

## Inclusive Teaching, COVID–19, and Ungrading: A Personal Essay Based on Thirty-Two Years of Experience Teaching American Culture

KUWAHARA Yasue \*

As diversity, equity, inclusion, and access increase their importance in various aspects of American society, critical pedagogy is gaining attention among educators committed to equity and justice. While the COVID–19 pandemic and the killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police, among other similar deaths, have pushed the reality of systemic discrimination to the forefront of society, it is important that we as educators review our teaching methods to see how they have maintained their inequity. In this essay, I will discuss critical pedagogy with particular attention to transparent assignment design and ungrading through my journey to make my classes more inclusive and equitable to students of diverse backgrounds.

Before describing my experience, I will briefly explain my background, the university where I have taught for the past thirty-two years, and the students and classes I typically teach. Growing up in Tokyo, I moved to the U.S. to study American culture in graduate school. My primary teaching focus and scholarly interests are American culture, East Asian popular culture, as well as diversity, inclusion, and equity. I accepted the position in the Communication Department at Northern Kentucky University (NKU) in 1989 because it was one of the few schools open to the teaching of popular culture. NKU is the youngest public university in the Commonwealth located seven miles south of Cincinnati, Ohio, and part of an area commonly known as Greater Cincinnati consisting of northern Kentucky, southeastern Indiana, and southwestern Ohio. The university began as an extension of the University of Kentucky, resulting from a grassroots movement of the residents of the area who felt their need for higher education was neglected by the state government. Becoming an independent institution in 1968, NKU has been primarily a teaching institution that serves the needs of local residents. While the university has always supported non-traditional students, with the introduction of the online Accelerated Program in 2018, the number of these students has increased considerably. Additionally, Kentucky introduced not only a

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\* Kuwahara Yasue is Professor of Communication, Director of Popular Culture Studies, and Faculty Diversity Fellow at Northern Kentucky University.

dual credit but a dual degree program for high school students, thus increasing the enrollment of high-school juniors and seniors.<sup>1</sup> For all these reasons, I typically have students between the ages of sixteen to sixty-five in my online classes. The university also attracts many first-generation students, i.e., they are the first in their families to attend an institution of higher education. This mixture of students with diverse backgrounds usually makes the class interesting but it has also made it challenging, especially during the pandemic.

### I: Revelation

Like many of my colleagues, I began my teaching career as a graduate assistant and led a weekly discussion session for a large general education class. Except for a brief information session during the new student orientation, there was no formal instruction on teaching and the professor I was assigned to provided me with on-the-job training. By the time I completed the doctoral program and started teaching as an assistant professor, I had fully mastered the teaching of lectures, media presentations, occasional discussions, quizzes, exams, short papers, research papers, and presentations. Students were assessed on a 10% spread scale and letter grades (A = 90%, B = 80%, C = 70%, D = 60%, F = below 59%). Because this was how my work was graded in graduate school, it was good and fair, I thought, until the provost raised a red flag by including my general education classes on the list of gateway courses. A gateway course is “the first credit-bearing college-level course in a program of study”<sup>2</sup> or a general education course. According to Jessie Kwak:

Ideally, gateway courses welcome students into a domain where they learn the foundational skills and knowledge they will need to succeed in the rest of their college careers. In practice, however, gateway courses can act as choke points that slow down student progress or take a lasting toll.<sup>3</sup>

Over the years, I was aware that my students’ grades had declined and that there

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1. The dual credit program began as a school-based scholar program in which students with high academic achievement were given the opportunity to take a course taught by a university professor. The course was counted as a credit for both high school and the university in which the student enrolled. A more recent dual-credit program allows high school students to take courses at the university and be awarded an associate degree upon their graduation from high school.

2. Jesse Kwak, “What Are Gateway Courses And Why Do They Matter to Equity in Higher Education?,” *Every Learner Everywhere*, June 2020, <https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/blog/what-are-gateway-courses-and-why-do-they-matter-to-equity-in-higher-ed/>.

3. Ibid.

were more D's and F's at the end of the semester. I blamed it on students because my classes—the content, teaching method, and assessment—remained the same. Also, my classes were popular general education classes as they always became full shortly after registration had started. I thought that students would not take a tough course for the general education requirement. The provost's red flag, however, forced me to look into the causes of the decline in students' performance. This was my introduction to critical pedagogy.

