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Ungrading in Art History:
Grade inflation, student engagement, and social equity

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Educators of art history have become more critical of the discipline in the last decade. Many of us have revisited the notion of canon and diversifying the curriculum to make it more reflective of global art history.[1] Faculty have made changes in *what* we are teaching, but the conversation around *how* we teach has not progressed to the same degree in our discipline. Many instructors still speak about slide tests and memorization as though those assessment methods and expectations are still the norm, the tried-and-true way to teach art history. In the last handful of years, there have been open discussions in social media across many disciplines about alternative pedagogies, including contract grading and spec grading, apart from content, that aim at creating an equitable environment focused on learning rather than ranking and maintaining hierarchies of privilege. One such approach is *ungrading*. According to scholar Clarissa Soresen-Unruh, the term ungrading "suggests the opposite of grading, [and] has long been associated with the idea of purposefully eliminating or minimizing the use of points or letters to assess student work."[2] The term ungrading has a wide range of applicabilities and Susan D. Blum noted that faculty who implement ungrading do so in a variety of ways.[3] For many who implement ungrading, quality feedback replaces grades for student assignments.[4]

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[1] Aditi Chandra et al., "Looking Beyond the Canon: Localized and Globalized Perspectives in Art History Pedagogy," *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 1 (2016), 1-48; Kimberly Mast, "The Art History Canon and the Art History Survey Course: Subverting the Western Narrative," *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education* 39 (2019): 40-51; Melissa R. Kerrin and Andrea Lepage, "Decentering 'The' Survey: The Value of Multiple Introductory Surveys to Art History," *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 1, no. 1 (2016), 1-15; Peggy Levitt and Markella B. Rutherford, "Beyond the West: Barriers to Globalizing Art History," *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 4 (2019), 1-23.

[2] Claissa Sorensen-Unruh, "A STEM Ungrading Case Study," in *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, ed. Susan D. Blum (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020), 140.

[3] Susan D. Blum, "Why Ungrade? Why Grade?," in *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, ed. Susan D. Blum (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020), 1-22.

[4] Susan M Bookhart, "A Perfect World is One with No Grades," *ASCD Express* 14 (2019), n.p.

We commend this journal for tackling the subject of diversifying curriculum and content. A number of articles discuss active learning pedagogies and the benefits of using them.[5] Still, we want to tie pedagogical development and innovation to social inequities in the discipline. There are a number of power structures that exist within art history that are not widely studied in the scholarship of teaching and learning. At the same time, museum professionals have been doing the work of unpacking power structures. A survey of art museum professionals, funded by the Mellon Foundation, is particularly important in establishing the lack of racial and gender diversity in the field today.[6] These power inequities are not formally acknowledged in undergraduate art history teaching, though a single study addresses doctoral recipients and their professional trajectories.[7] Gender, race, and class identity dynamics place limitations on who gets to establish authority in the field. This has, perhaps, contributed to the popular idea that art history is both stuffy and irrelevant, where irrelevance is a likely cause of student apathy. The discipline needs to attract individuals with greater racial, gender, and class diversity to conduct research and teach at the undergraduate and graduate levels to diversify perspectives and content of the discipline and grow art history in healthier ways. Art historians need to follow in the footsteps of museum professionals in doing this work.

Art history is a particularly relevant discipline to utilize the benefits of ungrading because we often want students to synthesize, according to Bloom's taxonomy,

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[5] Marie Gasper-Hulvat, "Active Learning in Art History: A Review of Formal Literature," *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 2, no. 1 (2017), 1-32; Ellery E. Foutch, "Bringing Students into the Picture: Teaching with Tableaux Vivants," *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 2, no. 2 (2017), 1-23; Marice Rose and Tera Lee Hedrick, "Multisensory and Active Learning Approaches to Teaching Medieval Art," *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 3 (2018), 1-28.

[6] Mariët Westermann, Roger Schonfeld, and Liam Sweeney, "Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018," *The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation,* January 28, 2019, 2, https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/b1/21/b1211ce7-5478-4a06-92df-3c88fa472446/sr-mellon-report-art-museum-staff-demographic-survey-01282019.pdf; Liam Sweeney and Roger Scholfield, "Interrogating Institutional Practices in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion: Lessons and Recommendations from Case Studies in Eight Art Museums," *Ithaka S+R,* 20 September 2018, 1-18, https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.309173; Dana Carlisle Kletchka, "Art Museum Educators: Who Are They *Now?*," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 64, no. 1, (January 2021): 80, 89.

