

Fostering Creativity and Risk-Taking Through Alternative Assessment in Music Technology and Beyond

Missouri Music Educators Association 88th Annual In-Service Workshop/Conference
"Harmonizing the Future: No Roads Needed. Just Music."

~~Alternative Assessment~~

Ungrading

What I want to share:

- Creativity and risk-taking depend on autonomy, challenge, and support
- Grades undermine creativity and intrinsic motivation
- What this looks like in practice (in the deep end)
- Some inspiration to get started this semester

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Summit Technology Academy (Lee's Summit, MO)**

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- **President, pianist of Lee's Summit Jazz Orchestra,
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- **Adjunct instructor at Univ. of Missouri-Kansas City and
Lindenwood**



What is Ungrading?

Ungrading is an assessment approach that does not emphasize points, scores, or letter grades.

Instead: Feedback, revision, self-evaluation and reflection.

Students often have greater flexibility in managing their workload.

When grades are required, final grades are typically determined through conversation between student and instructor, with student input (Stommel, 2023).

A Little Bit About My Research

“A Vital Role in Shaping All of Us”: Student Experiences with Ungrading and Durable Skills in Secondary Media

- freedom of choice
- a highly collaborative environment
- the safety of learning and participating in new experiences without fear of failure

My Origin Story?

My Experience With Ungrading in
the Previous Millennium

Also...



The most important thing to me:

creativity

“Creativity is as important as literacy.”

Sir Ken Robinson

How To Undermine Creativity

- Having students work for an expected reward
- Setting up competitive situations
- Focusing student attention on expected evaluation
- Using constant surveillance or monitoring
- Limiting autonomy through restricted-choice tasks

Hennessey, B. A., & Amabile, T. M. (1987)

PUNISHED
by
REWARDS

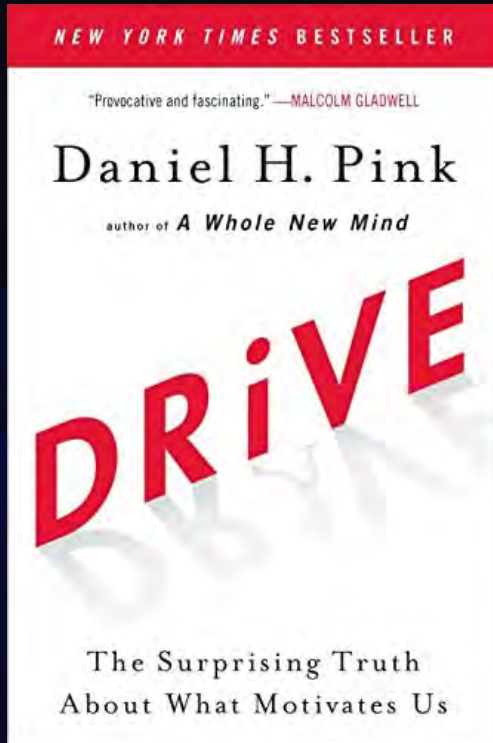
The Trouble with
GOLD STARS,
INCENTIVE PLANS,
A's, PRAISE,
and Other Bribes

With a New Afterword by the Author

ALFIE KOHN

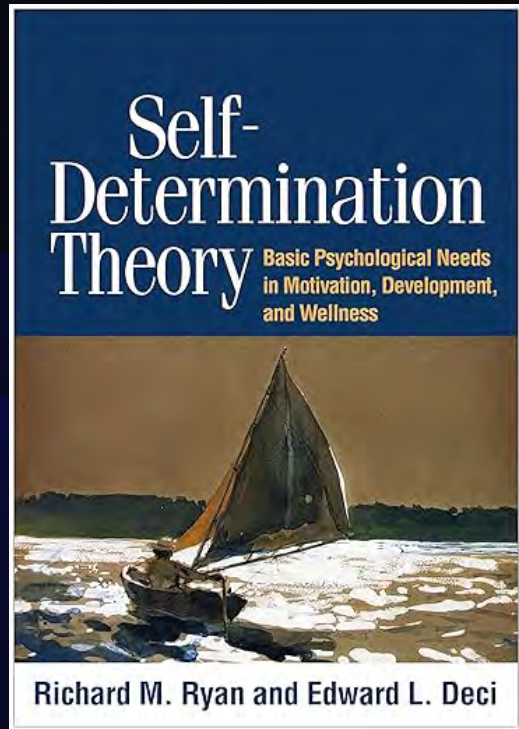
Author of *No Contest* and *The Schools Our Children Deserve*

“Artists do less creative work when that work is commissioned — that is, when they have contracted in advance for a reward.”



