

“Learning without the fear of failure”: Ungrading as an Alternative Assessment Method in Occupational Therapy Education

 Brittany C. Adams¹, Alexis M. F. Morin¹

Affiliations:

¹Western New England University
Springfield,
Massachusetts,
USA

Corresponding Author:

Prof Brittany Adams
brittany.adams@wne.edu

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Mental health concerns among higher education students, especially those in professional graduate programs, have reached a critical level, prompting exploration of alternative pedagogical methods to alleviate stress and enhance learning. This study investigates the potential of ‘ungrading’, a system that minimizes or removes traditional grades in favor of frequent, formative feedback, within the context of two first-year entry-level occupational therapy courses.

Methods: Through a mixed-methods approach using a survey design followed by a focus group, the authors gathered data from 17 students, examining their perceptions of ungraded assessment versus traditional grading.

Findings: Results indicated that if given the option, most students (94%) would choose ungraded classes for learning and retention, citing reduced stress, increased faculty support, and greater comfort in collaborative environments. Qualitative data revealed themes of decreased anxiety, enhanced material comprehension, self-reflection opportunities, and a supportive classroom culture. However, students initially struggled to adjust to the absence of traditional grading, suggesting that structured feedback and consistent check-ins could facilitate the transition.

Conclusion: This study contributes to emerging research on ungrading as a viable approach to supporting student mental health and engagement, while aligning with occupational therapy education ideals. Future research should explore the broader applicability of ungrading across health professions and investigate faculty experiences with this assessment model.

Key Words: assessment, ungrading, occupational therapy, culture, higher education

INTRODUCTION

The number of students in the United States diagnosed with a mental health condition increased steadily over the course of a decade from 2007 (21.9%) to 2016-2017 (35.5%) (Lipson et al., 2018, para. 13). Suicidal ideation has also increased over the years (Lipson et al., 2018). The 2023 National College Health Assessment survey revealed 78% of college students reported experiencing moderate to high stress levels (American College Health Association, 2024, p. 14). Stress and anxiety were noted as top factors impeding students' academic performance (American College Health Association, 2024, p. 6). Professional graduate students are especially at risk due to the intensity of the curriculum and high pressure of success in their programs.

Occupational therapy students experience above-average levels of stress and have reported academic work as a barrier to practicing self-care to attain well-being (Grab et al., 2021; Laposha & Smallfield, 2022; Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021). It is critical for occupational therapy educators to acknowledge student stress and implement strategies to change the culture in higher education to reduce student mental health concerns and assist with managing the experience of stress (Grab et al., 2021).

Refining and altering pedagogical approaches have been suggested as a strategy to support student wellness while also making a positive impact on their learning (Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021). Reexamining methods of grading and providing feedback may be one approach to support students' mental health and learning. The traditional methods of grading in higher education, such as point-based systems and letter grades, can have negative effects on students' motivation, and evidence indicates that such grading techniques

are not a valuable form of feedback (Cain et al., 2022). Higher education institutions should consider moving away from traditional grading methodologies and implement other valid and reliable grading practices (Cain et al., 2022; Newton et al., 2020).

Removing grades from the classroom has gained traction among educators who seek to maintain high expectations while decreasing the mental health burden on their students. A grade-free environment removes the pressure of obtaining a grade and allows students to focus on feedback to improve their understanding of a topic until they achieve mastery (Stommel, 2023). Prioritizing student well-being and fostering supportive learning environments may better prepare occupational therapy practitioners to deliver effective care to clients, given the opportunities to master content during their didactic education. The term 'ungrading' was popularized by Jesse Stommel and is defined in his terms as "raising an eyebrow at grades as a systemic practice, distinct from simple 'not grading'" (Stommel, 2023). He further explains the concept of ungrading as a process involving students in conversations about grades to empower students to be active contributors in their learning. Ungrading can be viewed as a practice to promote students' growth by either eliminating or reducing the use of assigned grades in a course and has a significant emphasis on providing recurrent and detailed feedback to students on their coursework (Kenyon, 2022; Stommel, 2023).

