

AN IMMANENT CRITIQUE OF GRADING

A THESIS

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Introduction

Grades are failing. The grading system in the United States (U.S.) set out to motivate students, measure student learning, and be efficient (Schneider & Hutt, 2013; Ryan et al., 2020; Durm, 1993). However, it is both unsuccessful and harmful. Grades systematically demotivate student learning, they are unable to measure that learning, and their desire for efficiency has led to numerous negative side effects (Kohn, 1999). Complaints about grades are not new to educational discourse; teachers have been discussing concerns about grading for approximately one hundred years (Crooks, 1933; De Zouche, 1945; Kirschenbaum, Simon, & Napier, 1971; Schneider & Hutt, 2013).

Why do we still use grades? First, many people are required to, as teachers in graded systems. While this thesis heavily critiques the grading system, I would like to acknowledge that this examination is exclusively critiquing the system itself, *not* the individual educators and institutions that are required to use the system. The system perpetuates structures of power and oppression, and folks in positions of power with the ability to transform the grading system have no incentive to change what benefits them. Moreover, the general public is so entrenched in the grading system that few critique the structure itself. Kohn (1999) likens our normalcy of grading to people who live in a terribly polluted city and believe it is natural to cough all the time. *It is not natural, and it can change.*

This thesis will examine grading by conducting an immanent critique; analyzing grading by examining if it meets its own criteria. I will first introduce and discuss the lens through which I will examine the grading system; critical theory. Next, the thesis will dive into the critical genealogy of the grading system in the United States to understand the reasons why grades were developed and to discuss their inherent assumptions. I will then highlight the contemporary

impacts of grading, thus examining if grades meet the criteria they set out to. Subsequently, I will examine a few alternative forms of grading, and finally, offer principles for humane grading.

This thesis will discuss the oppressive nature of grades. Before doing so, I would like to acknowledge that my inherent power as a white future educator innately upholds and perpetuates this oppression, especially because the majority of teachers are white women (NCES, 2018). I recognize that the decisions I make to choose to include or omit information inherently hold bias. Please see my references for more material. With this thesis and beyond, I hope to continually disrupt and dismantle these systems from within.

This thesis will also grapple with ideas about the aims of education; what it seems to be and what it ought to be. While I do not have space to completely dive into these questions, I will acknowledge that I believe the aim of education ought to be to empower learners to be confident and curious humans with the agency to change the world around them. Education ought to be exploratory learning rooted in interacting with the real world.

Conceptual Framework: Critical Theory

In this thesis, I take a critical stance – that is, a stance aimed at critiquing society and working to disrupt its underlying power structures. It is both an aim and a method; an idea as well as a way of being.

Critical theory presents a liberatory approach to pedagogy, focused on promoting social justice and equity through developing critical consciousness among learners. Critical consciousness is the ability to deeply understand and analyze the social, political, and economic structures that shape the world and society we live in. It involves continuously unveiling the inequities embedded in these structures and taking action to challenge them, in order to

transform and reshape society to be more just and equitable. It is rooted in empowering the oppressed and abolishing social injustice. Critical theory, and specifically critical pedagogy, challenges traditional teaching and grading methods. It emphasizes the importance of dialogue, reflection, and action in the learning process, seeking an inclusive and democratic classroom environment. Students are empowered to question authority and challenge forces of oppression both in and outside of the classroom. Critical theory is rooted in changing the minds of students and the world as one. It is a process of empowerment tied to cultivating critical consciousness.

I will be looking at the grading system and how its existence reinforces power structures in the school system as well as throughout society in the US. Critical theorists argue that grades are used to maintain power and control over learners, stating that grades lead students to view knowledge as something to be acquired rather than as a tool for empowerment and change (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1978). Specifically, students of color have been harmed by institutionalized racism and white supremacy in the schooling system. This harm is perpetuated by current grading practices, as I will expand upon further (Au, 2017). Freire puts forth the restorative notion of using assessments that focus on the process of learning rather than any product or performance of knowledge “gained”, also noting that students should have a say in how they are evaluated. I will end this paper with principles for humane grading that are rooted in this thinking, in an effort to examine how we can be a more just and equitable society, just as critical theory does.

Definitional Work: Key Terms

Before I begin, I would like to take a moment to define some key terms relevant to this thesis. Grades will be understood as symbols, often letters or numbers, that are given to

individual pieces of student work and/or synthesized measurements of student performance often at the middle or end of a class (Brookhart et al., 2016). Grading is the process of assigning said symbols. In order to discuss grades themselves, there will be moments where I will need to use some sort of quantifier to distinguish between grades. For clarity, I will use terms such as, ‘high’ and ‘low’ – with quotation marks – to describe grades that are labeled as such; A-Bs and C-Fs (or their numeral counterparts), respectively. However, I would like to acknowledge that language perpetuates systems of power and oppression in U.S. society. I do not condone thinking that any grade is innately superior to another, but because the system that the majority of folks in the U.S. grew up with does, I will use this harmful language to be clear. In doing so, I hope this clarity allows for more understanding of my thesis, and thus more dismantling of these systems.

