

Ungrading the Composition Classroom: Affect, Metacognition, and Qualitative Learning

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ABSTRACT: Responding to growing interests in alternative assessment practices, this article examines ungrading in two composition courses at a public university classified as a Hispanic-Serving Institution, detailing its implementation by two instructors in an Accelerated Learning Program composition class and a standalone composition class. Utilizing ungrading in our classes and highlighting student responses in their writing and interviews, we argue that ungrading serves as an assessment strategy that promotes radical student inclusion in the basic writing classroom. Ungrading, we suggest, has the potential to transform learning processes and relations by centering and transparently prioritizing affective dynamics of trust, care, and mutual recognition. In addition, ungrading couples these affects with a metacognitive framework for student self-assessment. For these reasons, ungrading—which we here aim to distinguish from other alternative assessment practices—is a valuable and highly implementable practice for writing pedagogy in the context of diverse university settings.

KEYWORDS: affect; assessment; alternative assessment; basic writers; basic writing; contract grading; metacognition, pedagogy; ungrading

As an assessment practice whose purpose is to decenter grades, ungrading has gained increasing interest among educators of late. Susan Blum notes in the introduction to her recent anthology *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)* that those who undertake the task of ungrading “are troubled by some of the consequences of and reasons for grades,” such as their tendency to dehumanize and mechanize the learning process, while drawing attention away from actual learning (2). Those who ungrade argue that in a fundamental sense, grades trade in extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation, encouraging student engagement through fear and competition rather than authentic interest, all while failing

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to accurately assess genuine learning and growth (Blum 3). What's worse, grades replicate and codify structures of social inequity. As Jesse Stommel forcefully puts it: "Agency, dialogue, self-actualization, and social justice are not possible (or, at least, unlikely) in a hierarchical system that pits teachers against students and encourages competition by ranking students against one another"(27-28).

While "ungrading" is a somewhat novel term—one making its rounds among university educators and compositionists, particularly since the start of the pandemic—its conceptual framework and ethico-affective orientations draw notable parallels to already-established scholarship on assessment. In *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*, for instance, Brian Huot has argued that because assessment is "a direct representation of what we value and how we assign that value, it says much about our identities as teachers and theorists" (1). Ungrading seemingly shares Huot's imperative to rearticulate the contours of assessment not subtractively, "as a way to enforce certain culturally positioned standards and refuse entrance to certain people," but additively, as an indispensable aid in transforming "the learning environment for both teachers and students" (8).

Much like the contributors to Blum's anthology, the authors of the present article are also troubled by grades. What's more, we have found in our own practices that ungrading, or "*going gradeless*" (Blum 2, emphasis author's), has proven itself to be nothing short of transformative—a pedagogical about-face rather difficult to abandon once taken up. In its current iterations, however, ungrading is noticeably porous. As Blum herself remarks: "The authors of this book's chapters are not uniform in our approaches," since alternatives to grading "incorporate a variety of techniques" (15). As per Blum's inventory, approaches to going gradeless range from tossing out rubrics altogether to collaboratively remaking them; testing or not testing students; turning to labor-based contract grades; and grading for "completion, effort, quality, or quantity," among others (15). While any approach to alternative assessment should be open-minded and flexible enough to respond to the unique contexts in which it is deployed, the diversity of approaches for what can be taxonomized as "ungrading" is notably vast. While such diversity is generative, the inchoate nature of ungrading as a category raises questions about what commitments and methodologies it specifically articulates and performs, beyond functioning merely as an umbrella term for a general dissatisfaction with the arbitrary and problematic nature of grades.

In what follows, we offer one possible answer to this question in the form of an approach to ungrading that we think marks its vital distinction

from other modes of alternative assessment. As we have come to understand and implement it, ungrading hinges its conception and practice of learning on a holistic, metacognitive, and student-inclusive process that resists quantification and radically resituates the *affective* relationships underpinning the interpersonal, as well as communal, dynamics of the writing classroom. We here use the term “affective” in a general sense to refer both to the force relations that capacitate bodies in different ways, sometimes prior to cognitive apprehension, as well as the emotional registers that become available to individuals as the result of such processes. Thus, we follow Brian Massumi’s key observation that emotion “is the way the depth of [affect] registers personally at a given moment” (4).

In their recent article, “In the Absence of Grades: Dissonance and Desire in Course-Contract Classrooms,” Joyce Olewski Inman and Rebecca A. Powell make the crucial observation that grades “work along the axis of affect” (31). Though they experiment with and ultimately favor a labor-based contract grading approach, the authors still point to what they perceive to be a distinct lack of reflexivity among compositionists concerning the affective dimensions of grades—specifically, grades’ power to produce affective identifications and attachments that necessarily complicate logocentric approaches to alternative assessment: “Grades convey identities and standing, and in that conveying, students derive comfort” (42). While some students in Inman and Powell’s study reported feeling “free to focus on improving their writing” with the absence of grades, many of those same students also reported having the desire to know the grade they had received on a paper after being surveyed on what they disliked about their experience with contract grading (39-40). Inman and Powell conclude that in order to begin the “decolonization process” that alternative assessment has the potential to enact, teachers must first “allow and encourage students to understand and voice their desires for grades even while denying them the satisfaction of that desire” (52). Such cognitive-affective dissonance, moreover, speaks to the general need for writing instructors to possess a better understanding of grades as “affective carriers” (Inman and Powell 40).

Echoing Inman and Powell, we want to suggest that ungrading, as we understand it, explicitly attends to the affective underpinnings of assessment by mobilizing them toward different ends. That is, one of ungrading’s most crucial contributions to alternative assessment is its propensity for making open discussion of the often negative—sometimes even traumatic—feelings produced by the disciplinary structures of giving and receiving grades. Ungrading addresses the issue of affects, both harmful and positive, head-on

by transparently seeking to establish an ungraded classroom culture critical of grading structures.

