July 2020

Team Grade Anarchy: A Conversation about the Troubled Transition of Grading

Jared Del Rosso
University of Denver

Blake Nordstrom-Wehner
University of Denver

TEAM GRADE ANARCHY: A CONVERSATION ABOUT THE TROUBLED TRANSITION OF GRADING

Jared Del Rosso, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology & Criminology, University of Denver

Blake Nordstrom-Wehner, Second Year Student, Gender and Women's Studies Major (GWST), Critical Race and Ethnic Studies Minor, President of the DU Queer Student Alliance, University of Denver

This essay takes the form of a conversation, shared through emails and Zoom calls, between Blake Nordstrom-Wehner (they / them / theirs) and Jared Del Rosso (he / him / his) about the effect of grades on teaching and learning.

Blake and Jared participated in the Spring 2020 Student-Faculty Partnership Program, organized by Virginia Pitts, Director of University Teaching in the Office of Teaching and Learning, at the University of Denver (DU). The partnership took place in Jared's spring quarter sociology and criminology elective, State Violence. This course usually enrolls about 30 students, mostly majors and minors in sociology and criminology. It is designed as a face-to-face course, but this spring, it was fully online. DU's undergraduate program uses a ten-week quarter schedule, and spring quarter runs from late-March through mid-June. The university went remote for the entire quarter, having sent the vast majority of students home amid finals during winter quarter. The single week of spring break provided emergency prep time for faculty to bring their courses online.

During the second week of the quarter, DU announced that a "modified Pass / Fail option" would be available for students during the spring quarter. This optional system allowed students to designate a course pass / fail, up to three days after receiving final grades in their courses. Students would receive a mark of Pass Plus for grades of C- or above. Pass would mark grades in the D range. No Pass would mark grades of F. (Why "Pass Plus?" Normally, students need to receive a grade of C- or above for a course to count for a major or minor. The university decided to continue distinguishing between students who passed with a C- or better and those who passed with a grade in the D range. Students need to receive a Pass Plus to receive credit for courses within majors or minors.)

Blake and Jared began talking about grading around Week 7, when it seemed like students in State Violence and Jared had found their way to something like a functioning course. Most of our conversation took place before Memorial Day, the start of Week 9. Then, the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, the widespread protests of police violence and anti-Black racism, and the violent state and federal response to those protests rapidly changed the U.S. Inevitably, this also meant that the context of teaching and learning at DU changed.

Late in Week 9, a student petition and social media pressure led the university to ask DU's Faculty Senate to vote on providing final exam accommodations to students. The student petition asked for accommodations for students of color. DU's Interim Provost instead asked Faculty Senate to vote on making accommodations available to all students, and the Senate voted to support blanket accommodations. The vote empowered faculty to give accommodations to all

students in their classes, including optional finals, alternative finals, and extensions. Jared gave all students the option to take an extra week to submit their final project, which most students had drafted the week prior.

The use, purpose, and meaning of grades was among the troubled transitions of the spring quarter. Many universities decided, as DU did, to offer a pass / fail option. But Blake and Jared both believe that this troubled transition might prompt a deeper consideration of grades, in order to promote more meaningful, authentic, equitable, and just teaching and learning in college classrooms.

Conversation about Grades

Jared: When you think about the effects of grading at DU—outside and inside your GWST major—what comes to mind?

Blake: For the classes outside GWST, grades just feel very stifling. They define what's considered valuable work, academic work, and even what's considered to be "work" more generally. You often have a strict rubric. Or you have grading that is based on standard English grammar, a classist as well as racist standard (hooks 1994). Even when your ideas are unique and valuable, your grade may suffer if your work doesn't fit the professor's expectations. But these expectations are set in ways that favor students with a particular background and particular training. It seems the more privilege you have coming into the classroom, the more likely you are to receive a grade that then bolsters your privilege (Supiano 2018).

This is often dismantled in my GWST courses. In most of my GWST classes, I've rarely received a rubric with more than three components. Usually, these are general. Did you answer the prompt? Did you refer to course content? Are you generating your own ideas? It's very freeing to not have strict rubrics. But it's also scary. It runs counter to the clear-cut expectations of high school and most of my other college classes.

Jared: I've used ungrading strategies (Supiano 2019) in both my winter quarter class (a required social theory course) and this spring (in State Violence). I'm finding that students often resist or worry about non-traditional grading strategies. Have you noticed this in your GWST courses?

