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This Course Is Ungraded: The Impact of Ungrading Practices on Students and Their Instructor

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Abstract: The researcher studied ungrading practices in an introductory course on emergent language and literacy in the early years for undergraduate students interested in pursuing careers as classroom teachers at an urban public college in the northeast United States. Based on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), the researcher applied self-efficacy and reflective teaching theories to address how a course designed with ungrading practices impacted students' self-efficacy and the researcher as a reflective teacher. The researcher used mixed methods to analyze data. Findings show that students' participation presented a calibration of dynamic interaction between personal, behavioral, and environmental factors. Findings also show how integral it was to build a supportive learning community to develop students' self-efficacy. Ungrading practices created conditions for a humanizing pedagogy. The researcher applied an ethics of care that diminished power over students and instead emphasized power with students. This shift in power enabled dialogic discourse that informed responsive teaching and reflective practice. Rather than best practices, a course designed with ungrading practices is deeply contextual and requires an inquiry stance.

Keywords: ungrading, formative assessment, reflective teaching, self-efficacy

1. Introduction

Traditional grading is problematic in teacher education [1]. In traditional systems, students ultimately pay attention to their grades; extensive feedback is often disregarded. Assignments become something that has to get done, which diminishes the joy of even creative assignments. Grades emphasize products over the learning process, even when assignments call for the process as integral to final submission. As Stommel [2, 3] asserts, grades are transactional. They emphasize competition and individualism and discourage collaborative learning, which would strengthen students' preparation for teaching [4]. They function as a gate-keeping process that risks the pernicious impact of perpetuating whiteness in teaching [5, 6].

For teacher education, developing competencies in formative assessments is critical [7]. Formative assessments enact integral, ongoing measures to monitor students' learning. Formative assessment includes metacognition or students' self-awareness of their learning process [7]. Students must experience formative assessment in their purposeful work [1]. In teacher education, students design and implement formative assessments in their lesson and unit plans. A grading system with an over-reliance on summative assessments, resulting in a final grade, provides limited opportunities for ongoing feedback that values students' learning process and informs teaching [8]. Instead, students need to know what they are doing well, what they need to work on, where they need more understanding, what support they need with academic English, and opportunities to reflect, revise, and resubmit [9].

Ungrading is a set of educational practices that sublimate grades. In this paper, I use the term ungrading practices to emphasize these educational practices. These practices emphasize formative assessment, teacher and peer feedback, self-assessment, and value learning process over product [3, 10, 11]. But ungrading is also a commitment to shift power in classrooms towards more distributed practices for equity, especially for marginalized students [3]. Course design and implementation become an inquiry to explore these important shifts in power. In this paper, I use the term ungrading to represent this inquiry stance. Researchers have reported the need for more studies that demonstrate "the complexities of learning and the various, and

important, contextual nature of [instructor's] discipline and teaching practice" [12], which is my intention for this paper. Therefore, I provide course design details in the Study Context and approach course design as inquiry in the Findings.

For the aforementioned reasons, I became intrigued with the ungrading movement and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) that my university offered. When I was accepted into a university-wide program, Transformative Learning in the Humanities (TLH), I had a supportive professional learning community (PLC) to take this on as a project, focusing on an introductory course in emergent language and literacy in the early years for undergraduate students who were interested in careers as classroom teachers. I had the following research questions in mind:

1)How did a course designed with ungrading practices impact students' self-efficacy?

Sub-questions included:

What challenges did they face?

What benefits did they gain?

What were some ways they evolved as learners?

2)How did a course designed with ungrading practices impact me as a reflective teacher?

Sub-questions included:

What challenges did I face?

What benefits did I gain?

What were some ways I evolved as an instructor?

After reviewing relevant literature and establishing theories that frame this study, I provide an overview of the course design to provide a rich context for the findings. I then present findings from implementing this undergraduate course. In my discussion, I provide a synthesis that addresses my research questions and some limitations. Consistent with SoTL's purpose of advancing teaching and learning, I conclude with an ongoing commitment to inquiry.

2. Literature Review

This study builds on research on ungrading. Ungrading is a clunky term; like the term nonfiction, it relies on the prefix to state what it is not. The term continues to center grading as a dominant practice. In most academic situations, teachers must submit final grades, making ungrading effectively "delayed grading," which perpetuates a capitalist, factory model of public education [1, 13]. For example, at my institution, I must submit and students are keenly aware that they are receiving final grades. However, scholars such as Stommel [2, 3] embrace the term as long as it functions as a liberatory pedagogical approach. Stommel gives the following definition for the term ungrading: "(1) an active and ongoing critique of grades as a system and (2) the decision to do what we can, depending on our labor conditions, to carefully dismantle that system" [3]. Stommel emphasizes deeply contextual processes that assume variability instead of decontextualized "best practices."

An ungrading course demands holistic pedagogical practices. As with formative assessments, students must be integral participants in these practices. However, with its commitment to distributive power for ethical outcomes, a course with ungrading practices provides cohesion to formative assessments. Course design becomes student-centered and negotiated. Instructors approach course design with an inquiry stance, as I do in this study. Scholars recommend involving students in decision-making regarding assessment [2], including many opportunities for self-assessment [5] and peer assessment [10], shifting the language of "requirement" and "submission" to "invitation" and "request." These discussions are most productive when we lead with purposes, or the "why" behind the "what": why each assignment or assessment is important for the course goals [14]. These learning-focused discussions enable negotiations of the syllabus and co-construction of criteria for excellence for each assignment [15]. Final grades are collaboratively determined between the instructor and the student [9, 15]. The negotiated curriculum requires deep trust between students and teacher [6].

For that trust to develop, ungrading requires a more intensive assessment of students' work than traditional grading [4, 6]. First, teachers must replace transactional, summative grading with explicit, formative feedback that addresses co-constructed criteria for excellence. Feedback on students' work must be timely so students can apply this feedback by revising or carrying this learning forward to upcoming work. Second, teachers need a broader range of ways to provide formative assessments. In addition to written feedback, teachers might provide one-on-one conferences, exit slips, mid-term reflections, and opportunities for peer and community-based feedback [5, 10, 11]. Third, by relinquishing external control of grades, teachers must address common issues, such as attendance, missed assignments, or lack of participation [16]. These efforts build strong relationships between students and instructor, enabling the co-construction of knowledge within the learning community [17].

