**Jesse Stommel**

Dr. Jesse Stommel unpacks his book, Undoing the Grade: Why We Grade, and How to Stop

**AS** [00:00:47] For today's podcast, it's a pleasure to have Dr. Jesse Stommel. Jesse is currently a faculty member in the writing program at the University of Denver. He is also co-founder of Hybrid Pedagogy, the Journal of Critical Digital Pedagogy and the Digital Pedagogy Lab. He is coauthor of An Urgency of Teachers: The Work of Critical Digital Pedagogy. Jesse is also a documentary filmmaker and teaches courses about pedagogy, film, digital studies and composition. He experiments relentlessly with learning interfaces, both digital and analog. He's got a rascal pup Emily, a clever cat, Loki, and a badass daughter Hazel. Welcome to the Student Success podcast, Jesse.

**Jesse Stommel** [00:01:30] Super good to be with you. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

**AS** [00:01:32] Thank you so much. I always ask all guests first if they wouldn't mind sharing anything about themselves, a hobby, a story, or perhaps a superpower something. Would you kindly share something?

**Jesse Stommel** [00:01:45] I don't think I have a superpower, although I know what my superpower would be if I did have one. So I'll tell you that. And then I'll tell you a little story. The superpower that I have always wanted, we always have this conversations, which superpower, did you want to fly, do you want to be invisible, do you want to teleport? And the one that like, since I was pretty young, I always said I wanted a bureaucracy laser where I could just point my laser at bureaucracy and it would just cease to exist. It would disappear. So just bureaucracy, it's gone. So that is the superpower I wish I had. However, sadly, I do not have that superpower. The story that I want to tell is it's not really a story. I just I guess I want to tell what else I do with my life because I didn't wake up one day and think I want to be an expert or researcher in assessment and grades. I'm a teacher. I've been a teacher for 23 years. That's what I feel like, that's my vocation. That's what I do for a living. I especially like teaching teachers, but lately I am also the co-owner with my husband of a toy and game store in Littleton, Colorado. It's called Play Forge, and our basic gist is that we sell toys and games, but we also teach kids and adults how to design and make their own toys and games. So we have a makerspace. We do classes for kids and adults, and we have an educational space called Littleton Learning Lab that is a one room schoolhouse for ages 5 to 105. So that is what I do with my day. My daughter Hazel is actually the manager of those spaces. She does all the hiring, all the firing, all of the play testing, all of the training of our staff members, talks to customers, gives tours. She is the head of those spaces.

**AS** [00:03:43] Oh, man, I want to grow up to be you. That is amazing. Well, first of all, that first superpower. That beats everything. That is the ultimate superpower. Oh, my gosh. I hadn't even thought of that. I love that.

**Jesse Stommel** [00:03:56] I don't know, maybe my book is kind of about this superpower if, I mean, maybe that's a segway of sorts, because I feel like so much of our work and education bureaucracy is the thing that keeps us, keeps us from moving forward, keeps us from engaging with each other as full humor, humans, etc.

**AS** [00:04:17] Yeah, I agree. The way higher ed can be set up is interesting. I just got out of a meeting. I do a lot of coaching with colleges. This is a brand new college now in the Midwest and I reminded them of something that I call my three month rule, and that is that the typical campus, when they want to do a lot of change, positive change, work toward more equitable outcomes across the board, that they really only have three months in a year to get priority work done. All right, What are you talking about? Three months? Think about it. Just think about it for a moment. Right, Summer? Sorry, we're gone. Fall. September, Oh you know, it's the start of semester is just too crazy. Now October's okay. November, December is crazy. It's the holidays. It's finals. January, Oh we're gone. February is like September, the start of the new semester. Spring, March is okay. Maybe part of April because you have spring break and then, May, forget about it because of, you know, finals and then on top of that, you have a committee structure, a dysfunctional committee structure that nothing can get through. Right. So I love your first superpower and I love what you do with your husband and your daughter and this makerspace. And I love to see that. Thank you for sharing that, Jessie. That's awesome. So I have followed you on social media for a while, and I just love all of your posts. You're so passionate about students, about being equitable. And I saw that you were highlighting that you came out with your new book, Undoing the Grade: Why We Grade and How to Stop. And I got myself a copy, obviously, and I reached out and I was so excited that you would participate in the Student Success Podcast and wanted to unpack this book a little bit. And I thought we start with kind of how this book came to be.

