

Ungrading, pass/fail, and us

Ungrading: What it is and why should we do it?

Padlet at <http://tinyurl.com/ungrading23>

Itamar Kastner (PPLS/EREN), January 2023



What's our mission?

Provide structures for students to grow as scholars and people

- We learn things
 - Learn new content
 - Acquire new skills
 - Think deep thoughts
- We grow as people
 - Meet new people
 - Get out of your comfort zone
 - Fail well, make good mistakes
(<https://blogs.ed.ac.uk/cooperative-learning-course/2019/04/25/on-failure/>)

Or: Rank students against each other

- Everyone starts at the same point
- Competition is a given
- The goal is to finish top

What's our mission?

First view: Learning is an ongoing process

1. Students engage with concepts and materials
2. Students have opportunities to try things out, receive feedback from instructors, and try again.
3. The cycle repeats until some goals are met or exceeded.

(This is what our PhD programmes are like)

What's our mission?

Second view: Learning is a competition that you can “win”

- Numbers signify worth (the mark)
- All will try to cheat
- Time pressure is necessary
- Late submissions are worth less than those “on time”

Student Preview mode is ON

How to submit assignments: uploading work via Turnitin

You should make sure that you **allow yourself plenty of time to upload your work** as submission can sometimes take several minutes. Leave this until the last moment to try to upload as this may mean that it does not get submitted until after the deadline. All submissions are automatically submitted.

If your submission has been successful, you will be provided with a submission ID number. Please keep a note of this as this is your unique ID for your work. If you do not complete the submission process successfully or correctly and do not receive a submission ID number, your work has not been **successfully submitted**. If that happens, please try again.

If you experience any **technical issues** which prevent you from uploading your work, or if it fails to upload, you should submit your work via email. If we receive your work before the deadline expires, you will not incur any late penalties. Any work which is not received until after the deadline will incur late penalties.

Please ensure that you **always use your EXAM NUMBER as the submission title** for your work (not your student number). Your exam number is on your University of Edinburgh student card.

General assessment information

All general assessment information is stored on the **Student Hub**. This includes:

- How to submit your coursework?
- Extension request forms
- Writing guidelines
- Referencing advice

What is Plagiarism?

Click here for a useful overview of how to avoid plagiarism.

Avoiding Plagiarism & Academic Misconduct 2019-20

What's our mission?

Provide structures for students to grow as scholars and people

We want students to ask:

“What did I learn?”

We want staff to ask:

“How can I help?”

Or: Rank students against each other

We encourage students to ask:

“How many points did I get?”

We make staff ask:

“How can I ensure compliance?”

(Sackstein 2015)

What's our mission?

What's your main complaint about students? (Or for students: about lecturers?)

- "They" don't do the reading
- "They" don't read feedback
- "They" don't come to class
- "They" only care about the marks
- "They" do everything last-minute
- "They" try to game the system
- "They" don't work with each other
- "They" don't care about the material

These are consistent with the second, “winning” view.

How to encourage learning over “winning”

1. Marking is parasitic on learning.
2. There’s a scholarship on alternatives out there.
3. Everything needs to be built up gradually (*scaffolded*).
 - There is no silver bullet for making our teaching better (especially not in a corporate university like ours).
 - However, marks inherently orient us to the second, “winning” view.
 - Removing marks forces us to concentrate on the “learning” view (Blackwelder 2020).

Marking is parasitic on learning

Basics

- Pass/fail: no number mark, just pass or no-pass.
 - Brown University, Reed sometimes, many smaller institutions; most PhD programmes
- Ungrading: in practice, alternatives to giving a mark (see [here](#))
 - E.g. self-assessment
 - Allowed in UoE (self assessment when CO moderates - Regulation 24)
- Feedback
 - Written comments on submitted work (“formative”)
- Marks
 - Number score (“summative”)
- Grade
 - Grade band: 1st, 2.1, 2.2, 3rd, Fail

Marking is parasitic on learning

What's your most salient memory from marks? (Gibbs 2020)

Was it...

- Positive? How? Why?
- Negative? How? Why?

Kohn (1993/2018) summarizes a massive amount of evidence indicating that marks are detrimental to learning in *Punished by Rewards*.

Marking is parasitic on learning

- [Dr. Tae on skateboarding:](#)
(from 9:00)
- “In skateboarding
[and academia],
failure is normal.”



Marking is parasitic on learning

For example: Butler's classic finding

- Butler and Nisan (1986), Butler (1987), et seq:
 - Marks only
 - Marks and feedback
 - Feedback only
 - (No feedback)
 - (Praise)
- In which condition did students improve the most?
- When did they try hardest for the next time?