I discovered a clue to the lower student performance unexpectedly during a faculty summer institute about information literacy. When the presenter asked us to name a flagship journal in chemistry, my initial reaction was “What! ?” because I had no clue. I was not good at or interested in the natural sciences in high school and therefore chose to major in English and English Literature as an undergraduate and American culture studies in graduate school. I was even confused about the purpose of the question. This moment was an eye-opener for me when we were told that this was how students would feel about the assignments not only because they did not know what to do but because they did not know why they had to do it. I never thought my instructions were inadequate because, except for an occasional one or two inquiries, students did not ask questions about the assignments and most of them did what was asked. There were a few excellent assignments and a number of mediocre ones because many of them did not spend enough time to complete them, I thought. In reality, however, they did not have enough information or guidance to do the assignments adequately. This was a shocking revelation to me. I realized that the cause of the lower student performance was actually me.

## II: Transparent Assignment Design

The above experience reminded me of a colleague who had advocated transparent assignment design. In a nutshell, transparent assignment design is:

The process of designing assignments so that the process of learning is more explicit for students. In other words, transparent assignments shed light on the assignment's purpose, task, and criteria.<sup>4</sup>

As the template and a sample assignment show (see Appendix), every detail of an

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4. Devsikhya Bose, Sarah Dalrymple, and Susan Shadle, “A Renewed Case for Student Success: Using Transparency in Assignment Design When Teaching Remotely,” *Faculty Focus*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/course-design-ideas/a-renewed-case-for-student-success-using-transparency-in-assignment-design-when-teaching-remotely/#:~:text=Transparent%20assignment%20design%20is%20the,purpose%2C%20task%2C%20and%20criteria.>

assignment must be spelled out so students know exactly what they are being asked to do and why, using the knowledge and skills they learned in class and understanding why this will help them in their college and post-college careers. To be honest, I had not been a fan of this method until my summer institute experience because I thought it involved too much spoon-feeding. I teach college students, not elementary or secondary school students. But now I was willing to give it a try so I joined a faculty learning community where I learned the know-how of transparent assignment design and had the opportunity to have my assignments critiqued by other participants as well as to critique their assignments. Then, I revised all the assignments in one of the courses I regularly taught. An assignment that used to be a half-page long became two pages with additional information. Because a common complaint among my colleagues is that students do not read, I was apprehensive about the length of the assignment. Will the lengthy instructions alienate students? Do they bother to read the purpose, knowledge, and skills section of the instructions? Do they read through the instructions for all assignments? Therefore, I asked for their feedback on the transparent assignments at the end of the semester and their positive responses surprised me. Below are some of the responses:

For the first week or two, I did not read the “purpose,” “skills,” and “knowledge” statements. This is because I was trying to just get to the assignment portion of the post and begin working on what I needed to get done. I believe why I did this is because for all of my other classes there was not something like this attached, most of the time it was just the instructions for the assignment and maybe some examples. After the first few weeks, I began to notice the statements and understand how they were helpful. I was starting to make connections back to the readings and learning that I was not making in other classes. Since for other classes I am just trying to follow instructions I generally do not pay attention to anything else. With these statements, I am able to understand how the assignment at hand is supposed to intertwine with the chapter for the week which then allows me to create a better product for the assignments.

The skills part of the assignments was very helpful because not only do you need those skills to be successful in this course, but it also reflects how it will help you in your professional life outside of school. Even if one does not agree with the statement, it still makes you consider how the content will follow you even after this course.

I always find that helpful in a class as it is a bit more interesting to learn when you know WHY you are learning it, besides just to get a credit. Without that information, I find I quickly lose interest in the course.

I continued to do the same survey for three semesters and the responses were equally positive. This indicated that my instructions were not adequate in previous classes. Reflecting on my experience as a student, I recalled that there were times I wondered how I would complete the assignments and why I would have to do them; however, I forgot all about this when I started teaching. Incidentally, I attended a student panel during the online teaching conference titled “REMOTE: The Connected Faculty Summit,” organized by Arizona State University in the summer of 2021. Students on the panel represented nationally known public and private four-year institutions from different regions of the country. One of my takeaways was the importance of “why.” Students unanimously said that they wanted to know the reason behind the readings, assignments, discussions, and so on. This assured me that the transparent assignment design would meet their needs.

