Ditching the Rubric:

Analyzing the effects of ungrading practices on student writing confidence.

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Abstract

For many high school students, grades can define a lot about their academic identity. For Self-Identified high achieving students, the reliance on grades for academic validation can be even worse. To separate grades from learning, many educators and scholars look towards going "gradeless" to remove grades as external motivational factors for doing well in school, as well as the inherent ranking of students that occurs with traditional grading practices. This essays questions just how much say grades have in determining a student's writing confidence, and how ungrading can affect said writing confidence. The research performed suggests a notably strong link between grades and how students determine if they are good at writing. Research performed also suggested that students saw an increase in writing confidence when compared to traditional grading methods. The author notes the limitations of this research, while continuing to argue the effectiveness of ungrading as a viable alternative to traditional rubric based grading.

Introduction

In high school, getting good grades is one of the biggest stressors students have to face. It can determine which university they will go to, if they can play sports, and almost all the time, it is the determining factor for whether or not they can call themselves a "good student." When I was an 11th grade student in an AP Language & Composition class, I wrote a research paper about a subject I was passionate about, and worked really hard to achieve a final draft I could be proud of. When I received the paper back, a large, red "C" was scribbled at the top of my paper. I still held that memory in the back of my head as justification for why I could never be a good writer for years. I needed the validation the grade held for me as a "high achieving" student, and when I did not receive it, it severely damaged my writing confidence. This has led me to wonder

just how much high school students rely on their grades to determine whether or not they see themselves as good writers. While there has been research done on the effects of grading on motivation (Ward; Gorichanaz, Blum). I set to look at how some students go a step further, using grades as a way to determine their identities as writers. Furthermore, as I explore how ungrading changes the focus of learning in education environments, I ask the question: can ungrading methods of assessment improve student writing confidence as opposed to traditional grading? In this mixed-methods study, I aim to analyze the possible effects ungrading practices have on high-school student writing confidence. This essay will start by grounding readers in what the term "Ungrading" means, what assessment tools are involved, and recorded student responses to the ungrading process. After, I will discuss the methods used in my research and analyze the data gathered from the sample group. Finally, I will discuss the implications my results have on ungrading research involving high school level students.

Literature Review

Ungrading – What is it?

In the latter half of the 21st century, there has been a rise in educators who have started to question the conventional ranking system used in schools. The current grading system in the United States developed during a rise in scientific management, mimicking the way factory production was divided into smaller tasks and then assessed, known as the Taylorian method (Blum 7). This idea that human learning can be broken down into the same, smaller compartments and tasks, and then assessed on a bell curve, then became the standard in American schools. This resulted in the system we use today, along with the reliance on

standardized tests to analyze the learning achievements of students (Blum 7; Ward 1). Many teachers and instructors today have noticed many issues with the conventional grading system, including inconsistency of measuring grades, gamification of school for students, and vilifying failure.

The term "Ungrading" refers to the different methods, techniques, and steps taken by some educators to shift the focus of school from achieving high grades to learning for the sake of learning. While the approach to ungrading is different for each teacher, they all have one main goal: To dismount the ranking systems in grading, and to focus on what is best for the students learning and needs (Blum 60; Ferguson 195, Stommel). In a recent Q&A posted on his website, scholar Jesse Stommel explains the term "ungrading" as "a present participle, an ongoing process, not a static set of practices…. a series of conversations we have about grades, ideally drawing students into conversations with the goal of engaging them as full agents in their own education" (Stommel). As explained by other scholars as well, such as Susan Blum and Alfie Kohn, ungrading does not refer to any specific one practice and there is no "how to" that can be followed. Instead, it is, as Stommel puts it, an "ongoing conversation" in which educators problematize the conventional grading practices developed almost a hundred years ago, and how best to give students more control in their learning.

While there is one overall purpose, every educator may have one specific, guiding reason, for the shift from conventional grading practices. Similar themes include an aversion to ranking students, equity for students of all races and cultures in school, redirecting focus from grades to learning, and – especially after the recent pandemic – more care and empathy for our students.

Aversion to Ranking

Conventional grades are inherently a ranking system. The higher the grade, the higher the student is ranked in their class, as well as in the school/institution as a whole. GPAs, Honors Titles, and Standardized testing are all examples of how education has used ranking systems as the norm in America for years now. This encourages students to be in competition with one another (Blum 5; Stommel). Ungrading removes the ranking of students within the course, and instead encourages collaboration with one another (Stommel). Of course, many teachers who implement ungrading in their classrooms are still required to give a grade at the end of the year, though they are achieved through grading contracts and self-evaluations where students are able to choose their grade based on the effort, they believe they wanted to or have put into the course (Blum 58, Inoue 136, Stommel). Such agency in the grading process deters ranking and competition within the classroom by giving students a choice in their grade, and thus focusing their evaluation of their grade inward versus outward against other students.

