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Letting Go of Grades: Creating an Environment of Autonomy and a Focus on Learning for High Achieving Students

ABSTRACT

In this essay we discuss an iterative, reflective writing assignment (the "learning charter") as a way to understand how high-achieving students experienced an ungrading learning environment. Working with evidence from student written reflection and in-class conversations, we chronicle how students articulated their perspectives on this approach through the fifteen-week semester. Our findings indicate that despite initial uncertainty, students found the environment to be one that promoted learning for the sake of learning, cultivated mental wellness, and compelled them to pursue meaningful questions about their own educational goals and experience. While this development was not without feelings of conflict and struggle throughout the course, by the end of it, students reported a renewed focus on the value of learning. We suggest that the strategies employed in this course might be successfully adopted in or adapted to other courses for high-achieving students, as well as other student populations.

KEYWORDS

autonomy, grades, metacognition, portfolios, motivation

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, scholars, instructors, and institutions have begun to re-examine the place of grades in encouraging and evaluating students' academic performance across all levels of education (K–12, higher education, and doctorate programs [Lynch and Hennessy 2017; Tannock 2017]). Grades often seem to be the only means available to assess and motivate student learning; notably even popular alternatives to conventional grading present options that still rely on the framework and ubiquity of grades as a means of articulating student performance (e.g., specifications grading [Guskey 2014; Marzano 2000; Nilson 2014]). Yet recent studies that have investigated the effects of non-conventional grade learning environments on student motivation and well-being suggest that in fact there exist a range of viable alternatives (Blum 2020; Brilleslyper et al. 2012; Chamberlin, Yasué, and Chiang 2018; McMorran, Ragupathi, and Luo 2017). Indeed, studies that have challenged the widespread and relatively long-standing practice of demarcating student performance by alphabetical and numerical scales have shown that students find motivation in learning and understanding rather than in grades (Chamberlin, Yasué, and Chiang 2018; McMorran, Ragupathi, and Luo 2017; White and Fantone 2010).

Chamberlain and colleagues (2018), for example, found that grades did not enhance motivation, but rather produced anxiety. When evaluated with a pass/fail format, however, motivation was enhanced and students felt that their basic psychological needs (e.g., autonomy, relatedness, and competence as defined by self-determination theory [Deci and Ryan 2000; 2002]) were being met and this promoted enhanced trust with faculty and cooperation between students. A recent study examined student and faculty responses to a university initiative that gave incoming students a "grade-free" period of assessment (McMorran and Ragupathi 2019). In that study, both students and faculty recognized that gradeless learning had the potential to impact student learning and well-being. However, there was some concern that when grades are not present to motivate learning, there is the potential for poor learning attitudes and behaviors to be adopted.

Collectively, these findings are consistent with self-determination theory, which hypothesizes that as students build competence, relatedness, and autonomy (i.e., basic psychological needs as proposed by self-determination theory) the motivations will become more intrinsic and less focused on extrinsic factors (Deci and Ryan 2000; 2002). Intrinsic motivation is doing something for the pleasure or enjoyment of the behavior itself, while extrinsic motivation is hoping to gain something from doing the behavior (Niemiec and Ryan 2009). The development of intrinsic motivation should focus on strategies that enhance autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Niemiec and Ryan 2009). A recent meta-analysis found intrinsic motivation to be related to both objective and subjective measures of academic performance (Howard et al. 2021). However, academic performance can also be influenced by cultural norms shaped by parents and other significant people if students adopt a social-oriented achievement motivation. This may lead to better academic performance; it also makes academic achievement thought of as an obligation (Tao and Hong 2014)**.**

Despite multiple studies that have shown the value of de-centering grades (whether in the form of ungrading, de-grading, contract grading, or another model), instructors and institutions both remain reluctant to get rid of grades. The list of colleges and universities that currently offer full or partial ungrading models is short (Blum 2020, 4), even while the practice of using pass/fail or competency-based assessment has a relatively long history in graduate settings (e.g., law schools and medical schools). Our hypotheses for such broad resistance to ungrading include attachment to long-held assumptions about student motivation, inability to see alternatives to systems and processes that have shaped K–12 and higher education for over a century, concern over ranking and sorting students, and misperceptions about what grades indicate about student learning. While it is not the place of this essay to address each of these issues, we frame our work both as part of a wider response to these concerns and as a contribution to the literature, often case-based, on the effects and benefits of unconventional grading.