### **III: COVID-19 and the Pedagogy of Care**

Going into the spring break in March 2020, the university administration informed students and faculty that all classes would be online when we returned due to the rapid spread of COVID-19. Having taught online classes for ten years at that point, the transition to virtual teaching was not difficult for me, requiring minor adjustments. However, I was not prepared for the experience that the following fourteen months would bring and that would change my teaching fundamentally. First and foremost, my priority was to ensure not only the physical but general well-being of my students. Some students informed me of their battle with COVID, while others did not. Every time they missed the assignment deadlines, I emailed them to see how they were doing. When they did not respond to my initial email, I kept emailing them until I heard back from them. Second, a substantial number of my adult students were registered nurses who were seeking a BS degree. Being frontline workers battling the pandemic, they worked long hours and were exhausted. In addition, many of them had families to take care of. Consequently, the assignment deadlines were still there but they did not mean much. Whenever they found time to work on the assignment was good enough for me. Third, the pandemic affected students not only physically but mentally and emotionally. One student in the fall semester of 2020 lost his job, moved to New York, and worked seventy hours a week in order to support his family left behind in Kentucky. His resolve to stick with the course despite the circumstances he was placed in humbled me. He needed emotional support before academic support. Another student was a victim of domestic violence that may have been caused by the pandemic. She focused on protecting her young daughter and was not in a condition to study for the course. I ended up referring her to Norse Violence Prevention, a unit in the university that helps students who are victims of domestic violence. Although it was not my immediate experience, the university-

wide survey showed that underrepresented students, especially Latinx students, were most affected by the pandemic as reflected in the number of students who withdrew from the classes. They were forced to give up on their education because of family obligations. Through these experiences, I quickly learned that flexibility was the key to surviving the pandemic. I am certain that my experience was shared by a majority of educators regardless of the levels at which they taught.

Amid such a chaotic experience, I encountered Jesse Stommel's pedagogy of care that gave a framework and perspective to my experience and became an occasion to review and transform my teaching. He was a keynote speaker at the Summer Faculty Institute at my university as well as the Teaching Professor Conference that I attended. Although it is nearly impossible to summarize his teaching philosophy, and I strongly recommend his book *Critical Digital Pedagogy*<sup>5</sup> to anyone interested, what influenced me most was the idea of a culture of trust. Stommel, a faculty member at the University of Denver, points out, with ample evidence, how colleges and universities across the country invested in online test proctoring systems based on the assumption that students would cheat no matter what when COVID forced classes to go online.<sup>6</sup> This is a clear indication of the culture of suspicion prevalent in higher education. Canvas, the learning management system used in my university, for instance, includes a lockdown browser and a Respondus Monitor. The former prevents students from opening other applications or web pages and the latter records students during an exam. In most classes, students cannot take an exam if they do not install these on their computers. Thus, students get a clear message about how the university perceives them. Stommel argues against such a system by saying that the amount of money spent on the proctoring system should be used to attend to students' basic needs if we truly care about their learning. Students cannot learn, for instance, when they do not have enough to eat. While it is rarely publicized, a lack of basic necessities, such as food, shelter, safety, etc. is a real issue among students in the U.S. and it is more likely to be found among marginalized groups due to systemic discrimination in society. With his pedagogy of care, Stommel advocates the building of a culture of trust which, along with flexibility, are "key principles of any pedagogy."<sup>7</sup> There was another eye-opening moment from Stommel's presentations that forever changed the design of my class. I had complained about students' lower performance because I was teaching a class for

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5. Jesse Stommel, Chris Friend and Sean Michael Morris, *Critical Digital Pedagogy: A Collection* (Washington, D.C.: Hybrid Pedagogy Inc., 2020).

6. The remote proctoring industry is expected to grow from being a \$4 billion market in 2019 to a nearly \$23 billion market in 2023.

