



Liberated Learning: a view of what ungrading could deliver

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Abstract

The enhancement ensuing when educators free themselves and students from devoting effort to graded coursework is summarised. General neglect of the closing stage in fully autonomous learning - namely self-evaluation to self-determined criteria - is regretted. The features and external evaluation of a historical scheme are reviewed and advanced as a model that could well be taken forward by ungrading practitioners.

Keywords: ungrading; autonomous learning.

Introduction

I was introduced to ungrading by a colleague who knew of my longstanding commitment to students' reflective self-evaluation. I delved into the burgeoning literature on ungrading with great interest, but with regrettably diminishing enthusiasm. For I was finding that most ungraders missed out on the potential of fully autonomous direction, management and evaluation of learning. As a nonagenarian but still hopeful academic, I was moved to contribute this opinion, citing occasional sources to illustrate my argument.

I aspire to promote fully autonomous learning, featuring genuine self-assessment, which was effective for me and my students forty years ago (Boyd et al, 1984; Cowan, 1984; 1987). I was then one of a minority who offered learners freedom to learn, to decide what and how to learn, and to make their own judgements of their learning against their own criteria (Rogers, 1969). We created supportive relationships of peers and educators who facilitated ongoing and unconstrained learning - without any directing (Freire, 1970).

Ungrading: the rationale

Ungrading originated in forceful papers criticising the grading of coursework as a deficits-based, outcomes-focused model (Geary, 2021), which research shows to have a deleterious effect on learning (Kohn, 1999). It is also at variance with the ideological case for autonomy (Freire, 2019). Many pedagogical practices embodied in ungrading schemes fall short of harnessing the full panoply entailed in having the freedom to learn. I often encountered in the ungrading publications teachers who are authoritatively involved in dictating learning goals, suggesting activities, determining assessment criteria, negotiating over the quality of the work, and approving final course grades. The opportunity for learners to autonomously identify, pursue and independently self-evaluate achievement of aims receives sparse attention.

Ungrading: the varied reality

Discarding grading often leads to complex teacher-defined goals and teachers' judgemental feedback, designed to ensure the learners' active engagement that was previously assured by grading. Examples are a correctly self-described 'fairly complex system' (Sorensen-Unruh, 2020), and the recently published 'go-to alternative grading templates' (Clark, 2025). Such authoritarian management follows Garrison (2011, p.83), who commends '*learning-centred learning*' [his italics] wherein the *instructor* [his title] is necessarily ever-present, managing the process, providing disciplinary direction and expertise, and diagnosing misconceptions. This is scarcely in accord with the Freirean vision of liberated learning.

Withholding grades temporarily, to oblige students to consider the teacher's feedback and to formulate a grade for the teacher's approval has been pursued institutionally (Taras, 2010). Many ungraders nowadays provide constructive feedback for students' consideration (Flaherty, 2019), suggesting scope for improvement (Gibbs, 2020). However, students' reflective reviews of their progress are often required (Dymond, 2021). Core abilities are developed around students' written 'reflection-for' forthcoming demands (Cowan, 2020), with the teacher's award of grades based on the subsequent 'reflection-on' evidence-based outcomes (Cosgrove, 2023).

The current looping of reflections on feedback with subsequent resubmissions (Clark and Talbert, 2023) evokes memories of my looping of learners' reviews and forward plans in reflective journalling (Cowan, 1998). Looping has been researched and effusively credited with greater student success, better long-term learning habits, higher motivation, lower stress, improved goal orientation, and avoiding unhealthy student/staff relationships centred on fault-finding and defensiveness (Gorichanaz, 2022). Some require peer reviewing within loops (Katopodis and Davidson, 2020). Looping may even have to proceed until the instructor makes no further comments (Talbert, 2022) - thus retaining overt authority!

Many ungraders require, and interact with, evidence of students' evaluative and constructive reflections, thereby promoting metacognitive development (von Renesse and Wegner, 2022). Following hooks (1994), having students reflect upon and evaluate their learning, and then discuss this facilitatively with their teacher, is claimed as pedagogically important (Stommel, 2023).

Self-chosen and ungraded aims

In some teacher-led schemes, students choose their own goals and pursue them in open-ended assignments, with the teacher's guidance (Gibbs, 2020). Students may design projects according to their declared goals, while also 'hobby researching' into interesting issues (Wolf, 2022). When students pursue self-established learning goals, with ungraded feedback on weekly submissions followed by self-evaluation, they are reported to be less stressed, make fewer complaints, and ask more questions about process (von Renesse and Wegner, 2022).

Teacherless relationships

Some ungrading has generated trusting and caring two-way relationships (Stommel, 2017), in which teachers are facilitative without being directive (Stommel, 2023). They comment and ask questions of students' qualitative self-evaluations, and respond in dialogue, 'talking to them' about their learning and how it happened (Stommel, 2020).

One imaginative scheme specifically advocates more human and compassionate interactions focused on their students' learning (Ferns et al., 2021). Acknowledging diversity, teachers engender caring relationships, and value providing their formative feedback conversationally, adapting to the learner's best-suited pace. They holistically feature empathic conversation and discussion, open up new possibilities, and generate increased learner motivation, reduced stress, and enhanced independence in learning.

Some ungrading reports stress two-way trusting, learning to trust their students beyond simply expecting them to trust their teacher (von Renesse and Wegner, 2022). They rate relinquishing control and trusting students as the most difficult aspect of going gradeless, and imply full or near autonomy in learning.