The ultimate goal of utilizing ungrading is to shift the focus from earning a grade to learning and retaining knowledge in a supportive environment. This innovative approach allows for an emphasis on the learning process

rather than quantifying performance through grades.

Traditional grading systems often lead students to prioritize grades over genuine understanding, which decreases their intrinsic motivation to learn. With traditional assessment models, students may receive limited feedback about areas of difficulty, focusing on the grade rather than the learning process. In contrast, ungrading allows faculty to provide qualitative feedback that can guide students in their learning journey. This approach not only helps students understand their strengths and weaknesses but also encourages them to take ownership of their learning (Smart et al., 2016).

This self-reflective practice cultivates a growth mindset, encouraging students to view challenges as opportunities for learning rather than as threats to their grades (Ferguson, 2024). Implementing non-traditional assessment strategies, such as ungrading, enhances opportunities for individualized support for students, thereby improving their overall learning experiences. The focus on formative feedback rather than summative grades can lead to a more supportive learning environment, where students feel empowered to improve (Newton et al., 2020). This approach aligns with the practice of ungrading, as it encourages engagement through self-reflection and emphasizes learning while empowering students by providing individualized feedback. Educators familiar with non-traditional assessment may see similarities between ungrading and competency-based education (CBE), as both challenge traditional grading. In CBE, students demonstrate mastery of skills, often using a satisfactory/unsatisfactory model, and focus shifts from earning grades to developing essential competencies. Despite

this overlap, the approaches differ philosophically: ungrading emphasizes student agency, self-reflection, creativity, risk-taking, and well-being, while CBE is system-oriented, specifying what students must achieve and measuring growth by demonstrated mastery (Cain et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2021). Ungrading can complement CBE in health professions education, particularly for skills-based learning. Faculty can set required competencies rather than grades, providing feedback and opportunities for reflection until mastery is achieved. This approach shifts the focus from meeting minimum standards to ensuring students develop essential skills and professional competence (AACN, 2023).

It is important to note that ungrading can be faced with challenges. One common constraint is the institutional requirement for submission of final letter grades (Matusov, 2025). To address this, faculty can incorporate ungrading practices within traditional grading systems while aligning final assessments with institutional requirements. This approach was used by the researchers and is described in the study methods.

An additional challenge that may be presented with ungrading is the potential for increased workload for faculty. It does require faculty to provide detailed feedback and guidance for students, which can be a time-consuming process (Stenson, 2025). Finally, evidence suggests that students can initially struggle with the lack of structure that can accompany ungrading. Students can also have difficulty with the new concept of measuring success in the course, not by letter grade or points, but through feedback and actual learning (Hasinoff et al., 2024). Student readiness can be addressed by providing transparent guidelines for ungrading, frequent

opportunities for reflection and feedback, and clear assignment expectations. While these challenges are possible, each can be addressed through careful planning, modifying ungrading approaches to best fit needs, clear communication, and starting small when first beginning with ungrading practices.

Overall, ungrading can be a valuable alternative method to traditional grading to minimize students' mental health concerns and increase their overall learning in a course. However, it's important to obtain insight into students' perceptions of ungrading and the practicality of it to assist with determining if it is a beneficial and viable option. The purpose of this study was to understand student experiences and perceptions of ungrading.

METHODS

Design and instrumentation

The researchers used an exploratory mixed-method survey design analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data, followed by semi-structured focus groups of student perceptions regarding the use of ungraded assessment practices in two first-year occupational therapy courses. The researchers received Institutional Review Board approval from the university to carry out this project as an exempt study. The study utilized two data collection methods. The first was a researcher-designed, retrospective, 17-question online survey, and the second was a researcher-designed, retrospective, seven-question semi-structured focus group. Both methods examined student perceptions about their experience being in an ungraded course, as compared to their experiences in traditionally graded courses. The survey and focus group questions were developed based on a review of existing literature on traditional and non-traditional grading practices,

assessment, and student well-being and were designed to compare students' perceptions of graded versus ungraded courses. As a pilot study, this served as an opportunity to establish preliminary validity and assess clarity and alignment with the study objectives. This pilot provides a foundation for refining the survey and expanding the study with a larger student population in future research.