There are many words and terms used to discuss some sort of opposition to grading; ungrading, de-grading, alternative forms of grading, equitable grading, etc. Relevant terms will be taken up in greater detail in a later section. I will be using ‘learner’ and ‘student’ interchangeably to mean the pupil; the person that is positioned in a school as the one that is learning from the instructor. While the two are often conflated, I would like to distinguish between student ‘learning’ and student ‘performance;’ student learning is a biological, exploratory act whereas student performance is the act of presenting perceived knowledge to others, often the instructor. I would like to note that while learning happens everywhere in the world, this thesis will focus on the learning that happens in school. Thus, ‘teacher’ and ‘instructor’ will also be used interchangeably to mean the more knowledgeable other – individual(s) given power in a school to give knowledge to and assess students. I will be using the definition of school that Illich presents in *Deschooling Society*, “the age-specific, teacher-related process requiring full-time attendance at an obligatory curriculum” (Illich, 1972,

pp. 25-26). Thus, ‘schooling’ will be defined as the process where one comes to be required to attend this obligatory school.

The Grading System’s Intent: A Critical Genealogy

If you've heard the saying, ‘the road to hell is paved with good intentions,’ you understand how the grading system came to be: with the well-intentioned goal of measuring and motivating student learning, yet resulting in oppressive stress and pressure. This section will illustrate how the grading system began, highlighting notable dates and events in its history. With a critical lens, I will critique assumptions prevalent in the system while also remembering the humanity of the folks who created these structures. I will organize my genealogy chronologically while grounding it in three core rationales behind the creation of grades; motivation through competition, efficiency, and measuring student performance.

Some sources differ slightly on specific dates presented, and there is inherent bias present in my choosing of what is important to include here. Please see Ryan et al. (2020) and Schneider & Hutt (2013) for more complete histories.

Early Evaluations

To begin in 1785, the president of Yale University, Ezra Stiles, sorted 58 students taking an exam into four categories (Schneider & Hutt, 2013). These scores – likely the first grades to exist in the U.S. (Durm, 1993) – were determined both by a perceived mastery of the response and by a student’s ability to demonstrate publicly what they had learned (Schneider & Hutt, 2013, 203). A Yale student at the time noted that Stiles hoped that the “mortification” of seeing their peers doing ‘better’ than them would motivate students who ‘underperformed’ to do better

next time (Ryan et al., 2020, p. 144). This origin of grades is rooted in extrinsic motivation – specifically, motivation through competition.

Stiles operated under the assumption that students need to compete to be motivated. Rather than taking the time to understand what exactly would drive students, he instead chose to introduce competition into the learning environment. This grading system is the start of competitive grades as motivators, which are prevalent throughout this genealogy. Additionally, this practice assumes that learning is measurable and correlated to performance on academic examinations. That is untrue, as I will prove later. However, that knowledge was not prevalent at the time, and it is cogent that Stiles and other folks in education would believe that.

There is no clear evidence of grading outside of Yale before 1813, when they streamlined the system to be a 1 – 4 scale (Ryan et al., 2020), likely the start of the 4 digit scale now prevalent in the U.S. (Durm, 1993). However, there were still no letter grades attached to these numbers. In 1830, Harvard University adopted the 1 – 4 number scale, before changing it to a 1 – 100 scale in 1837. The introduction of these scales show the first moves towards efficiency and streamlining grading in the U.S. as well as believing that measuring academic performance correlates with a measurement of learning.

In the early 19th century, the Lancasterian, or monitorial, model was prevalent across the U.S. This model was a response to systematic concern about student motivation, as educational scholars believed competitions such as the Lancasterian model were the “key” to motivating students. (Schneider & Hutt, 2013, p. 206). In this model, students were positioned due to their rank from frequent assessments in the classroom, and every day, students were reorganized based on how well they did, with “top” students moving to the front of the class and “low-performing” students heading to the back of the room (Schneider & Hutt, 2013, p. 205). This example is a

helpful window into the thinking of the time that Stiles also ascribed to; students need to compete to be motivated, and their performance in school is an accurate indicator of their learning. While reformers who thought this way were simply hoping to help students kickstart motivation, the result was harmful to students, which will be expanded on further below.

In 1867, Harvard faculty voted to remove a student's conduct from their grade, ensuring these grades were based fully on academic merit, noting that "gentlemanly behavior" should be evaluated with more than a simple calculation (Ryan et al., 2020, p. 145). This choice was beneficial – I will later explain why grading for qualities outside of academic work is problematic. "Gentlemanly behavior" or anything similar should not be graded at all, but removing it from one's academic grade is a step in the right direction.

The Development of Grades

In 1845, a standardized exam was given to students in public schools across Boston, Massachusetts. Standardized tests were seen as beneficial because they allowed schools to see the percentage of accuracy in a classroom while removing the potentially biased teacher. The beginning of standardized testing demonstrates the well-spread thought that testing student performance was a reliable and valid indicator of learning. Furthermore, it marks another step towards efficiency in schools.

Before 1850, The College of William & Mary used "expressive adjectives" in reports to parents and guardians (Durm, 1993). This is the origin of narrative comments as of grades. In 1883, Harvard references a student receiving a 'B' – the first recorded letter grade (Durm, 1993).

In 1897, Mount Holyoke College used a system that combined three common approaches – descriptive comments, letter grades, and percentages (Durm, 1993). In 1898, they slightly

altered their scale to read as follows; A: 95-100, B: 90-94, etc., notably with the inclusion of E: 75-79. Thus, the grading system that Mount Holyoke embraced in 1898 became the foundation for the grades that colleges across the United States use (Durm, 1993). Streamlining these grades moved the grading system towards efficiency, and again reinforced the notion that academic performance is related to learning.

