Volume **02** (2023) Issue 1 https://doi.org/10.13001/joerhe.v2i1.7847
Innovative Practices

Fostering Student Agency Through Ungrading

Project- and Portfolio-Based Methods and Case Studies

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Keywords: Ungrading, Project-Based, Portfolio-Based, Agency, Open Pedagogy

Abstract

Students in service writing courses, particularly those enrolled in non-writing majors, often struggle with low confidence in their writing ability, resulting in a desire to "just get through" the class with a passing grade. Furthermore, instructors of such courses often struggle with a balance between what students actually need to learn in order to be successful in their careers and the level at which they want students to be proficient in writing practices–and students struggle with the same notions. Using a pedagogy called "ungrading," students are released from their fear of "bad grades" caused by the feeling of being at the mercy of their instructor—this release fosters empowered students who can focus on their actual learning and improvement in writing. Using case studies from my TCOM 2010: Technical Writing and TCOM 3030: Instructional Design courses at Kennesaw State University, this innovative practice article introduces two methods for implementing ungrading in *any* class, including resources from my classes and considerations for implementing these methods in other fields.

Introduction

The idea that students need to be graded in order to determine success levels is deeply ingrained in our culture of teaching and learning. Yet, we see an increasing focus on social justice and agency in the classroom–so many of the innovative practices we cross paths with are designed to create more equitable access and experience for all students. In fact, as Sarah Lambert (2018) outlines, the very practice of open education is rooted in social justice agendas that emphasize equitable access to course materials. So, if open education has such strong roots in social justice, why do so many instructors continue to use, as Jesse Stommel (2020) puts it, "a hierarchical system [of grading] that pits teachers against students and encourages competition by ranking students against one another"? In my

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professional opinion, most instructors continue to grade simply because it is *what they have always done*. However, as Stommel (2020) explains, "[a]gency, dialogue, self-actualization, and social justice are not possible (or, at least, unlikely)" in such a system.

Ungrading is a pedagogical response to the oppressive nature of ranked grading. In Susan Blum's (2020) edited book *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, the general consensus among the authors is that the purpose of ungrading is "to create positive atmospheres devoid of fear and threat and focused on learning." In addition, ungrading is strongly complementary to open education and open pedagogy. As Heather Miceli (2022) situated in her presentation at the Open Education Conference, ungrading and open pedagogy are complementary pedagogies of care that are powerful individually but even more so when implemented together. Furthermore, Tannis Morgan (2016) cited Paquette's 1979 work that defined foundational values of open pedagogy as autonomy and interdependence, freedom and responsibility, and democracy and participation. As readers will discover through this article and their own implementation, ungrading *is* open pedagogy by these standards.

My first introduction to ungrading was unconventional. Rather than learning of this innovative practice at an academic conference, I believe I first read the word "ungrading" on Twitter. In all honesty, I don't remember what the Tweets said, but I am fairly certain they were written by Heather Miceli, whose Tweets on open pedagogy were my first introduction to that as well. When the idea entered my radar, I started attending conference presentations and reading academic blog posts on ungrading just to learn a little more—what interested me most about it was the idea that students are essentially freed from their fear of failure, enabling them to focus on learning. I wondered if that freedom would positively impact non-major students' attitudes toward required writing classes. As you'll read in this article, my experience was that yes, it does positively impact non-major students' attitudes toward required writing classes.

So, what exactly is ungrading? It sounds a bit like we just *don't grade*, right? But here's the thing: in the vast majority of formal higher education institutions, we have to assign grades–at least at the end of the semester. Yet, ungrading *is* happening in those institutions and in increasing numbers. No, ungrading is not just *not grading*—at least not in most cases. Ungrading is about *deconstructing* the culture of grades in higher education. It is about minimizing the power dynamic that grades create between students and instructors. Consider this: it's common for us as instructors to tell students that they are in control of their own grades–that as long as they apply themselves and do the work, they will get the grade they "earned." Consider whether that is *really* true, though. In my own experience, it's not–and that's because we create an idea in our minds of what an "A" grade looks like, and whether the student worked hard for it or not, we are ultimately the ones who decide if their work looks like what we think an "A" should be. So, to extend this idea, ungrading is about *empowering* students to take control and ownership of their own learning. It's about self-assessment, self-reflection, and overall improvement rather than an arbitrary idea of what "good" writing is.

I specifically interrogate the idea of what "good" writing is in my courses. In the following section, I will detail two methods I use in the two classes I currently teach, TCOM 2010: Technical

Writing and TCOM 3030: Instructional Design. If you don't teach a writing course, don't write this article off just yet–I will also explore how these methods might work in other subjects by reflecting on an actual conversation I recently had. No conflict of interest exists for my use of ungrading or my writing this article.

