



UnGrading or Labor Based Grading

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What is Ungrading?

Ungrading rejects the notion that teachers should be putting grades on individual pieces of student work. (Rosenblatt)



Why ungrade?

Researchers find that grades "play to extrinsic (not intrinsic) motivation, decrease enjoyment of learning, and increase fears of failure.

"More than that, grades aren't necessarily a good measure of student learning. And, based on additional research, we know they're subject to rampant inflation" (Flaherty).





Not only that, but:

Researchers have stressed that grades dampen creativity, courage, and enthusiasm, and that grades foster competitive environments instead of collaborative ones.

(Rajabzadeh)

“As soon as students are doing their work without feeling like they have to guess what the professor is looking for in order to get a good grade, they start doing wonderful things. They are more likely to take risks, collaborate, suggest creative formats and approaches and reveal important pieces of themselves.”

- Adam Rosenblatt





Grades & white supremacy:

“Grading, because it requires a single, dominant standard, is **a racist and White supremacist practice**. There is no way around it. . . Grading is almost always employed in order to control students (and sometimes their teachers), force students to be accountable (and sometimes their teachers), and measure or rank students (and sometimes their teachers), either against each other or against a single standard.

“Each of these purposes for grading in writing classrooms is detrimental to learning generally, and more harmful to many students of color and raciolinguistically diverse students. This is because “diverse students” means “not White students,” or students who use varieties of English that are not the standardized version used in the schools.”

- Asao Inoue

What types of ungrading exist?

- Grade Free Zones
 - **Labor/Contract Grading**
 - Self-assessment
 - Portfolios
 - Process Letters
 - Peer Assessment
 - Minimal grading
 - Student Made Rubrics
- (Stommel)



Value process over product

In a traditional course with a traditional grading system, the labor and time invested in this work is not rewarded.

With labor-based grading, students are incentivized to take intellectual risks.

Students might ask a question and hit the library for hours and begin writing only to find that the question asked cannot be answered. Recognizing what questions cannot be answered is just as important as recognizing the questions that can. (Rajabzadeh)

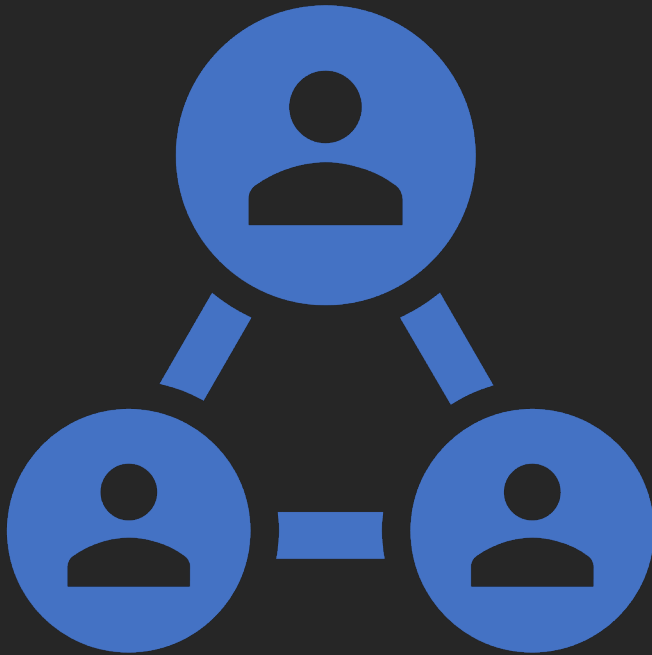




Ungrading in the context of our teaching

“Ungrading works best when it’s part of a **holistic pedagogical practice that emphasizes more flexible and empathetic teaching**. It starts with teachers just talking to students about grades. Demystifying grades and what success truly looks like helps give students a greater sense of ownership, while making learning more meaningful” (Leboff).

Labor-based grading (Asao Inoue)




Labor-based Contracts

- “Teaching Without Judging” (Barrett John Mandel)
 - Essentially, Mandel’s system is one based on quantity of work completed by students.
- Mandel calls this having “faith in students”
- Program-wide assessments of labor-based grading showed most students of color do better in final portfolios and are happier with their writing experiences with the absence of grades (Inoue, “Grading Contracts”).
- “Words instead of grades.”

What are labor-based grading contracts?

All pedagogies ask students to labor, to do something in order to gain something else. However, typical grading systems rarely account for students' labor in any way.

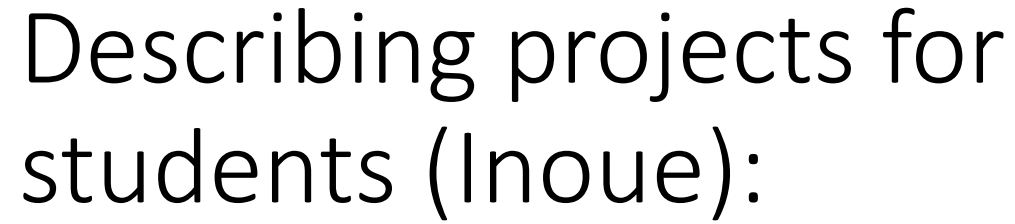


A labor-based grading contract:

Is a set of social agreements with the entire class about how final course grades will be determined for everyone.