**Jesse Stommel** [00:06:21] Yeah, you know, interestingly, I've been talking about the book a lot lately, and you, I think, you are the first person who's asked me directly, like, how did this book come into the world? And I kind of like the story, so I'm excited to get to unpack this a little bit with you. I don't know why it is, but I like projects like this to be a secret, so I didn't tell anyone that I was working on this. I've actually been working on it. Well, it depends on when you start counting. I've been doing some version of on grading alternative assessments since I started teaching in 2001, and I've been leading workshops about alternative assessments since I think 2003. I have been writing publicly about grades assessment since I think 2012. But in 2017, I started in a really concerted way to write a series of posts on my blog, and that first post is called Why I Don't Grade. And then the follow up to that was called How to Ungrade. And then I've published some book chapters, I've published lots more blog posts. I have published pieces in academe, pieces in times higher ed. But from that very first post, why I don't grade, I had this idea that I was working on a book and I told a few people quietly behind the scenes that I was working on this book, but I did not talk about it publicly and I just proceeded to write blog posts over many years. The truth is that from that very first blog post, I was always writing this book and at certain points I wasn't sure I was going to finish it. Or maybe I would, maybe I wouldn't. This is why I didn't tell anyone I was writing a book, because then you inevitably get the question, Well, when's it coming out? Well, how long until you're finished? Turns out it took me six years to write this book, and it came out very recently, and I really released it with very little advance fanfare. I think I let people know about it five days before it came out. And part of that is because right up until that point, I didn't know exactly what it was coming out or exactly whether it would be finished. I mean, you're working on these things kind of right up to the wire. I jokingly told my husband, well, jokingly, but also fully seriously, about three months ago, I told him, no, I don't even know if it was three months ago. I might have just been about two months ago. And the book came out a month ago. So two months ago, I tell my husband I said, I think I'm going to write a book this weekend. And I went down into my basement office and I spent the weekend writing. And in this case, writing meant taking all of these things I had been working on for the last five and a half years and assembling them into something that looked like a book, which is the piece of this project I hadn't done. I have almost enough at that point. And I just thought, Well, now's the time, I'm just going to put this together. And so I put it together and I knew all along that I always wanted to write about three or four new chapters already, kind of vaguely knew what they were going to be. So I sat down in a weekend, put this thing together, wrote drafts of these two, three chapters, and then weekend editor. And I said, Hey, Josh, that's my husband. I think I'm done with the book. And so he loves to tell the story because I in some ways wrote this book in a weekend. But also it took six years and also took 12 years and also took 23 years.

**AS** [00:09:55] Well, so maybe one strategy for people, because I know some people that say, Oh, I want to write a book, I just can't sit down and just get it done, is I think a strategy is if you blog for many years, you have the content there. Right. So it's a matter of just stitching it together. But that's really funny that you didn't tell that many people, but you stitched that up and over the weekend and then five days later you, you announce that. I love the book. And one of the things I want to do is, I'm a hard core practitioner and so are the audience here. One of the reasons they love the Student Success Podcast because they get beyond theory, beyond, well be more equitable! Or be more culturally responsive. They get actual examples like some nuts and bolts. So could you give us a taste test of the book of some of those nuts and bolts specific ways of doing ungrading? Because we hear a lot about it's a mindset, we get that, got to have an equity mindset, making sure that you don't have a student advisor mindset. That's great, that's foundational, that's so important. What are some specific strategies that you use and that you recommend for ungrading?

**Jesse Stommel** [00:11:11] I'm going to push your question off just a little bit and say a few things first, which is that I'm really inspired by this quote that I have in the book. And I actually I think over the course of writing these blog posts, I think I quoted this bit from Alfie Kohn three or four times, and he says something to the effect of I don't know if I can remember it completely, perfectly off the top of my head, but he says something to the effect of when we focus too much on the how's, we chase the why's back into a corner. And so this is one of the reasons why the whole first part of the book really keeps pushing and bracketing that conversation of how do we do this? How do we make it happen? It isn't because I don't think we need practical conversations about what this looks like in our individual teaching approach, I desperately think we need that. But in some ways, one of the things that the book sets up is this notion that we really need to just sit with our philosophy. Who are we as teachers? What do we think education is for? What kinds of relationships do we want to create with students? And that in some ways like, well, how do I do my grades or how do I do my assessment? We need to push that question off. Interestingly, I think this is incredibly practical work. And the reason it's incredibly practical work is because I think that answering that later question, how am I going to do my grades? How am I going to do my assessment is so much easier if the first thing we do is just start with those fundamental questions. So they may sound philosophical, they may sound like they're about mindset, but for me they're actually fundamental. And it's asking ourselves, what do we want to achieve as teachers? What kinds of relationships do we want to create? What is education for? I have an exercise that I do with teachers when I'm running workshops about pedagogy called Hashtag, and I call it hashtag because it happened on Twitter initially before Twitter fell into a, you know, a pit of despair, it's called hashtag four word pedagogy spelled out f-o-u-r-w-o-r-d pedagogy. And the reason I spell that out is because you can still find some of these tweets out there on Twitter as it lies at the bottom of this pit of despair. What I ask people to do is I said, write your pedagogies in four words. And I was inspired in some ways by the notion of a six word story where you write a story with a narrative in six words. For me it was, can we encapsulate our pedagogy in four words? In some ways, when I first did it, it was an experiment. Just I thought it was just in some ways like an icebreaker, a beginning to conversation. I ended up getting thousands of responses to this the first time I did it on Twitter. I think something like 3500 different responses, and some of them were just so dislocating for me as a teacher forced me to just reimagine what all of this was about because teachers were taking everything they believed about teaching and putting it into this kernel, these words. When I did that, I actually thought, Oh, well, if I'm going to do this exercise and I did it in-person and virtually at the same time, if I'm going to do this exercise, I have to come up with my forward pedagogy and my firm forward pedagogy that I came up really quick as an example was start by trusting students. And that has stuck with me since that day. I think I probably have a book in me with that as its title. Start by trusting students. I actually it occurred to me I could title this book start by trusting students, but I thought, no, I actually think I've got another book somewhere in the future, but I'm not going to tell anyone that I'm writing it. But at some point in the future I might use that. So I guess what I want to say is that to start this conversation about the nuts and bolts, I think that actually is nuts and bolts. What is your pedagogy? Who are you? What do you want to achieve? And from there, I think we needed that build on top of it. Some approaches, but happy to answer more questions and dive into the nuts and bolts more.