7. Jesse Stommel, "Designing for Care: Inclusive and Adaptive Digital Pedagogies" (presentation given at "The Teaching Professor Conference," New Orleans, June 4, 2021).

the students I wished I had, *not for the students I had*. I was oblivious to the fact that during the last thirty years of my teaching career, the typical college student had certainly changed, as “more than one in four have a child, almost three in four are employed and more than half receive Pell Grants<sup>8</sup> but are left too short of the funds required to pay for the college.”<sup>9</sup> Even though nearly half of my students fit the typical student characteristics, I was not giving much thought to their needs until the pandemic forced me to face them. After listening to and reading about Stommel’s care design, my class changed. For instance, following the practices of other like-minded instructors, I added to the first page of my course syllabus an equity statement and a pact to assure students of my commitment to treat them with dignity and respect. I tell students, especially those who are not active, that I understand that they have family, work, and social obligations and sometimes they are more important than school. I will listen and help them in any way I can. Based on the comments on the teaching evaluations and emails I get, students understand my intention to build a culture of trust in class.

#### IV: Ungrading

In the fall semester of 2021, I was asked to join a college book group that read Joe Feldman’s *Grading for Equity*.<sup>10</sup> This experience pushed me further into the quest for inclusive teaching. Beginning with the first chapter, entitled “What Makes Grading So Difficult to Talk About (And Even Harder to Change)?,” Feldman reveals the history of grading, culminating in the development of the A, B, C, D, and F letter grade system, and deals with the issues with the system in the first half of the book, and then proposes alternative grading practices in the latter half. This was another astonishing occasion for me in that I realized I was giving letter grades without giving any thought to how fraudulent the system was and what it did to students, especially students from marginalized groups. For instance, one missed exam, which normally means zero points, could change the final grade. Does this accurately reflect students’ performance in the class? Similarly, are assignments a reliable indicator of students’ mastery of the class content? Marginalized students, who often have obligations other than school and whose basic needs are not met, may not have enough time to adequately complete the assignments. Additionally, the letter grade system makes students study for

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8. A Pell Grant is a federal fund awarded to students with exceptional financial needs. Unlike a loan, it does not have to be repaid.

9. Sara Goldrick-Rab and Jesse Stommel, “Teaching the Students We Have, Not the Students We Wish We Had,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 10, 2018, [https://www.chronicle.com/article/teaching-the-students-we-have-not-the-students-we-wish-we-had/?cid2=gen\\_login\\_refresh&cid=gen\\_sign\\_in&cid2=gen\\_login\\_refresh](https://www.chronicle.com/article/teaching-the-students-we-have-not-the-students-we-wish-we-had/?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in&cid2=gen_login_refresh).

10. Joe Feldman, *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2019).

extrinsic motive (a grade) rather than intrinsic motivation (learning/acquisition of knowledge). Some of my colleagues think (and I used to be one) that this reflects a problem with the students. If we care and are serious about our profession, however, is it acceptable to ignore the fraud associated with the traditional letter-grade method which, research has shown, marginalizes the already marginalized groups of students? Thus, my search for an alternative grading method began and ended in “ungrading.”

Ungrading is a grading method that focuses on a qualitative assessment of student performance. While students get a final grade at the end of the term (the university requirement), I do not grade individual assignments but ask questions and make comments that engage their work. The students also reflect carefully on their work via an individual dialogue we have through mutual feedback. Students are asked to reflect on and assess their performance twice during the course. The final grade is determined based on a students’ work, self-reflection, and self-assessment.<sup>11</sup> The intention is to help them focus on working in a more organic way, as opposed to working as they think they are expected to. Ungrading was started by educators (K-12 as well as higher education) who were concerned about the inequity created by the traditional grading method. It has been practiced for nearly twenty years and, with the increased concern about equity and belonging in education as well as in society, has gained attention in recent years. It is a movement born out of genuine concern about teaching and learning. As such, there is no established definition of “ungrading,” which is also sometimes called “de-grading,” “going gradeless,” and “grade-free.” There is no established method to ungrade, either, as individual educators are searching for the best way to remove the dehumanizing grading system in their classrooms,<sup>12</sup> and little has been published on ungrading. I was first introduced to ungrading in Stommel’s blog posts.<sup>13</sup> After much research on my own and through attending workshops, I decided to adopt it in my “Introduction to Popular Culture” class. This is a general education course taken by students from diverse majors and backgrounds. My teaching goals for the course include having students recognize the impact of

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11. The instructor reserves the right to change grades as appropriate.

