When Inquiry Leads to the Unexpected: “Ungrading” With Preservice Teachers and the Struggle With Reflection

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Abstract

While the alternate assessment movement known as “ungrading” is increasingly common in K–12 classrooms, it has only recently reached higher education, and very little has been written about its use in teacher education classrooms. This article describes the organization and repercussions of one teacher educator’s classroom inquiry, through which a gradeless approach was implemented and adapted in a capstone course over four years. Given the degree of difficulty the future teachers appear to face when reflecting on their learning, the author considers their challenges in relation to changing perceptions and government expectations of how and why teachers learn, once in the field.

Introduction

Four years ago, I began questioning my evaluation practices when a colleague suggested we look into trying something new in a teacher education capstone course that we both teach. She had been following the growing discussion around “ungrading,” and based on our conversations, my interest was piqued. I began my own search and found that much of the discussion was springing up in blogs and podcasts.

While the rationales for going gradeless vary, I was interested in what is being written about the benefits of having students think deeply about their learning processes. Despite the increasing popularity of this practice in K–12 classes, I found that only some of the sources were related to post-secondary contexts at the time (Blum, 2020; Stommel, 2020), and notably few addressed teacher education. While some might imagine that “ungrading” refers to Pass/Fail models of evaluation, which are not uncommon in our field, that is not the case. Proponents of ungrading have suggested practices that include student self-grading (López-Pastor et al., 2012; Schinske & Tanner, 2014), portfolios (White, 2021), formative feedback for revision and resubmission (Dawson et al., 2019; Hasinoff et al., 2024), involving peers in feedback processes (Holmgren et al, 2018; Wanner & Palmer, 2018), using complete/incomplete in assessments (Hasinoff et al., 2024), negotiated grading (Stackstein, 2015), and labor-based or contract grading (Gaudet, 2022; Hasinoff et al., 2024; Inoue, 2022). Over the years, I had used all of these approaches; yet, they had not been the primary focus of any of the classroom-based inquiries I had undertaken. When it came to evaluation, my overarching intention with the future teachers had been to maximize ways to provide meaningful formative feedback—to influence their learning—while modeling the practices they would be using in their own classrooms in the future. I also accepted grading as a natural feature of my teaching.

When Faulty Assumptions Are the Impetus to Reinvest in Inquiry

In that first year of inquiry, I decided to opt for what felt like a minor addition to my regular practices. Alongside my colleague, we introduced negotiated grading for each of the students' assignments. I was already prioritizing professor and peer feedback and opportunities for revision and resubmission. As a new feature, students completed assignment evaluations using agreed-upon criteria in associated rubrics. They wrote explanatory texts that included a description of their learning, comments on features they felt to be pertinent, and a rationalization for the grade choice. I had follow-up conversations with some of the students. The discussions and their written rationalizations of their grades revealed a range of issues. There was uneven use of criteria, despite prior discussion and agreement; suggested grades were frequently connected to effort and completion; and some students expressed that their identities were associated with particular grades, such that attaining a certain percentage range is "just" who they "are."

It struck me as significant that while every student in higher education is confronted with evaluation and assessment policy, students in schools and faculties of education are in the unique position of learning *about* evaluation and assessment, as they will become evaluators of their own students. While these students were in the fourth or fifth year of a program leading to certification, their evaluation practices were not well reasoned. By that point in their studies, they had spent approximately 300 hours in three practica and had taken courses dedicated to student-centered evaluation, some of which I had taught. I had assumed that at this point, they would be well equipped to use guidelines, follow learning intentions, apply evaluation criteria, use formative feedback, and carry out a reasoned assessment. I was wrong. Another assumption was that they would find that the process positively shifted the power in the classroom, thus making the evaluation processes more just and equitable, which the literature on ungrading suggests. This was particularly important to me as our program has an aspirational outcome statement claiming graduates will act critically and contribute transformatively through their professional practice. I believed a year of "ungrading" would deepen their understanding of alternate assessment and related equitable repercussions. Instead, I discovered that many—if not most—of the students were not well equipped to participate fully in the process.