Blake: Some of my peers hate this. They want that clarity about what content correlates to what grade. Faculty respond in a few ways. One is to say, "I recognize this is different and difficult, so we'll set up review and check-in meetings." Others might say, "There's no rubric because I want a dialogue with you about the course," and just leave it at that.

I think a lot of fear about turning in an assignment without a concise rubric is that you won't get a good grade. I don't think most students are worried about what faculty think of them or about the intrinsic worth of their essay. For me, it's more about that fear of a bad grade.

Jared: Perhaps one thing that contributes to this fear of a bad grade is that so much of faculty-student communication is about grades. I've found it isn't enough to use ungrading strategies; I also unlearn the habits that I have for giving feedback. When I use a traditional grading structure and rubric, I would often craft my feedback to explain to students why their paper was deficient in terms of a grade—for instance, *"this earned a B on this criteria and not higher because…."* Responding this way, I often end up coaching students on how to make specific changes that will contribute to a better grade.

 I've also used language around grades that I don't think holds up. I'd write that a student "earned" a grade or, more neutrally, "received" a grade. I've realized, though, that the truth is I *assign* a grade. The former wording effaces the role of professor power and makes the grade appear more objective than it really is.

I've found all this deeply unsatisfying, particularly when students submit semi-autobiographical writing that uses course materials to illuminate the role of inequality or trauma in their lives. Applying a grade and "coaching" a student on how to improve the grade on an essay like that feels inappropriate, alienating, and, I think, even risks being harmful. More generally, I find that coaching students toward an improved grade often misses the mark. What makes student work original, illuminating, or deep is often not captured by the criteria that I list on a rubric, even though I've worked hard to develop purposeful rubrics.

I'm trying to find my way to feedback strategies that more clearly perceive what a student was attempting to achieve in their work and guide them toward a version of their work that more fully realizes this vision. I'm wondering, in your experience, how faculty can use written feedback to authentically contribute to students' learning.

Blake: I personally find the "compliment sandwich" to be quite grating, as it often feels insincere. Personally, I could go without the compliment if it's not sincere. But I also understand it is beneficial in a lot of cases, especially surrounding sensitive topics.

Rather than having to come up with two positives surrounding a critique, I prefer when a professor offers a positive followed by a question that gives me agency and ownership over my work while still opening the door for improvement. This is actually the type of feedback I often receive in peer review sessions and I've found it to be invaluable. Feedback like:

- It seems like you keep returning to this one specific example. Do you think that is too repetitive, or does it strengthen your argument?

- That paragraph is very insightful. How might it change in impact if you provided a citation or moved it to X location?

I also really appreciate links to external articles or books that relate to what I am writing about because it feels like it centers and values learning and curiosity.

Jared: And what about grades? Are there ways to use grades as feedback to authentically contribute to students' learning?

Blake: This, I have no idea how to approach. I've been struggling with this question a lot considering how ingrained grades are at the personal and institutional level. I am personally on Team Grade Anarchy and find that grading can feel like a dehumanizing circus act. I've never once felt that I learned more material as the result of a grade. I *have* honed in on my ability to follow instructions and decrypt the hidden curriculum to raise my GPA, but that is not really what I want out of my education. On that note, I'd go on a rant about how grading as we know it works to uphold harmful power structures, but I don't know that that's what we're going for here (Wolff 2019).

Jared: Well, it kind of is, as it raises questions about the purpose of grading. In *"I Love Learning; I Hate School,"* Susan D. Blum (2016) makes this point about grades serving capitalist interests. Grading, as we practice it, dates to the 1800s. Grades were developed largely as a way of sorting, ranking, and, with the later development of standardized exams, comparing students. This is exactly what a bureaucratically-organized, capitalist society requires.

I know that faculty are also concerned that grades are necessary, particularly in graduate programs, as a way of vouching for students as they enter professional fields. This came up in conversations about using the pass / fail option this quarter. For individual faculty members, I think it also reflects tradition—a sense that this is how we do things in higher education. Some of us may buy into the notion that grades, which many of us believe students indeed earn, reflect worth, intellect, or maybe effort. Others may believe grades are the primary motivators of student work. I think some faculty resisted pass / fail options this quarter for that reason; they worried that without the carrot-of-a-grade dangling, students wouldn't be motivated to complete coursework.

Assumptions about motivation, tradition, and bureaucratic imperatives compel us to grade, which is why, I think, many ungrading practices still boil down to a grade, just given in a different way. Many faculty, even those of who see grades as stifling or counterproductive, don't yet imagine ourselves as members of "Team Grade Anarchy," though maybe COVID-19 is forcing us to rethink this.

Blake: Are there any times where you feel like grades have had a positive impact on you or your students' learning?