Autonomous evaluation: the final stage of ungrading

Many recorded gradings for nominally ungraded learning are often seemingly determined by, or influenced by, or amended by, or at least approved by, the educator. Few educators seem prepared to enable learners to have full autonomy for self-evaluation. Nevertheless, this trusting transition to liberated learning is feasible and worthwhile. An ungrading educator wrote recently: 'I radically engaged in the act of respecting my students. I gave them the benefit of the doubt. I trusted that they wanted to learn. I believed in my students' abilities, and they gave me their trust in return' (Martin et al., 2021, p.11).

In my experience, the most difficult and most important final step towards Rogers' (1969) ideal of full freedom to learn is wholeheartedly trusting and non-directively facilitating learners' development to autonomous self-evaluation. In the 1983-4 academic year, I accepted the invitation of twelve eager students, who were about to enter their penultimate year, to negotiate a contract authorising them to undertake fully autonomous learning in a three-term core subject (Boyd and Cowan, 1985; Cowan, 1988). Our negotiated contract authorised them to exercise complete control of planning, managing, and evaluating their development. My role was overseeing adherence to the negotiated process (Boyd et al., 1984; Cowan, 1984) and being available to share in collegial discussions about developing desirable abilities.

Each student identified their goals for each week, planned to achieve them, reported evidence of progress, and displayed the weekly outcomes, inviting and giving peer comment. They all struggled to discover how to exercise absolute freedom and initially had been depressed by their lack of achievement. Their weekly study reports soon became thin, inadequate, or even downright trivial (Cowan, 1988). Three of them explained: 'The problem was that no-one was telling us what to do! For the first time in our student lives we were making our own decisions and finding out how to learn. ... it's not easy to learn to learn' (Boyd et al., 1984, p.5).

Responsibility for weekly self-appraisal, and the consequent discovery and use of the constructive potential of peer interaction, eventually promoted metacognitive reflection (Cowan, 1987). This notably emerged after following the demanding contractual commitment to autonomously undertake rigorous self-assessment, setting achievement data against self-determined criteria - and witnessing such judgements being recorded without challenge. Some initial self-assessments contained no defined criteria or did not use the declared criteria, or expressed direct judgements rather than analysing performance. These I returned for reworking. I neither offered nor implied nor even allowed myself to form any judgements, other than of the soundness with which the self-determined process was followed in accordance with our contract, the authentication of which was my contracted remit.

I wrote that: 'The whole nature of their learning changed to a significant extent, once the students eventually realised that they were to be genuinely responsible for assessing themselves' (Cowan, 1984, p.2). Nevertheless, the students still had problems and moments of doubt. 'We still felt sometimes that they were walking up a down escalator. But I think we all knew that we had something that worked – and that was a start' (Boyd and Cowan, 1985, p.226). Boyd wrote of this stage:

In accepting responsibility for setting my own criteria, I clearly made a firm commitment to my eventual choice. Hence, my learning must be rated at one of the higher levels on Perry's scale (Perry, 1970). Surface processing, which is encouraged by cue-consciousness, was absent – because I had chosen my aims and criteria and directed my learning accordingly. And deep processing was definitely encouraged – because I was subject to no pressures other than those which were self-imposed (Boyd and Cowan, 1985, p.230).

I rate that last phrase as highly significant when considering ungrading.

Evaluation of autonomous learning

I was naturally concerned about the impact on students' final degree classifications of taking part in this innovative penultimate-year experience. I identified the class position of each contracted student at the end of their second year. The spread of their positions roughly corresponded to the spread within the class. I repeated the exercise at the end of their (conventionally presented) fourth and final year. The twelve ex-Learning Contract students had moved up within the class of 60 by an average of almost 15 places (Cowan, 1987).

Two years ago, I received a volunteered reflective email from one of them, who wrote:

My greatest angst was reserved for the self-assessment. Despite my anxiety about what I was doing and achieving at the time, despite still being distinctly uncomfortable with the learning and teaching style we were attempting, I was finding that there was a perverse enjoyment in the challenge. I was being stretched; I was feeling engaged and excited about the course and what we were trying to do.

I think I actually became an 'adult'. The self-assessment process was so much more than giving yourself a mark for the term, or ultimately the year. It was a measure of personal growth. Whilst the self-directed learning model may have unlocked my ability to problem solve, to take on challenges I had no experience in addressing, to have no fear in challenging authority or question established 'rules'; that was less than half the benefit of the course.

For me, in hindsight, the greatest benefit was the self-assessment process that encouraged me to look at myself and sincerely ask, Have I done enough? Have I met the standard I was expecting to achieve? Could I have done anything differently or better? Am I honest? Does my mark stand up to scrutiny with dignity and integrity?

It is those self-assessment queries that I still find more challenging and still try to apply, not just as a Civil and Geotechnical Engineer, but as a husband and father (Murray, 2022).

Conclusion

Grant Murray's emphasis on the importance of personal sincerity and integrity in self-evaluation reinforces my confidence in trusting learners with absolute autonomy in learning and self-assessment. I hope more academics will progress to offering full learning autonomy, evaluated by the learners themselves. My advice to those who are so-minded is to try it wholeheartedly, expect it to succeed, trust your autonomous learners fully, and share with them in their journey of discovery.

Stommel (2023) maintains that trusting students to self-evaluate leads to a significant learning experience as part of a holistic, pedagogical practice, wherein students undertake coursework with intrinsic value to them. He advocates actively re-imagining assessment trustingly, demolishing further barriers keeping teachers and students from learning together. But he admits that he still approves grades (Stommel, 2023).

I urge readers to take the risky, final step to an autonomous learning situation divorced from powerful teachers, in which there is a trusting, learning fellowship between a facilitator and students.

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John Cowan is a nonagenarian structural engineer whose educational innovations and research have mainly been absorbed in what is now established practice in the sector. He still tutors and reviews online, and presses for ungrading developments to progress to the full autonomy in learning that he provided half a century ago.

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