

## 3QTL: Three Questions About Teaching and Learning

### Episode 1: How Might We Reimagine Assessment?

**Guest: Jesse Stommel**

#### **Description:**

Over the course of a twenty-five-year teaching career, Dr. Jesse Stommel has been interrogating the power dynamics that structure our grading and assessment practices. Every conversation about grades is also a conversation about power, he maintains, and “ungrading” might offer some possibilities for making our classrooms more inclusive, caring, and collaborative spaces. The rapid switch to online teaching during COVID-19 raised some new questions for Dr. Stommel about the state of post-secondary education, and he found himself reconsidering the very foundations of his teaching and learning practice. Join us as Dr. Stommel discusses the joys of collaboration and the problem with “pivots,” and shares some strategies for how we might reimagine grading and assessment.

#### **Bio:**

Jesse Stommel is currently a faculty member in the Writing Program at University of Denver. He is also co-founder of [Hybrid Pedagogy](#): the journal of critical digital pedagogy and [Digital Pedagogy Lab](#) (2015-2021). He has a PhD from University of Colorado Boulder. He is co-author of [An Urgency of Teachers: the Work of Critical Digital Pedagogy](#).

Jesse is a documentary filmmaker and teaches courses about pedagogy, film, digital studies, and composition. Jesse experiments relentlessly with learning interfaces, both digital and analog, and his research focuses on higher education pedagogy, critical digital pedagogy, and assessment. He’s got a rascal pup, Emily, a clever cat, Loki, and a badass daughter, Hazel. He’s online at [jessestommel.com](http://jessestommel.com) and on Twitter [@Jessifer](https://twitter.com/Jessifer).

#### **References:**

Stommel, Jesse. 2022. Compassionate Grading Policies. Jesse Stommel’s blog. 03 January 2022. <https://www.jessestommel.com/compassionate-grading-policies/>

Stommel, Jesse. 2023. Undoing the Grade: Why We Grade, and How to Stop. Hybrid Pedagogy Inc.

### **Other resources:**

Jesse Stommel's blog: [www.jessestommel.com](http://www.jessestommel.com)

Hybrid Pedagogy: The Journal of Critical Pedagogy:  
<https://hybridpedagogy.org/>

### **Sound clips:**

Construction 1:

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Construction 2:

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Construction 3:

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Cash Register:

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Rolling Bills:

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Coins:

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Chair Pivot: <https://freesound.org/people/sacredmatt/sounds/71827/>

Distant Convo 1:

<https://freesound.org/people/morganveilleux/sounds/389993/>

Distant Convo 2: <https://freesound.org/people/uniuniversal/sounds/631902/>

Door 1:

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Door 2:

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### Transcription:

[Theme music in]

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:00:12] So many people were willing to step back and look at the whole of education and say: What is this? What are we doing? What do we want this to be? How do we get it there? What have I just accepted as status quo in my own teaching? What do I need to push on? What questions do I need to ask?

DERRITT MASON: [00:00:31] Hello, I'm Derritt Mason. Welcome to "3QTL: Three Questions about Teaching and Learning". This season, we're in conversation with post-secondary faculty from across disciplines, and our three questions focus on how the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped values and transformed classrooms, challenging faculty and students in extraordinary ways while also sparking innovation. Our guest today is Dr. Jesse Stommel. Speaking personally, I first encountered Dr. Stommel's work on ungrading and alternative assessment in the middle of 2021, when I was desperate to change the way I did things in my own classroom. It is no exaggeration to say that he permanently altered my teaching and learning practice. At a time when existing inequalities in our classrooms were being exacerbated by the devastating effects of COVID-19, Dr. Stommel's invitation to raise an eyebrow at grades as a systemic practice, through approaches to assessment that emphasize compassion, care, trust, and equity felt deeply urgent. The questions that Dr. Stommel raises in his work around how assessment practices shape and enforce systems of power in our classrooms continue to resonate as we live, teach, and learn amidst the ongoing effects of the pandemic. Dr. Stommel also very generously makes many of his resources free on his website, which is [jessestommel.com](http://jessestommel.com). Jesse, thank you so much for being here. I'm really looking forward to our conversation.

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:02:01] Thank you. I'm looking forward to it as well.

DERRITT MASON: [00:02:03] I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind kindly introducing yourself to our listeners?

