Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series
Season 2, Episode 2: Ungrading with Jesse Stommel
Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

Catherine Ross (00:00):
Hello, and welcome to Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning. A higher education podcast from the center for teaching and learning at Columbia. I'm Catherine Ross, the center's executive director. Let's get started.

Catherine Ross (00:22):
I'm speaking remotely today with Dr. Jesse Stommel. Dr. Stommel is the co-founder of the digital pedagogy lab and hybrid pedagogy, the journal of critical digital pedagogy. He has a PhD from the university of Colorado Boulder. He is Co-author Of an Urgency Of Teachers, The Work Of Critical Digital Pedagogy, as well as a speaker and teacher with a focus on education, critical digital pedagogy and documentary film. Welcome to Dead Ideas, Jesse.

Jesse Stommel (00:58):
Hi, it's nice to talk to you today.

Catherine Ross (01:00):
For our listeners who may not be as familiar with Jesse's work, there's one area in particular that I wanted to talk to Jesse about today that he has tackled in his work on critical pedagogy, and that is the area of grading or rather, "ungrading" as he encourages instructors to think about this.

Catherine Ross (01:25):
I'd like to share Jesse's definition and his explanation of ungrading, and then I'll ask him to unpack it a little bit further for us. Ungrading is not as simple as just removing grades, the word ungrading, an active present participle, suggests that we need to do intentional critical work to dismantle traditional and standardized approaches to assessment.

Catherine Ross (01:57):
There's a lot to read, certainly, but no neat and tidy point of entry. Rather, each teacher and each student must find their own ways into the work. So Jesse, I'd love to hear you expand on this for us a little bit and understand why you feel this work is necessary and what we will gain by doing it.

Jesse Stommel (02:21):
I really liked that you quote the bit about it being an active present participle. So ungrading, as in a course can't be ungraded. You can't be done with this work. Instead, it's something that we are doing constantly because, to me at the heart of the work of ungrading is raising an eyebrow at grades and the systems and structures that enable them.

Jesse Stommel (02:43):
And doing this work is partly, it's as much about changing our pedagogical practice as it is about a series of conversations we have with ourselves, we have with our colleagues. And then most importantly we have with our students.

Jesse Stommel (02:55):
For me, the key to ungrading is bringing students into the conversation about how grades work, how they make meaning, what they are, their history, the kinds of reactions that we have to them, because I don't think we can just snap our fingers and have grades disappear.

Jesse Stommel (03:12):
We work in a system especially in higher education and throughout the K-12 system that students are working prior to coming to college. We work in a system where we're constantly graded and we're constantly grading each other and in some cases, grading ourselves. Grading our institutions, grading faculty, so there's so much of this within our system. But again, you can't just make it disappear because the second that you even try, the grade becomes this invisible force that's nevertheless impacting us and how we work together.

Jesse Stommel (03:50):
So I often say that even though I've ungraded to some degree in every course that I've taught for 21 years that I've been teaching, the grades still hovers in the classroom, affecting all of the work that we do in it. So bringing students into a critical conversation of how grades make meaning, how we can subvert grades, how we can nevertheless work productively within systems of grades, is the key to the work.

Jesse Stommel (04:15):
And that really is idiosyncratic because that happens differently for different students and different instructors. I don't think there's one way to do this. One thing I often say about pedagogical practice in general is that I don't like to proselytize. There isn't a series of best Jesse practices that anyone can do, and then suddenly work magic within their classes.

Jesse Stommel (04:34):
Instead, each teacher brings a different self and a different embodied self with very material circumstances that they're working at their own institutions to the work. And then works with students who also bring that idiosyncratic practice and also embodied material experience to the work of teaching and learning.

Jesse Stommel (04:56):
And so having a conversation, starting with a conversation where we ask each other, what do we want to do here? How are we going to get that done? What barriers do we need to push aside or question or critique?

Catherine Ross (05:11):
So, Jesse, do you see grades as a barrier to learning? Like why, what is driving these conversations that you're having with your students and with other instructors, as you think about grading?
Jesse Stommel (05:27):
I would say that they’re even more than a barrier. I would say that they actually do harm, which is... I mean, a barrier is something we go over. I think grades actually are an affront. To be relatively strong in my wording, I think grades do harm. They do harm to students, they do harm to teachers and they do harm to the work that we do together.