[7] Renate Sadrozinski, Maresi Nerad, Joseph Cerny, "A National Career Path Study of Art Historians: PhDs in Art History Over a Decade Later," Getty Grant Program, March 2003, https://www.education.uw.edu/cirge/wp-content/uploads/2008/02/arthistory_report.pdf.

historical information, contextual information, critical theory, and formal analysis, but often default to the disciplinary norm of slide tests, which only hit Bloom's lowest levels of learning. The metacognitive emphasis within ungrading, related to self-reflection, helps students to practice the higher-level critical thinking skills they need to arrive at synthesis and original insights.

When DiSalvo first encountered ungrading in blog posts, she felt that this might help students become more invested in their own education and counter the apathy for art history that she observed from fine art students at our open-enrollment, regional, comprehensive university. When she looked for ungrading blog posts or scholarship in the discipline of art history, she did not find any. Once she began implementing ungrading, students in the art department started telling DiSalvo that they wished more faculty at our institution would take up this approach. But when DiSalvo talked with other faculty about ungrading, they expressed hesitation. One of the main concerns that faculty voiced about ungrading is that they feared that students would inflate their final grades, which students typically choose for themselves in a system of ungrading. Faculty also expressed concerns about a possible drop in the quality of student work, over focus on student reflection at the expense of content, and higher workload due to increased expectation for feedback. Other alternative systems of grading may not elicit the same fears.

The concern about grade inflation is not a new one in higher education or limited to ungrading. Behind that specific fear is the more generalized one that grade inflation renders university education meaningless if it cannot easily slot students into a hierarchy of achievement. In these discussions with colleagues, DiSalvo countered this fear of inflation by observing that she often prompts students to give themselves higher grades than the ones they feel they deserve. She was curious as to whether there was evidence that would shed light on the existence of such grade inflation or the overall success (or not) of her ungrading practices. She also wanted to test whether returning power to students through ungrading would reduce student apathy.

This study addresses the following two questions: 1) How do the final grades that students select for themselves compare with traditional grades? 2) Will ungrading increase students' engagement in their own learning processes and counter apathy? To answer these questions, we will explore the benefits and application of

ungrading through a short thematic literature review and examine qualitative data from course evaluations and end of semester learning reflections and quantitative data from student final grades.

Ungrading: a thematic literature review

The extensive literature on ungrading comes from a number of disciplines, even if there is a gap with regard to art history. This body of work appears in both formal academic journal articles and book chapters, but also in the more informal spaces of blogs, where instructors share and discuss what they are doing in their own courses. Literature on ungrading centers on one of three main themes: traditional grading practices do not support student learning, traditional grading practices do not align with contemporary ideas of social justice, and the practicalities of implementing ungrading. In the spirit of these blogs, below co-author Lauren DiSalvo includes her own personal narrative about using ungrading in her upper level courses. It is important to acknowledge the privileges that allow DiSalvo to experiment with ungrading without reserve: low enrollment caps in her upper division courses and being on the tenure track. She also had administrative support for her willingness to eschew traditional grading systems and is at an institution that is teaching oriented with a low propensity towards rigorous oversight. While she cannot totally eliminate a grade thanks to institutional policy, what she can do is put the power of assigning that grade into her students' hands.

The scholarly literature on ungrading emerges from research that shows that traditional grading practices are correlated with negative student outcomes.[8] A foundational study by Ruth Butler and Mordecai Nisan established that grades enhance students' motivation to avoid receiving a bad grade, but they also found that grades increase fear of failure, anxiety, competitiveness, and the avoidance of difficult assignments.[9] Scholar Alfie Kohn, in his book *Punished by Rewards*,

[8] Tina Pippin, "Roundtable on Pedagogy: Response: Renounce Grading?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 2 (June 2014): 348–355; Jeffrey Schinske and Kimberly Tanner, "Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently)," *CBE Life Sciences Education* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 159–66.

