Ungrading

a chapbook.

COMPILED BY MARTHA FAY BURTIS
ILLUSTRATED BY ASHLEY HICHBORN

Intro:

In recent years, many brilliant educators have written about and presented upon the idea of "ungrading" or alternative assessment methods for teaching. These folks have led the way through a vital conversation about how we understand learning and how, if we're not careful, we can codify and institutionalize assessment practices that are harmful to students and learning communities. Thanks to the work of these experts, a quick online search will yield a myriad of resources, tools, and readings about these practices. We encourage anyone who wants to rethink grading to engage with the work of these educators; as a starting point at the end of this book you will find a link to our own collection of readings and resources.

However, this small collection attempts to do something different. Rather than collecting or pointing to the expertise that is available, we wanted to showcase the stories and voices of learners and teachers experiencing and experimenting with ungrading. In fall of 2019, we put out a call on Twitter, inviting followers to share their experiences in short form. We've compiled many of those contributions here, attempting to create space for the different perspectives and experiences that so many generously shared. Each piece is accompanied by the name and Twitter handle of the contributor so that readers may, if they like, reach out and grow their own network of creative, passionate, and generous educators.

The Open Learning & Teaching Collaborative at Plymouth State University is a dynamic hub for teaching & learning praxis and community-driven academic professional development. We are deeply committed to nurturing learning environments that are responsive to student need, that grow from a thoughtful consideration of both disciplinary context and the future of knowledge, and that amplify the impact of the academy on the public good.
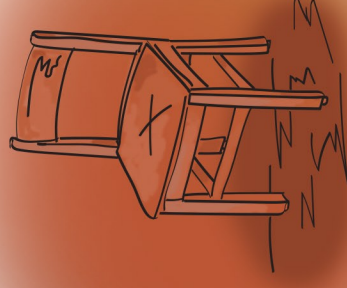
The CoLab: colab.plymouthcreate.net/

Ungrading Resource Page: bit.ly/colab-ungrading
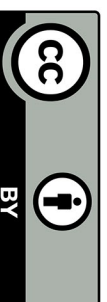
A super smart kid I know with a terrible English teacher (all tests, quizzes, and worksheets), is getting an F in class. He's not engaged, and is bad at memorization. Now he is so down and thinks he's "stupid". I told him, "Your teacher failed you."

- Overthrowing Education Podcast (@OverthrowingEd)

Imagine an introductory woodworking class that covers basic techniques. Students each make a chair for their final projects. Student B has never taken a woodworking class before, but they worked hard to learn the techniques demonstrated in class. Ultimately, Student B makes a simple but sturdy chair – very similar to the professor's sample chair.

Student A went to woodworking camp in high school and already knew all the techniques the professor demonstrated in class. Ultimately, Student A makes a chair carved with beautiful inlaid designs, which weren't covered in the class.

Which student deserves an A in the class?

Jess Calarco (@JessicaCalarco)

I've always felt uncomfortable with traditional approaches to grading. I can understand why some approaches to grading make sense for other disciplines, other courses, other teaching philosophies, but they often don't resonate with me. For the most part, I feel that with low stakes assignments, students either don't do them, or do them badly, or do them well

Maha Bali (@Bali_Maha)

