

# Alternative Grading Practices

Ungrading,  
Specifications Grading,  
and More

**Dr. Dana Wanzer**

[wanzerd@uwstout.edu](mailto:wanzerd@uwstout.edu)

04/22/2022





# Dana Wanzer

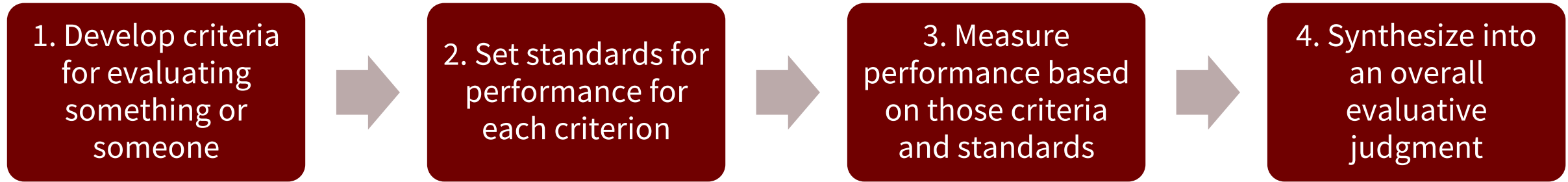
- Assistant Professor of Psychology in Evaluation at the University of Wisconsin-Stout
  - BS in Psychology
  - MS in Applied Psychology
  - Evaluation, statistics, methods, interpersonal effectiveness, etc.
- My profession is evaluation and applied research methods.



# My journey toward alternative grading practices



# Evaluation & Teaching



- Instructors and institutions usually decide the criteria & standards and measure performance.
- This is not an inclusive approach to evaluation, nor does it best support student learning and growth.
- **How can we better bring students into their evaluation processes?**

# Some foundational questions about assessment

- Who is assessment for? How does this question force us to rethink how institutions structure their systems for evaluation?
- What's the difference between grading and feedback? To what extent should teachers be readers of student work (as opposed to evaluators)?
- Why do we grade? How does it feel to be graded? What do we want grading to do (or not do) in our classes (for students or teachers)?
- What would happen if we didn't grade? What would be the benefits? What issues would this raise for students and/or teachers?