Ungrading also requires increased student responsibility for their learning, or agency [4, 13]. Ungrading maximizes formative assessments, which rely on a feedback loop [7]. Shepard et al. [7] describe three steps in a feedback loop. First, the learning community establishes clear expectations for a performance or assignment in its sociocultural context. Second, students and instructor compare their performance or work to those community-based expectations. Third, they reflect and provide feedback on strengths and areas of improvement that students use to revise their work or apply next time. Sackstein [11] asserts that when this feedback loop becomes an integral part of coursework, learning and assessment become "an active experience that promotes a culture of seeking deeper meaning" rather than compliance. Students develop metacognition, strengthening their motivation for ongoing learning [17]. Educators also emphasize peer feedback, making the teaching and learning loop distributive, which enhances students' metacognition. Palmer [18] notes that this self-awareness is "as crucial to good teaching as knowing [one's] students and [one's] subject." Katopodis [5] emphasizes the need for many opportunities for joyful collaboration "for mutual support in learning together as a community [that] sets them up to be successful in future semesters, the workforce,

and the world". Therefore, increasing students' responsibility for their learning has a humanizing impact, as they work alongside us to "upend oppressive, traditional systems of schooling" [5].

2.1. Theoretical framework

To address this paper's research questions about students, I now discuss relevant concepts in self-efficacy theory. Then, to address research questions about me as instructor, I discuss pertinent concepts of reflective teaching.

2.1.1. Self-efficacy

Based on social cognitive theory, self-efficacy refers to a learner's belief in their ability to perform at a high level as determined by the learning community [19]. In educational settings, this theory maintains dynamic interaction between personal (e.g., cognition and emotion), behavioral (e.g., homework, attendance), and environmental (e.g., classroom contexts) factors. Researchers distinguish task-specific self-efficacy and self-efficacy for learning new skills. Both types of self-efficacy influence students' learning outcomes [20]. Learners with strong self-efficacy demonstrate high levels of participation, persistence in tasks, interest in course content, motivation, and self-regulation. Self-regulation includes setting goals, applying effective learning strategies, monitoring understanding, and evaluating progress. Efficacious learners are self-reflective, revising their performance based on careful progress monitoring [21]. Schunk & DiBenedetto [20] asserted, "self-efficacy is a forward-looking construct oriented toward helping persons develop a sense of agency". One challenge of building learners' self-efficacy is generalizability: the transfer of self-efficacy beyond original contexts [20].

Bandura [19] emphasized self-efficacy develops through dynamic interaction with learning environments, which constructs what counts as high-level performance. Effective environments provide the skills needed to succeed and create supportive conditions of collaboration, cognitive distribution of challenging tasks, and ongoing feedback networks that facilitate self-reflection. These environments influence collective self-efficacy or the entire learning community's accomplishments and can-do attitudes. In a robust learning environment, peers influence and persuade students: "If they can accomplish this task, so can I." Providing choices is another key component of activities, resources, and learning outcomes [20]. Learning tasks that integrate skills provide mastery experiences for students to develop skills to succeed. Their involvement builds on a sense of belonging and perceptions of autonomy and choice. However, students need ongoing opportunities to self-evaluate their performance with specific feedback that provides clear information about their application of skills and progress toward goals. Self-efficacy is enhanced when students believe they are performing well and becoming more skillful. A strong sense of self-efficacy allows learners to approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided, which leads to a sense of achievement [21]. Collectively, these concepts of self-efficacy informed the conditions I wanted to establish in our learning community and provided data analysis tools.

2.1.2. Reflective teaching

Dewey [22] made reflective practice relevant in progressive education. Dewey advocated reflective action, "the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it". Reflective teachers have an inquiry stance as they take ownership of ineffective practices, raise questions, live with uncertainty, pursue knowledge, and seek solutions. In reflection, teachers consider the dynamic interplay of their practices, their students, the subject matter, and the context for learning. The teacher becomes a student of the learners. Therefore, reflective practitioners equally value students' inquiry and reflection [23, 24]. In Dewey's [22] rationalist view, reflection "enables us to direct our actions with foresight".

Schön [25] extended Dewey's conceptions by exploring how a reflective practitioner uses an active, experimental, and transactional process that values experiential knowledge. It is "the kind of professional competence which practitioners display in unique, uncertain and conflicted situations of practice", improvisational actions which he considered "knowing-in-action" or "intuitive knowing." Schön distinguished "reflection-on-action," which looks back to evaluate, and "reflection-in-action," which enables immediate action. Both forms of reflection contribute to the capabilities of a reflective teacher. While reflection-in-action is a solitary act that practitioners enact in the moment, scholars such as Cochran-Smith and Lytle [8] have emphasized a social dimension to reflection-on-action within communities of practice. A reflective teacher engages in dialogue and collaboration to improve practice within a community of practice, applying an inquiry stance "as a long-term collective project with a democratic agenda". In this study, I was fortunate to have my TLH community. I also intended to create a robust learning community for my students' self-reflection.

Freire [26] used the concept of conscientiçao, that is, "conscientization," or critical consciousness, to theorize critical reflection. In critical reflection, teachers challenge educational norms, such as standardized grading systems, to create possibilities for humanizing and empowering pedagogy. Freire applied the term praxis to meld reflection and action. He asserted that in dialogue, critical practitioners guide students to name systemic injustices (read the world), which then become objects to problematize and transform (rename), resulting in critical consciousness. Like Dewey [22], Freire realized this transformational process requires an inquiry stance. "For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings

pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" [26]. Dialogue is done with humility, love, and faith in students' learning capacities. This practice requires a shift in the distribution of power: instead of power over learners, teachers create conditions of power with learners. They interact with learners responsively, sensitively, mindfully, emotionally [23, 27].

3. Study context

This SoTL project occurred in an introductory early childhood literacy course with undergraduate students at a large urban public college. This course is required for students considering the professional sequence for teacher education or related fields like music education. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from my college.

Table 1
Demographics

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="2">n = 20</td><td colspan="5">International Students</td><td colspan="6">Work Full- or Part-Time Jobs
n = 18</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="5">Mainland China n = 2 | Taiwan n = 1 | South Korea n = 1 | Jamaica n = 1</td><td colspan="6">Housing Insecure n = 1
Parents n = 4</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Latinx
n = 5</td><td colspan="5" rowspan="2"></td><td colspan="6">Ages</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="5">Students with Immigrant Parents</td><td><20</td><td>20-25</td><td>26-30</td><td>31-35</td><td>36-40</td><td>>40</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">African American
n = 4</td><td colspan="5" rowspan="2">Turkey n = 1 | Poland n = 1 | Pakistan n = 1 | Lebanon n = 1 | Nepal/India n = 1</td><td rowspan="2">n = 3</td><td rowspan="2">n = 8</td><td rowspan="2">n = 5</td><td rowspan="2">n = 1</td><td rowspan="2">n = 1</td><td rowspan="2">n = 2</td></tr>
<tr></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">First generation to attend college n = 14</td><td colspan="10">Languages
Monolingual (English) n = 5 | Bilingual/Multilingual n = 15 | English as New Language n = 5</td></tr>
</table>

Based on theories of self-efficacy and reflective practice, and in ungrading practices, I aimed for a student-centered learning environment with distributed power. Practices included not penalizing absences or lateness but valuing participation as an important contribution to our learning community. In other words, I problematized attendance, one of several issues I address in the findings. The syllabus emphasized ungrading, as follows: (a) I would provide feedback on all their work, but no points and no grades; (b) students had the opportunity to revise and resubmit all work both before each due date and up to one week after I provided feedback as long as they showed what revisions they made and explained how they used my feedback; (c) they were going to reflect on their performance and grade themselves both in mid-term and end-of-term surveys. In addition, I stated on the syllabus: "During finals week, we will schedule a one-on-one conference to discuss and negotiate a fair final grade for the course. We will resolve discrepancies between your self-assessment and my assessment of your work to reach agreement." In surveys, I asked two questions that elicited ways I might support their learning.

