Ungrading: A Reimagined Assessment of Student Learning

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The Problem with Grades

I've never felt comfortable with giving students grades. What does an A mean? What does a C mean? **Can two students have learned the same amount and put the same effort into a course yet received two different grades?**

Delving into the literature on anti-oppressive pedagogy, I concluded that **traditional grading is an oppressive practice** that
- privileges students from highly resourced backgrounds.
- discourages students from taking risks.
- creates competition rather than collaboration.
- enforces the instructor-student power differential.
- is often arbitrary and subjective, even with rigorous rubrics.
- is not an accurate indicator of learning

One Solution

"'Ungrading' means raising an eyebrow at grades as a systemic practice, distinct from simply 'not grading.' The word is a present participle, an ongoing process, not a static set of practices (Jesse Stommel)."

Ungrading is both an approach and an activity that aims to **put the focus of students on learning and to transform assessment onto socially just and inclusive practice.**

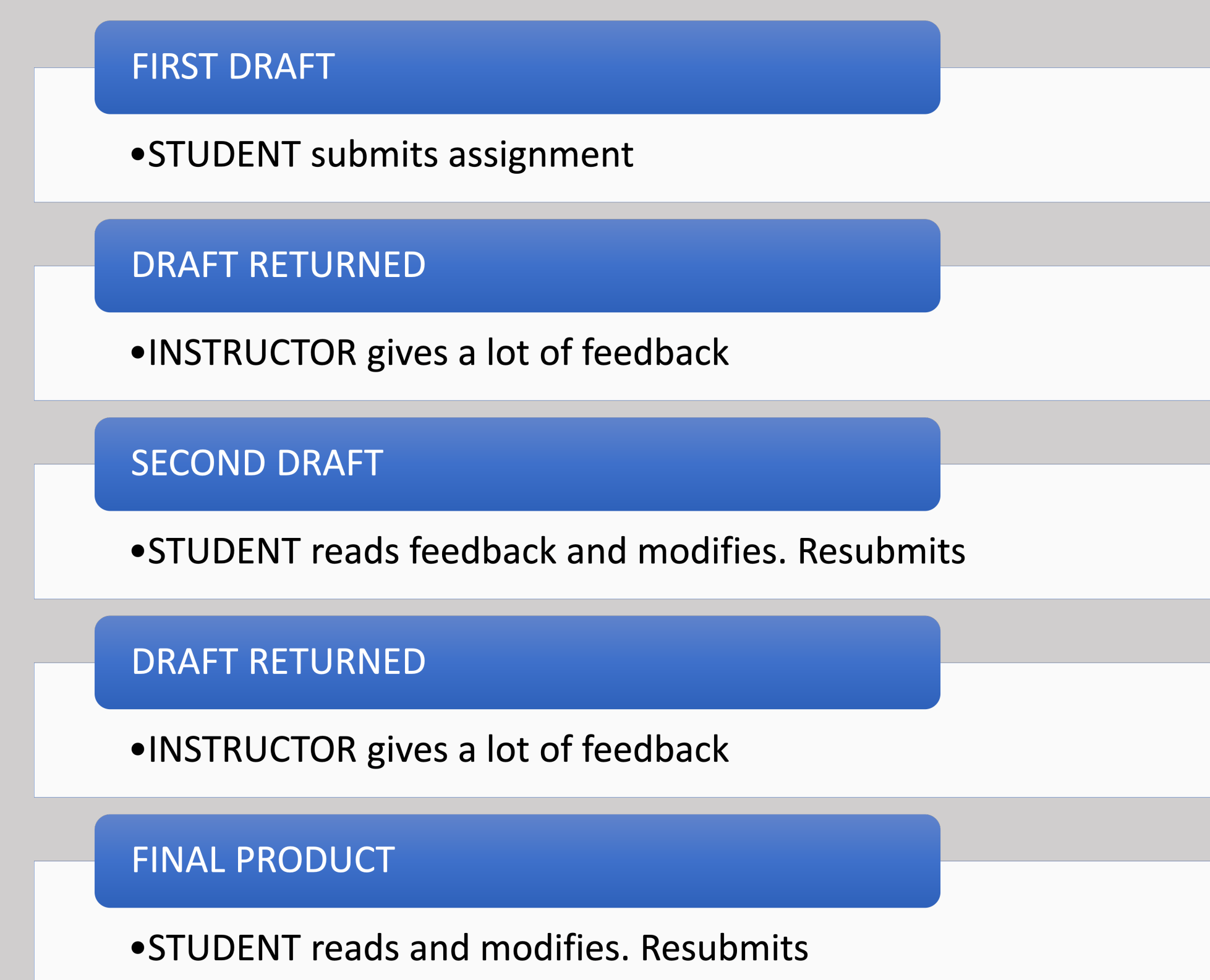## Essential Features of Ungrading

1. a shift in focus from the outcome (a grade in a course) to the process of learning
2. extensive feedback by the instructor on assignments in place of a grade
3. revision of assignments based on that feedback
4. **the opportunity for students to reflect on and evaluate their learning and give themselves a grade accordingly.**

Importance of Feedback

In her study on enhancing and undermining intrinsic motivation in grade school students, Butler (1988) found that **students who received only comments outperformed students who received grades *and* comments, and those who received only grades.** Students who received comments only were able to see the work as separate from themselves and something they had the power to change.

The Components of Ungrading
Part 1: Feedback Loop

Ungrading is a recursive process whereby the student submits an assignment, and the instructor provides constructive written or verbal feedback until a final product is achieved.

FIRST DRAFT
- STUDENT submits assignment

DRAFT RETURNED
- INSTRUCTOR gives a lot of feedback

SECOND DRAFT
- STUDENT reads feedback and modifies. Resubmits

DRAFT RETURNED
- INSTRUCTOR gives a lot of feedback

FINAL PRODUCT
- STUDENT reads and modifies. Resubmits

Part 2: The "Process Letter"

Students write a letter articulating what they learned and how the learning process was for them without having to focus on grades. These sample questions serve as a guide:
- What do you know now that you did not know before doing this assignment?
- Was the project challenging? Was it fun? Did it seem useful? What didn't seem useful?
- Did you learn anything unexpected?
- Did you expect to learn something you didn't learn?
- Did you become curious about anything new?
- What did you learn about how you learn?

Student Testimonials

" . . . this process forces you to actually self-reflect and define the quality of your work on your own. I have had to try and become more comfortable with defining my achievements without external validation . . ."

"This experience certainly made me realize how much I do for my professors rather than for the advancement of my own learning and skills, particularly in graduate school as I am learning for the sake of my profession and the individuals/communities I am going to serve."

"My learning and performance in this class became its own intrinsic motivation. Also, because of the lack of focus on grades, I could really try to do my best work without fitting some arbitrary rubric. "

Results of Ungrading

In student process letters, important themes emerged from the ungrading experience:
1. Lower stress and anxiety doing the assignment
2. Self-directed, intrinsically motivated learning
3. Appreciation for the feedback on what went right
4. An increased sense of responsibility and accountability
5. Acquiring a valuable skill of self-assessment
6. Focus on learning rather than the grade
7. Appreciation for instructor's trust in the students

Challenges to Consider

1. Students have been deeply socialized to focus on grades. It is not easy to shift their focus to *learning*.
2. Ungrading is a more labor-intensive strategy than giving grades. It requires providing continuous feedback and meeting with students to discuss their learning.
3. **Instructors must be comfortable surrendering some of their power and trusting their students.**

SCAN ME

Video made in collaboration with the CTL used in course to introduce students to the concept of ungrading

References

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