**AS** [00:15:16] I take teams through what I call a process of inquiry and action, so we get the coalition of the willing, mostly faculty, and we look at some data, we form our data-informed purpose statement and then figure out what do we want to do. And they, before they started on their journey toward an action plan, they wanted to know from their own faculty in their departments, they want to identify actually the faculty that have very high success rates, very low equity gaps or nonexistent equity gaps. And we ended up doing a focus group with them. And the first question that I asked them is to please describe your philosophy of teaching or your mission statement for teaching. I'm really glad you kind of, you know, that you pushed a little bit here. I appreciate you for doing that, because now I'm remembering, even though they're fantastic teachers and they were able to give us a lot of ideas, really good nuts and bolts ideas, they actually struggled with that question. And so if they struggled with it and they are pretty fantastic teachers, then those that are, let's just say, don't really care too much about their craft, what are they going to say? Right? So I really appreciate that, Jesse. So maybe if you want let's let's unpack that a little bit more about that foundational piece before we get into some some examples. Are you good with that?

**Jesse Stommel** [00:16:41] Yeah, And actually, I guess what I would say is that I don't in some ways it's not about them not understanding their craft. It might also just be that they don't have the language to talk about their craft. And I think that that's a fact that most teachers in higher education especially get little to no preparation or support for the work of teaching. A half of teachers in higher education by various different metrics get almost no preparation for the work of teaching. So it might be that they do have some sense of understanding of their craft but don't have the language to describe it.

**AS** [00:17:22] Good point. Good point, Jesse. Let's take the audience through some of the chapters. Give them a little taste. I hope that they, and by the way, I really love your frequently asked questions. I'm going to ask you later a few of them, because they're so great. I love that part of the book. Obviously, we're not going to do all because we want people to read the book. So take us through a journey of the book.

**Jesse Stommel** [00:17:47] Yeah, my husband actually, when I finished the book and he looked at the table of contents, he said, I love that your book has a frequently asked questions, and part of that is borne out of the process of creating the book. I don't think you have a frequently asked questions if you just write a book in solitude from beginning to end. But writing the book in public and in public both having it appear on my blog, but also regularly presenting chapters from the book and hearing people's voices, the questions they had, the responses they had, the reactions they had. Getting to see it on their face meant that the book has a completely different flavor. For me, it feels like it was written to gather with its audience because of the way it came about, and so having it have a frequently asked questions, I don't know that frequently asked questions is just in that chapter. I think it's threaded throughout the book. That chapter is kind of standing in for the fact that that notion of this book as something that is in conversation with its audience, it kind of runs throughout the first chapter. I wrote the chapter called Why I Don't Grade, which is well, and it's and it's not actually the first chapter. I'll say something about that a little bit more, but it's the first chapter I wrote knowing it would end up in a book at some point. There's a couple of chapters that I wrote back in 2012 and 2015, but they didn't know they were going to live in this book at the time that I wrote them. The first one that I knew was going to appear in this book was the one I wrote in 2017 called Why I Don't Grade. And I really wanted to start with this just the question of what is wrong with grades, and this one doesn't actually have a lot of research in it. There is research throughout the book that backs up the notion that grades are flawed, that grades do harm to students from marginalized populations, that grades are inequitable. That kind of data is strong throughout the book. But this one comes from a place of feeling. And it's partly because early on when I started leading workshops about grades, I would start with the question, How does it feel to be graded? How does it feel to grade? And the reason I did that was because over years of talking about grades, I, I discovered that feeling. Words came up in almost every discussion that I had about grades. Like if I asked a question like, why do we grade? What would happen if we didn't grade? The responses contained so many feeling words. So there's so much emotion tied up in grades, whether it's anxiety, whether it's a feeling of a loss of control. If you were going to give up grades. It's a feeling of being controlled if you're a student. But honestly, also if you're a teacher feeling like you're being controlled, feeling like people are watching you, people are going to expect particular things out of your grades. More than any other part about education, I found that people have not a lot of positive feelings associated with grades. Some, but mostly a lot of trauma and a lot of sort of deep angst around grades. And so I wanted that chapter to really embody that, to sort of it in some ways ask the question of how does it feel for me to grade, but also feels like it's almost a series of provocations. Like, this is what I think about when I'm thinking about grades. And so I wanted the book to in some way start from that place of feeling and slowly sort of get to move away from that place, almost modeling or mirroring what I do when I lead workshops. Whereas we start with just generated from the audience. What do we think of what do we associate with grades? What is the muck that we feel mired in? What is, what are the bureaucracies associated with this? And then to kind of build from there.