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:02:07] Yep, happily. I'm Jesse Stommel. I have been teaching for 24 years now. I have worked also in faculty development for, I think, about 18 years. I have a six-year-old daughter who is currently occupying most of my time in all of the best ways. And I am a faculty member at University of Denver, and I am the founder of Hybrid Pedagogy: the Journal of Critical Digital Pedagogy.

DERRITT MASON: [00:02:35] And in terms of teaching and learning, what do your classes look like in a given semester? How many classes do you teach? How many students do you have?

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:02:42] Currently, at University of Denver, I am teaching three classes per quarter. Right now, I'm doing Writing courses, which are pretty intensive, and it's a liberal arts institution, so I am happy that I only have about 16 or 17 students per course for those courses. In the past, I have taught anything, anywhere from 15 students face-to-face, to 100 students online, to nine classes at four different institutions simultaneously as a road warrior adjunct.

DERRITT MASON: [00:03:14] So, let's dive into the podcasts' three questions. The first being: I'm curious to know what the core values were that guided your teaching and learning practice before COVID. And how, if at all, did these values shift during the pandemic?

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:03:32] Back in 1999, I started teaching as a TA for a large lecture course. And then shortly after that, I started in 2001 teaching courses as Instructor of Record. At the time, I was teaching Shakespeare and I was teaching Literature and I was also teaching Writing. And one of the things that was really formative for me was collaborative teaching. As a TA, I worked really closely and carefully with the lead instructor for the course that I was teaching. And she brought me into the design of the course in ways that were pretty generous on her part in the sense that she really invited me in as a full collaborator on the course, which was wonderful for me at the time that I started doing that work. I was a senior in undergrad, and they had made an exception to allow a senior and undergrad to be a TA for a course. When I started as an Instructor of Record, I was teaching my own courses, writing courses, at the time. And then I was also co-teaching a Shakespeare class called Virtual Shakespeare with a longtime colleague and dear friend, R.L. Widmann. And then I was also teaching a course that was being simultaneously taught and taken by a group of graduate students. This was a course with Marty Bickman. We had a graduate class with 15 students and then we were also as a group of 15 co-teaching a class with 45 undergraduate students. We would teach the class and then we would get together and talk about and reflect on the class. That was probably the most foundational thing

for me that influenced me. I was engaged in conversations about pedagogy right from the first second that I was teaching in really rich ways, both in courses I was taking about pedagogy and then also with co-teachers. To this day, I feel this compulsion to co-teach and I try and find whatever possible ways I can and try and jump over all of the hurdles that our institutions often put up for collaborative teaching.

DERRITT MASON: [00:05:35] I'm curious to know: I've also done some collaborative teaching in the past, but it sounds like we're in similar situations where it can sometimes be challenging to create a collaborative teaching scenario in our classes. Any advice for those of us who are interested in collaborative teaching, but need to overcome those hurdles?

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:05:53] I've said before in talks that I've given that the structural barriers put up to collaborative teaching are a fatal structural flaw at most of our institutions; that essentially, those barriers they put up to collaborative teaching are indicative of all manner of different issues that are going on at the institution. Ultimately, when we think about something like grades, grades set up a system where students are ranked against one another. I think our systems also set up systems and structures like grades that rank faculty against one another and rank staff against faculty. And so, there's the sense in which there is both a cultural barrier to collaboration, but then there are also structural barriers, something like: Okay, if you and I co-teach a class, who gets credit for the course, whose load does it count towards? So, even the words that we're using in the way that we structure our labor, resists doing this kind of work. I guess the suggestion that I would make for folks is: the second that you hear something at the institution that is a bureaucratic barrier to doing collaborative teaching, that then has to be the thing that you work to try and dismantle if you have any structural power at the institution. And it isn't that we need to find loopholes in order to make this happen. That is what I've had to do for years and years. But ultimately, we have to certainly do that, so that it's possible, while simultaneously people with any kind of structural power need to be knocking those barriers down. And I would say it's incredibly rare. There are very few institutions where those structural barriers don't exist and persist. And honestly, most of those institutions, the only way that collaborative teaching is happening is people circumventing those barriers, rather than working to topple them directly.

DERRITT MASON: [00:07:40] I'm hearing collaboration is one of the values that's really at the center of what you're doing in the classroom and also collegially, with your colleagues. How did COVID affect that value if at all? Did it reinforce it? Did you find collaboration more challenging during the sudden shift to online teaching?

