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Ungrading Courses on Buddhism

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Ungrading Courses on Buddhism

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Abstract

I discuss my experiences switching to an ungraded assessment model to teach Buddhism. This model allows students to learn through failure and to chart their individual learning path. I first describe how grades inhibit learning and then describe the model. I also describe my successes and failures in implementing this approach. I then give some recommendations for those interested in trying this out in their classes as well. Finally, I reflect on the Buddhist dimensions of ungrading, specifically ideas of no-self, compassion, skillful means and sangha.

Introduction

In Fall 2019, I taught my first Religious Studies class in China. The institution where I had just started my position as an Assistant Professor, Duke Kunshan University, is a cooperative venture between Duke University and Wuhan University and supported by the city of Kunshan. It offers a liberal arts experience and is institutionally committed to interdisciplinary studies and pedagogical innovation. The student body is diverse, with 70% Chinese and 30% international students. Classes are organized into seven-week sessions for focused learning: students only take two classes per session. Class size is usually no more than 18 students.

My class was clunkily titled “Comparative Religious Studies.” To get students excited, I used Jeff Kripal’s *Comparing Religions* as a textbook.¹ As those familiar with his work will be able to guess, Kripal’s book is loopy: he talks about a whole range of fantastic phenomena, from poltergeists to levitation, from tantric sex to reincarnation. It’s a dazzling invitation to the study of religion, presenting everything that an 18-year-old deciding upon a major would find attractive. Or so I thought.

To ensure that students were doing the reading, I ran a Team-Based Learning (TBL) multiple-choice quiz sequence at the beginning of every class meeting. In TBL, students first solve multiple-choice questions individually. These questions are usually about the pre-class reading materials. After finalizing their answers, students confer with teammates and debate what the right answer should be, selecting one option as a group. The combination of their individual and group answers determines their grade on this course component. Teams remain the same throughout the entirety of the class, so you can see real bonding between classmates. The questions must be tough: you want the group to have something

¹ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Comparing Religions* (John Wiley & Sons, 2014). A new, revised edition of the textbook is just out.

substantial to talk about so the discussion deepens their understanding of the class topic. Ideally, during their discussion group members reiterate key points from the readings in their own words, promoting their understanding even if they get the answers wrong. I like TBL because it is student-centered, forging deep connections and camaraderie between peers, who feel like they're repeatedly being challenged to solve riddles together. And all this happens before I have said even a single word in class.

In my TBL iteration of "Comparative Religious Studies," I told students the multiple-choice tests would only revolve around key terms (such as "mysticism" or "spiritism") that I specified in a reading guide distributed to students in advance. I wanted to give students an idea of what to focus on while reading.

The TBL approach worked to an extent: students did bond, they got passionate about the quiz questions, and the tests seemed to help their understanding of key terms. However, after the class had concluded, one student told me that she loved the textbook but then confessed that, half-way towards the end of the course, she just started to scan the reading for the key terms and ignored the rest of the book. And this was a star student seriously interested in the subject matter. She would go on to major in religion. What bothered me about this is that I didn't think that the study of religion should just be understanding a couple of terms. It should be engaging with phenomena that are really weird, mulling over them, responding to them. And TBL, whatever its other virtues might be, wasn't quite doing that.

Thinking over what had happened, I came to realize that if what I wanted was for students to read the text reflexively, I was using the wrong strategy: TBL and my reading guide had put all the emphasis on the "right" answers which would then directly affect students' grades. Grades were inhibiting students genuinely engaging the material. This impression was reinforced by my teaching within the common core of my

university: I had several plagiarism cases that were mentally and emotionally exhausting. Equally exhausting were office hours spent with talented students haggling about their grade. It seemed grades were all that mattered. But I had come to teach, not to grade.

Problems with Traditional Grading Systems

In the Fall of 2021, I decided to dispense with traditional grading systems. Extremely helpful to me in making this change was a edited volume by Susan Blum provocatively titled *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*.² Most of my critiques of traditional grades and my initial attempt at ungrading were inspired by that book, which can be summarized as an approach to teaching that focuses on learning and self-evaluation instead of ranking. As I explain in this article, ungrading also has deep resonances with Buddhist ideas.