**AS** [00:21:31] We get back to bureaucracy, huh? Let's let's unpack a little bit because you have some chapters on the LMSs, and do you want to describe that a little bit,.,

**Jesse Stommel** [00:21:42] Yeah. And actually, that's kind of the next bit in the book. It is in some ways, and I went back and forth and back and forth as I was slowly putting this book together while slowly in a weekend, but also through the final revisions and final editing processes. After that weekend, I went back and forth. It essentially has three chapters that are about learning management systems, ones about data which feels connected to the learning management system, but it has two full chapters that are basically about the learning management system. They mentioned grades, but grades aren't kind of the core of those chapters. And I thought to myself, well, I'm not writing a book about learning management systems, am I? What is this? What does this have to do with anything? But it felt so important to spend enough time there. And part of the reason why I spent time there is I'm talking about grades as a system and I'm talking about grades, sort of the culture of grades. And I ask myself, where does that culture come from? What is feeding that culture? What is amplifying that culture? What is creating the anxiety that we feel around grades? And I was thinking about the ways in which teachers in higher education get very little preparation. Teachers in K-12 and higher education get very little support for the work of teaching. And then institutions are investing huge amounts of money in proctoring software, in plagiarism detection software, in learning management systems, and in some ways increasing their spending on these technological systems while decreasing their spending on support for teachers. And I've seen that over the course of my entire career, and it seems to just be getting faster. And what are those learning management systems doing? In some ways, I feel like the learning management system is attempting not very well to fill a gap, left a void left, don't adequately prepare teachers, don't adequately support teachers, give them a learning management system. And then what is those? What is that learning management system doing? It's essentially teaching teachers how to teach, and it's also dictating pedagogy to teachers so that that learning management becomes the compass that they're following instead of their own philosophies, instead of their own beliefs about what matters about the work of teaching or what teaching looks like. And I think these systems are insidious because these pedagogies are baked so deep into the system and the systems profess to be neutral when they're not actually neutral. And so these systems are telling us how we should grade. They're telling us what matters about our work. And increasingly over the years, I have so many students who come to me, I barely use the learning management system. My institution requires that I use it a certain amount, but I just read really carefully and say, Oh, I have to do exactly that much inside of the learning management system, and I do exactly that much, no more. But I have students come to me and say, where are the grades in the learning management system? And I'm flummoxed by this question because I've been really clear that I don't grade and I've been really clear that I don't use the learning management system. And yet students nevertheless ask about it in its absence, as it's almost a couple of things they feel they feel like without it, they're rudderless. And I. I think teachers often feel the same. Like without it, they're potentially rudderless. And I think that's problematic. I think our rudder, we should be our rudders, whether we're students or teachers, not a learning management system, not a for profit technology that's trafficking in student data, etc., so really that whole section about the book is to essentially say what is one of the most insidious mechanisms by which the culture and system of grades is propagated.

**AS** [00:25:28] And I got to imagine, Jesse, that it got even worse during the pandemic because everybody was flocking to teach online. And so they go to these systems because they had to rely on them, and now they're over relying on them, especially the grades piece and students asking, where are my grades? Towards the end you talk about, I think it's chapters 10 or 11 around assessment. Can you give us kind of an overview of that aspect of the book?

**Jesse Stommel** [00:25:59] Yeah. So after the learning management system, the first bits after that I talk about, I have the chapter how to ungrade, which I, and I wondered where to put this, but how to ungrade was my second piece that I wrote when I first started the book after Why I Don't Grade. And so it actually has a relatively nascent description of my on grading practice and nascent in the sense that it was six years ago. It wasn't all that nascent for me because I had been on, you know, doing some version of ungrading or alternative assessment for 13 years at that point. However, I found really quickly that the things that I was talking about in that chapter were changing and they were changing for a number of different reasons. One, the pandemic, the other, I had been doing a fellowship and doing a bunch of research about food and housing insecurity, working closely with a colleague of mine, Sara Goldrick-Rab, who does work on higher education policy, focused on food and housing insecure. And essentially she and I talked for many years about the ways in which there's both a policy response to food and housing insecurity, but there's also a pedagogical response. So really starting to think about equity in a more granular way, looking at specific populations of students, this is something that have been important to me all along. And in some ways, I think if we talk about, well, what's the why of alternative assessments, because grades do harm to marginalized students. At a more granular level, thinking about something like if we know that one in two of our students have experienced food insecurity in the last 30 days, then how does that change our pedagogical approach? If we know our students are experiencing homelessness and the housing insecured are at a rapidly increasing rate, what does that mean for something like homework, which is meant to be done from home? If we think about the the pandemic and the notion of learning from home or pivoting to online, what does it look like to learn from home if you don't have a home from which to learn from? Or there was conversations about making students turn on their cameras in Zoom. And to me, it was like, well, if you have a good percentage of your population who might be homeless or housing insecure, how do you demand that they turn their cameras on? Where are they even able to learn? What private place do they have to learn from where some of these proctoring technologies that require students to be in a closed space, they have to be in a quiet space. They have to have a closed door. They have to have multiple cameras looking at them. And I think to myself, what privileged population of students even has that space from which to do that? So then, I mean, ultimately my teaching and my approach to grades has changed so rapidly just in the writing of this book, because some of that work and because of that what we've all been dealing with since 2020. And so I start with how to, how to ungrade, and then I continue to revise that over the second half of the book, continue to talk about, Well, now let's add this to the mix and then what do we do now? Let's add this to the mix and then what do we do? And the newest chapters that I wrote for the book were one called Toward a co-intentional assessment, and then the other one on grading for equity. And those are the ones that I had always started to draft and started to work on and given presentations about, but hadn't really put into a into a concrete form. And so ultimately those became the product of everything leading up up to those chapters that ultimately we can talk about how we might ungrade, we can talk about alternatives to assessment, but those have to be constantly under revision because we have to be attentive to the specific circumstances of the students that we're dealing with at that particular moment. There is no magic solution to the issue of equity in education. It has to be constantly under revision because our students are changing and we're changing and our contexts are changing.

