

Un- (or Self-) Grading: Reflections from an Upper Level Elective

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Me to my mom: "Want me to pick up some dinner?"

Mom: "Oh I thought you had a lot to do today, are you done with all of your grading?"

Me: *whispers* "I will never be done with my grading..."

[#AcademicTwitter](#)



There is copious evidence that grades are not a good measure of learning, that they inhibit intrinsic motivation, and that they create a competitive environment between students and hostile relationships between students and teachers. We can't entirely remove grades quite yet, because they are hard-coded into so many of our educational systems, but teachers can (and should) raise our collective eyebrows at grades. And we should do this work together with students.

- Jesse Stommel

<https://www.jessestommel.com/grades-are-dehumanizing-ungrading-is-no-simple-solution/>

Why Did I Ungrade?

The Context

- Academic year 2020-21
- Upper-level elective “The Economics of Environmental Behavior”
 - Hybrid: in-person + remote
 - 13 students, all juniors or seniors
 - Assignments: reading + discussion, replication exercises, presentation of an optional reading, series of assignments building to a major research paper
- (Also, three independent study students)

How Did I Ungrade?

- The student still receives a grade
- The prof still defines the assignments to be done
- The prof still gives feedback on assignments
- The student identifies their learning & growth objectives
- The student evaluates themselves, considering their objectives, and proposes a grade
- The prof can accept or overturn the proposed grade

Ungrading

As I've explained, instead of grades being assigned to you (the students) by me (the professor), in this class, we will carry on through the course of the semester with no grades (though the TA and I will give plenty of feedback and comments).

You will [set goals for yourself at the start of the semester](#) on dimensions you want to make progress on, and we'll meet (if possible, within the first week of class) to discuss those goals.

Then you'll [write an assessment in the middle of the semester](#) (due Fri Oct 30) to reflect on those goals and your progress toward them, and make any adjustments to your goals that seem appropriate. I'll give comments on your self-assessment and I encourage you all to meet with me to discuss it.

Then at the end of the semester, after you've submitted your final paper, [you'll write a final comprehensive self-assessment](#) (due Sat Dec 19). In that self-assessment, you'll explain what grade you feel is appropriate for you for your semester's work, reflecting on your progress toward your learning goals and your overall view of your learning and growth in the class. It is possible that I will judge that grade inappropriate for you and submit a different grade to the college for you, but I find that unlikely - I expect you to all be thoughtful in this process.

Grade Distribution

- Most (9 of 13) students proposed A's
 - But they did great work and I believe nearly all would have gotten A's anyway
 - Who am I to judge? They felt they met their goals.
- 2 A-'s, one B+, one B-
- The only grade I changed was to bump up the B-

Students Reported Feeling Intellectually Freer

- “I think I did a very good job fulfilling the goals I laid out for myself. Admittedly, the goals I laid out were probably non-traditional.”
- Released from need to “check boxes;” enabled to engage thoughtfully
- “This class has shown me that the different types of smarts are just that, different.”

I Will Totally Do This Again

- My department would kill me if I did it in a core course
- I will try it in a lower-level elective
- I will keep the same general structure
- I might provide more guidance on goals (but not too much)

Thank you!

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