What convinced me to switch to ungrading so quickly? Here, I will only repeat the most striking features of the critique Blum and her contributors articulated. One such feature is the so-called “minimax” principle, which posits that in standard assessment models, students are nudged to devote minimum effort to achieve maximum results (i.e. high grades). By keeping grades at the center of the class, as the measure of learning, I was not promoting learning at all. I was pushing students to game the system and try to obtain maximum results for a minimum amount of effort.

Let me backtrack to explain this. Humans are not Pavlov’s dogs. At the time I switched to ungrading, this is something I learned by raising my two small children as well. I was reading the work of Alfie Kohn, a progressive educator who doesn’t think children should be punished or

² Susan D. Blum, ed., *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, 1st ed. (West Virginia University Press, 2020).

rewarded.³ These types of extrinsic motivations, he argued, are bad for several reasons. For one, they don't work: if you punish a child for stealing, the child might come to fear the punishment, but will not necessarily think stealing is a bad thing. Or the child might decide the punishment is okay, worth the risk, and will become crafty at evading discovery. They will no longer speak candidly with their parents to avoid being censored.

Kohn also pointed out that if a child sees the individuals it looks up to most—its parents—using punishments and rewards regularly, it will adopt this behavior as well, and punish its siblings and friends for behavior it finds disagreeable. Instead of punishing and rewarding, Kohn proposed that we reason with children, to give them a loving environment where they'd feel failing is okay and being open is a good thing. He convinced me that attempting to control children's behavior through extrinsic rewards creates individuals that lack an inner compass. I saw this problem quite often in my students, who had no clear answer to what I thought was an obvious question: "What are you interested in?" I suspect they did not know because up to that moment in their life they had followed the prodding of others.

University students are not small children, but a lot of the points Kohn was making were made by Blum and her collaborators as well (it's no coincidence that Kohn wrote the preface to Blum's book). Grades assume that students are like Pavlov's dogs: when you do really well, you get an A. But learning isn't something that needs to be forced. Humans are naturally curious and they learn without needing external incentives to do so. Grades (or any other rewards-based system) sabotages this natural tendency and implicitly communicates to students that what matters is not learning but your grade. This causes immense mental strain on the students: despite all the research that mental stress inhibits learning, we

³ Alfie Kohn, *Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishments to Love and Reason*, 1st ed. (Atria Books, 2006).

insist on putting students in situations that are extremely stressful. This makes it much more understandable why students plagiarize, or why they come to office hours to argue about grades: the pressure is immense. A bad grade could alter their future. Shortcuts are incredibly tempting.

One objection that I sometimes hear is that this is true, but students need to be assessed, and grades are the best way to ensure objectivity. But that's simply not true. Anyone who has taught team-taught courses knows that one instructor will rate the same paper differently. And one instructor even grades differently depending on how tired they are: one recent study found that one's last name is a predictor for your average grade.⁴ If your last name starts with an "A," you're more likely to get a high grade than if your last name starts with "Z." The most likely reason for this disparity is of course that instructors usually grade papers in alphabetical order, and they get tired when they get to "Z." How can we confidently assert from such evidence that grades are objective? To students grades must seem arbitrary, which is how you get students choosing courses that are taught by "easy professors." This is the minimax principle at work: it's worth more of your effort to research which professor is easy than it is to commit to learning the course material, because the former is a safer guarantee of high GPA.

Because of all these reasons and then some more, "Comparative Religious Studies" became ungraded, to the acclaim of students, who felt like they were finally in an environment where they could focus on learning, not grades. I certainly felt that way. In the model I'm about to describe for another, more Buddhism-focused course, you feel more like a guide than a teacher.

⁴ Pei, Jiaxin, Zhihan (Helen) Wang, and Jun Li, "30 Million Canvas Grading Records Reveal Widespread Sequential Bias and System-Induced Surname Initial Disparity," SSRN Scholarly Paper. October 16, 2023. <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=4603146>.