I found myself questioning the students' "assessment literacy," which Rogers et al. (2020) have described as having the knowledge and practical skills to create assessment opportunities that involve the teacher in analyzing student work, providing feedback, using the information to shape further teaching, and reporting on learning. Given the significance of these skills to effective teaching and student learning, and given what had been newly emerging in the ungrading literature around learner self-awareness and self-direction (Gibson et al., 2022; Gorichanaz, 2022; Guberman, 2021; Koehler & Meech, 2021; Meinking & Hall, 2022), I became committed to continuing the classroom inquiry the following year. I did so for three more years, and during that period, I secured ethics to survey students and run interviews with them. Their insights augmented what I was learning through classroom practices, through my reflective processes, and from the growing body of literature.

Questions have fueled my thinking and experimentation, including: How might ungrading contribute to a more equitable classroom? To what extent is non-hierarchical assessment achievable in higher education? And what is disrupted through ungrading practices? In the process of working through these questions, I have troubled over our dependence on the frameworks of evaluation that grade, rank, or classify learners at all levels of education. In what follows, I take a look at what brought me to engage in studying my own practice early in my career, I provide a snapshot of the current "ungrading" inquiry, and I share what I have learned about the challenges the future teachers experience when called on to reflect on their learning. I connect this to changes in the way reflection and reflective practice are represented in the regulatory frameworks we use in teacher education and point to why we should be concerned about this, at this moment in time.

When Inquiry Became a Habit of Mind

Studying my classroom practice is something that I began well over three decades ago, when I was a K–12 teacher who had headed to graduate studies with a host of unanswered questions. Documenting an initial year-long inquiry as part of my program was a pivotal experience for me as a teacher. Thinking critically about what was unfolding in the class, sitting with my questions, gathering forms of data to consider, and taking a systematic approach to decision-making became natural features of my practice. During the period that followed, I learned of Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) notion of "inquiry as stance," which effectively captured a defining feature of my life in education. These authors have described it in a later text fully dedicated to the concept. It is

> a worldview and a habit of mind—a way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that carries across educational contexts and various points in one's professional career and that links individuals to larger groups, and social movements intended to challenge the inequities perpetuated by the educational status quo. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. vii)

Approximately 15 years after my first classroom attempt at inquiry, I made the shift from working in the youth sector to working with preservice teachers. In the interim, after leaving classroom teaching, I worked on different collaborative inquiry projects across our large jurisdiction. These had focused on building communities of reflective practitioners and contributing to practice and policy change in K–12 schools. After having worked in diverse educational contexts and completing a doctoral program, I imagined that the transition to higher education would be relatively smooth. It was not. I found myself being questioned about what counts as research. My academic colleagues outside of the education department were not familiar with action-focused, context-driven, and collaborative forms of inquiry (Aitken, 2010). Times have changed since that initial period, and meeting the university's expectations has been readily achieved. I have been studying my own practice and adapting my courses, while also seeking ethics to involve students in the inquiries, which has led to academic publications. For nearly half of my years working in a school of education, working independently or with a colleague, I have used an iterative inquiry-based approach to increasing my understanding of how multimodal productions might foster future teachers' commitment to social responsibility and equity-driven teaching (Aitken, 2013; Aitken & Radford, 2012, 2018a, 2018b; Radford & Aitken, 2014, 2016). Contributing to

this area of study through classroom-based inquiry has been as important to me as continuing to improve my teaching practice.

Dealing With Disruptions of the Mind

In the academic publications my colleague and I produced, we often included some observations about the significance of the process for our sense of self; however, I have not written at length about the deepest personal repercussions of classroom-focused inquiry since my first efforts at it, which date back to over three decades ago. At the time, I was a young settler teacher and graduate student working in a remote First Nation community. The curious, thoughtful, and sometimes frustrated 11- and 12-year-old Naskapi youth in my class directly and indirectly pointed out the urgency of questioning the purpose of schooling. They prompted me to think about my own and their own histories. As a part-time student in a master's program, I worked my way through readings that helped answer some of the questions that were dogging me (Darder, 1991; Freire, 1972; Grundy, 1987; National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; Schön, 1983; Weiler, 1988). Still unsure how to move forward in my classroom, I encountered a text by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) which opened up a world of change. Using *The Action Research Planner* as a guide, I carried out that first year-long, classroom-based inquiry. The framework of critical pedagogy and critical literacy approaches resulted in conversations with the youth that led me to question my beliefs, my privilege, my purpose, and the problems of schooling (Aitken, 1993). I wrote about how I experienced a sense of immobilization at different points over the course of that year, and how I emerged with a new set of questions. I came away from that experience still committed to the enterprise of schooling, and belief in the possibility of change through education, which has continued to motivate me throughout my career. However, what I have been learning through the inquiry into the gradeless classroom with preservice teachers has left me unsettled in ways that I haven't experienced since that very first effort at researching my own practice, described above.