Two Methods and Case Studies

My experience with ungrading started with my ENGL 2311: Technical Writing course at Texas Tech University (TTU), where I teach part-time as a graduate student. I first tried it in Summer 2022 and then ultimately continued with the methods there and at Kennesaw State University (KSU), where I began teaching full-time in Fall 2022. As I was implementing ungrading in my TCOM 2010: Technical Writing class at KSU, I decided to also find a way to do the same in my TCOM 3030: Instructional Design course—because *why not*, right? While I do continue to ungrade in my class at TTU, I will focus on the courses at KSU for this article–primarily because my KSU classes use open educational resources and my TTU course does not (at least, not exclusively–due to a departmental textbook mandate).

In this section, I will share the two ways I ungrade in my classes at KSU. Because I teach at an institution that does require me to submit final grades, my approach stems from Jesse Stommel's (2020) method of self-evaluation and self-assessment. In both of the following cases, my students ultimately assign themselves a final grade based on their reflection of their own learning and improvement in the class. However, the process to that improvement looks a little different for each student. For each of the following methods, I'll provide a brief background of the course and my teaching history with it, followed by a description of the activities and assignments in the course and how they are "assessed."

Method/Case 1: Portfolio-Based Ungrading

The TCOM 2010: Technical Writing course at KSU is a service course that serves students in all majors but with a vast majority of computer science, engineering, construction management, and, more recently, psychology students. The course itself has specific curriculum requirements with some degrees of freedom as to how those requirements are met. The primary requirements of the course are that all sections are required to use the open textbook developed by faculty in our department (myself included), *Open Technical Communication* (2020), and that specific genres of writing are taught and asked of students.

KSU's TCOM 2010 course has four curricular genre requirements: students must write a cover letter and resume, a proposal, a report, and a set of instructions. *How* instructors make those assignments happen in their courses is, more or less, up to them—except for the required open textbook. So, given that I am a primary author on the required open textbook for the course, I have had a lot of freedom in how I teach my course. I make use of the resources provided by my department; many of them were created by or in collaboration with me. I have personally re-designed my TCOM 2010 course countless times in the collective 4-5 years of my teaching the course there. I have a tendency to want to redesign my courses any time I learn of a new-to-me pedagogy that feels like it will work better than what I'm

already doing–and that is how ungrading made its way into my pedagogy. In previous iterations of the course, I've actually tried to use a project-based approach (before I discovered ungrading), and if I had been able to make that work, this article would likely have had just the one method of project-based ungrading (in the next section).

Because the required genres in TCOM 2010 have such drastically different contexts of use, project-based has just never worked for my class. So, when I was developing my ungrading approach to the class, I wanted to find a way for the students to *learn from* and *apply* the feedback I was providing them so that they could improve their skills. To incentivize that level of engagement with feedback, I decided to use a portfolio-based approach. The syllabus for this course can be found in Appendix A, but the activities and assignments in my portfolio-based ungrading TCOM 2010 class look like this:

Weekly Activities: In most weeks/modules (I teach asynchronously online, but this would apply for any modality of class), I have application and/or discussion activities. In previous iterations of the class, I would have some kind of completion requirement and likely a compulsory peer response. These activities quickly became "babysitting" assignments that I was often not even reading before assigning participation points. For that reason, I made all weekly activities *optional* in the ungrading iteration of my course. They do not get graded–I don't even always look at them (depends on my workload that week). You may be wondering, "But Tiffani, how do you know they actually complete them?" Well, I don't, and *that's okay*. Remember, ungrading is about empowering students to take ownership of their learning. They should decide for themselves if they need the application activity or not–because they know better than anyone how their learning is going.

Major Assignments. We have four major required assignments throughout the semester, and these are the big genre requirements for the course. One important thing I do with these assignments is, where possible, *I give them choices*. Students must complete their cover letter and resume in the traditional way because our class is often their only opportunity to learn such an important document. However, when we do our proposals, students have the opportunity to choose whether to do a short, written proposal or a recorded presented proposal. Similarly, they have the same choice for their instructions assignment–they can do written instructions or a tutorial video. Finally, they have a required group project where they conduct research and write a report. The choices they have on some of their assignments are important because they give students the opportunity to choose the type of communication that is going to be most beneficial to them in their career paths; and because it's not getting a letter grade, they don't need to worry about choosing the "easier" option for a better grade. Unlike the weekly activities, however, these major assignments *do* get thorough feedback from me–then when we get to the end of the semester, students revise those assignments and combine them into a final portfolio.

Final Portfolio. At the end of the semester (really, I hope that they work on it over the course of the semester), students will take all of the feedback they received and learn from that feedback, revising their documents accordingly to create *better* technical communication. As part of these portfolios, students explain for each assignment what changes they made and why those changes make it better technical writing–but because students are still in control of their own learning, they *don't* have to make

all the changes I recommend in my feedback. I just expect them to explain why they chose not to–they are the writers, after all.

