

# 60-Second SoTL

## Episode 75 – Ungrading in an Online Asynchronous Course

### Featured Article

Emerson, Kerstin Gerst. 2026. “‘It Honestly Made Me Want to Work Harder’: Student Evaluation of Using Ungrading in an Online Asynchronous Course.” *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* 14: 1–15.

<https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.14.3>

### Transcript

(Music)

0:10

Jessie L. Moore:

Can ungrading work in a fully asynchronous online course? That’s the focus of this week’s 60-second SoTL from Elon University’s Center for Engaged Learning. I’m Jessie Moore.

(Music)

0:25

In “‘It Honestly Made Me Want to Work Harder’: Student Evaluation of Using Ungrading in an Online Asynchronous Course,” Kerstin Gerst Emerson explores how an alternative grading approach shaped students’ motivation, stress, and learning in a fully online course. Her article appears in *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, an open access journal.

0:47

Traditional grading systems often rely on extrinsic motivation and have been linked to increased anxiety and reduced risk-taking. Ungrading shifts the focus from points and letter grades to qualitative feedback, self-reflection, and intrinsic motivation. But this approach depends heavily on feedback and dialogue—raising an important question: how well does ungrading translate to asynchronous online environments, where instructor presence can feel limited?

1:15

To explore that question, Gerst Emerson conducted a case study of two sections of an introductory-level gerontology course at a large public university in the southeastern United States. The course was delivered fully online and asynchronously during short summer terms in 2023 and 2024. Both sections used identical content and were taught by the same instructor.

Published by the Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University

<https://www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org/podcasts/60-second-sotl/>

1:40

The ungrading design included repeatable, ungraded content quizzes; regular self-reflection check-ins; and extensive written feedback on assignments, typically returned within 24 to 48 hours. Students reviewed their accumulated feedback and self-assessments at the end of the semester and submitted a video reflection explaining and justifying the final grade they assigned themselves.

2:03

After students submitted their video reflections, Gerst Emerson asked them to complete an anonymous, IRB-approved survey. Thirty-five students completed the survey, with equal representation from both sections. The survey included Likert-scale questions about feedback, motivation, anxiety, and learning outcomes, as well as open-ended questions about students' experiences with ungrading.

2:26

Gerst Emerson used descriptive statistics to analyze the quantitative data and inductive content analysis to identify recurring themes in the responses to open-ended questions.

Overall, students reported high levels of satisfaction. More than 88 percent were extremely or somewhat satisfied with the ungrading approach, and none reported dissatisfaction. Students overwhelmingly agreed that their work was valued, that the course rigor was appropriate, and that they were proud of their work. All students reported being confident in the grade they assigned themselves.

While just over half disagreed that they felt anxious about their final grade, about one-third did report some anxiety—suggesting that even when students feel confident, the responsibility of self-grading can be unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

Students also reported strong confidence in meeting all six course learning objectives, particularly reflective objectives related to examining assumptions and stereotypes about aging.

3:23

Qualitative responses revealed four key themes. First, reduced pressure on grades allowed greater focus on learning. Second, ungrading increased their autonomy over their learning and fostered intrinsic motivation—captured in one student's comment: "It honestly made me want to work harder." Third, some students experienced stress or uncertainty as they adjusted to a new grading system. Fourth, students thought ungrading might not be applicable for all academic subjects and course types; several noted that they perceived ungrading as more suitable for discussion-based courses than highly quantitative ones.

3:59

Gerst Emerson concludes that ungrading can be effective in asynchronous online courses—but its success depends on clear and ongoing communication, robust feedback, and structured opportunities to develop

metacognitive skills. Instructors may need to revisit explanations of the grading process throughout the semester and provide scaffolds, such as reflection prompts, FAQs, or visual guides, to help students feel supported.

Ultimately, this study suggests that even in asynchronous environments, ungrading can promote motivation, ownership, and meaningful engagement—when thoughtfully designed and well supported.

To learn more about this study, visit our show notes for a link to the open access article.

4:38

(Music)

4:44

Jessie Moore:

Join us for our next episode of 60-second SoTL from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning for another snapshot of recent scholarship of teaching and learning. Learn more about the Center at [www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org](http://www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org).

(Music)