Yet if ungrading prompts students to attend to and reorient the affective aspects and registers of learning, creating a safe and supportive environment in which to do so—an environment where risk-taking is permitted—it also germinates a different set of affective identifications for teachers. Our experience has been that ungrading’s affective bi-directionality (its two-way flow between teachers and students) essentially disrupts or short-circuits what childhood literacy scholar Elizabeth Dutro calls the cognitive “leap to certainty” we as teachers are habituated to make when evaluating our students’ writing and performance (386). Put another way, ungrading both *moves* us toward the sympathetic consideration of our students’ goals, desires, and needs, just as it also *suspends* our familiar, often problematic habits of disembodied judgment in the assessment process. Our own iteration of ungrading draws on dialogical and metacognitive student self-assessment, which we think allows students to voice their anxieties and desires while also encouraging and inviting a meaningful change in those desires. We call this process “qualitative” learning. By this we mean learning that reflects not the “quality” of student writing or classroom performance, so-called, but rather the dynamic (and ultimately unquantifiable) experience of learning itself.

This article offers an implementable model for ungrading—one that prioritizes affect and qualitative assessment—based on our use of it as a pedagogical framework in a pair of first-year composition courses. These courses occurred in the Fall 2020 semester (in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic) at New Jersey City University (NJCU), a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) located in Jersey City, New Jersey. While gradeless curricula or alternative assessment learning models at the undergraduate level have primarily and traditionally been experimented with in predominantly White-Serving Institutions (Blum 4-5), we argue that ungrading is not only workable but desirable within more diverse university settings.

As we will later revisit in this essay, however, ungrading is faced with potential challenges and limitations.¹ Contrary to the possible misconception that ungrading entails more or less the abnegation of labor on the part of faculty, ungrading often requires just as much, if not more, labor on the part of the instructor—labor both intellectually and emotionally demanding. This fact is a particular challenge for part-time faculty, who so often comprise the majority of instructors of basic writing courses. Equally, we have found that while the majority of our students are open to and even excited by ungraded classrooms, some of our students still evince certain

apprehensions about evaluating themselves in a qualitative way. As we later discuss, we believe there are ways to mitigate these apprehensions despite the unavoidable reality, as Inman and Powell have shown, of grades being potent carriers of affects both good and bad.

Like other forms of alternative assessment, ungrading must be sensitive to the learning contexts in which it is practiced. Indeed, if teaching during the pandemic taught us anything, it is that our familiar pedagogies have failed to adequately respond to the unpredictable novelties of our students' lives, and, by extension, the novelties of real learning itself. Our pedagogies therefore require humility, flexibility, open-mindedness, and experimentation, even as they also need not shy away from certain key commitments.

To question grades—to treat them as institutionally embedded constructs rather than transparent necessities—is in many ways to reexamine one's approach to teaching in general. As we show here, our version of ungrading prompts our students to reflect on what their specific learning goals are (not necessarily bound to a given semester or class) through self-narration, which we see as crucial in capturing the qualitative, affective, and metacognitive nature of ungrading. Our narrative-based approach asks students to conceptualize themselves as individual learners, a gesture which opens up new possibilities for learning, just as it signals to our students that we trust them enough to take control of their own learning process and progress.

It is worth stressing as well that ungrading does not obliterate all assessment or feedback when it comes to the content and quality of student work. It is not a program for intellectual or epistemological relativism. Rather, ungrading recontextualizes assessment within a radically holistic, ungraded classroom culture and process. Such recontextualization does not then mean that course objectives are thrown out but rather that they must be recognized as necessarily abstract and in need of fleshing out within lived dynamic relation to the individual as well as collective needs and desires of the classroom: its felt and shifting atmospheres, and its processes of open-ended transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Assessment's relationship to composition pedagogy is marked with complexity. Huot discusses how "one of the driving impulses in the formulation of composition as an area of study in the 1970s was against current-traditional rhetorical practices that emphasized correctness and the assess-

ment methods to enforce it” (8). These practices Huot refers to centered the concept of assessment as needed because of a deficit in the student, in their writing, and in their learning. Huot asserts that while compositionists have “evolved pedagogies that conceive of teaching [writing] as a coaching and enabling process,” it is also the case that we “have yet to create in any substantive way a pedagogy that links the teaching and assessing of writing” (61). He emphasizes that assessment in composition needs to more fully connect to the values and attitudes that ground instructors’ pedagogies.

Assessment also affects the ways that students learn writing in an embodied sense. Stephen Tchudi, in the introduction to *Alternatives to Grading Student Writing*, speaks to the role that grades play in the student-teacher dynamic. One of Tchudi’s students, Julie, received an A on her first paper and then a B on the next. She explained that this was the best work she could do. Tchudi recommended that Julie revise because this paper was not as strong as her first one. The effect of Tchudi’s recommendation, however, was that Julie became demotivated in the course: “She did C-level work for the rest of the course and seldom talked to me. This experience was something of an epiphany for me. To this day, I blame the grading system for poisoning my teacher/student relationship with Julie, and since that course, I have never again put a letter grade on a piece of student writing” (x).

Tchudi has tried alternative assessment mechanisms, including contract grading and asking students to self-recommend grades. Similarly, Nicolle Caswell and William Banks take up the issue of embodiment in assessment when they write about LGBTQ students’ experiences with writing. They note how most LGBTQ students in their study chose to write about their identities or coming out stories when it was “permissioned,” meaning they knew the instructor and classroom would be supportive (364). Caswell and Banks argue that “writing assessors must concern themselves with the emotional (and physical) safety of the students they assess, recognizing that because knowledge and ability are fundamentally embodied experiences, we must attend to those bodies that remain marginalized in and by culture” (354).

In order to combat the deleterious effects of traditional grading, Ira Shor calls for contract grading as a mode for critical pedagogy in order for students and the instructor to share power. Additionally, Shor grades down to only a C in his course. Peter Elbow and Jane Danielewicz propose a “hybrid grading contract” where students would meet certain requirements of the class—such as attending class regularly, participating in all activities, and revising major assignments--to automatically receive a B. They explain:

“With our contract, we ignore quality of writing for grades up to a B—but focus explicitly on writing quality for higher grades” (2). Christina Kato-
podis and Cathy Davidson write about the use of contract grading in their
classrooms. Their grading focuses mostly on the quality of writing and input
from other students in the classroom to determine quality. C’s are the low-
est grades students can contract for in the classroom, though the authors
“reserve the right to reward a grade of D or F to anyone who fails to meet
a contractual obligation in a systematic way” (115). What’s at stake in all
of these approaches is how power is used and distributed in the classroom
through contract grading. For all examples, a base grade is given based on
a minimum amount of participation. These contract grading approaches
challenge traditional understandings of student-teacher power relations
and how the quality of writing is determined.

