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(U N) G R A D I N G   P H I L O S O P H Y

This course is a grade-free learning environment. Together, we will establish benchmarks reflective of the amount of labor required for varying degrees of learning in this class. At the end of the semester, you will reflect on your progress and communicate the grade you believe is appropriate for transcript purposes. Your grade should be a reflection of your labor in comparison to the community benchmarks, peer feedback, as well as your individual circumstances, goals, and personal growth.

Please note that assignments still have expectations and deadlines. I and your ensemble expect you to "show up" by coming to class every day and regularly completing all assignments. However, I know that we are all juggling various priorities and making strategic decisions. Rather than enforcing compliance, my role is to help you navigate your chosen workload and provide constructive feedback. Your success in this course ultimately rests in your hands, and I am here to mentor and support you along the way.

(UN)GRADING PHILOSOPHY - FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS*

Q: WHAT IS A GRADELESS LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?
A: A gradeless learning environment focuses on fostering curiosity, discovery, and personal growth, moving away from traditional hierarchical academic power structures that emphasize dominance and compliance. It is one way of decolonizing our shared educational space. As the teacher-person in this context, my role is to provide you feedback on your work, not to punish or reward you by taking away or giving you proverbial cookies. I want to help you craft your creative process by asking you questions, offering constructive comments, and giving you opportunities to fail without fear of repercussions.

Q: WHY DO THIS?
A: Removing grades from the theatre studio is a step I have wanted to take for years. Assigning grades to artmaking feels akin to assigning grades to someone learning to walk. To grow, artists need to take risks, make messes, re-evaluate, and start over again incorporating what they've just discovered. Having fun "failing" productively is the fastest way to get good at something. Think of trying to master a video game or watching a toddler take their first steps. You aren't anxious about looking "stupid" when you fall into the fiery pit of doom in Mario Brother's Call of Minecraft, you simply make a mental note not to do that again and you start over. This is what a toddler does. They take a first wobbly step, fall, and get back up. They aren't afraid of falling or "failing", and we don't mark them down, even if they fall over and over again. As humans, we have an embodied understanding that this is part of the process of becoming independent. I don't want you to be afraid to fall or "fail" as you take steps to establish your agency as an artist. And even if you are afraid, I want you to find the courage to try anyway, assured that if you make a mess, you're only job is to figure out how to not do it again (even if that means doing it multiple times). I don't want you to beat yourself up because you didn't get something right the first time. I want you to revel in the resilience and determination that come from wanting to get good at something hard because that's what you've decided to do, not because you are worried that if you don't it will

look bad on your transcripts. I can assure you that no one ever was denied a job as a theatre maker based on their grades. So... here is a quick summary of some of the research and reasoning behind this decision:

1. Grades tend to divert your attention away from your own experience and the actual feedback you are receiving from witnesses to your work. Detailed feedback can help you improve your performance, but when it is accompanied by a grade, the grade tends to overshadow the feedback. Think of how many times you've gotten a test or paper back and looked at the grade first. How did that grade impact how you viewed the comments you received? Did you even bother to look at the comments? It is challenging to prioritize growth when we are primarily concerned with grades.

2. Grades are probably discouraging you from taking risks, experimenting, and embracing constructive failure. But as I've noted above, these are essential for new learning and creative growth. By removing grades, we are building an environment that fosters your exploration and resilience.

3. Grading can create a transactional mindset where the game becomes not, "How can I get better at this?", but "How can I get the best grade for doing the least amount of work?", or even worse, "How can I cheat and not get caught?" Learning, however, is not a commodity. It requires a genuine investment of labor. By eliminating grades, we strive to emphasize the intrinsic value of learning and growth while removing the need to prove ourselves to some outside arbitrator.

4. Grades reinforce hierarchies and often disadvantage those of us whose lived experiences and cultural backgrounds differ from the traditional middle-class and white standards prevalent in our current educational system. By removing grades, we aim to create a more equitable learning environment that values relationships and collaboration.