**AS** [00:30:04] So in the same way that I don't like to be have a student deficit mindset, I've over the years, I've learned not to have a faculty deficit mindset when I see just some atrocious practices because I have to think back to, well, they were probably done to them in graduate school, right? Or even growing up. And so they that's what they learn. And so when they get their degree and they teach, they're just passing on those antiquated practices and doing that to to their students. So when they have an open mind, Jesse, that, okay, I'm willing to learn more about this ungrading, but they don't want to go on the deep end of the pool yet have it where they're at a point even when they're starting their first semester that students are giving themselves grades. Right? How can you help them tip their toes in the water, so to speak? How would you what would you recommend for them? Start with one assignment or two? And does it matte the subject matter? How can you help them feel like you can do this? Start small here. You can start by doing A, B and C.

**Jesse Stommel** [00:31:20] Yeah. I want to push on your metaphor a little bit. The notion of not going into the deep end of the pool. I think to be honest, I would say there is only the deep end of the pool, I think that the notion of the deep end of the pool implies that there's a shallow end of this pool. And the thing is, when we're talking about students are food insecure, neurodivergent, or queer students who have been ostracized from their family. When we're talking about students from marginalized populations, they don't just get to snap their fingers and suddenly be in a shallow end of a pool. So recognizing that a lot of our students are in the deep end of the pool and so we can't start from the shallow end, but to, you know, to to support what you're saying, we do still need to have a way in. And I don't think that way in is just a toss ourselves into the pool that, you know, the way in is to look at that pool and say, what's going on inside of this pool? How where can I be of help? What can I do? And also to look at ourselves and consider our own labor conditions. The reason that I don't demonize teachers in higher education, one in two teachers got little to no preparation for the work of teaching, as I already pointed out, which means they also got no preparation for teaching online. Suddenly, in a pandemic, they got no preparation for teaching from a place of equity or teaching marginalized students or teaching neurodivergent students, or no preparation, thinking about the complexities of something like accessibility and accommodations and and disability. And so all of these things become overwhelming for that teacher who's looking at the pool going, Well, I don't you know, I didn't even get prepared to lead a discussion in a classroom, much less deal with everything that's going on in this pool. And then the other bit is that 70% of the workforce in higher education is contingent or working contingent, adjunct precariously, which means that they're not adequately prepared, not adequately supported, sometimes not making a living wage themselves, sometimes dealing with their own food, food and housing insecurity. So all of which is to say that sit down at the edge of the pool, put your feet in the pool, look at the pool, talk about the pool, talk to the people in the pool, maybe like reach a hand out to those people to bring them over to the side, hold on to the side of the pool before we move any further. And for me what does that look like? I think it looks like a couple of things. The first thing it looks like is looking around at your institution and asking what barriers are there and what can you do to start to knock down some of those barriers, both barriers to your work, but also barriers to the students in their work. So that might be are the teachers at your institution paid a living wage? And is there ways that you can advocate for the teachers? Are you tenured at your institution and there's other folks around you who are struggling and precarious positions? Is there ways that you can collaborate with each other so that you can support their work and that ultimately you can help them and ultimately that helps you as well? So that to me is the first thing, what are the structural barriers? And then the other piece is what does it mean to start small to me? And to start small means talking to students really frankly about what's going on, which means having them talk about their own education, having you talk about grades as a system, having you potentially talk about your own precarity. I mean, certainly it's important to have boundaries. I'm a big fan of boundaries, but it's also the way that we erect boundaries is by being open, by trusting each other, by deciding what our limits are, deciding what matters. And for me, having those frank conversations is the first step towards ungrading. These can be really simple. It can be sitting down to students and saying, How does it feel when you're graded? When you're graded, how does it affect your motivation? What does one grade signal to you? What does an A in this class signal to you? What would a B signal. Two things, one, you find out things from your students and usually it's unexpected what you hear back and answer to those kind of simple questions. But you also just feel the students feel more like they're getting to see under the hood of grades as a system. So if you change nothing else about how you grade, just having a conversation with students about what grades are and how grades work. The one reason why this is super helpful is the biggest problem. One of the biggest problems of grades is that they don't communicate very clearly. What does an A mean? What does an A-minus mean? What does an A-minus B-plus mean? If I give you a 97 and I get a 95, what's the difference between those grades? The only functional difference is that a 97 is higher than the 95, so that the only thing it communicates clearly is that you did better than I did. So it ends up being a good system for ranking people against each other, not a good system for giving students feedback about how they're doing. But if you have those conversations, then grades start to have a meaning that isn't just purely abstract. So that's the first thing that I would say. And then I think you already named the next thing, which is grade less often, grade more simply, find ways to grade more clearly. And then ideally, which is where I've come to in my pedagogy, grade and do assessment as a conversation with students. So that assessment isn't something that happens to students, but it's something that they're engaged directly in. It's not something we're doing to them. It's a conversation.