A 20-year study showed that students with lower extrinsic motivation during art school achieved greater professional success years later.

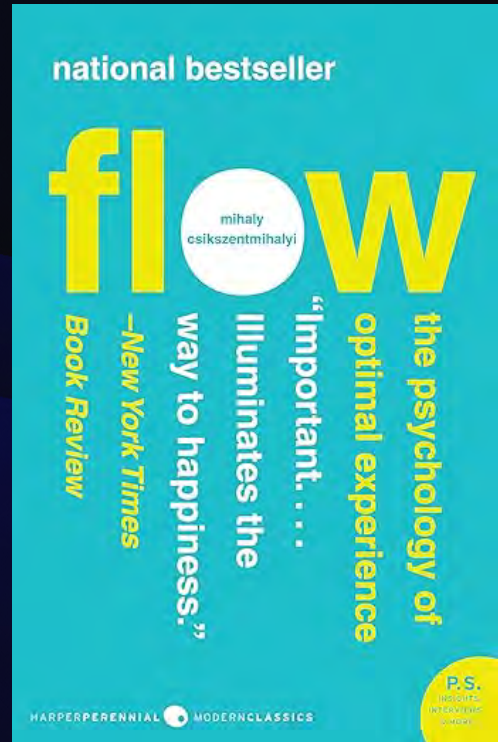
Intrinsically motivated artists: persisted through uncertainty and lack of recognition and produced work judged as higher quality.



Autonomy

Competence

Relatedness



A state of flow involves
“a clear set of goals...a
balance between
perceived challenges and
perceived skills.” and
consistent feedback.

10 to 25

The Science *of*
Motivating Young People



A Groundbreaking Approach
to Leading the Next Generation—
And Making Your Own Life Easier

DAVID YEAGER, PhD

Autonomy

Mentorship/Guidance

Motivated by “pride,
admiration, and respect.”

What's the opposite?

- No reward, no punishment
- Collaboration instead of competition
- Mentorship & feedback instead of evaluation
- Freedom and trust instead of surveillance
- Radical autonomy

**Let me try to make you at least a little
skeptical about grades.**

Grades Have Never Been Stable or Precise

- The A–F grading scale became standardized only in the mid-20th century (Schneider & Hutt, 2014)
- Yale used four grading systems between 1967–1981 (Schneider & Hutt, 2014)
- Grades were designed to:
 - sort and rank students
 - communicate with parents, colleges, and employers

100+ Years of Inconsistency

- Over a century ago, research showed teachers did not reliably grade the same work the same way

(Silberstein, 1922)

Nearly a century later:

- 73 teachers graded the same paper from 50–96

(Brimi, 2011)

- A century of research shows: wide variation in the meaning, validity, and reliability of grades (Brookhart et al., 2016)

Does this kind of sentiment sound familiar?

“The grade has in more than one sense a cash value, and if there is no uniformity of grading in an institution, this means directly that values are stolen from some and undeservedly presented to others.”

Meyer, M. “Experiences with the Grading System of the University of Missouri.” *Science*, 33(852), 661–667

1911

“When students from elementary school to college who are led to focus on grades are compared with those who aren’t, the results support three robust conclusions:

- Grades tend to diminish students’ interest in whatever they’re learning.**
- Grades create a preference for the easiest possible task.**
- Grades tend to reduce the quality of students’ thinking.”**

Kohn, Alfie. "The Case against Grades." Educational Leadership 69, no. 3 (2011): 28-33.

What Can We Do Instead?

- **Competency-Based Grading**

Students must demonstrate competence in broad program outcomes.

- **Specifications Grading**

Work is evaluated as meets specs or not yet against clear criteria.

- **Standards-Based Grading (SBG)**

Students are assessed on specific standards rather than point totals.

- **Contract Grading**

Students agree to clear expectations tied to a final grade.

- **Labor-Based Grading**


Grades are based on effort and process, not quality.

