Ungrading Themes for Upgrading UXD Assignments

Velian Pandeliev
University of Toronto
Toronto, ON M5S 3G6
CANADA
v.pandeliev@utoronto.ca

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Abstract
Rubric-based assignment grading in User Experience Design (UXD) can lead to students feeling anxious, uncertain, and overly focused on superficial success metrics. Presented for discussion are ideas from the ungrading and UXD education literature that can reframe assignments to decouple guidance from evaluation, encourage student initiative, build self-validation and self-evaluation skills, prepare students for industry, and foster ongoing positive dialogue with faculty, peers, and stakeholders.

Author Keywords
User Experience Design education, graded evaluation, ungrading, design critique, studio-based learning

CSS Concepts
•*Social and professional topics~Professional topics~Computing education*

Introduction
Conventional evaluation methods regularly tie student learning to quantitative measures of performance on a grading scale. Driven by a need for evaluation efficiency and differentiation, numerical grades pervade post-secondary education and are used to compare students within and between institutions and indicate professional promise to potential employers. [5]

However, educators have long noted a disconnect between the practice of grading and the need for guidance and encouragement that fosters a student's continued growth. [6] Notably, students I teach in a professional User Experience Design (UXD) Master's program struggle with graded evaluation, especially when it involves rubric-based assessments of subjective skills and outputs: they focus too narrowly on meeting evaluation criteria, they do not receive timely guidance, they fail to develop their own critical evaluation skills, and they cultivate unrealistic expectations of industry.

The ungrading movement has been suggesting alternatives to grading in learning contexts, including in competitive fields such as engineering and medicine. [2,5,7] Benefits of gradeless learning include reducing the stress of competition, fostering creative risk-taking, and emphasizing self-direction in learning. [5]

While ungrading cannot always be deployed to entire programs or institutions, aspects of gradeless learning are highly relevant to UXD education, parallel existing UXD education methods (e.g., peer critique, studio-based learning) and could enable students to take ownership of their work, build transferrable skills, and align their expectations with industry.

In this paper I present problems with a conventional approach to assignment grading in UXD, raise for discussion possible themes for alternative solutions, and identify challenges that still remain in determining:

How can we evaluate UXD assignments in a way that is objective, clear, and encouraging while differentiating exceptional work, providing rich feedback, and preparing students for the realities of industry?

Problem description

The assignment is a widely accepted deliverable format in higher education. It is submitted individually or in groups, evaluated by the instructor or a teaching assistant, and returned to the students with a numerical grade and feedback attached. A rubric-based assignment contains a detailed set of instructions and a rubric that enumerates grading levels and standards.

In UXD, where larger class sizes can strain studio-based learning [3] and limit contact time, this approach may be necessary for efficient grading, although it poses significant challenges for faculty and students.

Faculty challenges

SCALING PRESSURE

Faculty facing large class sizes and high workloads may be forced to delegate evaluating student work. Under such pressure, assignments are created with an eye towards grading efficiency, and with detailed rubrics to ensure consistent grading by teaching assistants.

LACKING FEEDACK

While faculty are eager to provide meaningful, growth-encouraging feedback on student work, in practice assignment feedback is sparse, given by teaching assistants, and applied to a finished deliverable that students rarely revisit or iterate on.

OBJECTIVE UNIFORMITY

Rubric-based assignments generate uniform submissions with limited creativity, surprise, or opportunity for exceptional students to stand out. Such assignments are tedious to grade while their rubric's tacit promise of objective evaluation does not match the circumstances of industry.

Student challenges

GAMING THE RUBRIC

Success is framed as meeting preset criteria, which focuses student effort on the minutia of the rubric's requirements and how to game it most efficiently. Considering the holistic impact of the assignment on their practical skills, or any deeper engagement with the subject matter, are not incentivized. Students are polishing the piano keys instead of making music.

GRADE EXPECTATIONS AND ANXIETY

Students experience a tremendous amount of stress related to assignment grading. [5] At completion, rather than celebrate and learn from their submission, students dread receiving their grade reductions and worry about how they rank against their peers.

