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Visual Reflection: New Tools for Pedagogy and Practice

Tempestt R. Adams

In this essay I present a visual journal to reflect on my experiences as a new ungrader. In line with the theme of this journal, my visual essay provides reminders and possibilities for us to consider to help spark more joy in our work. The guiding question of the essay is how can new practices such as ungrading and visual journaling enhance our joy and support students? The essay begins with a brief overview of three elements that anchor the essay: ungrading, arts-based methods, and visual journaling. Then, the visual journaling process, product, and an analysis is presented. The essay ends by revisiting the guiding question and presenting possibilities for educators to consider when engaging with arts-based practices.

Keywords: arts-based practices, visual journaling, ungrading

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Visual Reflection: New Tools for Pedagogy and Practice

As an educator, it has long been my goal to continuously examine my practices to ask how I can best support students. One of the newest and most substantial changes I have made to my teaching practices began in January 2022 when I started to tackle ungrading. Similarly, in my personal practice and creative research efforts, I have for the past few years engaged in visual journaling. Here in this essay, I marry the two: I use my visual journaling processes to reflect on my new pedagogical practice. In line with the theme of this journal, my visual essay provides reminders and possibilities for us to consider to help spark more joy in our work. Central to the essay is the question: how can new practices such as ungrading and visual journaling enhance our joy and support students? First, I provide a brief overview of three elements that anchor the essay: ungrading, arts-based methods, and visual journaling. Then, I present my process, product, and an analysis. I end with an answer to the essay's central question.

About Ungrading

Ungrading is both a classroom practice and philosophy that seeks to prioritize student feedback about their learning over scores or letter grades. Kohn (2020) defines ungrading as “eliminating the control-based function of grades, with all its attendant harms” (p. xv). In this essay, I use ungrading as a catch-all term though it has been called by other names such as going gradeless, collaborative assessment, or student-centered feedback. Ungrading is being explored at all levels of education including middle and high school and post-secondary settings as more and more educators question the overall utility of our grading system. Linked to the ungrading “movement”, are other popular approaches to grading such as labor-based grading, contract grading, and specifications grading. At its core, ungrading seeks to recenter the learner in the educational process by relying heavily on their self-assessment and reflection and ultimately increasing their autonomy.

Research on grades has shown students have less interest in learning for the sake of learning, they have a lower preference or desire to explore challenging tasks, and their thinking is less critical (Kohn, 2020). Blum (2020) contends grades are extrinsic motivators and ultimately operate as a reward for or a threat to students. Thus, the emphasis educational systems have placed on grades causes students to focus on performing behaviors of schooling instead of learning. Stommel (2021) and Chiaravalli (2020) both argue grades are not a good form of feedback so ungrading seeks to recenter more thorough conversations and feedback about learning. Scholars who are chronicling their experiences with ungrading have also highlighted findings that indicate classes with less of a focus on traditional grades lessen students stress and anxiety (Gibbs, 2020; Schultz-Bergin, 2020; Stenson, 2022).

About Arts-Based Methods

Arts-based research (ABR) is where science and art meet (Leavy, 2018). Using art at any or all stages of the research process, ABR allows researchers to engage in “artmaking as a way of knowing”

(Leavy, 2018, p. 4). Art-based research practices can use a variety of art forms including narrative or literary, performative styles such as plays and music, visual art such as painting or drawing, or multimethod approaches where art forms are combined (Leavy, 2018). Black (2011) explains arts-based methods “reveal tacit knowledge and make knowledge and meaning construction visible” (p. 68).

Similarly, Irwin (2022), argues

people need to engage with the arts in order to make their thinking visible, to hear the sounds of their inquiries, to perform the embodied nature of their ideas, or to story their experiences. For some, this is essential work unto itself. The processes of engagement through the senses teaches us something we can only learn through our senses. In this way, the arts not only act as a guide for inquiry, they become the basis for how one’s work is shared (p.3).

Given our natural “pictorial nature of the mind” (Marshall, 2005, p. 230), engaging in art-based practices allows us to share, understand, and connect more deeply. There is also great value in using ABR for public scholarship to communicate and extend beyond the walls of the academy (Leavy, 2018).

About Visual Journaling

Traditional journaling is the act and process of recording thoughts, insights, and feelings. Visual journaling takes this a step further by using images, art supplies, and words to reflect on experiences and make meaning. Redmond et al. (2021) defines visual journaling as “an expression process that employs both images and words in order to inquire into and reflect on phenomena aesthetically. The phenomena may be personally or professionally relevant, as journals take multiple forms— such as personal journals, diaries, or sketchbooks.” Visual journaling is one of many arts-based methods; art journals use mixed media for self-expression (Gullion & Schafer, 2018) and can include a combination of visual art styles such as drawing, collage, photography, and painting (Leavy, 2018).