Ungrading Courses on Buddhism

After Comparative Religious Studies, I ungraded a class titled “Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism.” Due to the syncretic feature of Chinese religious practice, I made the syllabus for the course open: after devoting three weeks to reading texts introducing each of the “three teachings” (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism), students voted on themes to examine during the weeks that followed. Such themes included gender & sexuality; Chinese religions outside of China; the role of dreams in Chinese religions; religious material culture; divination, and so on. These themes allowed students to see how Chinese lived religion combines ideas and practices from these different traditions. The fact that students voted on the themes they want to study ensured buy-in and promoted intrinsic motivation.

Conceptually, the course was based on an article by Robert Campy where he contests the usefulness of the reified term “religion” because it obscures the human beings who are religious. When we say that “Buddhism came to China,” we are being lazy because Buddhism is not an organism, a thing that can trudge into China. It’s individuals who affiliate with Buddhism who entered China at various points, and contemplating that gives us a much more fine-grained image of what actually happened. Campy also discusses Chinese alternatives to the term religion that can be useful to understand Chinese religion: “path,” “teaching,” “law.”⁵ The term “path,” for example, illuminates how it was possible for Chinese individuals to affiliate with all three of the Three Teachings (Confucianism,

⁵ Robert Ford Campy, “On the Very Idea of Religions (In the Modern West and in Early Medieval China),” *History of Religions* 42, no. 4 (May 2003): 287–319, <https://doi.org/10.1086/378757>.

Daoism, Buddhism), instead of having to be committed to one (as in the monotheist “religions”).

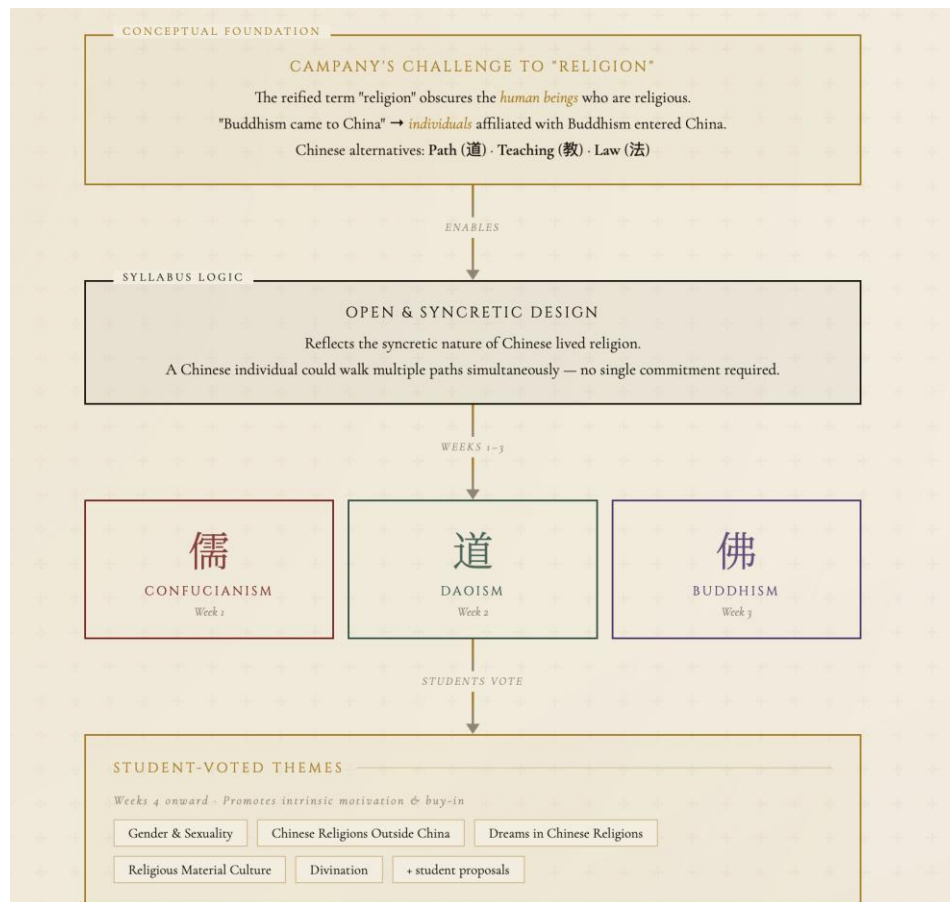


Figure 1a An ungraded course incorporating Buddhism

During the first week of the session, I met individually with each student. In this meeting we crafted a plan for how they would engage with the course topic. As I got students of all levels in the room—a feature of my institution where prerequisites for humanities courses are relatively rare—in this first meeting, we tailored the class to their needs. A freshman who had just arrived, for instance, might be challenged enough by the required readings; for them, just finishing the Campany article might be a struggle. A junior majoring in a humanities field, however, usually chose

