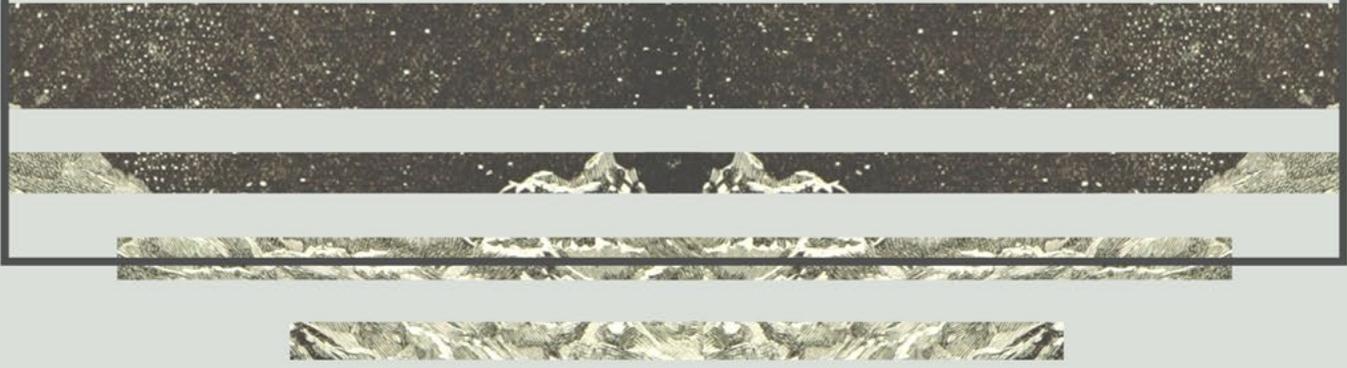


We will help each other to change the destiny of worlds, perhaps even to bring mankind back to humanity.



# UNGRADING HANDBOOK



This work is made possible by our [Patreon supporters](#):

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# THE WHY

Before we get started, we must frame our “why.” Watch the following video, then reflect on each prompt.



**Alfie Kohn: What do we value? (OFJCC)**

What is your “why”? Why are you an educator?

What is your fondest hope for children?

## Research

Ungrading is heavily supported by child developmental psychology and is supported by learning experts. Our obsession with standardization, rank and filing, and “competition” in education has distracted us from what works best for children.\*

- » Those who receive feedback-alone perform better in interest, performance, and outcome than those who receive solely a grade, or who receive a grade with feedback.
- » Students who learn new things because they’re interested perform better academically than those who learn new things because they want a high grade.
- » When students receive a poor semester grade, they almost always perform worse the second half of the year.
- » Students working in groups where participation is graded communicate and participate less than those who are not graded.
- » Those who are told that a test will be graded show no difference in performance than those who are told a test will not be graded.
- » When students are pressured by grades, they are less likely to perform well or be as motivated.

Additional research studies can be found on our website.

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\*Most research studies use standardized testing to measure academic knowledge. Although this is not a perfect measure, it is the primary methodology for academic attainment.



## Systems-Based Research

The need for ungraded classrooms goes beyond the development needs of feedback-driven classrooms. Additional benefits come from “going gradeless.”

- » A controlling environment is linked to greater short-term gains in rote memorization, but long-term interest, understanding, application, and social-emotional well-being suffer as a result.
- » Students placed in open, project-based environments with less direct instruction understand concepts more.
- » Two-thirds of college students report “overwhelming anxiety” taking a physical and mental toll. This statistic has increased 50% from 2011-2016.
- » The lack of teacher autonomy, creativity, and open-access to the curriculum contributes to burnout and exhaustion. A teacher’s primary concern is student well-being.

## Liberatory Pedagogy

In addition to the dampening of intrinsic motivation, educators must acknowledge the role that grading plays in the rank and filing of our students, disproportionately targeting students of color and low-income families.

- » An overview of 186 research studies in K-12 that demonstrate “new racism” - hidden racism within schools in the curriculum and systemic practices.
- » A look at “internalized racism” and the role it plays in our schools.
- » An analysis of liberatory pedagogy and grading.

What’s familiar in this research? Does it affirm what you already know? Does it line up to your own experience in the classroom?

Education as the practice of freedom affirms healthy self-esteem in students as it promotes their capacity to be aware and live consciously. It teaches them to reflect and act in ways that further self-actualization, rather than conformity to the status quo.

- bell hooks



## What does a grade mean?

Label	What does it mean to receive this? What does it feel like to receive this?	What's missing?
A (or equivalent)		
B		
C		
D		
F		

# THE HOW



See yourself as a worthwhile person who can also achieve in learning.