Jesse Stommel (05:48):
More than anything, I think the grades do harm to the relationships. The sort of very, very important relationships that we’re trying to develop between students, teachers, but also between students. So students with one another, with their colleagues and peers, turns learning environments into competitive environments, where students are being ranked against one another.

Jesse Stommel (06:11):
And then for teachers, I often start workshops that I do on ungrading by asking the question, "How do grades make you feel? How does doing the work of grading make you feel?" And I start from a place for a feeling because I think that grades become the elephant in the room and almost every conversation underway about education. Exactly because, there is such an emotional register that comes along with them.

Jesse Stommel (06:39):
And I have been doing this work 21 years. I've been leading workshops about ungrading for almost a dozen years, and I have never had someone say to me, I love the work of grading. Grading brings so much life and energy to my teaching. Grading makes the relationships I have with students so much stronger. They never say that. People instead, talk about all of the weight on their shoulders that doing the work of grading puts there.

Jesse Stommel (07:08):
Now I will say that teachers do talk about giving feedback to students, as being something that they love. On the other hand, they often talk about the fact that the grade makes their giving feedback more difficult because they find that they're constantly writing feedback to a grade that they're going to have to put at the end.

Jesse Stommel (07:29):
And they also talk about how students, once you put a grade on a paper, students are much less likely to read the feedback that was written and certainly less likely to engage with it thoughtfully. And so if feedback is such an important piece of this relationship, grades are actually frustrating that component.

Catherine Ross (07:47):
I really love what you’re saying. And I noticed in one of your blog posts, you had this fabulous quote that says, "Conventional approaches to grading are usually at direct odds with our institutional missions. So I look to those missions when advocating for teachers to have autonomy in their decisions about how, when, and whether to grade. I haven't seen a college mission statement with any of these characteristics.

Catherine Ross (08:19):
We pit students and teachers against one another. We ranked students competitively. We reduce the humanity of students to a single low-resolution standardized metric. We frustrate learning with approaches that discourage intrinsic motivation. We reinforce bias against marginalized students. And we failed to trust students' knowledge of their own learning."

Catherine Ross (08:44):
This is such a great quote. And I really like how you connected that to institutional mission statements to show how it odds some of these embedded practices really are with the ways in which institutions think about and talk about what they do with students. What sparked these ideas for you? Was there an aha moment when you realize that the grades were this huge untalked about issue in higher ed?

Jesse Stommel (09:16):
I would say what sparked that particular quote, it is whenever I give talks about grading, whenever I give talks about assessment, whenever I do workshops on ungrading, I invariably get at least one person saying, "My institution doesn't allow me to do this or I couldn't possibly do this at my institution because of X, Y, and Z." And I was always a bit confounded by that and I had to figure out a way to respond to that over many years of hearing that.

Jesse Stommel (09:46):
And the reason I was confounded by it is I've taught at probably a dozen institutions, maybe not quite a dozen, but part of the reason it's so many is because I was for a while for about nine years of my teaching career, I was a road warrior adjunct teaching up to nine classes at four different institutions. And so I had the experience of working at lots of different types of institutions with lots of different sets of practices and requirements.

Jesse Stommel (10:13):
And I had to find ways to navigate those because I actually, I mean, I guess to answer your question, I've never graded traditionally since I started teaching. And partly the aha moment was the first time I was in an ungraded class, which was one of my mentors, Martin Bickman, who is one of my professors at University of Colorado Boulder.

Jesse Stommel (10:33):
It was the first, and I think the only time in college that I was in an ungraded course. And the second that I worked within that environment, I realized, Oh, this is what I want to do, this is how I want to approach the work of teaching because something happened there for me.

Jesse Stommel (10:48):
And so the thing that happened more than anything else was the relationships that I developed with my fellow students and with my fellow graduate students, I was in one of his graduate courses and an undergraduate course.

