HUM 103 self-assessment guidelines for December   Denham
(Block two hours for this task. Due at least one day before you meet with me; details below.)

Hi, Humesters.
We're about half way through the year. When we look back at your work so far, it seems like more than just a few months. Does it feel like ages? Or was it just the blink of an eye between that weekend on zoom in August and now?

The self-assessments you'll write in our course are one aspect of the practice of ungrading that we are involved in together, you as a student and I as instructor of record (the person who is responsible for grades). *Unlike the October self-assessment letters, you are writing these to all faculty members in the course.*

From our first version of this assignment in October, you know already some of the background on ungrading and practices of liberatory pedagogy. I'm including that again here.

Lots of folks view grading as (* booming authority voice *) *very serious business*, so let's take it seriously, at least for those folks, but we're in charge here, they're not. By reading my notes here now with some care, you'll be better able to enjoy the self-assessment process and you and I will feel great about it. And we can ignore that authority figure in the hallway who's wondering why we're having such a fabulous time thinking about and talking about assessment.

To have everything in one place, I'm including here the section from the syllabus on grading and assessment, which I wrote back in July after a lot of reading and thinking and learning from other teachers and scholars. And after years, *years*, of seeing grading practices harm students more than help them. (I gave a big speech to the faculty once about the harm grades cause our students. I'll tell you about that some time if you want.)

Here is the section in our syllabus. Note especially the words I *emphasize* here.

grading and assessment

We practice what is sometimes known as ungrading or liberatory assessment in this course. Students assign their own grades. Students in the course receive lots of feedback and criticism on writing and on their portfolios and also carry out self-assessments as a practice of ungrading. Grades in the course come only at the end of the year, in May, and are assigned by the student, though informed by conversations in person and on the page with the course director, Prof. Denham. Students assign themselves 3 letter grades (all the same grade), one each for the three requirements satisfied by the course: (1) the writing requirement and the ways of knowing requirements in both (2) literature, creative writing, and rhetoric and (3) in historical thought. Students also provide a practice self-assessment letter about their work so far in the course in October, December, and February or March, and discuss those notes with Prof. Denham. This holistic system of complete student autonomy, constant interaction, conversation, and feedback, peer review, discussion of each other's work and ideas, targeted writing assignments that are revised for the portfolio, and periodic self-assessment focuses attention and care on the *processes* of reading, discussing, and writing *for each other about ideas that matter*, and helps us to get away from performative, achievement-oriented writing detached from an audience or an ongoing discourse. Your success in the course depends on your own *demonstrable commitment* to the project of learning together about the ideas, texts, artifacts, and problems presented in the course and on your *clear improvement* as a writer, discourse partner, creative practitioner, and contributing member of our collaborative learning community. Students assign their own year-end course grades based on these values. As course director, Prof. Denham

reserves the right to raise any of your grades, but not to lower them. There is no hidden agenda. You have the power here.

If there is a motto for ungrading, it comes from one of Jesse Stommel's students, who said his course was "an easy A," but "one of the hardest he'd ever taken."

On practices of ungrading and liberatory pedagogy, see, for example, Jesse Stommel, "How To Ungrade" (11 March 2018), and "Ungrading, and FAQ" (6 Feb 2020) and his ungrading genealogy "What if we Didn't Grade? A Bibliography" (03 March 2020), ; sj Miller, "Liberating Grades/Liberatory Assessment," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, Vol 1 (2) (Summer 2008), 160-171; Vicki Reitenauer, "A Practice Of Freedom": Self-Grading For Liberatory Learning," *RADICAL TEACHER* 107 (Winter 2017): 60-63.

Like Stommel, some of my own first encounters with what I now see as liberatory practices come from Peter Elbow, whose work I read in a course on teaching college writing at the Harvard Danforth Center for Teaching and Learning in 1987. Some other teachers and scholars who have influenced my thinking on liberatory, critical pedagogy are Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Henry Giroux, Antonia Darder, and Kevin Gannon.
My commitment to portfolios as the best way for you to show what you've learned and made and thought is also rooted in the work of these teachers and scholars.
I reserve the right to raise but not to lower your grades because some research indicates that students' ideas about rigor or achievement or learning are influenced by socialized practices of exclusion or marginalization, and thus some students who in some ways may occupy marginalized positions tend to be harder on themselves than do other students in non-marginalized positions, and thus to give themselves lower grades than they should.