Equity for Students

Aversion to ranking students goes hand in hand with another reason educators decide to use ungrading practices, and that is to create an equitable classroom for students of all races, class, and cultural backgrounds. Stommel states in his article, "Why I don't grade" that "Social justice [is] not possible in a hierarchical system that pits teachers against students and encourages competition by ranking students against one another." In other words, with the conventional grading practices, there is no way to have an equitable classroom, and one of those reasons – best explained by scholar Asao Inoue, is because it is built off of the "white habitus," or a white

perception of the world (Inoue 5). Inoue's main concern is that the way conventional grading in a writing classroom cannot ever be completely equitable if the teacher is reading and ranking student words, *especially* if the teacher's habitus differs from the students. Inoue says in his book, *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*:

> White language supremacy is a condition and outcome structures in assessment ecologies in such a way as to function simultaneously as an ideal and as the norm…white language supremacy is the structural condition that determines the standard by which literacy practices are judges in most if not all writing classrooms. (27)

For Inoue, removing the assessment with traditional grading conventions – whose standards are written with the white habitus as the norm – there becomes more space for those who do not embody those white supremacist "ideals" to thrive in the writing classroom as well – with their own language, thinking, and performance.

Degamification of Learning

Once the student's attention is no longer on how to get the grade they want, they are able to focus more on the learning they do in the course. Blum discusses this reason in her explanation for leaving grades behind: "I felt as if students were fixated on grades above all else…Most faculty conversations with students include some discussions of grades… And the professor takes on the role of judge rather than coach" (54). With such a fixation on grades, students approach each class with the mindset of "doing classwork to pass the course" rather than "doing classwork to learn." This is because when grades are a focus, it becomes more of a game for

students (Gorichanaz 7), and it becomes primarily outside motivators that push the students to succeed in school (Blum 56). When grades are left behind, students are no longer able to associate doing coursework with achieving high grades, and must turn to other motivators, specifically intrinsic motivation, to fuel their want to complete the class. Many teachers may feel that this will deter students from actually doing any work at all in the class. Jesse Stommel gives one piece of advice for educators that feel this way: "Start by trusting students." By telling students that the learning will be in their own hands, teachers are showing them they trust the students to take the course seriously, and in the cases recorded, students do (Ferguson 209; Ward 10).

Treating students like human beings.

Overall, these three reasons (of many) for switching to ungrading practices share one collective: Educators want to treat students like human beings. As said before, the method of grading used in the United States follows the Taylorian theory of assessing factory procedures, not human behavior. The misconception that human learning can be put onto a bell curve in the same manner has been thwarted by many psychological studies into learning (Blum 7). For educators and scholars promoting and using ungrading in the classroom, it is time to explore new ways to evaluate and, more importantly, *cultivate*, learning for our students.

This notion of changing the way we grade has become more prominent since the pandemic as students move to online learning environments, and teachers must find ways to better support them through such a large transition. In the article, "Ungrading, Supporting our Students Through a Pedagogy of Care," scholars Shaun Ferns, Robert Hickey, and Helen

Williams write about the increasing significance of rethinking our grading practices during the pandemic. They put emphasis on the shift in pedagogy and in learning in and after 2020:

> In the post-pandemic learning environment educators are reexamining best practices and a pedagogy of care is increasingly understood as fundamental to student success. This may involve a change in teacher/learner relationship where a focus shifts to provided support both for the learner as a person and their academic performance. (Ferns et al. 4502)

With a growing concern for student mental health, especially within high school, it has become crucial for teachers to consider how to best support students in their position as educators, which can include shifting grading practices to exhibit what may be a less stressful, competitive system than the conventional grading system we use now.

How does ungrading happen?

Ungrading isn't just a "one size fits all" method. Referring back to Stommel, Ungrading is rather a conversation with continuing exploration and research happening. In the editor's note of the book *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead),* Blum explains that while many of the chapters – written by various educators and scholars seasoned in ungrading – will give some tips and tricks for removing grades from the classroom, the techniques will all be somewhat different (15). However, they all are fueled by the same determination to find a better system of evaluation for not only them as teachers but also (and most importantly) for their students.

In her narrative about exploring ungrading in her junior high history classroom, Hadley J. Ferguson explains how the first semester it was a trial-and-error ordeal for both she and her students, who were in conversation with one another about the classroom grading change as it was occurring. She reflects on this dynamic shift in her classroom: "By letting go, the source of energy and authority in the room shifts. The door is opened for a partnership of learning, one where both the teacher and student have control over the process" (195). What Ferguson describes is a big part of how ungrading happens in *all* forms. The teacher and the student are no longer on different levels within the classroom, but rather collaborators in the cultivation of the students' learning. This can occur in many different ways. The following are some of the most noted assessment tools by scholars.

Grading Contracts

One popular assessment tool used in classrooms to replace traditional grading is Grading Contracts. Teachers will use contracts that show the required expectations for getting a certain grade (Stommel 37). With the requirements explicitly laid out, students can decide what grade they want to aim towards. While there still is a focus on grades and they can still act as external motivation for students, it is no longer a guessing game for them to figure out *how* to achieve the grade they want. Contracts can also be made together between the teachers and students, and no longer do the grades become a form of judgement.