Boils down to the matrix or table on the final page that delineates the labor required for each final course grade.

Works from a key assumption: It's better to separate the course grade from how and what students learn in the course.



- The process of the assignment (what chronological steps are involved in the labor?)
- Time on tasks/steps (how many minutes does each step in the process take?)
- Quantity (how many words need to be produced or read in the step?)
- Due date/time and method of submission for the products of the labor (when, how, and where is the

Example of Labor Contract

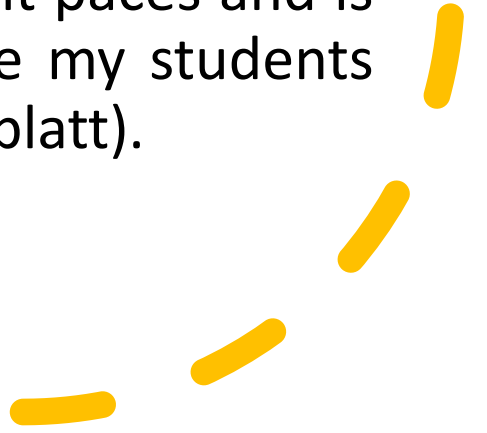
Table 4.1. The final grade breakdown in the grading contract

	# Non-Partic Days	# of Late Assigns.	# of Missed Assigns.	# of Ignored Assigns.
A (4.0)	3	3	1	0
B (3.1)	3	3	1	0
C (2.1)	4	4	2	0
D (1.1)	5	5	3	1
E (0.0)	6	6	4	2

Example 1:

“I use a system of labor-based grading contracts adapted from Asao Inoue’s book, *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*.

“Every assignment has a point value, and students get all of the points on their assignment as long as it meets the clearly-stated minimum standards I have communicated to them. I give plenty of feedback. . . opportunities for revision so that students . . . can demonstrate their learning and earn full points. . . I accept that learning happens at different paces and is an iterative process, and don’t penalize my students for the way that learning works” (Rosenblatt).

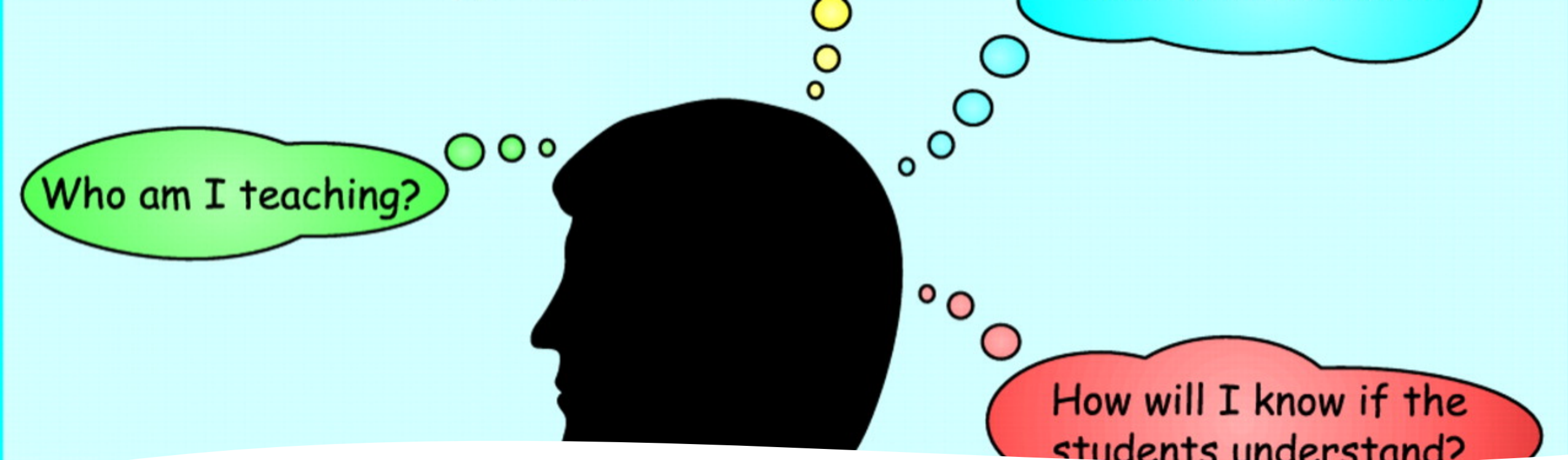


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Example 2:

“Without grades, ‘I think my relationships with students are better,’ Drier says. ‘Their writing improves more quickly and the things they learn stay with them longer. I’ve had lots of kids tell me it’s changed their attitude about coming to school’
(Kohn).





If I want to begin incorporating Ungrading into my teaching practice, where do I begin?

"First, do nothing. As you start to think about de-grading and/or a grading contract, take a full semester while you run your course as is, and while doing so, reflect on what you think might be happening if you changed to a grading contract. Think of it as a shadow course in your mind"
(Warner)



What if it doesn't work?

Adjust. The key is clear communication and mutual understanding between faculty and students.

Works Cited & Recommended Reading:

Flaherty, Colleen. “When Grading Less Is More.” (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/04/02/professors-reflections-their-experiences-ungrading-spark-renewed-interest-student>)

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