to take on more than the class readings, and individual projects ranged from documentaries to art pieces. Central in this initial discussion were always the learning needs and interests of students themselves.

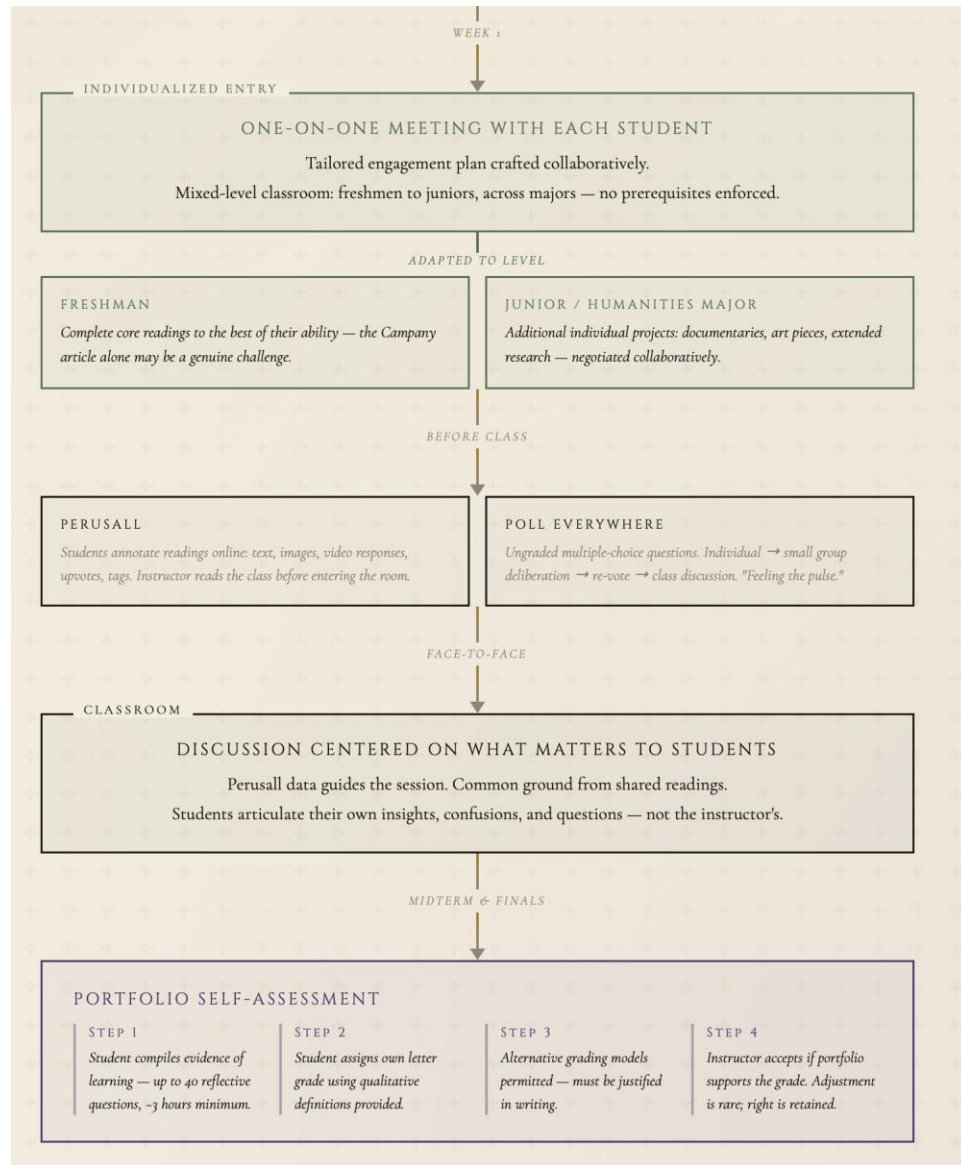


Figure 1b Student-centered ungraded assessment

As mentioned above, there were readings that *all* students are expected to do, to the best of their abilities. This is so we could have a

