

THESIS

*WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO PASS? CRITIQUING RECENT UNGRADING RESEARCH UNDER A
QUEER LENS.*

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ABSTRACT

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO PASS? CRITIQUING RECENT UNGRADING RESEARCH UNDER A QUEER LENS.

In this critical content analysis of recent ungrading research, 18 papers researching actual ungrading were analyzed through the lens of queer theory for their adherence to or deconstruction of exclusionary structural norms. It was found that while many papers successfully challenge exclusionary structural norms through the use of student-created success criteria, many applications of ungrading upheld structural norms by evaluating student success using participation grading, timeliness grading, and teacher-created success criteria. Applications of ungrading that challenged structural norms and binaries defined student success through demonstration of student learning and had broader boundaries regarding learning behaviors welcomed the classroom. Applications which upheld structural norms were found to have more exclusionary barriers to academic success, with final grades not only reflecting learning but also adherence to behavior expectations. This study points the way forward for future ungrading research to proceed in the direction of greater student agency and broadened boundaries regarding acceptable classroom behaviors.

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INTRODUCTION

Semester after semester, year after year, I find myself in a puddle of anxiety surrounding my grades. Throughout my schooling, grades have been of paramount importance in my mind. Grades were always a gatekeeper. They decided if I could go to the next grade, they decided if I could graduate, they decided if I could get the job I wanted, they decided if I could succeed. Grades are also a label. To the university, they're a label of intelligence. To teachers, they label expected behaviors. To families, they're a label of capability. To employers, they label position. As a student, it always bothered me that grades could dictate my future and label my position in the classroom but could never speak to the magnitudes of my growth or the sleepless nights spent studying. As a teacher, I am bothered that grades drive student motivation in the classroom above the allure of learning itself. *"What does it take to pass?"* is a question ignorant of learning, driven by traditional grading's devastating impact on student motivation.

In my frustration with grading, I became familiar with ungrading. Decentralizing letter and number grades from student evaluation, ungrading aims to communicate student learning and growth through qualitative means. Ungrading challenges traditional grading as a system far too abstracted from evaluation of student learning, centering classrooms on student agency in order to evaluate learning in ways that are meaningful and personal to students. Further, ungrading aims to reorient student mindsets towards intrinsic motivation in learning. In removing grades from student evaluation, students would focus less on success criteria and more on the acquisition of knowledge.

In my efforts to escape the confines of grading, it is of utmost importance to adopt new practices and policies with intense intentionality and thought. In his paper *Enhancing Ungrading*, Griffin Xander Zimmerman (2024) says “It is critical here to interrogate how ungrading systems, no matter how well-intentioned, can unwittingly uphold norming and exclusionary structures.” (347). If it is my aim to liberate students from the harms associated with traditional grading, I must also be intentional in establishing ungrading systems which not only avoid creating the same harms, but actively deconstruct them. Using queer theory as a grounding philosophy in this intentionality, I derive the purpose for my research and my guiding question: *How does current research deconstruct or uphold exclusionary classroom norms?*

While criticisms of traditional grading systems have existed since their inceptions, ungrading as a practice began to emerge in the 1990s. Despite more than 30 years of ungrading, research on the practice exploded in popularity in 2020, perhaps being influenced by shifting perspectives about grading among teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the influx of ungrading research, ungrading is rising in popularity and notoriety with educators across America. As the increase in ungrading research drives the rise in ungrading application in actual classrooms, it is becoming obvious that a review of the literature is necessary to ensure the future of ungrading proceeds in the direction away from traditional grading. In the growing landscape of ungrading literature, analytical criticism of recent methods and applications has yet to occur through the lens of queer theory. My research dives into the world of recent ungrading research- analyzing 18 papers written between 2021 and 2024 for the ways their ungrading methods and applications challenge or support structures, norms, or binaries that exclude queer learning behaviors

from achieving success in the classroom. Identifying which applications uphold which exclusionary norms and binaries helps to point the way forward for the future of ungrading, keeping the practice centered on student agency and equity.

In ungrading, *“what does it take to pass?”* becomes a question of classroom construction. When passing a class indicates successful learning, passing depends on the construction of classroom structures that privilege which students can access the learning and which students can't. As a scholar of ungrading and queer theory, it is my objective to clear the way for each and every student to pass by positioning ungrading pedagogy as a destroyer of gatekeepers to student success, thus recentering learning as the metric of student success over conformity.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

In discovering the ways current ungrading research deconstructs or upholds hegemonical classroom norms, structures, and binaries, it is imperative to understand the foundations of not only ungrading, but also traditional grading. Traditional grading carries with it a history of eugenic, standardizing policy and structure as well as effects that shift the purpose of schooling away from learning. Structures of traditional grading prize homogeneity of learning behaviors which privilege white, middle class, heteronormative identities. Ungrading attempts to deconstruct the harms propagated by traditional grading through student-centered pedagogy while broadening the categories of acceptable classroom and learning behaviors and shifting the lens of evaluation back to learning. As ungrading deconstructs and critically analyzes the boundaries and categorizations generated in schools by traditional grading, I aim to deconstruct the same structures in ungrading. Understanding of queer theory, a critical theory which probes categorization and structures that create categorization, is a necessity in understanding the ways I undertake my analysis of current ungrading research, guiding my research towards uncovering structures within ungrading that propagate the same harms as traditional grading.

TRADITIONAL GRADING:

What I refer to as traditional grading is the use of letter or numerical grades to communicate student evaluation in schools. Teachers evaluate student assessments and

behaviors with letter or number grades, making deliberate choices on what to grade and how, in the interest of promoting certain behaviors and motivating students to reach desired learning outcomes (Feldman, 2018, 6). Traditional grades double as both a representation of the degree to which students meet classroom expectations as well as a motivator for students to meet said expectations. The higher the grade, the better the student met the expectations for learning and behavior.

Before the commonplace establishment of traditional grading schemes in the United States, student evaluation was communicated qualitatively between teachers, families, and students through oral or written reports (Schneider and Hutt, 2013, 202; Feldman, 2018, 23). In urban schools and universities, the predominant structure of evaluation was through class ranking, which was thought to have shifted motivations in schooling towards competition among peers and away from academic development (Schneider and Hutt, 2013, 204-206). While students and their families were receiving more personal feedback regarding academic achievement, the vein of competition running through schools diverted students' motivation in learning from intrinsic to extrinsic.

The traditional grading system we are currently familiar with is a relatively recent development, being molded by industrialization of the early twentieth century (Blum 2020, 6). Grading systems evolved alongside the standardization of industry in the late 1800s to early 1900s and change in student evaluation was driven by the need to standardize communication about ability and achievement to universities and employers (Schneider and Hutt, 2013, 208-210; Feldman, 2018, 23). Letter and number grades were easier to synthesize into averages to communicate calculated student performance to universities

and employers nationwide. This came at the cost of precision, as letter and number grades became the standard labels for student ability across the US and qualitative modes of expressing a student's performance were abandoned (Schneider and Hutt, 2013, 208-210). The more intimate system of qualitative evaluation, which communicated specifics about a student's academic performance, was thus lost in the interest of creating a generalized system that communicated performance through averages and could be understood at a glance. At this time, schooling began to utilize bell curve grading in conjunction with behaviorist tools and ideas (such as IQs) to categorize students (Feldman, 2018, 20, 23; Schneider and Hutt, 2013, 213). The goal was to cull students for employment utilizing intellect testing and school performance, a practice that heavily discriminated against African American and further upheld racist structures in the US (Feldman, 2018, 22). Over the first half of the twentieth century, evaluation lost its clarity as a descriptor of academic progress and became a label of employability, shrouded in racist ideology and used as a tool of eugenics- a gatekeeper that allots opportunity to students who fit the mold. Despite its apparent entrenchment in our current educational system, traditional grading was never inherent to schooling and can be changed for the better.

Traditional grading serves as an extrinsic motivator for students, meaning students complete work in order to be rewarded with a grade. This is in contrast to intrinsic motivation, where students complete work because they hold interest in the learning being done. Grades as extrinsic motivators are linked to reduced risk-taking and academic rigor because the risk of receiving a poor grade discourages students from challenging themselves (Feldman, 2018, 31; Kohn, 2011, paras 6-9). Receiving a bad grade on an assignment can be the catalyst for a failing final grade. Because grades are the gatekeeper of

greater opportunity in the United States, it makes perfect sense that students would take the safe road rather than strive for greater learning. Further, extrinsic motivation does very little to encourage actual learning from students, shifting emphasis away from learning and towards the acquisition of the reward (grade) itself (Kohn 1994, 2). In other words, extrinsic motivation detracts from the learning made possible by intrinsic motivation (student interest in their learning). Looking further into the effect traditional grading has on motivation, studies have found links between teacher-given grades, self-concept, and personal interest that indicate grades relate directly to learner buy-in and how students see themselves as learners (Trautwein et al., 2006, 798, 800, 802). In other words, lower grades make students feel “bad” in a given subject and reduce their interest while higher grades make students feel good at a subject while their interest rises.

Another problem with the traditional grading system lies in the abstract and arbitrary nature of letter/number grades and how we assign them. We have known from the early days of traditional grading that criteria can shift from teacher-to-teacher, as shown by Starch and Elliott’s 1912 research on the reliability of grades in high school English classes. Their research found that different teachers graded the same paper vastly differently, each relying on different criteria to come to a final grade. Researchers discovered a “tremendously wide range of variation” when it came to the grading of the same written paper by more than 150 teachers, finding variation as large as 40 points difference between teacher’s evaluations (Starch and Elliott, 1912, 449, 454). This immense variation greatly demonstrated the arbitrary and abstract nature of grades. Because different teachers value different elements of academic success and ignore others, grades will mean different things across different teachers. Does a teacher grade on neatness of handwriting because they

believe it is a mark of successful learning or do they do it because they believe that there is one correct way to write? Does a teacher grade a paper favorably because it effectively communicates ideas or because it had perfect grammar? Does a teacher grade assignments about one topic but not about another? In the end, the letter or number grade does nothing to communicate to the student specifically what they did right or wrong and does very little to communicate to others exactly what was learned. Grades being abstracted from meaning does little to help students, often breaking the motivation of students who do not match the values held by the teacher. Alfie Kohn corroborates this idea, explaining that test scores and grades do little more than reflect knowledges valued by the teacher because the teacher chooses the weights of the grades as well as what the students are assessed on (Kohn, 1999, paras 10-11). Further, Feldman (2018) explains that traditional grades also often contain behavior-based criteria such as tardiness or physical in-class behavior (30). The inclusion of these criteria further abstracts the meaning of grades- do grades reflect actual learning or do they reflect adherence to classroom norms? While universities and employers take grades to represent student intellect of learning, inclusion of behavior criteria in traditional grades has shifted their true meaning away from learning and towards conformity. As teachers, it is our duty to reflect learning and progress in our evaluation of student work- creating meaning in the abstraction and doing away with arbitrariness in the interest of opening true lines of communication with our students about their academic performance and proliferation of learning in school.

Traditional grades do very little to communicate detailed performance notes to the students receiving them. As Blum argues, grades cannot inform students about their growth in specific skills or the details of their mistakes (Blum, 2020, 12). Grades are a

symbol that communicates how successful a student was in completing an assignment, but they hold no data regarding the actual elements that led to the grade. Amalgamating assignment grades into a final grade does more to further obscure the growth students made throughout their time in a classroom. Further, traditional grades often misrepresent actual learning in the classroom. David Clark and Robert Talbert (2023) outline the idea of false positives and negatives in traditional grading. False positives are final grades that overestimate learning when students earn more points on assignments worth more and less points on assignments worth less, creating a higher grade average and a disconnect between the grade and actual class performance. False negatives occur when students earn more points on assignments worth less points while failing assignments worth more points (like tests or essays), misrepresenting the work students put into the class and again causing a disconnect between grades and learning (Clark, Nilson, & Talbert, 2023, 19). False negatives and false positives are obscured in final grades, which causes a failure in communicating actual learning to the university admission boards and employers that use these grades as a gatekeeper. The problems created by false positive and negative grades can also be compounded by the inclusion of behavioral criteria in grading, further obscuring the representation of actual learning in a grade mark. Before the advent of traditional grades, oral reports from teachers to guardians informed a student's progress, and the shift to traditional grades did away with communications about students' true abilities (Brookhart et al., 2016, 805). The degradation of communication between teachers, students, and guardians has reduced feedback to a vague number that communicates very little about a student's strengths. This effect has bled through onto employers and universities, who no longer get a clear picture of students' true abilities. In

this way, traditional grading also fails in its goal to be a standardized system that communicates learning. Further, this causes grades to become a gatekeeper of opportunity rather than a communicator of learning or performance.