What are the barriers between your “why” and the actual implementation of gradeless learning in your classroom?

Can gradeless learning work in any classroom? What limitations may exist?

I've spent a lot of my career waiting for my supervisor, leader, or coach to tell me what to do or to give me the answers. My greatest professional heartbreaks typically occur when I discover that for whatever new challenge I am facing, there is no single best answer or solution or approach other than to research quickly, try courageously, fail reflectively, stand up, and try again.

- Cornelius Minor

## Creative Noncompliance

How far can we push our practice before someone notices and/or cares?

Policy	Whose policy is it?	Is this a perceived or a real threat? As in, what are the ramifications if you're "caught"?	Is there a way to reconcile these differences? What changes can be made to "make it work"?
e.g. mandatory grade reporting, extracurricular requirements, culture of building, peer judgment	e.g. the State, principal, board, superintendent, tradition		

Early in my teaching career, my colleagues taught me the art of creative noncompliance , a form of resistance that involved deflection and, yes, a level of dishonesty in which I always regretted having to engage. But I argue that teaching without exercising judgment is not truly teaching, and it is impossible to exercise sound, responsive judgment while also, for example, obediently following a canned curriculum, a mandated pacing guide, or a prescribed model of instruction.

- Deborah Meier

## With that in mind...

Is professional civil disobedience, or creative noncompliance, appropriate within a classroom?

Can the concept of creative noncompliance be applied in the student to teacher relationship? Would teaching students to question authority serve any purpose?





## Implementation

Our goal is to find frameworks that ignite intrinsic motivation, while still meeting district guidelines. Later, we'll talk about changing those rules! Here's a list of what we're currently using for students to tell their story of learning:

- » [Evidence Journals & Tutorial](#)
- » [Portfolio \(US Government\)](#)
- » [Portfolio \(9th Grade\) Draft - Based off Aaron Blackwelder's Portfolio System](#)

These aren't radical nor complex ideas. Our classrooms feature large-scale projects that enable learners to showcase learning in different ways. As a result, students demonstrate ideas in myriad ways and at various paces.

Would ungrading work in a classroom that remains otherwise virtually unchanged? Why or why not?

## How can we connect our current practice to ungrading?

What I am currently doing (use one or more examples, e.g. testing, projects, discussions)	Element of ungrading	How can my current system be transformed?
	An emphasis on feedback.	
	A focus on competence, a drive for excellence.	
	Self-paced as students learn at different speeds.	
	The ability to redo and recalibrate learning.	
	Student voice and choice in the curriculum.	
	A supportive, non-competitive community.	



**Students Share Work That Matters (EL Education)**

## **Implementation**

If we place these ideas into our classroom tomorrow, what will students think?

Will our classroom look different than our neighbor's? May this lead to difficulties?

One of the great missteps of education has been the idea that only some kids are intellectuals, or want to be. That only some students can grapple with complex ideas, and the others should be given the boiled-down version of those ideas.

- Dr. Susan Engel

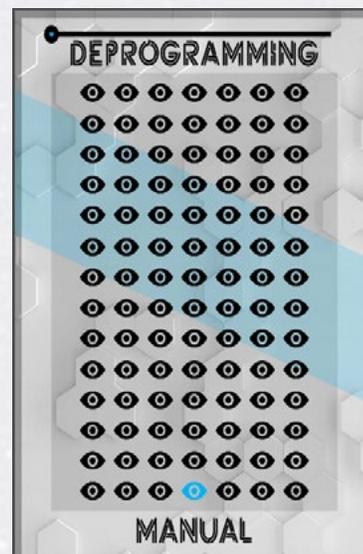
## “Deprogramming”

How can we bring students onboard to our practice? Running a progressive classroom is similar to managing a brand: we need everyone to understand the mission and vision. And to do this, we need to repeat what our mission and vision is constantly. Students should know something is different in your room from the start, and that we’re doing to promote learning.

Discussion questions are a good place to start framing our practice with students:

- » What is “competence”? Would you trust a doctor who achieved all A’s? What about if they barely passed their licensure examination?
- » What is excellence? How does it differ from competence? What is our goal in the classroom?
- » What is “success”? What does success mean in school?
- » What does a grade imply? Do you wish that grading was different?
- » What is the end goal of taking a class in high school? (Highlighting the debate between “college readiness”, achieving high grades, and/or actually learning content.)

We’ve assembled a collection of activities, discussion questions, and ideas for “deprogramming” in our [Deprogramming Manual](#).