common ground when we met as a class group. For me, the function of students doing the readings is to give them a space to articulate their own insights and questions. To understand what they are thinking (and also to check whether they are engaging with the readings), I asked students to annotate class readings using an online tool called Perusall. I uploaded all readings to this platform for students to annotate. Annotations could take many different forms: students could demonstrate their understanding of a passage in writing, but they could also post pictures or even movies in response. They could upvote comments they like, introduce tags, and so on. This digital tool helped me to get an idea of what students already knew, what they wanted to know more about, what they were confused about, and what they misunderstood, and all this before class started. We could therefore spend face-to-face class time thinking and talking about what mattered most to them.

I did keep one element of TBL: during the first iteration of this course, we regularly had ungraded multiple-choice questions on things that came up in earlier classes. Like TBL, students first individually answered these questions. I collected the answers using an online tool called Polleverywhere. This tool allowed me to instantly see where the problems are. For any question where there was significant divergence in the answers (less than 80% chose the right answer), I asked students to deliberate in small groups and then vote again. Afterwards, we had a discussion and I reviewed specific points if necessary. This type of informal questioning allowed me to feel the pulse of the class, without pushing the students to rush through the readings looking for what I thought was important. Later on, I stopped doing this for reasons I describe later on in this article.

Around midterm and during finals, I asked students to prepare a portfolio containing evidence of how and what they learned. At the end of both these written self-assessments, which could contain up to forty questions and usually took students at least three hours to fill out,

students assigned themselves a letter grade. They did so based on a qualitative definition of letter grades that I provided. They were free to provide an alternative manner of assessing their grades, but they had to justify this alternative model. I usually accepted this grade if I found that their portfolio supported it. I only rarely had to increase or decrease it, but did maintain the right to do so.

Incidentally, this approach made my classes more AI-proof than traditionally graded classes. Asking students to consistently reflect on what happened in class, on what they thought was worth learning are the types of questions AI is not well-equipped to answer. And if I did suspect that reflections were AI-generated, the interviews allowed me to hold students accountable for what they had put in their assignments. Moreover, since students were ultimately the judge of what they did in class, using AI to check a box was less tempting.⁶

Since these first experiments, I've played with integrating this type of ungrading with contract grading, where students "contract" to do certain things in satisfactory fashion in exchange for a grade specified in advance. The reasons for this were as follows: my classes became very popular with students, and some of them came driven by the perception that it was an "easy-A" class. Where in the beginning of my ungrading experiment, I saw every student deeply engage, to the best of their capacities, with the readings, now I saw more and more that some people were checking out. Their behavior eventually began to affect classroom dynamics in ways that were not conducive to learning (watching movies during class time, distracting other students, etc.). A disappointment further driving my need to rethink this approach was a field trip to a local Suzhou

⁶ In later iterations of "Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism," I created an ungraded AI assignment where students asked an LLM to pose as one of the religious figures we've studied, for example the Sixth Patriarch, Empress Wu Zetian, etc. The assignment was to catch the AI misrepresenting the figure.

temple that I had gone through a lot of trouble to arrange, only to see barely any students from the class show up.

Whereas before I pushed my identity as a professor aside, now I reasserted it. Inspired by what a colleague in biology had done, I required students to satisfy minimal conditions to argue for a certain grade:

The Menu (or "What will I do in this course")?

To argue for an A, you must *demonstrate* that you have *met almost all of these criteria* (missing at most 2), including *all of the orange criteria*.