Between 1870 and 1910, K-12 schools almost tripled in size, rapidly expanding and depersonalizing institutions and paving the way for grades as we know them today (Schneider & Hutt, 2013). As a result of this increase, instructors were unable to provide personalized accounts of every student's learning, yet they needed to find a way to track learners efficiently. Enter: contemporary grading; what was seen as the beneficial tracking system that allowed schools to make their measurement and communication of student learning more efficient. Grades were understood as a tool that communicated to students and stakeholders about their academic performance and served as motivation *without* creating excessive rivalry between students (Schneider & Hutt, 2013). Ryan et al. (2020) discusses how ideas about grading were borrowed from industrial management, noting that grading became a "tool of efficiency" to deal with the rapidly expanding student body (p. 146). Grades lightened teachers' loads, allowing them to quickly communicate information about student performance. This transition towards efficiency lies on the assumption that efficiency is necessary and important for schooling.

Grading for efficiency also has implications for the school-to-prison pipeline that I do not have time to discuss in depth, but I would like to acknowledge the inherently problematic nature of treating school, theoretically a place of learning, like an industry. However, people who were making decisions about the education system at the time were uncertain about the best course of action for managing rapidly expanding classrooms, and it is important to humanize these

choices. That being said, managing schooling as an industry clearly prioritizes efficiency as well as measuring student performance.

Contemporary Choices

In the early 2000s, there was a pedagogical move towards data-driven instruction, where teachers continually assess their students (Ryan et al., 2020). This transition was an effort to understand what students have learned, providing up-to-date information at almost all times on their performance. In reality, it resulted in a proliferation in the amount of grades given and received, which exacerbated harmful effects of grades that I will discuss shortly. Throughout the history of the grading system, grades were often given at the end of a year or semester, or potentially on certain assignments (Ryan et al., 2020). Now, with data-driven instruction, grades are everywhere. Grades originated as a way to lighten a teacher's load, and alternative forms of grading are often criticized for putting more work on a teacher. However, instructors are expected to give daily grades on mastery of a certain lesson *on top of* grades for homework, quizzes, tests, projects, etc. This is not only more work for the instructor, but it harms their students. I will delve more in-depth into the current effects of grades on learners shortly, but it is important to know that more grading obviously results in *more* of all of the mentioned effects.

Standards-based grading, a movement gaining popularity recently, breaks down information in concrete and specific skills that learners need to master (Ryan et al., 2020). Its goal is to be clear and concise in communicating information that students need to know. However, it also results in a proliferation in grades that students receive, and does nothing to address the same critiques that have been around for a century.

Both modern grading systems operate under the same models of efficiency and assessing student performance that have been around for centuries. These models hold flawed assumptions, and while they may have been valid in their time, they have become outdated. It is time to move towards a different system of grades, a notion that is even more proven by examining the current effects of grades.

The Grading System's Impact: Contemporary Effects of Grades

While they started out with positive intent, grades in the United States have become a detrimental, oppressive force, impacting students in a myriad of ways. I present four harmful impacts that grades have on students; they diminish the quality of student thinking, they create detrimental competition and anxiety, they are arbitrary, and they are oppressive.

Impact 1: Diminishing the Quality of Student Thinking

Grades diminish the quality of student thinking by increasing cognitive load, thus lessening the capacity for learning, as well as cultivating an environment with a lack of rigor. These result in a demotivation for learning, which is in direct opposition with their original purpose.

The cognitive load of a learner is increased by grades that stretch their focus from simply the content to both the content and their grade. Having a 'grading orientation' has been shown to be inversely related to a 'learning orientation.' Students who focus on grades neglect their learning; thus grades are *directly opposing* what the aim of education ought to be. Grolnick & Ryan (1987) conducted an experiment where one group of students were told they would be graded on how well they understood a lesson, and another was told there would be no grades

involved. The graded group faced more difficulty grasping the main point of the text than the ungraded group, and even remembered less a week later (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987). It makes sense why someone would comprehend and remember less if the majority of their brain power was focused on grades – there would simply be less time and energy for the actual learning of the content. Thus, grades lead to a diminished quality of thinking and learning.

Grades engender a less rigorous environment due to the prioritization of success over learning. Students consistently choose the easiest possible paths, thus diminishing their potential for rigorous thinking (Kohn, 1999). Whether that is an easier professor or class, a shorter assignment, or an essay on something they already know about, students often avoid taking any intellectual risks, which is needed for growth and learning (Polly et al., 2018). Students frequently ask, “is this on the test?,” preparing to ignore and forget material they will not strictly need to remember for the exam, or skim through readings for what they will “need to know” (Kohn, 1999). This is not because students are lazy, rather, they are making the logical choice. Students have grown up in an environment where grades, and therefore success, are prioritized over learning, so of course they consistently choose a path to success over learning (Kohn, 2011).

Put simply, grades and learning are *incompatible* (Kohn, 1999). Grades decrease motivation for learning, one of the core reasons they originated in the first place (Schneider & Hutt, 2013; Ryan et al., 2020; Durm, 1993). They do not work in the way they intended, and instead harm learning; they need to change. Through increasing cognitive load and influencing students to choose easy paths, grades demotivate learning.