Jared: I'm really reluctant to make a case for grading. As an undergraduate, I felt most alienated—including in courses I thoroughly enjoyed—when I felt that I was working "for the grade." It was sort of a dual pressure. I think most of my professors used rather traditional writing assignments with rather traditional grading approaches. So that was the top-down pressure; they sent signals that my work needed to take specific forms and meet certain, usually unarticulated expectations to receive a high grade. But there was also the internalized tension. I *wanted* to receive a good grade; but really, I wanted to simply learn

and express, creatively and in my own ways, what I learned. And those two desires didn't usually align.

As an educator, I loathe grades and grading. I think if you were to survey faculty members (during normal times) and ask them what they like least about teaching, the vast majority would say grading. Grading raises all sorts of problems. Inevitably, cheating and plagiarism are products of grading as we traditionally practice it; Blum (2016) makes this point. And when you use traditional grading practices, you often feel pressure to give the sort of feedback I described earlier: feedback that justifies the grade, rather than feedback that genuinely promotes, guides, or coaches learning. As grades can be alienating for students, I think grading is similarly alienating for many faculty.

Using "ungrading" strategies last quarter and, to a lesser extent this one, allowed me to use my feedback to better promote learning. I try to highlight the good ideas, explain what could potentially help the student develop them further in optional revisions, and offer different choices for ways to improve a work. I hope this is consistent with what you describe as useful feedback—questions and suggestions that offer students multiple trajectories for continuing their work. My feedback is no longer along the lines of, "if you do 'X,' your grade on this criteria would improve." Rather, "I think your essay is making a strong case for X. If this idea interests you, consider these things…" The feedback feels more authentic, to me at least, and, I hope, to the students.

Thinking about ungrading strategies, I'm curious to hear what you've learned about grading from the ungraded relationship at the heart of the student-faculty partnership program.

Blake: With the partnership program, there are no grades. You still interact with other students, faculty, and Virginia, but without the power structure that's set in stone with grades. In my GWST classes, you still operate within the institution and, so, you still receive grades. In the student-faculty partnership program, you don't feel like you have to filter yourself with academic jargon to have your thoughts valued or considered correct.

Jared: Another way of thinking about this is to imagine the student-faculty partnership program was part of a 4-credit, graded, course experience. (That's not that crazy of an idea, in my view, particularly as university budgets evaporate over the summer.) Imagine Virginia took into consideration my assessment of your work when assigning your grade. What would change about our work together?

Blake: If it was a graded experience, I think I would waste a lot of time agonizing over how grammatically correct this email is. I would probably do the same for all my notes. I assume some student partners, including myself, would hesitate to be vulnerable about the ways students think about and prioritize graded classes. Other than that, I'm having a difficult time with this question because it's hard to even imagine this experience as a graded course. Perhaps that speaks to how difficult it is to translate a graded course into an ungraded one?

Jared: What do you mean by hesitate? And why hesitate?

Blake: It's hard to put a pin in the nature of the hesitation for me. Certainly, I have concerns about negative feedback causing my grade to be lower. In theory, grades are given based on quality of work, but that can't possibly be the case all the time. I know that my papers are being graded by a person and that person has some opinion about me. How might a professor feel if I told them that I'm struggling to prioritize their coursework? What if I admit that I find a certain assignment to be less meaningful than I would have hoped? Will that affect my grade? In smaller classes, the relationship between professors and students might be more personal, meaning my comment could easily be recalled while my assignment (with my name on it) is being graded. In larger classes, maybe the professor doesn't know my name. But they just might learn it if I come up to them after class to inquire about the value of a particular assignment or ask that they consider contacting Campus Life and Inclusive Excellence about reducing harmful language use.

Jared: I'm interested in this because I think this speaks to something central to learning, within the traditional grading structure. This "hesitation" and the worry over minutiae (grammar within a conversational email, for instance) suggest ways that grades may interfere with genuine learning.

Scholarship on teaching and learning (Brookfield, 2015) suggests that faculty must know how students are interpreting lectures, activities, readings, feedback, and everything else if we're to be effective. This is one reason we solicit anonymous feedback. Yet, all of the classroom experience should be data for the professor to learn how teaching and learning are or are not working. If there's this moment of hesitance from students—which I take as a moment in which a student weighs whether to be candid—the flow of experience will mislead the professor. Professors are likely to hear and see what students think the professors *want* to hear and see, rather than what is actually going on in the students' learning. To me, this is likely to mislead professors about the progress students are making as learners and the effectiveness of the professor's teaching. It's also going to interfere with our work to be critically reflective about what we're doing.