Jesse Stommel (11:00):
And also the relationship that I developed with him as a faculty member, how I felt supported and how I felt my learning was supported and how I felt able to challenge the system that I was working within.
Jesse Stommel (11:13):
So to go back to those workshops and when people say, "Well, my institution wouldn't allow this." I had to come up with an answer and the answer was, "Well, why don't we actually look together at what the rules of your institution actually are?" And what I found with most of those interactions, we literally would Google the assessment requirements and we would read them.

Jesse Stommel (11:32):
And there was lots of rules about when grades had to be submitted, the bubble sheet that you had to fill out, or the Scantron or the computer system that you had to go, how you entered them, by what date you entered them. But very little and almost nothing in most cases about exactly how we did that work.

Jesse Stommel (11:50):
And so ultimately, realizing that grades are essentially working inside of a panoptic system where we've internalized the sense of control and the sense of normalizing of grades. Without there being nearly as many restrictions to experiment, as we often think there are.

Catherine Ross (12:09):
Wow, that is so fascinating. So it was your experience as a student that really set you on this path. Were all of the students in those classes equally happy about the ways in which this was approached or were there students who may be felt more uncertain or scared even by the move away from grading as the metric?

Jesse Stommel (12:36):
I would say both in my experiences as a student, in an ungraded class, and also in my experiences as a teacher. I mean now I've probably at some dish of tally, how many students I've worked with, but I can estimate it that it's several thousand after 21 years, so many different sections of courses. And I find that I experience something similar with most groups of students, is that there's a bunch of anxiety right at the start. And that anxiety gives away very quickly.

Jesse Stommel (13:05):
And where that anxiety often comes from is a worry that a rug is going to get pulled out from under them. They can't believe that it's actually as free as I make it sound. They can't believe that they aren't actually going to be subject to traditional grading at some point, it's just that it's being made hazy.

Jesse Stommel (13:26):
And so that's something I had to recognize. I had to recognize that being extremely transparent and having conversations with students was very important. And also making sure that in all of my descriptions of the work that we were doing, I was very careful not to use-

Jesse Stommel (13:41):
I became very careful not to use transactional language, because what's interesting is that even if you say you're taking grades off the table, so much of the language of education still has transactional registers that suggest or imply some sort of quantitative evaluation.

Jesse Stommel (13:58):
So in a word like assignment. I try and avoid the word assignment. I don't think a learning environment is a place where I assign stuff and students then deliver it to me into a receptacle. And then I return to them with feedback or grades. So in a sense, making sure that this transactional language is minimized or in some cases eliminated from our syllabus.

Catherine Ross (14:20):
That's also very interesting and another insight into the ways in which this kind of thinking has been systematized. In higher education nobody questions that it's a transactional kind of model. And I think that you've unpacked that is ... Well, I'm personally very grateful that you have unpacked those things.

Catherine Ross (14:48):
I just recently had a student me tell that the advice we were giving instructors on the use of student course surveys was really representing a student's evaluation of the transaction that happens when a faculty member delivers the knowledge and skills they're supposed to deliver. So it's a really embedded way of thinking for both students and instructors alike.

Jesse Stommel (15:16):
Well, and you see the evidence of that in the syllabus language, which I talked about, but you're absolutely right. You see it evidenced in the way that we're formulating questions on course evaluations. And I'll tell you there are certain questions on course evaluations.

Jesse Stommel (15:31):
I can take one look at the question, realize I'm not going to perform very well on that question, because the question is set up to imply a certain kind of pedagogy or a certain kind of relationship between student and teacher. One example is there's often some question about clarity, about the clarity of expectations.

Jesse Stommel (15:50):
And the truth is I'm not very clear about my expectations for students and that isn't because, there aren't expectations, it's that because they're not my expectations, they're student's expectations. And so actually I try and create an environment where the students set up expectations for themselves and their learning.

Jesse Stommel (16:09):
And it isn't me watching to make sure that they've met certain things that I would expect when a student asks me, "Hey, what do you expect from this assignment?" Sometimes I'll cheekily say, well, I expect absolute brilliance. But truthfully under that, what I expect is I expect them to do work and challenge themselves in a way that I couldn't anticipate or expect.

Jesse Stommel (16:30):
So in a sense, me relying too much on my expectations actually holds the students back from meeting the real goals that they might want to meet in a particular course.