The "Ungrading" Inquiry: Years Two to Four

Mapping the Growing Field of Study

The early writing I encountered about "ungrading" largely emphasized benefits for learning and student engagement without explicitly naming the underlying theory behind the particular practices. As the body of literature has increased, I have attempted to track the theoretical lenses behind claims of benefits. I have identified four tentative theoretical stances that call for ungrading practices. Some approaches can be connected to cognitive science, with claims of metacognitive awareness (Dosmar & Williams, 2022); improvements in skill, memory, and comprehension (Hackerson, et al. 2024); increased motivation and self-regulation (Koehler & Meech, 2021); and growth mind-set or acceptance of struggle as a sign of learning (Guberman, 2021). There is overlap between the stance of those who emphasize cognitive benefits and a second group, who have written about how ungrading increases equitable access in higher education. That literature has linked commonly used evaluation practices to the bolstering of white supremacist structures that serve the dominant groups. Writers who have emphasized the need for equity

for BIPOC students have foregrounded benefits of ungrading such as increased harm reduction, risk-taking and creativity (Stommel, 2023); capacity building (Emergence Collective, 2022); student voice in the process and outcomes (Rapchak et al., 2023); and reduced stress and fear of failure (Crogman et al., 2023). The third perspective is connected to the goals of dismantling institutional structures; it is less frequently evident but can be found in reference to disruption of institutional grading systems (Gibson et al., 2022; Inoue, 2022). Finally, there is a small body of writing that has connected ungrading to the absence of colonial-driven hierarchies of power. In this vein, St'at'imc and Sto:lo educator Carolyn Roberts (2023) has pointed to relationships as fundamental to learning, and awareness and self-awareness as part of the conditions for co-creation of knowledge.

"What if…?": The Importance of Conversations with Critical Friends

For those involved with action-driven inquiry, it's not uncommon to have a critical friend. In the summer following my experiment with negotiating grades with students, that friend was Curran Katsi'tsohrónkwas Jacobs, a Kahnien'kehà:ka colleague and research collaborator who is a member of the Mohawk Nation of Kahnawake. The summer after my first attempt, we had the first of many "ungrading conversations" that have followed. Curran's careful listening and questioning led me to think about my intent with this evaluation practice and my relationships with students. We talked about what sharing assessment with students means, and what is possible in a setting that structurally serves colonizing interests. "What if we thought of ungrading as a decolonizing process?" she asked. Interestingly, the Emergence Collective (2021) has referred to common grading practices as part of the "colonized mindset in evaluation." In light of my conversations with Curran and reflection on my early experiences of learning alongside members of the Naskapi Nation, I turned to the question of how to ground my evaluation processes in relationships. I wanted to draw attention to how this might create a "more equitable classroom environment" (Rapchak et al., 2023) and wanted to attempt a "non-hierarchical approach" (Kehlenbach, 2023), to the greatest degree possible. I wanted the process to support the students' personal aspirations and draw their attention to how this can contribute to the equity of their own practices.

In the course introduction and in the syllabus, I emphasized the significance of a gradeless course as a means to mirror what would be their own processes, once employed: they would be making decisions about all aspects of their professional lives without grades. From pedagogy to personal growth, these would happen largely on their own terms, with feedback from those around them. In terms of the course, I emphasized that they would reflect on and assess their own learning, growth, goal-setting related to elements of the course, and, ultimately, they would assign their own final grade. However, I would accompany them throughout the process, providing support and constructive feedback in a range of ways. I was also committed to not policing them.