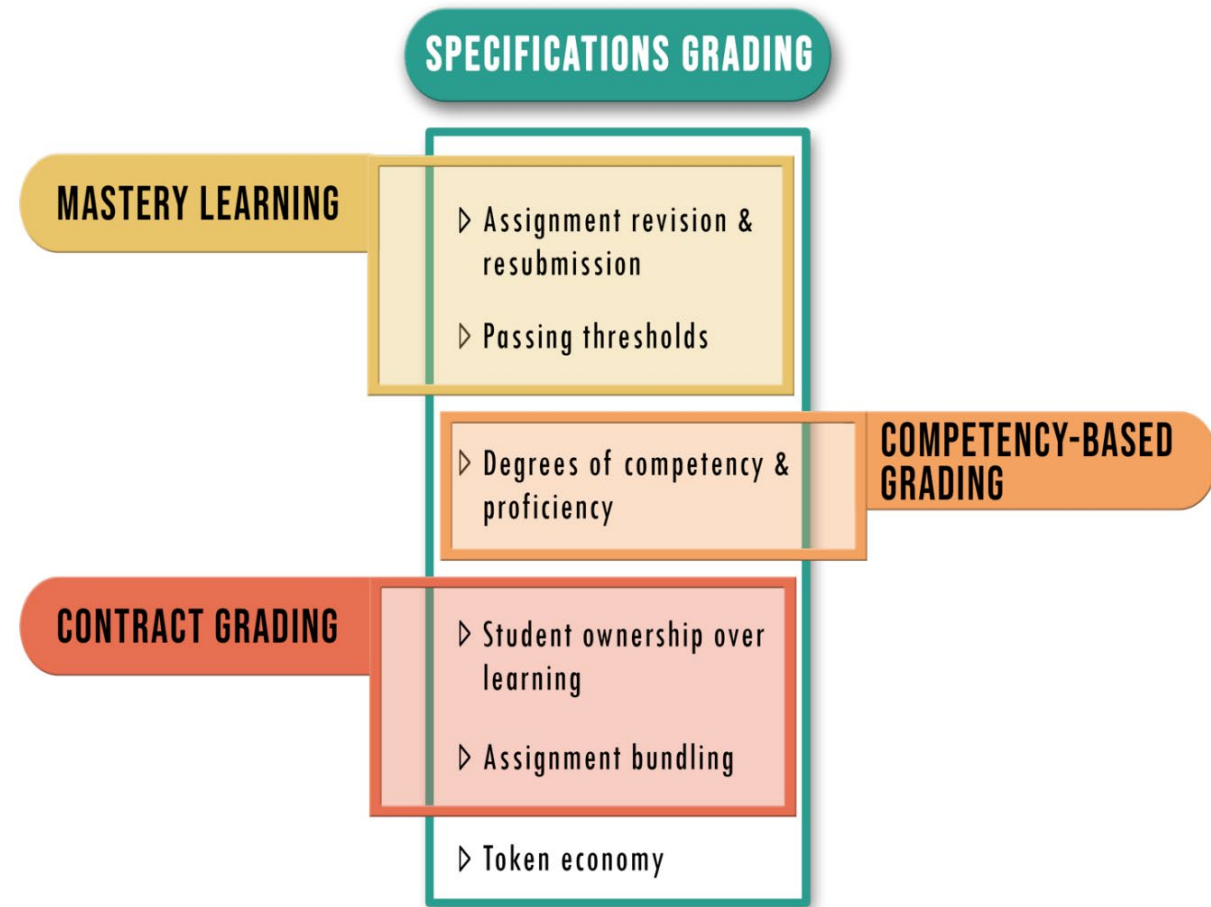
# Some of the problems with grades

## “Traditional grading:

- Stifles risk-taking
- Reduces trust between the teacher and student
- Supports the “commodity of grades”
- Hides information
- Invites biases
- Provides misleading information
- Demotivates and disempowers students” (Feldman, 2018)

# Alternative Grading Systems

- Standards-based grading
- Competency-based grading
- Contract/labor grading
- Mastery-based education
- Specifications grading
- Ungrading
- *and more!*



# Alternative Grading Systems





# Equitable Grading

## Accurate

and reflect a student's academic performance

- Avoiding zeros
- Minimum grading
- 0-4 scale
- Weighting more recent performance
- Grades are based on an individual's achievement, not the group's

## Bias-resistant

and prevent biased subjectivity from affecting grades

- Grades based on required content, not extra work
- Grades based on student work, not timing of work
- Alternative (non-grade) consequences for cheating
- Excluding participation and effort
- Grades based entirely on summative assessments, not formative assessments (such as homework)

## Motivating

for students to strive for academic success, persevere, accept struggles and setbacks, and gain critical lifelong skills

- Minimum grading and 0-4 scale
- Renaming grades
- Retakes and resubmissions
- Rubrics
- Grades based on scales, not points
- Standards based gradebooks
- Emphasizing self-regulation
- Creating a community of feedback
- Student trackers

# Determining Readiness

## Is your institution ready?

- In what ways does your institutional (or unit/departmental) culture value and reward innovative teaching?
- What forms of support exist at your institution for instructors who innovate or take risks in their teaching?
- In what ways does your institution evaluate teaching? To what extent are its methods nuanced and flexible?
- Does your department or institution have any grading requirements?

## Are you ready?

- How do you understand your identity and mission, with respect to your institution's mission and culture?
- How does your identity shape the kinds and levels of risk you are willing to take in your teaching?
  - *See Pittman & Tobin (2022)*
- How much teaching experience do you have? How familiar are you with the pedagogical approach?
- How much of a change would be necessary to incorporate these practices?

## Is your course ready?

- What is your readiness to teach this course? Have you taught it before?
- How does this course fit into the larger academic program?

## Are your students ready?

- How many students are enrolled in the course?
- What is their academic level? How prepared are they for this course?
- What is their familiarity and comfortability with alternative grading?

Streifer & Palmer (2021) Is specifications grading right for me?

\* Pittman & Tobin (2022) Academe has a lot to learn about how inclusive teaching affects instructors

# Two case examples



# Interpersonal Effectiveness Training

- Purpose of the course is to learn and build effective interpersonal skills
- Undergraduates (elective) & graduates (required), 30 students
- Activities include weekly reading reflections, journals, class discussions, an individual improvement project, and a group project
- **Dilemma:** How do I grade these deeply personal and unique journeys through the course?
- **Solution:** Students grade themselves (ungrading)! I guide them through the self-evaluation process.



# Interpersonal Effectiveness Training

## WHAT IS THE GRADING POLICY IN THIS COURSE?

This class is deeply personal, and for that reason **I will not be grading your performance.**

Why am I not grading you? Because (a) part of interpersonal effectiveness is good reflective practice, (b) there is ample literature on how grades can inhibit learning and reflection, (c) grades often prevent students from attending to the important feedback you'll receive in this course, and (d) your learning and growth will be entirely unique in this course.