Getting started: The Four Pillars of Alternative Grading



credit to Robert Talbert, *Grading for Growth*

My Four Pillars:




Disconnect
from
the LMS



Disconnect
from
a calendar



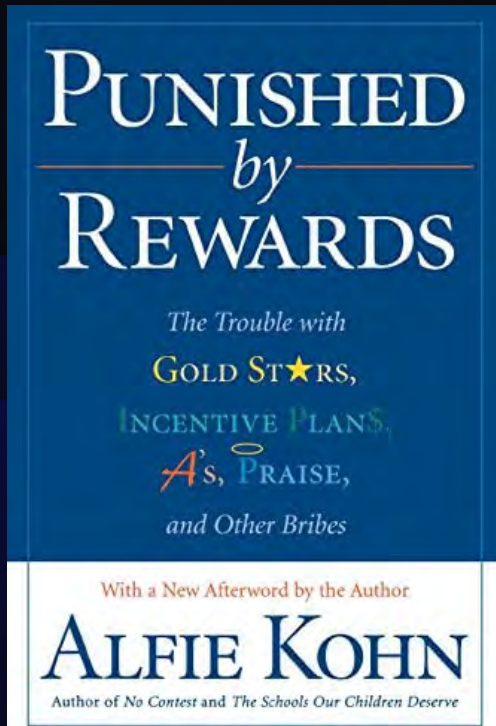
Use real
tools and
resources



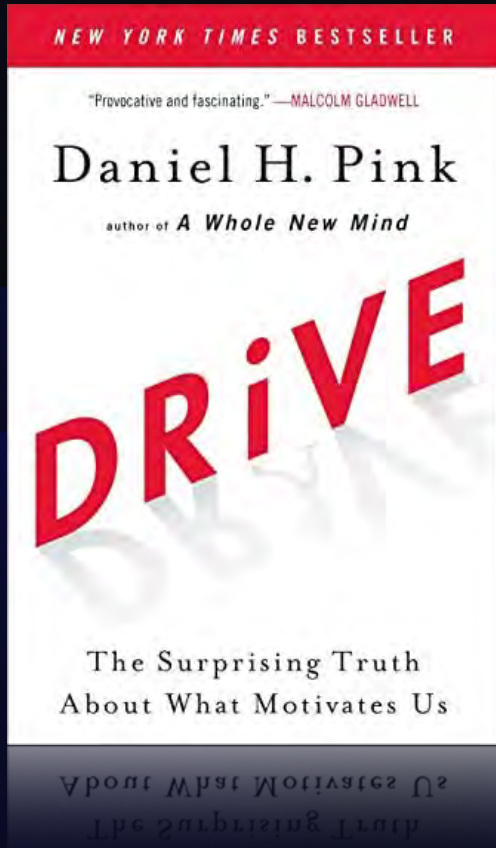
Connect to
the real
world

What we're doing in Lee's Summit Now (What's giving me permission to ungrade):

- Personalized Competency Based Learning
- Market Value Assets/Real-World Learning



Three Cs: Choice Collaboration Content



Autonomy

Personalized

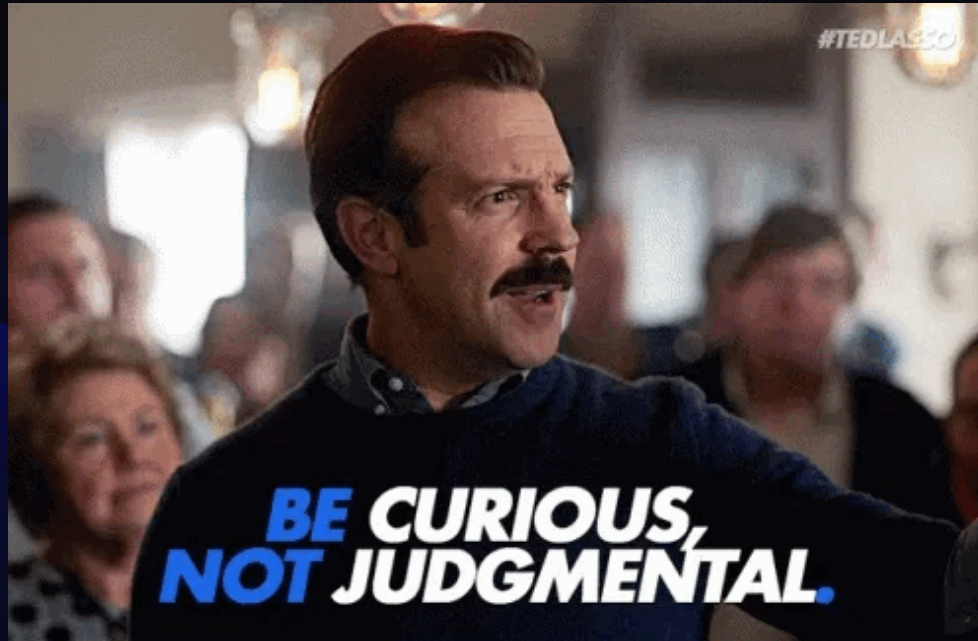
Mastery

Competency Based

Purpose

Real-World/Project-Based

Contract Based Grading



Mandel, B. J. "Teaching without Judging." *College English* 34, no. 5 (1973): 623-33. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2307/375330>.

