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COMMENTARY

Ungrading as Anthropological Pedagogy and Praxis

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Abstract

This commentary advocates for an understanding of critical pedagogy as an application of anthropological praxis. I reflect on how my implementation of a version the assessment strategy broadly known as “ungrading” emerged from fundamentally anthropological concerns, including a consideration of grades as a social construct. The specific transformative context of the COVID-19 pandemic created a well-documented set of challenges to teaching and learning and ultimately led to my decision to stop using the hegemonic framework of standard grading in most of my courses. Drawing on my personal experiences, I argue that critical pedagogical approaches are opportunities not only to transmit anthropological concepts, but also to apply them.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy; Applied anthropology; Ungrading

Introduction

In this paper, I reflect on why I have come to use the critical pedagogical assessment strategy of “ungrading” in most of my teaching, and how it functions as an application of anthropological praxis. In sharing my thought process as I have come to implement ungrading into my teaching, I emphasize how my understanding of and training in (linguistic) anthropology provides the foundation not only for what I teach, but also how.

“Ungrading” refers to a range of ways of rethinking assessment away from ranking, or putting students’ work on a scale framed either as a percentage model or as an A to F range of achievement. Instead, these approaches focus on feedback, skills development, or student goal-setting (Stommel 2023).

In a review of an edited collection about ungrading (Blum 2020), published in this journal, Daniel Ginsberg (2021) notes:

Critical pedagogy, you might say, is essentially applied anthropology. An ethnographer in the field or an archaeologist at a dig comes face to face with other human beings with a radically different way of being in the world, and their role is to understand that experience, communicate it to outsiders, and, for an applied anthropologist, operationalize that understanding in order to solve some problem

that the community is facing. Bringing that orientation into the classroom, a teacher of anthropology might give similar consideration to their students as to the participants in their fieldwork. We might leverage ethnographic perspectives in our response to daily pedagogical questions and frustrations – ranging from “How can I get students to read the syllabus?” to “How might we destabilize audit culture and promote the liberatory potential of education?” – and thereby align anthropology’s emphasis on emic perspectives with critical pedagogy’s commitment to democracy.

This reflection develops the points that Ginsberg raises here, describing the specific context and motivations for my transition toward ungrading as it extends from anthropological principles. In my case, after being pushed toward the idea of ungrading and other critical pedagogical approaches for years, the COVID-19 pandemic created the final impetus for transforming my syllabi. COVID has had a significant impact on academia, both as a biomedical pathogen and as a sociopolitical structure, which has been extensively documented, including in this journal (e.g., Santos 2021; Yankovskyy 2023). My personal experience of COVID took place while teaching at a university in Ontario, Canada, where, at least for some time, the importance of moving to online education was taken seriously and applied universally. I also lived in a household with someone at high risk of COVID complications, for whom our family remained cautious and protective well after most people around us returned to “normal.” My social life, mental health, and professional capacity, like that of many others, suffered significantly, and I found myself primarily orienting to the urgent need to provide care, both to my family and loved ones, and to my students.

Anthropological Observations

My training as an anthropologist has taught me to attune to the structural conditions that shape the lives of those around me, as well as to the ways that these structures are experienced and engaged with by different groups of participants. Teaching is no exception to this. During a crisis of a different type, in 2018, a colleague and I built a statement of principles centered around a commitment to doing and teaching anthropology in a way that was always “aggressively human” (Shulist and Biittner 2018). In developing this theme, we put forward a set of commitments, two of which are particularly important to what I am describing here:

1. We place empathy at the core of our learning and teaching experiences, and the human at the centre of our approach to theory and method, and
2. We exemplify kindness and care toward ourselves and others, and we aggressively insist on reminding people that we are humans first and scholars, teachers, and employees only in addition to that.

In this statement, we sought to articulate how anthropology, as the study of humans, made it necessary for us to put “humanness” at the center of our teaching and to use that

to shape not only *what* we teach, but *how*. Through my work as a linguistic anthropologist, for example, I have come to see how “participation grades” are rooted in the valuation of specific communicative norms that may be opaque to some, impossible for others, and culturally inappropriate for still more students. Further, the idea of “standard English” is widely recognized within the field as rooted in racist, colonial, and ableist approaches to language, which I encourage students to contest and challenge in the content of my courses.¹ How, then, could I justify insisting that students put that conceptual understanding aside and accept an assessment of their work based on those principles?

