An Exploration of the Anti-Oppressive Practice of “Ungrading” and its Effects on Student Learning

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I. Abstract

A significant challenge facing instructors at Columbia School of Social Work is the fair, equitable, and accurate assessment of students. Instructors use letter grades to evaluate student outcomes, but there is little agreement as to what grades indicate. There is, however, a shared implicit assumption that grades measure learning. The current study interrogates that assumption by comparing the learning outcomes of two sections of a Program Evaluation course, one that uses an “ungrading” pedagogical approach, and the other that uses a traditional pedagogical approach to grading. “Ungrading” is an innovative, anti-oppressive pedagogy in which students receive feedback on assignments and revise their work based on that feedback; however, their work is not graded. Rather, the student is asked to reflect on what they learned and on the process of learning (their motivation, effort, curiosity), and then give themselves a grade on the assignment. Anecdotal evidence suggests that ungrading fosters learning because students focus on the process of learning instead of the outcome of a grade. However, this claim has not been tested in a research study. This study aims to determine if there is a difference in the learning outcomes of students in a course with traditional grading and those in a course that is ungraded. Using a quasi-experimental design, two sections of Program Evaluation will get either the experimental condition or treatment as usual (TAU). The author hypothesizes that students who are in the ungrading condition will demonstrate greater learning, based on self-report and objective measures, than those in the TAU condition.
II. Project Scope

Framing and Participants

The problem that this research study addresses is the problematic nature of grading as an assessment of learning in the Columbia School of Social Work (CSSW). Not only is there a lack of alignment between grades and learning, but the practice of grading tends to be inherently racist and oppressive in that it advantages those who come from privileged educational backgrounds. The objective of this study is to explore ungrading, a pedagogical alternative that emphasizes an iterative process of instructor feedback, student revision, and student reflection on their learning to see if it promotes greater learning for students and a more equitable form of summative assessment. The specific research question is: Does an ungrading approach to assessment produce better learning outcomes for students than a traditional grading approach? Based on student reactions to a select number of ungraded projects that the author assigned in past courses, it is hypothesized that students will learn more in an ungraded class than in a class that uses traditional grading.

This research study will use a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest comparison group design to test the effectiveness of ungrading as an intervention. Students in two sections of Program Evaluation taught by the author will be enlisted, with those in the experimental class receiving the ungrading approach and those in the treatment-as-usual class receiving the traditional grading method. Program Evaluation classes typically have 20 - 25 students. Although the study relies on a non-probability convenience sample, there is no reason to believe that students in the two sections will be significantly different. Nevertheless, the pre-tests will determine comparability of the samples.

All students in both Program Evaluation sections will be briefed about the study by email prior to the first class and then given the option to participate. Students who agree and sign the consent form will complete several pretest measures including instruments to test their knowledge of program evaluation concepts (objective measure of learning) as well as their perceived competence and confidence conducting a program evaluation (subjective measures of learning). When the course ends, in addition to completing the same instruments in the pretest, students will be asked to rate their satisfaction of different aspects of the course and give feedback about the method of assessment that was used (grading vs. ungrading).

The findings of this study have important implications for social work education. CSSW is committed to social justice both inside and outside of our institution, and to providing an equitable and anti-racist education to our students. If ungrading is found to be a
pedagogy that prioritizes and fosters learning rather than merely attaining a good grade, then students can have an equal chance at excelling. Moreover, ungrading may be elevated to standard assessment practice so that all students can benefit from this pedagogy.

**Rationale and Literature Review**

The proposed project aligns closely with Columbia’s efforts to promote inclusive, anti-racist, anti-oppressive academic experiences and practices throughout the University. Ungrading holds promise as a pedagogy that brings us closer to that mission.

Educational scholars have documented the negative effects of grading. There is a growing body of literature on the notion of de-emphasizing grades in academia. “Ungrading,” de-grading,” and “going gradeless” all share the same objective: “to question the centrality of grades as an unchanging, unyielding fact of schooling (according to both teachers and students)” (Blum, 2020, p. 2).