## Spreading the Idea

How can we take these ideas back to our schools for more educators to understand?

For those who perceive higher barriers, how can we enact change at a systemic level to realize our “why”?

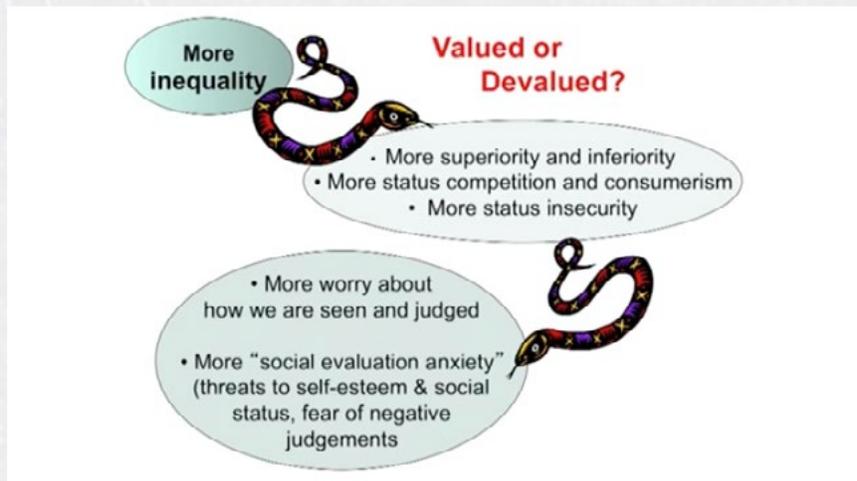


[New teachers who look at the 1970s free school movement] often make a serious mistake in failing to respect the real concern of many parents that their children may no longer have the means to manage and to cope within a technologically complex society. If a teacher can possibly convey to parents from the start that he or she is solid, sober...from that point on we can begin to win the loyalty of very large numbers of the parents of our pupils - and we can do so in a relatively short time.

- Jonathan Kozol

# Radical Education

What can we do to influence systemic change?



[Richard Wilkinson: Economic Inequality \(TED\)](#)

A “radical action.”	What are the risks?	What tools would you need to make this happen?
e.g. writing a letter to the school board, adopting a site-wide or subject-matter ungrading policy, fighting for community resources		

## Resources

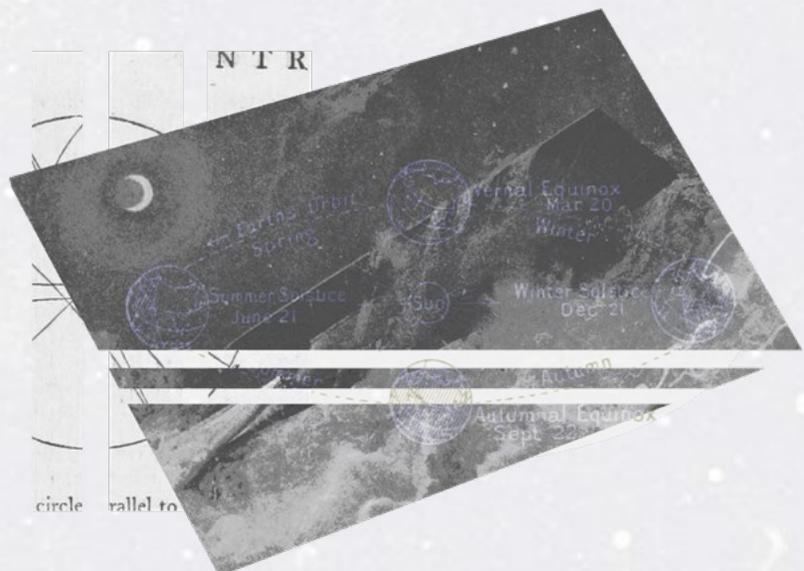
Below we've compiled a short list of materials to arm yourself with more tools on ungrading. None of these would be required to start the practice, but may prove useful for further fortitude or influencing peers:

## Books

- » [\*Teaching to Transgress\* by bell hooks](#)
- » [\*Punished by Rewards\* by Alfie Kohn](#)
- » [\*These Schools Belong to You and Me\* by Deborah Meier & Emily Gasoi](#)
- » [\*The Inner Level\* by Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson](#)
- » [\*The Book of Learning and Forgetting\* by Frank Smith](#)
- » [\*Why They Can't Write\* by John Warner](#)