 As a pedagogical choice, ungrading or "going gradeless" refers to a series of practices that endeavor to separate learning and the assessment thereof from the traditional ranking-based system of assigning grades to student work. Ongoing work in areas like diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as calls to question the origin, value, and especially consequences of the conventional grading model have inspired many instructors to experiment with ways of ungrading. While some institutions (e.g., Evergreen State University in the US, where students get no grades) have long embraced this model, most still require final grades to be submitted. How instructors make choices about ungrading and put those choices into practice can vary wildly. Within the world of our course (see course context below), ungrading meant that students received copious feedback on their work but did not receive any alpha-

numeric grades. The end-of-term grades that we were required to submit reflected work and conversations that took place between students and instructors in the learning charters and, especially, students' final portfolios for the course.

Our inquiry and our sketching of the course were explicitly informed by questions about high-achieving students' response to an ungrading environment. We were also interested in how the act of making space both for student control of the course and ample opportunity for reflection and dialogue with the instructors might open up a conversation about the place and value attached to alpha-numeric grades in a conventional learning environment. We drew specifically upon the pedagogies of and associated with the democratic classroom (Ellsworth 1999; Morrison 2008), students-as-partners (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014), and co-creation in teaching and learning, all of which approaches have roots in critical pedagogy (Freire 1994; Shor 1997) and empower students to make decisions about their course. In this course, students chose readings and activities, created assessments and rubrics, and led multiple class sessions. We show that the approaches and pedagogies that informed this course, each drawn from emerging trends in evidence-based practices, yielded results that align with findings across the literature of non-conventional grading.

Although our institution requires that we submit final grades, students received only feedback until the very end, when a final course grade was assigned; this suspension of grading throughout the semester encouraged students to focus on learning and their processing of the course rather than a grade as the culmination of the class. One type of iterative assignment, the "learning charter," was particularly useful in offering space for students and instructors to discuss progress towards course learning goals and experience of the course. We begin with an overview of the course context and significant pedagogies employed therein, namely co-creation in teaching and learning and end of course portfolios. We then follow a chronological outline to explore and explicate how students navigated their experience of the course from start to finish. This temporal organization highlights the development of students' thoughts and feelings as they moved through this course and brings to light the iterative and process-oriented ways in which students themselves made sense of their experience. Our thematic analysis of student writing reveals an initial mix of curiosity and openness, a muddling through questions about rubrics and structure for much of the term, and a shift towards resolution evident in their final reflective assessment of their work in the course.

While previous studies have focused on the effects of non-conventional grading on general populations of students (Brilleslyper et al. 2012; Chamberlin, Yasué, and Chiang 2018; Guberman 2021; McMorran, Ragupathi, and Luo 2017), we suggest that this approach is effective and transformative when employed in a class of high-achieving students, specifically by helping to foster the love of learning, promote risk-taking, increase self-evaluation, and mitigate students' levels of stress and anxiety in the learning environment. As it stands, this essay offers another contribution to the growing literature on ungrading and the pedagogies that have emerged from and expanded upon critical pedagogy, themselves approaches that have found a stronghold in a multitude of pedagogical and institutional settings.

COURSE CONTEXT

Twenty-three high-achieving second-year students at a mid-size liberal arts university in the Southeast region of the United States participated in this project. All students signed an informed consent form that was approved by the university's institutional review board and gave the authors

permission to use their work from the semester as well as their feedback for analysis. At our institution, some high-achieving students take part in a cohorted honors program; each student in our course was part of this honors program. In the broader context of the honors program, students take two interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary courses in their second year to help them think about how to research and communicate about significant, meaningful questions. These courses help to prepare them for their final two years of study during which they will propose and write a thesis. In addition to the high-achieving nature of the student population, four elements of the course are important to identify before we discuss our findings: (1) that the course, "Beauty and the Brain," was interdisciplinary (neuroscience and classical studies); (2) that we took a co-creation in teaching and learning frame for the course (see below and Bovill, 2020 for greater discussion of the topic); (3) that we used learning charters, as described below; and (4) that students created end of course portfolios to demonstrate their achievement of personal and course goals.