[9] Ruth Butler and Mordecai Nisan, "Effects of no feedback, task-related comments, and grades on intrinsic motivation and performance," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 78, no. 3 (1986): 210–16.

comes to the conclusion that punishment does not increase motivation.[10] Elsewhere, Kohn asserts that grades diminish interest in learning, create a preference for the easiest possible task, reduce the quality of students' thinking, promote a fear of failure, and increase levels of cheating.[11] Helen Williams observed that grades alone offer no indications on how to improve, depress the likelihood that students will read comments, and discourage reflective practice.[12] Blum outlines how grades function problematically as extrinsic motivators.[13] In our experience, many faculty members complain about students who are not sufficiently motivated to change as a result of bad grades. All of this work challenges what we know about teaching and learning and highlights the gaps in our own education, as most of us did not receive instruction in the theory of teaching and learning.

The Power of Grading

Grades and grading are part of a system of control whereby faculty wield power over students. Tony Harland, Angela McLean, Rob Wass, Ellen Miller, and Kwong Nui Sim have investigated the impact of assessment on university students' learning and concluded that assessment via grades resulted in a "pedagogy of control" and Williams echoed these same concerns.[14] Asao Inoue, who employed a type of contract grading, advocated for a quantity-based approach to grading that confronts the structure of the grading system whose singular standards uphold white, middle-class standards.[15] These scholars connected a "pedagogy of control" to systems of oppression, which is connected to influential educational theorist

[10] Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2018), 3-18.
[11] Alfie Kohn, "The Case Against Grades," *Counterpoints* 451 (2013): 144.
[12] Helen Williams, "Will Students Engage if There Are No Grades? A Review of the Evidence, and an Experiment in Ungrading," *13th annual International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation Online Conference, 9-10 November, 2020*, 2575–82.
[13] Susan D. Blum, "Ungrading and its Necessary Accompaniments," in *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, ed. Susan D. Blum (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020), 56.
[14] Tony Harland, Angela McLean, Rob Wass, Ellen Miller, and Kwong Nui Sim, "An Assessment Arms Race and Its Fallout: High-Stakes Grading and the Case for Slow Scholarship," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 40, no. 4 (June 2015): 538; Williams, as in n. 12.
[15] Asao B. Inoue, "A Grade-less Writing Course that Focuses on Labor and Assessing," in *First-Year Composition: From Theory to Practice*, ed. Deborah Coxwell-Teague and Ronald F Lunsford (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2014), 92.

Paulo Freire's ideas about education as liberation.[16] Freire argued that for students to truly learn, they needed to be empowered as co-creators of knowledge.[17] Vicki Reitenauer observed the ways in which her disciplinary commitments were in conflict with institutional requirements:

> It is a personal, professional, and pedagogical necessity for me as an instructor in gender studies to be preoccupied with issues of power, and a great part of my distress as a person interested in serving as a catalyst for students' breakthroughs… stemmed from my discomfort wielding the institutional power that has been vested in me through my assigning of grades to their work.[18]

These scholars understood the processes of student learning as ones that required a degree of freedom for students that is not met through a pedagogy of control. These types of power structures persist in the discipline of art history. As Rebecka Black has demonstrated in her survey of art history students at a public state university in southeastern Texas, students of art history experience feelings of powerlessness in the traditionally-graded classroom. Her study also finds results consistent with perceived elitism in the field where students from marginalized and working-class backgrounds engaged less than their white and/or upper class peers.[19] Such power inequities of class, race, and gender in art history could potentially be mitigated by ungrading which returns power to students in order to create better conditions for learning. For example, Madeline Will specifically connected her thoughts on the equitable classroom with ungrading.[20] Kristen Blinne described ungrading as part of a justice-seeking practice of "awareness pedagogy," which addresses the imbalances of power in traditional models.[21]

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[16] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary edition, (New York: Bloomsbury: 2000), 66-67.
[17] Ibid, 16.
[18] Vicki Reitenauer, "'A Practice of Freedom:' Self-Grading for Liberatory Learning," *Radical Teacher* 113 (Winter 2019), 103.
[19] Rebecka Black, "Understanding Influences of Perceptions of Power and Identity," *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 5 (2020), 17-20.
[20] Madeline Will, "Exploring Ways to Say So Long to Traditional Letter Grades," *Education Week* (February 6, 2019): 23–24.
[21] Kristen C. Blinne, "Ungrading" Communication: Awareness Pedagogy as Activist Assessment," in *Grading Justice: Teacher-Activist Approaches to Assessment*, ed. Kristen C. Blinne (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021), 255–296.