Traditional grading carries with it a history of racist, sexist, classist, heteronormative, and ableist norms. Grading was rebuilt around the concept of innate intelligence in the early 20th century, turning grades into a pseudoscientific measurement of intelligence through the use of IQ tests and other measures built on the basis of racism and eugenics in the interest of streamlining which students go where in life (Clark, Nilson, & Talbert, 2023, 15). In 2014 Asao Inoue wrote that writing failure under traditional grading arises from “irreconcilable differences between expectations of White, middle-class literacies in school and the raced, cultured, classed, and gendered home literacies that learners attempt to use in school.” (331). In other words, school and traditional grading selects for students who can perform in normative ways as dictated by structures of white supremacy which dominates the hegemony in America. In his 2022 book *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*, Inoue better outlined the relationship that causes traditional grades to be so inequitable.

“So if literacy has been, and continues to be, a white property in the US, and if the nature of white property is the right to exclude, and if grading by a standard is always about control, accountability, and measurement, then grading by a single standard is how most, if not all, schools and writing classrooms exercise the historical right to exclude in order to protect literacy as white property, all the while exclaiming and even believing that they are helping their students of color.” (10, 11)

In effect, traditional grading is a tool of white supremacy which serves to separate the races in America through rejection of non-white classroom behaviors. Because of this separation, a racial divide occurs that reduces opportunities for students of color to demonstrate learning in the classroom, which in turn reduces their opportunity as they exit the schooling system.

PARTICIPATION:

Grading participation in classes is a common technique under the umbrella of traditional grading to ensure student engagement. While broad, well-explained definitions of participation allow students to participate more comfortably, education researchers have found that the classroom environment is a stronger motivator for participation than grading (Paff, 2015, 138, 144). Grading for participation is an extrinsic motivator which does very little to reach students who are unconcerned with grades or students who may not be able to participate in the capacity expected by the teacher due to a variety of personal reasons. Through increasing accessibility, cultivating a classroom environment which emphasizes a variety of modes of participation is more effective than grade-motivated participation.

Grading for participation is a practice which is dependent on the teacher's personal criteria and is therefore subject to their biases. Grading participation could be dependent on how similarly a student participates to the way the teacher would participate (Lang, 2021, 1). Teacher criteria for participation can vastly differ from a student's actual lived experience. Students often have different ideas about what their teachers define as

participation, and this difference in understandings can create cause frustrations in teachers who feel like their class is not connecting (Fritschner, 2000, 351-357). For example, shy students may not speak up during discussions, but they do participate by being present and attentive. When a teacher's expectations for participation are not expressly communicated, students participate in ways the teacher doesn't recognize, or they fail to participate entirely. This discrepancy can be incredibly detrimental to a student's grade despite the effort they feel they are putting into class participation- the shy student fails because the teacher didn't recognize their mode of participation. Linking back to traditional grading, this can cause a false negative grade that massively underestimates actual student learning.

Because participation grading is susceptible to bias it has a great chance of being an inequitable practice that harms diverse students. When teachers aren't purposeful in understanding minoritized participation, it is often the students who look and speak like the teacher who get privileged in the grading of participation (Shah et al. 2021, para 6). Teacher-based notions of participation are often ignorant to student background knowledge, disabilities, and linguistic diversity. Because of this ignorance, students who speak, think, and look like the teacher will be graded more favorably for participation. This is an inequitable practice that often places white heteronormative hegemonic values at the core of the definition of participation in many classrooms- uplifting some students and leaving others behind.

DEADLINES:

Hard or strict deadlines are dates where students can no longer submit their work for credit. These hard deadlines can be incredibly discouraging, causing students to lose motivation in learning after missing deadlines and even causing them to give up on their educations entirely (Patton, 2000, 420). Hard deadlines actively prevent students from learning and demonstrating their learning. Further, Patton (2000) found that flexible deadlines led to higher passing rates while classes with strict deadlines saw higher dropout rates (421, 422). Flexible deadlines are essential to academic success as they afford students more opportunity to demonstrate their learning, despite any circumstances that otherwise would have prevented them to do so. In a paradigm dominated by traditional grading, hard deadlines abstract the meaning of grades because they do not allow all students to demonstrate their learning.

Flexible deadlines are a solution to the problems created by strict deadlines which disproportionately affect non-traditional students. In her 2014 study, Sharon Xuereb found that the two leading causes of dropout in higher education was academic workload and competing responsibilities among both traditional and non-traditional students (150, 151). It is reasonable to expect that high school students face the same pressures, as many of them work and take care of their families outside of school. "Equitable and inclusive deadline practices connect to the need for more flexibility for those most impacted by systemic learning barriers in post-secondary." (Hills and Peacock, 2022, 7). With flexible deadlines, students are better able to balance their school and personal lives, not punishing students for being overwhelmed by academic and work responsibilities. Further, flexible

deadlines open lines of support to disabled and neurodiverse students for which rigidity in deadlines acts as a gatekeeper to success (Hills and Peacock, 2022, 5). Flexible deadlines allow all students to receive credit for their completed work regardless of their circumstances.

Despite the misconception held by many teachers that flexible deadlines allow students to be lazy, Hills and Peacock (2022) found that deadline flexibility did not cause student procrastination (12). Further, it is shown that flexible deadlines can give students opportunities to turn in higher quality work (Fox et al., 2022, 51; Hills and Peacock, 2022, 13). When students are given flexible deadlines, they are free to channel more focus into the assignment itself rather than cheating or producing sub-par work. Flexible deadlines may help to clear some abstraction from the meaning of grades as they help to recenter student learning's representation over student behavior in the gradebook.

UNGRADING:

While ungrading has no formal definition by design, it can be thought of as a pedagogy which utilizes alternative modes of assessment, opting to separate from assigning traditional grades in favor of qualitative feedback. Jesse Stommel best summarized the rationale behind ungrading in his 2024 essay *Ungrading* in the following excerpt:

The word 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. Ungrading is a systemic critique, a series of conversations we have about

grades, ideally drawing students into those conversations with the goal of engaging them as full agents in their own education. (327)

In this way, ungrading is an attempt at centering intrinsic motivation in education by doing away with grades. In doing away with grades, we also do away with the associated detractors of extrinsic motivation: reduced risk-taking and academic rigor. Further, ungrading is an attempt to erase the abstract nature of traditional grades, centering learning (or labor) in the evaluation of class performance. Branching from Stommel's words, ungrading is a pedagogy built around questioning what we assess for, why we assess, and how we assess as teachers. Stommel cements ungrading as a liberatory, student-centered pedagogy, where students are not only being assessed but are in control and are an active actor in their own assessment. In other words, ungrading is a pedagogy that uses student agency as a tool to guide the ways students are assessed.

In his essay *From Degrading to De-Grading*, Alfie Kohn (1999) argued that doing away with grades was the key to fixing issues caused by traditional grading, namely reduced interest in learning, reduced academic rigor, and grade abstraction (paras. 4-16). Because each of these outcomes were created by the use of grades as extrinsic motivators, doing away with the reward would shift motivations back to learning itself. Kohn goes on to recommend the use of authentic assessment in the place of grades- narratives, portfolios, conferences, and student showcases as opportunities to measure academic performance in the place of letter or number grades (para. 34). This recommendation to return to qualitative modes of assessment as the measure of academic achievement would remain

core to the practice of ungrading, allowing teachers to richly communicate a student's evaluation in terms of their actual displayed learning.

As ungrading is not a prescriptive methodology, rather an ideology to base assessment practices on, there is not one correct way to ungrade. While Kohn established the pedagogy of ungrading on a foundation of qualitative evaluation, other educators have continued pushing the boundaries in the ways in which ungrading is established in the classroom. Jesse Stommel (2020) identified 9 common modes of assessment under ungrading pedagogy: grade-free zones, self-assessment, process letters, minimal grading (pass/fail, completion, etc.), authentic assessment (student showcases), contract grading, portfolios, peer-assessment, and student-made rubrics (36-39). Each of these modes of assessment aim to decenter grades as the primary motivator in class while centering qualitative feedback as the primary practice in evaluation. These strategies may be effective in centering student agency, but they do not function as ungrading on their own. Griffin Zimmerman (2024) warns that retrofitting ungrading strategies onto existing structures left by traditional grading results in teacher-centered classes, an inversion of the goals of ungrading (342, 343). In order to avoid the toppling of ungrading systems in the classroom, Zimmerman urges teachers to understand that co-construction of knowledge alongside trust and co-construction of classroom norms are essential to secure a student-centered classroom that is conducive for ungrading and the promotion of intrinsic motivation (345, 346). In other words, students cannot be intrinsically motivated inside a classroom that polices the ways learning takes place, and the only way to ensure that is by giving students a hand in their own schooling. Stommel's modes of assessment shine as ungrading strategies when students have co-constructed the ways their learning is assessed. If these

strategies were centered on teacher-created assessment criteria they run the risk of creating a new mode of extrinsic motivation: teacher pleasing. Recent ungrading research highlights a variety of assessment strategies currently in use in classrooms, which I will define moving forward.

SELF-ASSESSMENT:

Self-assessment is described as a student's reflection on their own abilities, processes, and products with the objective of directing a student's improvement in class (Andrade, 2019, 1, 2). Self-assessment can be formative (students self-assess during and after the process of completing assignments) or summative (students self-assess their performance throughout a semester). In the process of self-assessment, students focus on areas of growth and evidence of learning to guide their progress in class as well as to monitor academic progression. Although summative self-assessment used in isolation can cause discrepancies between student and teacher grade expectations (Andrade, 2019, 2), paired with formative self-assessment along the way, it can direct students towards meeting teacher expectations while giving themselves feedback that improves their performance (Davis, 2023, 144). This being said, student-assessed grades should take precedence in ungraded classrooms, as students are the most familiar with their own development and learning. While reflection is important on understanding missteps in assignments, Andrade (2019) suggests that self-assessment is only effective if the students have opportunities to correct their mistakes and learn from the process (3). Because self-assessment is a qualitative assessment of learning, when directed by student-created

success criteria in a co-constructed classroom, student-agency can be centered in the direction of learning. In ungrading, self-reflection can be used both in formative and summative ways, directing student progress with several reflections throughout the course and finishing with students deciding their grades in partnership with their teacher (Stommel, 2024, 35). Through the use of self-assessment, final grades can be rid of their abstraction, becoming fully based on the learning and progress students made throughout the course.

LABOR-BASED GRADING CONTRACTS:

Labor-based grading contracts center grading on labor, or the work quantity and time spent, rather than abstract notions of work quality. This method was popularized by Asao Inoue, who argues that the method deconstructs traditional grading's racist structures through a focus on labor, which is said to be a more objective benchmark than white supremacist-influenced notions of quality (Inoue, 2022, 13). By centering work completion as the sole metric of student evaluation, labor-based grading contracts do away with the abstract nature of traditional grades. Labor-based grading contracts can be considered an ungrading method because assignments receive no individual grade, and final grades are determined by whole-course performance. The method makes use of grading contracts (either teacher-created or co-created) which outlines specific labor requirements to receive a specific final grade in the class. For example, Inoue's contract for his first-year composition class outlined that a B grade requires students to be present in class 84% of the semester, rarely tardy, only turning in work late at the maximum of 5 times and missing

only 1 assignment (2022, 327-329). This contract outlines the labor needed to complete the class with a satisfactory, passing grade, and students have chances to improve upon their contracted grade though the semester. While getting rid of abstract notions of quality in regard to grades, labor-based grading still runs the risk of serving as extrinsic motivation in learning. It has been argued that labor-based grading contracts can still be inequitable despite its intentions, citing that the method pushes a hegemonic standard of labor akin to the single hegemonic standard of quality graded by traditional grading (Carillo 2021). In other words, labor expectations are susceptible to the same bias that makes quality expectations inequitable. Unless the contracts are student-created, there is the possibility that some students (such as disabled or neurodivergent students) will do more labor to get the same grade as students who put in less labor. Labor-based grading contracts are popular in recent ungrading research and the ways these contracts are constructed and are implemented are rife with opportunity for criticism.