I think teaching and learning should be replete with hesitations, though not the kind I understand you as describing. Hesitations, in discussions and in writing, can reveal what we understand and what we don't yet. They can, then, set the stage for future learning. They also suggest the ambivalence of human knowledge and learning, as when we hesitate to answer a question posed in a binary—"do you agree or disagree…"—in those terms. The hesitancies map the complexities, the proverbial "gray areas," of learning and of human life.

But if the hesitations signal a student's reluctance to ask for help or more from the professor, for fear of how the professor will respond with grades, it will, I think, stunt teaching and learning. And if grades underlie that hesitancy, it's yet another way in which they alienate and trouble learning.

Blake: You mention that "professors are often likely to hear and see what students think the professors want to hear and see, rather than what is actually going on in the students' learning." I am so, so, so guilty of doing this. I've gone so far as to stay after class to ask questions about the content that I don't even care about just to make the professor understand that I am truly putting effort into the class. Why? Because I know I don't have enough in me to write an "A" essay, but seeing my professor's face light up when I ask a question gives me hope that my "B" essay might just pass for more than what it's worth, according to the rubric. I am well aware of how ridiculous this is. Who is this even serving? No one! But I need grades to put on my grad school applications and I don't always feel like actually engaging with the content is the most efficient way to do that.

Jared: That hurts my heart. But I've seen it, too. I've made the mistake, in the past, of awarding extra "engagement" points to balance out the myriad penalties (for late work, "excess" absences, etc.) in the syllabus. These were meant to "reward" students who go "above and beyond" by going to the Writing Center with revisions or meeting with me. They led, in some cases, to transparent efforts to earn a few points, at the edge of the overall grade. The conversations they promoted were sometimes meaningful, sometimes not. I don't do that anymore.

I've also mostly stopped using grading penalties. In the past, I've penalized "no credit" submissions (or non-submissions) by not awarding the 5 or so points the assignment is worth. Not only is this a bad fit for the ungrading strategies I'm drawn to, I found that students who lost these points tended to be the ones working full time jobs, taking an extra class to ensure a timely graduation, or experiencing personal emergencies.

This spring, if a student misses one of these small, credit / no credit steps, I just shift those points to the final project. That way, students can still earn full credit in the course, even when something keeps them from completing the smaller assignments over the quarter. This felt absolutely necessary to me amid COVID-19, as any sort of grading penalty this quarter felt unproductive, offensive, and borderline unethical. There was just too much that could go wrong, too much that could legitimately take students away from their courses. Doing away with penalties and shifting points around meant the grading structure was more flexible than usual. The approach provided something like blanket accommodations to all students, and I didn't need to work out make up work, extensions, and things like that on a case-by-case basis and amid duress.

The approach also allows students to make decisions about what work is meaningful to them. If developing an outline or receiving a peer review isn't meaningful to them, or they have too much going on that week, they can opt not to complete the assignment and earn the points in other ways.

All of this begs the question, is pass / fail a solution to the problems associated with grading? Would you advocate that we make our spring quarter accommodations permanent, in recognition that all quarters contain, at least for some students, the profound challenges, losses, and traumas that spring quarter contained?

Blake: I would love to see every school use pass/fail (or pass/no pass) into the foreseeable future until grading can be deconstructed entirely. I think, in general, it decreases inequities among students, though it would be more helpful if it was the default grading structure rather than optional (as it was this past quarter).

Still, I don't think pass/fail is a real solution. Pass/fail grading doesn't get rid of ableism, racism, transphobia, or any other mode of systemic oppression, as well as the transgenerational trauma they produce, that contributes to inequitable grading practices. It feels more like a bandage or perhaps a step in the right direction to me, but not a fix in and of itself.

I can't help but wonder: What problem is pass/fail is trying to solve, exactly? Many of the issues surrounding grading appear to stem from valuing work on a scale that inhibits learning and perpetuates existing inequalities. I worry that using pass/fail only serves to turn this scale into a "good enough" versus "not good enough" binary without actually getting past the problems that grading presents. After all, the pass/fail grading system is just that: a grading system.

Jared: I think a pass / fail grading structure can undercut one of the historical purposes of grades – to standardize, compare, and rank students. I think, too, that it could help address some of the harmful effects on learning that we've been talking about—for instance, your example of asking a professor a question you're uninterested in so as to perform the role of the "A" student. It could also, if implemented alongside a student-centered culture of teaching and learning, flatten the power relationships between professors and students. But I agree that shifts in grading structures are insufficient to address systemic oppression and social inequality, which both structure institutional practices at universities and are reproduced by universities.