Getting Buy-in

One of the biggest challenges to implementing ungrading in higher education is getting the buy-in from administrators and students. Hadley Ferguson described the initial step as introducing ungrading to stakeholders, with special emphasis on administration.[22] Starr Sackstein's work offered the most comprehensive blueprint for onboarding different types of stakeholders for ungrading.[23] Additionally, she discussed how shifting the language of grades and learning can change mindsets by replacing phrases like "get good grades" with "achieve proficiency or mastery" or by telling a student to try another way instead of pointing out errors.[24] Will examined ways to navigate student mindsets and pushback.[25] In convincing students that ungrading would help them, Clarissa Sorensen-Unruh talked about ungrading in relation to competencies that employers want.[26]

Like Will, DiSalvo finds that the most crucial component of the ungrading process is introducing it to students. She engages students in a reflective activity where students freely associate with the words *grade* and *learning* followed by a discussion of the trends that we observed. This discussion provides an avenue through which students come to their own realizations about the futility of grades and their lack of correlation to learning.She then turns to a discussion affirming for the students how ungrading will be an uncomfortable process. By the end of the semester, however many students find that they have becomecomfortable with ungrading.

How to ungrade: Feedback and Reflection

[22] Hadley J. Ferguson, "Journey into ungrading," *Counterpoints* 451 (2013):196–8.
[23] Starr Sackstein, *Hacking Assessment: 10 Ways to Go Gradeless in a Traditional Grades School* (Cleveland: Times 10 Publications, 2015), 31–42.
[24] Starr Sackstein, "Shifting the Grading Mindset," in *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, ed. Susan D. Blum (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020), 74–81.
[25] Will, 23–24.
[26] Sorensen-Unruh, 145–9.

Much of the practical advice on ungrading comes from blog posts and personal narratives.[27] While this informal writing might not seem significant to some, social media has served as a testing ground for later academic publications by the same authors. A number of academic blog authors contributed chapters to a recent volume of collected essays on ungrading, edited by Susan D. Blum where many authors go about the business of ungrading and setting it up in a variety of ways in the classroom.[28] The essays in Blum's book, together with other resources, have been useful and practical blueprints for learning and adaptation.

Quality feedback is crucial to ungrading success, but feedback can come from several sources. According to Jay Percell, quality feedback is process-oriented, personal, informal, and genuine in order to establish trustworthy communication between instructor and student.[29] Percell emphasized that feedback can flowin a variety of directions-from instructor to student, student to instructor, and student to student. Jeffrey Schinske and Kimberly Tanner discussed self- and peer-evaluation of assignments as important avenues for meaningful feedback.[30] Helen Williams provided guidance on the different levels of feedback that can be facilitated during ungrading, such as class, individual, group, and peer as well as the tools of self- and collaborative assessment.[31] Christopher Riesbeck's ungrading system provided feedback in the form of critiques, and he discussed how to use technology to aid in this process.[32] Just as students need this feedback to improve, DiSalvo seeks out feedback from her students and provides opportunities for anonymous feedback so that students can voice any concerns that they might have. This mechanism, along with self-evaluations and reflections, are used throughout the semester as a way to promote dialogue between the students and DiSalvo about

[27] Jesse Stommel, "How to Ungrade," March 11, 2018, https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/; Heather Mitchell-Buck, "Adventures in Ungrading," August 14, 2019, https://www.hsmitchellbuck.com/2019/08/14/adventures-in-ungrading/; Clarissa Sorensen-Unruh, "Ungrading: A Series (Part 1)," Reflective Teaching Evolution, February 10, 2019, https://www.hsmitchellbuck.com/2019/08/14/adventures-in-ungrading/.

[28] Susan D. Blum (ed), *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020).

[29] Jay Percell, "Lessons from Alternative Grading: Essential Qualities of Teacher Feedback," *Clearing House* 90, no. 4 (July/August 2017): 111–115.

[30] Schinske and Tanner, 160.

[31] Williams, 2575–82.