For this essay, my visual journal entry was completed as a collage. Because collage requires a combination of a variety of things, it was the most appropriate art-making choice considering the numerous elements of my reflection. As ABR continues to emerge, collage has become recognized as a systematic approach to inquiry. Scotti and Chilton (2018) highlighted the utility of collage by researchers in various stages of the research process from the development of the research question, to conceptualizing the literature, to completing the data analysis. In this work, I adopted collage simultaneously gather, analyze and represent data and I operate as researcher-participant.

The Joy-Making Process for a Visual Reflection

Visual journaling is a joyful, self-care practice. Below I have outlined my three-step process for this entry.

Part One: Preparing for Joy

To create my journal entry, I started by gathering a variety of materials from my art supplies: magazines to find clippings, stamps, colored pens and papers, scraps of decorative and mulberry paper, and found materials such as string, bubble wrap, and seeds. After finding items I might be able to use, I sat them aside and opened my visual journal to a new set of pages. I prompted myself to create a background before starting the collage by asking the question: when you think about your work [ungrading], what are you feeling at this very moment? My answer to this, a variety of feelings- led me to draw spirals all over the page. Using a group of colored pens, I drew spirals in different colors and of different sizes. This mundane process began to feel therapeutic; I quickly realized those spirals on the page, some small and some large now coexist and overlap just like my emotions. Now centered with my feelings and the power of the spirals as imagery, I felt ready to move into the collage process.

Part Two: Gathering Joy

Mowinski (2022) explained creating collages can be done “through planning, intuition, or a combination of both” (p. 44). For me, my process tends to be more intuitive. Starting with the same guiding question reference above, I extended it to then ask, when you think about your work [ungrading] and the feelings that are at the surface, what is happening, or what do you want to happen as a result? Thinking about this, I flipped through the pages of magazines cutting out words, pictures, and letters that “fit.”

Part Three: Clinging to Joy

The final step in my journal entry, or collage process, was to organize the found materials and adhere them to the page. This process required some negotiation. As I started to organize items and find room for them in the overall project, I realized some cutouts or scraps no longer “spoke” to my question the way I initially thought they did. After removing some pieces and adding others, I was able to adhere, or “cling” to them to finalize the collage.

My Visual Reflection



The Analysis

In this section below, I share a written reflection of what the various elements on the collage represent. Anchoring the collage is a piece of twine that represents the connection between the individual pieces that make the whole. After studying the completed collage, I engaged in an analysis to attribute meaning. In Tables 1 and 2 I juxtapose how the elements of the collage are representative of reflections on my ungrading process alongside how those same pieces are reminders for our collective work as educators in higher education.

Table 1.

Left Side of the Collage

Collage Element	Ungrading Representations	Higher Education Representations
Cutout from magazine that says <i>truly life-changing</i>	Ungrading for me has been a bit life-changing. I am learning and growing, and I do not think I will be the same as a result of trying this	Our work in higher education despite our specific roles, can (and perhaps should) be “truly life-changing”; for our students

A piece of plastic	new approach. I have worked hard over the past two semesters to be transparent with my students letting them know that I am still learning what it means to evaluate their learning.	and for ourselves. Affixed to the cutout from the magazine of those words is a piece of plastic from a package to represent the need to be transparent in this work.
A zine An ink stamp that says <i>you've got this</i>	There have been moments during this Fall semester that I wanted to abandon ungrading. Tackling it in a large online section has been challenging but I find encouragement from these motivational reminders.	The quotes from the stamp and on the zine (“everything will be alright”) are motivational pieces to stay committed to our work.
Mulberry paper Cutout from magazine that says <i>new</i> Cutout from magazine that says <i>changes</i>	Oftentimes being vulnerable is uncomfortable but as a teacher educator, I worked to model the power expressing teacher vulnerability has with students. It reminds them that we are human and not all knowing. Not only did I muster up the strength to do with my students on day one of class but also with my ungrading community on my campus.	The transparency and thinness of the mulberry paper represent the vulnerabilities and worries we may feel when things in our work are new and/or changing.
Cutout from magazine that says <i>uniquely yours</i> Cutout from magazine that says <i>you supply the creativity</i>	Some of my fear with ungrading was that I would not do it “right”. However, I processed the connection between my desire to try and what my course learning outcomes required and quickly realized that my way is my way.	Despite shortfalls and challenges, other magazine cutouts remind us that this work is “uniquely” ours and that we “supply the creativity” as we work toward solutions that best serve our students in our unique spaces.