1. To identify and explain key concepts, rituals, and practices of the Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian traditions (Rooted Globalism); to increase reading proficiency in primary and secondary sources connected to Chinese religions; to demonstrate written and oral communication skills by delivering polished, confident and compelling papers, videos, art pieces, and/or presentations (Lucid Communication) do the following:
 - (a) Multiple Choice Exam
 - i. **Pass a short pass/fail multiple choice exam during week 5 on terms discussed in the readings and in class.**
 - ii. Contribute at least 3 relevant terms for the multiple choice exam by the end of week 4.
 - (b) **Make 2 substantive annotations per class reading on Perusall.**
 - (c) Actively participate, to the best of your ability, in all class reading sessions of primary sources. This includes expressing confusion, asking questions, drawing on previous knowledge, etc.
 - (d) Have 3 conversations with ChatGPT asking it to speak in the voice of a Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist. Identify when and where it makes a mistake. Write a short essay including a link to each conversation and accurate references to our scholarly resources. *Due by the end of week 6*
2. To demonstrate empathy for the worldviews of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (Wise Leadership), do the following:
 - (a) **Write three 2-page reports of your specific experience of living according to Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist principles over weekend 2, 3, and 4 of the session.**
 - (b) Live every weekday (M-F) of the session according to the yellow calendar, the Book of Changes, or the Five Precepts. Submit a short diary of every day as evidence. *Assignment starts week 2 and ends Friday of week 7. Entries cannot be more than 2 days late.*
 - (c) Take a course in meditation, etiquette, Tai ji or another art of your choice (Ben's approval required) connected to Chinese religions. Obtain a certificate and record a short video accurately describing connections with Chinese religions by the end of week 7.
 - (d) Write a good 2-page autobiographical essay describing your background and previous engagement with Chinese religions. *due by Friday of week 2*
3. Contribute to building a learning community. (Collaborative Problem-Solving)
 - (a) **Attend every class session and behave in a manner that is conducive to the learning of your classmates.** Inform Ben in advance if you have good reasons not to attend. Attending class in a manner that is conducive to learning includes (but is not limited to) not distracting classmates by doing stuff not related to class content on your computer or cellphone. Use your best judgement in conversation with Ben and your classmates to determine what is proper.
 - (b) Submit all assignments by the required deadline or, if not possible, inform Ben at least 8 hours in advance that your work will be late (but do not do this more than once).
 - (c) Regularly help classmates by answering their questions on Perusall, explaining the readings to them, explaining how Canvas and Perusall work, etc.
 - (d) Conversely, always seek help from your classmates, Ben, or other campus members when you don't understand something or have questions.
 - (e) Attend two lectures (at DKU or elsewhere; online or offline) related to Chinese religions and make an appointment with Ben to talk about what you've learned from them OR Join our field trip to the Shanghai Biennale on February 2nd and take a picture of at least 2 Daoist elements.
4. Develop the skill of self-evaluation by actively keeping track of your learning in the course (Research and Practice) and
 - (a) **Planning and executing a sophisticated research project** connected to Chinese religions of your own choosing and giving a 15-minute presentation on it during week 7.
 - (b) **Submitting three satisfactory learning reflections**
 - i. Intake essay
 - ii. Midterm self-reflection
 - iii. Final self-reflection

To argue for a B, meet *many* criteria from the list (missing at most 3), including *all but one* of the bold criteria. Criteria you don't meet should show meaningful progress.

For example, you did the exam but didn't pass, but can demonstrate that you've learned much since. You began a research project but it's not finished.

To argue for a C, either meet a few "A" criteria consistently (4-5 total, including at least 2 bold criteria), or meet many criteria (10-12), but less often. Show meaningful progress on a few more.

There are two options: Do a few things well and consistently or do many things fairly well but less often. For example, perhaps

Figure 2 A hybrid contract grading approach

As you'll notice, this system maintains a student's flexibility in arguing for a certain grade. I wanted more structure, but to still keep the openness of the system I had originally adopted, where the grade is based on a portfolio-type overview.

Introducing these prerequisites had the advantage that students familiar with traditional assessment and extrinsic motivation felt more comfortable. I could reasonably expect, and indeed did see, that most students showed up prepared for class discussion, were making annotations on Perusall, and were choosing assignments that suited them.

But ultimately, this hybrid approach also left me unhappy: because the focus—again—was on checking the box. By specifying the types of contributions students could make, I activated the minimax principle: students could choose the “easiest” path towards the highest possible grade. More changes were thus necessary.