[32] Christopher Riesbeck, "Critique-Driven Learning and Assessment," in *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, ed. Susan D. Blum (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020), 123–39.

the process of ungrading and give her an opportunity to improve her own ungrading practices. In this way, DiSalvo feels like she is joining with her students in becoming co-creators of knowledge, meeting Freire's ideal. We hypothesize that ungrading as a pedagogical practice does not benefit student learning without quality feedback.

Reflective assignments offer students the opportunity to assess their own progress. Sackstein offered the most complete how-to guide, with steps on how to teach students to self-reflect and self-assess.[33] Jesse Stommel, an oft-cited figure in the ungrading literature, provided recommendations on self-reflection prompts and also offered models of alternative grading in addition to ungrading.[34] Kristen Blinne's work included extensive sample assignments.[35] Both Vicki Reitenauer and Susan D. Blum chronicled how they implement self-reflections, assessments, and student conferences associated with ungrading; Blum even provided sample reflective assignments.[36] Susan Brookhart noted that student reflections and narratives on learning objectives that ungrading systems produce can serve as capstone assessments in their courses.[37] DiSalvo does roughly 5-6 self-evaluations per semester; some are cursory and others are more intensive. These assignments require students to reflect their progress in relation to course learning outcomes, attendance and participation, willingness to accept and use feedback, risks taken, their own learning process, and pride felt concerning learning. These assignments allow DiSalvo insight into her students' working process, struggles, and triumphs that she otherwise might not have encountered in traditional grading. The final component to her ungrading system is an end-of-the-semester conference where DiSalvo meets with each individual student to discuss their suggested grade for the course, which they have indicated in a previous assignment. On occasion, some of

[33] Sackstein, 99-120.

[34] Stommel, "How to Ungrade;" Jesse Stommel, "How to Ungrade," in *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, ed. Susan D. Blum (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020), 25–41.

[35] Kristen C. Blinne, "Ungrading" Communication: Awareness Pedagogy as Activist Assessment," in *Grading Justice: Teacher-Activist Approaches to Assessment*, ed. Kristen C. Blinne (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021) 195–254.

[36] Reitenauer, 103–105; Beckie Supiano, "Grades Can Hinder Learning. What Should Professors Use Instead?" July 19, 2019, https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190719_ungrading; Blum, "Ungrading and its Necessary Accompaniments," 56.

[37] Susan M. Brookhart, "A Perfect World is one with No Grades," ASCD Express (website), July 11, 2019, https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/a-perfect-world-is-one-with-no-grades; Hadley J. Ferguson, "Journey into ungrading" *Counterpoints* 451 (2013): 202–209.

her students have missed smaller reflective assignments or conferences. In this case, DiSalvo offers them her feedback in place of that missed self-reflection.

Understanding Impact

The success of the ungrading system is typically measured in one of two ways. The first mode of ungrading evaluation is anecdotal. For example, Alfie Kohn had conversations with middle and high school teachers who used ungrading and reported that they have better relationships with students and that students have better attitudes toward learning.[38] Stacey Korson observed that students focused more on content and felt like they had ownership with ungrading.[39] Ellen McMahan reported various positive reactions to ungrading, including increased pride and confidence.[40]

Some instructors were more systematic in collecting qualitative and quantitative data to support the use of ungrading. Based on feedback received from students Helen Williams found a favorable impact on engagement, performance, and workload when ungrading was instituted.[41] Laura Gibbs marks the success of her ungrading methodology, which she calls "all-feedback-no-grades," as positive student evaluations from the end of the semester. She reported that ungrading reduces stress, forms new learning habits, increases possibilities for creative work, facilitates better communication, and opens up new course design opportunities.[42] Few scholars reported student resistance or negative outcomes for ungrading. DiSalvo's students voiced discomfort with ungrading, but little resistance. She also noted that those same students have returned in subsequent semesters fully invested in ungrading.

