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Review of Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead), edited by Susan D. Blum

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REVIEW

Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead), edited by Susan D. Blum
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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.

Since anthropology provides such a well-established tool to re-envision education along more democratic lines, it always surprises me that we don't see more anthropologists participating in the ongoing interdisciplinary project of critical pedagogy. Foundational scholars in the field such as Paolo Freire and bell hooks began as teachers of language and literature, and recent contributions come from educators with backgrounds in English (Ashton 2017; Morris and Stommel 2018), education and digital humanities (Bali et al. 2020), and history (Gannon 2020), who have provided both impassioned manifestos and practical sourcebooks. Anthropologists, on the other hand, tend not to turn their analytic attention to their own institutions of higher education, as Hugh Gusterson (2017) explored.

One prominent counterexample is the work of Susan D. Blum. Beginning with an investigation of just the sort I hypothesized above, responding specifically to the question "Why do students plagiarize?" (Blum 2009), Blum next wrote an ethnography of her students' experience in higher education more broadly, which also functions as an autoethnography of her own experience of conducting this research as a classroom practitioner-scholar (Blum 2016). She then argued for the field of anthropology as a

whole to take up "learning, education, and schooling" as a major focus on the level of food or medical anthropology (Blum 2019). Now, in *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead),* Blum has compiled an interdisciplinary sourcebook to inspire educators of any subject at any level to think critically about their assessment practices and abandon whatever does not serve students' learning.

The overall argument of the book is that, while some form of assessment may be necessary to help students learn and know that they are learning, the grading practices that are commonly used to achieve this may not be a good fit for the purpose and ought to be reconsidered, if not discarded outright. The volume begins with a foreword by progressive education theorist Alfie Kohn and an introduction by Blum, both of which remind the reader that grades are a comparatively recent invention – dating, in their current form, from around the turn of the 20th century – that create as many problems as they solve, from their unreliability as a metric to their lack of detail as a feedback mechanism to the way they incentivize "easy As" and even academic dishonesty at the expense of actual teaching and learning. Next follow 13 essays demonstrating why an educator might do away with traditional grades, what might replace them, and how the transition might take place, divided into three sections: Foundations and Models, Practices, and Reflections.

While the authors in this volume represent a variety of liberal arts and natural science fields from both secondary and higher education, I read it as an anthropologist, and I felt a distinctly anthropological orientation throughout the collection. The first essay is by Jesse Stommel, founder of the Digital Pedagogy Lab, who argues for ungrading on grounds that resemble the familiar anthropological critique of quantification and experimental methods: "human action is incredibly complex … different humans engage in different ways at different times, and much of that engagement is effectively invisible to crude quantitative mechanisms … we can't participate authentically, can't engage in real dialogue, without first disrupting the power dynamics of grading" (31). Next, high school English teacher Aaron Blackwelder describes a problem-based assessment that requires students to complete what is essentially an applied anthropology intervention in which they "research the problems locally by performing interviews and surveys [and] create positive change in our school" (48), an experience that he summarizes by explaining, "In order to make learning relevant to them, I had to listen to them" (49). What better way to capture the value of emic perspectives? Next is Blum's own contribution regarding the other changes that must take place in a course to make ungrading possible, and although she never uses the term, her observations struck me as decolonial in spirit: ungrading entails sacrificing the uniformity that institutional policies require, recognizing that students each have their own "learning goals" and their own reasons for taking a class, and encouraging students to write for self-expression rather than to satisfy an external evaluator. Further on, in Chapter 10, high school math teacher Gary Chu's essay takes a reflexive turn when he discusses his own experience as a K–12 student: "I felt obligated to prove to my parents, teachers, peers, and society that I was a

good student, and getting good grades was the proof. So I played the game and got good grades just because" (162). Other authors present ungrading through folklore and through autoethnography, offering critical perspectives that make strange the familiar act of grading. Finally, writer and writing teacher John Warner offers a holistic perspective that connects his decision to ungrade with his struggles to create an attendance policy, his overall pedagogical philosophy, and the material circumstances of his work as contingent faculty. As Blum discusses in her conclusion, an ungraded course is not simply a traditional course in which everyone happens to get an A; instead, ungrading forces a rethinking of relationships not only between students and faculty but among faculty within an institution, between secondary and higher education settings, and between educators and the institutional policies and procedures that enable and constrain their work.

The diversity of perspectives represented here also provides a diversity of approaches to ungrading. At first I was surprised to read about techniques that I would have assumed were incompatible with ungrading; after Blum points out that "'learning outcomes' assume uniformity, in the factory model of schooling" (55), I was taken aback when high school English teacher Arthur Chiaravalli offers "relatively easy [ways] to document student progress toward meeting learning targets" (84), and when chemistry professor Clarissa Sorensen-Unruh shares a syllabus that assigns 15% of the grade to in-class exercises and 45% to major exams (Chapter 9). On further reflection, though, I realized what this really indicates: ungrading is not an all-or-nothing or one-size-fits-all approach but must be sensitive to local contexts and institutional requirements. Chiaravalli's "learning targets" come up in a discussion of how students might suggest their own preferred ways to demonstrate their learning. Sorensen-Unruh's case study shows that it's possible to implement ungrading in just a few elements of a course, so that if you have institutional constraints such as a department-wide common final exam, as she did, there are still ways to implement principles of ungrading. This, too, is an anthropological orientation: rather than being inflexibly prescriptive, any intervention must be adaptable enough to maintain sensitivity to local communities and to allow local participants to take ownership of it. Especially for educators new to ungrading, it is important to know that other options exist between naïve overambition (Ginsberg 2016) and the status quo.

For more anthropologists to conduct research on learning, education, and schooling (Blum 2019) or to engage with the interdisciplinary scholarship of teaching and learning, may be an ambitious goal; but as anthropologists know well, reflexivity begins at home, potentially as close as our own classrooms. This collection demonstrates not only that the practice of critical pedagogy is a way to leverage anthropological perspectives, but that the specific act of ungrading aligns with anthropological values, relying as it does on upending hierarchies and listening to the Other. For any teachers of anthropology who are interested in or curious about ungrading, this volume provides a variety of reasons to attempt it as well as ways to get there.

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