Students were encouraged to complete assignments by expected due dates. We discussed why this mattered for their learning and participation in our learning community. However, aligned with ungrading practices, such as avoiding punitive structures that reify power dynamics [4], I accepted assignments until the final week of class. Consistent with student empowerment, we co-constructed all assignment expectations, and students used these expectations as guideposts for what final grade they deserved for the course or the level of effort they put into assignments. Other elements of course design will emerge as I share findings.

3.1. Positionality

As a white, cis-gendered male professor, I was aware of my privileged position of power and the harmful ways it might be wielded in academic settings. I guided my positionality by applying SoTL principles. In this study, I conducted a systematic inquiry into students' learning, grounded in context, methodologically sound, in partnership with students, based on previous scholarship of teaching and learning, and am going public with the results [28]. As a reflective practitioner, I engaged in a cyclical practice that challenged my syllabus as a living document for a spiraling process of improvement (https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/studying-engaged-learning/what-is-sotl/). I expressed my commitment to teaching, reflective practice, and student empowerment. I intend findings to inform high-quality course design, give insights about student learning, and create optimal contexts for learning [12].

4.Research Methodology

4.1. Data sources and analysis

Table 2 summarizes data sources. Data sources for RQ1 mostly came from coursework aligned with course design. After final grades were submitted, a colleague conducted a focus group with semi-structured discussion questions to gather insights about students' experiences in the course. Additionally, two students participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews upon my invitation. All interactions were recorded and transcribed. Data sources for RQ2 were my reflective journal, feedback on students' work, discussions with students who met with me one-on-one, and end-of-term conferences. I wrote one reflective journal entry each week. Reflective journal writing was reflection-on-action; however, in my entries, I also commented on instructional decisions I made during class sessions, which described reflection-in-action [25]. These varied data sources across the semester provided robust triangulation "to understand the contexts under which learning occurs—from the what, why, where, who and how we teach—and the impact of these contacts on the student experience" [12].

Table 2
Data sources

RQ1: How did a course designed with ungrading practices impact students' self-efficacy?	
Data Source	Description
Mid-Term Survey	The survey consisted of three sections, based on overall course design and objectives: (a) Course content and participation; (b) Ungrading reflection; (c) Final statement. Part (a) had seven long-response questions and three semantic differential scale format questions for 10 questions. Part (b) had three long-response questions and one semantic differential scale format question for four questions. In Part (c), students wrote a lengthy response explaining their deserved final grade. The survey was completed during class time.
End-of-Term Survey	The survey format and all semantic differential scale format questions were identical to the mid-term survey to facilitate comparisons. It was completed during class time.
Exit Slips	They completed this electronic form at the end of each class session.
Transcripts of one-on-one interviews	This was an open invitation to all students. Two students participated in semi-structured interviews in person mid-semester. Each interview lasted 10 minutes.
Transcripts of focus group discussion	This was an open invitation to all students from a colleague requiring student consent. Nine students gave consent; however, two participated (one also participated in a one-on-one interview). The focus group had semi-structured questions. It occurred seven weeks after the end of the semester and six weeks after the submission of final grades via Zoom. A collewague conducted it to support participants' candid responses. The session was 30 minutes.
Transcripts of end-of-term conferences with each student	Each one-on-one conference was scheduled for 10 minutes via Zoom.
Students' submitted work, their self-evaluations, and my feedback	Except for weekly reader responses, all my feedback was in response to students' self-evaluations of their work based on co-constructed criteria for each assignment.
RQ2: How did a course designed with ungrading practices impact me as a reflective teacher?	
Reflective journal	I wrote one reflective journal entry each week.
My feedback on students' work	
Transcripts of one-on-one interviews	This was an open invitation to all students. Two students participated in person mid-semester. Each interview lasted 10 minutes.
Transcripts of end-of-term conferences with each student	Each one-on-one conference was scheduled for 10 minutes via Zoom.

I used mixed methods for data analysis to address RQ1. Semantic differential scale format responses were identical for mid- and end-of-term surveys and provided comparative quantitative data (see Table 3). Qualitative data sources for RQ1 and RQ2 were processed using qualitative analysis software (see Table 4).

Table 3
Students' quantitative responses, mid-term and end-of-term

	Mid-Terma	End-of-Termb
Course Readings: I have done the following amounts of course readingsc	100% = 13 76-99% = 6	100% = 12 76-99% = 7 51-75% = 1
Coursework:		
Book Talks	Very valuable = 15 Somewhat valuable = 3	Very valuable = 17 Somewhat valuable = 3

	Minimally valuable = 1	
Course Readings	Very valuable = 18 Minimally valuable = 1	Very valuable = 19 Somewhat valuable = 1
Reader Responses	Very valuable = 16 Somewhat valuable = 2 Minimally valuable = 1	Very valuable = 18 Somewhat valuable = 2
Group Presentations	Very valuable = 18 Minimally valuable = 1	Very valuable = 20
Learner's Reference Chart	Very valuable = 15 Somewhat valuable = 3 Minimally valuable = 1	Very valuable = 18 Somewhat valuable = 2
Pillars of Literacy Chart	Very valuable = 17 Somewhat valuable = 1 Minimally valuable = 1	Very valuable = 19 Somewhat valuable = 1
Glossary of Literacy Terms	Very valuable = 16 Somewhat valuable = 2 Minimally valuable = 1	Very valuable = 18 Somewhat valuable = 2
Sharing Children's Literature	Very valuable = 16 Somewhat valuable = 2 Minimally valuable = 1	Very valuable = 19 Somewhat valuable = 1
In-Class Interactive Activities	Very valuable = 18 Minimally valuable = 1	Very valuable = 20
Class Discussions	Very valuable = 17 Somewhat valuable = 1 Minimally valuable = 1	Very valuable = 20
Instructional Videos	Very valuable = 18 Minimally valuable = 1	Very valuable = 18 Somewhat valuable = 2
Ungradinge		
Ungrading has caused me to engage more in all coursework.	Strongly Agree = 5 Agree = 10 Disagree = 2 Strongly Disagree = 2	Strongly Agree = 8 Agree = 11 Disagree = 1
Ungrading helps me reflect on my learning process and grow as a learner.	Strongly Agree = 4 Agree = 10 Disagree = 3 Strongly Disagree = 2	Strongly Agree = 8 Agree = 11 Disagree = 1
I feel more empowered and responsible for my learning as a result of ungrading.	Strong Agree = 4 Agree = 10 Disagree = 2 Strongly Disagree = 3	Strongly Agree = 13 Agree = 7
Course Assignmentsf		
Book Talk		High quality/effort = 16 Some quality/effort = 4
Reader Responses		High quality/effort = 16 Some quality/effort = 3 In progress/not yet completed = 1
Read-Aloud Basket		High quality/effort = 16 Some quality/effort = 4
Group Presentation		High quality/effort = 16 Some quality/effort = 4
Interactive Read-Aloud Lesson Plan and Reflection		High quality/effort = 18 Some quality/effort = 2

Notes:

n = 19 (one student did not do the mid-term survey)

n = 20

Course readings values were %-age: 0-25; 26-50; 51-75; 76-99; 100.