Scholar, Asao Inoue created and advocates for contracts based on student labor. This is because they can be used as an antiracist method of grading that avoids judgment of students' own *habitus,* which can be different than the teacher's own (Inoue 82). They are exactly what they

sound like too: grading contracts that focus on the amount of labor done by students as its requirements for specific grades. Inoue's reasoning for using labor is that "[n]o one learns without laboring, without doing in some way, without moving their body, even if only slightly. This is what my labor-based grading contract assumes at its most basic level: to learn is to labor" (75). The contract he uses has a base line grade of a B, meaning that so long as students fulfill the labor required listed in the contract, the student will get a B. Those who strive for higher grades must exceed that labor to receive an A (Inoue 126).

Only looking to labor to determine grade removes judgement of work and the possibility of prejudice or biases, however, scholar Carrillo points out one major pitfall with the method of grading, and that is accessibility. In her text, *The Hidden Inequities in Labor-Based Contract Grading*, Carrillo points out the various ways that Inoue's contract grading method can prove to be inequitable for the students with disabilities that may hinder their ability to labor. She states, "the labor-based grading contract remains problematic because of the normative, neurotypical student at its center" (Carrillo 16). How neurodivergent students labor may can differ from how neurotypical students do, something that Inoue's contract does not make room for. This is also true for students who are in a different socioeconomic class, which may add on additional labor in other parts of their lives that makes it more challenging to provide enough time to focus on class. Instead, Carrillo suggests looking towards engagement instead of labor to determine the grades of students, cutting out the idea that willingness is equivalent to time to create a more accessible and equitable learning space (58-59).

Feedback

Providing feedback is an essential part of ungrading. It is the way educators share notes on the quality of work students turn in without assignment it a number or letter. Blum notes that

while many teachers who *do* grade will also provide feedback explaining why the student received the grade they did, most of the time students won't even read that feedback (Blum 12). Riesbeck, a teacher who uses gradeless courses for a subject *outside* of the humanities, shows how gradeless critique driven learning can works for his programming students. Rather than looking at their code and providing a grade based on how well it is written based on a rubric, Riesbeck prioritizes giving students feedback and "critiques," and the student revises and resubmits until they have mastered the coding solution (Riesbeck 123).

While this type of assessment method may work well for Riesbeck's programming classes, providing feedback for students in humanities classes, specifically writing courses, runs into the chance of becoming just as inhumane as conventional grading, especially if the critiques attack the different habitus and languaging students may practice compared to the teachers. Alfie Kohn says that "narrative [reports] are still monologues. If we prefer dialogue, we have to do more asking than telling" (xiv). What this looks like is adjusting the amount of judgement provided to students disguised as "feedback," and instead focusing on genuine feedback, meaning information based on observations of student work that can help students improve and stimulate learning.

Ferguson uses feedback as a replacement for grades in her first ungraded class, writing in the section of the report cards sent to parents a paragraph explaining what students have learned and how far they have progressed towards mastery *instead* of a grade (Ferguson 206). The paragraphs she provided were still assessments of the students' progress and still proved that learning had been done in the classroom, perhaps even more evidently than a simple A through F.

Self-Assessment

One really important part of Ferguson's final assessments was the student learning portfolios, created by the students themselves. This is another crucial aspect of ungrading: students self-reflect on their work and learning.

> Adding to the portfolio became part of the reflection process. It was where they showed that they know about their growth as students…we had dialogues about their work. I periodically reviewed the portfolios, making suggestions for what they might want to add. (Ferguson 208)

Ferguson's recorded experience of teaching her first ungraded class illustrates the shift to solely instructor assessment, to a combination of both instructor and self-assessment. Blum states that part of the importance of building self-assessment in students is that it prepares them to be conscious of the standards they set for the work they will do outside of an academic setting: "Sometimes things aren't perfect – and that's okay. But it is useful for them to understand and even articulate the reasons" (Blum 59). Learning in the classroom becomes more similar to learning in the outside world: students become more accountable in their learning and begin to recognize failure as a part of the learning process rather than something to be feared.

Some scholars, such as Stommel and Blum have used self-evaluation as the determiner of the grades they require to provide at the end of their courses for their institution. This means that students decide what grade they receive, providing a record of their work as evidence. Once again, this makes students more accountable for their own learning. Stommel says that he still reserves the right to suggest a different grade as he sees fit, but often it is to raise it, and that's because students become their harshest critics. And this, overall, is one of the main reasons

instructors decide to go gradeless in their classrooms: students become more aware of their learning. Ferguson notes the lack of phone calls and emails she received after the first set of gradeless report cards went out was partly due to the fact that the students were already aware of the learning they have done and could explain it to their parents. There was no question as to *if* the student was learning because the student knew the answer was that, yes, they did learn, based on the self-assessment learning portfolios they had created at the end of the trimester (208). With ungrading, students are truly placed in control of their learning and progress in the course; they start to have a say in the grades they receive.

Student Reception to Ungrading

Since one of the main focuses of ungrading is the impact it has on students, it is crucial to view the way students themselves have responded to various ungrading practices. Studies have focused on many age groups of students, including middle school, high school, and college/university level. It is important to note that similar to the conversation of ungrading, approaches used within studies also vary. Nevertheless, similar themes of student responses emerge.