Honors students, as a high-achieving group, are both like and unlike their non-cohorted peers. One study found that there were no differences in intelligence or persistence between honors and non-honors students, but there were differences in the areas of desire to learn, drive to excel, and creativity. The study authors suggest that important differences need to be taken into consideration when teaching this group of students (Scager et al. 2012). Honors students have also been found to have higher levels of perfectionism (Cross et al. 2018), as well as conscientiousness and openness to experience (Long and Lange 2002). Collectively, these differences could be related to ways in which high achieving students learn. The pedagogies employed in the course draw from a strong foundation of literature on the benefits of student-centered learning, among which we saw reduction in stress and the development of lifelong learning strategies to be most important to this particular course (Bradford, Mowder, and Bohte 2016; Overby 2011; Singh 2011). In addition, we had explored other ways of understanding and framing more precisely the nature of student agency in our course. A recent essay by Bovill (2020) briefly surveys the landscape of pedagogies linked to or described as the democratic classroom and students-as-partners. She then suggests that a range of similar activities and approaches might best be characterized as "co-creation in teaching and learning" (3), a phrase intended to capture the situation of an entire class collaboratively making decisions about content, assignments, and assessments in a specific course. (See also Bergmark and Westman 2015; Bovill 2014; 2020; Deeley 2014; Huxham et al. 2015; Lubicz-Nawrocka 2018) Although we as instructors made a series of decisions about the structure and framework of the course (e.g., the three movements, the ungrading, the portfolios); students filled in those spaces. For example, they determined guidelines and criteria for assignments, how to form peer teams and lead two distinct types of class sessions, and much of the content. For this reason and particularly due to the degree to which students made curricular and assessment decisions in the class, we would include this course under the umbrella of co-creation in teaching and learning.

Most significantly, a shift away from conventional models of grading marked a defining feature of the course. Although we were still required to assign final grades for the course per university policy, students received no other numerical or letter grades for the entirety of the semester; rather, students received ample oral and written feedback both from peers and from the instructors. We elected not to give any quizzes or tests; pre-class tasks instead included an iterative and dialogic learning charter (described below), regular reading, two peer-led collaborations (i.e., leading all or portions of class), frequent reflection and engagement in metacognitive work, and a final course portfolio. A few words about the learning charters and the portfolio will help sharpen the contours of the course.

Learning charters provide productive models for alternative grading. Closely tied to the principles of contract grading and grading contracts, learning charters in general offer students and instructors opportunities to create course-wide and individual goals, set learning objectives, and develop measures for assessing their progress toward those goals (Boud 1989; Brubaker 2010; Danielewicz and Elbow 2009; Kaplan and Renard 2015). Within the world of our course, learning charters served as a space for students to engage in goal setting and evaluation, reflection, and dialogue with the instructors. Beyond creating a space for one-on-one discussion and reflection, the charters became a space where students generated and developed material to which they later returned as they created their final course portfolios.

Students knew from the outset that their final grade would be determined by their end-of-term portfolios, in which they were asked (1) to articulate the degree to which, if at all, they met both the course goals and their individual goals; (2) to reflect, in writing, on why they did or did not meet those goals to the extent that they did; and (3) to support their statements with evidence from their coursework over the semester. In creating these objectives, our intention was to craft a framework that mimicked the research process and embraced the autonomy students experienced in the course. While students' grades for the portfolio did not wholly constitute their final grades, the portfolio grades nevertheless served as a mechanism for determining the final grades. Throughout our conversations with students and in our assessment of the portfolio, our focus remained on how well students captured, articulated, and supported with evidence their learning, not on whether or not or to what degree they met the goals. Final grades were thus determined by assessing the quality of students' work in those three areas. During the final exam period (see below), students gathered to share a brief "elevator pitch" about their portfolio and to discuss their growth and learning in the course.