Catherine Ross (16:42):
Yes. I think, if one agrees that learning comes out of laboring together, working together, the instructor and the students, there really isn't a way for an instructor or a need, I would argue, for an instructor to say, these are my goals.

Catherine Ross (17:04):
Because any goals would be mediated by who the students are when they come into that classroom and where they are with their own trajectory in education and what they need and want to get out of this course that they're taking with an instructor.

Catherine Ross (17:21):
So I obviously completely agree, and I can see in our future, we're definitely going to have a podcast on the evaluation of teaching in higher education, at some point. We won't go into that today, but so I want to just move us to something a little bit more, maybe helpful to our listeners in terms of their own thinking about small steps they could take in this arena.

Catherine Ross (17:53):
You offer several smallish approaches to moving towards less grading. So it's not really an all or nothing kind of paradigm that you've envisioned. So I was just wondering if you could share some of those ideas about small steps that people could take in this direction.

Jesse Stommel (18:14):
Well, I guess I would start with the smallest steps that people can take, because someone might feel that they're not ready to change anything about how they do the work of grading or assessment, but there is still something fundamental that they can change, which is to have open conversations with students about grading, about how they're doing it, their feelings about it, why they've set up the course, the way they have, and then asking students about what their reactions to it are.

Jesse Stommel (18:38):
Another thing that I think is really easy to add is self-reflection. I center self-reflection in my work where the students are actually grading themselves. They're writing process letters, they're writing writer's letters, they're doing self-reflection, self-evaluation. I do it differently each time I do it depending on the subject matter I'm teaching. But it's pretty easy to add self-reflection to any course.

Jesse Stommel (19:01):
So even a course, using traditional grading, asking students to reflect on their process or their growth or their learning throughout the course, and potentially even having students propose a grade for themselves. Even if the course isn't ungraded, even if ultimately the faculty member is going to make the decisions at the end, I'll tell you that it is a huge, huge help to have the students reflect on their learning and have the students talk about how they did in the process.

Jesse Stommel (19:30):
I cannot possibly be inside. Let's say I have 150 students in a semester. I might even have more, let's say about 150. It would be impossible for me to be inside of all of those students' heads to know how their learning works and how it happens. It would also, even without many students being impossible for me to even observe that many students in their learning or in the midst of their learning process.
Jesse Stommel (19:54):
And so having student voice in that becomes a tool that a teacher can use. Also, the thing that happens is that even if you're going to grade, even if the teacher is going to grade, the faculty member is going to grade, having some student perspective can really change the way you think about students. You might, for example, have a student who seemed to be very quiet in class, maybe spoke twice, and it's a discussion course and you think, well, that student wasn't very engaged or involved.

Jesse Stommel (20:22):
You might read their self-reflection and that student might say, "I have never spoken in a class before in my entire college career. I was amazed at my ability to speak in this class." And in your brain as the faculty member, you might be thinking, well, you only spoke twice, but to hear the student talk about how they got to that place helps you understand that engagement is not distributed equally between students.

Jesse Stommel (20:46):
And that you'll also start to find, some clear indicators and indications of the kind of bias that goes into what engagement is. We privilege certain kinds of engagement that generally very privileged students with privileged backgrounds are more capable of than other students who work in different ways and who are trained by our system to work in different ways.

Jesse Stommel (21:09):
And so you start over many years, reading many of these self-reflections and self-evaluations. I get to know who my students are. I get to hear a hum in the room that was just inaudible to me prior to hearing from those students. So I would say that those are some steps that people can take it probably will change the way that you grade, but it doesn't necessarily have to from the level of the syllabus.

Jesse Stommel (21:31):
And I would encourage folks to start there because one thing that I've seen is that, when we try and imagine we can snap our fingers and get rid of grades. So I'm just not going to grade anymore. Oftentimes what happens is, we subject students to invisible curriculum.

Jesse Stommel (21:46):
We start to subject them to unspoken expectations. And so really what we have to do is move much more slowly and much more intentionally so that we're making sure that we're not just eliminating grades, but we're actually eliminating these pedagogies that underlie them.