Extrinsic vs. intrinsic motivation

Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation refers to where the motivation for an individual stems from. Extrinsic is external, meaning that the reinforcement to complete a specific task come from outside the body (Bontempi). Grades are categorized as a source of extrinsic motivation as it is an outside factor motivating the student to complete their work. Intrinsic motivation, on the other

hand, refers to internal drive or interest in doing the activity that isn't concerned with any external factors (Bontempi). Blum notes that when grades are the priority concern for students, the intrinsic motivation to actually learn decrease. She states, "when comments on papers are accompanied by grades, students disregard our comments – often not even reading them and certainly not using them to improve or learn more deeply" (Blum 2). This comment points out the loss of any internal motivation, meaning that even if the teacher is concerned with providing feedback for students to improve as writers, the comments are ignored because students only care about the grade.

In a study done with university students, researchers looked at the impact that grades have on motivation. The students came from three different universities: one with traditional grading, one with a combination of tradition and pass/fail grades, and one with narrative evaluations at the end. The study found that students at the two universities with alternative-grading style showed more intrinsic, autonomous motivation, compared to the conventionally graded university, where students showed more extrinsic motivations (Chamberlin et al. 11) Similarly, Ferguson consistently reports that with her ungraded course, student focus shifted from getting a desired grade to the actual learning they do in class (209). This shift in focus can also be categorized as a "degamification" of school, as there is no longer a focus external, or extrinsic motivation, which is the type of motivation grades increase in student, leading to students to associate learning with "winning" or "achieving points," causing students to gamify school and learning (Blum 56).

In a small study done by educator Tim Gorchinaz, students recalled viewing grades as a game, focusing on that versus the actual equality of work (7). When switched to an ungraded environment, students could not use that tactic anymore, an while it was more difficult because

there was no grade to earn, forcing students to look at the work they did in a different way and find motivation to do well internally.

Less Stress for Students

Without the threat of a bad grade, students have also been reported to feel less stress (Gorichanaz 10; Taylor 89). This is especially true for students in courses with larger workloads, such as the students in Emily Ward's pilot study, who spent a large portion of their school year completing a research paper. Her results indicated that the students who were graded using a contract instead of traditional A-F scale, were less stressed by the research paper, and they were more likely to speak positively about the process of writing the paper – including deadlines and the stress that came from it (Ward 9). When receiving a poor grade is no longer a possibility, or simply something that is *not* out of the student's control, then students show less stress, more intrinsic motivation, and overall, a better relationship with learning as a whole.

Focusing on student support with the way we grade is especially crucial now after the pandemic. Scholar Kirsten L. Taylor notes that in her experience switching to ungrading during the shift to online education in 2020, many students felt less stressed because of going gradeless, as it gave them more room to "recover from mistakes" (89). Conversely, other students – those who really relied on grades in school – actually felt *more* stress because they no longer could track how they were doing in the class with the conventional scale they were used to (89). Ferguson also reported that many students still were fixated on getting a grade, even asking at the end of the first trimester of her ungraded course if they will finally receive their grades (206). This shows that while there are many positive student responses towards ungrading, students can

still find the shift challenging because of their comfort level with traditional grading conventions. To overcome this, however, many scholars urge that the key to success with going gradeless is to continue communicating with students. Additionally, because this shift is mostly about student success and equity, keeping them in conversation on how to track learning in the course.

One noticeable gap is in research done looking at how student writing confidence is affected by ungraded assessment compared to traditional grading practices. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the effects of ungraded methods of assessment on student writing confidence. I am most concerned with the relationship between grading and students' perception of their writing abilities, and if ungraded feedback-based assessment practices will cause a noticeable shift in that relationship.

Methodology

This was a mixed-methods study that used three surveys for data collection. It used a similar approach to Emily Ward's study about contract grading's impact on adolescents' perception of stress which used a combination of quantitative and qualitative data for analysis (6). Each survey had a combination of Likert scale, Yes/No questions, and short-answer questions, the last of the three different for each participant based on their answers for the other questions. A teacher from the Clark County School District volunteered their students for the survey, which was how students were selected. Student participation was determined based on class attendance on the first day of the study. Anyone who was there on the first day participated.

Prior to completing the assignments, students were given the first survey (Survey A) to complete. The purpose of Survey A was to collect data on student's initial writing confidence and

reliance on grades to determine writing abilities. Writing confidence was measured with a Likert scale question asking students how much they agree with the statement, “I am a Good Writer.” Nowhere in the survey were students prompted with the term “Writing Confidence.”

The second survey (Survey B) was administered after students completed both assignments. Survey B collected data on the students’ approaches to each assignment. This was in order to track any possible changes in the way students completed based on their knowledge of the way the assignment will be graded. Students were informed verbally about how they would be graded via a script presented by me at the beginning of the study, and then reminded by the teacher prior to starting the second assignment. One the survey, students were also asked to predict what grade they believed they would receive on each assignment. I chose to only administer this survey once after *both* assignments in order to keep student and participating teacher’s labor down since the study was conducted during their class time.