Table 2.*Right Side of the Collage*

Collage Element	Ungrading Representations	Higher Education Representations
<p>A magazine cutout shows a young child looking in up at lights</p> <p>A piece of bubble wrap</p>	<p>The possibilities for ungrading seem endless. I am one of few in my department going gradeless but I still have faith that this approach will continue to work in my students favor. I have already identified it as a key element of my research agenda and like that bubble wrap, I will protect it.</p>	<p>A magazine cutout of the child looking in awe of lights serves as a reminder that we should look to, and reach for the “stars”. In this work I hope to continue to dream of what our work can be and can create and when possible, maintain a child-like faith. The bubble wrap layered there represents both the need and desire to protect that purity.</p>
<p>Cutout from magazine that says <i>we're together</i></p>	<p>Though my ungrading colleagues are external to my program and department, I am grateful for how relationships are now forming across my college and across institutions.</p>	<p>Though we oftentimes work in silos, many of us are working towards the same goals so we should work together more.</p>
<p>A yellow piece of tissue paper (in color theory yellow is linked to hopefulness)</p> <p>Ransom style cutout making the word equity</p> <p>A paper heart cutout</p> <p>A magazine cutout of a hook</p>	<p>I have always taught from my heart and done so with much hope. For me ungrading allows me to do that more fully and in a way that creates more equity for my students.</p>	<p>Collectively these illustrate the ways our work is both guided by and rooted in a longing for educational equity and justice.</p>

<p>Flower seeds that have been glued to the page</p> <p>A decorative piece of paper that shows birds and bees near flowers</p> <p>A magazine cutout of greenery from a garden</p>	<p>Though my pedagogical practices are evolving, these images remind me that at the root of my philosophy is the sentiment that education is a practice of freedom (hooks, 1994) and ungrading is in line with that belief.</p>	<p>The representative reminder here is to stay grounded in our educational philosophies and how they guide our efforts.</p>
<p>A blackout poem that says “acknowledging the need to uplift, sustain for social transformation. With explicit attention to collective experience to (re)construct.”</p>	<p>When I think about my ungrading experiences, I have to be sure to consider the collective experience of my students. I have to also engage in ongoing research to add to what we know about ungrading procedures.</p>	<p>This poem reminds us our work in higher education is predicated on a desire to advance our communities.</p>
<p>Small decorative rocks glued down</p>	<p>Rocks can symbolize strength, durability, longevity, and more. Ungrading may seem like a trendy thing to do in academia now but I intend to continue to refine my processes and withstand any pressure.</p>	<p>The rocks speak to the need to stand firm in our “why” and the hope that those efforts outlast us in these academic spaces.</p>

Possibilities

Based on this reflective art-making experience, I revisit the question central to the essay and offer one key takeaway or possibility for us to center and create more joy in this work while better supporting our students: join in with arts-based practices and research. This can be in personal practice, in classroom practice, and/or in educational research.

In Personal Practice

Hash et al. (2021) explained “expressive art-making in visual journals invites us to address myriad challenges in our teaching and research in reflective and interactive ways. As we create journal entries, we construct and synthesize personal and collective ways of knowing.” Adopting visual

journaling can be a sustainable self-care practice in our personal lives. If we are yearning for more rest, more enjoyment, more engagement, more centering, and more learning, visual journaling can be an outlet to consider.

In Classroom and Research Practice

Emerging evidence from Redmond et al. (2021) indicates visual journaling in the classroom serves as a form of authentic assessment, can facilitate immersive student engagement, and creates varied opportunities for the expression of knowledge. Using more creative and arts-based opportunities in the classroom increases student autonomy and is less restrictive (Hartel et al., 2017). Taking the knowledge learned in our class and applying creative methods can enhance students' ability to express and synthesize information in a variety of ways (Hartel et al., 2017). Linked to both classroom practice and research, arts-based methods have been cited to raise social consciousness. Leavy (2017) explains applying art-based approaches to research can “reveal power relations (often invisible to those in privileged groups), to raise critical race or gender consciousness, to build coalitions across groups, and to challenge dominant ideologies” (p. 10). Additionally, arts-based methods, including visual journaling, validate and recognize art-making as a valid form of knowledge construction (Hash et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Through visual journaling and adopting a new pedagogical practice, I have recently opened myself up to a lot of new things. As we work to find and create more joy in our work, I invite other higher education scholars to do the same; this is how we grow. Yet, too often we stick with practices and policies even when we know they do not completely work for us. We implement assignments, grades, programming, and research the same way time and time again. Arts-based methods, ungrading, and visual journaling have been presented here as tools for you to consider a new way for each of these. Through my visual reflection, the feelings of how these new approaches were (and still are) scary emerged but not without recognition of how my beliefs about education remain the same. Those convictions withstand the variety of emotions, such as worry, I may periodically feel in my work. To date, my approach to ungrading, and perhaps even visual journaling, is different from others who engage in these practices but what we do have in common was the willingness to try. Though I am still a novice, I am reminded of Patricia Leavy's (2018) words: the arts hold unique capabilities with respect to helping us see, think, and feel, provoking and transporting us, troubling the taken-for-granted, and promoting deep engagement and learning” (p. 707). Will you explore more deeply with me?

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