Impact 2: Grades as Arbitrary

Grades are arbitrary and subjective (Kohn, 1999). One letter can never encompass enough – or any – information about what a student understands or where they need help. *Why* do we need grades to do that? The history of grading presents that efficiency was the reason why that came to be, but efficiency is *not a good enough reason* to keep using such a harmful system of oppression. I understand that sentiment puts more work onto already overworked and underpaid teachers. Ideally, changing grading would result in more change that would account for this additional work. I will expand on this tension later. To continue, even when a teacher meticulously calculates an “accurate” grade, these number or letter marks are extremely arbitrary (Kohn, 1999). A score on any test reflects more on how the given instructor wrote the test rather than a student’s knowledge; everything from what specific skills the teacher decided to test, what questions were excluded, and how many points each section was worth all have a significant impact on a student’s score. Thus, grading is entirely arbitrary. Grades cannot be considered valid or even reliable if they are this subjective.

Furthermore, an assignment can easily be graded differently by two different instructors, or even a single teacher who reads it at two different times (Kohn, 1999). As shown previously, grades were meant to be objective and transfer information about a student’s learning. However, grades are extremely subjective, arbitrary, and thus unhelpful in conveying student understanding or measuring their learning. It is impossible to communicate a student’s learning or understanding by simply assigning a number or letter to an assignment or course.

Impact 3: Cultivating Competition and Anxiety

In addition, grades create competition, leading to unnecessary stress and anxiety. Take, for example, the system of grading on a curve (first implemented by The University of Missouri in 1905 (Ryan et al., 2020)). This system was designed with the intention of having scores be normally distributed across the grade scale. In a class of fifty, this would look like one student receiving an A, seven students receiving a B, seventeen receiving a C+, and so on (Summers, 2023). This system assumes that success is not attainable for all. It believes that learning and schooling are competitive acts that require competition. It is inherently oppressive and inequitable, as the performances of other students necessarily limit and determine a learner's grade. The grades of a class are literally manipulated to suit the outcome that a particular instructor desires (Shelton & Razi, 2021). Furthermore, if every student 'earned' a 'high' grade – rather, performed at the level of 'earning' a 'high' grade – they would not all be able to receive that preferred grade, simply because an instructor desired a graded curve. Only a small group of students are allowed to succeed, which is inherently oppressive, especially when considering the lack of equitable access to academic support (Shelton & Razi, 2021). This engenders competition among students, and turns what should be a supportive, friendly, collaborative environment that cultivates learning into an extremely stressful contest.

Students are pitted against each other, even when a curve is not introduced into the classroom. Contemporary grading emphasizes individualism, where every student believes their work, and thus their learning, is an individual practice. Students have been conditioned to believe that working collaboratively is equated with cheating, as so many measures of academic performance are individual. Students often groan about group projects, failing to see the benefit

in collaboration. True learning and exploration are rooted in collaboration. These effects are a failure on the part of the school system.

Grades not only harm relationships between students; the teacher/student and student/learning relationships are also negatively impacted. Learners need to be able to trust instructors, yet the grading system does not allow for that trust, as teachers are positioned as separate and superior. Grades also damage the relationship between a student and their learning, as I discussed above – they prioritize grades over the learning process itself. While the grading system was put into place in part to extrinsically motivate learners, Schneider & Hutt (2013) note that this failed, and instead engendered “unhealthy” amounts of competition and anxiety (p. 217). This anxiety and stress is not only obviously harmful to students and their relationship with other bodies in the learning environment, but extremely unnecessary for learning itself. Through competition, grades hurt the relationships that students cultivate in a learning environment.

The stress of grades leads to poor mental health (Gorichanaz, 2022). 8 in 10 college students report that frequent stress negatively impacts their sleep and subsequently their ability to learn, which in turn increases stress (Bloodgood et al., 2009). This cycle makes way for more anxiety, depression, and even substance abuse (Pascoe et al., 2020). Additionally, suicide is a growing concern among college students. Having thoughts of suicide is extremely common; 8 in 10 people will have thoughts of suicide in their lifetime, and the stress of grading, specifically in college, only exacerbates that. Currently, suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students (Aslanian and Roth, 2021). However, research around alternative forms of grading shows that student health and wellbeing are improved when traditional grading is eliminated (Spring et al., 2011). Thus, the harmful effects of grading are dangerous and lead to

poor mental health in students. These effects are exacerbated in minoritized students, as I will expand upon below.

Impact 4: The Oppressive Nature of Grading

Worst of all, grades are oppressive and inequitable. They force learners to conform and comply, which leads to disproportionate discipline, especially for Black students (Gordon, 2022). Many teachers assess some sort of “professionalism” (a problematic term often used to police people of color, especially Black women, in work environments (Jackson, 2021)), often in the form of not accepting or penalizing late work. A ‘lower’ grade because of late work comments *only* on a student’s compliance, not their learning or their understanding (Shelton & Razi, 2021). Shelton & Razi address this underlying issue, saying that when a system punishes disobedience and rewards compliance, it is, “implicitly showing value for racist norms that are not as arbitrary as they seem; they are the products of implicit biases, and even anti-Blackness, that have been practiced for hundreds of years” (2021). These values are entrenched in our education and grading system, reinforcing norms of power and privilege and teaching students to comply and conform to those in power.