The final survey (Survey C) was then administered after students received and reviewed their grades for both assignments. The purpose of Survey C was to track any possible changes in writing confidence after experiencing an ungraded method of assessment. Students were asked once again how much they agree with the statement, “I am a Good Writer,” and then were asked if they had changed their answer. They were also asked about their satisfaction with the grade received on each assignment, and if the feedback received changed how they felt about their writing. Response rate was 100% for the Survey A, and 58.3% for the Survey B and C.

Assignment

The prompts were selected and provided by the teacher and administered to students two weeks apart from one another. Students were given the class period to finish the assignment, which asked them complete one, thesis-driven paragraph answering the prompt. The prompts were sample questions that students would see on the Advanced Placement Literature test. The question, reflective of the typical third question on the AP Literature exam, asked students to speak on a specific concept, issue or element that is reflected in a fiction work. Typically, this would be a piece of their choosing, however, the teacher used prompts specific to the fiction they read in class. The prompts also reflected assignments they have done previously in the course as they prepare for the AP test.

Assessment

The style of assessment for the first assignment of the study followed the same grading style used in class by the students' teacher. This included a rubric with points administered based on how well expectations in each rubric section are met.

Claim/Topic Sentence	10 pts **Full Marks** The topic sentence is a claim that presents a defensible interpretation of the text and answers the prompt.	8 pts **Approaches Expectations** The topic sentence is a claim that presents a partially defensible or somewhat specific interpretation of the text and addresses the prompt.	5 pts **Below Expectations** The topic sentence approaches the standard of a claim. It may be an observation, a summary, or topic or it may simply rephrase the prompt.	0 pts **No Marks** No topic sentence, off topic, or not a claim whatsoever.	
Evidence with Analysis/Commentary	20 pts **Full Marks** Provides apt and specific references to the text as evidence in a line of reasoning to support the claims. Consistently explains how the evidence supports the line of reasoning. Utilizes multiple literary elements or techniques that contribute to overall meaning.	16 pts **Approaches Expectations** Provides specific evidence for all claims arranged in a line of reasoning Evidence may not be the most appropriate to support the claim. Explains how some evidence supports the line of reasoning. Explains how at least one literary element or technique contributes to overall meaning.	10 pts **Below Expectations** Provides some specific relevant evidence, but not enough to support the claim. Explains how some evidence supports the claim, but no line of reasoning is established. or the line of reasoning is faulty.	5 pts **Below Expectations** Evidence is mostly general. Summarizes evidence but does not connect to claim.	0 pts **No Credit** No evidence or commentary.
Universal Significance	10 pts **Full Marks** Convincingly connects the interpretation of the text to universal truth, what it means to be human, or a situation of greater significance.	8 pts **Approaches Expectations** Mentions universal topic but does not convince of/develop significance outside the context of the text.	5 pts **Below Expectations** Mentions universal topic but does not develop universal truth or its significance. OR-Restates claim or thesis instead of connecting to universal truth.	0 pts **No Marks** No universal significance included.	10 pts
Grammar/Spelling/Punctuation/Syntax/Diction	10 pts **Full Marks** Vivid and persuasive writing style, including use of syntax and diction. Few to no errors in grammar, spelling. punctuation, or syntax. Little to no passive voice.	8 pts **Approaches Expectations** Some errors that interfere with meaning. Use of "dead words" or non-specific diction. Choppy or underdeveloped syntax.	4 pts **Below Expectations** Grammatical errors interfere with meaning. Syntax and diction are immature.	0 pts **No Marks** No discernable effort for correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, elevated diction, and/or mature syntax.	10 pts
					Total Points: 50

Fig.1, Rubric used for grading the first assignment.

The second assignment was graded as pass/fail based on completion. Students were also provided extensive feedback on each category reflected on the rubric: Claim/Topic Sentence, Evidence with Analysis/Commentary, Universal Significance, and Grammar/Spelling/Punctuation/Syntax/Diction. Completion was determined based on

engagement with the prompt. Since the assignment was framed as practice for the test, I decided that so long as the work of the student is engaging with the prompt provided in some way, they would receive a complete. An (fictional) example of an incomplete assignment would be a paragraph responding to a prompt about *Hamlet* discussing current movie reviews.

Demographic

The study was conducted at a Public High School in the Las Vegas Valley. An Advanced Placement literature teacher volunteered her students (n=12) for this study, and assignments used to conduct the study also doubled as typical school assignments for students. The students in the class were high school juniors and seniors, and they came from a high school with a majority of white students. Students in the class were also in the last few months of AP testing prep, as the study was conducted in February of 2023, and the test is scheduled for May 3rd, 2023. To maintain anonymity, no personal information was collected, and all surveys completed were anonymous.

Results

Grades and Writing Confidence

Based on the data collected, it was obvious that students directly correlated how well they did on writing assignments with their writing abilities. Even if they were highly confident in their writing to start, if a grade did not match their own expectations, their confidence could decrease. When asked how much they agreed with the following statement, “Grades provided by my

teachers have sometimes changed the way I view my writing," over half of the students either agreed or strongly agreed.