One of the things this past quarter is teaching me is that an individual course and its professor can partially—but only partially—protect against or resist these effects. I say partially here for a few reasons. One is that a course, from the institutional perspective, still must boil down to a grade. Another reason is that, as professors, we teach and learn with students who are in several courses at once. Inevitably, the structures designed by other faculty members will shape students' experience of my courses. Students will have to make decisions about how to use their time and energy across courses. They will have to consider all their courses at once, not just mine in isolation. And all these individual-level decisions about course design and implementation will add up to a culture of teaching and learning, which may or may not align with my own. Students will approach my courses, my assignments, and me, too, in ways and with habits learned in other courses. This is to say, I'm learning that it's not enough to tinker with my course design. Change—and, so, work for change—has to happen at other institutional and social levels.

What about you? Over this past quarter, what have you learned about how you prioritize learning, grades, and your courses?

Blake: I am always working to prioritize learning. My greatest missteps have come from ignorance. Never do I cause more harm than when I am acting on misinformation or lack of information. Because of this, learning has and continues to be a priority for me. Sometimes I get that from the classroom, but often times I do not.

As for grades, I have always struggled to prioritize this, but have managed to do so in a way that often impacts my learning. In past quarters, I have often prioritized grades more so than the actual class. For example, last spring, I once (or possibly twice?) skipped your course on denial for a Native Student Alliance action. Each time, I checked in with you first in an attempt to make sure my grade wasn't going to be negatively affected (yikes, sorry!). I have skipped many readings so that I can prioritize Advocacy and Support meetings, edit lists of demands, etc., but I try to pick readings that I know I won't be quizzed or graded on. It rarely affects my grade enough to let it fall below a letter I think will get me into grad school. What I'm trying to get at is, I care more about getting a "good" grade than knowing the composition of the earth's mesosphere.

As for courses, this is where it gets messy for me. I usually prioritize courses when I find them meaningful or when I need to in order to keep my grades up. I do this by working overtime when I can so that I can skip class or miss an assignment when I need to tend to more important things. That worked for me up until about a week ago when protests against police brutality and anti-Black racism saw a surge in both participation and publicity. I have too many friends and community members in immediate need for me to justify prioritizing my courses at the moment, even if it may impact my grades significantly. To prioritize classes (or even grades) at this moment simply because I can personally afford to is not in line with my values. I have heard my white and NBPOC colleagues speak of feeling empowered by focusing on school because that is what they feel their role is as students. I try to refuse to play into that always, but especially now and especially because I can easily afford not to.

Jared: You're suggesting how important it is for faculty to consider the social context of learning (Martinez-Cola et al., 2018). There isn't this firewall between our classroom and the rest of the world that forces other commitments and priorities to fall away when we enter a classroom, log into Canvas, or show up for a Zoom meeting. I think, in readying for spring quarter and persisting throughout it, many professors realized this. But looking forward to the fall, I wonder if some faculty members might begin thinking that students had time to plan for another unusual, troubled quarter. Some faculty might also expect that students already know how to succeed in an online course. Others might think it's time to return to "business as usual," even though we're really nowhere near there yet.

What would you hope individual faculty members consider, when designing courses, for fall quarter?

Blake: I just hope faculty members have empathy. I hope students' lives are considered important. I hope that professors do not take for granted that schoolwork is a priority for their students. Mostly, I hope faculty share the power to determine what counts as

meaningful work, and I hope that students, finally, can themselves determine what that means.

References

Blum, S. D. (2016). *"I Love Learning; I Hate School": An Anthropology of College*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Brookfield, S. D. (2015). *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

hooks, bell. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

Martinez-Cola, M., English, R., Min, J., Peraza, J., Tambah, J., & Yebauh. C. (2018). When pedagogy is painful: Teaching in tumultuous times. *Teaching Sociology,* 46(2), 97-111.

Supiano, B. (2018). Traditional teaching may deepen inequality. Can a different approach fix it? *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 6. Retrieved June 24, 2020 (https://www.chronicle.com/article/Traditional-Teaching-May/243339).

Supiano, B. (2019). Grades can hinder learning. What should professors use instead? *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 19. Retrieved June 24, 2020 (https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190719_ungrading).

Wolff, R. D. (2019). "Grades are capitalism in action. Let's get them out of our schools. *Truthout,* August 5. Retrieved June 24, 2020 (https://truthout.org/articles/grades-are-capitalism-in-action-lets-get-them-out-of-our-schools/).