Grades also create room for immense teacher biases, specifically racial biases, that influence grading (Shelton & Razi, 2021). Unchecked bias has the potential to be extremely harmful in the grading process. Shelton & Razi bring up an example of a large group of teachers who were asked to grade a mock essay. Teachers (who are majority white (NCES, 2018)) were given one of two almost identical essays – the only change was that the name of the sibling was identified as Dashawn in one set and Connor in the other. Teachers were about *five* times more likely to give ‘higher’ grades to the essay that named Connor as a sibling rather than Dashawn,

even though the essays were otherwise identical (Shelton & Razi, 2021). It is clear that racial bias is prevalent in grading, and it is imperative to acknowledge and challenge this bias.

The system was set up for identities in power, specifically neurotypical white folks. Anyone who does not fall into those identities is often neglected or punished for non-compliance. This only exacerbates all the negative effects I have laid out previously for folks who do not hold identities in power.

Once we acknowledge this bias, we need to work to reimagine the grading system. Kohn (2011) notes that excusing inaction on the effects of grades by saying the grading system is a given is something that a responsible educator could and would never do. He states that it is necessary to assess whether a certain practice benefits students. If it does not, responsible educators are obligated to work towards eliminating it and do the best we can to minimize harmful impacts in the meantime (Kohn, 2011, p. 149). It is *not enough* to acknowledge and ignore these effects. It is *imperative* to work to dismantle this structure of oppression that is the grading system, which is why I will analyze alternative forms of grading in the next section.

Additional Impacts & Conclusion

If I had more space, I would discuss other arguments such as; grades encourage cheating (Kohn, 1999; Anderman et al., 1998), do not account for the myriad of ways that learning and knowledge occur and can be represented (Shelton & Razi, 2021), decrease interest in subject matter (Kohn, 1999), and are set up so that it is significantly easier to fail than succeed (Shelton & Razi, 2021), to name a few.

Clearly, grades have harmful effects on students. They reduce the quality of student thinking, create unnecessary competition which leads to anxiety and other dangerous mental

health effects, and are entirely arbitrary, thus unreliable and invalid. Worse, they reinforce systems of oppression in our society. At best, receiving a grade based on “mastery” would simply leave students confused, not knowing what they did well or what they need to work on, and at worst, it would harm student mental health, specifically minoritized students.

Alternative Forms of Grading: Benefits & Breakdowns

After learning about some of the adverse effects of grading, many teachers and schools (who have the agency to do so) adopt alternative forms. While there are countless models for alternative grading, I will look at three main forms; ungrading, labor-based grading, and narrative comments. Ungrading is occasionally used as an umbrella term for alternative forms of grading. However, I will define it more specifically below. I will analyze these methods and present their benefits as well as their breakdowns.

As you read, please be aware that while I critique these methods, I also recognize their innovations in the stubborn field of grading. I critique them because it is important to strive for the very best. Philosophy looks at where things *ought* to be, and my thesis represents exactly what I believe the grading system *ought* to be doing. I thank all these methods for being steps in the right direction, and commend all educators who use these methods for their courage and care.

Alternative Form 1: Ungrading

Learners assign themselves a letter grade in the innovative yet inequitable system known as ungrading. Often coupled with self-reflection, this form of grading is a step in the right direction, theoretically addressing the inequitable arguments of grading and removing teacher biases (Inoue, 2022). However, because there is still a grade being worked towards, it does

nothing to challenge specific effects of grades like diminishing the quality of student thinking or creating unnecessary stress. It may even reintroduce inequity, as students who have been conditioned to believe they do not ‘deserve’ an A (often people of color, people who come from a low income background, and women/genderqueer folks) will not give themselves as ‘high’ a grade as their confident white male counterparts (Carillo, 2021).

Additionally, instructors who use this method often require students to justify their grade, and reserve the right to change it as they see fit. The required justification can engender stress and anxiety, especially when students are required to do so in person, in front of the instructor. Furthermore, when an instructor positions themselves as being able to change the grade as they see fit, that perpetuates their authority as well as the power dynamics inherent in a classroom, and is arguably just as (if not more) harmful as assigning a grade themselves. If a student assigned themselves an A- and then received a B+ (or ‘lower’) instead, they would likely feel very badly about themselves, as grades are, at the moment, inextricably tied to self worth and mental health (Gorichanaz, 2022). In this scenario, ungrading is *more harmful* than an instructor simply assigning a student a traditional grade.

Ungrading without instructor input can be a more equitable and liberatory practice. As I established in my introduction, education ought to be about exploratory learning and empowering students to change their world. How can a teacher assess how “well” a learner explored and changed the world around them? And *why* is that arbitrary evaluation so important to our educational system? There is no reason other than preparing students to be complicit workers who will not challenge the often oppressive status quo. If we, as radical educators, do not want that outcome, then *why* do we need to have (control over) grades? However, I am torn; I do think that an instructor having the potential to ‘raise’ a student’s grade may be important, if

they are underestimating themselves. Nevertheless, that opens up room for teacher bias, as teachers may only raise the grades of certain students. Thus, it is important to implement this practice at a young age where students have not internalized beliefs about their identity as a student and what grades they deserve. At any age, ungrading without instructor input does have the potential for equity and liberation in the school system.

