

# Afterword. Co-intentional Assessment

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So much of our educational system approaches grades and standardized approaches to assessment as though they are inevitable. Maxine Greene asks us to “imagine the world as though it might be otherwise,” and this is the work that I see driving this collection. In her story, Kristin DeMint Bailey writes, “Our subjectivities matter because they inform what we focus on, why we do what we do, and how we go about doing it.” The stories told throughout this collection are deeply idiosyncratic, because each of us bring different perspectives, different contexts, and different bodies to the work of teaching. However, the chapters here also sit alongside one another, creating intersections and frictions, “a constellation of interdependent voices” in productive dialogue.

I’ve written extensively about ungrading. In short, the word “ungrading” means raising an eyebrow at grades as a systemic practice, distinct from simply “not grading.” The word is a present participle, an ongoing process, not a static set of practices. The work of ungrading is focused on asking critical questions about assessment with the goal of dismantling a dysfunctional system that does harm to students, and also teachers. In “When We Talk About Grades, We Are Talking About People,” Sean Michael Morris writes, “Deciding to ungrade has to come from somewhere, has to do more than ring a bell, it has to have pedagogical purpose, and to be part of a larger picture of how and why we teach” (2021). The books I was reading when I first learned to teach, when I began to devise my own approaches to assessment, were bell hooks’s *Teaching to Transgress* and Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Their words on critical pedagogy echo inside my own thinking about grades, pushing me to ask hard questions of myself and my practice.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues against the banking model of education, “an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.” (1970, p. 58). In place of the banking model, Freire advocates for “problem-posing education,” in which a classroom or learning environment becomes a space for asking questions—a space of cognition not information. Critical pedagogy is focused on helping students become “readers of their world,” in the words of Freire. hooks extends this in her advocacy for “continual self-evaluation,” both of a student by the student and of a teacher by the teacher. In *Teaching to Transgress*, she writes, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (1994, p. 13). This means acknowledging the full and complex humanity of students and also

working to mitigate the harm done by systems that too often fail to see students and teachers as full humans.

In his chapter from this collection, Asao B. Inoue, expresses the need to “equip our students, all of them, with antiracist practices and strategies for their own futures.” The work of this collection asks teachers to reflect honestly on our own educations, our own experiences of privilege and marginalization, and the origins of our pedagogical practices, and how those practices have evolved (and will continue to evolve). More than anything, this collection asks us to do this work together with students. Martin Bickman writes, “We often ignore the best resource for informed change, one that is right in front of our noses every day—our students, for whom the most is at stake.”

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Many students were born into a system of crude quantification. I don’t say “born into” flippantly. I have a 6-year-old, and I’ve watched her growth quantified in discrete ways since the day she was born. She’s adopted, Black, and has two gay dads, so her “development” has always been a subject of peculiar discussion. She’s had wonderful doctors, who see and engage her as the full (and rowdy) human that she is, but she is also regularly reduced to a data point, plotted upon a chart pre-determined before she came into the world. Assumptions are made about her because she’s Black, because she’s adopted, because she’s a girl, because she has two dads. But the data already being collected about her has little to do with the full and lovely human being my daughter actually is in the world.

In a *Time* magazine article, “All Teachers Should Be Trained to Overcome Their Hidden Biases,” Soraya Chemaly gathers and reflects upon data about how girls (and girls of color, in particular) encounter their education. In that piece, she cites a study showing Black girls are twelve times more likely than their White peers to be suspended. While Black children make up less than 20 percent of preschoolers, they make up more than half of out-of-school suspensions. Each time I read or share this data I find myself shocked, wondering at when and how a preschooler would or could find themselves *suspended*. My shock, though, is a point of privilege. I can’t fathom being suspended from preschool, because I showed up for preschool in a White, male, not-yet-recognizably queer body, and my disability is invisible. My experience of school was different from the experience of my BIPOC classmates, different from the experience my daughter will have.