Grading Contract for a B (Mandel, 1973):

- an intellectual journal covering the course readings and the class itself.
Due twice: mid-term and end of the term.
- “customized” exam (in-school? take-home? oral? on what? when?)
Due any time after the second-third of the term.
- paper on the influence of Artaud or Brecht on contemporary theatre.
Due any time.
- original play in the style of one modern playwright: Due any time.
- close analysis of one play (if the analysis differs from that which evolves in class discussion). Due any time.
- non-verbal project. Due by last class day of term.
- one of your own, but must be cleared with the instructor.

What might that look like in music tech?

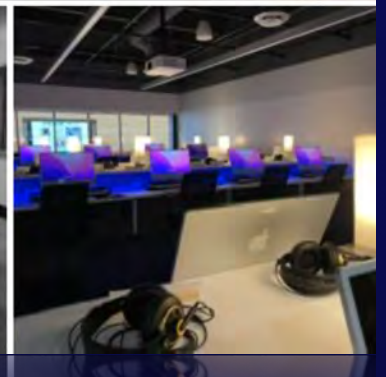
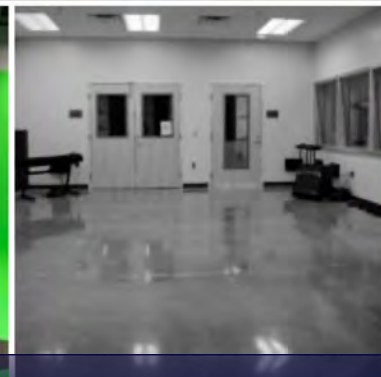
- Creative Process Journal – Digital journal documenting class work, projects, listening, and technical learning. Due twice: midterm and end of term.
- Customized Skills Assessment – Student-designed demonstration of technical learning (DAW workflow, signal flow, MIDI, editing, mixing, live audio, etc.). Due any time after the final third of the term.
- Artist/Producer Influence Project – Study of how a major artist, producer, or engineer shaped modern music production or sound design. Due any time.
- Original Music Project – Create an original piece in the style of a contemporary artist, genre, or producer, with production notes. Due any time.
- Track Analysis Project – Technical analysis of one professionally produced track (structure, sound design, mixing, effects, workflow). Due any time.
- Non-Verbal Audio Project – Sound-only storytelling project (soundscape, Foley, ambient narrative, audio storytelling without dialogue). Due by last class day of term.
- Student-Designed Project – Custom project proposed by the student and approved by the instructor, with defined learning goals and deliverables. Due date negotiated.

**Let's Dive Into the
Deep End**

What might this look like?

Digital Media
Technology

@STADigitalMedia
digitalmedia.lsr7.org



What I hope you would see from students:

- Engaged, active learning
- Collaboration & individual work
- Real world projects
- Skills learned when they're needed
- Things I can't even imagine

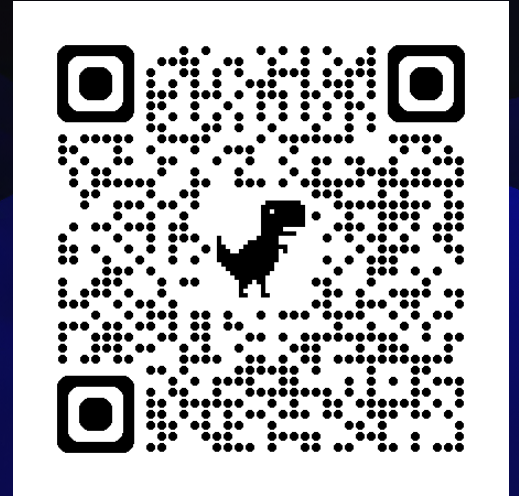
What I hope you would see from me:

- Daily meeting
- Mentoring, advising, problem solving, and trouble-shooting
- Digital observation & communication
- One-on-one and small group learning

Quests Website Walkthrough: quests.sta.lsr7.org

One example:

[https://quests.sta.lsr7.org/
course/33-samples-patches-
and-more/](https://quests.sta.lsr7.org/course/33-samples-patches-and-more/)



Some projects:



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ARTIFICIAL SOURCES

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Examples of Capstone Projects

**Let's Go Back to
the Shallow End**

Pick one assignment and one pillar



credit to Robert Talbert, *Grading for Growth*