**AS** [00:36:44] Thank you for that. Yeah, I remember my first year teaching, I was in survival mode. I felt like I was thrown into the deep end without knowing how to swim. And so that's where that pool metaphor comes to mind. And because we've been so indoctrinated even in K-12 to receive a grade, how do you deal with students who are anxious that they're not going to be graded? How do you deal with that? I'm stealing that from one of your FAQs. You have many, but I'm just giving people a little taste here of your FAQ.

**Jesse Stommel** [00:37:22] Yeah. The thing I guess I would say first is that the that you asking that question me asking that question, in some ways we're worried about student anxiety because we feel that anxiety because teachers, especially teachers in higher education, but teachers at all levels tend to be the people who performed best within grading systems. We stayed in school and in some cases we stayed in school a long time. I joke that I'm a 13 year senior because I stayed in school a long, long time, and that was because I like I thrived within those systems. So the people who are most anxious about it are often the teachers who spent many, many years thriving within those systems, and then students, the students, especially the students who perform really well in those systems, they're often the ones who experience the most anxiety, and they experience anxiety because they have a visible goal post and they know how to reach that goal post. They're well trained, well versed, well practiced, and reaching that goal post. So if you remove that goal post, suddenly they feel a sense of dislocation. And the thing I would say is that they're worried. What are they worried about? They're worried a rug is going to get pulled out from under them. And they're also worried that there won't be a visible goal post. And so one of the things I say in the book is don't replace visible goal posts with invisible goal posts. You have to talk about the goal posts and as you move it to the side, you have to talk about what's going to be there instead and ultimately what's going to be there instead. It's not going to be a system like grades. It's going to be a system that's different from that. So for me, it's about talking to students about what metacognition is. So metacognition isn't just a fancy word for, you know, talking about our own thinking. Metacognition is a practice. It's something that we engage in as part of our learning. We learn better when we're thinking about and reflecting on our learning. The other thing, as we learn better with other people, when we're thinking about and reflecting on and talking about our own learning, because your learning wouldn't be visible to me can't be inside your head. I mean, we imagine we can do that when we're giving grades. We imagine we could look at a paper and somehow grade the student learning. But the student learning isn't on that piece of paper. The student learning is still in the other person's head. And so ultimately, metacognition is what starts to surface. Some of that, getting people talking about what's happening for them as they're learning and as they're experiencing difficulty and anxiety ends up allowing us to collaborate better with one another. So I usually find that I can get over that anxiety really quickly. And what's interesting is we ask the question, Well, what if students are experiencing anxiety about ungrading or anxiety about other alternative approaches to assessment? Well, students experience a lot of anxiety about grades, so it's not like we're increasing the anxiety for students. It might be different, a different kind of anxiety. But ultimately, if we're talking really open with students, it becomes an anxiety that we can move through and move past, I think. A little bit of anxiousness is good. I think a little bit of anxiousness is a sign when people are learning that something is happening with them that's unexpected and that's learning ultimately. So a little bit, but making sure that there's guardrails and making sure that there's supports in place so that students never feel like that anxiety is going to be outside out of their control.

**AS** [00:40:49] Thank you, Jesse. So you provide a lot of narrative feedback. I remember since following you, you take a lot of time to give students feedback, to really take care, to help them understand and help them reflect on their work. So how do you do that? How do you manage that? For the faculty member that says, Oh, I have 100 or 140 students per section? How do I begin to manage that when I'm providing, I'm supposed to provide all this feedback?