I've been teaching large classes for so long I think I reached some kind of lifetime capacity for grading. I stopped feeling like I really knew the difference between an A– and a B+. It was feeling more and more random.
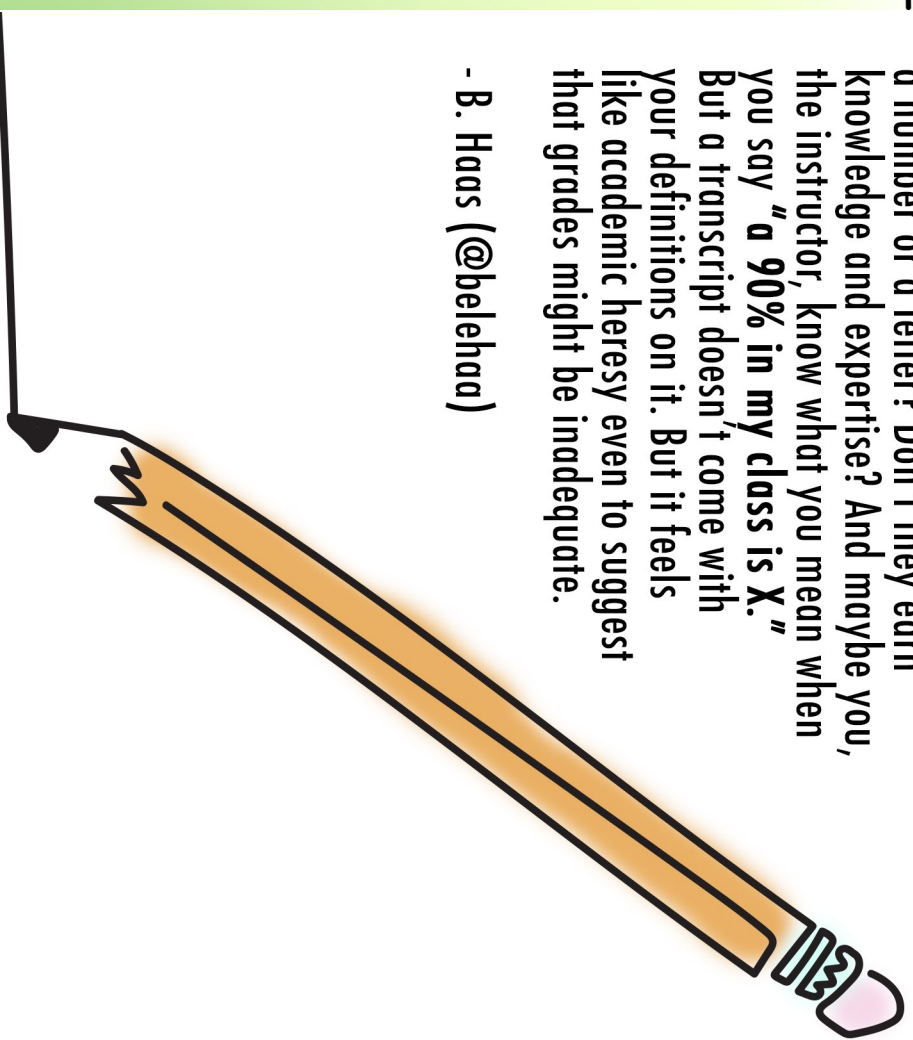
Jennifer Doyle (@FromaLeftWing)

I don't believe grades actually work for gatekeeping, making sure students don't advance until they're ready. Grades reinforce bias more than they illustrate learning.

Jesse Stommel (@Jessifer)

A+ 100
A 95
A– 90
B+ 88
B 85
B– 80
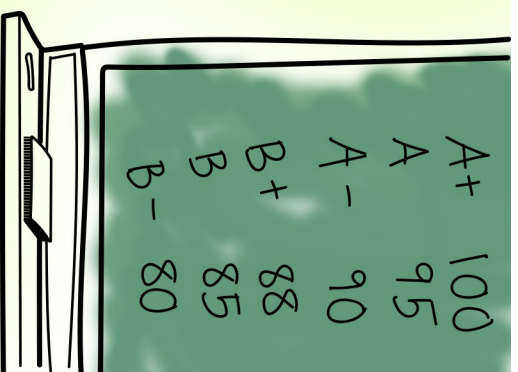
I experimented with #ungrading this semester and I'm persuaded more than ever that grades are a one-dimensional descriptor (and a poor one at that) for what goes on in a class. Distilling my ungraded students' learning, growth, and mastery into a letter feels wrong. We may say **"I'm not giving you a grade, you're earning it,"** but do students really earn a number or a letter? Don't they earn knowledge and expertise? And maybe you, the instructor, know what you mean when you say **"a 90% in my class is X."** But a transcript doesn't come with your definitions on it. But it feels like academic heresy even to suggest that grades might be inadequate.

- B. Haas (@belehaa)

I'm a non-traditional student whose BA is in Art but is now doing STEM. Grades have largely been a counter-productive assessment for me. I do not learn well in this old-fashioned pedagogy & assessment method.

Megan Lynch (@may_gun)

I'm finishing up a 143-person lecture. Students could choose assignments. Due dates were paced so that we were never crushed by having work from the WHOLE class. This made a huge difference; it made work feel manageable. Honestly, now I think this is really how lectures should be done. When you are grading so much work, you lose so much time to adjudicating the difference between B, B+, A- and A. All that energy, freed up, goes into giving advice. Teaching.
- Jennifer Doyle (@FromaLeftWing)

I'm often told "ungrading can't work in classes of 50, 100, 400," but I actually think it works better. In larger classes, I can't possibly see inside the brain/process of each student, so self-reflection is what helps me "see" student learning and know when support is needed.
-Jesse Stommel (@jessifer)