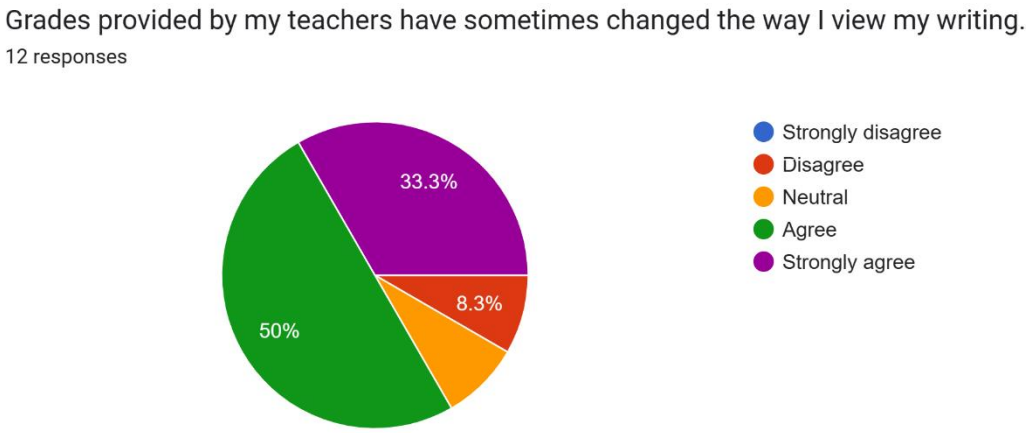

Fig.2, Pie Chart of responses for question from Survey A.

Those students were then prompted in the survey to describe a time that grades impacted their feelings on writing. Some of their responses used language discussing their writing confidence:

> When I got a C on a timed write essay, it shook my writing confidence.
>
> If I turn in an assignment, I think I did good on but receive a bad grade, my confidence goes down.

Ten out of the twelve students mentioned times where their grade was lower than expected, and each student noted their feelings about writing being negatively impacted. The language in student responses suggested that the negative impact occurs when they receive a grade that doesn't reflect the way they felt about the assignment before turning it in. The grade given then ultimately changes their approach to writing as indicated by this response provided by

one student: “Anytime I receive a lower grade or a grade I think should’ve been higher [I’m] going to change my writing since the [teacher] thinks my writing could be better or different.” This student response and those similar to it also suggest that there is a link between the grades received and writing confidence.

This possible connection is further indicated by the level they agreed to the statement “I am a good writer,” which asked in both the Survey A and Survey C to measure student writing confidence. The following chart shows the student response from the first essay:

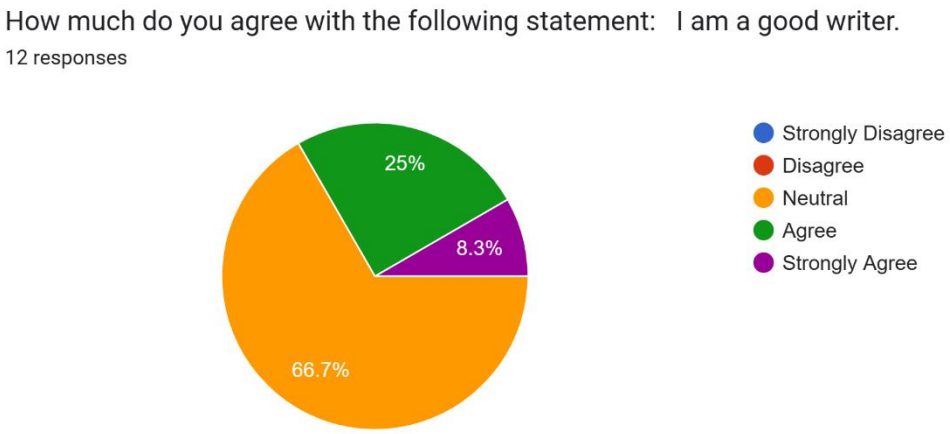

Fig.3, Pie chart of responses from Survey A.

As illustrated by the Fig. 3, students did not select “disagree” or “strongly” for this survey question, and the majority of students (n=8) selected “Neutral.” However, the written responses explaining their choices indicate that many of these students do not identify with being a good writer.

I don't think I am a high-level writer. I always have plenty of feedback when I do corrections and peer editing. I think that I am a good writer but not as good as I think I should be.

I definitely wouldn't say I am a good writer. I have my stronger points with stronger essay prompts and structures. And I have a lot of areas to expand and grow.

The written responses from those who selected "neutral" all followed the same trend; they justified their answer with their ability to achieve certain scores in school. This also suggests a possible correlation between the grades students receive and their confidence in their writing abilities.