Instead, I will provide ample feedback on your performance in the journals, discussions, and other class activities. You will reflect on your performance in this class, including to what extent you have:

- completed majority of the class activities, including class participation and engagement;
- met the course objectives as listed on the first page of the syllabus;
- took chances and risks, failed and tried again, and took charge of your education; and
- grown and developed as a human being through this course.

At the end of the semester, you will defend which grade you believe you have earned in this class (see the grading policy below). I reserve the right to adjust your grade based on my perceptions and your peers' perceptions of your effort and growth in this course. We will discuss halfway through the semester your progress in receiving the grade you are hoping to earn, and you will be practicing this reflection regularly throughout our course.

# Interpersonal Effectiveness Training

## **WHEN ARE ASSIGNMENTS DUE? HOW ARE THEY GRADED?**

Reading reflections are due prior to class. It is extremely important you complete them before class; otherwise, you will not be able to fully participate in the class discussions.

Class participation activities are due after class. I'll do my best to give you time to complete them and submit them at the end of each class. Otherwise, please turn them in within 48 hours so you do not forget what we did in class.

Journals are typically due **Fridays at 5pm**. However, if you need more time on them, please take additional time as needed to complete them. I would rather see a high-quality journal turned in late than a low-quality journal turned in on time.

All assignments are graded complete/incomplete. A complete means you have satisfactorily completed the assignment. An incomplete means it is missing or does not satisfactorily meet the expectations for the assignment. If you receive a grade of incomplete, I will provide you feedback so you can re-do the assignment until you get a grade of complete.

# Student responses

“This class has no quizzes or exams that will make or break your grade. Instead, **you have the ability to determine your success in the class.** You get to decide the effort you put into this class and grade yourself based on that effort. **This scared me at the start** of the semester because I am a little shy and struggle to speak up in large group settings, but this was totally okay. **The class gives you multiple opportunities** to improve your communication skills and practice what we are learning in class.”

“The way this course is structured allows for a much **less stressful experience.** I feel like **I was able to learn the material** in a much better way that suited my strengths as a student rather than another course where the the grade is the focal point and the learning is secondary.”

“The suggested deadline concept, complete/incomplete, and self-evaluation aspects of this course **focus on reflection and buy-in for self-improvement, rather than a hierarchical standard delivered from faculty.** As a result, **it was much easier to be motivated to improve** and to apply the course material to our lives than other classes. I would STRONGLY recommend keeping this structure in place, or even applying it to other classes in this department.

# Statistics

- **PSYC 290:** learn to conduct & interpret statistics in psychology ( $n = 20$ )
- **PSYC 790:** learn about research designs & methods and how to conduct & interpret statistics in psychology ( $n = 15$ )
- Activities include weekly readings, practice activities, homework assignments, and a final project
- **Dilemma:** Student pacing varies widely, and I felt some students passed the course without really *getting* it.
- **Solution:** Set clear expectations for each assignment and minimum “contracts” for each letter grade to ensure earning a passing grade meant they had met the minimum course objectives.



# Statistics

## WHAT IS THE SEMESTER SCHEDULE?

DATE	TOPIC	READING	READING REFL.	PRACTICE ACTIVITY	HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT
1 Tu 01/25	Intro to the course	Syllabus		P 01 (D)	
Th 01/27	Statistics foundations	SWJ 1, 2	RR 01 (D)	P 02 (D)	
2 Tu 02/01	Install jamovi & modules	Canvas	RR 02 (D)	P 03 (D)	
Th 02/03	Data management			P 04 (D)	1. Introduction to statistics (D)
3 Tu 02/08	Overview of jamovi	SJW 3 & 4	RR 03 (D)	P 05 (D)	
Th 02/10	Hypothesis testing			P 06 (D)	2. Introduction to jamovi (D)
4 Tu 02/15	<i>Spring primary election</i> Effect sizes & p-values	SWJ 5	RR 04 (D)	P 07 (D)	
Th 02/17	Power & BEAN			P 08 (D)	3. Hypothesis testing (D)
5 Tu 02/22	Inferential statistics	SWJ 6	RR 05 (D)	P 09 (D)	
Th 02/24	Parametric assumptions			P 10 (D)	4. BEAN (D)
6 Tu 03/01	Independent t-test	SWJ 7	RR 06 (D)	P 11 (D)	5. Student hours (D)
Th 03/03	Dependent t-test			P 12 (D)	6. Inferential statistics (D)
7 Tu 03/08	Chi-square	SWJ 8,	RR 07 (C)	P 13 (C)	
Th 03/10	Correlation	10.1		P 14 (C)	7. t-tests (D)

# Statistics

## WHAT IS THE GRADING POLICY IN THIS COURSE?

This course is using specifications grading. This means that (a) each assignment is graded as pass/fail and (b) your final course grade is based on the number of assignments you successfully pass, as detailed below.