Grading limits my creative process.
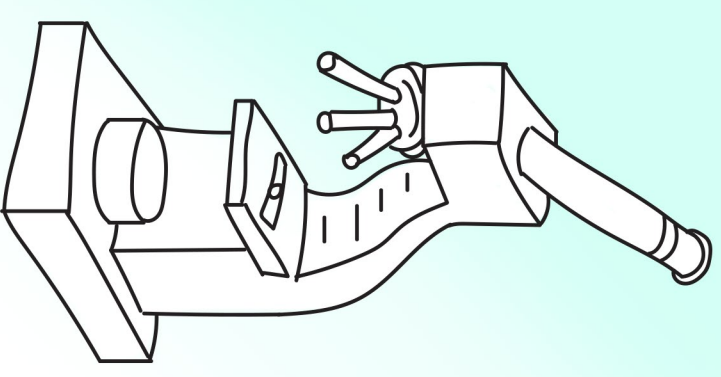
Stef Chae (@bystefaniechae)

One point I've taken from #ungrading in STEM is to emphasize process instead of product. It's notoriously hard to grade design, critical thinking, problem solving, but we know they're critical to STEM learning. We can focus on guiding students in doing them.
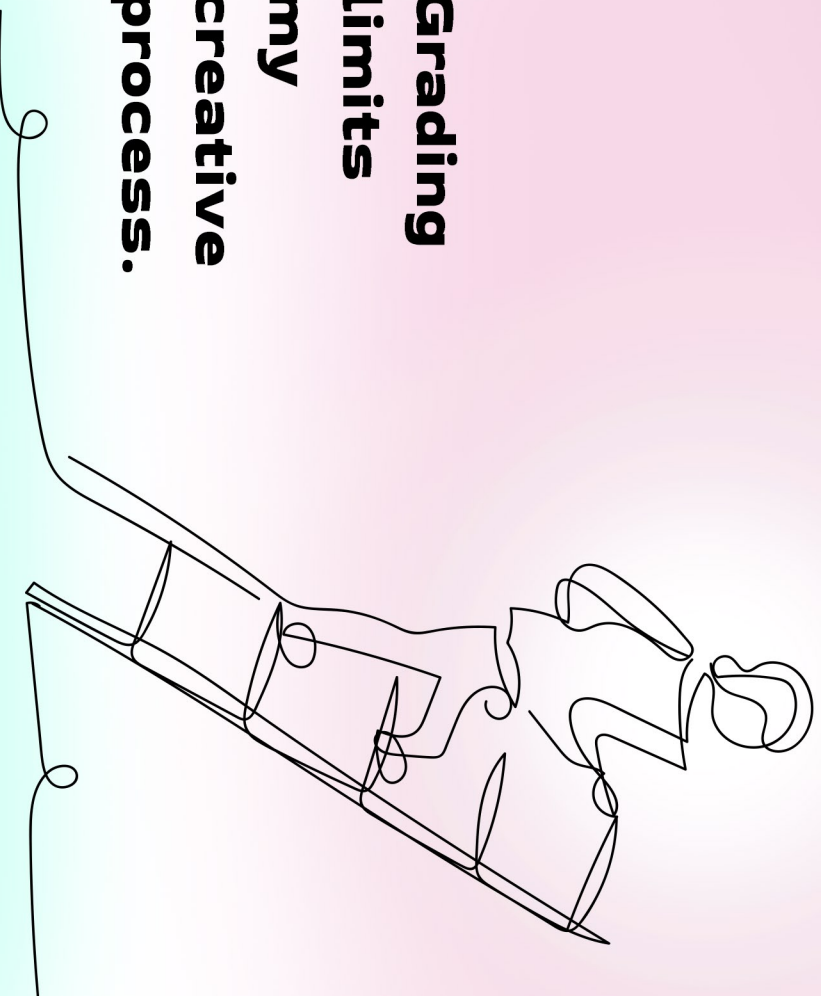
-Sofia Lemons (@SofiaLemons)

I did some collaborative exam things in one of my biology major courses this semester. I wasn't sure what to expect but these were full of very lively discussions that I participated in by guiding groups when off topic.

-JC (@theAandP_Prof)

Getting a good grade feels like relief. sometimes joy. Getting a bad grade feels horrible. There's anxiety no matter what. I personally value the teacher's feedback more than the grade but I can't shake the belief that "bad" grades = stupid/failure.