TABLE 1
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR FINAL SCORES AT EACH SESSION BY FEEDBACK CONDITION AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

		Comments group		Grades group		Grades plus Comments group	
		High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
<i>Task A</i>							
Session 1	M	18·77	10·14	19·64	9·86	19·60	9·64
	SD	6·63	5·02	8·67	4·88	5·80	5·64
Session 2	M	25·36	17·86	24·95	12·50	16·77	6·55
	SD	9·33	8·70	9·91	7·86	5·61	4·73
Session 3	M	24·27	13·50	16·45	8·59	11·82	5·82
	SD	6·70	7·79	9·34	6·41	5·26	5·40
<i>Task B</i>							
Session 1	M	19·36	10·27	19·68	10·32	18·68	10·12
	SD	5·35	4·01	7·36	3·71	6·60	3·63
Session 2	M	25·59	17·64	16·09	12·59	14·36	11·95
	SD	9·39	10·16	6·63	5·94	5·17	3·71
Session 3	M	24·95	14·27	14·91	8·50	14·95	9·18
	SD	5·38	4·61	6·63	3·07	5·83	3·40

Marking is parasitic on learning

The situation in our university

- UoE Hons degrees (MA/BSc) get a grade, usually calculated based on marks.
- As far as I can tell, this has never been motivated in the history of UoE.
- Hons courses do not have to give marks (grade bands are enough - Regulation 35).
- Pre-hons courses do not have to give grades (pass/fail is enough - Regulation 35.3).
- No marks for PhDs (our most prestigious degree).
- Nobody makes us give marks when we review papers.

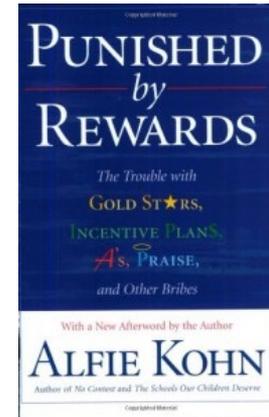
Where are we creating a scarce resource? Why this way?

And how can we get back to a “learning” view?

Alternatives to marks

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

- Kohn (1993): feedback
- Blum et al (2020): pass/fail, Ungrading, contract grading
- Other mainstream pedagogical advances have little to do with grades.
 - Active learning
 - Peer instruction (Mazur 1997)
 - Releasing feedback before the marks
 - Etc.

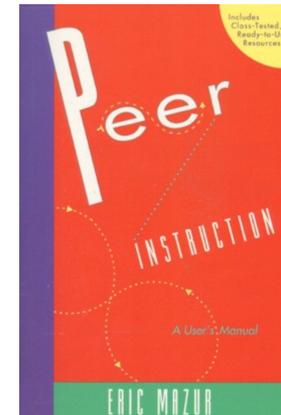


UNgrading

Why Rating Students
Undermines Learning
(and What to Do
Instead)



EDITED BY
Susan D. Blum
With a foreword by Alfie Kohn



Challenges

Practical concerns

1. What if it doesn't work?
 - We've been using a system that doesn't work for decades, if not centuries.
2. Students have been indoctrinated to chase marks (though student input is crucial).
3. We are also indoctrinating each other.
 - LOR: "In what percentile is your student?"
 - What do we look at when we evaluate PhD applications? Why?
4. "Employers want marks" (Sorensen-Unruh 2020: they probably don't).
5. Degree classification, hurdles for progression, calculations for BA, and other spandrels.

Challenges

What if "they" don't want to learn? How will students be motivated?

1. Blackwelder's (2020) "actual work": if we rely on punishment and reward, maybe we need to reflect on what we're trying to do.
2. Kohn (1993), et seq: rewards don't motivate people, they get people to obey.
3. Academic "misconduct"
 - The concept of "cheating" can be rethought entirely.
 - Tae: "When learning is the goal and learning is the reward, there's no point in cheating."
4. There's a bigger structural problem:
 - Our institution has few structures or incentives for us to develop our teaching.
 - It's something we can do on our own time, or instead of writing a grant.

What next?

More strategic issues to discuss next

1. Pass/fail as the default in our Transformed Curriculum
2. Pass/fail and Ungrading as valid options in Boards of Study
3. Additional events and conversations. Are grades necessary, and for whom?
4. Honest investment by UoE in teaching and learning:
 - Structures to promote staff's work on their teaching
 - Improving, or at least ceasing to harm, staff's working conditions (see [here](#))

Thanks

- Rebekka Puderbaugh for many useful comments
- Grant Buttars at the Centre for Research Collections
- Pavel Iosad and LEL TeachLing
- Michael Barany, rasehné limki, Chris Sangwin and Sophia Woodman
- <http://tinyurl.com/ungrading23>