Many studies on ungrading emphasized the effectiveness of feedback processes. Maria Jackson and Leah Marks assessed whether reflection on feedback

[38] Kohn, "The Case Against Grades," 144.
[39] Travis L. Martin, Matthew P. Winslow, Michelle A. Gremp, Stacey J. Korson, Gaby Bedetti, Ellen Hutcheson McMahan, David Stumbo, Elaina Short, and Holdyn Morrow, "Ungrading Across the Disciplines: Reflections of a Professional Learning Community," *Pedagogicon Conference Proceedings* (2021), 5-8.
[40] Ibid., 5-8.
[41] Williams, 2575–82.
[42] Laura Gibbs "Let's Talk About Grading," in *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, ed. Susan D. Blum (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020), 93-100.

improved student use of feedback and/or performance.[43] They found that students reported more engagement with feedback, with 77 percent of study participants in favor of using reflections and 57 percent in favor of grade withholding. Andrea Dlaska and Christian Krekeler studied adult learners of the German language and found that limited feedback that focused on grammar did not impact student performance.[44] Mustafa Kurt interviewed students in an English language course and asked about the process of collaborative assessment and feedback, including self-assessment, peer-assessment, and negotiated assessment between instructor and student. Students found the process successful. Furthermore, this study provides insightful data on the reasons why students underrated and overrated themselves that affirms the need for instruction in evaluation processes.[45]

Other studies focus on the accuracy of self-grading, as many faculty members express a concern about grade inflation. Stommel addressed this and reported that he bumps up most students' grades as students tend to underrate themselves.[46] A study on self-graded homework of 266 students at a public, western land-grant university business college concluded that students graded themselves fairly and gender differences were slight and not statistically significant.[47] Philip Sadler and Eddie Good found that when comparing self-grading, peer-grading, and teacher-assigned grades, students and teachers both graded assignments similarly in a middle school environment.[48] When it came to peer assigned grades, however, peers tended to grade higher-ranking students lower. The study also found that lower performing students tended to inflate their own grades. Ultimately, the study concluded that with proper training self-grading could both further student understanding of material and be reliable and accurate. There do seem to be conflicting results in many studies when it comes to assigning grades, though. Brent

[43] Maria Jackson and Leah Marks, "Improving the Effectiveness of Feedback by Use of Assessed Reflections and Withholding of Grades," *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 41, no. 4 (June 2016): 532.
[44] Andrea Dlaska and Christian Krekeler, "Does Grading Undermine Feedback? The Influence of Grades on the Effectiveness of Corrective Feedback on L2 Writing," *Language Learning Journal* 45, no. 2 (June 2017): 197-200.
[45] Mustafa Kurt, "Collaborative Assessment: Fostering Ownership in Assessment," *Education* 134, no. 3 (Spring 2014): 336-8.
[46]Stommel, "How to Ungrade."
[47] Mark G. Simkin and Debra Stiver. "Self-Graded Homework: Some Empirical Tests of Efficacy." *Journal of Education for Busines*s 91, no. 1 (January 2016): 51-3.
[48] Philip M Sadler and Eddie Good, "The Impact of Self- and Peer-Grading on Student Learning," *Educational Assessment* 1, no. 1 (2006): 23-29.

Strong, Mark Davis, and Val Hawks' study found that college students in general education classes tended to inflate their grades when they assigned them, finding that 57 percent of students assigned themselves an A when in actuality only 31percent earned the A by the instructor's evaluation. This study had students receiving traditional grades all semester until the final exam where the grade was withheld. They then met with the teaching assistant who informed them of their rank in the class. The student next filled out a survey where they assigned themselves a grade. The lack of adequate training and reflection on self-grading might be an explanation for the high inflation rates. Regardless, the study found that self-grading does improve understanding of the material.[49] Mark G. Simkin and Debra Stiver found further that self-grading enhances interest and engagement, reinforces comprehension, increases confidence and positive attitudes, and builds value for lifelong self-guided learning.[50]

Ungrading opens channels of communication by emphasizing feedback and creates trust between faculty and students as they learn to hear each other. Students learn that their value does not lie in the grade, but they are supported with multiple feedback processes that offer clear paths to improvement. Still, a number of gaps remain in the ungrading literature. Much of the benchmarking for the success (or not) of ungrading is anecdotal. Quantitative approaches to the success (or not) of ungrading are difficult, because grades are still one of the main measures of student success and ungrading students are involved in determining their own grades. Qualitative approaches to measuring success tell us about students' experiences and feelings about ungrading, which may or may not indicate their real learning. Still, reflective assignments aim at revealing that gap. As ungrading has not yet been studied in art history, it is unclear how ungrading could help the discipline resolve its problems of power.