Asao B. Inoue takes a different approach in contract grading by focusing
more on labor than the quality of writing. In *Labor-Based Grading Contracts:
Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*, Inoue
addresses how grades are afforded to certain students based on race and socio-
economic status. Inoue sees labor-based contract grading as a counter to the
White language supremacy that comprises higher education (130). Inoue’s
class, like Elbow and Danielewicz’s, has a default grade of B. Inoue’s contract,
however, is different in that it concentrates on quantity through labor. The
delineation of labor detailed in his contract shows that students must com-
plete a revision of two mini-projects, an individual class presentation, three
mini-project responses, and a final project. Inoue also counts attendance,
late work, and missed assignments into the student grade, thus prioritiz-
ing the quantification of student labor as a necessary means of producing
more equitable relations in the composition classroom. Like others, Inoue
is interested in the distribution of power, but instead of focusing on quality
of writing, he focuses on the data of labor by students. As Ellen Carillo’s *The
Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Grading Contracts* has recently pointed out,
however, Inoue’s work does not address students with disabilities or students
who are multiply marginalized: “I have become concerned with how labor-
based grading contracts, which are intended to promote equality and social
justice, unintentionally privilege some students over others” (8). Carillo
thus ventures into how Inoue’s approach to labor through the quantitative
is seen as neutral, when in fact, labor is still ideological in this manner and
leaves certain students out of just assessment practices.

Inoue’s approach to alternative assessment has had material influ-
ences on writing programs and in many ways has become the standard

bearer to labor-based contract grading. In “Openings, Risks, and Antiracist Futures at a Hispanic-Serving Institution,” Lizbett Tinoco, Scott Gage, Ann Bliss, Petra Baruca, Christen Barron, and Curt Meyer discuss that at their university, Texas A & M University, San Antonio, “75% of FYC faculty and 66% of English literature faculty have incorporated labor-based grading as an assessment practice” (1). They follow Inoue’s approach and explain that “our use of labor-based contract grading has fostered an assessment ecology in which faculty seem both conscious of and committed to decentering the hierarchical relationships and power structures traditional forms of assessment often create between teacher and student” (2). Reflecting on Inoue’s work for the context of their university and student population, the authors decided that labor-based contract grading was successful in their classrooms and helped instructors reorient their positions in writing assessment.

Following many of the premises of contract grading, ungrading is another alternative assessment practice which focuses on metacognition and reflection. The practice of self-assessment, for instance, is central to Blum’s ungraded class when she asks students to respond to questions like: “What were [you] trying to get out of the assignment? What did [you] learn? What was successful? What was less successful? Why? What might [you] do differently? What would [you] like help with?” (59). These questions perform the valuable work of recasting the teacher’s role as one of directing the student toward agency in their learning process through metacognitive reflection.

Further, ungrading is not only an assessment strategy in composition but in other fields as well. In Jeffrey Schinske and Kimberly Tanner’s “Teaching More By Grading Less (or Differently),” the authors describe how ungrading functions in undergraduate science courses. Schinske and Tanner ask, “[D]oes grading provide feedback for students that can promote learning? How might grades motivate struggling students? What are the origins of norm-referenced grading—also known as curving? And, finally, to what extent does grading provide reliable information about student learning and mastery of concepts?” (159). They come to the conclusion that instructors should focus more on effort-based grading, encourage student self and peer evaluation, and avoid grading on a curve.

In all, it is critical to remember, as Shane Wood writes, that “[c]lassroom writing assessment practices, including teacher response, are never neutral” (1). Ungrading has its own beliefs and attitudes that influence the pedagogy of the classroom, just as rubrics, contract grading, and labor-based contract grading do as well. Furthermore, while some students may appreciate a gradeless classroom in whatever form, it is also the case, as Inman and

Powell observe, that grades have a productive power as “identity markers”: “Students are primed by our education system not to assess the quality of their own writing but to use the grades they receive to categorize themselves and to prepare for the emotions that come along with the identity these grades create” (40). While it is possible that many students may be open to and excited by alternative assessment practices, it is also the case that the affective identifications students experience via traditional grading systems may manifest in unpredictable ways, across varying identity markers. Inman and Powell thus think that making assessment more equitable is crucial work, but it is work that needs to acknowledge how students’ identities connect to grades: “This is to say, simply casting grades as ineffective ignores these identities and affect, the emotional residue and system of values, that students and instructors associate with grades” (35).

As these examples indicate, ungrading emerges from a wider ecology of alternative assessment practices. Still, it has remained somewhat ambiguous whether ungrading is distinct from, or rather ensconced within, contract grading as simply a larger part of alternative assessment. Going by Blum’s anthology, it would seem that ungrading and contract grading are to some extent enmeshed, though not without certain lingering questions about their potential divergence. For example, how does ungrading approach the democratization of power in the classroom differently from contract grading? To what extent does ungrading center metacognition and affect as compared to quantification? In addition, what more specifically does addressing the affective dimensions of grades, as well as the difficult-to-quantify aspects of learning, look like at Minority and Hispanic Serving Institutions and in basic writing classrooms?

METHODOLOGY

Institutional Context

We implemented our approach to ungrading in two classes: English 102 ALP, taught by Caroline (Associate Professor of English and WPA), and English 101, taught by Austin (an adjunct instructor and PhD candidate in English) at New Jersey City University, a public university, in the Fall 2020 semester, at the height of the pandemic and fully online (a notably kairotic moment in which to rethink assessment). In 2021, Jersey City was named the second most diverse city in the country (“Diverse”). A smaller state school, with 5,844 undergraduate students, NJCU has a diverse student population:

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43% of its students identify as Hispanic/Latinx, 23% as African American, 18% as White, 8% as Asian, and 8% as Other (“Profile and Outcomes”). NJCU is classified as a Minority-Serving Institution and a Hispanic-Serving Institution.