EFFORT-BASED GRADING:

Resnick and Hall (2005) compare the learning philosophies of “display-oriented goals” and “learning-oriented goals”, the idea that intelligence is finite and innate to a person versus the idea that intelligence builds via problem-solving effort (2-4). The learning-oriented goals are the basis of effort-based grading, a method that takes the work and growth students display in class as a grading measure, equating displayed effort in class as a metric of learning. Resnick and Hall go on to say, “Good teaching is a matter of arranging for students to do their own knowledge construction, while assuring that the

ideas students develop will be in good accord with known facts and established concepts.” (8). This idea grounds the use of effort-based grading, because as long as students put forth the effort to construct using the tools given by the teacher, they are meeting the objectives of the class. Effort-based graders often utilize these concepts along with self-assessment of student effort to determine appropriate final or assignment grades (e.g. Dosmar and Williams 2022). This assessment of student effort makes grades reflective of the student’s experiences in the class as a metric of learning rather than an abstraction caused by traditional grading.

Effort-based grading is criticized because of its subjectivity and possibility for grade overestimations. Davis (2023) claims that students may not truly metacognitively reflect when it comes to effort-based self-assessments because they can be drawn to exaggeration in the goals of achieving a higher grade (144). This idea demonstrates that although effort-based grading aims to shift student attention towards the acquisition of knowledge, it can be counterintuitive because of extrinsic motivators from lingering elements of traditional grading such as final grades. This being said, if effort is indeed an indicator of learning, then effort-based grading has the potential to exist as a more meaningful evaluation than traditional grading despite its incidental presence as an extrinsic motivator.

QUEER THEORY AND QUEER PEDAGOGY:

Queer theory, while difficult to define in whole, is in part a theory of sexuality and gender in relation to normative structures across society. Further, queer theory questions categorizations and their constructions beyond gender and sexuality, probing the

structures that decide what is considered *normal*. “In short, queer theory challenges the modern system of sexuality as a body of knowledge that structures and organizes the personal, institutional, and cultural life of individuals in Western societies.” (Yep et al., 2003, 4). In other words, normative and dominant structures formed the parameters of categories like sexuality and gender and continue to define parameters of all other categorizations. Queer theory seeks to challenge these dominant structures’ definition of these parameters. *Sexualdiversity.org* states “Queer theory and politics necessarily celebrate transgression through visible differences from norms. These 'Norms' are then exposed to be norms, not natures or inevitabilities.” (2022, para. 1). This situates queer theory as a deconstructive critical theory which changes the perspective that deviation from the norm is a negative offense. Rather, it situates this deviance as normal. It also situates queer theory as a system of thought applicable to the challenging of any societal structure and categorization. Because normative structures were built upon heteronormativity, to challenge or disrupt these structures is to queer them.

Queer theorists can also analyze structures through the upsetting of binary systems such as masculine/feminine or normative/queer (*Sexualdiversity.org*, 2022, paras 3-5). Through the upsetting of these binaries, we can decentralize the idea that queer behaviors are “other” or different from normal despite their rejection by normative structures. Queer theory recognizes that normative structures were created by people and systems that privileged certain identities over others and are therefore not inherent or given by nature.

The term queer and the idea of queering (verb, to queer) are subject to much debate in terms of definition (Whittington, 2012, 158). In his 1995 book *Saint Foucault: Towards a*

Gay Hagiography, David Halperin argued that within the world of queer theory, queer indicates a position perpendicular to, opposite of, and against the normative (62). Queering perspectives, structures, and ideas then is to deconstruct their normative structures from the queer, or deviant position.

Queer pedagogy refers to the queering of the ways in which we teach, disrupting what is thought of as cemented practice in teaching. “Normative assumptions are seamlessly embedded in all levels of educational practice, from pedagogies to lessons to policies to assumptions about the aims and goals of education.” (Mayo and Rodriguez, 2019, 2). Queer theorists put education under the lens of queer theory with the aim of identifying the categorizations created by the predominant structure. Inevitably, students who do not fit into the normative structures of education are seen to be deviant- in other words, queer. For example, students who struggle with class tardiness are seen to be deviant (queer) to criteria of “good” students as determined by dominant structures of schooling which equate timeliness with academic rigor. By the definitions of queer established earlier, students who fail or suffer in school due to the normative, hegemonic structures are queer. Therefore, the behaviors they exhibit which have set them perpendicular to the normative structures are queer behaviors. Queer theory and queer pedagogy do not aspire to a paradigm shift or new hegemony, the goal is to endlessly queer structures in the pursuit of pushing the boundary of what is normal.

“But queer pedagogy queers assumptions and practice, even its own. Settled patterns of ethical and political practice need to be continually alert to their limitations in ways that we cannot begin to easily know, even if we think we’re already quite queer enough.”

And as we continue to insist on the complications that race, class, gender, gender identity, disability, and ethnicity bring to what is defined as either LGBT, queer, or other terms that resonate more with members of other communities, we're both insisting on queer presence and being careful that queer doesn't itself keep becoming another form of normalizing power." (Mayo and Rodriguez, 2019, 4).

The goal isn't to shift the normative structures to let in marginalized identities, the goal is to shatter the ideas that there is *normal* and *abnormal*, giving every identity a space to flourish, even as new identities take form and our understanding of current identities shift.

Ungrading is a practice which queers grading. Ungrading interrogates the ways traditional grading (abstraction of meaning, false positive/negative, eugenics, etc.) has constrained students to categories of acceptable behavior in school, working to break those categories down through alternative assessment strategies which are oppositional to traditional grading. Ungrading's core tenets of trust and co-construction of knowledge and environment (Zimmerman, 2024, 342, 343) broaden the categories of behaviors that are welcome in school because it shifts power into the hands of the students who will reform those categories to suit their needs.

Despite ungrading's position as a queering force, it is critical to continue pushing the boundaries. Just as queer pedagogy queers its own practice (Mayo and Rodriguez, 2019, 4), ungrading must continue to queer itself to avoid becoming the new exclusionary norm. "It is critical here to interrogate how ungrading systems, no matter how well-intentioned, can unwittingly uphold norming and exclusionary structures" (Zimmerman, 2024, 347). In the

remainder of this paper I will undertake this task, analyzing recent ungrading research under the lens of queer theory to uncover the methods which propagate and dissolve exclusionary binaries and structures. This is all in the interest of eternally pushing boundaries in the acceptance of queer classroom behaviors, as even ungrading has the potential to establish exclusionary normative structures as the pedagogy gains momentum in the world of teaching.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

The purpose of this study is to unpack and analyze the ways in which ungrading has been applied in research since 2019. Looking at application of ungrading techniques and student outcomes described in studies done in researched classrooms, my goal is to determine the ways different ungrading applications uphold or deconstruct existing exclusionary structural norms and binaries in school. By identifying specific pedagogical moves that deconstruct or reinforce structural norms, I am able to make clear the existence and harm of those structural norms while also queering the path forward and pushing applications of ungrading towards equitable classroom outcomes. The question that guided my research was *How does current ungrading research deconstruct or uphold exclusionary classroom norms, structures, and binaries?* In answering this question, we can direct the future of ungrading research and applications towards equitable student outcomes.

METHODOLOGY:

To conduct my research, I utilized the critical content analysis methodology. This methodology allows researchers to code texts for emerging patterns while reading through a critical lens, adopting a political stance to frame the examination of inequalities arising from texts (Short et al., 2017, 3-5). Critical content analysis allowed me to read recent ungrading through a queer lens- interrogating the methods of each paper and their impact on exclusionary structures in ungraded classrooms. Through critical content analysis I was able to identify overarching themes across the recent research, making exclusionary norms

visible as well as exposing patterns in researched ungrading methods that reinforce them. Critical content analysis is crucial as a research methodology in answering my research question because analysis of recent ungrading research can only uncover the deconstruction or support of exclusionary normative structures through the use of queer theory as a grounding lens.

DATA COLLECTION:

In questioning how ungrading applications deconstruct and uphold exclusionary norms in school, I directed the scope of my research towards recent research published about real-life applications of ungrading. The first step of data collection was conducted using PRIMOsearch on CSU's library website by using the keyword "ungrading." Because PRIMOsearch is CSU's primary research database, it seemed to be an appropriate setting to collect peer-reviewed papers regarding ungrading's application in schools. I limited my data collection to papers published between 2019 and 2024 in order to center my research on recent conversations in ungrading. Because the number of studies on ungraded classrooms have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, this time frame best allowed me to capture the current state of ungrading applications in classrooms and the presence of exclusionary structural norms within. The search yielded 109 papers written between 2019 and 2024 with the keyword "ungrading." The next step in my data collection was to manually check each paper for its research context. This process involved reading the abstract or bodies of each individual paper in order to determine whether or not they fit my study parameters. Because my study parameters stipulate that each data point must be a

study of real-life applications of ungrading, this step reduced the data pool to 18 data points. Papers were excluded from the data pool because they either did not center on actual real-life application of ungrading in classrooms/schools or they were inaccessible through their publishers. The remaining 18 papers were written between 2021 and 2024 and centered on real-life ungrading application studies.

By centering my research on a data pool made up of published research papers, this paper aims to serve as a greater commentary on methods of ungrading application in relation to exclusionary norms which limit student success in school. By focusing on a variety of research papers rather than conducting a case study I am able to make broad observations regarding patterns in ungrading application as well as their current and future implications in regard to student agency and equity.

DATA ANALYSIS:

My data analysis occurred over the course of four distinct stages. The first stage involved the reading and summarization of each of the 18 papers (data points). I wrote summaries for each data point that included the course topic and details, description of ungrading methods used, and student responses or outcomes. These summaries were listed in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet in rows corresponding to their respective paper. This primary stage acted as the foundation for further reading and analysis of each paper.

The second stage involved another reading of each data point using open coding to label exact ungrading methods within each application as well as their relationship to exclusionary structural norms in education. Open coding involves the labeling of data

points with descriptions which guides the path the research takes after data collection (Glaser, 2016, 108). The labeling of data points under open coding is directed by the research question and topic and theoretical lens, allowing the researcher to identify the ways their data is in line with the scope of their research (Glaser, 2016, 109). During this stage of data analysis, I highlighted specific ungrading methods in blue, while highlighting methods that seemed to uphold exclusionary norms in pink and methods that deconstructed norms in green.

Because of its basis in dissecting normative categorizations in societal structures, queer theory directly influenced which methods I labeled as upholding or deconstructing exclusionary norms in the second stage of data analysis. Queer theory supposes that societal structures have situated “*queer*” (differing from the norm) to be in opposition to “*normal*” (in alignment with the norm), yet queer theorists push to broaden the definition of normal behaviors to include queer behaviors. From this direction, I was able to label ungrading methods that broadened the definitions of “normal” and acceptable classroom/learning behaviors to encapsulate traditionally “queer” behaviors as deconstructing exclusionary classroom norms, structures, and binaries. Further, I was able label the methods that maintained a strict preference for normative classroom/learning behaviors as methods that upheld exclusionary norms, structures, and binaries.

The third stage of my data analysis involved the refining of open codes into common themes across the data points. I used axial coding, a coding method that allows researchers to refine open codes into patterns and common themes (Simmons, 2017, 79-80), to separate the 18 data points into categories based on the ungrading methods displayed in

their contents. This stage was facilitated through a third reading of each paper while analyzing each highlighted sections for commonalities in ungrading methods across applications and papers. Axial coding uncovered three common ungrading methods used across the data points: self-assessment, labor-based grading, and effort-based grading. While each of the 18 papers studied utilized one of the three methods, several used mixed-methods approaches that combined two or all three of the established categories. In the coding spreadsheet I created 3 columns named for the three methods. This allowed me to mark which paper demonstrated which of the three ungrading method(s). The third stage of data analysis also yielded commonalities regarding elements of ungrading methods which reinforced or deconstructed exclusionary norms. Patterns of participation and deadline policies in classrooms were frequently observed to be closely associated with the deconstruction or upholding of exclusionary structures in ungrading applications. Because these patterns exist in the context of ungraded classrooms and assist in the discussion of my research question, I added columns in the spreadsheet which marked articles that had participation or deadline policies, and if those policies upheld or deconstructed exclusionary norms.