-Jack Frost (@whynytulaughing)

Although a fair number of students did focus on the work and iterations, a higher number of them simply used the iterations, feedback and reflexive evaluation as a way to limit their efforts ("right, so I've pretty much already achieved a 60").
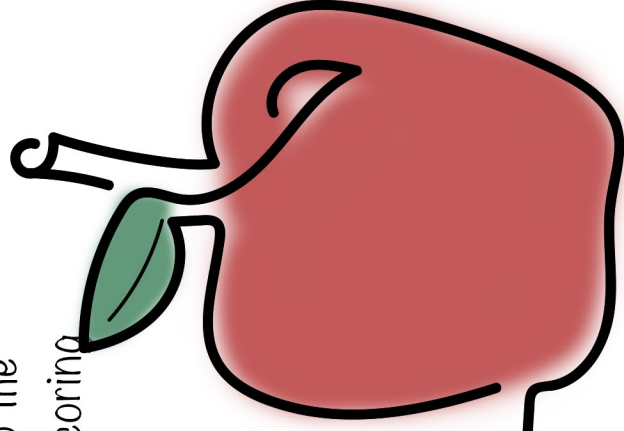
- Dr Emeline Brulé @e_min_e

Using the professor's sense of the student's progress could backfire if the professor has bias.
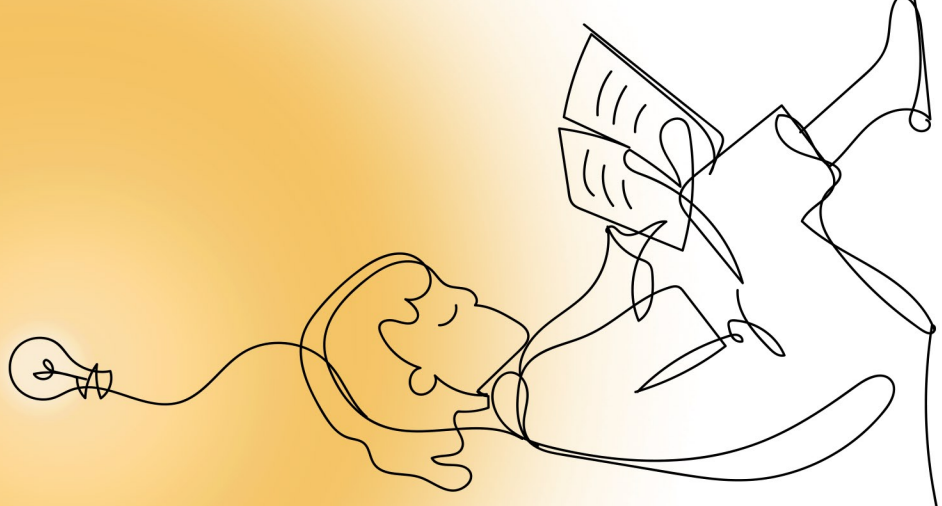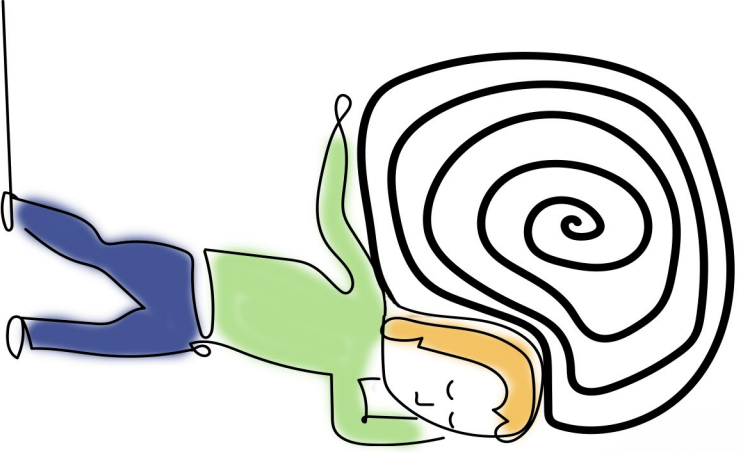
- Megan Lynch @may_gun

That is an extremely important and valid point Megan! Speaks to the importance of transparent scoring criteria I think....

- Jess O'Reilly
@Cambrian_Jess

Grades always gave me such intense anxiety. If it was a class I struggled with, I'd feel like a failure. I'd feel stupid. If it was a class I was good at, and I got a little lower than expected, my confidence went down significantly.