12. In Stommel’s words, “Agency, dialogue, self-actualization, and social justice are not possible (or, at least, unlikely) in a hierarchical system that pits teachers against students and encourages competition by ranking students against one another. Grades are currency in a capitalist system that reduces teaching and learning to a mere transaction. They are an institutional instrument of compliance that works exactly because they have been so effectively naturalized. Grading is a massive coordinated effort to take humans out of the educational system.” See “How to Ungrade,” in *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, ed. Susan D. Blum (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2020), 2728.

13. Jesse Stommel, “Why I Don’t Grade,” *Jesse Stommel* (blog), October 26, 2017, <https://www.jessestommel.com/why-i-dont-grade/>.

popular culture on their lives and on society, and develop their critical thinking ability through analysis of popular culture artifacts and events in their immediate cultural environment. The goal of NKU's general education program is to provide students with an opportunity to ask questions, seek new points of view, apply principles of reason, adjust ideas in relation to new situations, and take reflective action.<sup>14</sup> Thus, I determined that ungrading was a good fit for my teaching as well as for the university's goals as students expand their knowledge of popular culture through hands-on experience rather than the memorization of information.

Because ungrading was unknown to the majority of students, faculty, and administrators, it required extra consideration to adopt this new teaching method. First, I did not know how students would react to it and thought it was wise to let my department chair know of my intentions in case some unhappy students complained about it or expressed their frustration in the form of lower evaluation scores. Fortunately, knowing my dedication to critical pedagogy, the chair was supportive of my new venture. My next consideration was the students. I decided to offer them the option of choosing ungrading or the traditional letter grade method after explaining the new method and the reason for its adoption as well as the issues inherent in the traditional method. I had them read the brief article "The Case Against Grades"<sup>15</sup> and share their experience with grades throughout their educational career on the discussion board. Almost all students agreed with the point made in the article and described the negative impact of the emotional roller-coaster ride the grading system had had on them. Asked to choose a grading method, however, only fourteen out of thirty-four students chose ungrading. This result surprised me, especially after their negative experience with grading, so I had to ask those who chose the traditional method the reason for their choice. The most common answer was uncertainty about a new grading method. Being so used to the traditional letter grade system, they could not even imagine how their work would be graded. Even those who chose ungrading kept asking me how their work would be graded. Another common answer was that, even though they did not like the grading system, an A, when they got it, made them feel good. A few students said that they were close to graduation and did not want to rock the boat at this point by trying a new unknown method. I fully understood their reasoning for choosing the traditional method. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that those who chose ungrading were traditional age (18–24), including a few high school seniors, except for one non-traditional student who had asked several questions before her final decision to choose ungrading. It became clear as the term progressed that a couple of students chose ungrading for the wrong reasons. One of them was a fast-food restaurant manager who seemed to enjoy

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14. "General Education," Northern Kentucky University, accessed June 24, 2022, <https://inside.nku.edu/gened.html>.

15. Alfie Kohn, "The Case Against Grades," *Counterpoints* 451 (2013): 143–53.

her long hours of work more than school, and the other was a student athlete who was obligated to spend a considerable amount of time in practice. They thought that ungrading was easier than the traditional method and thus met the needs of their busy schedules. Two other students wrongly understood that ungrading was no work. This was a point I reminded all students about a few times throughout the term. Indeed, it is also a misconception among the faculty who are overwhelmed by grading. Having graded 100–140 assignments weekly, I understand the burden of grading and the relief that the thought of ungrading brings. Ungrading did not make my schedule easier, however, because I spent the same or more time giving feedback to individual students as it was a means to stimulate students' interest and help them learn. Upon receiving my feedback, students are asked to give their thoughts on it. They do not have to revise their work because it forces them to focus on specific aspects instead of a holistic experience. I respond to their ideas and thus we keep a dialogue rolling. There have been students who did not respond but those who actively participated in the dialogue benefited from it most, as the following comments attest:

Even though I felt like I was learning a lot of things, the comments and feedback that I received pushed me to learn even more. The comments helped me to look deeper into what popular culture really said about my experiences and how things can be perceived differently. I enjoyed being able to message back and forth about each paper because I think it helped me to have a better understanding of the subject and material.