Most of the NJCU student population work while attending college. 81% of the undergraduates work either full or part-time jobs (“Fact Sheet”). The university’s mission statement focuses on providing “a diverse student population with an excellent university education,” and pledges that NJCU “is committed to the improvement of the educational, intellectual, cultural, socioeconomic, and physical environment of the surrounding urban region and beyond” (“Mission Statement”). The university’s identity is tied closely to the local community as many of the students come from the Jersey City area. Most students attending NJCU are first-generation college students with 73% of them receiving Pell Grants for college (“Profile and Outcomes”).

NJCU offers two tracks for composition courses: English 101 and 102, and Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) English 101 and 102 for Basic Writers. The ALP program is modeled on the eponymously named sequence at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC). According to CCBC, the ALP model should function as “a form of mainstreaming” that works to “raise the success rates and lower the attrition rates for students placed in developmental writing” (“ALP”). Administrators at CCBC designed their ALP program so that half of the class would be standalone composition students and half basic writers as designated by the institution. The basic writers also take a companion class that “functions as a workshop to provide the support the basic writers need to succeed in English 101” (“ALP”).

NJCU’s ALP classes differ from the CCBC model. At NJCU, though an SAT score is optional, the placement procedure for basic writing involves SAT score/and or high school GPA. Any student placed in standalone composition takes a 4-credit English Composition 101, without the ALP lab model attached. Students who take the ALP course take both a 4-credit and 2-credit course. Therefore, NJCU students do not receive one of the main benefits of the CCBC model because they do not take classes with more advanced student writers. Part of the reason for this is because more students place into ALP than regular composition so it would be logistically difficult to balance the course sections. In Fall 2020, 65% of students placed into ALP English 101. In order for students to move out of ALP English 101 into standalone English 102, students must pass the course with an A or A-.

Interviews and Student Narratives

Our research design included textual analysis and semi-structured interviews of the four students that participated with IRB approval. The students were selected based on their voluntary interest in participating in the study when we announced it to the two classes. We analyzed the essays, student narratives—specifically, what we call Narrative Self-Evaluations (NSEs)—and classwork of the student writers in both courses. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with the students at the end of the semester to better understand their thoughts on ungrading in our courses and what they saw as its strengths and weaknesses. This study unfolded during the coronavirus pandemic, thus both classes were conducted via Zoom. Likewise, our interviews also occurred via Zoom.

As we discussed research questions together, we decided to focus on the following questions for our interviews: “What kinds of grades did you receive in your past writing classes? To what extent did these grades transform how you saw yourself as a writer? How did you respond to ungrading practices in the composition classroom? What was confusing about them?” and “What are the benefits to ungrading practices for you as a student? What are the limitations of ungrading practices for you as a student?” These were guiding questions that led to more of a conversation between the students and ourselves on their experiences with grading and thoughts on ungrading. The interview process for us involved “active listening” (Talmage, Lillrank) in order to meaningfully engage with what students thought about this different assessment practice. We wanted to make sure that our students were able to speak freely on what they thought of ungrading and how it connected to their past writing assessment experiences. We then analyzed the interviews by focusing on patterns of students’ experiences with ungrading, the differences in ungrading versus grading for their motivation and learning, and the benefits and limitations of ungrading as an overall assessment practice according to the students.

We are aware of the power differentials in interviewing students on an assessment strategy while they are taking our classes. As Carol A.B. Warren explains, “The interview encounter is framed by the circumstances that got the interviewer and the respondent to the moment of it” (131). This is why we made sure that the interviews were voluntary and were clear to students that participation was not tied to improvement in the class. Also, ungrading itself requires a certain amount of trust in the community of the class and of the instructor. That classroom environment helped with conducting the

interviews at the end of the semester after a repertoire had been established within our classes.

For the essays, NSEs, and classwork, we read all of the students' work together as co-authors so that we could understand the themes that connected to the interview data. We read the student writing, specifically the NSEs, many times throughout the planning and writing of this article. We anticipated certain themes like anxiety over grading and ungrading, increased feelings of community in the classroom, and confusion with respect to ungrading at the beginning of the semester. While aspects of these themes were apparent in students' NSEs, we did not anticipate the extent to which students assessed themselves intensely and expressed powerful and complex emotions in connection to grades, being graded, and undergoing the process of ungrading. We also did not anticipate the extent to which our students would voice care from their professors as a priority and central issue for them in their learning. As we continued to write this article and reread the NSEs, we also recognized that the atmosphere ungrading created in the classroom made some students feel more motivated in drafting and revising their essays.

Establishing the Ungraded Classroom

For a class to be ungraded on a macroscale (rather than through discrete assignments, for instance), students should have ample opportunity to become stakeholders by being introduced to some of ungrading's basic concepts. Our focus on purely qualitative assessment emerged from our reading of Stommel who includes statements like the following on his syllabi: "This course will focus on qualitative not quantitative assessment. . . While you will get a final grade at the end of the term, I will not be grading individual assignments, but rather asking questions and making comments that engage your work rather than simply evaluate it" ("Why I Don't Grade"). In our classes, Stommel's blog piece "Why I Don't Grade" was assigned as a particularly useful framing text due to its readability and philosophical breadth. Additionally, our course syllabi featured some exposition about ungrading: its principles, its ethos, and how it was going to work throughout the semester. On Austin's syllabus, for instance, the following language was used: "I practice something called 'ungrading,' a pedagogy that strives to decenter grades as the primary means of assessing student work. Throughout the semester, we will aim to create a culture of ungrading—of trust, mutual recognition, and mutual support—as an intentional practice framing our

learning process” (“Syllabus”). Instructors venturing into ungrading would do well to present students with as clear and concise a conceptual framework as possible for what ungrading is, what commitments it entails, and how it functions, thereby planting the seeds for a culture of ungrading early on.