Stommel, a proponent of ungrading, describes the deleterious nature that is inherent in conventional grading, asserting that “Agency, dialogue, self-actualization, and social justice are not possible . . . in a hierarchical system that pits teachers against students and encourages competition by ranking students against one another” (2020, p. 28).

Diane Pike (2010) challenges the “dead idea” that grading motivates learning: “Does grading represent learning? Maybe ... but mostly, grading motivates getting grades” (p. 4). She goes on to explain that “Interesting and relevant assignments, timely feedback, connection between student and teacher, connection among students, meaningful use of time—these things motivate learning” (p. 6).

Butler (1988) researched the relationship between evaluation and intrinsic motivation and interest in learning. She found that fifth-grade students who received comments on their work performed significantly better and showed attitudinal benefits greater than students who received grades or no feedback at all. This study highlights how traditional grading can undermine motivation to learn while feedback in the form of comments can inspire it. Similarly, in their study with a sample of university students, Lipnevich and Smith (2009) found that “descriptive feedback on an essay examination was found to be most effective when given alone, unaccompanied by grades or praise” (p. 319).

McMorran, Ragupathi, and Luo (2017) explored the impact of “gradeless learning,” defined as “assessment without letter or numerical grades, such as pass/fail systems and narrative evaluations” (p. 362) in students at the University of Singapore who had
endured a rigorous and competitive educational system to get to university. First year students reported that this method of assessment helped them adapt to university life, allowed them to take academic risks such as enrolling in interesting courses without the fear of a failing grade, and reduced the overall stress of the university experience.

As an educator committed to anti-oppressive, equitable and liberating pedagogy, the author has integrated ungrading into her courses for selective assignments. For example, students in Direct Practice have to present on a therapeutic intervention of their choice. Students receive extensive feedback about the strengths and areas for improvement on their project, but no grade. In a reflection letter, students write about their learning, effort, and motivation in doing the project, and give themselves a grade accordingly. This same process has been implemented in a Program Evaluation class for a semester-long project that students complete in segments. Students have consistently reported that ungrading enables them to focus on their work without the stress of being graded.

**Assessment and Evaluation Plan for Specific Aims**

The Program Evaluation course at CSSW teaches students how to conceptualize, design, and perform some type of evaluation for a social service program. The curriculum is both didactic and experiential, taking students from the creation of a logic model to the analysis of the data they collect. This study will compare the subjective and objective outcomes of two different pedagogical approaches to the course - one that uses ungrading and the other that uses traditional grading. Quantitative instruments (surveys, questionnaires) will assess the concrete learning outcomes of the course such as change in knowledge of program evaluation. The author intends to design a multiple choice test that covers the concepts that students will learn during the course for the pretest and posttest. Additionally, surveys will be administered for the pretest and posttest to measure the affective components of each pedagogy, such as students’ confidence and perception of their competence in performing a program evaluation. At the current time, it is not known if appropriate affective instruments already exist, but the author will consult with Assessment and Evaluation Expert Glen Davenport at the Center for Teaching and Learning to locate relevant measures and/or design appropriate ones for this study. Students will also complete a satisfaction survey when the course ends to gather feedback about the two pedagogical approaches. Thus, the goal of this evaluation plan is to understand which pedagogical approach leads to better learning outcomes and a more satisfactory educational experience.
Role of Key Personnel

Three people will be actively involved in the research study.

Principal Investigator - Amy Werman, Lecturer in Discipline at CSSW, will oversee all aspects of the research study. Additionally, she will be teaching two sections of Program Evaluation, one that will have the experimental condition and the other that will have the TAU condition.

Teaching Assistants - Two teaching assistants, one for each section of Program Evaluation, will help with
- administration of the instruments at pretest and posttest,
- providing feedback and/or grading of papers

The teaching assistants will be carefully trained by the PI in how to provide feedback and grade papers. Inter-rater reliability will be checked.