-Bethany G. Thomas (@bethanyggthomas)

My institution is not one where ungrading--or other alternative approaches to grading--is common. In fact, many, many people at my institution associate lower grades with rigor, believe that grades are both essential and beneficial, and often see grades as inherently meaningful. Many people assumed that students would all give themselves As (they didn't). Some people assumed that either I would assure students ahead of time that they would all get As (I didn't), or that if I didn't guarantee As, students would be unhappy or frustrated about not knowing where they stood. In conferences, the nearly unanimous answer to the question, **"How did it feel to get feedback on your writing without getting a score or a grade?"** was some variation of, **"Great."** Evaluations also bore out what students said about ungrading in conferences. Even the students who were not 100% fans recognized the benefits: **"The grading system was both good and bad at the same time but it made writing these papers less as an assignment and more of something I wanted to do."**

-Sydney Bufkin (@writeandrevise)

In a new university I started at this year I argued for no grading -- assessment should only be pass/fail. It was fantastic. My students and I loved it.

- Meera Atkinson (@meeraatkinson)

My partner was threatened with non contract renewal if she didn't grade and grade on a strict bell curve.

-Jon Henner (@jmhenner)

As someone who started back at school this fall I'm amazed I still feel the same anxiety about grades. If I know the number/letter attached to an assignment before I see feedback it completely colors my view of the feedback.

-Shannon (@shauser)

What we know from the literature is this - written feedback & grades don't play well together when implemented at the same time (Students only pay attention to the grades) and grades are, at best, a fuzzy way of giving feedback.

So #ungrading divorces the two and focuses on the feedback I see #ungrading as changing the nature of assignments coupled with a conversation about their performance with the student (and from that conversation we determine grades).

Rissa Sorensen-Unruh (@RissaChem)

10.
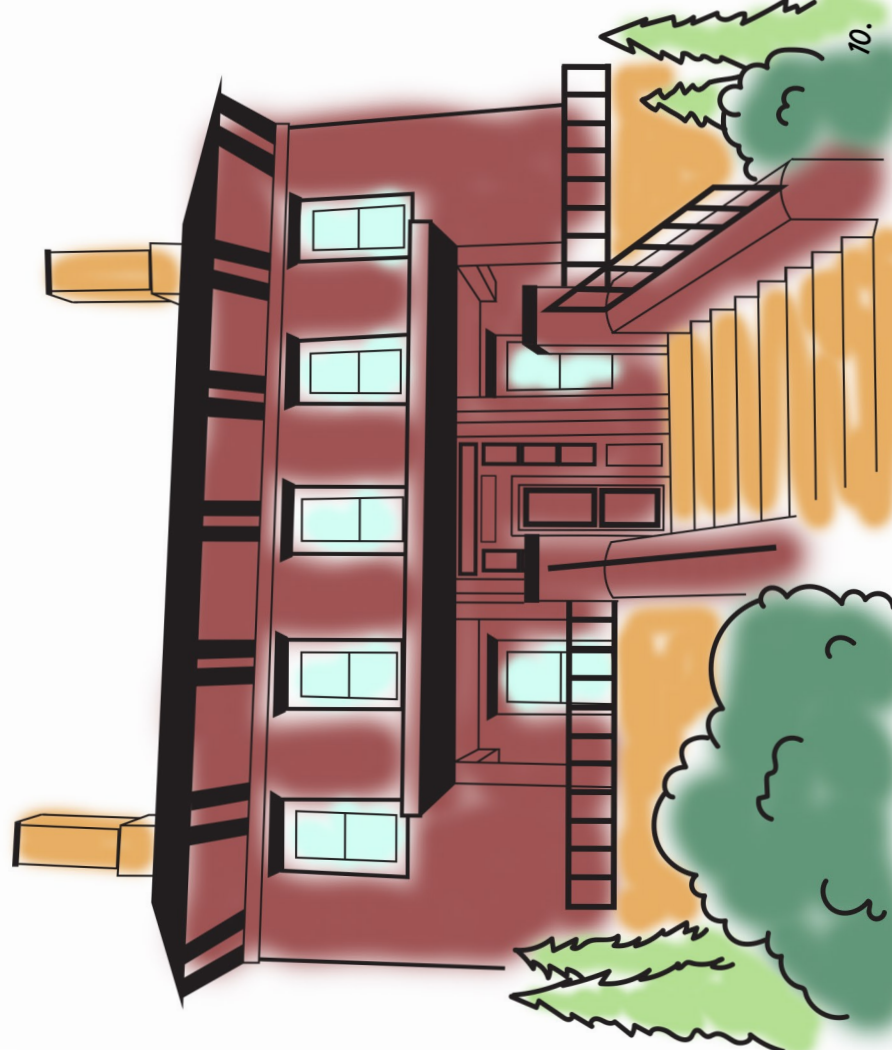
If we want students to listen to feedback and use it we need to realize that the grade is noise that prevents hearing it clearly, accepting it fully, using it later.
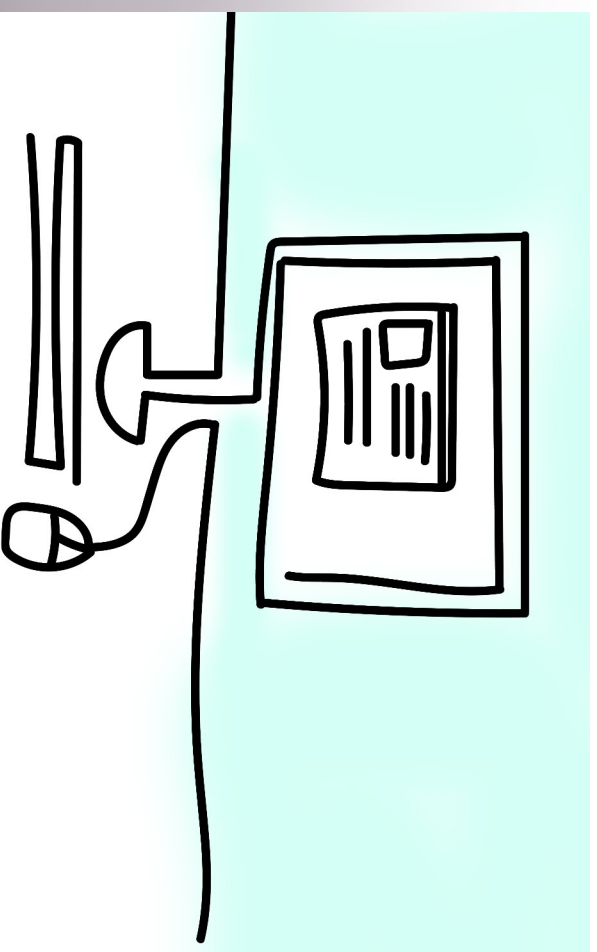
-Lisa Gurthie (@LisGurthie)