METHODOLOGY

In an effort to capture the students' perspective concerning how they were evaluated in this course, the authors listed all the potential places where they might find the students' thoughts regarding the ungrading environment. An initial brainstorm helped the authors identify the following sources that they examined for this paper: a survey given prior to the first day of the course, learning charters, portfolios, an in-class portfolio discussion, and course evaluations (mid semester and final). After these sources were identified, the authors then created a plan where they independently coded specific assignments and then came back to discuss what they read and coded. Various themes across the students' work emerged independently and were corroborated across the instructors' coding, which took place over multiple iterations. Following the coding of the data, the authors had a final meeting to confirm the predominant themes they identified, which are those discussed in this paper (Braun and Clarke 2006). Student writing and conversation (recorded and transcribed) appears in unaltered form to retain the authenticity of the students' comments. Unless otherwise noted, we have selected student quotes that we coded as representing a common opinion (or theme).

We have organized our findings in a temporal framework (e.g., beginning, during, and end of the course) to capture and highlight students' thinking and development over the semester. In addition to offering a helpful organizational frame, this temporally based discussion captures the shift in students' views of the course pedagogies over time; it reflects a period of on-boarding and eventual buy-in as students grew accustomed to a different course environment. Each section (beginning, during, and end)

draws upon evidence gathered from course tasks and in-class interactions for which we offer some context.

FINDINGS
Beginning

Prior to the first day of class, the students were asked to read all course documents (e.g., course syllabus, schedule, and resources). We created an additional document that we titled the "course ethos" where we explained the principles of the course and communicated our commitment to students' intellectual and personal growth in the course, the co-creation approach (framed as collaboration in this document), and student autonomy (see Appendix for the "course ethos" document's language). After reading these materials, the students were asked to respond to questions in an online form about what they were excited about and viewed as the greatest challenges in the course. To underscore our view of holistic learning and holistic views of students, they were also asked to tell the instructors about themselves as a learner and as a person. From their responses to these questions, three important themes emerged.

Multidisciplinarity

A common response to what students were most excited about but also viewed as a challenge was the multi- or transdisciplinarity of the course. They identified feelings of excitement about the varying backgrounds of the instructors, as well as about the guest speakers who would come in from different disciplines to discuss overarching questions about beauty and a beautiful life from their disciplinary perspective. However, with this excitement, students also expressed some concern over whether they would be able to understand the varying perspectives of the course with many expressing doubts about their ability to understand the neuroscience content.

Stress

Another common theme in the pre-course questions about students' perceived challenges and in questions that asked students about themselves and their personalities was that many of these students identified as having a predisposition to experiencing anxiety and stress. This seemed to manifest in two forms, neither of which were explicitly connected to our course or the role of ungrading in the course. First, students identified stress and anxiety that came from grades and their ability to perform at a high level. As explained by one student, "I am an extremely hardworking, independent, and goal-driven person. I also get stressed out extremely easily, especially when it comes to classes and grades (probably common for honors fellows)." Second, this stress and anxiety came from students' perceptions of their ability to manage their time and be able to stay on top of course work. For example, one student wrote, "My biggest challenge in most courses is pacing my work and starting assignments when they are assigned. I usually don't leave things until the last minute, I just don't start as early as I usually can."

Self-Awareness

In a pre-course question asking the students to tell the instructors about themselves as learners, the students showed a great amount of self-awareness. This was seen through comments where students articulated ways that they learn best and what they perceived as helpful to their learning. The students also often discussed the need for an interactive classroom environment where they could be an active

participant and where there was a great amount of class discussion. This self-awareness can be clearly seen by one comment from a student:

> As a learner, I really benefit from healthy discourse and debate to center my thoughts and really articulate what I want to say, and when I feel passionately one way or another I will stop at (almost) nothing to get my point across. I learn best by simultaneous visual and auditory means.

It is worth noting that an interest in and a sometimes discomfort with the multidisciplinarity of the course only came up at this early point in the semester and was not really mentioned throughout the rest of the course. However, the themes around self-awareness in this population and ideas of stress about the outcome of a course and tension will be seen throughout our findings. Additionally, the themes that emerged from students' responses to these pre-class questions, while perhaps more intensely focused and frequently articulated, are not necessarily specific to honors students and rather reflect concerns and perspectives often held by the broader population of students.