I implemented these changes in a class titled “Modern Buddhism.” As a textbook, I used John Strong's *Buddhisms*, which I think is the best textbook to teach introductory courses on Buddhism.⁷ For this course, I decided to take personalized education to another level. Inspired by the tutorial model of Oxford University, I told students that instead of meeting as a group of 18, we'd meet in small groups. These groups would be decided by me, and would be divided as to the level and interests of the students: what year were they? Had they taken classes in religion and

⁷ Strong, John S. *Buddhisms: An Introduction*. Oneworld, 2015. A good discussion of textbooks (to which I contributed) was published as Brooke Schedneck et al., “Introduction,” *Religious Studies Review*, March 28, 2021, rsr.15039, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.15039>. I chose Strong's textbook based on Berkwitz, Stephen C. “Textbook Buddhism: Introductory Books on the Buddhist Religion.” *Religion* 46, no. 2 (April 2, 2016): 221–46. <http://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2015.1091217>.

Buddhism before? What did their intake statements indicate about their level and interests?

Since I was allotted 5 hours of class time per week for the class of 18 students, I met with 3 students for 45 minutes or so per week. The task of each student was to collaborate with each other to structure this 45-minute session. What was unclear? What should we be paying attention to? At the end of almost every week, students submitted a 750-1000-word journal that asked them about what they learned, what challenges they had, and so on.

I was really happy with how this system worked. Most groups ended up functioning well, and shy students told me they felt it was much easier for them to speak about their interests and confusions in this context. The journals were a joy to read, and convinced me that despite the much shorter simultaneous interaction time, students were learning a lot. The journal assignments were easier to give feedback on than the multiplicity of assignments I had in the contract grading approach, thus reducing workload a bit to compensate for the intensity of the small-group meetings.

This last ungrading approach is partly the result of my thinking about “butts in seats.” It has become commonsensical to take time in class as a measure of learning.⁸ At my institution, a full-time course of 4-credits equals 5 hours of instruction per week, whereas a 2-credit course equals half of that time. Though this is convenient from an administrative point of view, it tells us much less about how much students are actually learning. There seems to be convincing evidence that a 2.5-hour lecture doesn’t teach students very much, whereas an active learning classroom teaches

⁸ Susan D. Blum, *“I Love Learning; I Hate School”: An Anthropology of College* (Cornell University Press, 2016).

them much more.⁹ This has led me to the conclusion that quality time is better than filling up all of the scheduled time.

How to Get Started With Ungrading

So perhaps you feel attracted by ungrading and want to try it yourself. You may face institutional constraints. How tolerant is your institution towards these type of approaches? And how vulnerable is your own position (are you an adjunct? an associate professor?). All these considerations ought to determine whether and how you ungrade. I was fortunate in being able to go all-in and still receive the support of my institution, which was receptive to the evidence that grades hamper learning and that these alternative methods might do better at promoting it, but your situation might be different.

If you do have some leeway to experiment with ungrading in your classes, one way to do it is to start small. In traditional grading systems, a small percentage of the grade is usually allotted to participation, which is notoriously difficult to assess. A student who speaks a lot but rarely says anything relevant might get a better participation grade than a shy student who helps their classmates grasp key concepts of the course in study groups. One way to solve this problem is self-assessment. Ask students to write a short essay narrating their experiences in class. What have they done well, and how could they do better? At the end, ask them to give themselves a grade, making clear that, if their narrative is not convincing,

⁹ See, for example, Freeman, Scott, Sarah L. Eddy, Miles McDonough, et al. "Active Learning Increases Student Performance in Science, Engineering, and Mathematics." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 23 (2014): 8410–15. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1319030111>. This meta-analysis for STEM fields found that failure rates for students in traditional lecture-based classes were 55% higher than those in active learning environments.

you will not give them the grade they want. In this way, you're not only training students to self-assess, but you can also allow them to practice argumentative writing.

One thing that this has revealed to me, and something I hear often from other ungraders, is that female students, non-white students, and students from lower-class families tend to rate themselves much lower than white men. The role of the instructor here then is crucial in calibrating self-assessment, in helping students see how much (or how little) they've learned.