A rubric totaling 100% can leave students with the mistaken impression that a perfect score exists in a subjective, competitive industry like UXD, and that it can be obtained by meeting a list of expectations. Students who "did what was required" are left confused and upset by a less-than-perfect score, while their focus on following guidelines will not differentiate them in an industry where it is the bare expected minimum.

UNDERDEVELOPED TASTE

Students following preset rubrics do not develop the vital skills of setting expectations, deriving validation criteria, and self-evaluation. Feedback flows down from the instructor, who alone has access to the entirety of the cohort's work, while students are deprived of the opportunity to align their expectations or learn from their peers. Without any agency in calibrating success criteria or access to comparable work, students do not develop essential industry skills.

Discussion themes

In consultation with fellow faculty, the following themes were developed to address the above problem by (1) reducing menial grading load on faculty, (2) offering students timely, meaningful feedback from faculty, peers, and stakeholders, (3) alleviating grade anxiety and stress, and (4) preparing students to own and evaluate their work as they enter industry.

Open guidelines encourage ownership

Instead of a set of requirements and a matching rubric, the instructor articulates a general goal for the assignment, and an inspiring description of the target output. Students are invited to become original creators; defining, scoping, ideating, and designing their original contributions [8]. Students are challenged to own, to evaluate and to validate their work: Is this meaningful? Is it challenging? Is it one's best? Faculty receives and responds to an interesting, varied, creative collection of student work, while exceptional students have a chance to distinguish themselves.

Ongoing, decentralized feedback

Students share work in progress in design critiques, enabling a more public conversation to develop around the goals, qualities, and challenges of the assignment.

Critique is offered both by experts (faculty, TAs) and by peers, combining expertise with relatability [3] and allowing students to align their work with excellence, improve their design, and practice evaluation.

Alongside in-class design critiques, which may be limited by time or logistics, decentralized methods and digital technologies [3,4] can offer a suitable amount of timely guidance while easing the burden on faculty.

Collaboration, celebration, and positivity
Students working on self-defined assignments are less likely to be protective of their work and competitive with others. This allows them to openly seek guidance and fosters a feeling of solidarity and mutual support.

Upon completion, assignments are shared with the class. A mood of celebration and validation surrounds the final display of student work; this may include a party, mock-awards ceremony, or a chance for students to speak reflexively to their creative process and provide summative feedback to peers.

Relevant, meaningful outputs
Student work completed at such great cost to time and energy should have utility and application beyond the course for which it was created. [1] Assignments can showcase students' skills in real-world contexts, making them useful in portfolios, CVs, and interviews. Students are encouraged to produce popular, shareable outputs with broad appeal (e.g., videos, blog posts, web pages, or events), and to advance their work through additional channels such as conferences or journals.

Real-world validation
Student work aims to involve stakeholders in need and provide them with a tangible benefit, e.g., contribute to an open-source project, support a community partner, etc. On completion, student work is exposed to a wide variety of stakeholders such as industry professionals, other faculty, or potential employers that could provide both the validation students desire and the authentic, real-world critique formerly sought solely from faculty.

Challenges and conversations

Grades are not required when we provide guidance, feedback, or critique of student work, and they cannot replace students' confidence that their work is strong enough and that they will be okay Out There.

Some ungrading themes are highly compatible with UXD practices such as studio-based learning and design critique, and they may help educators overcome bottlenecks or ease student anxiety. However, completely eschewing conventional grading may be difficult, unrealistic, or pose additional problems.

UXD programs are likely to be situated within academic hierarchies with rigid grading policies that may require faculty to issue letter or percentage grades.

In addition, students want to be evaluated fairly, to understand how their grades are determined, and to be certain that their transcripts will remain competitive when compared to those from other institutions. [5]

Finally, as non-competitive as a learning environment may strive to be, students know that they are training for the same industry, and they need ways to differentiate themselves in a competitive job market.

With this paper I hope to elicit a discussion of examples, techniques, and challenges other educators have encountered, and to consider how adopting ungrading ideas in UXD assignments could be useful in expanding our shared toolbox with approaches suitable to a variety of pedagogical and institutional contexts.

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