During

Early on in the course (week 3), the students completed their second learning charter. In it, students were asked to respond to the question, "What might happen if you don't meet your goals for the course?" Almost all students reported that they would have a sense of disappointment. This disappointment took two forms. One was disappointment because failing to meet the goals might impact their grade in the class (despite our emphasis that grades would be determined by the quality of their portfolio work in response to the three questions asked rather than progress towards goals). A secondary and common response was that there would be disappointment coming from them not developing as a person (e.g., personal growth). Both of these ideas are reflected in the following excerpt:

> Not meeting my goals for the course tangibly would result in not getting an A or otherwise desirable grade. Further than that though, not meeting my goals in this course would be disappointing. More than grades—this class is offering me the opportunity to grow as a student, intellectually, and also in tangible skills that can and will be applied outside of the classroom.

Concern over grades as abstract ideas (i.e., separate from the context of the course), navigating a course without regular or frequent grades, and the relationship between grades and learning informed many of the student-and-instructors' conversations in the learning charters throughout the semester. For some students, a set of internal tensions regarding individual versus societal values and expectations bubbled up over time, while others began to express a more direct sense of the possibilities that an ungrading environment might present. In what follows, we discuss these developments in terms of "struggle" and "opportunity," highlighting comments from students that effectively capture and reflect the thoughts of their peers.

Struggle

Students who articulated difficulty or struggle with an ungrading environment during the middle of the semester did so in a variety of ways, sometimes taking ownership of the problem and at other times externalizing an underlying need for grades, rubrics, and other familiar performance-based tools in

the course, most often as ways of keeping them "on track" in the course and up-to-date with pre-class tasks. One student's comment both captures the sentiments of their peers and highlights how students viewed the learning charter as a place for working through their thoughts and engaging with the instructors:

> Because there is so little emphasis on grades and specific assignments and deadlines, I'm really finding myself floundering when it comes to small assignments that we have to turn in. I'm usually an incredibly organized, put-together person, but for some reason, I literally keep completely forgetting about assignments we're supposed to do in this class … In every other class I'm really on top of my assignments, but with the laidback structure of this class and lack of immediate consequences I keep finding myself failing to remember to do these things. Part of me knows that this is a wonderful learning experience for me to learn how to maintain responsibility when I don't have immediate consequences for failing to do so, but as I'm struggling to come up with mechanisms to practice this skill, I wanted to reach out.

This student expresses both a sense that the no-grades environment is "good for them," but also that they feel a need for immediate "consequences" as motivation for completing all required tasks.

Other students located their uncertainty about their grades in the tasks of activity design and assessment criteria (students were responsible for creating several activities and assessment criteria in the course). Despite an awareness that they themselves were in charge of making decisions in the course and an awareness that thinking through this sort of process was a goal of the course, students at times seemed to feel like they were out of their depth. As this student writes, this sense of unknowing was connected as well to a lingering concern about their final grade in the class, which we also see as reflecting their confusion about how the portfolio connected to final grades:

> Sometimes I struggle with not knowing really the guidelines for anything we do in terms of how each thing will account for our grade. I understand that the point of the class in a way is for us to figure that out on our own but I think it's hard to just not know at all how our final grade will look based on what we do in class.

Likewise, the following student's words capture a sentiment widely held by the class that showcased an almost dispassionate distance from grades; articulated here in terms of a "formula" that one needed to know to "get the right letter grade," the grade and its acquisition are seen as something distant and disconnected from learning. Interestingly, this distance was paired with a self-appraisal that removes a sense of agency:

> I think that what causes fear and anxiety for me is not knowing the exact formula to get the right letter grade in the class. I think that this concept of focusing on the grade more than what you actually get from the class is something that is so ingrained into the student's mind.

We find in this student's mindset evidence of a more widespread attribution of success to one's ability to identify and conform to a formula or play the game the right way rather than to other qualities connected to success, e.g., hard work, discipline, perseverance, etc. Another student offered a similarly

theorized perspective, sharing that "we know how to work the system, they are safe for most of us as honors fellows. However, we know that grades are not the best representation of learning and achievement." This student aptly and concisely identifies the inherent tension between grades (which students, in their learning charters and elsewhere, linked to performance and outward-facing criteria) and learning (which they framed as a meaningful, lasting, and internalized process).