When students revisited the question, some student's responses changed from the last:

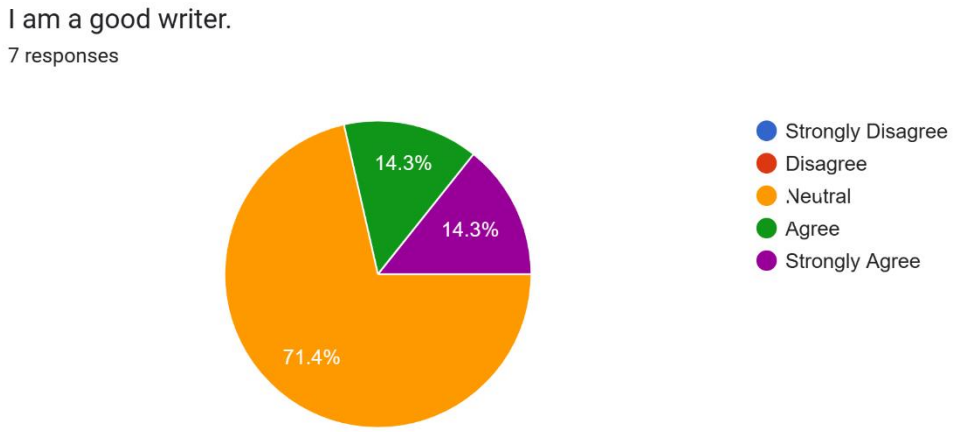

Fig.4, Pie chart of responses from Survey C.

Only seven students total completed Survey C compared to the Survey A which had twelve respondents. However, out of the seven that responded, four (57.1%) said their answer changed from t Survey A. Since only two agreed and strongly agreed, it would mean two lowered their

answer, though the explanations given on *why* the answers were changed contradict this. Three out of four students noted feeling that they either improved or had increased confidence in their writing, one student explicitly stating the feedback-based assessment as the reason for the change.

> I think I've improved from before…I'm more comfortable answering prompts in a correct way.
>
> I feel a little more confident in general in my ability to write [an] effective essay.
>
> My answer changed because of the comments. I was surprised that my thesis was actually good.

For these specific students, the ungraded assessment style seems to have impacted their writing confidence positively.

However, for those students who kept the same asnwer, they expresses passivity in their relationship to writing, doing it simply as a taks needed to be done in school. When asked if the rubric-graded assignment altered how they felt about their writing, 71.4% (n=5) of students who answered this survey said no. When asked why they felt the same, one student wrote, "I've seen so many numerical grades that I'm desensitized to whatever feelings come out of them." The student answered similarly to the same question asked about the second assignment saying, "It's just another assignment. I don't have any emotional attachment to it. 57.1% (n=4) of students also stated that they did not feel any differently about their writing after the assignment graded for completeness. Most students in these categories noted the reason for a lack of change in writing confidence was due to the fact that they felt that they deserved the grade they received. This was true for both assignments.:

I thought the grade reflected the effort that was put into the assignment.

I received a ‘complete’ which shows that my writing was efficient enough and I successfully completed the task.

When looking at the answers to these questions from the Survey C, it becomes uncertain whether or not student confidence in writing is significantly altered by the grading practice used. This could be due to the specificity of these questions, as they are ones that ask students to self-evaluate their feelings on writing, something that many students may have not pondered before.

Overall, students exhibited comfort with the conventional grading practices. In the Survey B, students were asked what they thought their grades would be for the first and second assignments, respectively. While students were aware that they would be graded on a complete/incomplete basis instead of A-F, students still predicted either a percentage score or a letter grade for the second assignment along with the first. Additionally, some students on the final survey reported being unhappy with their grade for the second assignment, one because they could not find a letter grade on the feedback sheet they received, and one because it did not say “100” on the sheet anywhere. This further suggests a reliance on the letter grade/percentage to tell them how well they did on writing assignments.

Grades as Extrinsic Motivation

Along with was effect of grades on writing confidence, other themes not pertaining to the hypothesis were also seen within the data results. This included a continuous dependency on conventional grading as extrinsic motivation for students to want to improve. It is important to

mention, however, that the knowledge students had on how each assignment was graded did not affect the effort they put into their writing. As I was examining both assignments, there was not a distinct difference in the quality of their work as it pertains to answering the prompt. Furthermore, in the Survey B, one student mentioned their effort increased based on what they learned in the class in between each assignment: "I specifically worked on my evidence and analysis portion, and I ensured to follow the step-by-step quotation analysis from the lesson." This shows that despite the change in how this assignment – which main goal is practice for the students prior to the AP exams – is graded, the students were still motivated to complete it.

Contrastingly, students responses for Survey A noted multiple times in their written responses that grades are the motivating factor for improving their writing skills.

> … I got an 86 on a timed writing recently. I want to know how I can improve.

> Earlier this year, as my writing was not as good as now, we had a timed write quite like today which I scored a high C based on the rubric…after looking at comment of what I did wrong I was able to ensure it would not happen again. So, the grading that was done and seeing how it affected my grade influenced me to strive [to become] better.

Following this same trend, the majority of students who answered the surveys used grades they received and how well they have done in their courses as the determining factor for whether or not they are a good writer.

Focus on Standardized Testing in the Writing Process

The last significant theme noticeable in the results of the survey was reliant on the demographic of students in the study. Since they are in an Advanced Placement course, the class focus is to prepare students for the exam taken at the end of the semester. The exam requires students to write short essays on various literary themed prompts. This examination style is similar to other writing portions of standardized tests such as the ACT and SAT, which a majority of high school students prepare for within their other academic courses as well. Students often looked down on other recognized parts of the writing process, such as rough drafts and the revision process.