This is the world my assessment practice lives within, and it’s not a world where easy answers, or universalized best practices, are useful—or possible. Inoue writes about what he calls, “divergent judgments,” which suggests that assessment must be a “critical dialogue” in the words of Freire. A student in the class I’m ungrading might be the very same student who was suspended from preschool because she was a girl of color. Every bit of who students have been, and the material circumstances they face, influences how they do (and can) engage. This is why I’ve written with Sara Goldrick-Rab (2018) that we need to

teach the students we have, not the students we wish we had . . . Today's college students are the most overburdened and undersupported in American history. More than one in four have a child, almost three in four are employed, and more than half receive Pell Grants but are left far short of the funds required to pay for college.

One hundred ninety-five thousand college students responded to the Hope Center's 2020 #RealCollege Survey. Nearly three in five experienced basic needs insecurity. Just over one-third of students experienced moderate to severe depression. Students from marginalized groups are more likely to experience basic needs insecurity. Seventy percent of Black students, 75 percent of Indigenous students, and 65 percent of LGBTQ students experienced basic needs insecurity. Female students were seven percentage points more likely than male students to experience basic needs insecurity.

A meta-analysis from John M. Malouff and Einar B. Thorsteinsson, which included data from 20 studies of 1,935 graders, found that "bias can occur in subjective grading when graders are aware of irrelevant information about the students" (2016, p. 1). What they call "irrelevant information" included sex, race, disability, physical attractiveness, or knowledge of prior performance. The authors ultimately suggest "blind grading," the practice of grading with no identifying information about students beyond the work being assessed. But I'd argue that race, gender, and ability do not constitute "irrelevant information." We can't counter bias by ignoring it. Who students are is exactly relevant, and their specific contexts need to be accounted for in our approach to assessment.

Consider some examples. Amarendra Sharma and Abigail Carr found that "food insecurity is a significant factor in determining the average Math-SAT score. An increase in food insecurity lowers the students' Math-SAT scores." Chad Cotti and colleagues (2018) found that students perform more poorly on exams when they are several weeks removed from receiving food-stamp benefits. So, it's not just *whether* students are food insecure that influences test scores, but the likelihood that they have received support and how recently they received that support. Jennifer A. Heissel and colleagues ("Testing, Stress, and Performance: How Students Respond Physiologically to High-Stakes Testing") found that "children displayed a statistically significant increase in cortisol level in anticipation of high-stakes testing. Large decreases and large increases in cortisol were associated with underperformance on the high-stakes test" (2021, p. 199). Acute stress leads to a large increase in cortisol, which has a direct negative effect on performance. And trauma, which often leads to dissociation, can cause a significant decrease in cortisol, also leading to lower performance. COVID-19 has certainly exacerbated anxieties around performance and testing. But the students most likely to be struggling now were struggling even before the pandemic. And those students (and so many of us) will continue to struggle.

Grades are more than just a bureaucratic abuse. I don't use the word "abuse" lightly. I was a victim of abuse, and I bristle when I see the word "abuse" used as a metaphor. The voices of students, and the specific stories I've heard students tell over the years, inhabit my work. Over the 22 years I've done research on grades and assessment, I've talked to hundreds of students about their educational experiences and hundreds of teachers about their experiences as students. I've heard from too many students who didn't get help when they were struggling:

Part of the reason why I never asked for help was because I saw what my professors thought of those who did.

I dropped out of college, in large part due to the hoops I had to jump through to get my disabilities recognized.

It's a lot easier to stay motivated when you're not made to feel like you're stupid or a liar. It's a lot easier to focus on studying when you're not focused on having to justify yourself.

I often begin workshops about grades and assessment with the questions, "how does it feel to grade? how does it feel to be graded?" The answers I've gotten back have been startling. And, even where I find myself unsurprised by the answers, I am struck by the emotional language and by the accounts of trauma that arise within almost every conversation I've had about grades. Conversations about grades are, ultimately, conversations about power, which is why they are so often fraught, especially given how many of us have specific traumatic experiences of both grading and being graded. In this volume, Wonderful Faison writes, "Teaching writing is about teaching power relationships. Conversely, assessing writing is about navigating and making those power relationships visible through assessment tools."