Q: DON'T YOU HAVE TO GRADE US?

A: Yes and no. At the end of the semester, the college requires that I input a final grade for your transcript, but I don't have to be the one who assigns that grade. I just have to be the one to enter it. I believe it is my job to assess your work and provide you with constructive feedback. It is also my job to mentor your ability to assess your own growth. However, feedback and mentoring are not synonymous with grading. By removing grades from the equation, I can assess your work more openly and honestly, while you learn to manage and assess your own growth.

Q: HOW DOES UNGRADING WORK?

A: Since we have to honor the fact that the college will want a final grade for your transcript, at the beginning of the block, I will ask you to review the course learning outcomes and compare them to your own goals. This will help you set intentions for your growth throughout the block. We will also collectively establish grading benchmarks as a community. These benchmarks will include expectations for each letter grade and accountability standards for collaborative work. Toward the end of the block, you will reflect on your progress and compare it to the community grading benchmarks. Based on this reflection, along with the feedback from your peers and your own unique circumstances, you will set your own final grade in an end-of-term conference or video. If your chosen grade differs from the community benchmark, I will request a basic rationale but will ultimately honor your choice.

Q: WHAT ABOUT CHEATERS?

A: In short? It's their loss. If someone chooses a passing grade without putting in the necessary effort, they are the ones who will miss out on valuable learning and growth opportunities. It is my responsibility to provide those opportunities and encourage student engagement, but it's not my job to make students take advantage of them. Graded or ungraded, if someone has their mind set on cheating, well...cheaters gonna cheat. That's their problem, not yours.

Q: BUT ISN'T THAT UNFAIR TO ME, IF I DO ALL THE WORK?
A: Not really. In the long run, your grade in this class holds little to no significance in the professional world. Casting/hiring decisions and real-world applications focus more on your acquired skills and knowledge rather than your GPA. This course presents opportunities to learn, and you are free to seize them. While I will do my best to make the material interesting, relevant, and accessible, it is not my role to force growth or interest on unreceptive or unready students. Someone in this class will likely do less work than you, just as someone will likely do more. But that's not your concern. Turn your attention to setting and accomplishing your own goals. Engage proactively with your peers. And practice being a supportive and reliable colleague.

Q: DOES THIS MEAN THERE ARE NO DEADLINES OR EXPECTATIONS?
A: Nope. I still expect you to "show up". This means coming to class on time, supporting your classmates by being a reliable and compassionate colleague, following assignment instructions, submitting your work on time, and asking for clarification when needed.

Q: I FEEL LIKE MAYBE YOU DON'T CARE ABOUT MY WORK.
A: Not true. On the contrary, I am deeply invested in your work, your process, your well-being, your resilience, and who you are as a person and as an artist. I want the best for you. It is because I respect you and choose to believe in your respect for yourself as a human and an artist that I am doing this.

Q: I WORRY THAT I WON'T PRIORITIZE THIS CLASS IF THERE ARE NO GRADES..
A: I hear you and I encourage you to explore those feelings. Take some time to reflect on what this means for you as a creative individual. What habits of heart and mind do you need to start practicing now to support yourself as an artist? If you want assistance in organizing and balancing your commitments effectively, please don't hesitate to ask me for help. I'm happy to help you think through this.

Q: HOW CAN I TRUST MYSELF TO ASSIGN THE RIGHT GRADE?
 A: If you are uncomfortable giving yourself a grade, it might be because grades hold little intrinsic value and you are starting to see the little green man behind the curtain (*The Wizard of Oz*, for those who didn't get the reference.) However, being empowered in your own learning does have value, great value, in fact. I invite you to lean into this process. Evaluating yourself can give you a greater respect for your work, for the work of others, and for the community that is supporting you. Self-assessment provides another avenue for personal development. However, if the process becomes distressing rather than merely uncomfortable, please let me know. If this is getting in the way of your learning, I will work with you to assign a grade based on our community benchmarks and my limited knowledge of your circumstances.