The fourth and final round of data analysis involved a final reading of each paper and their open/axial codes. In this final reading I focused on discovering patterns of which specific exclusionary norms were being upheld or deconstructed across the dataset. In other words, I was able to narrow down specific exclusionary norms and what ungrading methods uphold or deconstruct them in recent research. This final round of analysis was the missing puzzle piece in answering my research question as it directed my thoughts on

the overarching states of exclusionary norms in current ungrading conversations (to be presented in the discussion chapter).

POSITIONALITY:

My interest in ungrading comes partially from my resentment of traditional grading as a label of student learning. As discussed in the literature review, traditional grades fail to truly reflect student intellect because of their abstract definition and inclusion of success criteria that does not reflect student learning, such as classroom behavior. As a student, I was continually frustrated by my grades failing to reflect the learning I'd done because of grade penalties on late work or missing points participation points because I was too quiet in class. As a teacher I was frustrated that my students were stuck with low grades because final grades reflected average performance instead of actual learning or growth throughout the semester. Ungrading calls to me as a way to mitigate the issues of abstract grade meaning and ignored student outcomes, reaching students on levels that values their perceived learning while centering their agency in the process.

While ungrading calls to me as a liberatory practice with the potential to ease the pains caused by traditional grading, I strongly believe that ungrading applications require constant criticism and analysis in order to be recognized as a legitimate mode of student evaluation. As a scholar of queer theory, I believe that exclusionary structures, norms, and binaries promote hegemonic knowledge and behaviors in schools, and are therefore roadblocks to true evaluation of student learning. Ungrading runs the risk of promoting the same structures, norms, and binaries as traditional grading because of traditional grading's

entrenchment in educational systems in America. It is my objective as a proponent of ungrading to evaluate the state of current research in the interest of pointing ungrading application in the right direction, away from the pitfalls of traditional grading and towards student-centered classrooms and equitable learning outcomes.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

I analyzed the papers in this study looking for the ungrading methods used in ungraded classrooms as well as student perspectives and outcomes in order to identify the destruction or upholding of structural norms in the classroom. After analysis, it became obvious that each of the 18 papers utilized at least one of three different ungrading methods. These methods are self-assessment, labor-based grading, and effort-based grading. Each paper detailed the use of at least one of these methods, and several papers detailed the use of either two or all three methods. Some of these papers studied multiple classrooms or courses with distinct ungrading methods, while some used mixed ungrading methods in the same course. Each of the papers studied unique applications of these three methods, making it rife for analysis through the lens of queer theory in the next chapter. In this chapter I will present the data collected on the applications of ungrading methods from my research. The first three sections will focus on the ways self-assessment, labor-based grading, and effort-based grading were applied in recent research. The next two sections lay out the application of mixed-method techniques. These sections look at the ungraded classrooms that combined self-assessment and effort-based grading, and applications of all three methods in the same course. For the papers which describe multiple methods being utilized in distinct courses or classrooms in the same paper, I will separate their results into the appropriate section, resulting with the same paper being featured in multiple sections.

SELF-ASSESSMENT:

This section serves to delineate the ways self-assessment was applied in ungrading classrooms not using labor-based or effort-based grading. As mentioned in the literature review chapter, self-assessment can be used as formative or summative assessment. Formative self-assessment refers to self-assessment utilized alongside assignments as a tool for reflection and in some cases self-grading. Summative self-assessment refers to self-assessment which directs students to reflect on their performance and learning throughout a course. In some cases, summative self-assessment has students determine their final grade for the course. Through the analysis of each paper and their self-assessment applications, we can begin to understand how exclusionary norms exist in current research. In this section I will go through each paper, giving context to their study and laying out the ways in which self-assessment was used in each ungraded class in the interest of delineating their deconstructions and upholdings of exclusionary norms. While this section will draw your eye to the deconstruction and upholding of exclusionary norms in each paper, further discussion and categorization of these norms will occur in the discussion chapter.

Guberman "Student Perceptions of an Online Ungraded Course." (2021)

This paper centers on an asynchronous history course for undergraduate students at a 4-year university. The class was structured around three ungraded presentations, peer and teacher feedback, and three learning reflections (91). There were also opportunities to “enhance their learning and by extension their grade” through the completion of three

optional essays (91). Self-assessment was applied in this classroom via the three learning reflections, where students answer reflective questions regarding their learning in class and assigned themselves a grade based on criteria outlined in the classroom syllabus created by the teacher. This is an example of summative self-assessment in use. If the student's self-assessed grade differed from the teacher's own assessment, they would discuss the disparity in an email (91). The researcher stated that less than 10% of students assigned themselves a grade that wasn't agreed on by the teacher (91). Students in the class reported that self-assessment helped them better reflect on class performance (94), while the syllabus criteria was flexible enough for their own learning ambitions to shine in the class (94).

In summary, this study highlighted the importance of peer feedback alongside teacher feedback. While this acts to decentralize the teacher from classroom power structures, the use of teacher-created success criteria does the opposite. In challenging exclusionary norms, the flexible success criteria allowed for personal learning behaviors to shine in class. In contrast, teacher-created success criteria could overshadow this deconstruction and act as a force to uphold normative success expectations.

Dosmar and Williams "Ungrading Assessment Practices" (2022)

This paper is an article from the National Teaching & Learning Forum where two college professors outline the ungrading methods used in their classrooms. In this section we will focus on Williams's application, which is centered on self-assessment in an undergraduate first-year composition course. This course was completely ungraded except

for a holistic final letter grade at the end of the semester. Instead of letter grades, Williams returned student work with feedback. Self-assessment was utilized twice during the course, at the mid-point and end of the semester (1). These self-assessments are both summative and involve the students creating an inventory of assignments they completed paired with reflections on their performance on each assignment (1,2). Both self-assessments ask the students to assign themselves a letter grade based on their performance. The instructor assigns the students a letter grade based on their self-assessment justification as well as one-on-one conferences with the students (2).

While the self-assessment allows students to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their work throughout the course, Williams did not explain what student performance was based on in this class. This obscures the metric by which the students are assigning themselves grades. By all likelihood, Williams's feedback on student work was what directed student notions of good or bad performance in this course. In determining how the methods of this application uphold or deconstruct exclusionary norms, it is important to understand that the students grade themselves based on assignment performance. While the students may choose the grade they receive, it is likely to be tainted by the teacher's feedback on their assignment performance. To determine if this upholds or deconstructs any exclusionary norms, we must venture to understand what the assignment feedback praised or disparaged.

Ferguson and Bonner "Ungrading in Organic Chemistry: Students Assessing Themselves and Reflecting on Their Learning." (2024)

Researchers are two professors teaching the same organic chemistry course to undergraduate students at a 4-year university. They applied formative self-assessment to the grading of four 15-minute in-class quizzes throughout the course (3). Their idea of ungrading was to put the power of grading in the hands of the students rather than the teachers via self-assessment. After taking their quizzes, the students would grade themselves question-by-question using a rubric created by the instructors. This rubric did not provide the correct answers, but it did instruct students in which ways they should assign points to their recorded responses (3). This was in the effort to get students to utilize class resources to find the correct answers. Partial points were allowed for questions that were not fully correct. Students could earn back credit for up to two points by writing corrections and reflections on why they initially answered the question wrong (3, 4). The researchers also gave the students the option to "opt-out of ungrading for each quiz" (4) meaning they wouldn't have to self-grade but would also miss out on any opportunities for corrections or reflection. After the self-assessment was completed, the instructors would check their work and read reflections before entering a numeric grade in the grade book. The researchers believe that the reflection portion of the self-assessed quizzes improve student performance, but they stated that they currently do not have data to support the claim (5). They also raised concerns that students were often "giving themselves a higher grade than they actually earned," in an effort to "game the system" and receive better grades despite their perceived lower effort (5).

This ungrading application pushes the definitions of what is considered ungrading. Since the study makes use of the term in its title, I found it appropriate to include in the study. That being said, this application shifts the responsibility into the hands of the students while leaving all the structures of grade-based motivation intact. This adherence to the norms has the possibility to prize students who are better at focusing on tests over those who cannot, and thus reinforces exclusionary norms. Further discussion on this study and its failure to deconstruct exclusionary norms will be found in the discussion section.

Brewer "Extreme Ungrading: Rewilding the Classroom through Human-Centered Design" (2024)

This paper showcases the ways the researcher established ungrading over four iterations of her software design class for undergraduate students at her university. The basis of her ungrading lay in the way she did away with exams and rubrics in favor of feedback, more substantial assignments, and self-assessment (4). In the first iteration, self-assessment came in the form of formative self-evaluation forms which were used in the place of exams at several points throughout the semester (4). In later iterations, students would complete midterm and final self-assessments to serve as benchmarks for progress (6,7). Despite utilizing the feedback and self-assessment practices associated with ungrading, the researcher would mark each assignment as "needs improvement", "meets expectations", "exceeds expectations", and "distinguished", which were loosely mapped to C-A+ letter grades (4). The researcher stressed that students who repeatedly met expectations would receive a B in the class. The students' final grades were determined in a

three-step process. First, students would assign themselves a grade in their summative self-assessment at the end of the semester based off of grading criteria created by the instructor (5). Second, the instructor calculated weighted grades based off of the assessment of their work as mentioned earlier. 50% of the grade would be decided by final project performance, 25% depended on the completion of formative self-reflections and reading reflections, and 25% percent depended on student participation (4). There were no provided criteria for the evaluation of student participation. The third step of the grading process involved comparing the student's self-assessed grade to the computed grade, taking into account student justification in order to assign the final grade (5). The researcher reported that the disparity between students' requested grade and their actual final grade was highest in the third iteration, citing the effects the COVID-19 pandemic had on new college students as a possible reason for the students' "miscalibration between effort and outcome" (5,6). In the third iteration, 47% of students received lower grades than they claimed they deserved, whereas in the fourth iteration 50% of students asked for a higher grade than they received (6,7). Moving on, it is also important to note that students were able to resubmit reading reflections for a higher grade (5). It is also important to know that the researcher accepted late work for full credit in the second iteration and every iteration after it (6).

Despite the label of ungrading being applied to this class, each assignment was given a grade that was tied to a traditional letter grade despite the change of wording to represent the grade. This demonstrates an adherence to traditional exclusionary norms stemming from traditional grading. Nonetheless, student self-assessed grades still had an impact on their final grade given they could justify why they deserved that grade. In

dissecting the ways this paper upheld and deconstructed exclusionary norms, it is important to look at who determines the valued learning behaviors in the class and how the final grade reflects it. In this case, the teacher determined student evaluation but gave the students a degree of input. Further discussion of this paper's interaction with exclusionary norms will occur in the next chapter.

Ubbesen, Bruenger, and Lemer "Accessible Ungrading" (2024)

This paper highlights the ungrading practices that the three researchers apply in their first-year writing classes for undergraduates at their university. In this subsection, we will focus on the researcher Bronson Lemer's application of ungrading. Lemer's course was completely ungraded with the exception of a final letter grade in the class, determined by student-defined success criteria. Success in this class is defined by engagement with course assignments and activities, which the students define as participation in the classroom community, presence in class, giving and responding to feedback, and participation in class discussions (367). The students in this class self-assess their work through written reflections on each paper they complete. This asks them to evaluate how they engaged with the assignment and with the instructor's feedback (367). Students are given time to revise their writing based on the feedback they receive before they self-assess. The goal of this self-assessment is to help students track their performance through the semester before they meet for a final conference with the professor where they decide on a final grade together (367). Students in the class reported that they felt more comfortable taking risks

in their writing because there were no negative consequences for trying something that didn't work (368).

The use of self-assessment in this circumstance was formative but it also acted as a benchmark for students to assess their own performance in the class. This usage may be helpful in centering students' personal goals in the writing classroom, helping to push against exclusionary norms which dictate rigid rules about appropriate academic performance.

Gorichanaz "It Made me Feel Like it was Okay to be Wrong': Student Experiences with Ungrading." (2024)

The researcher is a professor for two undergraduate courses, computer interface design and social aspects of information technology, at a large, private, 4-year university. The researcher uses summative self-assessment at the mid-point and end of each course. These self-assessments are completed through an online form which asks students to share their experiences in the class, reflect on their learning, and assign themselves a grade. These self-assessments are guided by students' own personal learning goals, which they each established at the beginning of the course and refer to throughout (71). The professor responds to each student's self-assessments with a letter sharing his own comments and observations on the students work in class as well as in their reflections. If the professor does not agree with a student's chosen grade, he responds in the letter with his own assessment but also gives feedback for the student to improve (71). The self-assessment in the middle of the course serves as a reflection for students and also as an intervention tool

for the professor. The self-assessment at the end of the course, the grade chosen by the student is the grade that is entered into the gradebook about 98% percent of the time (71). In other cases, the professor will intervene and enter the grade he feels most fits the student's performance. Students reported that the researcher's ungrading method helped them shift their focus away from grades and towards being fulfilled by learning (73, 76).