Among teachers, I have often heard variations on the theme that failure is productive. Students learn considerably more from trying to do something difficult, failing, and then figuring out what went wrong and how to become successful in the future. I agree with this in principle. The problem is that the structures in which students learn are not designed to allow students to lean into this truth. Failure costs money, adds years to their degrees, affects their future prospects, and damages their mental health. For marginalized students, these failures may be literally impossible to absorb. The cost of such failures has continued to ratchet up due to the cost-of-living crisis that has continued to escalate in disaster capitalism. In response to the extreme shifts that took place in 2020 and 2021, I shared the common experience of asking how we were supposed to continue teaching and learning as “normal” in a context that had become far from normal and in which no one was really okay. In observing my students during that time period, I finally had to conclude, as a human and an anthropologist, that giving them grades (even flexible or generous ones) that they would carry forward on their transcripts felt nonsensical at best and cruel at worst.

With these understandings in mind, I transformed the way I approached the evaluation of student engagement and communication skills. The hegemony of grades as a structuring device, however, was deeply embedded, and required considerably more self-reflection. In this regard, the ethnography *I Love Learning; I Hate School* (Blum 2016) pushed me forward. As Blum reports, complaining about grades appears to be a near-universal experience within educational settings. Students are hyper-aware of the grades they need in order to accomplish their goals, they approach their courses with a focus on how to maximize their grade points, and they have been taught to think of their self-worth and identity in grade-based terms (“I am an A student”). Instructors, for their part, are exhausted by the amount of time it takes to give thorough feedback, then frustrated because students do not learn from it – if they read it at all, it is to use it to argue for a change to their grade. Blum’s book was written prior to some of the extensive structural changes that have now become normalized in higher education settings – including the lasting damage of the COVID pandemic, increasing economic insecurity, and rising political threats to the safety and wellbeing of some students. As students have been forced to navigate their academic priorities against what are, for some, literally life-or-death conditions, and instructors accordingly face a deluge of requests for academic

¹ See Flores (2020) for further discussion.

consideration and accommodation, these observations and insights have only become more relevant.

As an instructor, I have been socialized into thinking about grades as not only the outcome of teaching, but also the mechanism for it – attendance points are there to get students to come to class, late penalties and formatting deductions train students to pay attention to instructions, rubrics create transparency and connect assessments to specified learning outcomes. Students, likewise, believe that grades and learning are the same thing. In a recent conversation that I overheard, when a young student was asked about their “best” and “worst” professors, their response focused entirely on grades. The “best” professor was the one from whom the student had gotten a high grade, and the “worst” was the one from whom their assignment grade was lower, which they attributed to the professor’s lack of clarity in teaching and instructions. Examinations of student course evaluations tend to confirm that students’ perceptions of their professors are often primarily based on whether or not they got the grade they were aiming for in the course, and when students ask for information about a professor, what they really want to know is the likelihood that they will be able to get an A.

Why Ungrading is Anthropological Praxis

In another article linking critical pedagogy with research, Kathryn A. Kozaitis (2013, 134) defines “anthropological praxis” as “theory in applied anthropology that informs the investigation and amelioration of social problems.” Contrary to popular discourse that treats the academic environment as detached from the “real world,” our classrooms are spaces in which social problems can be perpetuated, as well as ameliorated. This is not merely because our classrooms have people in it who live through various types of problems – including the pandemic conditions that prompted my teaching reform – but also because the conditions of teaching and learning are themselves “social problems.” If I reflect on my resistance to letting go of grades, it comes back to one theme: without grades, how would I differentiate between students? How would I rank them? How, to use a not-quite-metaphorical phrase, would I distinguish who *won* and who *lost*?