The survey included both multiple-choice and guided short-answer questions and was split into three sections, including the initial required statement of consent. The first section gathered demographic information including participants' age, gender, ethnicity, and prior educational degrees earned. No identifying information was collected. All data were stored and reported in aggregate to ensure individual identities could not be discerned. Broader demographic categories such as wider age ranges were also utilized to reduce identifiability, and the reporting of unique demographics that could point to an individual was omitted.

The second section of the survey addressed participants' prior experiences with alternative grading practices, and the final section collected participant feedback regarding graded versus ungraded, or grade-free, assessment models. This section gathered data about participant perceptions regarding their preferred assessment model regarding overall learning, retaining information, comfort, stress level, and motivation to learn. Additionally, data was collected about their perception of faculty in each model, including faculty attentiveness, approachability, and fairness. Finally, participants were asked to indicate if they would choose a graded or ungraded/grade-free class if given the choice,

with an optional open response to provide a rationale for their decision.

The focus group followed a semi-structured interview format with open-ended and probing questions. Participants signed an informed consent prior to participating in the focus group. Questions focused on overall perceptions of ungrading, thoughts about alternative assessment models, any perceived impact ungrading had on mental health (positive or negative), whether their approach to the course might have been different if the courses they took were graded, perceptions of the ungrading policies used, and which model of assessment (graded or ungraded/grade-free) would be selected if given the opportunity. Participants also had the option to provide any additional information that allowed the researchers to better understand their experiences in ungraded courses. Individuals eligible for participation in the study had to be first-year occupational therapy students at the host university, 18 years or older, and had to have successfully completed two ungraded courses in the curriculum. Participants were excluded from the study if they were second- or third-year students, if they hadn't successfully passed two ungraded courses, or if they were students from another program or university. Participants could opt to complete just the anonymous survey or both the survey and focus group.

Ungrading in Practice

Ungrading is not a standardized assessment method, but a flexible pedagogical concept focused on feedback, reflection, and student ownership of learning (Blum, 2020; Stommel, 2020). As such, the researchers' implementation of ungrading reflected these core principles while adapting to institutional requirements for final grade submission. Fidelity

was conceptualized as alignment with the underlying philosophy of ungrading rather than duplicating a prescriptive assessment model. The ungrading approach emphasized feedback, student self-assessment, and dialogue around learning goals, consistent with high fidelity to the foundational philosophy of ungrading. Learning activities included reflective videos, skill-based competencies, quizzes, and written assignments. Each assessment was accompanied by individualized written, verbal, or group discussion-based feedback. All assessments outlined clear expectations for earning a "pass." When expectations were not met, students received feedback, implemented revisions, and resubmitted the work until the expectations were achieved.

This process reinforced a focus on genuine learning and skill development rather than compliance or grade attainment. Minor adaptations to traditional ungrading practices were necessary to meet institutional requirements, including the submission of a final grade. Final letter grades were self-determined by students through an end-of-semester reflective paper that examined their own learning and performance throughout the course. Faculty retained the right to adjust a final grade if notable discrepancies existed between the student's self-assessment and the instructor's evaluation.

Data Collection

Survey data was collected through an online survey using Google Forms, and the focus group was completed in-person and was not video or audio-recorded to maintain confidentiality. Field notes were recorded, and each participant was identified utilizing a number to assist with tracking individual responses. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling of students who had

previously taken ungraded courses in the professional occupational therapy program and passed them successfully. Students who had only taken traditionally graded courses in the professional occupational therapy program were not eligible to participate. There were 17 participants for the survey and five participants for the focus group. The participants had all completed their ungraded coursework prior to participation in the research study.

Potential participants who met inclusion/exclusion criteria were contacted via email and provided with the survey link as well as the predetermined date for the focus group. The email clarified that participation was completely voluntary and that there would be no negative consequences if students opted not to participate in any portion of this study. The primary investigators contacted eligible students following the completion of the courses and after they had received their final grades to reduce pressure on participants.