Q: WHAT IF I DON'T FEEL LIKE I'M LEARNING ANYTHING?

A: I intend to create an intentional space filled with lots of engaging and relevant experiences that afford opportunities for discovery and growth. However, if you believe an assignment doesn't contribute to your learning, please don't hesitate to discuss it with me. I am not interested in busy work. If that is what you feel is happening, perhaps we can revise the instructions to align with your learning strengths or collaboratively devise an alternative assignment. Just as I'm giving you feedback to help you grow as an artist, your feedback helps me grow as a teacher. , An alternative learning activity that you suggest may help me make discoveries or benefit other students in the future.

PROVISIONAL COMMUNITY BENCHMARKS
(Adapted from Ashleigh Reade, Boston University)

These are intended as starting points for a discussion on our community benchmarks. Begin by considering how much labor might be needed to accomplish each level. Reflect on what other elements should be included to help you define the meaning of these traditional grades.

Benchmark "A": Proficient Fluency ("Excellent")

You have completed all major assignments and actively engaged with all reflective work. Your preparation for and engagement in class activities and discussions has been exemplary, consistently supporting the ensemble learning environment as an outstanding partner and colleague. Outside of class, you have dedicated substantial labor to fully understanding and embodying the course content, resulting in a high level of confidence in all the learning outcomes, including your own goals. Even when you couldn't attend class, you diligently reviewed the recordings, reflected on the content, and prepared accordingly. Your understanding and embodiment of the material are strong enough that you can independently incorporate these processes into your work as an artist and could effectively assist others in learning and practicing it.

Benchmark "B": Solid Comprehension ("Good")
You have completed all major assignments and actively engaged with most of the reflective work. Your preparation for and participation in class activities and discussions has been consistently active, contributing positively to the ensemble learning environment as a reliable partner and colleague. Outside of class, you have dedicated considerable labor to grasping the course content, resulting in a solid level of confidence in all the learning outcomes. You have no more than two un-reviewed absences. While you comprehend and embody the material well, you may not feel completely confident in independently incorporating these processes into your work as an artist or in teaching it to others.

Benchmark "C": Working Knowledge ("Fair")
You completed all major assignments and engaged with significantly more than half of the reflective work. You prepared for most classes and participated somewhat in class activities and discussions. You may not have contributed to the ensemble learning environment, but you did not undermine it through absence, inattention, or lack of preparation. You devoted some labor outside of class to mastering the content and feel somewhat confident with most (or confident with only some) of the course learning outcomes. You have no more than four un-reviewed absences. You understand and can embody at least 70% of the material. You are likely not confident in independently using these processes in your work as an artist or in teaching it to someone else.

Benchmark "D": The Struggle is Real ("Poor")
You may have missed one major assignment or neglected a significant portion of the reflective work. Your preparation for and engagement in class activities and discussions has been minimal, but you have not disrupted the ensemble learning environment. Outside of class, you have invested little labor in mastering the content. You may have more than four un-reviewed absences.

Benchmark "E": This Just Wasn't the Semester ("Fail")
You may have missed multiple major assignments and/or neglected most of the reflective work. Perhaps you undermined the ensemble through absence, lack of preparation, or inattention. You have invested little to no labor in mastering the content and therefore would need to retake the course to learn the material and/or succeed in more advanced work.

For more on why grades don't work:
[The Happiness Lab Episode 10: Making the Grade](#)
[The Super Mario Effect - Tricking Your Brain into Learning More | Mark Rober | TEDxPenn](#)
[Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead) edited by Susan D. Blum](#)

This document reflects an evolving and reflexive practice that invites your input to improve. The ideas included here come from the work of Ashleigh Reade, Jeremy Sortore, Starr Sackstein, Jesse Stommel, Asao B. Inoue, and many other educators.