Progress Report & Reflection. Finally, the final assignment in the class, and arguably the most important one, is their progress report and reflection. In this short writing assignment, students are looking at the course objectives and their progress in meeting them, their actual performance and improvement in writing and communication, and how the stuff they learned is applicable beyond the class. This assignment is important because they are really reflecting on the whole semester as a learning experience and where they stand as writers now. But of course, we still have to give a grade, right? We're still teaching at an institution that requires final grades. So as part of this reflection, *students advocate for their own deserved grade*. They choose their own grade based on their own reflection on their performance in the class and improvement as writers, and then they explain to me why that is the grade they deserve. As compared in conversations with my KSU colleague Stephen Bartlett, this grade justification process is similar to the way we don't just walk up to the boss and say "give me a $5,000 raise." They can't just come to me and say "give me an A." They have to give a rationale for their grade. This is also good practice for the workplace when it does come time for them to advocate for a higher salary.

Of course, because there is always the chance that a student will take advantage of this set up, I do still reserve the right to change the grades students advocate for. However, honestly, I've only had to do that for a handful of students–and most of them were actually adjusted upward because they were being *too modest* in their requested grade. This phenomenon is something Stommel (2020) observed in practice as well.

Method/Case 2: Project-Based Ungrading

The TCOM 3030: Instructional Design course is an upper-level elective in the Technical Communication and/or Interactive Design majors at KSU. I will sometimes see students from other majors who are minoring in either subject, but the vast majority of students in the class are majors in my department. This course is typically offered in Spring and Fall semesters with one course section each–at the moment, I am the only person in the department teaching TCOM 3030. Similar to TCOM 2010, I have revised the way I teach this course several times–though probably not as heavily as I have in the other course. Between 2018-2020, I taught the course 2-3 times in a hybrid modality (one class a week with half the course content delivered asynchronously online), and I developed that course using a combination of readings I found on the internet and the structure of a somewhat disorganised version of the course previously taught by another faculty member. To be honest, those first few versions of the course were still somewhat disorganised and felt like the course was still "finding itself," so to speak.

When I returned to KSU to teach full-time in 2022, I (once again) re-designed the TCOM 3030 course, this time armed with two solid open textbooks that I found through EdTech Books, *Design for Learning* (2021) and *Foundations of Learning and Instructional Design Technology* (2018), as well as more teaching experience and training. For the last two semesters, I've taught the course asynchronously online, so it needed to be re-designed anyway (from its original hybrid format). It seemed only logical to

attempt an ungrading approach since I was already planning it for my TCOM 2010 class. However, this time a portfolio approach didn't make as much sense. For an instructional design class, the most logical big assignment is to have students develop instruction–in my course's case, a short online training module. So, instead of using the portfolio-based approach from TCOM 2010, TCOM 3030 uses a project-based approach. At the beginning of the semester, students decide on a topic for their course projects (which I call "microlearning objects"), and then throughout the semester they meet specific milestones where I provide feedback. The syllabus for this course can be found in Appendix B, but the assignments and activities in TCOM 3030 look something like this:

Weekly Discussions. Similar to TCOM 2010's weekly activities, TCOM 3030 has weekly discussion prompts for students to consider as they work through the course content. These discussions are treated the same way as the weekly activities in the other class–they are optional, and they are not graded. I *do* try to read them all, but students don't hear from me about them. The discussions are purely for the students' own application.

Three Major Project Milestones. Throughout the semester, students are working on one big project—a short online training called a microlearning object—while applying the Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation (ADDIE) process model of instructional design. In line with the content we cover throughout the semester, students are expected to meet project milestones. With all three of these milestones, I provide thorough feedback for them to learn from and use to improve their final projects (and their instructional design skills).

Milestone 1. As we approach the first milestone in the course, we will have covered the Analysis and Design phases of ADDIE, so that is about where I expect them to be in their projects as well. So, for Milestone 1, students submit a low-fidelity training design, prototype, or storyboard of their project. They have freedom to submit this milestone in whatever format is going to be most useful to them, and then I give feedback as best I can, making students aware that the more thorough their work is, the better feedback I can give. Most students submit Milestone 1 as a hand-written set of notes and mind-mapping or an outline of their project developed in Microsoft PowerPoint or Google Slides.

Milestone 2. When students get to Milestone 2, we've spent several weeks on the Development phase of ADDIE, including things like content development, technology tools, and document design. So, for Milestone 2, students submit a new prototype, this time in the authoring tool of their choice (I typically recommend Genial.ly as a free tool, and students generally like it), with as much of their instructional content included as possible. At this point, I'm looking for instructional text, videos, and structure, though it varies from project to project.