Course work values were: minimally valuable; somewhat valuable; very valuable.

Ungrading values were: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree.

Course Assignment values were: minimal quality/effort; some quality/effort; high quality/effort; in progress/not yet completed. These measures applied only to end-of-semester survey.

Table 4
Summary of codes by research question and themes

Total distinct codes: 73		Total number of excerpts: 1535		Total number of codes: 3495	
RQ1: How did a course designed with ungrading practices impact students' self-efficacy?					
Total distinct codes: 44		Total number of codes: 2963 (.85)a			
Theme 1: Course design		Theme 2: A learning community		Theme 3: Self-assessment	
Total distinct codes: 20	Total number of codes: 1331 (.45)b	Total distinct codes: 4	Total number of codes: 438 (.15)b	Total distinct codes: 20	Total number of codes: 1194 (.40)b
RQ2: How did a course designed with ungrading practices impact me as a reflective teacher?					
Total distinct codes: 29		Total number of codes: 532 (.15)a			
Theme 1: Reflective practice		Theme 2: Feedback		Theme 3: An ethics of care	
Total distinct codes: 21	Total number of codes: 227 (.43)c	Total distinct codes: 5	Total number of codes: 271 (.51)c	Total distinct codes: 3	Total number of codes: 34 (.06)c

Note: a = %-age of total; b = %-age for RQ1; c = %-age for RQ2

Using constant comparison [29], data underwent iterative cycles of open and axial coding, with analytic memos to consolidate themes. Constant comparison enabled themes to emerge from students' and my data sources (see Table 2), consistent with SoTL principles [30]. Constant comparison provided " the intentional and rigorous application of research tools that connect[ed] the question[s] at the heart of [this] inquiry to student learning [and my teaching]" [18]. Units of analysis ranged from sentences to entire passages. For example, the following student statement became two units of analysis: "There were many unexpected activities and knowledge in this class. It made me realize there are many ways to teach younger students." The first sentence had the code of teacher support, and the second sentence had the code of pedagogy, and both codes coalesced into the category of participation. Qualitative software facilitated constant comparison of these units of analysis for consistency of codes. For example, by searching all excerpts for the code "teacher support," I was able to refine and apply a robust working definition.

I generated 73 distinct codes within eight categories, integrating deductive and inductive codes based on self-efficacy and reflective practice theories, and consolidated codes to derive themes [31]. For RQ1, codes coalesced into the following categories: participation, course content, student learning, summative assessment, self-evaluation, and ungrading. Through this iterative process, I further synthesized these categories into the following three themes: (a) course design, (b) a learning community, and (c) self-assessment. The theme "course design" included codes from categories of participation, course content, and student learning. The theme "a learning community" included codes from categories of participation, course content, and student learning. The theme "self-assessment" included codes from categories of student learning, summative assessment, self-evaluation, and ungrading. For my self-study (RQ2), codes coalesced into the following themes: (a) reflective practice, (b) feedback, and (c) an ethics of care. Table 4 summarizes the amount and percentages of codes for each research question and theme.

5. Findings

5.1. Students' self-efficacy

I organized the findings by my two research questions. Table 3 presents quantitative data for RQ1: How did a course designed with ungrading practices impact students' self-efficacy? Table 3 shows strong levels of engagement in both mid-term and end-of-term. Mid-term, only one student (and the same student in all categories) rated each course activity minimally valuable, and at least 15 (out of 19) students rated each course activity very valuable (one student did not do the mid-term survey). At least 14 students agreed or strongly agreed that ungrading helped them to engage more in coursework, reflect on their learning process and growth as learners, and feel empowered and responsible for their learning, which are measures of self-efficacy for learning new skills.

End-of-term ratings improved across all coursework categories and ungrading measures. For example, there were no minimally valuable ratings, and at least 17 (out of 20) students rated each category very valuable. Three categories had unanimous ratings, three more had 19 ratings, and four had 18 ratings of very valuable. Course reading results remained high both for mid-term and end-of-term. Nineteen students agreed or strongly agreed that ungrading helped them to engage more in coursework, reflect on their learning process and grow as learners (the same student disagreed for both categories). All 20 students agreed or strongly agreed that ungrading made them feel empowered and responsible for their learning. A strong indicator of self-efficacy for performing tasks is students' effort in course assignments. At least 16 rated high quality/effort for four of the five assignments, with four rating some quality/effort. For our culminating assignment, which included creating a lesson plan for an interactive read-aloud, implementing the read-aloud with a child or children, and reflecting on the lesson, grounded in course readings, 18 students indicated high-quality/effort and two rated some quality/effort. Clearly, most students found purpose and expressed agency in coursework and assignments.

Qualitative data provide more nuanced findings regarding students' self-efficacy. I present these findings in three themes: (a) course design, (b) a learning community, and (c) self-assessment (see Table 4).

5.1.1. Course design

Students valued the numerous opportunities they had to show their understanding, the emphasis on experiential activities that simulated classroom-based practices, and the recursive, spiraling design of the course. An example of providing many opportunities to show understanding, in our end-of-term one-on-one conference, Milagros (all names are pseudonyms) felt she deserved a final grade of B+ because, although she did high-quality work, she submitted many assignments late, had two absences, and often arrived late to class. I was comfortable with giving her a final grade of A, and provided the following explanation. (Note: I omitted filler words, repetition of phrases, or discontinuous fragments for clarity. Otherwise, I kept my and each student's syntax, usage, and punctuation intact throughout the manuscript.)

Participation was all of this: attendance, course goals, book talks, mid-term evaluation, final evaluation, your actual read aloud basket for the book celebration, and the names worksheet. Participating in discussions for other people's digital read aloud baskets on Blackboard. You did a really good job. Like you said, you had two absences. But one was COVID-related and you pointed out, you were late a few times, but no big deal. That all worked out, you know.