**Jesse Stommel** [00:41:22] Yeah, I mean, ultimately I would say that when I started doing this work, I was what I called a road warrior adjunct, teaching up to nine classes at four different institutions, teaching a thousand students, up to a thousand students in a term. So I didn't develop my teaching approach in a, you know, a happy little, I've only got one section of 15 students per year. Ultimately, a lot of my practices are about saving time for the teacher because so many of us at work in precarious positions or our overworked and ultimately I want to spend less time on grading and more time developing relationships with students. And I don't think that it's it isn't as simple as replacing grades with feedback because feedback can potentially have its own set of problems. Feedback can also be hierarchical. Feedback can also be a device or a mechanism for power and control. Feedback can be presumptive, feedback can be patronizing. And so to some extent, just loading students with feedback can do the same or worse than what grades do. So for me, it's about asking students what kind of feedback they need and not necessarily feeling like there's something in us that makes us feel like and I did this when I was first grading papers. I wasn't putting grades on them, actually. I know I was great putting grades on them because I was a TA first. So I did have to put grades on papers when I was TA and I would use a pomodoro timer and I would set it for like a minute and a half. So I would spend a minute and a half on each paper. I don't remember the time that was on the Pomodoro timer. I think a pomodoro timer is just a minute or 2 minutes or something like that. But so I would time myself and I would try and spend the same amount of time on every paper. And I realize, like in hindsight, how kind of bizarre that is and imagines that every student needs the exact same amount of feedback, that they need the exact same amount of time for me. It's sort of a notion of fairness, but I don't think that's really how that bears out. There are times when a student just needs to be left alone and they'll tell me that. They'll tell me I'm I'm doing great. I'm in the zone. And I think I have a vision for what I'm doing. I don't need help right now, but I'll call you in later because I think there's a point later that I might need you. If we load that person up with feedback, it's not useful. It's not good time management for us and it's not good for them or their process. So instead of figuring out when students need feedback, what kind of feedback they need. So it might mean that on a particular assignment there are a bunch of students I don't give any feedback to at all, and there are a few students that I work with really carefully. So when students are writing self evaluations, I always have a question that says, What are you struggling with? What do you need help with? What questions do you have? Where are you at right now? And I use those in the answers that they put there sort of determine when and how I engage with those students. I also do a lot of giving, and this is great for the teacher who has 250 students in a lecture class. You don't have time to write a letter to 250 students. Those 250 students might all write self reflections. Honestly, with 250 self reflections, you might not even have time to read them all. But what you can do is survey them. And by the time you've read the 25th one, you'll start to notice trends, you'll start to see things recur. And so maybe it is that you just flip through them and carefully read a handful of them, and then you write a letter back to all of the students and say, here's what I'm noticing. But, you know, as teachers, we think we're not doing our job. If we're not grading, we're not doing our job. If we're not reading every single bit of student work. The great thing about not expecting ourselves to read every single thing that students do is that all of a sudden we can ask students to do a lot more. This is what Peter Albo calls a zero point assignment. We tell students, you just got to do it. You don't even have to turn anywhere. All of a sudden we can ask students do way more work because it doesn't have to pass by our approving eyes in order to have happened or to have been valuable.

**AS** [00:45:21] That's so helpful, jesse. It reminds me, I was working with a group of English faculty and the prompt I gave them, what's been really difficult to teach and very difficult for students to understand. Something that was a problem in 1923, in 1933 and 1943, all the way to 2023. And what they did, is they did bring in sample student work and they didn't bring 250 papers. They kind of brought in, I forgot how many, about maybe 20 papers, and they began to see a theme that they really struggle with analysis and the faculty struggle teaching analysis. That was the jumping board, right, for figuring out, let's finally tackle analysis. How can we as faculty come together to collaborate, to figure out how are we going to teach this? So they actually created a common lesson plan for that. They did a graphic. It was beautiful graphic organizer and everything. So what's your answer to that, Jesse? When the institution says you got to submit grades, how do you help a faculty member with that question?

**Jesse Stommel** [00:46:52] I think I mean, the first thing that I recommend that folks do is they go to their institution's policies around assessment. It might be their institution, it might be their department, it might be both. And just find out what the policies actually are. We often internalize so much expectation that isn't necessarily there at our institutions. Most institutions that I work with have pretty bare bones expectations around assessment, and they're usually not always, but they're usually pretty clear about what those expectations are. And so go find out what those expectations are. And especially if you're adjunct or you're precarious, follow the rules, but don't follow rules that aren't actually there. Instead, then use the gap that is created for you because the institution isn't telling you everything to figure out how to insert yourself in your own pedagogy. For example, I've never seen an institution that says students can't do 100% of the decision making around the grades that they get. Sure, they might. Some might imply that's probably not what they mean, but I've never seen one say that. And so the thing is that you have to put a grade on a transcript. Well, what is that act? That act is bubbling at a scantron or picking a grade from a dropdown. There may be no reason at all that you can't just allow students to make the decision about what that grade is. And if we ask ourselves, well, then I'm not doing the job as my job as a teacher, that makes an assumption about what our job is as a teacher. It's our job to rank students against one another is our jobs to quantitatively evaluate students. Is that what we boil, you know, boil our life's work down to most of us know most of us think something else is important, more important than that. And so that I mean, that's what I would say is give as much or even the smallest bit of that work over to students so that students are partners in that process as opposed to merely recipients of the grade that they're getting. If you're not comfortable having students grade themselves, have students write a self-reflection where they talk about their learning in the course. Because then when you go to give them a grade, that's just more information that you have. And it's actually information that isn't anecdotal information that is it's about something that is going on inside of the students head that you can't make visible in any other way than having them write about it.

**AS** [00:49:16] So as we wrap up here, well, you humanities people, you English and and writing people, you and your ungrading. I'm a math instructor. I'm in STEM. Don't give me this baloney. How do you respond to that?