A few years ago, I read a *New York Times* article that summarized the findings of a recent study. The title alone was enough to clench my stomach: "When Report Cards Go Out on Fridays, Child Abuse Increases on Saturdays, Study Finds" (Jacobs, 2018). The study (specifically of primary-school-aged children) tracked calls made to the Florida Department of Children and Families child abuse hotline alongside dates when report cards were released by public schools throughout the state. The increase in abuse following the release of a report card was pronounced when the report cards were released on a Friday, as opposed to other days of the week. This finding led one of the researchers to offer a "practical solution" (in their account of the study to *The New York Times*): release report cards earlier in the week, as though the timing of the grade reports was the problem and not the nature of the reports. Nowhere in the study itself or in *The New York Times* article does the grading system itself get a sufficient sidelong glance.

Early in 2020, educational institutions across the US (and around the world) were having discussions about how to grade in the midst of a pandemic, something I heard repeatedly described as "compassionate grading." For at least a single

term, many institutions offered some version of a pass/fail approach to grading, but the majority of these conversations also failed to adequately inspect grades as a system or acknowledge the ways that already marginalized students are more likely to be marginalized by standardized assessment. From the start, I wondered why institutions hadn't been talking about "compassionate grading" prior to the pandemic. And as institutions began pivoting back to so-called "business as usual," I have found myself wondering why all these supposedly compassionate policies wouldn't simply continue. Is cruelty a necessary precondition for grades?

When the institution where I taught in early 2020 began its own decision-making process about shifting to some variation of a pass/fail system, input from faculty was collected in a Google document. The document produced was 13 single-spaced pages with just under 7,000 words. The most common word is "students," which appears 138 times. The word "GPA" appears 20 times. The word "struggling" appears nine times. The word "stress" appears eight times.

I wrote in that document:

I would encourage us to make sure to center student voices as much as possible in this discussion. Many of us are talking to students and trying hard to help, but the students most likely to be in close communication with us are the students who are best able to cope with this situation. Many other students are overwhelmed and have gone quiet. Those are most likely the students already marginalized to begin with, queer students, disabled students, first generation students, Black students, students already experiencing basic needs insecurity, etc. In the last two weeks, I've heard from students who are food insecure, LGBTQ students struggling to find a support system, students who have lost their jobs, students afraid they might lose scholarships, students with intense anxiety. For those students, business as usual is not possible, and it's not even possible to fake it.

Initially, students were not asked to contribute in any meaningful way to this decision-making process. They quickly assembled their own Google document, arguing that the institution and its faculty were "clearly lacking student input on this critical decision." The student document grew to 48 single-spaced pages with almost 26,000 words. The most common word in that document is also "students," appearing 327 times. The word "health" appears 50 times. "Stress" appears 64 times. "Struggle" appears 52 times. "Anxiety" appears 18 times. "Access" appears 26 times. And "worry" appears 30 times. At least three students write in the document about being food insecure, two reference being housing insecure, and 11 write about their own disability or concern for other students with disabilities. The word "GPA" appears 77 times in that student feedback document, which I still find heartbreaking. In March 2020, worry about how a compassionate (in this case, pass/fail) grading policy would affect their GPAs was at the top of students'

minds. Students were also worried about whether pass/fail grades would be accepted for transfer or as prerequisites for medical school.

Put simply, if an institution continued grading-as-usual during the pandemic, here's what all those grades have been measuring: how well students and teachers "pivoted" to working online, whether students had necessary access to course materials and meetings and support at home, whether students had homes from which to "shelter in place," and how capable students were of "performing" in a crisis. What all those grades mostly weren't measuring: student learning, engagement, and/or content knowledge. But this is not unique to grading in the midst of a pandemic. Nor was my former institution's decision to not include students in a conversation about a compassionate grading policy. The biggest cruelty of grades as a system is that they frustrate the already tenuous relationships between students and teachers, and between teachers and their institutions.