Providing many ways to participate mitigated the impact of a narrow view of participation. For one middle-aged student, Yolanda, who worked as a program director, the course reinvigorated her commitment to education: "And I have to say that at every weekly exit ticket, the flow of the class, the way that it was, it was a lot of information that we were getting. Some of it I was privy to, some of it reminders, but some of it new information and new insights, and really, it's one reason why I'm sticking with education."

Students emphasized hands-on, experiential learning aligned with course readings, other resources, and especially their current or future classrooms. Hands-on activities were motivational and engaging for students. In our digital exit slips, they used phrases such as, "I enjoyed…," "I loved…," "It was a delight to do!" "We laughed and had so much fun!" and would thank me for the class session. Hands-on activities helped them envision their future careers. For example, Jacqueline stated: "I enjoyed the bingo game today. I was very excited when I found out I won a book. It is the start of my collection of books for my future classroom. Moments like this really make the idea of becoming a teacher feel real." Class activities also connected with classrooms where they currently work. For example, in an exit slip, Patricia stated: "Even though my group was the one that gave the vocabulary presentation, the professor provided more ideas that I could use in my classroom, especially how many vocabulary activities could be done during interactive read-aloud." Students also connected hands-on activities to metacognition. For example, Kersandra stated in the mid-term survey: "I used to think I was an auditory learner, and even though I still feel I am, I also now realize that I learn best by actually doing the activities myself." Fatima emphasized these connections in the following end-of-term survey statement: "This class made me realize how important visual and hands-on learning is for me. I can read articles, but I best retain this information by seeing it applied. I value this learning more now. I need to implement all the different ways of learning in my future classroom to see all of my students strive. This class fuels my passion to become a teacher."

Students also valued the spiraling curriculum, in which we repeatedly returned to revise and expand concepts and frameworks. For example, Kristina stated: "This class showed me that I best learn reading the material first at home and then learning about it in the classroom. Also, the way that we build off our assignments, such as the 'Pillars of Literacy' chart proves to me that revising my answers truly helps me to learn from my mistakes." In our exit slips, Steven commented how beneficial it was that we revised reader responses in class as we discussed each week's assigned readings: "Every week, I feel mentally engaged in class, and I am ready to discuss our new learning from our homework readings. I open my computer to revise what I had on my reader response and improve my answers based in our class discussions." Students expressed the value of having opportunities to revisit and revise their work based on feedback I provided. For example, in the end-of-term survey, Eleanor wrote: "I also enjoyed the classroom map. I liked how I created mine in the beginning of the semester then received feedback and learned new information that I implemented into a new, improved map."

Students also perceived coherence of developmentally appropriate practices across "pillars of literacy." This understanding of foundational skills was a goal of the course design. For example, in the end-of-term survey, Sunghee wrote: "The pillars of literacy have helped me understand how young children acquire their literacy since they all work together to grasp a text. You'll notice that mastering one skill will make learning the next skill easier. Learning about each skill individually we can see how important it is for young children to master or at least know the skill, because as young children age, texts will only get harder for them." This recursiveness supported students in perceiving how imperative differentiated instruction is, as Roxanne stated in our mid-term survey: "Sometimes students won't be able to progress as fast as the rest of the class, so you have to be able to adapt to those standards as a teacher to devote more time to students who may have a hard time with the material."

This recursive curriculum also supported students' understanding of culturally responsive practices, as Eleanor stated in her mid-term survey: "Being a culturally responsive teacher builds equity in the classroom. Children come from different backgrounds, and supporting them and their culture through readings or activities not only keeps them engaged, but allows them to feel supported." Also strongly woven into course design were experiences with children's literature, and students realized the value of "windows, mirrors, and sliding doors" [32]. For example, in an exit slip, Suri stated: "I enjoyed when the class discussed how to introduce books centering around topics of mirrors, windows, and sliding doors. This was great because it revealed how to deal with frustrated parents and the importance of appropriate preparation." Our emphasis on diverse children's literature

influenced students' metacognition of culturally responsive practices, as Haeny commented: "I always knew that in a classroom there were books and I was never interested in reading any of these books, and now looking back on it, I think it was because I wasn't seeing myself in the classroom. I saw books we had to read. I never saw books about places my family came from or any stories about families like mine." Jasmine expressed how this integration of children's literature changed her mind: "This class made me curious about books and what other books are out there. I did change my mind about books because I got to see that they are important after all in children's education."

Students also described the support I provided to facilitate their learning. One kind of support was my interactions during learning activities, as Patricia explained in an exit slip: "There was a point where I would just think about words, but having the professor come over and creating the words by removing the letters helped a lot because it made me visualize the words. After that more words started to come out." Students described the supportive access I provided to resources for their learning, as Yolanda's statement explains: "The group presentations, the book talks, and the wealth of resources that has been suggested or made available to us. I appreciate them all." This middle-aged student, Yolanda, cited previously, stated using these resources in her role as program director. Students also expressed appreciation for the deliberate and thoughtful design of each class session, as Aisha's exit slip statement attests in response to what was most helpful: "As always, the flow of the day and the collaborative tone set by our professor."

5.1.2. A learning community

Pervasive in students' data sources was how much they valued the learning community. In exit slips for the final class, some students expressed missing this class when it ends and making friendships. They spoke of the class as a caring, collaborative community of practice, an important goal I had in course design that supported their learning. One of the students in the focal group, Omar, commented: "There's a lot of times where we were instructed to turn around and talk to a partner, or we were working in groups, and it just made things very easy. And, you got to make friends, and it was a very positive environment." He discussed collaborative note-taking's value during group presentations to generate practical resources about the pillars of literacy. The other student in the focal group, Liliana, explained how, because ungrading removed their worry about assignment grades, students approached coursework with a sense of "companionship."

Every time we would come to class, we didn't focus on, "What grade did you get?" We were talking about discussions and what the professor had highlighted in our work that we would mention to our peers and our colleagues. So that was one thing I enjoyed that I would say it helped me a lot, because not only did I get to discuss what my favorite part of an article was, or a project. But I also told them, "oh, like professor had commented on my work, saying that I highlighted this key area, but I missed this," and another student can pick up saying, "oh, you missed this, but that's what I highlighted." So, I thought that was really interesting, and what motivated me in the course.

Similarly, they valued small group work that was integral in course design. Aisha commented: "For my group presentation, I was in constant contact with my members along with contributing in our zoom meetings to prepare for our day." After participating in a jigsaw activity to study course readings, Nancy commented in an exit slip: "I enjoyed separating into a group with two other people who read a different article. I enjoyed this because I was able to converse with people I normally don't talk to and it was informing to hear about articles I didn't read. It was interesting how each article tied into each other." Students loved when their group presentations were well-received. Yolanda was one student I was aware of who had a difficult and painful experience in her small group, an issue that I address later in my reflections as instructor. Otherwise, students expressed strong positive experiences, such as Suri's statement in the end-of-term survey: "It made me realize that working together and engaging as a group made me learn the best. I enjoyed the conversations we had together. It wasn't a class that drained me like the others, where kids are expected to come into class and listen to a lecture. And since this class is about 2 hours and 40 minutes long, it felt like time was passing by so fast."