If, in this schema, education amounts to a series of games to be played and formulae to be followed, that activities and assignments exist for the main purpose of winning points or displaying one's skills in performing should come as no surprise. Nor should the reaction, frequently observed in the course and well-articulated by the student quoted below, that many students have yet to consider the purpose of activities and assignments aside from means of acquiring desired grades be unexpected. As this student writes:

> I just have never considered before what the point or purpose of assignments is apart to complete them for class and receive a grade. When we move away from uniformity and set standards, rules, and guidelines it feels impossible to grasp how to weigh the merit of a project and how to wrestle with expectations and goals. This is something that I am still grappling with and that is still very new to me.

Questions about standards, noted above, as well as the relative merit of one's work informed multiple in-class and in-charter conversations, especially when the students took charge of designing criteria for a significant task in the course, namely the second peer-led collaboration. This assignment offered students an opportunity to take over one of six open class meetings at the end of the semester (what we called the third movement of the course) to explore the question of whether there is such a thing as the beautiful life. No other guidelines or instructions were provided by the instructors, instead, students needed to determine details such as how to form groups, how to decide which group led class on which date, what (if any) criteria they wished to establish for the group's work, how (if at all) to request feedback, and so on. Of all the discussions relevant to this assignment, the one in which students attempted to determine criteria proved the most frustrating for them. In the final learning charter (due in week 12), we asked each student to consider and analyze why the process seemed so mired in struggle.

Several of the threads about standards and guidelines are woven together in one student's representative analysis of the inherent apprehensions that this process brought to light:

> When we were creating the criteria for this everyone was struggling to understand the fact that we truly weren't getting grades—that there was no rubric. It seemed like a trick almost. But I ended up really liking this. It helped me go outside my comfort zone for a presentation, something I don't think I would have done if we were being assigned strict grades and had a rubric to tick off the requirements.

This student's articulation of the struggle suggests that even in the ungrading environment of the class, the charge of creating their own assignment (and contemplating how to assess it) distilled the abstract or theoretical elements of the course into a real-life, real-time awareness of the varied factors and tensions that the grade-free environment brought to the surface.

Opportunity

While the absence of conventional grades created some discomfort for students, it also fostered an environment of intellectual risk-taking, vulnerability, and freedom. One student's comments about the ungrading experience and their learning captures a broader trend in the learning charters: on the one hand, students expressed a generalized preoccupation and stress about grades as a feature of their lifetime learning experience (as discussed above); on the other hand, they interpreted this course environment as an opportunity to evaluate their attitudes toward and relationship with learning:

> One thing that I am worried about is the lack of grades. I know a lot of our class has reservations about this because we have been worried about grades our entire life. However, I know that it is a good challenge for me to work without them. I think it will help change the way I learn and the way I approach learning.

Similarly, many students remarked that "without grades being a factor I am able to take a risk in that area and try something different or creative, that we could explore a true passion and further be able to expand from it," and that the course ethos "provides me the freedom to really think and 'chew on' difficult questions without the pressures of formulating my ideas into a paper or assignment for a grade." Comments and dialogues of this nature peppered the pages of the learning charters and continued in-class; that students so often expressed a sense of freedom to explore topics of special interest to them because there was no grade attached to it aligns with the previously-described student perception that desirable grades are attained by following formulae over which students themselves have no control or voice in creating. Similarly, this viewpoint suggests that even if students explored a topic of interest to them in a course with conventionally graded assignments, their discovery was inhibited by the fact that the assignment carried a grade, perhaps because they perceived a need to anticipate what an instructor wanted.

Aligned with this excitement over student-determined and structured inquiry we found an even larger chorus of student voices pleased to be engaged in learning for the sake of learning. Many students clearly expressed joyful anticipation of learning as something that came hand-in-hand with the ungrading approach, for example this student who wrote "I do love that there are no grades because it really gives us as students the opportunity to just learn for the sake of learning, and it takes pressure off of us." We see in this statement an implicit expression about the relationship between the course's environment and students' mental health. Others explicitly noted this relationship, framing it as an opportunity to strengthen their growth mindset: "The class not showing letter grades until the end of the semester also helps strengthen the learning/growth mindset part of me." Others more pointedly discussed mental wellness:

> I also feel that this class is set up in a way to support mental health and stability. Like just the stress and intensity of grades really inhibits wanted learning in my opinion. I haven't felt the burnout in this class that I have in others and I think that is a testament to the openness. I am still learning a ton and I am not destroying myself doing so.