This isn’t exactly the reasoning that was in my mind when I ultimately chose to implement an “ungraded” syllabus in my spring 2021 course. If I were to describe what drove me to that decision, the biggest factor would be my own exhaustion and my recognition of that same exhaustion on my students. After going through the pandemic teaching (and life) conditions for the previous year, I simply could not imagine myself getting through the slog of another course in which students were stressed out about deadlines (no matter how much I assured them extensions were always available), and in which my conversations with students focused almost completely on how they could ensure they were maximizing the points they could get on their assignments. When I consider what I want my students to understand coming out of my courses, the central

point is almost always that the way things are isn't the way things have to be, but rather, that culturally determined structures have shaped our sense of what is necessary in our social worlds. I want them to be able to think, at least a little bit, like anthropologists – to consider how they can use ethnographic methods and anthropological concepts to understand power, social relationships, communicative interaction, and processes of categorization. In this application, my research becomes my teaching. As Copeland and François Dengah (2016) observe, the artificially created sense of separation between these aspects of our work as academics (dividing our labor in to atomized boxes of “research,” “teaching,” and “service”) is a social construct whose utility can be questioned. Further, because I teach anthropology, I am not beholden to any kind of overarching structure of knowledge that a student must demonstrate in order to be competent in the field, as would perhaps be the case in engineering or medicine. As such, I can afford to ask: what if I let go of that control? What if differently situated students are allowed to learn and think with different parts of the toolset I am providing them? What if I can create a scenario where it's possible for everyone to win?

The specific approach to ungrading that I use relies on a portfolio assignment that students work on throughout the semester and submit for holistic assessment at the end of the term. I ask them to ensure that their portfolio includes some way of demonstrating their mastery of a few broad learning outcomes (for example, engagement with and understanding of academic readings), but they have autonomy in determining how and when they complete these elements. The assessment is completed collaboratively – while the university continues to assign me the role of final arbiter of the students' grades, I invite students to tell me what they think their grade should be as the starting point for their assessment. Prior to submission, they have been given guidance on what a “good” level of achievement would look like, and I encourage them to think of that as a baseline for a B level grade (see attached Appendix for a section of these guidelines). The most important component of this process is feedback. I create a folder in the course learning management system for each week of the semester, and I let students know that they can submit as much or as little of their work-in-progress as they would like. Each week, I set aside a specific time in my schedule to go through the folder and provide comments. No grade is provided; I simply indicate areas where the student is missing something or off-track, highlight interesting themes, answer their questions, or encourage them to cultivate an idea or approach that they seem to be developing. The process of giving gradeless feedback has transformed my relationship to students from being an adversarial one in which my primary job is as the gatekeeper of the As, to being a conversational one in which I can focus on *teaching* them. Recognizing the difference in affordances created by this interactional apparatus is another element in which I credit my training as a linguistic anthropologist.

In discussing this approach to teaching, the first thing many colleagues note is that it appears extremely time-consuming and that it does not scale well to large classes. This latter point is undoubtedly true – I have used this portfolio structure in courses with 40

students and under, beginning at the second-year level. In my first-year courses, which may have 150 or 200 students and rely on teaching assistants to help manage the assessment process, I have not been able to use this structure. While thus far, I have personally retained a more traditional approach to grades in those courses, the success of my previous transformations inspires me to try to identify how to use some of those models in these larger settings. With regard to labor, I also like to emphasize that the work I am doing in providing feedback replaces not only time spent grading, but also time spent engaged with students who are contesting their grades, managing and approving the minutia of tracking absences or late submissions, and even dealing with integrity violations.

Student responses to this assessment strategy have been, on the whole, positive, though it may be uncomfortable at first, perhaps especially for high achievers who have long relied on their ability to navigate academic expectations and find the best path to get an A. Trust building over the course of the semester, such that these students find the confidence to explore and experiment with moving away from checking boxes associated with their desired grade achievements, is vital. Such students often meet with me early in the semester or submit material into the feedback folder raising questions that function, pragmatically, as an attempt to get me to grade them covertly. In one recent case, a student shared that her submission had taken her hours to perfect – far more than would be expected for the length of what was submitted – and asked how she could avoid that in future. From my feedback, and my follow-up conversations with her, she not only realized that she could let go of the boxes to be ticked and find ways to explore creatively, but also that her long held assumptions about requiring clear guidelines and structure in order to fit her “learning style” were in fact holding her back from actually learning by keeping her focus only on the grade.