5.1.3 Self-assessment

Self-assessment was woven into course design, providing students ample opportunities to reflect on their goals, learning process, and outcomes. In end-of-term surveys, students consistently appreciated these opportunities. For example, Jasmine stated: "Not grading makes me treat each assignment the same way compared to usual grading. And I feel more capable and responsible for my own learning. This is because the teacher will give comments. Not grading helps your learning process, it takes the pressure off of me for the assignment or course." They contrasted these practices with traditional grading, as Marisol's end-of-term survey statement attests:

Grading invokes a daunting ability to constrict creativity with rubrics that tell one what is necessary to get the A grade. It is my experience being a robot in just doing what I need to do to get the A or settle for any of the other grades after that and then be ranked among other students based on a letter instead of the body of our work which speaks volumes.

Forty-two excerpts were coded metacognition. Students expressed a deeper understanding of literacy concepts. In our final summative one-on-one conference, Milagros stated:

So, during the course, when I did do the readings on time, I felt confident in the subject matter and I felt, "okay, I know this." So it didn't hit me like something new, whereas when I didn't do the course readings, it was like everything was new. So I

was just learning everything, but I wasn't making connections with anything from the past. So when I did make the connections and to feel more like I was prepared and I could understand better, like on a deeper level.

Many students expressed new awareness of what kind of learner they are or how they learn best, predominantly naming hands-on, experiential learning, but also class discussion, group work, and group presentations. For example, Nancy stated in the mid-term survey: "This class helped me realize that project-based learning, or presenting to the class, or, in other words, teaching, is the best way I learn."

Sometimes, students' metacognitive statements explicitly expressed transformation, such as increased confidence as learners. In our one-on-one summative conference, one student, Lindsey, who claimed never receiving the supports she needed in previous school experiences, discussed how what she learned transformed her own reading and writing practices:

I never learned about phonemes or what a grapheme is and being able to realize that everything actually pieces together. I learned for myself that words that I might struggle with, I can now break down into smaller words. And I was reading a book the other day, and usually I would just skip over the word, which I really shouldn't do, but I do. And I was able to sit there and I was able to break it down. And if I didn't know the word after that, I was able to use my resources to figure out what it meant. But like the classes taught me, there were things growing up I didn't learn. And in this class, I learned something that I would definitely share in my classroom and to help students, and it helped me.

Students exclusively stated they met their learning goals. Some students generated new learning goals during the course and expressed agency in wanting to learn more or pursuing their inquiries. In the mid-term survey, Suri stated: "I feel like I'm doing pretty well with achieving these goals but there's also other goals I want to consider for future me when I step foot into the classroom. I want to slowly achieve those goals as much as I can. I hope to be more knowledgeable in children's literacy and creating a safe space for children through books." Students' connections to practical applications and future plans reinforced and expanded their learning goals. As Gabriela stated in the mid-term survey: "100% my goals have been changed, and all for me as a person and a future teacher. There are certain goals I now have that I didn't before because I never thought that deep into certain topics, like vocabulary and comprehension."

As Table 3 shows, at least until mid-term, not all students embraced ungrading eagerly. Some students preferred a traditional grading system to gauge their performance. Some students expressed the need for more positive feedback, or affirmations of what they are doing well, before providing feedback on what they can improve in their work. Some students expressed anxiety about only having feedback to rely on and having to figure out their progress on their own. However, some students were clear about ungrading from the start. In the mid-term survey, Marisol noted that since elementary school teaching is her intended major, "my interest doesn't lie in my grade, but in the lessons I am understanding and using for my future classroom." By the end of the semester, all students experienced ungrading as empowering to their learning process.

Ungrading accounted for 16% of student codes. In the focal group discussion, Omar expressed what many students communicated:

There's no focus on grades. Then there's the focus on content. So, I was very motivated to understand what was happening in all the assignments and the readings. And my goal in the beginning of the semester was to understand how literacy works in children and how literacy is important. And I think that I achieved those goals. And it was my first education class at [college], so I felt that was a very positive experience for me.

Students stated how ungrading enabled them to submit "a better version of my work," as Xiaoyi said in our end-of-term conference. Again and again, students were more willing to apply hard work because ungrading freed them up to value their learning process, as indicated by Aisha's mid-term survey statement: "Ungrading helps me become more detail oriented, more engaged and present, and strive to be my best without focusing on the rubric/standard to produce the standards outcome."

5.2. Instructor's reflective practice

Three themes emerged from the data to address RQ2: How did a course designed with ungrading practices impact me as a reflective teacher? (a) Reflective practice; (b) Feedback; and (c) An Ethics of care (see Table 4).

5.2.1. Reflective practice

In my reflective stance, I checked in with course objectives, acknowledged mistakes I made during the course, affirmed positive outcomes and student performance, and expressed joy and relief, which freed me up to take more risks. For example, in my reflective journal, I wrote:

I feel this sense of relief that I'm not keeping score on the students. As a result, assignments have less high-stakes. This has pushed me to practice more "flipped classroom" with students. The reader response and group presentation assignments occur like content preparation, so we can explore and try out activities in class. At the start of Class Session #4, I even told them about flipped classrooms, and how the reader responses effectively provide this context preparation for our coursework.

I paid attention to incidents of implicit bias or possible harm my position as a white, cis-gendered, male professor might cause. In one incident, I was aware of this positioning as I realized my frustration when a middle-aged, African American student, Monique, neglected to upload her group's digital presentation before class. I soon shifted the presentation to after the break to provide time for Monique to upload the presentation. Later, I reflected:

It did all worked out well in the end. [The group] gave a great presentation, with sufficient time to delve into the topic of fluency. Monique shined in her presentation, and I gave positive and affirming feedback. But I can't help but worry about the discomfort I contributed to making Monique feel embarrassed, unduly stressed, and disenfranchised as a Black woman student, older than most, after putting all that effort and intellectual excellence to prepare an outstanding presentation.

It was a discomfort that I worked to resolve in subsequent weeks of the course.

I also reflected on issues of time. For example, I reflected on running out of time in class for students to fill in our digital exit slip, provide sufficient attention to important content, or allow sufficient time for discussion: "I also kept feeling the press of time to move on, so we could get through all my plans for the day. And this is a balance I'm always wrestling with: letting discussion flow, especially for all these important topics that arise versus 'getting through the agenda.'" I was also aware of how much time a course designed with ungrading was demanding of me and wondered how I would manage if I had two sections of the course. I felt the pressure to keep up weekly with feedback on their submissions so they could build off my feedback to improve their learning.

