Grading Options Presentation

Nov. 15, 2022

Scott Ellis

**Specifications Grading**: Students can select what grade they might want to achieve by selecting the assignments (or parts of assignments) they want to complete. Great resource: Linda B. Nilson’s *Specifications Grading : Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*. Stylus Publishing, 2015. [Available through Buley online]

*Approaches to/Reasons for/Comments about Specifications Grading:*

* Can be based on pass/fail and competency models. Instructor establishes competencies to meet course goals.
* Can counteract grade inflation: If the students need to complete a component, we can set the bar of what counts as completion. (That is, we could count what we normally consider to be “C” work as fulfilling it, or we can raise the standard to “B” work or higher.)
* If students do not reach the threshold for acceptable completion, we can allow them to revise it one or more times. The number of possible revisions is up to us. Using this option, there is no partial credit—the students either completed it according to specifications or not. We can then allow for revisions (and set clear guidelines and due dates for revisions), or we can let students drop some assignments that did not meet the set standard.
* We must establish clear guidelines and requirements, so students know what is expected.
* We should not try to evaluate every aspect of every assignment—only the key components that we expect students to demonstrate.
* This method can save time for instructors because the student either did or did not complete the assignment to your specifications.

*Grade Levels*:

* We can adjust the grade levels according to increased difficulty (from Bloom’s taxonomy): memorize, demonstrate understanding, apply knowledge, analyze, etc.
* We can also “bundle” assignments by adding additional components to the assignment for additional assessment levels. For instance, for a standard paper, you might also ask students to complete other elements—an outline, a review of scholarship, self-reflection, etc.

*Examples* To find other examples from different instructors, see chap. 7 from Nilson’s *Specifications Grading*.

**Ungrading**

Students grade themselves according to instructor feedback and established criteria. Great resource: Susan Blum’s *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*. West Virginia University Press 2020.

*Approaches to/Reasons for/Comments about Ungrading:*

* It may be a better fit for “intrinsic” student motivation by shifting the focus from the instructor as the “law” to students completing and assessing their own assignments.
* It promotes student awareness of their own work by directing them to think about their efforts and how they match with the assignment.
* It helps to shift instructor’s time from “giving grades” to offering feedback. Cuts the time spent wrestling over a particular grade (“Is this a B or a B-?”)
* It increases dialogue with the students about their learning.
* It gives students some agency in the grading process.
* “Ungrading” is not an all-or-nothing activity. You can ungrade short assignments or long, informal or formal assignments, the first third of a class or the last third.
* A few ungrading advocates suggest eliminating deductions for late work. [This approach will not work for me. Too often I receive packs of work in the final week! However, I am willing to negotiate a new due date if a student reaches out to me.]
* There is a slight learning curve as students shift away from the “just give me a grade” mindset.
* According to research and my own experience, women and students of color tend to grade their work lower than other students. On the plus side, when I have discussed such moments with students, they seem to gain some confidence in their work.
* Personal Note: Ungrading was tricky with an asynchronous class, in which students were more likely to grade themselves higher, perhaps because there was no F2F accountability—until I mandated a Zoom session!

Options for Ungrading:

* *Self-Assessment*: Direct students to assess their own work by connecting it to the assignment, to the instructor comments, or to class-established guidelines. Self-assessment encourages metacognition, so students are thinking specifically about what they are learning. (This is a skill we want all students to develop!)
* *Learning “Artifacts” or “Portfolios”:* At the end of the term, students select the work from various assignments that reflects their best work and demonstration of learning. Students can write a “cover letter” for them or even create a voice-over video that discusses their learning.
* *Process Letters*: Direct students to write letters (or videos) in which they discuss what they have produced and learned. They could write a letter for each assignment or two or three times a semester.
* *Grading Contract*: The instructor, often with input from students, create clear criteria for final grades (“A student earning an A must complete XYZ”). Students then sign a “contract” for the grade they will work to earn in a class. The instructor then can either grade according to work completed, or they can also incorporate comments and feedback on assignments during the semester. [This approach is similar to Specifications Grading.]
* *Peer-Assessment*: This assignment can be formal or informal, and it could incorporate process letters. This approach can work particularly well for group projects by asking students how each group member participated.
* *Minimal Grading*: Instead of using formulas with several gradations (A-F, or 100-point scale), reduce the scale to two or three (completed or did not; no pass, pass, or high pass).

Brief Bibliography:

Blum, Susan. *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*. West Virginia University Press 2020.

Butler, Ruth. 1988. “Enhancing and Undermining Intrinsic Motivation: The Effects of Task-Involving and Ego-Involving Evaluation on Interest and Performance.” *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 58 (1): 1–14.

Dunn, Dana S., and Jane S. Halonen. 2019. “The Extra-Credit Question: Should You Offer It or Resist?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. April 3.  
  
Elbow, Peter. 1994. “Ranking, Evaluating, Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment.” *College English* 12.

Kohn, Alfie. 2006. “The Trouble with Rubrics.” *English Journal* 95 (4).

--. “Grading is Degrading.” *The Education Digest,* 1999, Vol.65 (1).

Nilson, Linda B. *Specifications Grading : Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*. Stylus Publishing, 2015.

Schinske, Jeffrey and Kimberly Tanner. “Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently).” CBE Life Sciences Education. 2014 Summer; 13(2): 159–166.

Stommel, Jesse. “How to Ungrade.” https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/

Supiano, Beckie. “The Unintended Consequences of ‘Ungrading’” *Chronicle*, April 29, 2022.