An ongoing challenge for me is how to support students, especially neurodivergent ones, who struggle with loose deadlines and lack of structure in the assignment timeline. In some cases, I have imposed “checkpoint” deadlines, where I reinsert a grade-based consequence if a student has not submitted anything for feedback by the checkpoints. More recently, I have leaned in to offering support rather than consequences to students who have not submitted anything, or only minimal work, at the halfway and two-thirds points of the semester. Most students respond to these personal emails and either present something for submission or ask for a meeting to discuss their barriers and concerns. In these meetings, I remind them that they are welcome to submit very rough drafts or outlines of their ideas, and I encourage them to lean in to their strengths – for example, if they have a special interest or are inclined to go down “rabbit holes” of reading, to share with me what they find in those areas. “Everything counts” is a mantra I have used with these students, meaning that whatever they have that shows their learning can be used in their favor. While no approach works with all students, I no longer find that this looseness is an insurmountable barrier for students who struggle in the absence of structure and deadlines.

Conclusions: Ungrading in its Structural Context

While I have focused in this reflection on the structural challenges that led me to apply critical pedagogical approaches, there are also specific conditions that have enabled me to do so. First and foremost, I am a tenured professor, and that allows me to take risks and explore options without fear of losing my livelihood. Even more so, I am tenured at an institution with a faculty union, so my work as a teacher, and students' perceptions of it, are evaluated in highly regimented ways. I work at a research-intensive university, which means that I have a low teaching load each semester and some flexibility in how I spend my work time. As noted above, the classes in which I have used this strategy are relatively small. I am also a white woman who speaks English natively, and I am never perceived as having an "accent" or way of speaking that leads to my being categorized as uneducated, unintelligible, or other negative valuations. Whether I would have been able to enact this type of pedagogy in the absence of one or more of those factors is impossible to say, but I am hopeful that if more people in positions like mine do so, it will strengthen the arguments allowing these practices to extend throughout the academy.

This reflection is not a claim to significant expertise on the idea of "going gradeless," but rather an attempt to articulate how my transformed approach to teaching extends from my training as an anthropologist. Anthropological observation and critique have made it clear to me that in our attempts to use grades to *measure* and *represent* learning, the systems around it have led to the *grade itself* being seen as the primary outcome of a course. The structural problems that these conditions produce became especially visible during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when all of the systems we have come to rely on cracked; these structures have yet to be fully repaired. As I teach my students, these systems that often seem like unbreakable universals are often very new and very culturally particular – grades have only been a part of learning systems for a little over a century. In inviting them not only to think, but also to learn, anthropologically, I have used the structure of the course itself as a space where, in a small way, we can do things differently and create different experiences. In this way, challenging the central assumptions about how teaching and assessment work constitutes not only the transmission of anthropological ideas, but an act of anthropological praxis.

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Appendix

The following is an example of the text I provide to students as a way of expressing how they should think about different levels of achievement in the course. This text is from a 200-level Cultural Anthropology course from Fall 2025. Prior to using this kind of statement, I occasionally had students who assessed themselves as deserving of an A+ for completing all of the required tasks; since I have used this kind of statement, students have never suggested a grade more than one level higher than what I would likely have assigned on my own (e.g., they suggest an A when I might have given them an A-).

When considering your grade, I will ask **you** to assess each section of your portfolio, as well as to consider how well it fits together into a “big picture” of your learning. This means that the starting point for conversation about your grade will come from you, and I will ask you to explain how you arrived at that. In your explanation, you should use the feedback you have received throughout the course, with a focus on what you have learned and how your understandings or skills have improved as a result of your work.

At the end of term, you will consider the feedback you have received throughout the semester and articulate how you think it translates to a letter grade. I encourage you to keep in mind the basic idea that a B is intended to represent an overall “good” level of achievement. This means that if you consistently submit work that meets the requirements, thoroughly answers the questions, and does not include significant misunderstandings or errors, your overall grade should be in the B-range. In order to assess yourself as achieving an A-range grade, you should be aiming for strong work that makes connections between ideas, shows an ability to apply the concepts, communicates your ideas in a well-organized way, and extends on what has been said directly in the course materials. A-range grades must also demonstrate that you have considered feedback (either mine or your peers’) and used it to improve on your work throughout the term.