Because the grade assessment is based on holistic experiences rather than performance, the grading in this class can reflect very personal notions of interaction with learning. This has the opportunity to help in deconstructing exclusionary norms because terms of academic success can be defined by individual students, broadening the definitions of acceptable learning behaviors. This is complicated, however, by teacher intervention. Teacher intervention in self-assessed grades help to reinforce the teacher's implicit biases and have the opportunity to uphold traditional notions of academic success, a historically exclusionary norm in schooling.

Ramnarain and Santucci "Bringing Radical Assessment into Radical Political Economy: An Ungrading Experience" (2024)

The researchers focused this paper on a class "the Economics of Class, Race, and Gender" for undergraduate students, in which they were in charge of structuring the class and implementing ungrading methods. The students set up individual learning goals and worked together to set community norms for participation, deadlines, and work quality (6). These would be the metrics by which they assessed themselves using process letters at three points during the course. These process letters are summative self-assessments that

have students first reflect on their learnings in the class, then reflect on their learning goals, progress, and challenges in the class (6, 7). Students were asked to give themselves a letter grade based on their self-assessments in the final process letter. Besides the process letters, the students also completed weekly formative self-assessments which asked them to reflect on their reading and classwork while evaluating their work using the classroom norms established cooperatively at the beginning of the semester (6). At the end of the course, each student created a portfolio of their work to be paired with the process letter before a conference with the professor. At this conference, students made the case for their final grade in the class (7). Students in the class reported that the self-assessments paired with feedback from the professor in a co-created classroom setting helped them develop better learning and self-awareness over the course of the class (12, 13).

When learning is led by individual goals as well as co-constructed classroom norms and success criteria, students gain a sense of agency over their learning. The students become centered in the construction of the classroom and have better chances to make learning their own. Student agency deconstructs norms which limit student modes of engagement in their learning as well as norms which situate students as passive in their educations. Further discussion of this paper's conferencing will be found in the next chapter.

Bailey and Wilkinson "Ungrading in the Composition Classroom; Affect, Metacognition, and Qualitative Learning" (2023).

The researchers center their paper on the two beginner college composition classes they teach at a diverse, public 4-year university. This course was taught online during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The class was ungraded through the use of extensive teacher feedback taking the place of assignment grades as well as the use of several summative self-assessments (17). These self-assessments took the form of what the researchers called narrative self-evaluations or "NSEs". NSEs ask students to talk about their learning goals and personal lives or histories, as well as to reflect on their writing and performance through the course. The researchers argue that NSEs allow students to make themselves more entirely seen and understood, helping to tailor feedback to each student's work in a more individualized manner (18, 19, 20). In one course, NSEs were assigned at the mid-point and end of the course. In this course, students would assign themselves tentative grades based on how they felt about their performance in class holistically. In the other course, NSEs were assigned after three major assignments, serving as both formative and summative self-assessment throughout the course. The students would reflect on the work they put into the assignment, then assign themselves a tentative grade for the assignment (19). In both courses the self-assessed grade has to be agreed upon by the teacher, but they insist that the teachers kept intervention to a minimum to avoid challenging the students' lived experiences (20). Student interviews after course completion revealed that students were made to feel more comfortable, confident, and motivated under this course's ungrading context due to the consideration of their unique backgrounds and experiences as part of self-assessment (24-26).

Bailey and Wilkinson's ungrading application is discussed in detail in the next section, but it is important to highlight the NSEs ability in acknowledging the many factors that affect learning as well as the many different ways learning can be experienced by students. In removing the constraints from student evaluation, these researchers deconstructed norms attached to standardized notions of academic success and opts for a much more personalized understanding.

Newton "Student Perceptions of Democratic Contract Grading, Specifications Grading, and Ungrading in Community College" (2023)

While this paper studies three different grading schemes in community college classrooms, this section will focus on the application of ungrading in the English composition course detailed within. This study is focused on one section this course. The researcher detailed that the course assessment was based on peer and teacher feedback rather than letter grades other than a final grade at the end of the semester, which was determined collaboratively with the students in a final conference with the instructor (41, 43). The instructor utilized a variety of feedback strategies including group feedback, peer feedback, generalized class-wide feedback, and conference-based individual feedback (42). Further, each assignment was prefaced with their purpose in learning (42). Students completed self-assessments on their assignments which entailed the identification of strengths and weaknesses in their writing as well as ideas for raising performance (42-43). The final assessment was paired with a self-assessment which asked students to grade their own final papers in preparation for their conference with the instructor to determine

the final letter grade (43). The researcher found that prompt feedback was impactful in the students' understanding the course performance expectations (67).

The abundance of feedback helped to guide students in their self-assessments, providing them with benchmarks with which they could base their performance. Without such a plethora of feedback, it is likely that self-assessment would be less likely to hinge on the course objectives and could lead to lower quality learning from the students. If the feedback came solely from the teacher, it is possible that their implicit biases could uphold exclusionary classroom norms. But because the feedback came from varied sources, it would seem that those same norms were deconstructed because of the valuation of diverse interactions from peer reviewers.

LABOR-BASED GRADING:

In this section, I will lay out and describe the ways in which researchers observed the application of labor-based grading in ungraded classrooms in the effort of exposing the components that deconstruct or uphold exclusionary norms. As described in the literature review chapter, labor-based grading is a method of ungrading which sets a grade based on the volume or amount of work done by students. Higher grades depend on a higher output of labor by the students under labor-based grading. Often, labor-based grading is applied through the use of grading contracts, which lay out the labor requirements the students must complete to receive a given grade. As in the previous section, this section only outlines papers centered on ungraded classrooms that use labor-based grading in isolation. In this section, I will outline the context of the courses studied in each section as well as their

specific applications of labor-based grading, any associated student outcomes, as well as structures that point to the degradation or propagation of exclusionary norms.

Spurlock "Improving Student Motivation by Ungrading" (2023)

This researcher outlines the application of what he calls an "alternative grading scheme" that he created for use in three different computer science courses for undergraduates at his university. This application involved the creation of grade criteria based on completion of lab activities, homework assignments, quizzes, and a final project (633). Because the criteria for each final grade is dependent on the completion of specific amounts of each assignment type, it aligns with labor-based grading. Its emphasis on completion of assignments as the measure of success rather than performance or quality also makes it further aligned with labor-based grading. After homework, lab assignments, and quizzes, students are returned their work with feedback and a marking of complete or incomplete. The final project is similarly given feedback, but are labeled either "complete", "nearly complete", "somewhat complete", or "incomplete". These labels are roughly correlated to percentage grades, where "complete" refers to a 90% or higher and "incomplete" refers to a score of less than 70% (632). Along with the completion criteria included in the grade breakdown, each letter grade requires students to use no more than a certain number of "redo requests", which would allow the students to retry an assignment in the hopes of it being marked complete when it was previously marked as incomplete (632). These redo requests are limited per student, per assignment type. Using more than the allotted redo requests would shift students into a lower final grade criterion. This was

done in the interest of reducing the grading workload for graders (633). The researcher said that very few students used too many redo requests, and those that did were students who struggled to keep up with deadlines or attendance (634). These students used their redo requests to turn in work that they had been late in submitting. In the case of students meeting different grade criterion for different assignment types, they are encouraged to discuss with the professor in order to reach an agreement for the appropriate final grade (633). Students reported that the alternative grading scheme motivated them to challenge themselves. They also reported that they felt a heightened sense of self-efficacy over their learning (635).

Variable “levels of completion” can be comparable to the letter grades of traditional grading, especially when the level of completion directly computes to a percentage grade in the gradebook. When this evaluation type is used in conjunction with limited assignment redo attempts, it becomes obvious that this class prizes traditional academic engagement over diverse modes of engagement. In other words, students who cannot meet the teacher’s biased expectations of completion within the first attempt are essentially discouraged from trying again and growing as a student, thereby fundamentally upholding exclusionary norms in the classroom.

O’Meara “In Absolute Control of My Own Grading Destiny’ Student Reflections on Engagement-Based Grading Contracts.” (2024)

This researcher centered her paper on her ungraded English course for undergraduate students. Her class utilizes an adapted form of labor-based grading

contracts which she calls “engagement-based grading”. The researcher explains that engagement-based grading is based on labor-based grading, with the main differences being student-created criteria for the A grade level. The application begins with professor-created passing grade criteria. Each student is expected to receive a B grade in the course if they fulfil all of the passing grade criteria. These criteria define the expectations for student timeliness, participation, engagement with feedback, and volume of engagement with class assignments (374). Not every assignment is required, and the passing grade criteria allows students to skip a number of assignments at their own discretion to pass. As long as students can complete the number of required assignments while meeting participation standards and engaging with teacher feedback, they can pass with a B. Each submitted assignment is marked for completion by the professor along with feedback. Students have the opportunity to revise and resubmit as they please. To achieve an A grade, students can achieve the classroom-constructed criteria on top of meeting the passing grade criteria (375). Because these grading contracts separate grades by assignment completion volume, this method fits well within the umbrella of labor-based grading. Students reported that this ungrading method centered student autonomy and allowed them to show off their academic abilities to their best effort.

The use of student-created success criteria allows students to take ownership over the ways their learning is assessed. This increases the diversity in acceptable learning behaviors in this classroom and serves to deconstruct exclusionary norms which ordinarily prize non-diverse behaviors.

Murphy "Crises, Fast and Slow: A Contract-Grading Response in Digital Humanities Pedagogy."
(2023)

This paper is written by a professor teaching a digital textual editing class for third-year undergraduate students. Her application of labor-based grading was in the form of grading contracts. The grading contract scaffolded grades by the number of "additional engagement assignments" the students completing, with the A-level contract requiring four and the C-level contract requiring one (90). Differing from standard labor-based grading contracts, each grade level contract requires a higher level of complexity regarding the requirements of the course's final project (90). The researcher calls this "project-focused contract grading" (87). These differences in complexity came in the form of the addition of additional sections to a student's final project. A-level contracts require the addition of 3 specific sections to their projects while C-level contracts require the addition of only 1 specific section to the project. Despite the differences in work complexity separating the grade levels, this method is still in line with labor-based grading because the grading contracts because complexity in this context is marked by an increase of labor produced by the students. The researcher claims that the decision to engage with a given grade requirement showcases the ability levels and learning that the students demonstrated throughout the course (89). The researcher explained that by eschewing grades in favor of her grading contract has helped the students produce higher quality work than in past semesters where the grading contract was not in affect (95).

In this class, the instructor dictates a bare minimum work expectation, for which the students are rewarded with a C. Because the labor expectations were created by the

teacher; the students have no input in their assessments. This leaves the classroom open for the possibility for students to be left behind. Students who do not operate under the same modes of learning that are prized by the teacher's labor expectation will be unseen by assessment and will be graded poorly despite actual learning. Teacher-created success criteria reinforce exclusionary norms in the classroom.

Moody "First-Year Writing Ungraded Study at Eastern Kentucky University" (2023)

This researcher was focused on student outcomes from ungraded freshman composition classes at their university. They polled 19 students who had recently completed freshman composition classes that utilized labor-based grading contracts. Since these responses are coming from students in different sections of the same course, they are taught by different instructors and therefore, each labor-based grading contract was different (32). The researcher did not outline each individual application in each class, but they did reach out to one instructor for insight into the common ways the instructors use the contracts. It was found that it was common practice to forgo grading entirely, opting for a completion based, more standard application of labor-based grading contract (33). The interviewed instructor explained that their rationale for the use of labor-based grading was inspired by increasing student risk taking by removing the obstacle of a failing grade (33-34). Students interviewed shared that labor-based grading helped them shift their focus towards engagement with the coursework and away from grade-related anxiety (37). They also reported feeling more motivated by a grading contract because they knew the amount of labor they put into their work would result in a better grade (36).