In an ungraded system, an instructor should almost never ‘lower’ a grade a student has given themselves, because teachers should *trust their students*. I understand that making this point makes some folks uncomfortable; what if a student takes advantage of this system? I offer two points counter to this one. First; when adopting ungrading, students feel more in community and are able to communicate better in general and with their professor (Gorichanaz, 2022). Both of these outcomes cultivate a strong learning community where students are more invested in their learning and thus both ‘deserve’ ‘better’ grades and are able to be more honest about their grades. One professor reported that he agreed with the grade learners assigned themselves 98% of the time (Gorichanaz, 2022). Secondly, and more importantly; *why* do instructors believe they can assess student learning better than students themselves? And, *why do we distrust students?* In actuality, we have been conditioned into a system that believes students do not bring knowledge into the classroom, when in fact it is the opposite. It is crucial to recognize and appreciate inherent student value, which cannot be done without trust. Jennifer Hurley, a professor at Ohlone College, writes that, “When I practice trust with my students, they work hard for me, and their efforts are genuine. Many find their intrinsic love of learning, which has been hiding all this time” (2023). These are beautiful effects of trusting students. This framework may help combat the effects of certain learners underestimating themselves as mentioned above. In order for equitable ungrading to work, teachers need to cultivate a community rooted in trust.

Alternative Form 2: Labor-Based Grading

Labor-based grading is another liberatory option for teachers looking to challenge the status quo. Often conflated with contract grading, this option is not heavily researched.

Labor-based grading is when a professor assigns students an A as long as they complete work in the ‘spirit’ of the assignment, which can be understood as having a learning orientation. This approach is rooted in grading for completion or labor input, eliminating biases and arbitrariness that comes from grading for quality. There are often detailed assignment sheets for students to work off of, which outline expectations for each submitted assignment. Students are able to see what is expected of them, while understanding that they will be given the benefit of the doubt.

This approach often makes students, faculty, and others uncomfortable. We are rooted in a graded system that has conditioned us to believe that the only valid representation of knowledge gained is a ‘high’ letter grade. When that is taken away, anxieties start to appear, as this system requires trust that many are not used to. No adult affirms that a student has learned something, rather, learners must trust themselves to engage in and validate their own learning. While that is scary, grades create harmful, even dangerous side effects as established above, and this approach mitigates the majority of those effects. Now that we know about these side effects, it is crucial to rethink our system. *Why* is it better, appropriate, or even *acceptable* that someone else would tell a student how “well” they learned? It is only better in systems that value compliance to authority figures. If we want education to be a liberatory practice, we cannot continue with traditional grading. Even though it is intimidating, labor-based grading is a liberatory practice designed with trust in mind, one that will help students rather than harming them.

For example, let's use an assignment that asks you to record an interview with someone on a specific topic and then take a picture with them. However, your interviewee does not want their picture taken. In a class with traditional grading, this would cause many students stress and anxiety about not getting 'full points'. In a labor-based grading class, you would not be anxious about this grade, because you would know that you completed the assignment from a learning orientation, and thus you will get full credit.

Regardless, this form of grading does not address teacher bias, as it is still possible for teachers to label some student work as being completed without a learning orientation, thus not in the 'spirit' of the assignment, and not 'deserving' of an A. However, I would argue that cultivating a community of trust as mentioned above would remedy that harm, as students would be working hard (maintaining a rigorous environment, though I am interested in *why* that is important – a topic for another paper), and teachers would trust them to do so. That fact, coupled with clear expectations from instructors, will lead to positive effects for students. I position this approach as the best alternative form for grading if an instructor must submit concrete letter (or other) grades to a school.

Alternative Form 3: Narrative Comments

Narrative comments are the best way to communicate with learners about their understanding and their performance, as they remedy the majority of negative effects of grades. It is established that grades diminish student thinking, create stress, competition, and anxiety, and are arbitrary and oppressive. Narrative comments *without* grades increase the quality of student thinking, as an individual is not working towards a grade and is able to focus entirely on their learning. They decrease competition and therefore cultivate a collaborative environment,

diminishing stress and anxiety and thus improving the mental health of the students receiving them. They are the opposite of arbitrary; rather they are specific in their communication of a student's areas of/for strength and growth. Unfortunately, it is still possible to see teacher bias in narrative comments. However, the lack of a letter/number grade takes power away from the oppressor (teacher) and instead opens a strong dialogue between teacher and student. It obliges learners to reframe into a learning orientation, rather than a grading orientation, restoring true learning. Narrative comments are the most liberatory and equitable form of providing feedback.

Hurley (2023) and Kohn (1994) remind us that narrative comments accompanied by a letter grade are essentially useless, as students often ignore the comments entirely. However, the magic happens when comments are given *instead* of grades. Students frequently ignore narrative comments when they are presented with a letter or number grade, but in the absence of one, they not only read, but are eager for, comments. The only viable solution for learning is to rid the school system of grades in order to provide students with real feedback that will help them grow into democratic and curious people.

The most frequent critique of narrative comments is that it is more difficult and time-consuming for instructors to provide comments than a grade. However, radical and responsible educators must still make room for them. In every system of oppression, in order to be liberated, the oppressor needs to give up power and make sacrifices. The system of grading is no different. Teaching is a difficult yet rewarding life. Providing feedback may take more time, but that is *not a reason not to do so*. I would like to take seriously the fact that I am a student discussing this issue, and the vast majority of discussion on grading is done by current or former instructors. Many instructors push back against these ways of grading, but adopting an alternative form of grading is not only beneficial but necessary for the liberation of students.