Compassionate grading in a pandemic (or anytime) isn't just about rewriting policies. It has to be about engaging students more fully and critically in conversations about their own education. At the start of the first pandemic lockdown, I wrote to all the students in my classes, "I'm here to support you however I can. Take care of yourself and your family first. Our class should not be your priority. Everything about this class is flexible. Whatever happens, we will work it out." A few months later, I wrote a piece for *Academe* about my own experience of the pandemic. I wrote about my husband being laid off from his job, about our cat dying, about my mom's brain hemorrhage, about telling our daughter that her grandma might die. I wrote, "I've heard from teachers around the world that they aren't sure they want to be teachers anymore if this is what the work continues to look and feel like . . . and I've talked to students who've found that the challenges of just living have made their schoolwork an afterthought." What kind of assessment approach does our current moment warrant? How do we address the fact that grades as a system disrupt the already fragile communities we are working to build in education? How do we push back against those systems without putting ourselves and our own livelihood at risk? In the face of rules and restrictions that seem insurmountable, what is our ethical responsibility to students?

We do need to restructure our policies. However, as we find new ways to reach out to students asking for help, and not just in the midst of a pandemic, we also need new (more direct, more honest) ways to draw students into conversation about our pedagogies, not just the *what* of teaching, but the *how* and *why*. Ultimately, grading and assessment can't be "compassionate," unless it's work we do with students rather than something that happens to them.

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In *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire describes "dialogue" as "a horizontal relationship" that pushes back actively upon "vertical relationships," which he describes as "loveless, arrogant, hopeless, mistrustful, and acritical" (2021, pp. 40-41). This is the work of centering students, but not at the expense of teachers.

Both play an active role in and through this process. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he writes,

A revolutionary leadership must accordingly practice co-intentional education. Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. (1970, p. 56)

Co-intentional education is the shared examination of education with the goal of making space for teachers and students to define and redefine that space together. Our pedagogies become something we develop with (not for) students. This depends on each of us being what Freire calls “teacher-student with students-teachers,” teaching each other, “mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are ‘owned’ by the teacher” (1970, p. 80). Freire’s use of the word “owned” here is important, because so many of the bureaucracies of education, grades in particular, function within a system of currency (where grades and GPAs have something akin to “exchange rates”). It isn’t enough to empower students within that system (and perhaps fruitless even as an attempt); rather, students must be drawn into the construction and reconstruction of that system.

Freire is not speaking explicitly about assessment here. Students becoming “readers of their world” means they can critically interpret their material and political circumstances in order to make effective change. Assessment is a tool teachers use in education to help (or hinder) this process. There is little room for agency or critical interpretation of material and political circumstances when power structures and crude hierarchies are reproduced or reinforced within education, with grades as the most direct mechanism for this. Simply, students can’t learn to make effective change in their world from within an educational system they are discouraged from interrogating and powerless to change. Drawing students into critical conversation about assessment, then, is a way of helping them become readers of their world, but more specifically, readers of their own education. This is a necessary precursor for co-intentional education.

The work of drawing students into the construction of courses, curricula, and assessment is especially important for students who are marginalized by institutions and systems. As a disabled, queer student, I might have attempted to assert agency over my own education, but almost always in the face of systems designed to strip me of that agency. Entering into conversation about my power as a student within those systems would have been predicated on my full personhood being recognized and acknowledged, which I have occasionally felt personally throughout my education, but never structurally. And, now, as a White male teacher with a different relationship to power in a classroom, I can grapple with my own educational history while also interrogating my own privilege and working to dismantle the structures I currently benefit from. I can only do this effectively if I do it alongside the students, and colleagues, with whom I work.



It's far too rare that teachers (or educational institutions) bring students fully into conversation about the what, how, and why of teaching. In my own practice, I have asked students to reflect on their own learning, and to grade themselves. The work of metacognition and self-reflection, though, means more than just having students process their learning; it means asking them (and ceding space for them to) engage in much deeper questions about education and the nature of educational institutions. I've long said, "we need to stop having conversations about the future of education without students in the room." To that I've added, "if students don't feel welcome within conversations about pedagogy, teachers need to ask ourselves what we've done to make these conversations hostile to them." We need to do intentional, critical work to dismantle traditional and standardized approaches to assessment. We can't do this work without understanding the specific contexts of the students we work with. This means we have to start by seeing students as full humans. We have to design for and with our most marginalized students. For our work to be equitable, pedagogical, we can't merely ask students to grade themselves, but must work together to interrogate and dismantle grades as a system.

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