This comment connects to a broader set of associations that students made (in their learning charters and, later, in their portfolios) between the perceived low-external-pressure environment of the course, its ethos of focus on learning, and their general well-being. We see also in students' articulations of opportunity a distinctive quality of this population: students are excited to be challenged, curious to observe how the new environment will shift the ways in which they think about learning, and open to change.

End

On the last day of class, the students were asked to share a two-minute oral pitch about how they did or did not develop as a learner, a task for which their final portfolio project prepared them. Additionally, they completed evaluations of the course developed by the honors program. From the final pitch to the class and subsequent discussion in class, four prominent themes came out: 1) Use of learning charters as places to see personal growth; 2) Autonomy; 3) Intrinsic motivation; and 4) Extrinsic motivation. For the sake of space, we briefly discuss each theme, citing examples of student writing and comments for each.

Use of learning charters as place to see personal growth

Many of the students mentioned that when starting to think about what to create for their final portfolio, they began by going back to their learning charters. They saw these as a place where they had previously reflected on their learning, but also as documents that enabled them to reflect on their growth and trajectory over the course. One student said:

> I appreciated the structure of this class because we were able to reflect back on the learning in the learning charters … it was more of a way for me to talk about what I learned without having to share in a way that made me kind of uncomfortable and that felt forced to me.

Through the reflective space of the learning charters, it was common for students to then discuss the personal growth that they saw in themselves during the course. One student commented, "One of the things that I saw within the learning charters themselves is I did get more open over time, like one of them was saying, more vulnerable. And I saw that definitely as personal development for myself."

Autonomy

Another theme that came out in this final class was that students felt that they had a chance to demonstrate autonomy through the class and through the creation of their final portfolios. One student commented, "All of us students can come up with some pretty cool ideas and projects if we're given the chance." This sense of autonomy that they developed in their class seemed to extend outside the confines of the classroom. One student expressed this by saying, "So I have to stop letting other people influence my decisions and I have to learn how to make my own decisions and one of those decisions is to stop letting other people affect me."

Intrinsic Motivation

A prominent theme that emerged from the final discussion was how this course helped increase students' intrinsic motivation and their joy of learning. The identification of this liminal space between

intrinsic motivation (learning) and traditional extrinsic motivation (grades) can be seen by the following student quote:

> I learned about myself that I do really well when there's not a lot of borders around learning, and when I have more of an open space. And I feel like without that open space and not a grade structured class that this was, I wouldn't have been able to discover how creative I can be in other ways than just through traditional creative writing.

Another student said, "I realized that not everything has to fit neatly into your plans or Google calendar. And sometimes learning can be more fun when it's random and doesn't seem to fit with anything else." The joy of learning and the impact it can have on a person's identity is easily identified by the following statement from one of the students:

> But I realized over the course of this semester that I do actually love learning and I love academia that I might actually end up going that path. And that's okay too. And it's okay to … it's not people's assumptions that should be defining what I choose. I should really choose what I want to do and whether that is fulfilling their assumptions or going against it. If it's what I want to do, I should do it.

Extrinsic Motivation

Despite many students reflecting upon their love of learning, extrinsic motivators such as grades were still a common theme that was articulated in our final discussion. One student reflected:

> I think one thing I felt about this course that I found extremely frustrating at first was not having grades in the beginning, 'cause I evaluate myself on what professors think. So they'll assign a number and I'm like, "This is my self worth." And that's definitely not healthy. But I know as honors scholars a lot of us will do that. A lot of people in general will do that, honors scholars or not."

High achieving students such as those in this course often view their classes as a grade-based competition with one another; when grades are taken away a shift in the environment is possible. One student said,

> And the no grades, I felt with the competition … it definitely made it feel a lot better. 'Cause it was once again like not being, "What did you get?" "Oh, that's right, I'm better than you." It's like one of those things because you feel like you're less than someone because they got a higher score. There's no bragging rights in this course.