Readers should trust my perspective as a student, not write it off as being unimportant or uneducated. Regardless, when there is this much evidence of the harmful effects that grades engender and it is known that narrative comments rectify these effects, educators must implement them, if at all possible, despite their potential difficulties.

Additional Alternatives & Rebuttals

There are a myriad of other alternative forms of grading that I do not have time to discuss (contract, equitable, mastery-based, specifications, and standards-based grading, to name a few). These often hinge on learning outcomes, which are beneficial because they eliminate grading for compliance and non-academic standards (such as late assignments, attendance, or participation). However, they are used at every level of the schooling system, distorting their intended function. They are often relative and vague, creating the potential for teacher bias and inequitable use that perpetuates white supremacy and other oppressive forces in school. Thus, I chose what I believe to be the best alternative forms of grading to examine in this thesis.

There are a multitude of alternative forms of grading. I examined a few options, and came to the conclusion that if an instructor is not confined by submitting grades, I recommend using narrative comments. While I do not have time to examine the specific qualities of strong teacher feedback, many scholars have written on this topic (Percell, 2017; Brookhart, 2017; Voelkel et al., 2020). However, if an instructor's school requires grades at the end of the semester, I recommend giving comments to students until the end, and then using labor-based grading for their final grade. I will expand on my recommendations in the following section.

I will now address common critiques of alternative forms of grading. Before I begin, I would like to reiterate that we live in a graded system, and I am critiquing the system – *not*

individual educators or entities. That being said, some learners say they would not feel comfortable in a learning environment without grades. However, I want to reject this notion for a few reasons. This graded way of being is ingrained into every schooled human in U.S. society, and it feels difficult, if not impossible, to push back against. Nevertheless, it is *imperative* to do so. The only way we can begin to make students feel comfortable without grades is to reduce them. I now feel comfortable in environments without grades because I have learned in those environments. There are ways to scaffold this idea for folks who have been indoctrinated, such as offering to give a theoretical grade to students who wish to know what they would have received. Furthermore, it is important to implement alternative grading practices at young ages to curtail this perception of grades. This approach, along with a community of trust and helpful feedback, will allow all students to feel comfortable without grades.

Learners also worry about their loved one's perception of their grades. Everyone who has a stake in their education – friends, siblings, parents, guardians, grandparents, etc. – may perceive a learner as 'not smart enough' if they are not receiving grades, or a school or teacher as not 'good' or prestigious enough if they do not assign grades. Unfortunately, this may require a bit of a transitional period as more and more folks commit to alternative forms of grades. Stakeholders who always experienced traditional grading may take more time to understand why alternative grading practices are so beneficial. However, there is a wealth of research on the harmful impacts of grades that students, instructors, and schools can fall back on to explain their choices.

In less graded systems, students express concerns about the perception of their grades for the next institution they will attend. High school students worry that colleges will not accept them if they do not have a clear grade for every class. College students fret that graduate schools,

specifically schools that place an intense emphasis on a student's GPA (grade point average), will not consider their application if it shows evidence of alternative forms of grading. However, Kohn (2011) states that high school graduates of de-graded schools are still accepted into college by a myriad of selective institutions that are both private and public. Colleges receive narrative reports on top of interviews, essays, and recommendations which all offer a more complete picture of an applicant when compared to a single GPA score. These schools also state that their students are often more motivated learners and better prepared for college overall. Moreover, if de-graded high schools send their students to selective colleges, de-graded colleges will be able to send their students to selective graduate schools. Thus, it is possible to reject grades and still be accepted by prestigious institutions.

Furthermore, grades have been understood to help learners see that they have learned a specific skill. However, that can happen without all the stress and harmful effects of grading by simply using narrative comments – from an instructor and/or in self-evaluations. As our systems become less graded, students should also have the confidence to know they have learned something without adult input.

While there are critiques of alternative forms of grading, the benefits far outweigh the costs. It is imperative to do as much as possible to rectify the harm that grades cause. Thus, I will give recommendations for humane grading in the following section.

Principles for Humane Grading

Laying out the problematic nature of grading was extremely important in my overall argument, yet discussing problems without solutions is unhelpful. In this section, I will lay out five principles for humane grading; grading that centers the learners and counteracts negative

effects of grades. For applicable principles, I will state possibilities for implementation in both graded and ungraded learning environments.

1. Cultivating a Community of Trust

As shown above, trust is *imperative* in any classroom that wants to forgo traditional grading practices. Trust and grading go hand in hand; when students know they are not trusted (and are unilaterally graded), they behave accordingly – avoiding intellectual risks and rigor, even cheating. However, when students are not only told but *shown* explicitly that they are trusted (which inherently means they are not unilaterally graded (and as I have said, if a school mandates grading, I recommend labor-based grading,)), these negative side effects vanish (Kohn, 2011; Hurley, 2023). Furthermore, a community rooted in trust will mend and strengthen relationships between teacher and student as well as a student and their learning that are broken by traditional grading. As Hurley says, “trust is at the core of meaningful teaching” (2023). She writes about the empowering nature of trusting students (and herself) in every way, saying that this trust leads to student co-creation of learning, learners believing in themselves and their capabilities, and a collaborative environment for all bodies in the classroom. This inherently engenders a safe, caring, equitable classroom environment for all. Critical theory is based on empowering students, and trust is the first way to do so. A classroom environment rooted in trust will engender curious, confident students with a learning orientation.