Below is an example of a single self-assessment of participation within a traditionally graded course:

Please write 150-200 words in response to each question below.

1. What are 2-3 examples of your engagement that you are most proud of? What do you think your best contribution to our class has been so far?
2. What are the areas in which you think your engagement could be improved? What might your professor and your classmates do to help you improve? Have there been any instances where another student's engagement was particularly useful in helping you learn?
3. What has been the hardest part of the course so far? How have you worked to address the challenges you faced, and how might you adjust your learning in the future to meet the challenges posed by this aspect of the class? How can your professor and your classmates help you?
4. How would you rate your engagement during this section of the course overall, and why? What letter grade would you give

yourself? Give specific evidence supporting your case for this grade, using the attached Appendix for a qualitative description of grades

This is a low-threshold way to see whether ungrading is for you.

For me, ungrading changed everything. Students are motivated and encouraged to see learning as a joy and as an end in itself. Students volunteer to do things. One student in my Buddhism class did a presentation on a Pema Chödrön book she read independently. Another made an animated film expressing her understanding of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Class was about learning and curiosity.

Ungrading as Buddhist Pedagogy

Now how is this teaching practice itself Buddhist? Going into class with a set agenda, such as “these are the texts that we should be reading, this is what students absolutely should understand,” ignores what students need or are interested in. For me, ungrading is about no-self, about getting out of the way. University instruction too often still revolves around the ego of the instructor, what they think students should know and do. It’s hard to let that go. It was extremely hard for me.

But if we take our identity as scholars lightly, we can approach class as a space that is co-created. Certainly we are the experts in the room, but being an expert should not mean that we determine the complete agenda. We should be guides, not gatekeepers. Becoming a guide means putting ourselves to the side. It means understanding that students learn at different speeds, and they take away slightly different things from your class. It means understanding that some things (like writing a paper) are easier for one student and harder for another. In short, it means being compassionate towards our students.

In Mahayana Buddhism, compassion as a teacher means adjusting the teachings to the level of the student. This is the well-known idea of *upāya* or skillful means. The Perusall annotations and the personal interviews with students allow me to apply skillful means when teaching. Once I get to know students, I might know that one student likes science fiction and thus would learn by comparing the supernatural powers of a bodhi-sattva to those of Neo in the dystopian film *The Matrix*. Another student might learn more through conversations than through writing papers. Thus, I can shape the class to meet students where they are, not where I want them to be.

Ungrading my Chinese religions course in this manner also interacts with Campany's argument in interesting ways. As mentioned earlier, Campany argues that conceiving of religion as a reified "thing" (that, for example, "comes to China" or "spreads to Japan") isn't very useful because it erases both the agency and the great diversity among people who are Christians, Buddhists, and so on. He suggests that critically examining the metaphors we use to think about religion might help us to better understand what it is that human beings do. He himself has drawn on the sociologist Anne Swidler to suggest that religion is like a repertoire of practices and ideas. Some Buddhists might recite sutras every day but never meditate. Some might meditate but never go to a temple. All these individuals are "Buddhist" but this no longer means that they have to act exactly the same.

Campany's conceptual framework gives students the liberty to understand Buddhism in their own way. It gets rid of the notion that there are "foundations" of Buddhism that absolutely need to be covered. It also helps eliminate the distinction between "real" and "counterfeit"

Buddhism.¹⁰ My Chinese students often see people worshipping in temples as the latter. But in my own scholarship on American Zen Buddhism, I've found such notions a hindrance to a scholarly understanding of what Buddhists do.

Finally, ungrading for me is also about sangha, about creating a community of learners. This is a teaching environment that is vastly different from a traditional, instructor-centered one. Students do not feel like they are competing, but instead become part of a mutually supportive network, where your classmate is your ally. And I become a guide who is there to help them achieve their goals, whatever they may be. It's been the best experience teaching I've ever had. I've always been caught in a role trying to make students succeed in assignments. Now, class has instead become the intellectual journey of discovery that I always wanted it to be, that made me want to be a professor in the first place.

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