USING NARRATIVE SELF-EVALUATIONS

The core of our ungrading practice consisted of several informal reflection pieces, or Narrative Self-Evaluations (NSEs), during the course of the semester: two for Austin and three for Caroline. Approximately one to two pages in length, NSEs are informal writing assignments that ask students to discuss their educational goals, interests, and histories, and thus to graft connections between the class and their identities as learners. NSEs accomplish this through a series of basic questions that prompt narrative-based, metacognitive reflection and self-evaluation. Our approach to the use of NSEs came from our reading of Stommel, yet we felt that introducing the aspect of narrative (not present in Stommel’s examples) would offer an important element of low-stakes, metacognitive reflection. Thus, we devised a set of questions we felt would encourage a narrative of student development from the mid-point of the semester to the end. The questions devised for our NSEs were similar to the self-assessment questions Blum asks of her students: “What were they trying to get out of the assignment? What did they learn? What was successful? What was less successful?” (59).

NSEs ask students to center themselves in the learning assessment process by telling the teacher stories about who they are as students, allowing for what is often occluded in “scholarly” classroom exchanges, i.e., racialized and gendered bodies, disabled bodies, socio-economic backgrounds, parenthood, learning and literacy histories, etc. NSEs build off of cover letters or other reflections that many instructors already use in composition courses for metacognitive work. In “Writing beyond the Page: Reflective Essay as Box Composition,” Lindsey Harding writes how in composition “reflection seems to become more of a direct response to course design and assessment practices and the impact of both on students’ feelings towards writing” (240). Harding asks her students to create digital, multimodal reflections that promote metacognition and represent the identities of her students. These reflections span the course of the semester. Harding writes: “I wanted my students to analyze essay structure and composing processes and evaluate their specific experiences with these elements and activities” (240). Similarly, NSEs ask students to reflect on their writing and course performance through the

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lens of metacognitive reflection. We chose narration as the focal method for NSEs because of its qualitative nature. Our stories about who we are, what we have experienced, and how those experiences have shaped us cannot be quantified. Moreover, to tell them is to more explicitly humanize ourselves in the learning spaces we inhabit.

The information provided in the NSEs is self-selected; students are encouraged to share only what they feel comfortable sharing. Moreover, they are encouraged not to view NSEs as exercises in grade justification. Below are directions taken from Austin's syllabus for the midterm NSE:

Midterm Self-Evaluation

In approximately one page (two pages maximum), tell me a brief story about who you are as a student. Why are you in college, what are you interested in achieving with your college degree, and how might this class fit into your broader educational goals? What are some of your specific goals for this class? What would you like to accomplish for the remainder of the semester? Based on these reflections, and all the work you've done so far this semester (including participation), what overall course grade do you think you've earned at this point?

Please reflect on and answer these questions holistically (that is, without itemizing them) in a 1-2 page reflection. I am interested in your thoughts about this as a process, so please do not feel like you have to justify your course grade. You are not on trial. Rather, this activity is meant to be an open-ended and thoughtful exchange. I am curious about your own reflections when it comes to your learning process and what you would like to accomplish.³ ("Syllabus")

We determined that NSEs could be submitted alongside, or separate from, any other assignment, since they run parallel to the class's other forms of instruction and content. NJCU is a grade-giving institution (as most institutions are). We decided that students would propose tentative grades for themselves in their midterm and final NSEs. We decided that for Austin, grade proposals would be holistic, applying only to how the students felt they were doing in general, rather than to any discrete assignment. In contrast, for Caroline, grade proposals would apply specifically to each major, discrete assignment. Moreover, we felt that these proposals would need to be con-

tingent on the agreement of the teacher. It is important to stress, however, that the teacher aims to have minimal intervention in this process, since the point is to promote receptivity to the students' lived learning contexts, which become the primary vehicle for assessment.

In Austin's class, for instance, one student, Serena², wrote the following in one of her NSEs:

I get afraid and am shy because I know I don't belong, and mostly because I know that I'm just an outsider in this country. Why am I in college? Is the question that I try to answer myself every day when all I want is to give up because I don't see the point in continuing when anxiety and not being able to understand the subject hits me all at once. But why am I in college? That's easy, I am a first-generation student or college student trying to reach my goals and be a successful woman. But most importantly I am trying to make my father proud because I know that with a good education perhaps one day, I can give back everything that he has done for me.

Serena's narrative foregrounds the concrete nature of her learning context, which includes feelings of inadequacy about her performance of standardized English and a sense of purpose (and pressure) about being a first-generation student. Allowing such contextually rich, qualitative information to guide assessment immerses teacher and student alike within affective flows of becoming and learning together—spaces which privilege what Tamara S. Hancock and Oona Fontanella-Nothom call (after Karen Barad and Lenz Taguchi) “intra-active pedagogies”: “intra-active pedagogies are practices [taking] place *right in the middle of things*, in our very living and doing” (2). For Serena, writing her NSE gave her the chance to reflect on herself as a learner, thinking metacognitively—even therapeutically—about her goals and obstacles. For Austin, Serena's narrative informed and shaped the feedback he gave her on her formal writing assignments. He was therefore able to absorb and apply the information gathered from Serena's NSEs to her other work in the course, making his feedback more compassionate, receptive, and individuated.

For Caroline's ENGL 102 ALP class, ungrading worked somewhat differently than in Austin's because she asked for students' narratives three times throughout the semester, synchronous with each major assignment in the class. Caroline had a prompt that she revised from Austin's that focused on students' writing processes and experiences. Below is an example of the NSE

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from Caroline's class submitted for the second major assignment (a short research essay):

Essay Questions:

How was your experience writing this paper? Did you have a clear understanding of what you wanted to write or did it take some time to know?

How did this writing process compare to the other two papers? Which paper did you find easier to write and why?

What was the easiest part about writing this paper? (This can be anything from knowing what the theme is you wanted to write on, to finding the sources, to grammar).

What was the hardest part about writing this paper? (This can be anything from knowing what the theme is you wanted to write on, to finding the sources, to grammar).

Since grades must be assigned for this course, you are asked to assign yourself a tentative grade on this paper. Why are you choosing this grade?