Labor-based grading allowed students to feel like their work was worth something, no matter if it was driven by teacher-pleasing or grade-seeking behavior. This deconstructs an exclusionary norm which supposes that work which pleases the teacher is worth more than work that doesn't.

Wilson "Ungrading Writing: Changes in Motivation, Volition, and Perceived Learning" (2023)

This researcher studied and interviewed 57 undergraduate students across seven sections of an online research writing class. These seven sections were taught by two instructors using identical labor-based grading contracts. These contracts separated grades by the volume of work completion. An A is achieved by completing three essays satisfactorily, one annotated bibliography, and 30 out of 35 online discussion posts and homework assignments. A C was achieved through the completion of three essays, one annotated bibliography, and 20 out of 30 discussion posts and homework assignments. An F meant that students failed to complete one or more essays and the annotated bibliography, while completing less than half of the discussion posts and homework assignments (61). The instructors did not assign letter grades to assignments, they rather marked them as complete or incomplete. Students must revise their incomplete assignments for it to count towards the grading contract (61). While all passing grades must complete all three essays and the annotated bibliography, they differ by the number of homework assignments and online discussion posts they complete (61). Through their study, the researcher found that student motivation and volition were unchanged by the ungraded courses (97, 100) . The researcher also found a decline in student perceived

learning over the course of the semester (106, 107). They attribute this decline to a lack of academic rigor in the course or perhaps student inexperience with ungrading (98, 101, 102, 107).

Similar to Murphy's study, this classroom also upholds exclusionary norms through the use of teacher-created success criteria. Further, the use of labor-based grading while only accepting work that the teacher deems sufficient is counterintuitive to the expectation that labor is equivalent to academic success. Because labor-based grading supposes that labor is a measure of academic success, not giving credit to any turned-in assignment is ignorant of the student's mental processes and mental labor in the classroom and reinforces norms which suppose correct and incorrect modes of academic engagement.

EFFORT-BASED GRADING:

This section is dedicated to delineating the ways papers in this study apply effort-based grading in ungraded classrooms as well as outlining some ways their methods challenge or support exclusionary norms. As with the two previous sections, this section pertains only to papers whose subject was classrooms using effort-based grading in isolation. As discussed in the literature review, effort-based grading uses effort and student growth as the metric for grading, as opposed to the amount of labor as in labor-based grading or teacher-dictated notions of quality.

Ubbesen, Bruenger, and Lemer "Accessible Ungrading" (2024)

This paper highlights the ungrading practices that the three researchers apply in their first-year writing classes for undergraduates at their university. In this subsection, we will focus on the researcher Molly Ubbesen's application of ungrading, as Lemer's ungrading application is discussed in the self-assessment section. Ubbesen uses effort-based grading through what she calls "credit-based grading" (360). This approach to ungrading is based on giving students credit for every assignment they turn in regardless of completion (360). This differs from labor-based grading because credit is not dependent on completion. Rather, a student's effort is acknowledged and rewarded regardless. In this application, Ubbesen assigns 4 points to a complete assignment, 3 points to a complete but late assignment, and 2 points for incomplete assignments which can be revised and resubmitted within one week to earn the full 4 points (361). Students receive 1 point for work that is late and incomplete, and no points for missing work (361). Students can turn in late work until one week has passed since the deadline. Ubbesen stresses to her students that this point system is meant to mirror a complete/incomplete system that encourages revision (361). The assigning of points is not meant to represent a letter grade, rather they are meant to serve as a mark of completion or a reminder to revise. While the assignment completion is worth 50% of the final grade, the other 50% is determined by attendance (361). Ubbesen does not grade for participation since each student interacts with the class in different ways and capacities. "Even listening is engagement." (361). Students who miss class can make up the missing points by working through the class agenda on their own time. Students from this class reported that the grading scheme helped students feel less stressed and more seen (362).

In her ungraded classroom, Molly Ubbesen deconstructed exclusionary norms though acknowledgement of diverse modes of classroom participation as valid and welcome in the academic environment. Through encouraging assignment revision and flexible deadlines, she broadens the boundaries regarding acceptable classroom and learning behaviors regarding academic success.

Fluharty "Focused on Freedom: Exploring the Potential of Grading Contracts to Support Writers in the Secondary English Language Arts Classroom" (2023)

This paper involves a focus group discussion of teachers of undergraduate first-year composition instructors utilizing grading contracts. One participant, Marie, detailed the use of a labor-based grading contract that rewards effort over perfect completion.

"While the product of the student may not be perfect, there were ways that Marie identified if a student was engaged with the material or not, including communication through emails and the use of resources that were at their disposal"
(42)

Despite her labeling this grading contract as labor-based, the emphasis on student effort and usage of class resources sorts this method into the realm of effort-based grading. As I discussed in the literature review, effort-based grading builds off of the idea that teachers give students the tools, while students use those tools to build knowledge. Effort-based grading rewards students for the effort exerted through the use of the tools to build knowledge. Marie's application of effort-based grading rewarding students for completing assignments to the best of their abilities, citing a student who would submit photos of their

hand-written writing for full credit (46). The student's effort was rewarded. Marie reported high levels of engagement and student-teacher communication stemming from her application of ungrading methods (47).

The acceptance of diverse interaction with classwork and assignments pushes the boundaries regarding acceptable student interactions with learning. When teachers accept work through diverse modes and formats, they begin to deconstruct exclusionary norms in their classrooms.

SELF-ASSESSMENT + EFFORT-BASED GRADING

This section presents the data found in recent research papers which center on ungraded classrooms that use a combination of self-assessment and effort-based grading methods. This section is concerned only with the mixed-method applications of ungrading that synthesize self-assessment and effort-based grading as found in recent ungrading research. In the dissection of each paper's ungrading application, I will also begin to lay out elements which act to uphold or deconstruct exclusionary norms in the classroom.

Theobald "Human Centered Data Science. Ungrading in an Introductory Data science Course." (2023)

This paper centers on the ungrading methods used by the researcher in her introductory data science course for undergraduate students at a 4-year university. This course used student-created grading contracts. In the course studied, the students

determined that the criteria for receiving an A grade would be based on the demonstration of proficiency for most, if not all, of the teacher-created learning targets in the course (329). Proficiency was demonstrated to the professor through the use of final portfolios put together by the students. These portfolios gathered artifacts from the course to demonstrate their proficiency in each learning target. Throughout the course, there were plenty of opportunities for the students to achieve proficiency in each target (329). Because students could choose their own artifacts to showcase their proficiency, their effort in the class was showcased in the portfolios rather than their labor or performance in specific assignments. This places this type of grading contract firmly in the territory of effort-based grading because it centers students' effort and by allowing them to construct their own learning. Further, these grading contracts involved a self-assessment portion which asked students to give themselves a final grade for the course alongside a justification. Besides the end of term summative self-assessment, students also completed a midterm summative self-assessment in the form of a narrative summary of their personal experiences in the class. These midterm reflections also asked students to give themselves a tentative grade for the class. For both self-assessments, the students would meet with the professor for a one-on-one conference where they would discuss feedback on class performance (330). The student-created grading contracts guided the self-assessment for both conferences and the final portfolio. Besides demonstrating proficiency, the grading contract also differentiated grades based on timeliness, interaction with feedback both from peers and the teacher, and by participation in group activities (329). Each of these grading criteria were created, defined, and agreed upon by the students in the course. At the end of the semester conference, the students would come to consensus with the instructor on their

final grade for the course based on the justification given in their final portfolios based on the grading contract criteria (330). Students in the course reported a decrease in grade-related anxiety and an increase of learning-oriented motivation (330).

Through the use of student-created success criteria, this instructor was able to break down exclusionary norms stemming from teacher bias in success criteria creation. Further, the use of final portfolios allowed students to display work they felt best displayed their learning and allowed them to dictate the ways in which they were assessed in class. Through the increase of student agency in learning assessment, this class was able to deconstruct exclusionary norms which constrict how learning is assessed and who is privileged in effect.

Meinking and Hall "Enhancing Trust and Embracing Vulnerability in the College Classroom: A Reflection on Ungrading and Co-Creation in Teaching and Learning." (2024)

This paper centers on an interdisciplinary second-year honors class for undergraduate students that was co-taught by the researchers. There were two iterations of the course with slight differences between their methods. The first iteration has the students create final portfolios which they would use to self-assess and justify their final grade in the course (5-6). The second iteration has the students complete a summative self-assessment which included answering prompts that discussed their work and effort over the course of the class, creating artifacts to display their learning in the effort to make a justification for their desired final grade (5-6). Both iterations of the course had students self-assess their performance under the lens of effort-based grading. In the case of the final

portfolio, students would choose assignments that would summarize their effort in the class in order to justify their desired grade. In the second iteration, students would demonstrate their effort through their self-reflective answers to the prompts as well as through the creation of artifacts for the self-assessment. The professors honored each student's chosen grade within a half letter grade (6). The final grade in the class was the only grade given and each assignment was given feedback instead of a letter grade (5-6). Students in both classes reported greater levels of trust in the instructors as well as a boost to their autonomy over their learning and academic performance (9-10).

Similar to Theobold's ungrading application, the use of final portfolios gives students agency over how they are assessed, deconstructing exclusionary norms that removes power from students over their own education.

Dosmar and Williams "Ungrading Assessment Practices" (2022)

This paper is an article from the National Teaching & Learning Forum where two college professors outline the ungrading methods used in their classrooms. In this section we will focus on Dosmar's application, which is centered on a combination of effort-based grading and self-assessment in her undergraduate programming course. Her class is completely ungraded with the exception of a final letter grade. This final letter grade is determined by the professor but is influenced by a midterm and end of semester summative self-assessment, where students evaluate their experience in learning and completing work in the class (2). After the Dosmar reads a student's reflection, she writes them each a personalized letter which details their performance in the class as an

explanation for why they are receiving the grade she assigns. This grade assignment is based on student performance, growth, and resilience (2). She cites a student who earned an A for demonstrating growth and resilience despite not performing perfectly on assignment (2). The use of growth and resilience in assessment is correlated with effort-based grading because it rewards the effort students display in class. Because this course utilizes self-assessment alongside the teacher's own effort-based assessment of student performance, this course demonstrated the use of a mixed-method application of ungrading. This approach to ungrading can center, validate, and reward students for their effort in engaging meaningfully with the content of the course.

Despite inviting students to participate in the conversation regarding grades, Dosmar ultimately makes the decision for the final grade. This prevents students from having a hand in their own evaluations and fails to deconstruct exclusionary norms in the classroom. This being said, the validation of student effort in classwork does help to shift perspectives about what is being graded in class and may deconstruct norms regarding valued knowledge in the classroom.

SELF-ASSESSMENT + LABOR-BASED AND EFFORT-BASED GRADING:

This section is dedicated to presenting the ways papers in this study showcased ungrading schemes that involved self-assessment, labor-based grading, and effort-based grading synthesized into one mixed-method approach. This section is only concerned with papers that outlines these techniques all in one course, thus it excludes articles that showcase these methods in isolation across multiple courses. Along with outlining the

methods of the ungrading applications, I will also begin to highlight aspects that uphold or deconstruct exclusionary norms in the classroom.

Stranford "Fostering Student Agency and Motivation: Co-Creation of a Rubric for Self-Evaluation in an Ungraded Course." (2024)

This paper centers on the researcher's ungraded immunology course for upper-level undergraduate students. The class was wholly gradeless except for a final letter grade which was decided upon by the student in a final self-reflection and conference with the instructor. To guide this self-assessment the instructor worked with the students to co-create a rubric of success criteria. This rubric had four components: effort, mastery, participation, and personal goals (7). This rubric contains aspects of both labor-based and effort-based grading. Several terms on the rubric stipulate completion of a minimum number of in-class and out-of-class assignments to achieve success (7), emphasizing the role that labor takes in the success criteria of the class. The rubric also stipulates effort criteria such as attendance of office hours, attendance at class meeting and group meetings (7). These criteria reflect effort-based grading because the attainment of success is contingent on the students demonstrating their engagement with the course content to the instructor. Furthermore, the inclusion of personal goals in the success criteria can create a learning experience that is tailored to each student. Students' success in their personal learning goals is contingent on their (self-determined) effort in engaging with the class content. Because the achievement of personal goals requires students to take learning into their own hands, making use of class resources to build personal learning, it aligns with our

definition of effort-based grading. This rubric was used as a guide for student self-assessment, which they completed three times throughout the semester (6). Self-assessment had two parts. The first was a formative reflection on course content, with students answering questions about their learning (5). The second part involved a self-reflection on interaction with success criteria, grading themselves with the co-created rubric (6). Students would revise their self-assessments after a conference with the instructor where they would discuss the contents of their writing (6).