Method and Discussion

In previous studies, researchers have used qualitative data from students to gauge the effectiveness of ungrading, emphasizing students' feelings about the process. Researchers have also used quantitative data to assess the gap between self-assigned grades and teacher-assigned grades in both middle school and general

[49] Brent Strong, Mark Davis, and Val Hawks, "Self-Grading in Large General Education Classes: A Case Study," *College Teaching* 52, no. 2 (2004): 54-5.
[50] Simkin and Stiver, 52.

education classes. This study will engage qualitative data from student reflections and quantitative data from final grades to answer questions about grade inflation and student engagement.

All of the data collected for this study comes from upper-division art history courses that were taught within an art department. DiSalvo taught all relevant sections between 2018 and 2021. The ungraded and traditionally-graded sections were not taught simultaneously, with some sections taught before the pandemic, some in the middle of the outbreak, and others during the pandemic. For each course, there was one section taught with traditional grading and the other with ungrading. Ungraded sections included multiple self-reflections, a few peer evaluation exercises, and written and oral feedback from the professor. At the end of each semester, the professor met with each student to review their progress and contributions to the class. We compared class averages and word patterns from traditionally graded and ungraded sections.

Quantitative analysis

We began with two research questions, the first of which was "How do the final grades that students select for themselves compare with traditional grades?" Using DiSalvo's final grades from traditional and ungraded sections, as detailed in the table below, there is an unambiguous answer for her case: the self-assigned grades from her ungraded sections are not inflated grades. Students consistently assigned themselves lower grades, as measured by class averages, than the traditionally graded sections. This is despite the professor encouraging ungraded students to not be so hard on themselves in their self-assessments. Only the first section of traditionally graded Photography bucks this trend.

Art History Course	Grading System	Sample Size (N)	Average Final Grade
Renaissance	Traditional	14	3.52
Renaissance	Ungraded	19	3.18
Nineteenth Century	Traditional	17	3.87
Nineteenth Century	Ungraded	17	3.55

Photography	Traditional	12	3.23
Photography	Traditional	7	3.91
Photography	Ungraded	19	3.76

In comparing the averages, adjusted for class size, across all sections of traditional grading and ungrading, this result remains consistent. The average score for a student with traditional grading was 3.63 compared with 3.50 for ungrading. The differences here are not large, as students achieved slightly higher grades with traditional grading, but it does show that students in the ungrading system did not receive measurably inflated grades. This is a very small sample from a single professor, and so cannot be generalized to all sections of upper-division art history courses at all institutions in the United States, but it does offer a small snapshot of the practice of ungrading in one place.

Qualitative analysis

In comparing the course evaluations from DiSalvo's traditionally graded and ungraded courses, there are some patterns that emerge. The standard course evaluation for all courses at our institution includes the following questions: How can this class be improved? What were the greatest strengths of this course? What were the greatest strengths of this instructor?

In comparing all of the ungraded sections' course evaluations with all of the traditionally graded sections' course evaluation, we pulled the top thirty most frequently used words. We used a word cloud generator to help with this process.[51] In the ungraded course evaluations the word "student" ranked as the third most frequently used word of a total of 1790 words whereas "student" only ranked no. 29 out of 1129 total words with the traditionally graded evaluations. In the traditionally graded section, most comments involving the word "student" revolved around student participation and instructor communication. For example, one comment described DiSalvo as creative in her invocations to get students to participate. With ungraded sections, on the other hand, the usage of "student" tended to coincide with comments about trust, respect, standards, and learning. For example, one student wrote about how DiSalvo's trust in the students made them

[51] The website for this free and open tool is worldclouds.com.

want to excel. This high usage of "student" in the ungraded courses would suggest that the ungraded classroom created a more student-centric classroom, returning power and agency to students' learning.

Using the same form of analysis, the words "feedback" and "learn/learned/learning" showed up in the top 30 most frequently used words for student evaluations only in the ungraded sections. If the focus on ungrading is to shift attention away from grades and onto student learning, the high frequency of "feedback" and "learning" only in the ungraded course evaluations would suggest that students are more closely focusing on educational processes and paths to improvement.