The balance between learning versus grades was also evident when examining the course evaluations created and distributed by the honors program. One of the final questions was, "What grade do you expect to receive in this course?" At the time students completed these evaluations, they had not received any grades, but had received feedback throughout the semester on various assignments. Half of the class said that they expected to receive an A, some of whom linked this estimation to their perception

of work and effort put forward in the course; e.g. the student who wrote "Based on the work and effort I have put in to this course I expect to receive an A, but I have not received any grades all semester so I am really not sure." The other half of the class did not put a letter grade down in response to the question. Some students elaborated on this uncertainty, for example the student who wrote, "I literally have no idea. We didn't receive grades for any assignments so I have no clue what my final grade will be." Others reframed their response to be more about learning, noting that they felt that they had learned a fair amount or had grown as a person so that the grade was less relevant. A good depiction of this is by one student who wrote,

> Not sure at all, but it doesn't matter because I think I did well. This course didn't focus on grades and I really think that allowed me to focus on learning. So I have no idea about my grade but I feel fulfilled.

CONCLUSION

Based on our findings, high-achieving students can experience personal growth, meaningful learning, and productive struggle in an ungrading environment, though the process will not be without moments of anxiety and discomfort. These findings are important not just for what they might tell us about this particular type of student population's response to an ungrading environment, but also and importantly about ungrading as a practice in other contexts. Publications about ungrading, especially in higher education classrooms, have been relatively scant, with conversations and the sharing of resources predominantly relegated to social media, blogs, and other web-based platforms. This seeming dearth of scholarly conversation is particularly interesting in light of the number of instructors who have adopted ungrading or non-conventional grading practices in a broad array of their courses. For instructors wishing to adopt or adapt the approaches explored here, we strongly suggest incorporating the learning charters or similar reflective, process-based writing opportunities as a way of building trust and transparency between individual students and instructors.

This project demonstrates that the use of a non-conventional grading system in a course of high-achieving students can foster autonomy and intrinsic motivation (e.g., joy of learning [Deci and Ryan, 2000; 2002]) which has been shown in a recent meta-analysis to be related to academic performance, while external motivation was found to be related to decreased well-being (Howard et al. 2021). This is consistent with previous research (Chamberlin, Yasué, and Chiang 2018; McMorran, Ragupathi, and Luo 2017; White and Fantone 2010), but may be one of the first essays to show these results in a high-achieving population, one that is notoriously and intensely focused on high standards and performance. The primary limitation of this study relates to the generalizability of the findings. The classroom was relatively small in numbers and included high achieving students. There are, however, instances where non-conventional grading methods have been implemented across colleges and universities of different sizes (Chamberlin, Yasué, and Chiang 2018; McMorran, Ragupathi, and Luo 2017).

For those seeking to adopt or adapt elements of these practices to their own teaching contexts, focusing on the basic psychological needs of students (e.g., autonomy, relatedness, and competence) in the classroom can be one way to help students internalize motivation and minimize the focus on external motivators (Deci and Ryan 2000; 2002) and to promote students becoming lifelong learners (Niemiec and Ryan 2009). While not everyone might be ready to take on a full version of ungrading, introducing elements of it (e.g., low stakes assignments, collaborative moments, self-assessments, or comments-only

feedback) can offer an entry point and comfortable space for experimentation. The pedagogies discussed in this paper give examples of practices faculty can incorporate into their classroom to help enhance the intrinsic motivation of their students. Taking students out of their comfort zone created a liminal, transformational space for learning to happen; the disruption that students articulate having experienced at various stages in this learning environment contributed also to meaningful intellectual and personal growth.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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APPENDIX

We are excited to offer second-year Honors students this opportunity to investigate both the course content and their own ideas of the beautiful life through the lenses of neuroscience and classical studies. We hold the following principles as central to upholding the spirit and integrity of the course:

- students will work both independently and collaboratively to understand and critically examine course content and material
- students will develop individual learning charters to support their work in the course (with the feedback and guidance of their professors)
- students will document and reflect upon, often and thoughtfully, their work in the course, culminating in a course portfolio due at the final exam period
- students will learn and grow from their professors' feedback on their work throughout the course but will not receive any letter or numerical grades until the end of the term