Catherine Ross (22:05):
I would strongly concur with your advice. I've certainly used those student reflections and also having students grade themselves throughout my teaching career and have found it to be extraordinarily powerful and moving, very moving sometimes.

Catherine Ross (22:25):
And I think some instructors are fearful that if they allow students to grade themselves, they'll all give themselves A's, but that has certainly not been my experience. In fact, sometimes the students are more
critical of their own work than I would have been in that situation. And it is a very powerful learning moment for the students when they recognize that they have a role to play in this process.

Jesse Stommel (22:55):
It's easy for us as teachers, especially because the work of teaching is so hard and there's a lot of emotional labor. And for many, there's a lot of invisible emotional labor that goes into the work of teaching. That it's really easy for us to see the negative. When we do have negative responses to certain pedagogical experiments, we see and focus on the negative, rather than paying attention to what's happening across our group of students.

Jesse Stommel (23:25):
So a couple things, I absolutely agree students in the main are more likely to grade themselves harder, or be harder on themselves, than I would be. And I will also say that that is not distributed equally. So students of color, female students are more likely to be harder on themselves. This is one of the reasons why the open conversation is so crucial, because you want to make sure that you don't reinforce biases that are there and essentially make the situation even worse.

Jesse Stommel (23:56):
And then the other thing that people often ask is well, "How do you even get your students to do anything without the motivation of grades?" And I would say, I get it. It is hard. There's a finesse that goes into it. Because one thing that happens is if you grade some things and don't grade the other things, students will do the things that are graded, but not do the ungraded things.

Jesse Stommel (24:19):
But if you don't grade anything, there isn't that same discrepancy. And so really be thinking carefully about how you're moving motivation throughout a term. One thing people often say is, well, what if I grade less assignments? Like, for example, what if I grade everything at the beginning, but then I don't grade anything at the end.

Jesse Stommel (24:37):
And to some degree that ends up being problematic because you're then training students for the first two thirds of a class, to respond and react to grades, but then you're taking those grades away. And so I would suggest just the reverse. How about teaching a course where nothing is graded for the first half of the term.

Jesse Stommel (24:53):
Where it's just a sandbox for student learning. And then in the second half you begin grading, because then you really create a free space for students to experiment. I'll say that my students historically have done a lot more work for me than they would if they had been graded but that's not true about every student.

Jesse Stommel (25:12):
Certain students do decide not to do the work. And I guess I feel that's their decision. That's their decision to make, as long as I'm not seeing a trend where no one's doing anything, but I will say that my favorite comment that I've ever gotten from a student in on all of my self evaluations or students'
evaluations of me and my teaching is, "I did more work for this class than any other course, it was an easy A."

Jesse Stommel (25:37):
And I love the juxtaposition of those two things. The idea that the course was an easy A, but the students did more work than they had ever done. Because I can see how that was exactly true, it was an easy A because they never worried that a rug was going to get pulled out from under them. They always knew they were going to be rewarded or were able to reward themselves for hard work, but they felt so intrinsically motivated that they challenged themselves and pushed themselves to work in ways they never had before.

Catherine Ross (26:06):
That really speaks to the kind of relationship you must develop with your students and the trust because many students, I think would have some sense of panic if they had no grades by midterm, because how do I know how I'm doing and what I have to do and what if I have this scholarship I have to keep and I don't know, and it's too late to drop.

Catherine Ross (26:29):
So I think it's really does show that you spend a lot of time and energy building that trust with them, that it's going to be okay, and that we're going to get through this together. And nobody's in a threatening place.

Jesse Stommel (26:46):
Yeah. I mean, I would say that the pandemic has forced me to think about the amount of work that I'm doing, that my students have been doing. And I have had to do a lot of reflection on what I'm capable of because, I'm overwhelmed at work. So many of us, if not all of us are feeling overwhelmed.

Jesse Stommel (27:05):
So I've had to think about where to best use my time and energy, emotional labor, and actual just labor. And one thing that I've found is that people are often worried, "Oh, what you're describing sounds like so much work." And I would say it is more of a certain kind of work. Building trust is hard and it's a particular kind of labor that is challenging. But I wouldn't say that it takes more hours.