Expanding the Inquiry: Securing Ethics to Better Understand Student Perspectives

In these last three years, I have worked with five groups of students in the capstone course. I have continued to keep a researcher notebook, documenting my observations, analyzing students' self-assessments, and making anecdotal comments. However, better understanding students' perspectives became a priority. I obtained approval from the institutional research ethics board, so that once the students' final semester was complete, they would be invited to participate in an anonymous online survey. If they were interested in being interviewed, they were directed to contact me. Over the three years, 163 students in five sections have completed the capstone course and have been sent a link to the online survey. This represents 90 individuals who were in secondary education programs and 73 who were elementary education candidates. Of the 163 students sent the link, 49 completed the survey, and nine participated in interviews.

The survey remained the same over the three years; it included ranking and array questions and open-ended prompts grounded in ungrading-related studies. These included perceptions of the impacts of the ungrading processes on learning, on work produced, and on participation; current and past uses of peer and professor feedback; and concerns about grades, grading, and ungrading. The interviews focused on expanding comments about these areas. In several cases, the duration of the interviews exceeded the anticipated time. The nine interviewees included individuals who had completed the elementary education program, as well as secondary education program participants with disciplinary specializations in English, social studies, English as a second language, and science education.

What I learned from the survey and interviews complemented what I was learning in an ongoing way through structured reflection in the class. The data analysis process informed revisions of my assignments and refining of my classroom approaches. With each successive running of the course, I sought to shift student attention from grades to the learning process. My written and oral instructions became clearer; feedback was provided in increasingly diverse ways, based on students' interests; and guiding activities and prompts were refined to support reflection and their reflective self-assessments. In the most recent iteration of the course, I introduced the body of research informing my decisions and spoke about my own inquiry process more frequently.

When Hoped-For Outcomes Intersect With Unexpected Responses to Change

There are encouraging findings related to student perceptions of the impact of gradeless practices. Nonetheless, I am concerned about an issue that I believe is particularly pertinent for teacher education. It is the unexpected discovery that emerged early on: the difficultly students experienced when asked to engage in reflective processes related to identifying and assessing their own learning. Before turning to this, it is worth looking at how features of the gradeless classroom were perceived. For example, 27% of respondents agreed fully that the processes were beneficial to them as learners; that number rises to 75% when we take into account those who agree mostly (33.5%) and agreed somewhat (14.5%). Findings related to student perceptions of the impact on the quality of their work were similar. Their explanations for this are diverse.

The language of cognitive science was evident in comments about experiencing “internal motivation,” “deeper learning,” along with references to it as “a good metacognitive practice that helps me reflect on my learning.” One participant commented, “Ungrading made me ask myself, ‘What did I learn or take away from this assignment’. It felt like a stronger conclusion than what I had been used to.” The discourses of equity, access, and control were used by others to describe its impact. I have included the participants’ statements in full, as they point to how they may have otherwise experienced assessment practices as stressful, inauthentic, outside of their control, and possibly demoralizing:

> I really feel that I was encouraged to take ownership of my performance in this course.
>
> I felt like I was in full control.
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> Doing the work and putting in the effort wasn’t the concern during this process but rather recognizing my own worth and praising myself.
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> [It] provided me with less stress.
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> It allowed me to give my full attention and commitment to the assignments that felt most personally relevant which, in the end, ended up leaving me with a more personalized and authentic experience of the course.

While fewer respondents indicated the process was not beneficial to them as learners, their comments focused on the need for incentives to get work done, the primacy of the number grade, and the commodification of education. As one participant explained, “I felt accountable only to myself which didn’t push me enough.” Another described the process as being “upsetting to those who are paying so much for this course and want the opinion of a professional.”