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:07:56] I'll go back a little bit and say a bit more about your first question. Sort of another thing that is foundational to my approach is research that I've done into Critical Pedagogy. And ultimately, Critical Pedagogy is about creating space in a classroom where we have what Paulo Freire describes as teacher-[dash]student, student-[dash] teacher. So, it's essentially exactly as you kind of alluded to, not only about collaborating with other colleagues and other faculty members, but finding ways to bring students into the work of teaching. And it isn't necessarily about giving students agency because ultimately, students come into a learning environment with agency. Oftentimes, our institutions and our institutional structures, and sometimes our pedagogical structures, sometimes our technological structures, strip that agency from students relatively quickly. So, it's about making sure that that doesn't happen and doing the structural work and the community building work to create a space in the classroom where... you know, Paulo Freire talks about students becoming readers of their world, able to contribute and push back and resist and make an impact on their political, personal and cultural circumstances. But ultimately, for me, that also means becoming readers of their own education, so that they can become full agents in their own education. The thing for COVID for me is that when the pivot happened, most institutions were not prepared to pivot online. Because the people at the institution had very little experience with online teaching, depending on what institution you were at. Some institutions, fully online institutions, I think, in some ways, rested on their laurels, because they thought: Oh, we got this, we know how to do online teaching, but they didn't necessarily know how to do online teaching in the midst of a pandemic, and institutions where there wasn't a lot of online teaching -- I was at one of those institutions when the pandemic pivot happened and I had had at least 15 years of experience teaching online and so for me, the sort of logistics of it wasn't as much of a challenge, the biggest challenge was maintaining the communities at the heart of the institution where I was at. How do we keep students in conversations about their education? What happened during the pivot was all of a sudden, the institution stepped in, in a very patronizing, patriarchal way, made decisions for the students, for the students' best interests, didn't necessarily include students in those conversations. So, I would say that at a structural level, COVID and the pandemic pivot made everything a lot more difficult, because all of the relationships that I was working to build in my classes and among colleagues became all the more difficult because the institution was asserting itself in a much more strong way, an inflexible way. Even where it was trying to offer help or assistance, that assistance still felt patronizing, patriarchal, inflexible. But then I would say simultaneously, what was happening was teachers were desperate to hold on to the thing that they loved about teaching. And for a lot of those teachers, that thing they loved was having these rich relationships with their students. So, as the institutions failed to address what was necessary at the moment, I found teachers doing the opposite, stepping in and finding ways to move

forward. So, I guess what changed in my teaching was, I felt in some ways, like conversations I've been having for 24 years, all of a sudden, felt revitalized. So many people were willing to step back and look at the whole of education and say: What is this? What are we doing? What do we want this to be? How do we get it there? And those conversations were super inspiring to me and forced me in a lot of ways to say, hey, what have I just accepted as status quo in my own teaching? What do I need to push on? What questions do I need to ask?

DERRITT MASON: [00:11:57] And ultimately, what did you find? What did you need to push on? And what questions did you end up asking?

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:12:02] I've been doing a version of ungrading since 2001. And I've been leading workshops on ungrading and alternatives to traditional or standardized assessments since about 2005. So, in some ways, I felt like this was my wheelhouse, because one of the things that I found most problematic in the midst of the pandemic pivot is okay, if all of this is happening, if students are experiencing this, teachers are experiencing this, we can't just go on business as usual. And I think the biggest business as usual, at a lot of our institutions, are our structures for assessment. I don't just mean assessment of students, but I also mean assessment of teachers. So, peer review processes, evaluation processes, annual review, promotion, tenure; all of those things are also bound up in those assessment problems. Ultimately, that had been something that I had been working on and researching and sort of making the center of my work since about 2017. And it's not that I thought I had answered all the questions. But I thought I had gotten my own teaching to a place where it was doing the work that I was espousing, and where it was a model for what I was researching and what I was talking about and what I was writing about. The pandemic pivot forced me to step back and look at my own syllabus. And by syllabus, I mean, the whole of my teaching, not just the document itself. Step back and look at it and say: What am I not paying attention to? What questions am I not asking? What laurels am I resting on at this point? And a whole bunch of my assessment practices changed pretty dramatically in order to accommodate and create flexibilities for students who are dealing with chronic and acute trauma. But then, as I went on, you know, three years into the pandemic, I continued to look at most of the things that I created and say: this was just good for every student; I should have been doing all of this stuff all along. The fact that there even needed to be a pivot to address the issues that students were facing in the midst of the pandemic ended up being a source of realization for me, that ultimately the students struggling during the pandemic are the students who are most likely to have been struggling even before the pandemic. And the big shift that happened was that all of a sudden, those students had to talk about what was going on. It wasn't something that they could continue to deal with on their own.