As I reviewed the syllabus note above, as I prepared to send you this note, I spent some time with an essay by Alfie Kohn, a popular writer on education and a fierce critic of many commonly-held educational practices. In "The Case Against Grades" he summarizes evidence about the effects of grades on learning. Use this evidence to explain our course's grading practices to your own in-house sceptics: parents, family members, siblings, other teachers, your high school principal, whoever needs to know. Kohn says:

• *Grades tend to diminish students' interest in whatever they're learning.* A "grading orientation" and a "learning orientation" have been shown to be inversely related and, as far as I can tell, every study that has ever investigated the impact on intrinsic motivation of receiving grades (or instructions that emphasize the importance of getting good grades) has found a negative effect.

• *Grades create a preference for the easiest possible task.* Impress upon students that what they're doing will count toward their grade, and their response will likely be to avoid taking any unnecessary intellectual risks. They'll choose a shorter book, or a project on a familiar topic, in order to minimize the chance of doing poorly — not because they're "unmotivated" but because they're rational. They're responding to adults who, by telling them the goal is to get a good mark, have sent the message that success matters more than learning.

• *Grades tend to reduce the quality of students' thinking.* They may skim books for what they'll "need to know." They're less likely to wonder, say, "How can we be sure that's true?" than to ask "Is this going to be on the test?" In one experiment, students told they'd be graded on how well they learned a social studies lesson had more trouble understanding the main point of the text than did students who were told that no grades would be involved. Even on a measure of rote recall, the graded group

remembered fewer facts a week later (Grolnick and Ryan, 1987).

Alfie Kohn, "The Case Against Grades" *Educational Leadership* 69.3 (2011): 28-33. Cited from the expanded version on his site here https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/case-grades/.

Put another way, what about our purpose at Davidson? "The primary purpose of Davidson College is to assist students in developing humane instincts and disciplined and creative minds for lives of leadership and service." Those humane instincts do not thrive when structures to measure learning pit you against one another, rank you competitively, reinforce bias, or reduce you and your learning to a number or letter. Nor can you nurture your mind to be disciplined and creative when we prioritize assessment practices that discourage intrinsic motivation or if we fail to trust your own knowledge of your own learning. Finally, leading and serving go hand in hand; how can you be a leader or servant when you're encumbered and distracted by some external rubric or measure that is likely incidental or even counter to your goals? (I use Stommel here for more on this point about the conflict between institutional mission and grading effects.)

So that's some background. Now what?

This assignment is a self-assessment. It's about *your* learning. Most of this assignment is actually taking care to read and puzzle over this text, the one you're reading now: my description of the process and the rationale for it.
Now that you've written your October letter and met with me, consider again what you've learned.

Write a longer note to *all your teachers* now in which you touch on a few of these questions or similar ones you might ask yourself about your own learning now halfway through our course. Note that I am being very general about *what* you might bring as examples ("aspects," "things," "excerpt," "interaction"), but very *specific* about the requirement that you talk about *your own learning*.

Devote one paragraph to each of the following points:
- What aspects of the course have been most helpful for your learning so far? How and why?
- Describe one or a few particular things that have been difficult and challenging for your learning so far.
- Quote a new excerpt from your work from a slack post or an annotation that you are proud of, that you feel shows you learning something new. Describe briefly why you chose this passage.
- Describe an interaction from a discussion (one-on-one, AT, section, outside of the course,…) in which you helped a fellow Humester learn.

Craft this as a letter to all of us. ("Dear Humanities Professors, I …"). Plan to do this in one sitting; aim for flow as you write this. 400-800 words. Put this in a word or pdf file (LastnameFirstnameLearningDecember.pdf or .docx) and attach it to a slack DM to me. Please attach a document directly, not a link to a one-drive or google doc file. Those DM threads are confidential; I will share your attached letters only with faculty in our course. I imagine it should take you about 15 minutes to read these guidelines carefully, about 15 minutes to make a list of "aspects," "things," an "excerpt," an "interaction" that can show me something about your learning, and about an hour or so to write your letter. Don't overthink it. Embrace the moment. Don't give yourself a grade. We just want to hear about your learning.

Finally, book an appointment with me in office hours for some time between 30 November and 8 December (use this link office hours meeting) and include in your DM to me when your meeting day and time is, so I know you've done that. Send your letter at least one day before our meeting.

Those meetings show up automatically on my calendar; we meet in my zoom room (not in the Carolina Inn; I hope we can meet there next semester).

So, to summarize:

(1) You've read this. Yay!
(2) Make your list.
(3) Book a meeting time, knowing that you will post your letter at least a day before your meeting. I can't meet with 75 of you on December 8, so please try to book spots through the week or so before 8 December.
(4) Write your letter to us. Save it with the filename protocol above.
(5) Start a DM to me in slack. Say hi, tell me your meeting time, attach (use the little paperclip icon) your letter. Click send.
(6) We meet!
(7) Done!

Thank you.

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