences, we discussed the grades they gave themselves and their reasoning. For the most part, I agreed with every student's self-assessment. Twice I had questions about how low the grades students gave themselves in comparison to their documented work and progress. Only one student gave themselves a higher grade than I thought was warranted. In all circumstances, we talked through the issues and came to a mutually agreeable final grade determination.

One item on the Concluding Reflection asked for a response to: "EN 149 is a required class. It is a gradeless class. It became an online class due to the pandemic. Given all these factors, reflect on your overall learning at different points in the semester." Comments regarding grades and learning included:

- *My learning during the in-class semester was strong. I was committed to the schedule of coming to class and completing the work. My learning during online class lessened but I still was learning. Gradeless made it less stressful.*
- *Due to the many difficult transitions throughout this semester, it became very different to learn online. Despite this, I feel my learning was not very much affected. ... The gradeless course let me focus on good work and taking advice rather than just focusing on a good grade. It allowed me to appreciate and take in each activity as they were for my personal learning and growth, not information on an upcoming test. I was able to connect with my peers and discuss our lives and experiences, not what the notes said. Overall, I was able to make meaningful connections with myself, my peers, and the coursework because I was able to absorb it on my terms and through my actions and take in what I was learning.*
- *Because of the fact that this class is gradeless I felt as if I learned more from this class than I have any class I was trying to earn a good grade in. I was more interested in the material of this class because I was learning for myself and not to get an A. I would say I definitely preferred in person classes because they were more fun to be there in the moment with everyone there but I don't think my learning was affected by moving online for this class because I was so intrigued in its material.*

## Conclusion

Engaging with ungrading has been transformational for me as an educator even if it has been challenging as I learned about and navigated this new paradigm. Once priding myself on the “rigor” and “tough but fair” practices of my pedagogy, providing feedback without grades has helped me see the inherent incompatibility of rigid grading structures and internally motivated learning. I’ve developed a stronger sense of the importance of the relationship between instructors and students in an educational setting rather than the contractual one set forth in most college syllabi. Creating a better balance of power in the classroom is one important way to foster stronger relationships that lead to more meaningful learning. “Connection before content” (Block, 2009) has certainly rung true during the pandemic, but it’s a practice that should always resonate with educators.

I’ve made mistakes and am still learning about ways to push students without pressure, to allow them agency while still promoting learning, and to guide rather than direct. I need to better learn how to re-educate students about the value of self-assessment, de-centering me (the instructor) as the final authority of progress and excellence. Quality self-assessment takes practice, and I can improve the processes by which students learn how to engage in vigorous critique.

Ultimately, however, I hope to err on the side of humanizing education. If students tell me they can’t turn in an assignment on time because they are sick, my default is to tell them I hope they feel better, not demand a doctor’s note and take off points for lateness. Building a community of mutual trust is essential to promoting equity and justice in the classroom. Social media groups of educators love to share the “biggest student lies” or “most creative student

excuses” at least once a term. But if we analyze the structures that put students in the position to need to create these excuses, we can see where the true fault lies. A wholistic education’s purpose does not just want to prepare students for “the real world,” but wants to help evolve that world into something better. As Ginott (1972) states:

It is true that modern life is often like a rat race. People struggle to be first in line; they push, wrestle, insult, and lie. Do we want to prepare children for such life? No. On the contrary. We need to tell children that rat races are not good for people. We want school to be not a replica of, but an alternative to, raw reality.

As educators, we can interrupt the narrative that our classrooms must mimic the negative attributes of society, especially when that narrative upholds structural elements that perpetuate inequity and injustice.

Although most Spring 2020 students felt like ungrading was effective in EN 149, a class required by the core curriculum but not part of any student’s specific major requirements, some felt like it would not be feasible in classes for their majors. I imagine many instructors would feel similarly. Yet if Mercy demands transformation in order to get to the root causes of injustice and suffering in our world, why is transforming the practice of grading beyond us? We can grapple with exploring new and empowering forms of educational assessment as we confront and expand the conversation around grading and grades. Both students and educators benefit from questioning and reimagining how evaluation and assessment are conducted in Mercy institutions of higher education.

