

FLC Ungrading

2022/2023

Learning takes work, practice and failure
(and grading doesn't reflect it)



Reasons to reconsider traditional grading

- We can't even agree on what a C means; how is a student supposed to get meaningful feedback from one?
- Evidence shows grades can decrease student performance on future assessments
- Anxiety about grades is part of the student mental health crisis
- Traditional grading schemes can push students to be risk averse

Examples of how we are getting students to the level of mastery

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SOWK 260: Social Welfare, Social Policy, and Social Work I

SOWK 260 is a prerequisite to SOWK 360, a writing intensive course

Goal: for students to understand the process and iterative nature of writing and therefore focus on feedback for scholarly writing, rather than grade.

Ungrading Strategy: no grade for first paper

- All students receive full points for submitting on time and meeting with me.
- Steps for success provided to students ahead of time.
- By engaging in the process, final product aims toward mastery.

Observations:

- Students reported that they appreciated the one on feedback.
- Anxiety was alleviated - for all of us.
- Second papers have not yet been submitted so effectiveness in improving writing not determined.
- Time required to meet with all students was extensive; could not do this with a large class.

Bambi Chapin - bchapin@umbc.edu
ANTH 211: Cultural Anthropology
(GEP C/SS; gateway for major; 45 students)

Goals: for students and for me:

- Focus more on learning and less on grading
- Make feedback timely and effective
- Assess student progress more accurately

Ungrading Strategy: Moved most activities to satisfactory/unsatisfactory

- Set passing standards at what was B-level + opportunities to revise (inspired by “Specifications Grading” - Nilson 2015)
- See class assignments as learning activities not [only] as performances of having already learned it

Observations:

- Benefits so far: students seem far more engaged, prepared, and into it all – and far less anxious. Me too!
- Ongoing concerns: I am not sure doing this half way as I am is really good enough to achieve the promises of “ungrading” and....I am still behind on grading :(

Matthias Gobbert - gobbert@umbc.edu

Math 221: Linear Algebra

(3 credits, required class, 60 students, mostly non-majors (Pre-)Comp Sci/Eng)

Goal: use pedagogy of **mastery-based learning** to improve learning outcomes and decrease DFW rates, at lower cost to department due to less grading.

Ungrading strategy: automatic grading software by the textbook publisher (available via Course Materials Initiative) to (i) increase time-on-task to practice (multiple attempts at homework), (ii) get immediate feedback (automatic grading, except essay questions), (iii) motivate study of textbook (by hints available inside problem), and (iv) save grading cost (only essay questions).

Observations: (a) Students are **satisfied with homework practice and immediate feedback**. (b) Approach mostly successful for material that can be learned by practice only (not theory). (c) Extension to quizzes/tests problematic due to availability of online resources.

Tomoko Hoogenboom - tmkhgnbm@umbc.edu

JPNS 302: Advanced Japanese

(3 credits, requirement for major/elective, 14 students)

Goal: Students focus on what they learn rather than their grades

Ungrading strategy:

- Students submit individual goals for this semester with how to achieve the goals, and meet with the instructor for a mid-term check up/reassess their goals = autonomous learning
- Submit comments on their initial responses to the questions on handouts - if they indicate what was missing in the original submission, they receive full points = self-reflection of their learning

Observations:

- Some students are aware of what needs to be done to achieve their goals while others are not used to being responsible for their own learning = goals are set but no action is taken

Martin Kobren- mkobren@umbc.edu
Poli 309: Law and Economic Inequality

Problem: Students in upper-level social science course learning to apply assigned reading to public policy issue

Solution: Fishbowl discussion led by instructor using a small group of randomly chosen students while the rest of the class watches and reacts to what their classmates say. Instructor focuses discussion on how the readings apply to the problem by asking students make creative suggestions. Students in the discussion group react to suggestions, first asking for positive reactions, then negative reactions, and finally for ways of improving the suggestion.

Ungrading: Students reflect, in writing on best point and how it changed or improved student's thinking about the topic

Marie van Staveren - mvanstav@umbc.edu
CHEM 312L: Advanced Lab
(WI, majors only, 10 students)

Goals: For students to focus on learning content rather than arguing about points, and for students to self assess their own writing and see where they can grow.

Ungrading Strategy: Majority of assignments are graded perfect (full credit) or not done (no credit) with unlimited attempts. Students practice responding to feedback, self assessing from the grade sheet, and being comfortable getting feedback before a work is 'done'.

Observations: Discussions focus on learning skills, not acquiring points. Students appreciate amount of feedback. Pros: they like having unlimited attempts. Cons: they struggle with anxiety when turning in work that isn't done, they struggle with the lack of due dates.

Cynthia Wagner, cwagner@umbc.edu
BIOL 635L and BIOL 636L: Advanced Molecular Biology Laboratory
two semester, seven-credit lab for AMB MS students

Goal: students to become (fairly) independent researchers and be the experts on the questions they are researching

Ungrading strategy(ies):

- Practice molecular biology techniques in the context of research project
- Reflective writing—with feedback, but ungraded

Observations:

- students worry about making mistakes, yet failure is common in research science
- student reflection and faculty feedback enhances student mastery

Bibliography & Recommended Readings

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