It is also important to note the inclusion of participation criteria on the co-created rubric. This section stipulated contribution in class and group discussion as well as thoughtful interaction with self-assessment (7). Because these criteria were co-created, the students had input and could therefore try to ensure equity in their definition of participation. Further, they allowed for resubmission of assignments that received poor feedback and the acceptance of late work within one week as acceptable in moderation in the success criteria (7). While this policy allows room for mistakes, there was no rationale included with the late work deadline. While these criteria are co-created, they still serve to uphold exclusionary norms which dictate normative modes of academic engagement while excluding alternative modes.

CONCLUSION:

These 18 papers showcased how recent ungrading research in classrooms have centered on the application of three main methods, self-assessment, effort-based grading, and labor-based grading. Despite the categorization of these methods, each paper

demonstrated vastly different mechanisms in which these methods operate in the classroom. Self-assessment was shown to be used in formative and summative methods, sometimes having students choose their final grade. Self-assessment was sometimes guided by teacher feedback and sometimes guided by rubric-style success criteria. While labor-based grading always remained centered on student labor output, it varied on how those metrics were measured and conveyed to students. Interestingly, there was no research on the applications of labor-based grading in tandem with self-assessment. Effort-based grading was utilized both with and without grading contracts and varied based on how student effort was centered in the assessment of assignments. More frequently, we saw effort-based grading paired with self-assessment, perhaps because effort may be better seen as a metric of success when students gauge their own effort in relation with course content. Moving into the next chapter I will elaborate more deeply on the methods and aspects of each ungrading application which upheld or deconstructed exclusionary norms. The next chapter will lean more heavily into the queer theory lens in order to establish patterns of binaries and norms affected by elements of each recent ungrading application.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

This study aims to answer the research question *“How does current ungrading research deconstruct or uphold exclusionary classroom norms, structures, or binaries?”* In the previous section I deconstructed the elements of ungrading that were displayed across 18 papers studying ungrading applications. While laying out the elements is useful to understand patterns in how ungrading is presented in current research, the queer lens is quintessential to answering my research question. By centering a queer lens, I can interrogate the ways ungrading creates space (or fails to create space) for individuality beyond the values already accepted in school. This section will use this queer lens to bring to light structural norms that are upheld or deconstructed by elements found in these papers. Under the context of this study, structural norms or binaries are upheld because they align with the status quo of traditional schooling today. Upheld structural norms and binaries fail to challenge the structures of power in the classroom or the boundaries of what knowledge and behaviors are valued in the classroom. These norms and binaries often establish the teacher as the holder of power and create parameters which value certain kinds of participation or interaction with course content. Deconstructing these structural norms and binaries involves the shifting of power structures and academic success criteria to make room for diverse modes of interaction with course content, broadening the parameters of academic success to allow individuality to flourish in the classroom. In this section I speak about the student/teacher binary which details the power dynamics in the classroom. In traditional classrooms with upheld structural norms and binaries, teachers occupy the masculine, dominant role while students occupy the

submissive feminine role. I also speak about the idea of a good/bad student binary, where students who fit well within the parameters of success as dictated by the traditional structural norms sit in the upheld position of “good” student, while those who’s strengths lie outside what is valued by the system are labeled “bad” students. Both of these binaries are exposed in ungrading through analysis under the queer lens.

SELF-ASSESSMENT:

The majority of classes which utilized self-assessment in ungrading involved students assigning themselves a final grade for the course. The criteria which guided the self-assessed grades is the metric by which we can evaluate this practice’s impact on structural norms and binaries in the ungraded classroom. In Lemer’s writing class, Gorichanaz’s computer science class, and Ramnarain and Santucci’s economics class, self-assessment was guided by student-created learning goals and success criteria. By centering success criteria on student notions of academic success and personal learning goals, power structures are shifted from teachers to students. Student-created success criteria allow students to use their individual strengths as metrics for success, widening the boundaries what kind of performance is valued in education and shifting definitions of what behaviors, knowledges, and values are upheld in the classroom. In contrast, self-assessment which is guided by teacher-created success criteria leave power in the hands of the teachers and the objectives of their institutions. While teacher-created success criteria do not necessitate student harm, it is neglectful of student learning motivations and does not allow students to have a hand in the assessment of their own knowledge and academic strengths. This

highlights a structural norm in education: teacher or establishment-oriented learning goals create a type of learning or interaction with course content that is “correct” and a type of interaction that is “incorrect”. Correct and incorrect modes of engagement with school is the gatekeeper that creates a good/bad student binary. Good students demonstrate behaviors that are valued by the predominant structures, while bad students demonstrate behaviors outside what is valued by the hegemony despite equal effort. While the aforementioned examples use self-assessment guided by student-created goals to deconstruct this norm, other examples failed to challenge this. The one of the strongest examples of this structural norm being upheld can be seen in Brewer’s software design class. This class compared student self-assessed grades to calculated grades based off of the teacher’s notion of student performance on each assignment (Brewer, 2024, 4). The final grade calculation was done by the teacher by finding the difference between the self-assessed grade and calculated grade, and it resulted in many students, sometimes 50% of the class, receiving grades lower than they thought they deserved (Brewer, 2024, 6-7). Not only does this demonstrate a massive difference between student and teacher-defined success, but it highlights students’ struggles against the values which create the good/bad student binary. These students felt as though they were successful in the class, but because their behaviors did not match the “correct” behaviors upheld in the structure, they were overlooked. Through the lens of queer theory, we can see that the structural norms that create the good/bad student binary are exclusionary to students who demonstrate diverse styles of interaction with course content. In the end, this ungrading method served to uphold structural norms by rigid adherence to teacher or establishment-based notions of success, performance, and engagement with course content, with self-assessment doing little in

regard to acknowledgement of the individuality of students' experiences with learning and academic success.

Strategies which maximized student-teacher communication at a personal level were the most successful at challenging structural norms and binaries. Bailey and Wilkinson's college composition classes made use of "narrative self-assessments" which were self-assessment essays that include students' histories, personal lives, and lived experiences as a metric that influences their perceptions of academic success (Bailey and Wilkinson, 2023, 18). The instructors used these narrative self-assessments to direct their feedback on student writing and performance as well as a way to understand the rationale behind a student's chosen final grade. This level of communication between teacher and student breaks down the binary relationship between students and teachers. Under the lens of queer theory, teachers occupy the masculine, dominant role while students occupy the feminine, submissive role in traditional classrooms. This is evident through the establishment of grade rulings, classroom norms, and predominantly upheld modes of student engagement being established and enforced by teachers, while students have these structures and expectations enforced upon them with little input. In Bailey and Wilkinson's classrooms, this binary relationship is deconstructed because student individuality is centered in the determination of academic success. The teachers understood that learning is a deeply personal process and is directed by individual processes. This understanding shifts power from the hands of the teachers into the hands of the students. Bailey and Wilkinson understand that each student learns and succeeds in their own individual way. By centering this concept in their evaluation of student success, they deconstruct structural norms surrounding student success, opening the way for students to succeed as they are,

and not as products molded by the educational system. In other words, this application allows behaviors outside of those upheld by the predominant structure to be seen and accepted into the norm. Beyond Bailey and Wilkinson's classrooms, ungrading applications which utilized conferencing for self-assessment of final grades function though strong student-teacher communication serves to degrade the same binary relationship and structural norm. For example, Ramnarain and Santucci's economics class concluded in conferences where students would rationalize their chosen grades based on co-created classroom norms, individual learning goals, and final portfolios (2024, 6-7). This classroom's use of co-created success criteria paired with an actual one-on-one conversation over final grades centered teacher-student communication and shifted the power over evaluation out of the teachers' hands and into the hands of the students. By students and teachers seeing each other as individuals, the parameters for success as dictated by the prominent structures of education can be widened to include diverse behaviors which still demonstrate personal success, thus deconstructing exclusionary structural norms.

Ferguson and Bonner's organic chemistry course took perhaps the most shocking approach to ungrading which did very little to challenge structural norms in the classroom, let alone traditional grading as a practice. Despite the term ungrading in the title of the paper and their use of formative self-assessment on graded in-class quizzes, this study demonstrated strict adherence to structural norms regarding measures of student success, the good/bad student binary, and structures of power in the classroom. While students were instructed to grade their own quizzes as a form of self-assessment, the scores they could achieve were limited to a teacher-created rubric which dictated the terms of

“correctness”. (2024, 3-4). The only reflection on learning involved with this method was reflecting on why they answered a question wrong. This method of self-assessment essentially turns students into graders, a labor that they are minimally rewarded for should they correct their wrong answers. Because students become graders rather than self-reflectors, there is no emphasis on personal strengths in regard to correct answers. Instead, all the emphasis falls on incorrect answers, a deficit-oriented view of self-reflection that serves to only tell students that they do not fit within the parameters of success as dictated by the predominant structural norms, thus upholding the good/bad student binary. While it could be argued that shifting the responsibility of grading to the students also shifts power to the students, the use of teacher-created success criteria still cements the teacher as the dominant holder of power, further upholding the teacher/student binary mentioned earlier. Since this strategy involves the assignment of letter or percentage grades to the completed quizzes, the argument can be made that this paper does not properly utilize ungrading despite its insistence. However, the inclusion of this paper in my study is justified by the paper’s use of the ungrading label in its title and contents. Ferguson and Bonner’s class utilized a mode of self-assessment under the name of ungrading, therefore it is my responsibility to point out that their methods fail to match the liberatory standards that ungrading claims to strive for.

LABOR-BASED GRADING:

Each ungraded classroom in this study made use of labor-based grading through grading contracts. The main distinction between each application lies in the construction of

each contract. While each contract was dependent on assignment completion as the metric for labor, each class was differentiated by notions of completion, inclusion of behavioral criteria, and authorship of grading contracts. Each application was built on teacher-created success criteria, with only one classroom adapting student-created success criteria into their labor-based grading contracts. O'Meara's (2024) English course featured a grading contract in which the B-level contract was stipulated by the professor and the A-level criteria was co-created by the student (374, 375). Student-created success criteria shift power structures in the classroom, allowing students to change the metrics by which they are assessed to better fit their diverse behaviors. This breaks down the good/bad student binary by increasing acceptance of student behaviors which historically haven't been accepted under the predominant structures. This also helps to disrupt the student/teacher binary, as the teachers are forced to accept student authority over their own assessment. This being said, student-created success criteria in this course are severely underscored by O'Meara's teacher-created B-level criteria. This choice causes students to be limited to creating A-level criteria which rests above B-level criteria, which may be already out of touch with the students' notions of academic success. Teacher-created success criteria expect an amount of labor from the students that they have no say in. This is ignorant of individual student needs, learning styles, and demonstration of learning because it assumes a baseline standard of labor expected of the students which is based on the predominant expectations dictated by the hegemony that forms the education system. The use of teacher-created grading criteria in these cases reinforces the teacher's role as dominant and the student's role as submissive, thus upholding structural norms that hold students as

inactive participants in their own education and forcing them to conform to hegemonic expectations of academic achievement.

Labor-based grading functions by using student-displayed labor as the metric for success. When classrooms utilize hard assignment deadlines and limit revisions, it limits students' abilities to receive credit they deserve for their labor. Spurlock's (2023) ungraded classroom utilized a labor-based grading contract which stipulates a revision limit at each grade level. If students wanted to receive credit for their work that was deemed incomplete, they could use a "redo request" which would allow them to receive credit for their labor while risking dropping a grade level on the contract (633). This stipulation counterintuitively punishes students for making use of the feedback they received and does not effectively reward them for their labor. This strongly upholds the structural expectations that "good" students should do the work correctly on their first try nearly every time. This is ignorant of the diverse ways that students learn, as this policy assumes that students will have a concrete understanding of course content every time they perform on an assignment. By preventing students from demonstrating their learning by limiting their ability to revise work for credit, teachers actively reinforce the structural expectations that make up the good/bad student binary while discouraging from learning through retrying. In these cases, the "bad" students who could not produce perfect work the first time will not try again and will therefore miss out on the opportunity to display their learning. In contrast, unlimited revision opportunities can have the opposite effect on this binary. Wilson's (2023) research writing class would only give credit to work that met expectations or were revised to meet expectations (61). By allowing students to revise their work for credit, it shifts performance expectations to be forgiving of mistakes. By

doing this, the ideas of good and bad students shift away from the structural expectation of perfection. This is complicated through the use of teacher-created notions of “meeting expectations” being aligned with structural norms of acceptable student performance. That being said, allowing revisions tells students that perfection is not standard nor expected, broadening the notions of what makes a “good student” good and degrading the good/bad student binary and allowing all students to display what they learned.