DERRITT MASON: [00:14:29] You've written at length about ungrading and alternative assessment and something I really appreciate that you've written that I think about often is, I'm paraphrasing you here, so forgive me, but "every conversation about grades is also a conversation about power". What I'm hearing in your comments is how the pandemic really kind of exposed so many unequal power relationships that existed prior to COVID. It exacerbated these unequal relations between teacher and student between institution and teacher and student, etc. You did mention ungrading as maybe an umbrella term for alternative forms of assessment. Is there a working definition of ungrading that you prefer, that you often offer to folks?

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:15:09] Yeah, I actually don't see ungrading as an umbrella term for alternative approaches to assessment. But it's actually good for you to ask that because it allows me to suss that out of it. For me, those are two separate things. And I put them next to one another in some ways as a kind of diptych, two things that sit next to one another, two conversations that sit next to one another. There are lots of alternative approaches to assessment. The history of alternative approaches to assessment, alternatives to grades is just as long as the history of grades, which is not a particularly long history; they were only invented a couple of hundred years ago, and they only rose to popularity really in the last 60 years. And there are also a wealth of things that fit into alternative approaches to assessment. And to imagine that ungrading can swoop in and be a container for all of that, I think is not useful, because ultimately, I want people to be able to suss out all of the distinctions and the different things that exist inside of that large wealth of research practice. Ungrading for me and the way that I define it as: a raising of the eyebrow at grades as a system and working towards dismantling that system. So, it isn't necessarily a series of practices that we do in our classroom; it is connected to those practices, certainly. But what it is, it's the conversations that are necessary for us to have in order to do that work; it is the structural work. So, if we think about alternatives to assessment as the practical work and the theoretical work, and in some cases, structural work as well, the ungrading starts with a structural critique. That's what's most important about it. It is a looking at those systems of power, that influence all of the conversations that we have in education. Grades are the elephant in the room of every conversation happening in education. And ultimately, what we need to do is not have grades structuring all of our work in education. The next bit is asking ourselves: what structures do we need to work to dismantle in order to make it possible for teachers even to do alternatives? And that's difficult work.

DERRITT MASON: [00:17:17] I see now where I erred in my misconception of ungrading. So, I suppose it's possible to have alternative forms of assessment that do not, in fact, begin from a place of structural critique.



JESSE STOMMEL: [00:17:28] There are tons of books out there that you could go to, and you could pick from different modes of an assessment, like you're picking from a menu, and you could implement those. Ultimately, you have to ask the deeper questions, like: Why am I making this change? Why am I doing this work? Why am I shifting my practice? What's problematic about grades? And if I go back to your question about COVID, and I think about like, how have both of these things changed for me, ungrading, the conversation, has become even more imperative, because I've seen even more directly how damaging grades are and especially damaging towards marginalized students. And then if I think about alternative approaches to assessment, one of the things that I've started to think about is the way that some of those alternative approaches to assessment, they essentially center grades, even more than decentering them. And ultimately, I think the goal has to be, if we recognize and acknowledge that grades are doing harm, especially harm to marginalized students, the goal has to be to decenter them from our pedagogical approaches. I have been trying to work in my own practice to get as close to not grading as I can. Ultimately, you have to have some amount of structural power; you can't be adjunct, contingent; you can't be a subject of an institution that is dictating how you do assessment. I get kind of frustrated when people equate ungrading with not grading because most teachers can't not grade. And so we have to be able to have these hard conversations while recognizing that the labor conditions in education are such that not every teacher will be able to implement them in the ways that are ideal or even the ways that are good. Sometimes we have to be balancing: what does our institution expect of us? What do we have to do in order to maintain our own livelihoods? And what can we do to make the situation better for students?

DERRITT MASON: [00:19:27] Two other questions that you've posed in your writing that were really influential for me that in fact brought me to ungrading are: what does it feel like to grade and what does it feel like to be graded? Because again, the reason that I discovered your work and discovered, you know, the history of writing on ungrading and other compassionate, I should say, forms of alternative assessment is that grading for me, especially during COVID just started to feel terrible. It kind of exposed the arbitrariness of grades to begin with, and I started thinking there must be a way to do this differently, so it feels less like I was, I guess, enacting this harmful power dynamic on students who were really, really struggling during a really difficult time.