Jesse Stommel (27:31):
In fact, if anything, I would say that it potentially, especially after working like this over many years takes less hours. And it's partly because building trust, I think humans are social creatures and learning is a social behavior. When we come to it as a space of education, we want to learn and we want to learn together.

Jesse Stommel (27:55):
So to some degree, we at our institutions spend a lot of time undermining trust that is there naturally. And so trust is hard to develop, but I think it's made harder and more difficult by bureaucratic systems that are institutions that get in the way and frustrate that work.

Catherine Ross (28:14):
Indeed. And the amount of time spent grading is significant. So substitute that with building trust and working towards a better way of thinking about learning, seems like a great deal to me.

Jesse Stommel (28:30):
Yeah, absolutely building human relationships. I mean, I don't think human relationships takes time, constructing a course, devising a course that uses a system like this takes time. I end up doing more work devising and designing courses. And then also building relationships during courses. By the time we get to grades, a lot of my colleagues are talking about the 30 hours they're going to have to spend grading the week before a week before Christmas.

Jesse Stommel (28:56):
And I'm sitting there thinking, "Ah, yeah, this stage is actually going to take me about an hour and a half or an hour and 45 minutes." Because the work has already been done. So to some degree, I don't necessarily know that it's more work, but it shifts the work around and it's different kinds of work. I mean, building trust human relationships, it's more emotional labor, but grading takes time.

Catherine Ross (29:18):
So what would you say is something you've learned from your students?

Jesse Stommel (29:22):
Going back to what I talked about earlier, when I talked about self-reflection, I've learned never to underestimate them. Always to just ... and it's not even that I overestimate them, people often say you've accused me of overestimating students, but that's not what it is either. Always to approach students with a sense of wonder, and a sense of awe. And to be inspired by what they bring to the work, whatever it is.

Jesse Stommel (29:49):
When a student tells me, I had one student once who, I had created a course 15 weeks, 10 weeks. I can't remember if it was quarter system or semester system. And it had a series of activities that they were doing one after another, all of a sudden, after week four, the students stopped doing the work for week five, the work for week six.

Jesse Stommel (30:10):
I get an email from the student probably week seven, I can't remember exactly when it was. And the student said "I'm still stuck on that thing we did week four. And not stuck like I can't get past it, but stuck like I can't get over it." So we were reading the book, House of Leaves by Danielewski. And it is the kind of book you get stuck in. It's one of these, everything, but the kitchen sink, giant tomes like Moby Dick.

Jesse Stommel (30:39):
When I've taught Moby Dick, the same thing happens. You could spend a lifetime reading it and finding new things in it, or a book like Jane Austen's Emma. If a student said to me, I stopped reading the rest of the books for this course, because I just wanted to read and reread and reread Jane Austen's Emma, am I going to say to them, you better put down Emma, come and catch up with us?

Jesse Stommel (31:00):
No, what I said to the student, as I said, stay lost. Find ways to connect that text to the stuff that we're doing as we move along. And the student did then circle back around and come back to join us in a sense. Although they were really with us all along, it's not like they stopped doing work.

Jesse Stommel (31:17):
They circled back around and were able to make connections between the texts that they had gotten lost in and all of the other stuff that we're doing. So recognizing that students, when you think they've gone away, they usually haven't. The best thing to do is just ask them.

Jesse Stommel (31:35):
And when you think that they're not showing up, oftentimes, it's because they have something else that they're showing up for. And whether that's House of Leaves, Jane Austen's Emma, or the kids that they're trying to take care of at home while getting a college education, that's part of the work.

Jesse Stommel (31:54):
That not showing up but having to show up for something else is part of the work of education and not a distraction, not a tangent. We didn't lose them. They're not in desperate need of retention. I think far too often, we talk about retention. And what we really mean is the students stopped doing what I was telling them to do. That isn't failure of retention. That's something else entirely. And I think making sure that we are recognizing that students have their own paths and that we let them have those paths and not get in their way.

Catherine Ross (32:26):
Well, that is a beautiful ending to our conversation today. Thank you so much, Jesse, for being here, I've really enjoyed this conversation.

Jesse Stommel (32:37):
Thank you so much. Happy to come back and chat more.

Catherine Ross (32:38):
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