This NSE prompt helped Caroline's students know that their instructor saw their writing in the larger, embodied context of their lives. Many students reflected on writing an essay while working at their jobs and struggling to balance their academic work with their lives' other competing demands. These responses aided Caroline in seeing what most students were asking for help with based on the questions in the NSE. Caroline was also better situated to more fully understand the emotional aspects of grades to her students. As one student, Leticia, writes in one of her NSEs:

In my opinion, most of the time in school and in the classrooms, we are usually given a grade for our assignments without much feedback or help on improving our weaknesses, and in the end we just forget everything that we had learned and move on to the next class. We aren't really taught to seriously value our work and

progress that we had put our heart and soul into. It's as though the grade given to us defines us and that all the hard work we had done really meant nothing.

Leticia was in the second basic writing course of the sequence at NJCU and was able to reflect on how sometimes no matter how much of herself she put into her writing, it was not enough. The grade still stood as the definer for herself as a writer and as a student. Leticia reflected in this NSE on the affective dimensions to the grading of writing and how that had impacted her experiences with learning writing. NSEs quite often provide more dynamic and compelling information than traditional assignments. In a sense, this is not at all surprising. When students embody and humanize themselves by telling us who they are as learners, we are able to catch a glimpse—a snapshot—of what actually motivates them.

RESULTS

Affective Dimensions and Desiring Economies

Inman and Powell's study and resulting conclusions proffer contract grading as a viable (though fraught) alternative to traditional grading (31). For us, a study like Inman and Powell's raised the question (also implicit in Blum's introduction) whether and how ungrading differs from other alternative assessment practices. In our view, the kind of dialogic configuration ungrading supports at least implies the possibility of a meaningful distinction between ungrading and an assessment practice like labor-based contract grading. Thus, we want to suggest that the substantial difference between them is not merely technical or stylistic, but based on how ungrading, unlike labor-based contract grading, attends to the affective underpinnings circulating within assessment processes, and makes a deliberate effort to reorient those affects. Our use of NSEs as detailed above suggested to us that one of the distinct benefits of ungrading is the affective relations it promotes, i.e., openness to novelty, generosity, and care-centered action, coupled with the desiring economies (of precarious self-worth and institution-contingent approval) it moves to contest. If, as Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg posit, affect is defined in part as "the name we give those forces...that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension," and that can "likewise suspend us," then ungrading, as we see it, has the potential to both suspend and propel us in different, vital directions (1).

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As we have been suggesting, ungrading's strength lies in its insistence on reimagining assessment as a student-centered and student-inclusive process driven by student-teacher dialogue about the qualitative aspects of learning itself (i.e., students' lives as students). Our use of narrative as a framework, then, was deliberate, since we were interested in how forms of narrative that specifically enacted our students' self-positioning necessarily eschewed the quantitative measuring of student knowledge and performance. For us, this meant building a practice of ungrading sufficiently keyed into the power of affects, since the affects ambulating within the writing classroom so often impact the way students perceive themselves as writers and thus also impact writing efficacy. Commenting on the connection between the diminishment of students' fears about language accuracy and the successful practice of antiracist writing pedagogy, for instance, Amy D. Williams, Sarah Kate Johnson, Anika Shumway, and Dennis Eggett have recently observed that "as students become comfortable dwelling in the unsettling affects that openness to new ideas requires, they also become less sensitive to affects that could diminish their writing confidence" (34).

Diverse approaches to contract grading share the common denominator of quantifying student labor. While it is certainly valuable (as seen in a contract model like Katapodis and Davidson's, for instance) to encourage students to plan ahead for a given semester; and while it is undoubtedly more equitable knowing what one must do as a student to obtain a fair grade, it is also worth asking how shifts in affective relations change our practices and our thinking when it comes to assessment. For instance, when we turn to a model like Katapodis and Davidson's, which involves course contracts that base grades on peer review and ask students to plan ahead in terms of labor commitments, we might ask: *How can we know what a given semester entails?* If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that learning environments are unpredictable because living is unpredictable. How, then, do we center compassion, non-judgment, and mutual care as radical praxis if we are also in the same instance prioritizing abstract conceptions of student labor? Inoue emphasizes compassion in his classroom by using what he calls a "Charter for Compassion" (189). Yet for Inoue, compassion applies to peer review and class discussion, operating more as a charter for classroom conduct and thus an appendix to his assessment methodology (131). However, labor, as Carillo points out, is hardly universalizable. An hour of labor is quite different for working students, students whose first language is not English, or disabled students, for example. Labor therefore is qualitatively different within its differentiated contexts. Moreover, student labor in the composition classroom

carries with it unavoidably affective entanglements and challenges. Thus, as we discovered, it is ungrading's explicitly metacognitive framework of assessment—a framework which allows such affective entanglements to be voiced, just as it also invites the production of different affective registers, such as mutual recognition and trust—that identifies it as a unique approach to alternative assessment.

Students' Responses to Ungrading

We found, both through interviewing students and analyzing their writing, that students discovered much value in the NSEs as a method to reflect on their writing and as a means of creating and attending to the more affective dimensions of their work. The students interviewed commented on the extent to which ungrading created a space for them to expound on the uncertainties inherent to writing at the college level. NSEs worked as a genre of student writing that emphasized the trust and care aspects of ungrading that are particularly valuable for first-year composition and basic writing students.

Leticia: Creating Positive Affect. Caroline had concerns about what students' responses to ungrading would be when she first used it in her ALP class. She did not know if students would like the agency involved or if they would feel like they were not getting enough directness from the instructor. Most students in the ALP class ended up not only being open to ungrading, but embracing it. One student, Leticia, explained her experience with ungrading in the last essay's reflection: "I don't really like to grade myself/judge myself because I tend to rate myself lower than what others would have expected me to choose. I'm not really confident in my abilities." This uncertainty mirrored how a number of students felt about grading themselves in the class. They were unsure and tended to grade themselves harsher than called for. There were a couple students who graded themselves higher than what Caroline would have assigned, but most students graded themselves lower. This reflection seemed to represent how much grades can be arbitrary, especially in the case of grading students' writing.