If students were interested in participating in the focus group, they emailed the researchers so they could be provided with the informed consent form for review and sign prior to participating. Participants who elected to complete the survey were asked to consent to participation prior to beginning the survey. The survey was open for a two-week period, and one reminder email was sent during that time frame.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the survey were descriptively analyzed in Microsoft Excel using frequencies, means, and percentages to summarize participants' responses. These results provided an overview of general response trends and variation among participants. Qualitative results from the survey's

open response questions and the focus group responses were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Responses were reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data, and recurring ideas were identified and grouped to determine common perceptions. Focus group data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns and meaning units reflecting shared experiences and perspectives. All coding was conducted independently by each researcher, followed by comparison and discussion of identified codes to achieve consensus and enhance reliability. Triangulation of qualitative data occurred through comparison of codes and interpretations between researchers, which strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. The resulting themes were synthesized and compared with quantitative survey results to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions of ungraded assessment.

RESULTS

A total of 17 students participated in this study. All participants completed the survey and five students participated in the focus group. Section three of the survey focused on participant experiences with alternative grading practices. Four of seventeen participants (23.5%) reported they had previously taken an ungraded course while six of seventeen participants (35.3%) reported they had previously completed ungraded assignments in other courses.

Demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1 on the following page.

Table 1: Demographic Survey Data

Demographic Information	Data: N (%)
Age	18-25: 15 (88.2%) 26-35: 2 (11.8%) 36-45: 1 (5.9%)
Gender	Woman/Female: 15 (88.2%) Man/Male: 1 (5.9%) Other: 1 (5.9%)
Ethnicity (select all that apply)	White: 15 (88.2%) Black: 1 (5.9%) Latino or Hispanic: 2 (11.8%)
Undergraduate Degree	Psychology: 5 (29.4%) Health Studies/Science: 5 (29.4%) Biology: 2 (11.8%) Exercise Science: 1 (5.9%) Athletic Training: 1 (5.9%) Visual Art: 1 (5.9%) Therapeutic Recreation: 1 (5.9%) Kinesiology: 1 (5.9%)

Table 2: Ungraded vs. Graded Survey Responses

Question topic	Ungraded: N (%)	Graded: N (%)
Learn best	11 (64.7%)	6 (35.3%)
Retain information best	12 (70.6%)	5 (29.4%)
Most comfortable	15 (88.2%)	2 (11.8%)
Stress level is higher	1 (5.9%)	16 (94.1%)
Motivation to learn is higher	10 (58.8%)	7 (41.2%)
Faculty can be most fair	14 (82.4%)	3 (17.6%)
Faculty are most attentive	11 (64.7%)	6 (35.3%)
Faculty are most approachable	17 (100%)	0 (0%)
Overall choice	16 (94.1%)	1 (5.9%)

Quantitative Data

Sixty-five percent (65%) (11/17) of students felt they learned best in a grade-free (ungraded) class. However, 59% (10/17) reported their motivation was higher to learn in a graded course. Seventy-one percent (71%) (12/17) identified that they retain information best in a grade-free class. A majority of students (82%) (14/17) felt faculty are most

attentive to their learning in a grade-free course. An overwhelming number of students (94%) (16/17) indicated their stress level is higher in a graded course versus grade-free and expressed feeling most comfortable in a grade-free class. All students (100%) reported faculty are most approachable in a grade-free class and 94% (16/17) stated if given the option they would choose to take a grade-free class. All responses to the questions regarding graded versus ungraded courses are shown in Table 2.

Qualitative Data

The following five themes emerged from the open-response question on the survey and the focus group responses: the novel concept of ungrading, decreased anxiety, allowed for greater absorption of material, ungrading creates opportunities for self-reflection, and supportive culture created by ungrading. Statements from survey responses

and focus group responses are included under each theme to provide context. Participants overwhelmingly reported a grade-free approach was significantly less stressful compared to a graded course, and equally as important, the reduction of stress with this model did not result in decreased understanding of the course content.