2. Student-Driven Learning

Student-driven learning will fix the motivation crisis in schools that grading fails to. Grades were invented to motivate students, yet extrinsic motivation is not as effective as intrinsic

motivation (Clanton Harpine, 2015), thus we need to intrinsically motivate students to learn through student-driven learning. That shows up in two essential ways; first, students need to have as much say as possible in what is being taught as well as how lessons are taught. Allowing learners to have agency over subject matter will inherently increase student interest, participation, and motivation. It is also imperative to grade in a student-driven way by asking learners what they want to get out of their class(es). They can create growth criteria for themselves based on their personal and/or professional goals, and judge themselves on meeting their own goals. This process should be centered in their learning, not their performance – in the process, not the product. In an ungraded school, self-reflective comments would be the backbone of their feedback, paired with teacher comments. It is imperative that grades are *not* assigned when they are not necessary. In a graded school, I would recommend a singular labor-based grade at the end of the semester, as opposed to multiple unilaterally decided grades throughout. This approach will deeply motivate students, especially when paired with intentional trust.

3. Feedback Through Audio Narrative Comments

Narrative comments have a unique ability to cultivate humanity in the grading process. As detailed in the alternative forms of grading section, it is imperative to give all teacher (and self) reflection in the form of narrative comments, rather than a singular grade. This will eliminate competition, thus removing related anxiety and mental health concerns that stem from traditional grading. Additionally, with the absence of a letter grade, students are able to increase their cognitive potential for the subject matter, improving the quality of their thinking. Furthermore, this approach gives them specific feedback on where their areas of strength are as well as their areas for growth, rather than an arbitrary number or letter.

An important addition not expanded on earlier is that commenting through audio recording is extremely beneficial (Hurley, 2023). This takes stress off of teachers, as it is often quicker to talk through feedback as opposed to writing it. Moreover, it allows for humanization of the grading process. Audio feedback is often, if not always, imperfect; teachers ramble or lose their train of thought, and there is no paper record of feedback given. However, Hurley (2020) found that students *loved* this form of feedback. It humanizes their teacher, strengthening the necessary bond between instructor and learner. More importantly, there is something innately humanizing about hearing a human voice discuss what they see and value in your work, rather than simply skimming through written comments (Hurley, 2020). In an ungraded system, these audio recordings can and will serve as the only feedback students need. In a graded system, it is still crucial to have this feedback, and only this feedback, throughout the semester. If you need to assign grades at the end of a class, *please only do so at the end of a class*. The following principle will examine how to humanely grade if you are obligated to submit a grade.

4. Labor-Based Grading

As previously stated, if an educator must submit a grade to a school, labor-based grading is the humane way to do so. This approach would work best with a community of trust that utilizes narrative comments throughout the semester that detail exactly how students can improve. As long as they complete this work thoughtfully, they should receive an A. This will allow for an increase in quality of student thinking, a decrease in competition and related mental health concerns, and paired with comments, take away from the arbitrary nature of grades. Thus, labor-based grading is the most humane way to grade, if an educator is obligated to do so.

As this classroom should be rooted in trust, many students should receive an A. If that makes you uncomfortable, please examine *why* that is. *Why* do we view a class that awards only a few students a ‘high’ grade as better or more desired? *Why* would we not want all students to succeed? The answer is that we have been indoctrinated into an oppressive system that values competition. Thus, labor-based grading fights inequities and injustice in our school system by ‘awarding’ students based on their inherent value and thoughtful input, rather than their performance in the class.

Additional Recommendations

It is imperative to reject the oppressive nature of grades as much as possible. Thus, I also suggest blind grading (giving feedback to student work anonymously, i.e. covering up student names before giving comments) to reduce teacher bias. Furthermore, I want to recognize culturally sustaining practices. These are incredibly important in fostering an inclusive and equitable environment in the classroom, and can go a long way in repairing harm done by the oppressive structure of grades. See Paris (2012) for more in-depth recommendations that I do not have time to discuss here.

Conclusion

This thesis began by presenting a genealogy of grades in the U.S. It detailed three main reasons why grades were invented; to motivate students, increase efficiency, and measure student learning. However, those goals are not being met. The grading system today diminishes the quality of student thinking and cultivates extremely stressful environments through competition

that are detrimental to students' mental health, both of which in turn demotivate learning. Grades are also arbitrary and unreliable, and they are systems of power that perpetuate oppression.

In order to remedy the harmful effects of grades, I examined alternative forms of grading and then offered principles for humane grading. I discussed the benefits and disadvantages of ungrading, labor-based grading, and narrative comments. Subsequently, I presented four principles for humane grading; cultivating a community of trust, student-driven learning, narrative comments, and labor-based grading (if necessary). These principles addressed the harmful effects of grades and offered solutions for educators. All of my work was done through a critical theorist perspective.

Incorporating the principles for humane grading will allow learners to be invested in their learning while cultivating powerful relationships with each other, their instructor, and the learning itself. This will empower students while recognizing and appreciating their inherent value, rather than trying to judge that value. Learners will become curious, powerful citizens with a strong critical consciousness. Their faith in themselves coupled with their ability to analyze and critique systems in our society will lead to positive change throughout our society at every level. This will lead to a kinder, more compassionate world.

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