> …it takes me a bit of time to construct a piece without going back and saying, "I don't like this."

> If I write [a] first draft, it probably will not be complex or with the correct facts even, I just write my ideas down and go from there. I know though that sometimes my process or information might be incorrect so that's a few things I know I need to improve.

Due to the type of writing students prepare for, their writing process reflected a focus on creating a first draft that is nearly perfect. This aligns with the fact that these students are preparing for a standardized test. Their goal is to complete the best writing in a minimal amount of time However, the impact of such developed writing processes outside of courses preparing for standardized tests have the possibility of being damaging to students, though further research would have to be conducted on the subject to fully understand the implications of standardized testing on the writing process.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the effects of ungrading practices on high school students' writing confidence. The results suggest that there is a possibility for ungrading practices to not only increase writing confidence, but more importantly separate the observed connection students have between quantifiable grades and their perception on how well they write.

Results also indicate that students are too comfortable with conventional grading to see a significant change in writing confidence after only one ungrading experience. This aligns with the student reaction other scholars note occurred when they transitioned students to a gradeless classroom (Blum; Ferguson). The demographic of the participants in this study – high achieving AP students – could have also increased resistance to ungrading. As suggested by my results, these students heavily relied on extrinsic motivation and the validation that came from receiving letter grade, similar to results in Gorichanaz's study (6). Those were the things that told them they were high achieving students – better than the rest. Taking away the letter grades and possibility of being ranked decentered the "quality" of student that the individual was from the feedback received. Everyone earned complete, meaning that all were on the same level. That can be difficult to accept as a high achieving student who looks for the validating "A," as reflected in the results of the Survey C where some students showed dissatisfaction at only receiving a pass/fail score.

Additionally, I noticed a shift in what these students prioritized during the writing process, compared to what has been commonly accepted as the "writing process" in higher education. Students focused on completing a pristine first draft over the development of ideas. This aligns with the expectations put on them due to standardized testing. In standardized testing setting,

students are only given a certain amount of time to complete typically 2 or 3 essays. For the AP test – what the students of this study were preparing for – students are given 2 hours to write three essays. Their scores from those essays will determine 55% of their total exam score ("AP English Literature and Composition Exam") With such a short amount of time to produce well-crafted, analytical essays, teachers are then required to teach a writing process that adheres to the standardized testing expectations. In fact, the rubric used to grade the first assignment in this study is based off of the scoring guidelines for the Literature exam itself. While it prepares students on how to achieve the highest score possible on the AP exam, the scoring rubric, and consequently the grades they receive, turn into the main motivators for students to do well in this course.

The study provides a new insight into the relationship between the standardized testing and learned writing processes by high school students. It also provided further insight into the reliance high achieving students, such as AP students, have with conventional grading, and the possibly increased resistance they have to ungrading. Limitations of this study include the small sample size and lower response rate to the surveys. Also, the demographic of students that did participate was limited to a predominantly white, higher achieving course, which only represents a small fraction of high school students. An additional obstacle that could have impacted results is that the assignments were still for course credit. While the grade for the second assignment was still given as a pass/fail, students still knew that it was ultimately going to impact their course grade as a whole. Because of this, there may have been no visible separation between the ungraded methods of the second assignment and the traditional grades they will receive in course, which may have affected perception of the ungraded methods.

If this study were to be repeated, a larger, more diverse, pool of students could give better insight into the way high school students' confidence is impacted by different grading methods. Focusing on different populations of students, based on race, cultural background, course level, all have the potential to change the outcomes of a similarly conducted study. Also, providing students with more ungraded assignments, such as in a semester long study, could also provide more insight into the way ungrading shifts writing confidence as well as the determiners students use to define themselves as good or bad writers. More time to become comfortable with ungrading practices and replace the extrinsic motivations students typically have because of grades could possibly show significant differences in writing confidence between the beginning and the end of a study similar to this one. Nonetheless, this study provides significant insight into the connection between grades and writing confidence in students and opens the door for more research on how ungraded methods of assessment can help to remove grades as determining factors for how well students believe they can write.

Conclusion

As illustrated from this study, while we continue exploring the use of ungrading methods and practices in secondary education writing classes, it is important to remember how reliant students are on grades to determine their confidence in writing and writing ability. Separating these two elements may prove to be challenging, especially for students that rely on grades as validation, such as high achieving AP students. Part of this validation comes from the emphasis on obtaining standardized testing and scores for the school. While in higher education, instructors have more freedom to explore the realms of ungrading, secondary education teachers

do not. The pressure for students to perform well on standardized testing results in pedagogy dedicated to the teaching of test taking. Student writing confidence then becomes linked to scores given, whether that be on the AP exam or in the classroom. The next step is to figure out how to create a space in secondary education – an space so focused on test taking – to begin to implement ungrading practices. The question is not *if* we should still move forward implementing ungrading practices in high school classrooms, but rather, *how* we make the room for them in an environment dedicated to producing high grades and standardized scores.

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