

Ungrading an Online Counseling Course

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Abstract

Ungrading, or alternative assessment, is an educational practice that is growing in use and can be effective in online counselor education. Alternative assessment aligns with social justice, competency-based, and community of learning educational philosophies. Assessment that is meaningful for teachers and learners can increase engagement, openness to feedback, and intrinsic motivation for counselors-in-training. A counselor educator describes how one online course was ungraded.

Keywords

assessment; online learning

Ungrading, or alternative assessment, is both a philosophy and a teaching practice (Kohn & Blum, 2020). Akin to the community of learning philosophy, students are assumed to have intrinsic motivation and the ability to master course content when the right environment is created (Murdock & Williams, 2011). Ungrading is rooted in a social justice framework that seeks to eliminate the way traditional grading can reflect access to resources more than actual learning. Alternative grading schemes are often used in competency-based learning (Townsend & Schmid, 2020), which has been proposed as an appropriate learning model for counselor education (Brammer & Goodrich, 2021). A variety of ungrading methods can be used but almost all incorporate scaffolding and opportunities to improve so that all students can achieve outcomes that reflect their learning and growth. This is in opposition to a system hierarchical ranking (A, B, C etc.). A graduate counseling course is a natural fit for this model as the students are generally interested in the course content, and therefore motivated to learn. And there is little usefulness in creating a grade-based hierarchy in counselor education. Online learning platforms are conducive to ungrading because they allow for frequent instructor feedback, ease of peer review, and tracking of student outcomes. The author “ungraded” one of their online counseling courses as a pilot to expand

the practice in their own courses and for other instructors to learn from.

The Course

The chosen course focused on crisis, trauma, and grief counseling and was taken by mostly master’s level counseling students, with some education and certificate students. The course is part of a CACREP-accredited online program and I have been teaching the course for many years. I chose the course because it is one that students are generally motivated to take and there were already some elements in the course that lent themselves to alternative assessment. These elements included small group case study experiences and choice in assignments so that students could customize their learning experience to their goals and interests.

The Philosophy

Prior to modifying the course, I developed a “grading manifesto” to lay out a student assessment philosophy that was in-line with my teaching, counseling, and moral philosophies. The goal was to provide a reference point for putting ungrading into practice, but also to share my philosophy with students so they could understand the rationale behind a practice that might trigger some uncertainty or anxiety. The key points

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were: 1. All students can learn the content to an “A” level and so should be given the opportunity to demonstrate that, 2. Counselors must self-assess and take ownership of their own learning, 3. Grades can be a distraction from feedback, 4. Counselors should be able to tolerate ambiguity, and 5. Counselor identity should not be shaped around GPA. My grading manifesto tag line was “creating learners, not grade earners.” I also contextualized my beliefs in my own experiences as a student, as an instructor and grader, and my personal moral convictions related to social justice and empathy.

Course Modifications

Because ungrading was a novel approach for the students in the course, I wanted to create extra supports for them. I combined a community of learning model with alternative assessment, for a course motto of “High Contact, Big Content, Small Grading.” Small groups were already utilized in the class for case study discussions, and so I used these same groups for on-line forum discussions and group exams conducted orally on Zoom. I also added an optional text group and a weekly “reading club” for students and myself to chat while working on course material. The ungrading aspects of the course included forum discussions and experiential activities being graded complete/incomplete, with unlimited opportunities to re-do incomplete assignments and a limit of one incomplete to get a final grade of an A. For other assignments I also encouraged revisions (as time allowed), increased the amount and quality of my feedback, and decreased my emphasis on correcting APA Style. My institution requires final letter grades, so students proposed a final grade based on provided guidelines and I accepted or modified their proposal. Students evaluated their own learning by rating their competence/knowledge on the course objectives at the beginning and end of the course as well as reflecting on their outcomes in a final forum post. I introduced these modifications by including the grading manifesto in the Week 1 module along with video and written announcements. During synchronous sessions I also discussed specific assignments to help clarify and responded to individual questions as they arose.

Student Responses and Learning

I did not formally collect data on student learning or satisfaction, though I hope to in the future. Anecdotally, student responses to these course modifications were positive. Both in their comments and in their end of course evaluations, students seemed to understand the rationale for ungrading and its benefits. Many of the questions that were asked related to the group, oral exams as this was a new experience for them.

In talking before the exam most reported feeling anxious but, for many, these feelings lessened afterwards and they found the experience valuable. My observation was that quality of work did not decrease and may have even increased when students were asked to modify or re-do assignments. Students seemed to appreciate more meaningful feedback and increased interaction both with their peers and with the instructor. Their assessments of themselves at the end of the course was remarkably congruent with my own assessments and only in a few cases did I modify their proposed final grade (and only upwards). My own experience of the course was also positive. I felt that I was actually assessing their learning, not the amount of time they gave to something, their predisposed abilities, or previous educational opportunities. Compared to other times I taught this course, I felt I got to know my online students better and I had a stronger sense of what content was grasped most readily. I was able to observe which assignments and course materials seemed to have the most impact.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

I gained a number of useful insights from teaching this course ungraded that I could apply both in teaching this course again, as well as for other courses. One thing I had not anticipated was how difficult it was to give a group a common grade on their exams. Individual performance was more variable than I thought it would be, perhaps because they collaborated in preparation less than I anticipated. I ended up factoring individual exam performance into their final course grades but it would have been good to have a more formal way to do this. The other assignment that needs to be adjusted is the one paper in the course in which they create a client in crisis and then design an assessment and intervention plan. The only adjustment I made to this assignment was to give the opportunity to re-do parts that were graded lower. However it came too late in the term for there to be much time to do this and so most of my feedback went un-utilized. It was clear from the papers that there were concepts they could have used more instruction on but no opportunity to provide this. In the future, I could do the paper in parts, giving feedback along the way as I have done in other courses. I would also like to try “workshopping” the papers where they share them in their groups and then meet with me to discuss improvements.

In terms of my efforts to build community within the course to enhance learning, the repeated small group interactions appeared helpful and I developed more rapport with students through the exams and feedback. However the optional interaction opportunities, the reading club and the text group, were underutilized and it was unclear how impactful they were. This

matches my experience with online and adult learners in general, they have to be very efficient with their time and so they only do what they must. This should not be seen as a weakness on their part, perhaps even a strength, as they prioritize and set boundaries. These are qualities we value in counselors. This is something I can keep experimenting with, getting feedback on, and I will seek ideas from other online educators.

I have begun to introduce alternative assessment to my program and I hope as a department we can continue to have conversations about how we are using grades in the work of training counselors. Grading philosophies and practices are often inherited and implemented without much reflection or critical analysis. We should think more about how grading coincides (or not) with our profession's valuing of social justice, life-long learning, and openness to feedback.

Applications and Cautions

Ideally, grading practices would be congruent with teaching philosophies, and instructors would feel free to grade in a way that suits themselves and their students. However, the context of the teaching should also be considered. The algorithm that makes up student outcomes and satisfaction does include their perceptions of the instructor, and those perceptions include stereotypes, biases, and expectations. Educational innovation may carry risk for faculty who are vulnerable or unsupported in their institutions. Students may respond differently when instructors ask them to trust and risk, depending on who is asking. There are multiple roads that lead to desired learning outcomes. Alternative assessment could be part of one of those roads but should not be considered the only path. When we ask faculty to try something new it should be done in a supportive environment where the stakes are low enough for a range of results to be tolerable and certainly not harmful to the instructor (Pittman & Toobin, 2022). If we are seeking an affirming and encouraging educational experience for all students, we should also seek that for faculty.

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