In my reflective journal, I also expressed concerns, possible solutions, and actions I took to solve them. One concern was the quality of some students' coursework and some students not submitting coursework for my review. For example, in one entry I wrote:

Maybe I should ask the students. First, I would share my concerns (and the burden it puts on me) about late submissions. Next, I would ask: would it help YOU if I gave absolute deadlines for all assignments, or is it better that I take a flexible approach to assignment submissions? Finally, how do you approach assignments differently, knowing that it's ungraded and that I will accept work after the deadline?

A solution was to reach out to students as soon as I felt concerned, either in person, or by email or phone. In my journal, I expressed frustration with students who were slow to respond to email queries or voice messages but also satisfaction when students responded. In one journal entry, I wrote: "So, one outcome to my trepidation about students who are not doing the work is, as a result of ungrading, I'm keeping up with my feedback weekly, catching students early, reaching out to them for discussion, and negotiating a shared understanding of their coursework." Sometimes, I felt I was trying harder than they were. But when they responded, they invariably thanked me for reaching out.

Another ongoing concern was students' attendance. After week seven of the course, I wrote: "I have one student who now has three absences, Omar, and two students with two absences (although Omar is doing outstanding work). So, yeah, I'm concerned about their attendance since, as I tell the students, the bulk of our learning occurs in class. But I'm not grading them on attendance as I used to do." Ultimately, I was required to submit final grades. Within the first weeks of the course, I worried:

about students who don't do the work or who have spotty attendance, thinking, "I'm not being graded, so I'll just not engage." And what will I do if these students then give themselves an A for the course? I did state in the syllabus that if we disagree on the grade they deserve, we will have a one-on-one conference, so maybe that is enough of a deterrent and will keep students honest with their self-assessments.

Solutions did not always occur immediately. Some issues, such as Yolanda's hurt from her group project experience, took time and patience and living in discomfort. I had to carefully consider when and how to speak with group members, how to provide openings to repair their relationships and monitor their progress.

The act of facing challenges also led to solutions. For example, near the end of the semester I wrote:

As we near the end of the semester, and we have surveys and one-on-one conferences of their course performance coming up to determine their final grades, I now realize that I need to migrate from a roll book to a spreadsheet so each student can view their progress: their attendance record, what they submitted, what's missing, feedback on each assignment. They need to see their status for coursework. It's amazing that I'm only realizing this now, after 15 years of college-level teaching. But, I think ungrading pushed me to perceive this need. All feedback, all "how am I doing?" needs to be made transparent, a conversation between me and each student. So, I will figure out how to do this kind of online grading system.

Some solutions arose from the TLH community. In my one-on-one discussion with Lindsey, I shared what I learned from a TLH session I attended:

...we had that digital read aloud basket [their first course assignments besides weekly reader responses], and I was just gonna give feedback. And then people reminded me, "well, why don't you just first have them grade themselves on it?" So now I said, "oh yeah!" Literally, like after this [discussion], I was going to email all of you and say, "OK, here's the grading criteria, tell me how you did," and then I can just give you feedback on it because I'm still trying to get out of the habit of just the grading, deciding for you, and instead trying to give it more over to you to figure out more for yourselves. So it's a learning process for me too.

This was a pivotal moment when I learned to rely on students' self-assessment of their work as a basis for my feedback.

5.2.2. Feedback

For weekly reader response work, I realized how important it was to provide timely feedback. They needed that feedback first, to realize that their responses mattered, and second, to work off my feedback when we delved into understanding course readings and responses each week. During class reviews, students revised their work collaboratively, integrating insights from group interactions and class discussions. In the recursive design of the course, we consistently revisited anchor charts and classroom maps to elaborate or revise our thinking based on new understandings from course readings.

For all other work students submitted, I invariably responded to their self-evaluations. Their self-evaluations were based on co-constructed criteria for what constituted high-quality work for each assignment. My feedback became dialogical, working towards a common understanding of strengths and ways to improve their work. For example, here is the feedback I provided Eleanor for our culminating interactive read-aloud lesson planning assignment:

I like how you carefully used the criteria to construct your response. I mostly agree with your self-evaluation. However, please see my comments in your planning worksheet. I also wanted to see THREE suggested extension activities. For your reflection, I suggest a concluding paragraph that synthesizes all that you learned and realized from doing this work. Overall, I'm glad you learned so much from this experience.

By mid-term, a few students expressed concern because, in addition to feedback on improving their work (predominantly on reader responses at this point in the semester), they also wanted more positive feedback to affirm and build off of what they did well. This reminder guided me to start feedback with strengths before addressing ways to improve their work.

For end-of-semester one-on-one summative conferences, five students received higher final grades than they gave themselves, 12 students received their final grades, but three received lower final grades than they gave themselves. These were the challenging one-on-one conferences. I relied on the spreadsheet of feedback they received across all course components to anchor our discussions. Here is an end-of-conference summary with Suri:

I know you wanted an A. I was thinking more around a B plus because the interactive read aloud, what we discussed about your read aloud basket. Some issues with the group presentation about using more of the resources I gave. Some of your reading responses, four absences that, you know, also limited some of your participation.

When we had our final conference, Monique was still missing substantial coursework, so I held up submitting all final grades to give her a few more days to complete the coursework. So, while these three conferences were challenging, in the end, no students complained, and all understood their final grades.

5.2.3. An ethics of care

My course design valued building a learning community. As Shepard et al. [7] established, formative assessment is contextual and students rely on a safe, caring learning environment to practice metacognition. I demonstrated an inquiry stance that was responsive to students' questions. Early in the semester, in my reflective journal, I noted how Omar expressed concerns about ungrading:

"I'm a perfectionist, and a grade lets me know how I'm doing." Some students nodded in familiarity.

Someone commented, "But you're getting feedback."

"Yeah, I know, but that's not enough. I want the concrete measurement."

I responded, "Do you need a grade to know how you're doing?"

A discussion ensued about valuable forms of assessment in school settings. Instead of a conclusive answer, I stated: "This discussion is exactly why you all should consent to participate in a focal group discussion with [my colleague] about ungrading."

We had other discussions from an inquiry stance for challenging, social justice picture books that students shared in class, such as when Liliana introduced a book about migrant children and asked, "So, how do you have these discussions with children? Aren't you worried that parents will protest?" Another time, Monique held up a non-fiction book about slavery from her read-aloud basket. In my reflective journal after class that day, I wrote:

After sharing about the book, she shared her experience as a sixth-grade student. She said that was the first time a teacher brought up slavery in the United States, and the teacher brought up the topic for 10 minutes, a cursory handling of the topic, like, say it and get it over with, and let's move on. Monique said that she was so angry that day and for a long time afterward at white people, and why was she hearing this for the first time, and how come this wasn't a more integral part of social studies and US History in school?

We eventually had to move on with our agenda. In my reflective journal, I wrote:

Wow! What could I say? I stated that her story explains exactly why we must raise and create safe spaces for these difficult and painful parts of our history, or we risk silencing and, therefore, marginalizing our students. I held up Born on the Water as another example of a picture book that makes children aware of this troubled history.