Regan (1978) writes that Catherine McAuley exemplified “courageous contagious concern” for others and “broke through the impossibilities of her time.” Although today’s

educators are faced with different challenges from Catherine's time, we can still walk with her and transform an inherently harmful structure that damages students, especially our most vulnerable ones.

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## Appendix A

**EN 149-DB****Mid-Semester Self-Assessment**

*Please complete this self-assessment prior to our one-on-one conference on February X or Y.*

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_

How many classes have you missed? \_\_\_\_\_ What were the reason(s) for your absence(s)? Did we discuss them in advance? Did you reach out to me before/after your absence to find out what you missed?

How **actively engaged** are you in class?

\_\_\_ Completely absorbed (take notes, contribute to discussion and/or actively listen)

\_\_\_ Basically pay attention (sometimes do the above)

\_\_\_ Am not too interested; easily distracted

Describe how you are engaged in class:

How much of the **reading** have you done for class?

\_\_\_ All or almost all \_\_\_ A substantial amount \_\_\_ About half \_\_\_ Some \_\_\_ Almost none

Describe how you read for class:

Have you turned in any **assignments** late or not at all? If so, why?

Have you responded to written and verbal **feedback** on your writing assignments, including making a writing appointment if recommended? Explain the ways you have/have not responded to feedback, as well as ways you have incorporated feedback in subsequent writing efforts.

Based on your above answers and your evaluation of your **effort** and **learning** in this class, what grade would you assign yourself at midterm? Make sure you justify this grade in writing below.

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_ (range: A+ to F)

## Appendix B

Welcome to the EN 149 - Composition of Happiness **Concluding Reflection** for Spring 2020.

The goal is to reflect on your learning journey in this course. A well-prepared reflection will probably take 1-2 hours, so get comfortable!

Assemble your tools (computer, folders, notes, etc.) and access the LMS and any places you've saved your work for this semester. Remember that this form must be **completed and submitted** by May X, 11:59pm. *No late submissions will be accepted.*

**TASK 1:** Assemble all class work, including your Mid-Semester Self-Assessment

**TASK 2:** Read all of the above.

**TASK 3:** Consider the above work and also your activity in class and online. Then answer the following questions.

1. What work of yours was particularly strong this semester? Explain its positive features.
2. What work of yours was less strong? What aspects made this work weaker?
3. What do you think you learned the most about this semester? Provide reasons/evidence for your opinion.

**TASK 4:** Beginning/End Connections

1. What was your original happiness score (measured the first week of class)?
2. What is your current happiness score (measured the last week of class)?
3. Describe the differences between these scores and why you think this is so.
4. What were your initial goals for this class? What did you hope to learn?
5. Did you learn something you didn't expect to learn? Please explain your answer.
6. Write below your happiness definition from the first day of class. Would you change it? If so, how? If not, why not?

**TASK 5:** Readings

For the next series of questions, consider the readings for this course (list here):

1. Which two or three readings made the strongest impression on you? You may use the readings above, or, if you read an outside article or website on your own, you may include it.
2. Describe what you learned from the course readings.

**TASK 6:** Evaluate course activities. Consider: lectures, videos, podcasts, readings, writings, assignments, conferences, projects. Think of in-class, out-of-class, and online activities.

1. Which of the course activities particularly stands out for you? Why?
2. What topic or activity pushed you to learn the most? Please describe.

## OVERALL LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Reflect on your overall learning at different points in the semester (especially considering the required nature of the course and the transition to online).

In one complete sentence, answer the following question: What did you learn in this course that truly matters?

Have you turned in assignments late?

If you have had to turn in assignments late, did you initiate communication with instructor?

Please provide any additional information regarding incomplete or late assignments. (only if needed)

Given your honest assessment of your learning, your effort, and your contributions, suggest your final grade for this course:

Justify the grade you gave yourself.

(Modified from Blum, 2017)