GRADE	READING REFLECTIONS	PRACTICE ACTIVITIES	HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS	SUBMISSION DEADLINE	REVISION DEADLINE
D	1-6	1-12	1-7	03/29	04/28
C	1-9	1-17	1-10	04/19	05/03
B	1-12	1-22	1-13	05/05	05/11
A	1-12	1-22	1-14	05/05	05/11

Notice that each grade builds off the previous grade because the assignments build off each other, and the assignments to get a D are considered “core” assignments necessary to pass the course. It is strongly recommended that you complete assignments in order, otherwise you may experience confusion on later assignments. This is why there are unit deadlines. If you do not meet a deadline, you should still work on those assignments, but you will not be able to do the final project.

# Getting started with alternative grading systems



# Three steps for getting started

1. Ensure clear and measurable learning objectives
  - For the course, modules, and assignments
  - Build in backwards design: determine objectives, create learning assessments, then build activities to prepare students
2. Build a network of other alternative graders
  - In and outside of your university, in and outside of your discipline
  - Get the support of your chair and administration
3. Keep it simple
  - Can students understand it? How easy it for you to revise to? How easy it for you to keep updated through the semester?



# Small things you can do tomorrow to start ungrading

## 1 Change how you talk about assessment

Ungrading works best as part of a holistic pedagogical practice. Use words like “ask” or “invite,” rather than “submit” or “required.” Ask students about their expectations for their work, rather than centering yours.

## 2 Invite students to a conversation about grades

Ask students how being graded makes them feel, how it affects their motivation. As a group, read and discuss a piece like Alfie Kohn's “The Case Against Grades.”

## 3 Grade less stuff, grade less often, grade more simply

Create space in your course for discovery and experimentation. Use a grading scale that feels less arbitrary and communicates more clearly to students. Ask students to do work that you don't “collect.”

## 4 Ask students to reflect on their own learning

Even if you change nothing else about how you grade, ask students when and how they learn. Ask what barriers they face. Listen. Believe the answers.

# Alternative Grading Practices

Ungrading,  
Specifications Grading,  
and More

**Dr. Dana Wanzer**

[wanzerd@uwstout.edu](mailto:wanzerd@uwstout.edu)

04/22/2022

A hand holding a red pen over a blank page in a spiral notebook. The notebook is open, and the page is white. The background is a dark, textured surface.

**Questions?**

# Resources on Alternative Grading

What really is an A? by  
Chris McNutt

Starting the  
Conversation About  
Grading by Tyler Totter

Making (up) the grade  
by Heather Lyon

A pedagogy of kindness  
by Catherine Denial

Non-Traditional  
(Un)Grading Systems –  
An Overview by Peter  
Romaskiewicz

Alternative grading:  
Practices to support  
both equity and  
learning by Adriana  
Streifer

Teaching more by  
grading less (or  
differently) by Schinske  
& Tanner

Mastery (and other)  
grading blog posts by  
Robert Talbert

Grade anarchy &  
student learning by  
Marcus Schultz-Bergin

Continuing adventures  
in ungrading by John  
Warner

Why I don't grade by  
Jesse Stommel

Promoting critical  
thinking skills through  
effective grading  
techniques by J. Morse

Getting out of grading  
by Scott Jaschik

# Resources on Ungrading

[Grades are Dehumanizing: Ungrading is No Simple Solution](#) by Jesse Stommel

[How to Ungrade](#) by Jesse Stommel

[Ungrading: An FAQ](#) by Jesse Stommel

[How to Ungrade webinar](#) with Jesse Stommel

[Ungrading: An introduction](#) by Jesse Stommel

[Thread about Ungrading](#) by Danielle M Hinton

[When we talk about grades, we are talking about people](#) by Sean Michael Morris

[Ungrading: Adding learning intensive writing assignments without increasing grading load](#) by Julie E. Sharp

[Why grading less is more](#) by Colleen Flaherty

[Continuing adventures in ungrading](#) by John Warner

[Reflections on ungrading for the 4<sup>th</sup> time](#) by Mahabali

[Chemistry educators try 'ungrading' techniques to help students learn](#) by Claire L. Jarvis

[Ungrading: A series](#) by Clarissa Sorenson-Unruh