In feedback on the Final Essay, Caroline asked her students to also respond to what they liked about the class and what they would improve. Leticia remarked that what she liked was that the class created more of a relaxed learning environment: "I really liked how chill everything was and really enjoyed the texts/readings you assigned to us...You are very patient

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with us and care about us being able to understand the readings and form our own thoughts/opinions from them.” Leticia’s comments reveal that ungrading’s relaxed learning environment does not produce a dip in motivation but rather the opposite, that is, increased motivation on the part of the student to improve and develop their writing without the external pressures of grades bearing down upon them. Caroline also received more comments that students felt cared for which seemed to reflect ungrading instead of grading traditionally.

What Caroline found compelling is how much more students shared in these narratives than usual. She was able to understand the material conditions of what her students were working through in a way she did not know as much about before, especially in relation to her students’ jobs and how they impacted their time and energy to write. Leticia stated in an interview why ungrading, specifically the NSE, helped her in the class:

For me, I thought it was really good because I got to elaborate and explain why I wrote the paper, my thought process through it, what type of emotions I was going through while writing it, and yeah I just felt good about it because you wanted to listen to us and see how our whole mental process was going through writing that certain paper. And it was kind of a relief for me. . . it was good to explain how and why I was feeling through the whole process.

Ungrading became a way for students to share their process of writing the papers in Caroline’s basic writing class, including the emotions they had while writing the paper. This type of insight provides the instructor more knowledge of what students are experiencing and also provides students with the agency to tell their own stories.

Serena and Raphael: Compassion, Authenticity, Care. Similar to Caroline’s students, many of Austin’s students also expressed their view that ungrading was beneficial because it fostered a non-judgmental learning environment in which to develop their writing. Austin’s students equally remarked on feeling supported and trusted because of ungrading, in notable contrast with previous and/or concurrent classes. Serena detailed the following thought process about ungrading:

At first, when I was writing, I was thinking, oh, maybe [Austin] won’t like this [piece of writing]. But then I was like, oh but [Austin] said that he’s not going to grade on this or that. So, I felt that that was

good because I could actually tell what I wanted to tell and express myself how I wanted to express myself, freely, without having any limitations. It feels good to practice writing without being judged for it.

Like so many students, Serena's statement suggests that when it comes to writing, she is in the habit of trying to anticipate what it is she thinks her teachers might want. She also expressed the sentiment that "grades do not portray what you are capable of doing, who [you] are, or how smart [you] are," remarking, too, that prior to her experience in Austin's class, she and her fellow classmates have thought about and sensed the more or less arbitrary nature of grades.

Another student, Raphael, expressed in his interview that his enthusiasm for ungrading stemmed from his sense, gleaned throughout the semester, that ungrading makes teachers accountable to students by fostering more compassionate, authentic relationships: "If I sense that you really care, and I like your style of teaching, then I'm really going to care as well. [Ungrading] made me really want to try [since with ungrading] the teacher actually has to do something, not just give busy work." Raphael expressed a similar sentiment in one of his NSEs: "Real learning, to me, is when the instructor takes the student's opinions into consideration. . . The students and teacher essentially become partners that learn from each other, rather than a student just taking in information repeatedly without getting a chance to express how they feel about that information or how they interpret it." Interestingly, Raphael also compared the learning dynamics of ungrading to intergenerational and intra-communal forms of knowledge production, which notably diverge from more individualistic conceptions of knowledge: "[Ungrading] is the same concept as having a friend, parent, uncle, etc., that teaches you life lessons."

A through line in many of Austin's students' NSEs was indeed a sense that grades have little meaning or value beyond their connections to institutional requirements and socio-economic success/class mobility. What also repeatedly arose (and which is especially important to keep in mind in the context of the massive trauma unleashed on students—students of color in particular—by the pandemic) was the extent to which Austin's students identified grades as having deleterious effects on their mental health. In their NSEs, Austin's students repeatedly characterized their histories of being graded as the product, more or less, of institutional caprice, as well as genera-

tive of severe anxiety, depression, isolation, and the distress that naturally arises from grading's social-hierarchical function of sorting.

Potential Drawbacks

Like any assessment practice, ungrading faces certain limitations. Most students are largely unfamiliar with what ungrading means, which can lead to a degree of apprehension about it as a practice. The majority of students tend to move on from initial skepticism, but some students may have concerns that ungrading is too lenient or flexible in helping them become better writers. These students tend to think that instructors should be in full control of the grade and that there should not be any authority ceded to students on grades. This makes sense when we understand that students can sometimes be unsure of, and/or feel a lack of confidence in, assessing themselves. Student anxieties about ungrading underscores the extent to which grades and grading are ineluctably ingrained within educational systems and cultures. As Inman and Powell note, “while course contracts seem to provide students with a new frame of reference for process and improvement, they could not divorce their ideas of improvement from the markers they believe are designed to reward that improvement” (41). While grades are not static entities but dynamic processes—processes which ungrading seeks to transform—it is nonetheless true that the material-affective reality of grades and grading persists at the institutional level.

Ungrading can also take a lot of time and labor for instructors to learn how to adapt to their classrooms. Instructors have to explain to students what ungrading means and what it will look like in their courses. Along with reading students' essays, instructors will have to read—and, moreover, design—an informal student writing apparatus, or some other similar ungrading methodology, to frame and accompany the processing of more standard writing assignments. Contrary to the misperception that ungrading is lax in labor and feedback, instructors who ungrade have to examine their own assumptions about how grades are determined and what grades ultimately mean, sometimes comparing the initial or intuitive grades they would have given to the grades the student thinks they deserve. All of this requires more energy than in traditional modes of assessment, something particularly at issue in the context of the university's exploitative labor practices and its reliance on a majority of adjunct labor within departments (especially for basic writing courses). In light of this fact, one thing we suggest is that the labor of ungrading can be scaled up or down by assigning

shorter NSEs, and/or making NSEs count towards the writing requirements of the composition program.