In-kind support from SOLER would be requested for
- navigating/completing the Institutional Review Board process for the proposed research study.
- working through any logistical issues around the design/implementation of the research study.
- assisting with locating/creating appropriate instruments.
- creating a data analysis plan/assistance with analyzing the data.

III. Project Timeline
June - September 2022
- Finalize design of study - locate or create instruments, decide on a data analysis plan, etc.

October - November 2022
- Submit proposal to the IRB for approval ("exempt" review expected)

December 2022
- Prepare all the materials for the pretest and posttest

January 2023
- Pretest for students in both Program Evaluation sections who decide to participate

April 2023
- Posttest for students in both Program Evaluation sections who decide to participate

May 2023
- Data analysis
- Write-up and delivery of report on findings of the research study

IV. Budget Overview and Justification

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<td>Services of SOLER staff¹</td>
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<td>(2) Teaching Assistants²</td>
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<td>Gift cards³</td>
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¹SOLER will provide facilitators to assist the PI during various points in the research project including help with drilling down the specifics of the final research design, completing the IRB proposal, and running the data analyses.

²The teaching assistants comprise the largest expense of the budget. Each will have their own section of Program Evaluation. Their responsibilities will include compiling the materials for and administering the pretests and posttests, assisting the instructor (PI) during class, and providing rigorous feedback and/or grades (depending on the treatment condition) to students on their papers. The teaching assistants will closely collaborate with the instructor (PI) throughout the research study to make sure everything is going according to plan.

³Students who choose to participate in the research study and complete both the pretest and the posttest will be eligible to win a $100 gift certificate in a drawing at the end of the semester. Five $100 gift certificates will be awarded. Program Evaluation classes usually average around 25 students, so up to 50 students may be eligible for the drawing.

⁴SPSS software is essential for storing and analyzing the data from the research study. The PI will need access to the data on her personal computer. A year subscription to the IBM SPSS Statistics Grad Pack should be sufficient once the research study is under way.
References


April 29, 2022

Office of the Vice Provost for Teaching, Learning, and Innovation
Columbia University
New York, NY 10027

Dear Provost’s Office Colleagues and Members of the Review Committee:

I am delighted to write in support of Dr. Amy Werman’s application for a Science of Learning Research (SOLER) grant from the Office of the Vice Provost for Teaching, Learning and Innovation. Dr. Werman is a creative educator who constantly challenges our typical assumptions when it comes to the science of learning, and aims to create a nurturing environment to maximize teaching effectiveness. She is seeking to conduct a comparative study of “unggrading” pedagogy within two Program Evaluation classes this coming fall, to evaluate whether it can foster better learning compared to traditional pedagogy.

Dr. Werman has been a deeply committed and passionate teacher of social work students for 20 years. We are fortunate that she has been a member of the faculty of Columbia School of Social Work since 2009. I am impressed by her dedication to innovative and forward-thinking pedagogy. She has spoken with me about her work to continually educate herself on different pedagogical approaches as a way of affording her students the very best educational experience. She has also shared her fundamental belief is that teaching is about relationships. She works to create an inclusive, equitable, and anti-oppressive classroom environment, inviting students to help shape the course content and assignments. She is justifiably proud of maintaining strong connections with many of her former students – which speaks to the deep impact that she has on their learning and their careers.

This application exemplifies Dr. Werman’s commitment to exploring anti-oppressive, anti-racist approaches to teaching at the graduate level. It aims to formally assess whether ungrading can appropriately level the playing field for students of very different academic and experiential backgrounds, and make academic evaluation more equitable.

Dr. Werman’s proposal is fully aligned with the School’s commitment to academic excellence. I believe this project will benefit the School of Social Work’s academic curriculum, and enhance the educational experience of our students. I am pleased to support this proposal and am most grateful for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Melissa D. Begg
Dean & Professor