
Book Review

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Susan D. Blum (Ed.), *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*. West Virginia University Press, 2020, 269 pp., ₹2,160.00. ISBN 10-1949199827, ISBN 13978-1949199826.

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Ungraded Learning

What is the purpose of education? Is it to mould students into compliant recipients of information, their worth measured by a system of quantifiable rewards? Or is it something much broader and wider? Susan D. Blum and her fellow contributors in the book *'Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)'* invite us to imagine learning as a self-discovery unconstrained by grades.

Many books argue for the improvement of and strategies for grading approaches. For example, Hierck and Larson (2018) attempts to change the grading practices from punitive measures to feedback-centred systems. But such works stay within the standard-based system. Away from this, *Ungrading* takes a critical lens and radical approach of assessment to education, with cases of specific course implementations.

Susan D. Blum is not the first to argue for ungrading in education. Alfie Kohn, in *Punished by Rewards* (1993) and *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (1999), critiques traditional grading. Deservingly, Kohn wrote the foreword for *Ungrading*. Starr Sackstein in *Hacking Assessment* (2015) provides strategies for ungraded classrooms. He too has contributed a chapter to this book. Susan has assembled a group of authors with nonconformist ideas on grading for this collection.

In an age obsessed with quantification, we have come to accept grades as the arbiters of intellectual worth. Yet, the book, *Ungrading*, convinces us that this seemingly objective measure often obscures the real learning. This collection of



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essays is authored by a diverse cohort of educators. Together they challenge the deep notion that grades are synonymous with achievement and they propose a radical shift—a move towards ungrading.

In three sections, Blum and her contributors illuminate the insidious ways in which traditional grading can warp the educational experience and what can be done. The first part, Foundations and Models, provides the theoretical basis and various approaches to ungrading. The second part, Practices, provides practical examples of ungrading implemented in real classrooms across different disciplines. The third part, Reflections, comprises case studies on the ungrading experiences.

They argue that the pursuit of high marks can trigger a performance-oriented mindset which will rely on rote learning. Genuine understanding will be undermined. Driven by the fear of failure, students become preoccupied with the outcome rather than the process. This, the authors contend, hijacks the very purpose of education, which is essentially to cultivate a lifelong love of learning and critical inquiry.

Key Themes

The book first looks at the inherent limitations of grades as a true reflection of abilities of students. Reducing the complexities of learning to a single letter or number or grade fails to capture the realities of individual learning and their progress. In this way, the approach of grading not only overlooks the unique learning journeys of students but can also be demoralising.

But, that is about the problem.

Ungrading argues for self-reflections, portfolios, and peer evaluations and similar alternative approaches as the solution to the problem. This shift, the authors suggest, allows and equips students to take intellectual risks to go deeper into the subject matter.

The proposal of ungrading is not limited to assessment and evaluation. The book portrays the potential of ungrading to address systemic inequities inherent in traditional grading systems. For instance, standardised assessments, which are mostly ignorant of the diverse backgrounds and learning styles of students, can perpetuate bias and be devoid of inclusivity. By re-imagining how we measure success, educators can create a more equitable classroom where every student has the opportunity to grow.

The book does not shy away from the challenges of implementing the ungrading approach in our educational settings. It acknowledges the likely resistance from institutions, parents, and even students accustomed to the familiar metrics of grades. So, the authors provide practical strategies and real-world examples to guide educators in ungrading approach in classrooms.

The core of the book can be told as the joy of discovery and the pursuit of knowledge should not be overshadowed by the anxiety of evaluation. For building that argument and providing practical strategies for upgrading, the book presents a variety of themes.

One is the *illusion of objectivity*. The book challenges the assumption that traditional grades are objective measures of learning. In reality, grades are often influenced by subjective factors, such as the bias of the teacher or background of the student and many other variables that confound or hinder the accurate reflection of true understanding.

Reclaiming student agency is another theme that authors of different essays point out in this book. *Ungrading* encourages a focus on effort, progress, and self-reflection and growth mindset in students. By removing the pressure of grades, students take ownership of their learning. It encourages them to set their own goals, pursue their own interests, and engage with the material in more meaningful ways.

Ungrading promotes a shift from competition to collaboration by building a community of learners. The book advocates for assessment practices that are designed to support learning through collaboration, rather than simply measuring it at the individual level. This involves recognising the *hidden curriculum* of grading, where seemingly objective assessments can inadvertently nudge a competitive mindset and extrinsic motivation. By exposing these unintended consequences, educators can adopt alternative assessment practices embedded with student agency. In this context, the idea of ‘assessment *for* learning, not *of* learning’ is a recurring theme in the work. This includes using feedback to guide progress of students, providing opportunities for self-assessment, and using a variety of assessment methods to capture the diverse ways in which students learn. This is not to say that assessment has no place in education, but rather that it should serve as a guide, not a gatekeeper.

Ungrading is not just an argument for the abolition of grades. It is a plea for a more holistic and humane approach to assessments in the educational context. The core need comes from the recognition that the real worth of every student, regardless of their ability to conform to arbitrary standards, cannot be measured by a grade. If we really value the often repeated phrases in educational discourses such as well-rounded individuals, critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, educational resilience and the like, we need to think beyond the current forms of grading.

Evidence and Explorations


The book offers rich anecdotal evidence. But there are less researches with robust methodology. The science of educational evaluation—*whether through traditional grading, ungrading, or anything in between*—demands strong empirical grounding. Perhaps this is because the research in this area remains limited. Therefore, the studies in this book can also be a call for future works that are contextual, research-driven, and grounded in diverse educational settings.

The fear of increased workload for faculty members due to the ungrading approach and the need to address resistance from stakeholders accustomed to traditional grading also require further studies. The core practical question remaining is how to live in the complexities of standardised testing within an ungraded framework? This also demands more work.

Ungrading emerges as a pedagogical philosophy that de-centres the traditional role of grades, shifting the focus from performance-oriented evaluation to a more holistic understanding of student growth. We are in a society which is increasingly defined by metrics and measurements. As an oasis, *Ungrading* provides a radical proposition: that true learning flourishes not in the shadow of judgment, but in the light of exploration. This proposition challenges us to (re)imagine the very foundations of our educational systems.

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