Most of all, I established an ethics of care. A strict policy on attendance seemed ridiculous once I considered students' life circumstances. For example, near the end of the semester, I wrote in my reflective journal:

And then there's Xiaoyi. She went through two weeks of a kidney ailment and is now taking anti-bacterial kidney medicine. Then she sent me pictures yesterday of her mom's harrowing car accident. She came to class this morning, even though her mother is injured and swollen from the car accident, at the doctor's office as we speak, and how she is going home after class to tend to her mom. Nevertheless, she came to class, contributed to our pot-luck breakfast, and managed to bring in three or four of her book basket books, even though she was unable to get to the public library yesterday as a result of her mom. These students are examples of why we cannot be draconian about their attendance but work with them to support their attendance and participation.

This is especially imperative in a public institution with the diverse student population I describe in this course.

6. Discussion

The data show that a course designed with ungrading practices significantly impacted students' self-efficacy. In the first few weeks of the semester, some students were challenged by ungrading. They were uncomfortable with no quantitative measures of their performance, relying only on my feedback, having to gauge the quality of their performance for themselves, and taking ownership of their learning process. For instance, Milagros became comfortable delaying work, knowing there was no penalty for late submissions. These responses were expected as they expressed students' conventional school experiences. However, as our system of ungrading gained momentum, students developed self-efficacy. Their participation presented a calibration of dynamic interaction between personal, behavioral, and environmental factors [19]. Table 3 shows their development of self-efficacy attributes such as feeling empowered and responsible for their work, putting in high quality and effort, and valuing class discussions as a source of learning. As students expressed in exit slips, they had strong engagement for class activities, interest in course content, and persistence in learning tasks. In their self-reflections, they expressed pride, growing self-confidence in achieving learning goals, and an interest in pursuing new lines of inquiry based on course content [21]. I was so excited how, week after week in their exit slips, students expressed the transferability of practical applications of our learning to school settings [20]. They expressed agency as they imagined their plans as educators and their intentions for new learning.

Findings also highlight the importance of a supportive learning community to develop students' self-efficacy. Students expressed how ungrading freed them up to practice collective self-efficacy [19], sharing their concerns and the feedback they received. They revised their thinking based on distributive insights and collective wisdom, which developed their metacognition [18]. Frequent peer review increased their understanding of co-constructed criteria for excellence, strengthening their ability to apply them to their work and establishing a more cohesive and supportive learning community [1, 10]. Learning tasks integrated skills for mastery experiences [20] of practical applications in school settings. The recursive nature of review and learning literacy practices provided deep and even transformational learning. This enabled students to realize theory into practice, in other words, pedagogy. The course wove in ongoing self-assessments, which provided many opportunities for metacognition, resulting in deeper learning [14, 17]. Data showed students were not afraid of difficult tasks. They reported maximum effort for our culminating project (see Table 3). They approached the work as a challenge to master because it mattered for their learning goals [21].

A course designed with ungrading practices also impacted me as a reflective practitioner. Data show the dynamic interplay of course design with student participation, course content, and our learning community [22, 23]. In reflection, I became a student of the learners [24], living in uncertainty and even discomfort to notice how I wielded my privileged position of power as a white, cis-gendered male professor and to find better ways to support their learning, build community, and provide constructive feedback [25]. Ungrading prompted transformative changes to course design, such as providing a spreadsheet that summarized all feedback across all coursework for students or providing opportunities for students to grade and self-evaluate themselves on course assignments and using their self-evaluations as dialogic feedback [1, 3, 5, 7], or implementing flipped classroom structures that enabled many opportunities for recursive, spiraling curriculum to develop literacy pedagogy. In the spirit of SoTL, the course syllabus became a living document for a spiraling improvement process [12, 28, 30].

Ungrading also opened an inquiry stance that enabled humanizing pedagogy [26]. We engaged in dialogic discussions, including ungrading, that problematized traditional practices [2], for transformative learning. I implemented an ethics of care that diminished power over students and instead emphasized power with students. This redistribution of power is not without challenges [16]. Findings reveal concerns about students' participation, coursework, and final self-evaluations. I stated how sometimes I felt I cared more than they did. I had to resist interpretations of their ambivalence. I had to confront my concerns about time, such as finding a balance between spontaneous discussions and my plans or shifting my practices to provide timely feedback on their work. I had to find solutions to maintain and revisit ambitious but attainable aims for learning and negotiating students' performance to establish a final grade [1, 9, 15]. I was fortunate to have a PLC [8] to explore challenging solutions such as maintaining ongoing communication with students or monitoring students' social and emotional learning. The negotiated curriculum requires deep trust between students and teacher [6, 17]. In my reflective stance, I took responsibility for our learning community's complex dynamics [27].

6.1. Limitations

As a result of a scheduling conflict, only two of nine students who gave consent and planned to attend were able to attend the re-scheduled focal group. In addition, only two students participated in one-on-one interviews. One of those two students also participated in the focal group. This outcome limited data sources. However, as Table 2 shows, I had a robust set of data sources for this study, and, in addition to comparative quantitative data (see Table 3), I had 1535 excerpts for units of analysis (see Table 4) to triangulate findings. Second, as stated, my institution requires final grades. As a gatekeeping mechanism, final grades also have potential pernicious impact, especially on marginalized students, as represented in my course [4-7]. I caution conflating ungrading with "not grading." As this paper demonstrates, ungrading enabled mitigation of these impacts [3]. For example, ungrading pushed me to negotiate final grades with my students for the first time in my career, and their self-reflections informed our discussions. As with other sources of evidence, instead of power over learners, I created conditions of power with learners for

humanizing pedagogy [26]. Even with final grades, I interacted with learners responsively, sensitively, mindfully, and emotionally [23, 27].

6.2. Conclusion

In keeping with SoTL, I emphasized course design as an inquiry project to study the impact of ungrading practices on students and me, their instructor [12]. This commitment pushed me to always center student learning. By shifting the distribution of power for equity purposes, I could show how this ungrading course was more than a set of formative assessments. A commitment to ungrading established sociocultural conditions to strengthen learning. Shepard et al. [7] assert: "Sociocultural approaches make it possible to design for equity in educational settings by attending both to who learners are when they join a community and who they might become". Findings were grounded in the context of my ungrading practices. Students consistently expressed joy, delight, fun, and laughter in our learning opportunities. It is the opposite of the decontextualized forms of standardized assessments students experienced in their schooling that interpreted them as deficient or incapable. My intentions are not to establish "best practices"; rather, as Stommel [3] advises, I seek to develop "good-for-some-people-in-some-contexts practices" for liberatory intentions. Therefore, as long as I am teaching, this inquiry process will continue.

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Ethical Statement

This study contains no studies with human or animal subjects performed by the author.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the research are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Author Contribution Statement

Theodore Kesler: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration.

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