Additionally, if a composition program enforces stricter requirements around traditional grading, an instructor who wishes to pursue ungrading will be challenging departmental and programmatic norms. As we understand it, and as we mentioned in our introduction, ungrading does not seek to do away with course objectives but rather foster a more dynamic, concrete relationship to them. Ungrading attempts to access students' often underdeveloped intrinsic motivations surrounding course content and purpose. However, because of its challenge to institutional norms, implementing ungrading can be anxiety-evoking for the instructor and will likely require—particularly for the first time—more intellectual and emotional labor on the part of the instructor. This, again, is specifically an issue for adjuncts and their ever-precarious institutional conditions.

It is possible, too, that instructors might find ungrading less than desirable because it cedes authority in the classroom when there are already power differentials based on race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and institutional status. In “Academe Has a Lot to Learn about How Inclusive Teaching Affects Instructors,” Chavella Pittman and Thomas J. Tobin make clear, for instance, that practices like ungrading can affect marginalized faculty in challenging ways: “In urging faculty members to adopt inclusive teaching practices, we need to start asking if they actually can—and at what cost.” As Pittman and Tobin go on to explain: “Students—especially White males—are already more likely to challenge the authority, expertise, and teaching skill of instructors who fall into underrepresented categories of the professoriate by virtue of their race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, and so on. So there are real costs for such instructors who adopt inclusive teaching practices like flexible deadlines, ungrading, and classroom-civility policies.”

Sherri Craig, in “Your Contract Grading Ain’t It,” also asks, “[W]hy does contract grading have to be labeled as anti-racist or pro-Black?” (145). Craig emphasizes contract grading in her work, but the same could be equally said of ungrading. As two White instructors, we recognize our own privilege in the context of institutions of higher education, as well as the complex power dynamics at play in the basic writing classroom when it comes to ungrading. We wish to heed and acknowledge Craig’s point that managerial solutions are insufficient in addressing broader institutional inequities, which is why we do not think that ungrading should be institutionalized in writing programs. Instead, we feel that WPA’s would benefit from engaging and experimenting

with the ideas and pedagogical values put forward by ungrading but should not mandate them as institutionalized practices.

CONCLUSION

Some of our ungrading practices should be adjusted for future implementation. Caroline, for instance, would have explained more to students about the uses and purposes of NSEs. One comment students repeated concerning ungrading's potential limitations was how they felt unsure about how to proceed in evaluating themselves. A related challenge Austin faced was ensuring and communicating to students that the function of NSEs is not to justify the holistic grade proposals but rather to engage in metacognitive reflection (the holistic grade proposals being only an institutional requirement). In some ways, this challenge only makes sense. That is, while traditional grades may often produce more stress than ungrading, ungrading can also produce novel forms of stress. This is something instructors should highlight and discuss in their framing of ungrading. Ungrading's use of dialogue opens productive and supportive spaces in which to address such anxieties.

For instructors, ungrading is an assessment practice that concentrates its efforts more on metacognition and the affective dynamics of the writing and learning process. Importantly, it emphasizes care and compassion as fundamental for transformative learning. Such a shift in cognitive-affective priorities for assessment, however, might lead some to question the intellectual rigors of ungrading as a practice. While ungrading operates as an assessment model whose foundations are care, support, and student self-assessment, it nonetheless maintains the intellectual rigors of any other writing classroom. Students still write major assignments and complete homework; they still read a variety of texts and analyze them; they participate in peer review; they receive detailed feedback from instructors on drafts; and they receive grades at the end of the semester, with the crucial difference that these events occur within an assessment framework that fosters intrinsic motivation and compassionate pedagogy. In this sense, a final grade is understood as institutionally inevitable, yet the *process* by which it is achieved has undergone significant alteration.

For Writing Program Administrators, ungrading is an assessment practice valuable to share at diverse institutions—specifically, regional public universities, HSI's, and HBCU's. However, as Rachel Ihara writes, “[W]e need to resist the temptation to simply transplant ideas about ‘basic writers’ into our

new programmatic contexts, instead taking the best of what we have learned from decades of research on basic writing pedagogy, while being mindful of the social justice issues that have troubled the field from the beginning” (88). As an assessment practice for basic writing classrooms—institutional spaces where students have been historically marginalized—ungrading shows a lot of promise in its avoidance of what Davidson calls the “deficit model” of education: “In the deficit model, poor scores are a problem of the learner, not of the instructor or institution” (57). While we have offered two different approaches in this article to ungrading, there are still multiple ways to ungrade, and ungrading will be different according to different classrooms and contexts. Similar to discussions about contract grading, then, ungrading opens up enthusiastic and challenging conversations about pedagogy and assessment, and their co-implication, among instructors within writing programs. This discussion provides a space for instructors to reflect on their assessment practices and how those practices can become more transparent and care-centered.

Ungrading connected us to the humanity of our students, attuning us to their educational goals and intrinsic motivations. As an alternative assessment measure granting us unique insights into our students’ lived learning experiences—their goals, desires, challenges, and aspirations—it also acted in transformative ways on our experience as writing instructors, and continues to do so. In providing students with agency through dialogical openness and compassionate receptivity, our students expressed feelings of being valued in the classroom as a whole, not just in their writing. In our own experiences with ungrading, we have found that students quite often feel encouraged and pleasantly surprised by the investment of trust and process-based learning ungrading makes in their education. Equally, ungrading has given us as educators a sense of renewal and redoubled enthusiasm for teaching, thus transforming our own identities as educators.

NOTES

1. We recognize that ungrading has complex intersections between K-12 assessment strategies and assessment within composition studies. For the focus of this article, we concentrate on assessment at the first-year composition level at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI).
2. All students’ names are pseudonyms.
3. The prompt for the Final Self-Evaluation is the following:

We have come to the end of the semester. We made it! Reflecting on

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your midterm self-evaluation, the work you've done, and all that you have learned (if you stop and think, it's probably more than you realize!) do you feel as if you've achieved your goal/s this semester? Have those goals changed? If so, how have they changed and why? Most importantly, what do you remember about this semester that you will take with you into the future? Lastly, based on these reflections, what overall course grade do you think you've earned? Do not feel like you need to answer each question separately. Just take them in as a whole and write a 1-2 page reflection.

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