Novel Concept of Ungrading

Students repeatedly expressed it was difficult to adjust to the new model of ungrading and found it challenging to comprehend ungrading practices, particularly how their work would be reviewed, whether they have met the criteria of an assignment or not, and the overall meaning of ungrading. They noted difficulties in understanding their level of

performance without traditional grading methods. Students suggested implementing check-ins throughout the semester and additional feedback on performance to help them transition into this new grading system.

Focus Group Participant 1: *"I had a hard time conceptualizing if I was doing well or not because I've always thrived off of my grades."*

Focus Group Participant 3: *"It was hard to gauge whether I knew the material well enough without a letter grade."*

Decreased Anxiety

Students reported feeling reduced pressure and stress associated with earning grades. It was commonly expressed that they felt this led to decreased thoughts of failing the course. Finally, reoccurring comments were made on students feeling an increased level of comfort within the classroom environment and course.

Survey Participant 9: *"The grade-free classroom allows students to genuinely learn the material without worrying or stressing over a grade. In graded classes I focus more on memorizing the material to do well on tests, rather than taking my time to learn the material as I would for an ungraded class."*

Survey Participant 13: *"I felt like I was able to learn the same amount of material but in a more comfortable and less anxiety filled setting."*

Survey Participant 12: *"I personally am very hard on myself and I feel like the ungraded method allowed me to actually learn without the fear of failure."*

Allowed for Greater Absorption of Material

All students stated they experienced an increase in motivation to learn the course

content. They further noted the reduced pressure of grades and stress along with enhanced motivation to learn allowed for greater comprehension of the content for long-term memorization versus short-term. Course content and curriculum within the occupational therapy program is scaffolded and requires students to carry over knowledge from previous courses, and students agreed that the ungraded environment assisted with this.

Focus Group Participant 2: *"We were given frequent feedback and had to use it which helped to enhance the content we were learning."*

Survey Participant 11: *"The grade-free approach allows students to be active participants in learning, engaging in content for application rather than a numerical representation of learning."*

Focus Group Participant 4: *"Ungrading is progressive and simulates real life."*

Ungrading Creates Opportunities for Self-reflection

Multiple participants felt an ungraded course facilitated critical reflection on their performance and the content learned. Students commented that the self-reflection components enabled them to reflect on whether it was their best work and if they truly understood the material. However, increasing opportunities for self-reflection throughout the course would increase value per several students.

Focus Group Participant 2: *"Ungrading provided more opportunities to self-reflect, almost like a journal."*

Survey Participant 7: *"I like that ungraded classes give us the opportunity (or require us) to reflect deeply on our work and be critical of our work without focusing on a number grade and instead focusing on the actual*

content.”

Supportive Culture Created by Ungrading

Students stated that because the pressure of earning a traditional grade was removed, there was decreased competitiveness among peers within the course. They expressed rather than competing with their peers, a grade-free environment allowed for increased peer collaboration and ability to provide constructive feedback to their peers. All students felt their peers supported one another with digesting the content and provided encouragement when needed.

Focus Group Participant 4: *“The ungrading model reduced competitiveness in the classroom.”*

Focus Group Participant 5: *“Ungrading provided a good foundation for the culture of the program which is supportive and encourages peer support.”*

DISCUSSION

This pilot study examined students’ experiences and perceptions in ungraded courses within an occupational therapy curriculum. Findings indicated that most students preferred the grade-free environment, reporting reduced stress, increased comfort, and stronger faculty-student relationships compared to traditionally graded courses. Students described feeling better able to learn and retain information without the pressure of grades, though some continued to associate grades with motivation. Qualitative themes supported these results, highlighting decreased anxiety, increased self-reflection, and a stronger sense of support and community among peers.