## Articles

- » [Reflecting on Ungrading for the 4th Time](#) by Maha Bali
- » [Ungrading](#) by Susan Blum
- » ["In your opinion, what matters?"](#) by Nick Covington
- » [From Degrading to De-grading](#) by Alfie Kohn
- » [Competitive Grading Sacrifices Good Teaching](#) by John Krumboltz and Christine Yeh
- » [The Secret to Surviving Teacher Burnout](#) by Chris McNutt
- » [Failing Grades for Retention](#) by Gary Natriello
- » [Abolishing Grading is the First Step to Better Assessment in Mathematics](#) by Sunil Singh
- » [Why I Don't Grade](#) by Jesse Stommel
- » [Going Gradeless: Student Self-Assessment in PBL](#) by Matt Weyers



## Websites

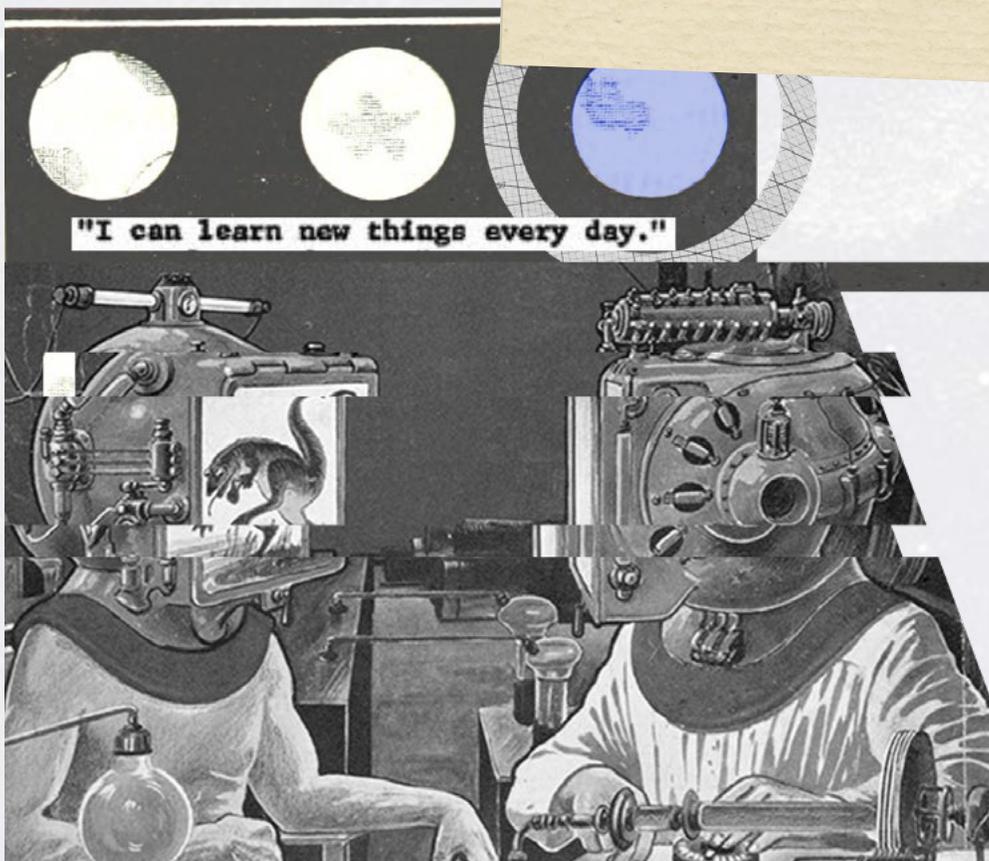
- » [Greater Good Magazine](#)
- » [Self Determination Theory](#)
- » [Teachers Going Gradeless](#)
- » [Human Restoration Project](#)

## Resources

- » [HRP's Gradeless Learning "Why Sheet"](#)
- » [HRP's Infographic of Ruth Butler's Motivation Study \(1987\)](#)
- » [HRP's "Grades =/ Assessment" Teacher Workbook](#)

Like any other tool for facilitating the completion of a questionable task, rewards offer a -how- answer to what is really a -why- question.

- Alfie Kohn

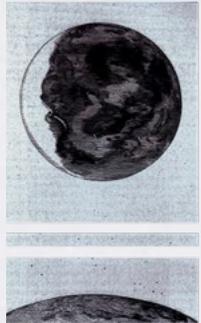


MY

# LEARNING JOURNEY

This is my “why.” I went into education because of this. And it’s not just my idea, there’s research to support it.

Here’s what’s holding me back. I may be able to mitigate these problems by...



These elements of gradeless learning are more than possible within my classroom:

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This will have such a positive impact on my classroom. Here's how I'll convince students to join in:


I'm pumped up and ready for change. Here's what I'm going to do:

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