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:20:10] I would say in every single conversation that I've ever had with a group of teachers or students about grades, 'feeling words' start to pop up almost instantaneously. And that's why I created that question, center that question in those conversations. There's a whole bunch

of feelings that we have to work through before we can get to, for example, addressing the power structures, and certainly those feelings are associated with power structures, but they're also separate conversations that can happen alongside one another. The goal is to wade through the experiences that we've had in our own education around grades and figure out what kinds of trauma we have associated with grades. And I don't use the word trauma lightly because I think educational trauma is something that's motivating a lot of the interactions that teachers have with students and trauma on both sides: trauma for the students, and also trauma for the teachers, because the teachers were once students themselves. And a lot of that trauma is if not caused by grades, it's definitely connected to grades.

DERRITT MASON: [00:21:11] Speaking of the feelings associated with grading and ungrading, for that matter, when I started implementing some ungrading techniques for the first time, I found that students were actually quite anxious, which I wasn't really expecting. The idea that I was going to abandon a system that students were so imbricated in because of how it really structures the very foundation of the entire education system; I guess I wasn't prepared for the level of anxiety from students where they were like: "Whoa, hang on, what? This has never happened before. I don't know how to deal with this. And at the end of the day, what grade is going to go on my transcript," right? It's like the removal of grades somehow manages to recenter grades. I'm wondering if you've encountered that anxiety, and if so, how you manage it, or how you try to bring students on board with ungrading.

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:22:02] One of the reasons why we can't just say oh, there's no grades here, nobody has to worry anymore [Derritt: yeah! (laugh)] is because grades are capital, one of the sources of anxiety is just change. Change is hard. Students are used to grades; something other than grades is unfamiliar. But I think that the deeper source of anxiety is that grades are also currency. And we don't take that currency away; they still exist as a currency, irregardless of what we do with them. And so ultimately, recognizing and acknowledging that with students, I think is super important, and talking about. It's not: the grades don't have value; grades have value. The problem is that they have the wrong set of values. But we can't suddenly strip them of that value that they have. Grades affect student's life, they affect students' future job prospects, they affect the pay that students will potentially get later down the road. They affect whether they get into Law School, whether they get into Medical School, whether they get into Graduate School. They have an effect. And acknowledging that is super important, rather than just saying, oh, grades are meaningless. We don't need to have grades in here. The best possible thing is to look up at it and ask what is it doing to us? How is it changing how we interact here? And honestly, that can often happen with one single conversation with students. That might actually be enough to break down some of the ways that it's impacting our interactions and the

student learning and even influencing my teaching. One thing that is true is that often the students who experience the most anxiety are the students who are most successful within systems of grades. You're taking that currency away and that currency is super important, because that's the other thing I find when I talk to people about grades is they very quickly conflate the worth of the grade with their own self-worth. That's part of that emotional conversation. But then the other group of students for whom grades are super important, are the most marginalized students who are used to lots of invisible goalposts; first-generation students. All of a sudden, the grade is something very tangible, and it is a currency that they can look at and see and immediately know what its impact is. So you take that away from either of those groups of students, and it causes anxiety. The thing that kind of breaks that down for me, it's just having conversations with students. What do grades do for you? How do grades motivate your learning? What do you like about grades? What do you not like about grades? Those kinds of conversations help students kind of suss that out. Some of those students are motivated by the reassurance that "oh, a rug isn't gonna get pulled out from under me, I'm gonna do just as well as I've always done in this class, but I might be able to push myself harder".

DERRITT MASON: [00:24:36] I feel both seen and attacked by your descriptions of the different types of students who react with anxiety to grades because I mean, that was me, especially as an undergrad student, and I mean, as a graduate student. I definitely chased A's and it's been really interesting to think back during this whole process about like, what motivated me as a student and how I really did attach high grades to my own sense of self and my own self-worth. When I was implementing ungrading into my graduate seminar, I had a similarly self-described high-performing student who really wanted me to assign mock grades to assignments that I wasn't assigning grades on, just so they could feel reassured that they were performing at an A level, which helped them navigate the type of ungrading I was trying to do in that class.

I might transition now into our second question, which is: I'm curious to know what best supported and hindered your teaching and learning practice during COVID? What did you find?

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:25:35] At the start of the pandemic pivot, I... and I use the word pivot in air quotes.... Just to be clear [laughing], I don't love the word "pivot". At the start of the pandemic, for lots of reasons we can talk about, but it is...