Another thing [I was most proud of this semester] was how much material I have actually retained after doing the experiential projects. I think actually being able to apply the material to real life has made a world of difference and actually makes it meaningful to me rather than another quiz. I also liked the personalized feedback and this influenced my work for the better. Having specific feedback is much better than a “Good work!” or “Do better.”

This class is very unique and I thoroughly enjoyed learning and doing this kind of work this semester [...] I thought I could roll through the class without the book and still do well, as I have in other classes. I soon realized from your feedback that I was missing several key elements of the assignment and I could have done better [...] The second experiential learning project was something that I put an abundance of work into. I bought the book and changed how I went about the assignment. I worked hard and read the passage in the book [...] The feedback on these assignments was different because you were able to see what I was communicating and I think that you were able to see that I read the book for these papers [...] I feel as if I have opened up in this class more than anywhere else. It is refreshing to let my opinions come through in my work.

These comments show that ungrading is an effective teaching method that motivates a student to learn for the sake of learning instead of the grades. Furthermore, the dialogue with students informs me of their learning beyond the tangible results they submit. One of the students in the capstone project course for Popular Culture Studies minors wrote the following in her final reflection:

Ultimately, I am proud of the expansion of my knowledge and my pushing myself out of my comfort zone. I viewed this work more as having the opportunity to highlight the important fight women have been taking on and the actions they are doing to make this change throughout society. Rather than viewing it as a paper I am just writing and researching, [I felt I was] participating in the voices of sharing the importance of women. I honestly have a hard time grading myself because I want to give myself an A-for the hard work and challenges I truly focused on overcoming but if we are just focusing strictly on the paper, I would say a B.

This student was deaf in one ear and unexpectedly had gotten a full-time job writing for and editing a newsletter for a local veterans' organization just before the semester started. It was a dream job for a journalism major and she was determined to keep it. Through our dialogue, I knew how tough it was for her to complete all graduation requirements, including my course, while working full time. Therefore, her self-assessment was especially meaningful. I would have given her a B if the grade were solely based on the materials she had turned in but I was perfectly fine with an A-because of my knowledge of her efforts throughout the semester. This illustrates how ungrading reflects a culture of care and makes learning equitable and inclusive to all students.

As of this writing, I have taught four ungrading classes and am currently teaching the fifth one. Unquestionably, there is still much room for improvement to make my class more effective and equitable for student learning. One thing for sure is that I am relieved from the pressure of grading as much as students are. Previously, my comments on students' work were excuses for the grades, i.e., why they lost points, but now I offer students genuine comments and feedback based on my interest in their work. This was an unexpected consequence of ungrading that I enjoy very much. Ungrading has been used in many disciplines, including STEM courses, and there are a variety of ways to adopt it. Because I don't have enough space here to discuss it further, I strongly recommend Susan Blum's book<sup>16</sup> for those who wish to know more.

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16. Susan D. Blum, *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2020).

## Conclusion

On June 22, 2022, the Forest Hills School District in the suburb of Cincinnati passed a resolution that banned “critical race theory, intersectionality, identity and anti-racism from student instruction, staff training and hiring practices”<sup>17</sup> at its board meeting. As appalling as it may sound, it is part of a sweeping trend across the nation born out of the reaction to the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd that exposed the existence of systemic discrimination. Faced with this reality, educators must seriously reflect on the consequences of their teaching. Do we teach to maintain the status quo of inequity or do we want to be a change agent? The transparent assignment design and ungrading discussed in this essay are two ways to make teaching equitable and accessible to students of diverse backgrounds so that they can become active participants in a society that has historically oppressed them. It is my hope that this essay offers the reader the occasion to think about their teaching or the education that they received.

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17. Madeline Mitchell, “Forest Hills Meeting Ends With a Resolution Against Critical Race Theory,” *The Enquirer*, June 23, 2022, <https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2022/06/22/forest-hills-school-board-ban-critical-race-theory-anti-racism/7697580001/>.

## Appendix

### Transparent Assignment Template\*

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*This template can be used as a guide for developing, explaining, and discussing class activities and out-of-class assignments. Making these aspects of each course activity or assignment explicitly clear to students has demonstrably enhanced students' learning in a national study.<sup>1</sup>*

#### Assignment Name

Due date:

**Purpose:** Define the learning objectives, in language and terms that help students recognize how this assignment will benefit their learning. Ideally, indicate how these are connected with institutional learning outcomes, and how the specific knowledge and skills involved in this assignment will be important in students' lives beyond the contexts of this assignment, this course, and this college.

