

Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)

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Abstract

Book review of *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, edited by Susan D. Blum with a foreword by Alfie Kohn

Keywords

Ungrading, Grading, Assessment, Professional Development

Educators, raise your hand if at any point during your teaching career you have thought “What would it be like if I did not have to grade anything?” The book *UNgrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)* can answer that question and any others you may have about the concept of removing traditional forms of grading from your teaching repertoire.

Published in 2020 by West Virginia University Press, *UNgrading* is a series of essays compiled and edited by Susan D. Blum, Ph.D., with a forward by Alfie Kohn. The book provides an in-depth look at how student performance can be assessed without using a letter, a percentage, or an accumulation of points. *UNgrading* is divided into three sections: Foundations and Models, Practices, and Reflections. Each section presents the contributing authors’ rationale for incorporating ungrading into their classes, the outcomes they have seen in their students, and best practices for those who may want to try it themselves.

The authors of *UNgrading* hail from a range of institutions (middle school to post-secondary), disciplines (language arts/writing, philosophy, film studies, math, organic chemistry, and others), and levels of ungrading experience (novice to expert). The essays are well written, insightful, and at times, funny, which made the book an easy read. No matter what you teach and how long you have been teaching, *UNgrading* will give you new ideas to help you reignite your classes or reaffirm what you may already know if you have put ungrading practices into action.

One of the aspects of the book that I appreciated was its inclusion of pop culture references. For example, references to ’80s movie classics like *The Breakfast Club* and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* in Chapter 2, “What Going Gradeless Taught Me about Doing the ‘Actual Work’” (Blackwelder, 2020), made me feel as though I was reading a book about academic assessment *did not feel like a book about academic assessment*, which was a nice break from some of the more formal books I read in my profession. That is not to say that the book was void of a research foundation—the authors’ insight was grounded in both research and personal experience. The authors did not try to sugarcoat their pitfalls; rather they were open about their struggles with both gaining students’ acceptance of and engagement with the ungrading processes and constructing their ungrading practices to meet institutional expectations.

Additionally, the authors provided helpful examples and tools that educators will find useful. For example, Katopodis and Davidson (2020) provided several examples of the contracts they have used in their classes, as well as examples of self- and peer evaluation forms, in Chapter 7, “Contract Grading and Peer Review.” An educator could easily revise these examples to fit their curriculum. Sorensen-Unruh (2020) included excerpts from her syllabus and a template used for ungrading student exams in Chapter 9, “A STEM Ungrading Case Study: A Reflection on First-Time Implementation in Organic Chemistry II.” In Chapter 12, “Conference Musings and the G-Word,” Kirr (2020), a seventh-grade English Language Arts teacher, included the personal letter she sends to parents to help them understand her “different” grading structure. The verbiage could be useful to educators who may want to modify it to explain an ungrading structure at the college/university level. In summary, the inclusion of these examples and tools may bring additional value for educators who do not want to spend time re-creating the wheel.

Although there are many reasons to regard this compilation as a valuable resource, there are some weaknesses to address. If you read the book from cover-to-

cover, the book may seem a bit repetitive, as many of the same sentiments about ungrading were shared in each essay. If you are already sold on the idea of ungrading or just pressed for time, you might consider jumping right into the Practices section or perhaps not reading all the chapters in the Foundations and Models section. However, I would recommend taking the time to read Chapter 13, “Wile. E. Coyote, The Hero of Ungrading.” Warner (2020) discussed the use of ungrading in writing-intensive courses, which would be beneficial for educators in agricultural communication courses who focus on developing writing skills. Another aspect of the book that some may consider a weakness is its staunch positionality against traditional grading, which may be off putting to grading traditionalists.

Beyond reading this book for your own professional development, consider recommending this book if you are a teaching mentor or preparing graduate students for teaching positions. *UNgrading* can help you introduce different ideas and approaches to grading even if the ungrading structure is not one you would personally use. The book could serve as required reading in adult learning or curriculum planning, instruction, and assessment courses.

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