These results align with findings from previous studies indicating that ungrading can

promote intrinsic motivation, support student mental health needs, and reduce pressure and stress (Cain et al., 2022; McMorran & Ragupathi, 2019). Students in this study also expressed that ungrading allowed them to focus more on understanding course content and applying feedback rather than performing for a grade (Blunt, 2023). Utilizing a grade-free approach as a strategy supports recommendations by Grab et al. (2021) and Lewis-Kipkulei et al. (2021) regarding a crucial need to refine and implement strategies to support students’ mental well-being. Student requests for additional feedback opportunities suggest that clear communication of expectations and consistent open dialogue are essential to help adjust to nontraditional assessment models. Establishing clear procedures at the start of the course may reduce uncertainty, further supporting a positive transition to this learning environment.

Ungrading appears to complement pedagogical approaches that prioritize student-centered learning and well-being by enhancing communication, building trust, and creating a positive classroom environment. As such, fostering positive faculty-student relationships not only improves student comfort and engagement, but also enhances motivation, learning outcomes, and professional growth. Educators should consider how grading, or the absence of it, aligns with their teaching philosophy and course objectives to ensure assessments support students, the course, and the overall learning culture.

Limitations

Although positive feedback on ungrading was received from students, limitations exist within this study. First, the sample size was a small convenience sample of one cohort who experienced ungrading for the first time, which may limit generalizability to other

cohorts or the broader occupational therapy student population. To mitigate this, the study used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative survey responses and focus groups, allowing for triangulation and a more comprehensive understanding of student perceptions despite the small sample size.

Second, the study relied on self-report data reflecting upon subjective experiences of stress, motivation, and learning. To address this limitation, multiple researchers independently reviewed and analyzed the qualitative survey and focus group responses. This collaborative approach helped reduce individual bias, ensure consistency in interpretation, and strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, making it more likely that the results accurately represent students' experiences.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

Ungrading is a valuable tool for educators seeking to promote authentic learning and well-being. While it may not fit every context, emerging evidence, including findings from this pilot study, suggests numerous benefits. Ungrading can reduce stress and anxiety, promote self-reflection, and foster a supportive classroom culture. Quantitative and qualitative data from this study indicated that students felt more comfortable engaging with course content and faculty feedback in a grade-free environment, without compromising comprehension or motivation. These findings align with prior research showing that ungrading enhances intrinsic motivation, promotes well-being, and encourages deeper engagement with learning (Cain et al., 2022; McMorran & Ragupathi, 2019; Newton et al., 2020).

Given these benefits, educators should ensure that their assessment methods align with their teaching philosophy and course learning objectives. Faculty may consider gradually integrating ungrading principles into existing models. For instance, quizzes can remain part of the course but be re-framed: students might create potential quiz questions, collaboratively complete the quiz, and discuss responses as a group. This approach supports mastery of content while encouraging peer collaboration and reducing performance pressure.

The authors encourage faculty to consider implementing ungrading practices to support student mental health, promote a positive culture, and maximize student success. This model is adaptable across delivery formats and assignment types. Future research should examine ungrading across larger and more diverse cohorts, investigate the impact of repeated exposure to ungraded courses, and assess potential benefits for faculty, such as workload, satisfaction, and instructional effectiveness.

There is also a need to further explore the effects of ungrading on both students and faculty. These steps would provide stronger evidence to refine ungrading practices and assess their effectiveness across diverse academic settings. Such studies would strengthen evidence for non-traditional assessment strategies and inform best practices in occupational therapy and other health professions education.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights ungrading as an assessment method that can foster a more supportive, feedback-centered learning environment, especially within health professions education. By alleviating grade-related

stress, ungrading can enhance students' mental well-being, motivation, and engagement with course content. As this study suggests, clearly defined procedures and expectations are key to helping students transition into ungrading smoothly, thereby optimizing their experience and learning outcomes. While ungrading may not suit all educational contexts, it offers a valuable addition to the educator's assessment toolkit. Encouraging student reflection and iterative improvement, this model supports the development of critical competencies in a way that traditional grading may not. By integrating elements of competency-based education and peer collaboration, ungrading aligns with the ideals of occupational therapy as well as other health professions.

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