**Skills:** The purpose of this assignment is to help you practice the following skills that are essential to your success in this course / in school / in this field / in professional life beyond school:

*Terms from Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives may help you explain these skills in language students will understand. Listed from cognitively simple to most complex, these skills are:*

- understanding basic disciplinary knowledge and methods/tools
- applying basic disciplinary knowledge/tools to problem-solving in a similar but unfamiliar context
- analyzing
- synthesizing
- judging/evaluating and selecting best solutions
- creating/inventing a new interpretation, product, theory

**Knowledge:** This assignment will also help you to become familiar with the following important content knowledge in this discipline:

- 1.
- 2.

**Task:** Define what activities the student should do/perform. "Question cues" from this chart might be helpful: <http://www.asainstitute.org/conference2013/handouts/20-Bloom-Question-Cues-Chart.pdf>. List any steps or guidelines, or a recommended sequence for the students' efforts. Specify any extraneous mistakes to be avoided.

#### Criteria for Success:

*Define the characteristics of the finished product. Provide multiple, annotated examples of what these characteristics look like in practice, to encourage students' creativity and reduce their incentive to copy any one example too closely. With students, collaboratively analyze examples of work before the students begin working. Explain how excellent work differs from adequate work. It is often useful to provide or compile with students a checklist of characteristics of successful work. This enables students to evaluate the effectiveness of their own efforts while they are working, and to judge the quality of their completed work. Students can also use the checklist to provide feedback on peers' coursework. Indicate whether this task/product will be graded and/or how it factors into the student's overall grade for the course. Later, asking students to reflect and comment on their completed, graded work allows them to focus on changes to their learning strategies that might improve their future work.*

\* The author developed an earlier version of this template at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

<sup>1</sup> Winkelmes, Mary-Ann. "Transparency in Teaching: Faculty Share Data and Improve Students' Learning." *Liberal Education* 99,2 (Spring 2013); Winkelmes et al, "A Teaching Intervention that Increases Underserved College Students' Success." *Peer Review* (Winter/Spring 2016).

## Sample Transparent Assignment

### Scrapbook Entry #1

The purpose of this assignment is to make you aware of your daily cultural environment, i.e. popular culture.

In order to successfully complete this assignment, you need the following knowledge and skills.

Knowledge: Popular culture is our daily cultural environment. The knowledge of and familiarity with popular culture that surrounds you every day will help you complete this assignment.

Skills: This assignment will help you practice the following skills which are essential to be successful in school and in your professional career as well as to live a meaningful life.

- **Diligence**: Diligence results in increased creativity, an expanded point of view, a sense of pride, and satisfaction in relationships (Forbes).
- **Persistence**: Persistence is a skill that employers highly value because they need people who can power through tough circumstances (Harappa.education).
- **Time management**: No matter what your job is, being good at time management will greatly improve your hireability (ShenZhen Daily).

Task: Throughout the term, you will be keeping a “scrapbook” of popular culture that exemplifies the concepts covered in the course. This can be an actual physical scrapbook, more of a journal with pictures/scrap/articles taped in, or an online scrapbook (there are many apps and websites that allow you to do this, which I have never used, so picking one is up to you but you must be able to share it with me somehow), a PowerPoint where each slide is a different “page” in the book or other means. This scrapbook should be a mixture of text (written words, reflection, descriptions, journal entries), images (pictures you take, screenshots, snaps, tweets, pamphlets, drawings, etc.), and other scraps (articles, ticket stubs, flyers, ads, links to videos, pamphlets, etc.).

Specifically, each week you will be asked to find one or two example(s) of the concepts covered in the module—for instance, the American Dream in Module 3—from your daily cultural environment and discuss how they relate to the concepts.

I will check your scrapbook at the end of the second week to make sure you are on the right track. I will check it again after the fourth week. At the end of the term, you will turn this in through an uploaded file, or link. This should

accompany your end-of-the-term letter.

Entry #1: Find examples of popular culture, pop culture, folk culture, and elite culture and explain why and how each example represents its specific culture. It is important that you understand the definition of each culture.