This last comment is reminiscent of an encounter I had with a student, in a year other than the one in which the above comment was made. As had been the case for each assignment, I did not assign a numeric grade to the work but provided feedback at intervals, and on demand. The student and I met in person to discuss their progress, and I provided video feedback. I described the thoroughness of the research, the clarity of the content, the effectiveness of the organization, and precision in the use of the codes and conventions of the format. A few days after I had sent the video feedback, the student asked me how they had “done.” Despite having seen the video file, they implored me to tell them how they had “really done.” A response to an open-ended prompt in the survey captured the heart of the issue: “I can’t pull myself away from the marks/grades that I want. It’s difficult to put aside the grades.” Another respondent wrote, “It is difficult for students to switch their mentality so suddenly.” I had not anticipated how deeply disruptive the change would be for some students.

Unpacking Assumptions About Reflection on Learning

The focus of the remainder of this article is on two issues related to the practice of reflection on one’s learning. First, I will share what emerged about the students’ responses to the call to do so. I will follow this with a consideration of how governmentally driven regulatory frameworks for teachers and teacher education may indirectly contribute to this phenomenon.

In the first year of this inquiry, as I traced students' responses and reviewed their written explanations of thinking about their learning and the negotiated grading, I was struck by how novel self-reflection seemed to be, and how it challenged students in unexpected ways. In the following three years, the surveys and interviews provided a wider picture of their perspectives and why it posed challenges. Early on, I learned that the request to reflect on their learning was understood by some to refer only to the transfer of the grading role from me as professor to the students themselves. This was despite discussions and provision of materials that I believed explained it as a process of learner self-reflection. Students used terms like reflect, self-reflect, assess, self-assess, evaluate, and self-evaluate interchangeably. I propose that my use of the term "ungrading" appeared to lead students to focus to a greater degree on numbers, rather than on whatever processes might be involved prior to that point. In the most recent year, I have used the term "a gradeless class" as a means to mitigate this.

Students linked their prior experiences to current perceptions. As one early interviewee explained,

> We don't have a lot of in-depth experience with self-reflection, I find it's a lot of like those, you know, little surface-level reflections that we get [pause]. We've encountered aspects of it [pause], but it was never fully scaffolded or structured, or called ungrading. We just kind of encountered it in like, you know, not fully implemented ways [pause]. Where here it was really the focus of the entire semester.

The following year, a related point was made on the survey.

> I believe that having ungrading as a "norm" THROUGHOUT [their emphasis] the education program would help students develop the quality of their metacognitive reflections. In other words, we were introduced and "raised" in the BEd program to fit the criteria and needs of the course instructor. Ungrading is such a different mentality, and I think that my peers and I could have internalized the practice if it was exposed to us throughout the course of the four-year program.

These comments are illuminating, and troubling. I incorporate moments of reflection in all the courses I teach, and believe that reflective experiences are common in my colleagues' classes. Additionally, all students encounter a tool for reflective discussion, which is part of our practicum handbook. Yet, the students' written and spoken comments frequently characterized "reflection" as an object for the professor, rather than a process for the learner. As one student claimed, "I don't necessarily see *these* as highly helpful except for if the teacher needs or wants feedback" [emphasis mine]. More problematically, another student commented on the survey, "I felt it lost its purpose, and we were writing our evaluations based on what the teacher wanted to hear." Significantly, "figuring out" what professors from across the university departments "wanted," in order to secure a desired grade, arose in multiple interviews. It was described as a practice of figuring out "invisible" expectations and "tailoring" to fit those requirements, which would not be evident in instructions or tools.

What Are the Implications of the Inquiry, to Date?

When I consider what might be achieved through a year-long course at the end of a four- or five-year program, it is gratifying to find that representations made in the most recent survey have been overwhelmingly positive. Equally, each year more survey respondents have reached out to be interviewed. Some have commented on how they are considering what their own gradeless classroom might look like. This might suggest that I have been able, over the course of four years, to better accompany my students as they think about their learning, and help to shift emphasis in the course from grades to the process. However, this does not change the fact that reflection on learning continues to be characterized as new, unusual, or “really eye opening,” as one interviewee remarked. As someone whose life in teaching has been profoundly shaped by maintaining a reflective stance, this is tremendously concerning.