Milestone 3. As we approach the end of the semester, students submit Milestone 3, in which they should have a mostly-complete prototype of their project, including assessment/engagement activities. At this point in the semester, we have covered all course content, including the Implementation and Evaluation phases of ADDIE, so they are armed with all of the knowledge and tools needed to finish the project.

Microlearning Object with Presentation. At the end of the semester, students submit their final project. Ideally, they will have used my feedback throughout the semester to keep improving on their work as they go. With their submission, I also ask them to submit a short presentation where they describe the project and their design process to me, their classmates, and any other audiences they might share it with (such as job recruiters).

Progress Report and Reflection. Finally, TCOM 3030 students also submit a progress report and reflection with the same guidelines given to TCOM 2010.

Observed Benefits and Considerations

Using these ungrading methods in my classes has produced interesting observations and transformations in my classroom. First, students are very apprehensive of the idea of ungrading at the beginning of the semester. The idea scares them a little bit because it's new and different and because they've never seen an instructor relinquish their power like that before–they almost see it as too good to be true. However, as we continue through the semester and students have the chance to see that I really do want them to take control of their own learning, they kind of settle into the idea.

One thing I've seen from ungrading is that the work students produce is so much more meaningful. Because students are freed from their fear of failure, they are able to focus on making their assignments work for them. So, I generally see a very diverse range of final products, and it's incredibly rewarding to see students investing so much into their assignments. I also see in their reflections that students really take pride in their hard work and improvement–so when they reflect on it at the end of the semester, they do it with an energy that I can actually feel as I'm reading it. And believe it or not, I actually *do* see a lot of them completing the optional activities each week.

I also see my own workload *slightly* decrease, but the time I spend working is also more meaningful. Instead of spending hours reviewing minor activities and giving feedback and participation points that don't actually do anything to improve their learning anyway, I'm focusing on giving meaningful feedback on the bigger assignments so that they can improve on all the smaller topics from within their bigger projects. And because I am giving personal, meaningful feedback, students actually communicate with me. I teach asynchronously online from across the country for one institution and out of town for the other; I never used to get any students emailing me to ask questions or requesting meetings to touch base. But I do now because they want to talk through their improvements and feedback so that they can get the most out of the class.

Implementation in Other Fields

I was recently talking with my husband, who has a degree in Mathematics, about how I ungrade and the positive impact I've seen in my classes from it. As a firmly logic-focused person with interests heavily influenced by STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, he was sceptical that ungrading could be applied to fields in which there *is* a right and wrong answer. And I do

recognize how one might not see ungrading as a viable option for those classes—it's not for everyone. It really does require an open mindset about instruction and assessment, and it really does require the instructor to look beyond right and wrong answers to focus on general improvement and understanding of the concepts.

Recall from my earlier discussion that ungrading is about *self-assessment*, *self-reflection*, and *improvement*. So, how might one allow students to "self-assess" work that has a right or wrong answer? It's more about looking at the bigger picture than that micro-level work. One way you might apply portfolio-based ungrading to, for example, a Mathematics class, would be to provide detailed feedback on where students went wrong in their work (assuming you require them to show their work). Then you could give students the opportunity to learn from that feedback by giving them either the same or alternative problems that assess the same concepts *with the correct answers to those problems*. Students would then complete, self-assess, and submit at the end of the semester in a "portfolio" of sorts. By giving them the answers, you afford students the ability to check their own work–and if they are having trouble getting to that correct answer, they can come to you for additional support. At the end of the semester, even if students don't end it with the correct answers for every problem, you would give them the opportunity to reflect and self-assess for a final grade based on their overall improvement, similar to my technical communication and instructional design students.

As you can see, it's very possible to apply ungrading to *any* subject–it just might require a bit of creative thinking and brainstorming. So, I leave you with this challenge: how might ungrading work in *your* classes? I'd love to hear your ideas!

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Appendix

Appendix A. TCOM 2010: Technical Writing Syllabus (Spring 2023, 16-Week)

Access the syllabus for TCOM 2010: Technical Writing

Appendix B. TCOM 3030: Instructional Design Syllabus (Spring 2023, 16-Week)

Access the syllabus for TCOM 3030: Instructional Design

Appendix C. TCOM 2010: Technical Writing Syllabus (Summer 2023, 4-Week)

As we should in higher education, I am constantly learning from each semester and revising my courses based on that learning. In Summer, I taught two 4-week technical writing courses, so my teaching needed some changes to be more manageable for such a short course, both for my own time management as well as for my students. For the sake of space in this article, I don't outline those changes, but I am providing the syllabus for this revised version of the course. I was very happy with how the Summer courses went, so I ultimately decided to implement a version of this Summer syllabus for my Fall courses.

Access the newly revised syllabus for TCOM 2010: Technical Writing (Summer 4-Week)