Ungrading is shift away from assessment to FEEDBACK, something that's part of a process as students are moving forward, not something at the end of a process.

-Laura Gibbs (@OnlineCrsLady)
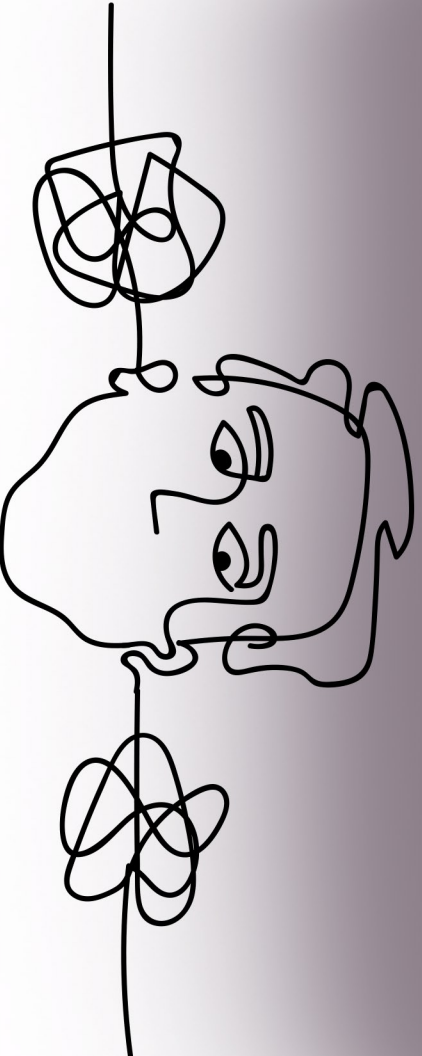
I like the all feedback no grades approach, but
1) I feel like I would get overwhelmed when 60 submissions come in at once, and 2) I don't have a good means to deliver feedback…
-Laura M. Tilghman (@LauraMTilghman)

"For full credit, each entry/exit slip should be completed thoughtfully. Please note: You will be self-evaluating your own entry/exit tickets for determining the score on this assignment. Instructor will also provide input to your self-evaluation."
-Saria Shukla (@SaritayShukla)