The Contribution of Regulatory Frameworks to Changing Perspectives

In the first few years after beginning to work in teacher education in the mid-2000s, it was common to discuss the importance of reflective practice. When our faculty revised our program at that time, we chose critical reflection as one of two transversal abilities that we would develop. Since reflection had been the focus of a faculty member’s research, our discussions were well grounded (Beauchamp, 2006). The students’ second school placement experience was named the “Reflective Practicum”; students would spend a half-day each week over fall and winter in schools. Weekly seminars with a professor focused on developing observation and reflective abilities through a feedback process. In that practicum, teaching a class was limited to two experiences over the course of the year. However, in the early- to mid-2010s, our accrediting body determined that the “Reflective Practicum” inadequately developed the competencies that were named in the ministry framework that fell under the teaching act (MEQ, 2001). This involves the complex work of beginning to know the curriculum documents, understand how and why feedback matters, and draw on this knowledge to create and implement plans in the classroom, while ensuring that the environment is conducive to learning. Increasing the emphasis on opportunities for teaching was a significant change for everyone. Until that point the practicum prioritized the section of the competency framework that I recall referring to as the “reflective competency,” number 11. It was expressed as, “To engage in professional development individually and with others” (MEQ, 2001, p. 113). Its five features described characteristics familiar to those who engage in classroom inquiry: “Discusses the relevance of his or her pedagogical choices with his or her colleagues; Reflects on his or her practice (reflective analysis) and makes the appropriate adjustments; Spearheads projects to solve teaching problems” (MEQ, 2001, p. 114–115). In subsequent years our accrediting body called for other program changes, including increased hours for courses in disciplinary teaching methods; this necessitated removal of reading and seminar courses, through which students may have engaged in critical reflection.

Given what I had been uncovering, I turned my attention to the most recent competency framework (MEQ, 2021), the updated career-long expectations for teachers. The wording of Competency 11 has been rephrased as "Commit to own professional development *and to the profession*" [emphasis mine] (MEQ, 2021, p. 74). The description states:

> The professional development of teachers is bolstered by the opportunity for continuing education that meets the highest quality standards consistent with the objectives of the school's educational project. School administrations, educational bodies, unions, universities and the Ministère are also responsible for the continuing education of teachers, by creating the necessary conditions for teachers to participate. (MEQ, 2021, p. 75)

While the previous framework connected professional development to self-directed learning and individual and collaborative solving of teaching problems (MEQ, 2001), the current framework has foregrounded accountability, competency development, and prescribed professional development. There is an echo of the importance of reflection, as one of the nine features of Competency 11 refers to adopting "a reflective stance" (MEQ, 2021, p. 76). Nonetheless, with its clear emphasis on externally provided professional development, which "bolsters" one's status and shapes public opinion, it is fair to say that very little weight is currently given to reflection as a feature of teacher learning.

Can We Be Hopeful? Aim for Problem-Solving Over Solution

Earlier in this text, I mentioned that the ungrading inquiry had unsettled me in ways that I had not experienced since my earliest attempts at classroom inquiry. Like that first experience over 30 years ago, I am left with many questions. Do I feel hopeful, as I did at that point? I'm not quite certain. In a recent volume on the importance of responsive teaching and the types of thinking that are required at this moment in time, Willison (2024) has highlighted the problems of the increasing availability and promotion of codified approaches to improving practice. They have made the point that the world is increasing complex, which requires even greater teacher adaptability and flexibility than previously expected. Similarly, Hallman et al. (2022) have pointed to the inadequacy of "packaged practices" and "scripted and solution-oriented" teacher professional learning. They have emphasized the importance of one's own inquiry.

> Knowledge-in-action positions teachers in agentive ways in relation to their students and classrooms. It orients them toward challenge and problem solving rather than "solution." How fitting it is in these times to urge preservice and in-service teachers toward embracing challenge, despite the uncertainty of the era. (p. 127)

How fitting, the authors have rhetorically stated. My experience suggests that it is very fitting and it is a call to teacher educators. If we are to effectively prepare future teachers, then we need to recenter reflection and reflective practice in our programs, even if the regulatory framework with which we are working has not prioritized this. We need to ensure that our students develop the capacity to critically reflect. Going gradeless in teacher education may provide some hope, particularly if it lives up to the promise of helping our students manage, direct, and assess their own learning.

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