Ungraded labor-based grading walks a fine line when it comes to disrupting or upholding structural norms in the classroom. Teacher-defined standards of labor strongly uphold the identity of students as cogs in the work machine. Each student must perform labor at the same standard in the same ways to operate successfully as a component of the workforce. In other words, we are teaching students that they have no agency over their labor, telling them that submission is the only way to survive in the world beyond school. Through the use of teacher-defined labor in labor-based grading, we are telling our students that there is only one kind of labor that is useful, and that kind of labor is defined by the ones who profit off that labor. Students who can perform this kind of labor well are rewarded through their acceptance as a cog in the machine, while students who can't are devalued as poor workers and are left to struggle or fail. Student-defined labor returns the value of labor to the hands of the students, returning to them the agency which the workforce might try and take back. This prepares our students to define the future of labor, broadening the horizons for the valuations of different kinds of labor which aren't currently valued in our society. The students who previously struggled to meet the expectations of labor as established by structural norms could flourish through the redefinition of labor under a more inclusive light.

EFFORT-BASED GRADING:

Ubbesen's (2024) classroom was the strongest example of an effort-based ungraded course which challenged structural norms stemming regarding perceptions of student work. By accepting and awarding points to each student for work they turn in despite the arbitrary idea of "completeness", Ubbesen acknowledges the individual lived experiences the students took to complete their work. This decenters the teacher as the gatekeeper of academic success and allows students to center their own learning goals as the marker of success. This broadens the terms of what values and behaviors are acceptable markers of success, allowing the "queer" behaviors to thrive under the new norm. To further deconstruct the exclusionary normative structures of grading, Ubbesen's class does not punish students for revising their work and does not evaluate student participation. These two classroom policies further center the student as the creator of their own learning and opens doors to allow queered learning behaviors to thrive in the classroom. This is evidenced by students' reports of feeling more seen in the classroom community.

While Ubbesen's ungrading application works towards the degradation of structural norms, it is not perfect. The inclusion of late work deadlines and attendance grading can be seen to adhere to exclusionary traditional structures which promote traditional student success values. These policies are ignorant of student individuality and lived experiences which may cause students to learn in an equivalent way despite performing late or absently. To teachers who ungrade their classrooms but still include these practices as a measure of success, I ask you to question what attendance and timeliness truly measure in regard to student success. If student attendance or timeliness does little to affect the work they are

doing for the class or the learning they are demonstrating, is it fair to punish them for taking a different path to the desired learning outcomes? If timeliness and attendance issues are causing issues in their academic success it should be reflected in their performance in assessments and demonstration of their learning. I urge teachers who utilize these structures in their classrooms to realize that these practices do little more than keep students with diverse (queer) learning behaviors from succeeding despite demonstrated learning acquisition.

SELF-ASSESSMENT + EFFORT-BASED GRADING:

The Theobald and Meinking and Hall papers both utilized this hybrid approach through self-assessment of effort, demonstrated through student-selected artifacts to determine a final grade for the courses. The use of final portfolios composed of student-selected artifacts allowed students to showcase what they believed to be their best work in the classroom in order to argue for a grade that they felt they deserved. This method shifts power structures in the classroom by making students the evaluators of their own learning, a power usually reserved for teachers under normative structures, thus deconstructing the teacher/student binary. While these students still need to justify their learning to their teachers, they are in greater control over the ways effort and learning are valued in the classroom. Students in these classes can use their individual voices to make the case that their modes of learning have value in the classroom, thus deconstructing normative ideas about learning and academic performance.

Theobold's (2023) ungraded classroom hinged on student-created success criteria which happened to include timeliness and participation criteria (329). Because the success criteria were student-created, it could be assumed that the students felt that timeliness and particular forms of participation were necessary for the achievement of learning and academic success. It is unclear whether or not the students adopted these policies into their success criteria because they were accustomed to the expectation previously placed on them by normative academic expectations. We have discussed that student-created success criteria helps to broaden the boundaries of what is acceptable under the structural norms that dictate academic success, but it seems that sometimes students believe that adherence to the existing norms is useful to their academic success. I suggest that more research is necessary to determine student perceptions of timeliness and participation in relation to individual notions of academic success.

Dosmar's (2022) ungrading application was interesting because she used student self-reflections to understand their effort but did not afford the students the option of picking their own grades (2). Because Dosmar was the primary assigner of grades, the grading of student effort was contingent on her values as an educator. In other words, only demonstrations of effort which fall under the umbrella of her perceptions of effort are valued in her classroom. This unfortunately reinforces the binary relationship between teachers and students, leaving the structures of power in the classroom virtually untouched. Students will ultimately be motivated by a teacher-decided final grade to conform to normative modes of work ethic in order to match the expectations of the teacher. Despite the ability of self-assessment to center student voice in the classroom,

teacher-decided grades ultimately fail to incorporate student voice and perspectives into their evaluation and ultimately upholds exclusionary structural norms in the classroom.

SELF-ASSESSMENT + LABOR-BASED AND EFFORT-BASED GRADING:

Stranford's (2024) ungrading application was the only paper in the study to use all three methods. This application made use of co-created success criteria, teacher-student conferences, and student-decided grades based on the co-constructed rubric, similar to several papers in this study that help to deconstruct exclusionary structural norms and binaries in education (7). Each of these practices decenter teachers as the holders of power and allow students to bring their own strengths into the classroom where they previously weren't valued. Even the labor requirements in the rubric were student decided, centering student voice in the classroom and creating space in the structure for a new norm. Similar to Dosmar's application, Stranford's class decided to include participation and deadline terms in their success criteria (2024, 7). It was not clear if this decision was teacher-influenced or influenced by existing perceptions of traditional notions of academic success. That being said, this class inadvertently upholds structural norms surrounding traditional notions of participation and late work in education while deconstructing norms concerning power structures and valued behaviors.

IMPLICATIONS:

Remembering Jesse's Stommel's words discussed in the literature review chapter, ungrading is meant to be a liberatory pedagogy which challenges systemic practices through the centering of student agency (Stommel, 2024, 327). Branching from this idea, applications of ungrading which fail to deconstruct systemic norms in the classroom also fail to achieve the foundational goals of ungrading. In my research we saw ungraded classrooms fail to deconstruct structural norms and binaries through the use of teacher-created success criteria, teacher-created definitions of participation, and overreliance on norms of traditional grading like deadlines, revision limiting, and final grades. These establishments are remnants of the traditional grading paradigm which teachers consciously or unconsciously bring into the new ungrading paradigm. The inclusion of teacher-created classroom expectations can be mandated by the establishment, or they could be brought into ungrading by the fear that students cannot succeed without them. Each of the papers in this study stated that the establishment required final grades for the course, which can be one source of adherence to the hegemonical structural norms of traditional grading. This being said, the queer lens allows us to see that adherence to these structures strips students of agency over their educations and constrains the behaviors which are considered acceptable for academic success. The papers which demonstrated methods which deconstructed structural norms and binaries trusted students to be the gatekeepers of their own education. Basing classroom expectations and success criteria on student-dictated notions returns agency to students and gives them the freedom to set the terms of their own success. Broadening the boundaries of what defines student success lies in the hands of the teachers by allowing students to create the definition themselves. Not

only does this challenge systemic practices which places teachers in power over students, it aligns truly with the foundational values of ungrading. Further, it arms students with the experience and power to be the masters of their realities. Students are the future leaders of the world and arming them with agency over the institutions they inhabit also arms them with the ability to bring about positive change outside of school. Ungrading classrooms which fail to challenge structural norms fall short of this goal and ultimately reinforce submissiveness of young people under the institutions they inhabit. This study is in the effort to steer ungrading research in the direction of progress, and the goal is to interrogate the ways ungrading still clings to the past. Papers which fail to interrogate normative structures that hinder student autonomy and agency under the label of ungrading obscures the goals of ungrading. These papers are constrained in their attempts to utilize ungrading for change in the system and further serve to reinforce exclusionary structures. The proliferation of this research obscures the original intent of ungrading, which is to center student agency in the classroom while removing the external stress from grades. Ungrading research exploded in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the plethora of information is muddied by studies that leave power structures and binaries concrete in their applications. If our goal is to deconstruct the harm on students stemming from traditional grading, researchers must center complete deconstruction of those structures. It seems to me that there is a hesitation to sever ourselves completely from the structures and norms we are used to. The unfortunate effect of this hesitance leaves these structures intact and weakens the public perception on the effectiveness of ungrading pedagogy. I strongly urge future researchers and teachers who are interested in ungrading to deeply interrogate the rationale behind their decisions in their classrooms. Intentionality in ungrading

application is necessary to fully deconstruct exclusionary norms and will help to prevent student diversity from being lost in notions of academic success. If we wish to establish ungrading as a viable pedagogy, we need to rid ourselves of adherence to traditional norms in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

18 research papers spanning a three-year period highlighted the necessity of student-created success criteria in the interest of ungrading's continued success as a liberatory pedagogy that centers student agency. If ungrading is to remain a method that aims to center learning in the evaluation of students, students must be the ones to define what learning looks like. Teacher-created notions of learning run the risk of being ignorant of queer learning behaviors and can increase the probability that classes will return to external motivation in the form of teacher-pleasing academic behaviors. It was observed that ungrading methods that failed to deconstruct exclusionary systemic norms often utilized on remnant elements of traditional grading such as teacher-created success criteria, deadlines, limited revision, and participation grading. The latter three elements are behavior-based grading notions and do not relate to evidence of learning. This cling to traditional grading constrains the space for queer learning behaviors in success criteria, shifting focus away from student-centered learning and towards conformity with societal expectations.

While ungrading defies the establishment of concrete methods and applications, I believe that there are classroom structures and establishments which prevent the creation of true ungraded classrooms. In studying exclusionary norms in ungrading applications, we can discover applications and methods which actively push against student agency in the classroom. Because centering of student agency is a core tenet of ungrading, I have come to believe that true ungraded classrooms must avoid the elements of traditional grading mentioned in the previous paragraph while allowing students to share in the creation of

their classroom expectations. To get rid of numeric grades is not enough to get rid of the side effects on students because their voices are not a part of the conversation regarding their own educations. Doing away with grades while leaving student agency unaffected simply reorients extrinsic motivation towards teacher-pleasing behavior. Queer analysis of recent research allowed me to discover that the classrooms which centered student agency through student-constructed norms broadened the boundaries of what is considered acceptable academic behavior. Because of this, I believe that the truest ungrading applications involve student-created classroom norms and success criteria because student agency is best centered, and the students cannot be motivated by extrinsically by the teacher's biased expectations.

This study was limited by its small sample size. While the sample size is comparable to the expected sample size of members in a focus group, I expect that different patterns might emerge from a larger sample size of papers. Further, every paper included in this study was found using only one library database. I expect that different databases contain different resource, which would further change the landscape of emerging patterns regarding ungrading and exclusionary norms. It is my recommendation to future researchers that this line of research be continued using a larger, more diverse sample size.

In writing this paper, I find myself increasingly aware of the intentionality of my grading choices and work assignments. I urge my readers to use the data I collected to reorient your own grading practices towards centering student agency in the interest of broadening the boundaries defining success in your classrooms, making the queer commonplace. It is my solemn belief that each and every student possesses potential to

succeed academically. As teachers, it is our duty to provide students with opportunities for their potentials to shine. We must stop diminishing this shine by motivating our students through encouraging teacher-pleasing behavior. We must stop diminishing this shine by grading for non-learning behaviors like timeliness or participation. When we as teachers qualify a student's success through anything but their demonstrated learning, we reinforce structures that make queer behavior unacceptable and hold our students as submissive in the process of schooling. We must create the space for our students to decide what shining looks like. If students can dictate the terms of their own success, they stop asking "*What does it take to pass?*" and they start telling you "*What can I do to learn more?*"

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