**Jesse Stommel** [00:49:32] Ultimately, what I would say is that there are lots of different disciplines that function in lots of different ways, and we ultimately need to adapt whatever assessment or approach to grades we use to our disciplines. So that means that, no, I don't necessarily think a math professor can grade just like I do or or use, assess the exact same assessment tools that I use. On the other hand, I don't think that there's something unique about specific disciplines that change the nature of grades themselves. Grades are inequitable. Lots of data shows the way that grades do harm. They do harm to marginalized students, but they also just do harm to intrinsic motivation. And I don't think in any discipline, I don't think there is a discipline that is thinking to itself. I really want to kill intrinsic motivation. And so what I would say is that there's ways that these approaches can be incorporated into any discipline. And it's about asking yourself what matters to me, what matters to my discipline, what's most important? I often get asked the question, Well, would you want your doctors to be grading themselves? And my answer to that is I almost died from a chronic illness and the doctor did exploratory surgery. It ended up being chronic appendicitis and very strange presentation of it. The doctor did exploratory surgery. He just started to cut into my abdomen. And what I needed that doctor to be able to do was when they encountered something they'd never encountered before, I needed them to have the problem solving skills, the critical thinking skills that they needed in order to address that. I didn't need their ability to give sutures to be quantified on a 100 point scale. What I needed was in that moment when they saw something they'd never seen before, I needed them to be able to save my life. And to me, that's not about how many times they were graded. They were having to do something novel at that moment. And so in some ways, in some of those disciplines, it's even more important that we have those metacognitive faculties. I needed them to know that they could cut and not kill me, and that took self assessment, not external assessment.

**AS** [00:51:52] That's a beautiful example and I'm glad you're well that you here. Oh, boy. I got to tell the whole the whole health care system, I had to deal, I had to yell at doctors and oh, my gosh, that's just another talk about pedagogy and processes in that industry. They do so much, they actually kill people. But at any rate, one more thing I wanted to ask you about, because I did work with a group of math faculty, and one of the things that I was able to get them to investigate is just to do a survey with the math faculty to understand how do you grade, you know, what's the frequency, what do you provide a point system, weighted, do you allow students to drop a grade or not? Right. So long story short, what we found out from this data is that it's basically a lottery for students, what section they enroll in, because just weightting alone the way they weighed, one instructor, the way they weight a student will earn but a A-minus. The same student in a with a different instructor would earn a C because of how things are weighted. And this was presented to the math department. And as you can imagine, there are people like, well, you know, you know, just protecting those antiquated practices. I have to be really tough because if I don't, then I'm not preparing them for the next class or my colleague over here, he's just too easy. Right. Which is kind of a deficit mindset for your own colleagues. Like, yeah, the first thing they go to that they, that they're easy, not that they are really focused on learning and I find that fascinating. Last or maybe second to last question for you is how have you helped faculty that are still stuck on that mindset about grades and are still skeptical. How do you move them along? What are some strategies, some techniques to help them understand that this is really about learning and this is the so much better for our students, especially our faculty that teach at community colleges, with the most disproportionate impact to students, open access universities. Right. What's been your experience to help them change their mindsets?

**Jesse Stommel** [00:54:19] I think that thing that I often go to is a comment that a student gave to me that helped me kind of put this in perspective. A student said to me once on the course evaluations, they said these two sentences next to one another, just without much commentary around them. They said, I worked harder for this class than any other class in my life. It was an easy A. Those two questions next to one another. So the sense in which, like you're too easy on your students, the truth is that grading is easy. Quantifying people and ranking students against one another with a standardized mechanism, that's easy. What's harder is the critical thinking. What's harder is building relationships. What is harder is getting students to be able to evaluate themselves. And people often ask, What are you students good at grading themselves? And I say, No. Am I? No. I know this is deeply, deeply hard work that they learn over time. So if anything, my goal is not necessarily to make them experts at self-evaluation or self-reflection, but it's to plant seeds that then will potentially and hopefully continue to grow throughout their life so that even when they go into a class that is more conventionally grading, they're doing some of those self-reflective metacognitive activities and so that they approach all of their classes no matter how they're graded with a slightly different frame of reference. But to me that's harder work. People often put something like ungrading or something like alternative assessment or contract grading at odds with rigor. But ultimately, I can't stand the word rigor. We can have a whole other episode of that podcast, just about the word rigor. But the suggestion is that somehow these things are easier and, you know, doing what we've always done, following the status quo, doing what was done to us, that's way easier than developing a pedagogy that's well considered and thoughtful and created in conversation with students. Being graded by a standardized test is way easier than grading yourself using metacognitive techniques. So ultimately, that's what I would say. I would say that this is challenging work and letting them see how challenging it is.

**AS** [00:56:44] Start by trusting students. So, Jesse, I want to thank you so much for joining the podcast. I encourage everyone, and I'll have in the show notes a link to it. Also to Jesse's blog. He's got a lot of information, a lot of resources. Encourage everyone to please check out Undoing the Grade, Why we Grade and How to Stop. Jesse, I want to again, thank you so much for your time. Is there any last words of wisdom before we adjourn?

**Jesse Stommel** [00:57:17] I don't know. I guess I would say that truthfully, the last words of wisdom shouldn't be mine. That in the dedication to this book, the last people that I pay homage to are the students who ultimately, like, none of this would happen. None of my work would exist without them. They've influenced so much. So again, ask your students, talk to your students. That's where the wisdom will come from.