When comparing student evaluations from traditionally graded and ungraded sections of Nineteenth-Century Art, instructor-oriented words like "information" and "teaching" and "lectures" appeared in the top thirty most frequently-used words for the traditionally graded section. More student-oriented words, like "feel" and "learned," were used by students in the ungraded course, suggesting increased student investment in the ungraded art history sections. Students in the ungraded sections focused less on what DiSalvo did and more on what they learned in the course, shifting students' focus from teaching to learning.

In DiSalvo's ungraded courses, students wrote final learning reflections where they commented on their experiences with ungrading. Several themes emerge from these reflections. Many students expressed some level of discomfort with not knowing their exact grade, with some reporting in the same sentence that they liked receiving the increased feedback but wished they had also had a specific grade. Typically students narrated how ungrading felt foreign at first but became less so over the course of the semester. Some acknowledged that the discomfort of not having a specific grade was due to a lifetime's exposure to traditional grading schemas.

Apart from feelings of discomfort and uncertainty, students also reported surprise at liking the ungrading system despite initial feelings of apprehension. Even as students described discomfort over not knowing their precise class standing during the semester, they also voiced their appreciation of their agency in the process of assigning grades. Students often described experiencing less stress during the semester, which they tied to ungrading. Many students expressed appreciation for the focus on learning in the ungrading system, citing that it helped them to take a critical look at their own learning processes. Frequently, students reported that they found themselves working harder or caring more in the ungrading

system since they felt accountable to themselves. Some students reflected how ungrading removed some of the "gaming" from grades and they found themselves abandoning previous strategies of calculating what needed to be done to get a certain final grade. Lastly, students reflected on how they felt seen by the instructor and valued by the process of ungrading whereas traditionally graded classes left students feeling like one of many. One student even wrote about her journey in discovering the value of her own worth outside of a number. Student reflections demonstrated a positive relationship to learning and an appreciation of ungrading in helping them achieve this end.

Conclusions

It is something of a paradox that the system of ungrading must ultimately produce grades, even if the choosing of those grades happens in a different way. The quantitative data strongly suggests that DiSalvo's ungraded upper-division art history students did not choose higher grades, on average, than DiSalvo assigned in the traditionally graded sections. Indeed, these self-assigned grades came to a slightly lower class average than the professor-assigned grades. Within a traditional framework and understanding of grading, that might seem to point to DiSalvo's ungraded students learning and achieving less in the ungraded classroom. However, the qualitative data from student evaluations and end-of-course reflections does not point to inferior student learning, but instead to increased engagement and increased student understanding of what they learned individually and contributed to the course. This was consistent with what DiSalvo observed informally in comparing traditional and ungraded sections of the same upper-division course. While Strong, Marks, and Hawks' study suggests that students in general education classes are more likely to inflate their grades, this study suggests that upper-division art history students might be less likely to do so.[52]

While our quantitative and qualitative data may at first seem contradictory, we argue that they are not. One thing that we do want to emphasize here is that no grade is a perfect reflection of student learning, as student assessment processes are never the objective measures of academic achievement that we want them to be. Rather, our findings support the existing literature, which indicates that grades are a construct designed to place students in a hierarchy, with the side effect of marking students as having a particular value. As DiSalvo's students indicated, ungrading

[52] Strong, Davis, Hawks, 54-5.

provided an alternative to this model by making the students feel seen. Perhaps the real benefit of ungrading lies in the creation of a power structure that both centers students and gives them the tools and framework for understanding that centering, instead of centering professorial judgement in the form of grades. Ungrading gives faculty the space to create a more equitable classroom. Perhaps, as a result, ungrading can counter student apathy that stems from perceived irrelevance of the field.

There are many possible future directions for research on ungrading in art history. We are interested in the ways in which ungrading would impact different populations of students. We suggest another way to measure the usefulness of ungrading as a pedagogical practice would be to collect data about the retention and graduation rates of students after participating in ungrading and compare those rates with those participating in traditionally graded classes. Such institutional data would offer a bigger picture of learning and the effectiveness of ungrading, though we have not been able to undertake that work in this study. Still, we are interested in pursuing the question of whether or not many more students at open-enrollment institutions, like ours, would thrive under an assessment system that focused on feedback and self-reflection, where students shared power with faculty. With the increased pressure to justify the relevance of art history as a discipline, ungrading appears to be one tool to tackle this larger problem. By attracting and retaining a more diverse group of students to the discipline, pedagogical practices like ungrading may help more students to envision themselves as art historians.