DERRITT MASON: [00:25:47] ... it is one of, like, "unprecedented". It is like an overused pandemic word, I think [laughing].

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:25:53] Well, then I'll just say, really briefly, what my issue with it is, that something that pivots is a desk chair. A pivot is designed so that you can pivot one way and then pivot just as quickly back the other way. And that's not what any of us were experiencing, there was nothing quick, there was nothing easy, there was no mechanism for us to rotate around. In fact, what we recognized was that we didn't have the mechanism in place to effect a pivot, and there was no neat and tidy pivoting back. So, the word pivot is actually a misnomer. It points to the things that we exactly didn't do, the things we failed to do. It would have been great if it could have been a pivot. But the thing is, it couldn't be, and it wasn't. The thing that helped me the most was my colleague, Sean Michael Morris and I, very, very close to the beginning of the lockdown and the, again, air quotes pivot, we started what we called open online office hours. And we ended up having anywhere between 15 at the start to 150 people show up for these office hours. And we just kind of gave our time over to a Zoom room. And we weren't going in as teachers; we were going in as facilitators, facilitating a conversation. And also, we went in without questions predetermined in advance, because we wanted it to rise from the group of teachers that we were talking to. We started doing this every week, every Friday. And I think we did it for four months, every Friday. And then I think we moved to every other Friday. But we continued to do this from March of 2020 until December of 2020. I felt like I got as much from the people in those conversations as I gave. And that was our goal. And it feels like something that one of those moments in my teaching that was almost this kind of perfect example of why I love the work that I do and why I love talking to other teachers, because everyone was there, really struggling, but also wanting to just talk through openly about what was going on. We made a point of never recording the Zoom conversations; people asked us to record them, and we said we're not recording this. And the reason we're not recording this is because we want this to be an ephemeral space, a space where we can just talk through things together. And I feel like increasingly, that has felt rarer and rarer in a lot of the public spaces where I work: Twitter, my blog, the pages of Hybrid Pedagogy; increasingly, this space for just ideas and process and working through our struggles and working through the things we don't know and stumbling towards and understanding of what we should do going forward. There are so few spaces for that, I think increasingly, and partly because I think of the assessment structures of education, and the fact that we feel like we're constantly being evaluated at every turn, whether it's by our colleagues, whether it's by our institution's promotion structures, tenure, when single tweets show up in conversations about someone's promotion or tenure, we know that that system is broken, that it leans towards surveilling people rather than supporting their growth and development.

DERRITT MASON: [00:29:03] That sounds like a really wonderful space that you created. What hindered things the most for you in the classroom?

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:29:10] I think that the thing that was the hardest for me, going back to what we talked about earlier, was just watching the conversations happening at my institution. I wrote a piece called “Compassionate grading”. and it’s one of the more recent posts on my blog. I wrote it a, I think, a year and a half ago or so reflecting on those first moments. And reflecting specifically on conversations I was seeing about assessment in those moments. And I was watching one conversation happening among all the faculty at my former institution, I was watching another conversation happening among all the students. And those conversations were literally happening in separate rooms, separate Google Docs, and they also felt like they were happening in separate rooms. Everything that the faculty were saying didn’t seem to acknowledge the things that the students were saying. To be clear, I would not blame this on those faculty in the conversation; it was the responsibility of the institution to facilitate a conversation across that divide. But the institution did just the opposite. It furthered the divide between students and teachers by putting these conversations in separate rooms, by failing to have a large town hall style conversation, where we all looked at each other. And we asked ourselves, what are we going to do? How are we going to deal with this? Instead, the institution thought: “Oh, we know what we’re doing”. And they didn’t. And that was clear right from the start. But it was also clear in hindsight, and the truth is: no institution knew what it was doing. Someone asked me once: Well, what is the institution that’s really getting this right? And my answer was: None of them. Dealing with acute and chronic trauma is not a thing we get right. It’s a thing we work on. It’s a thing we have hard conversations about, especially when the sources of those trauma are something that’s emergent. And that’s changing on a day-to-day basis. I resisted the question, because I don’t think there really was a way to get it right. But there was a way to get it wrong. One is to assume you knew what you’re doing and that you could get it right. But then the other way to do it wrong was to do deliberate harm to students and faculty. And I saw institutions doing that.

DERRITT MASON: [00:31:35] So, is there one thing, Jesse, that you started doing during COVID for the first time in your classes that you think you’ll continue doing now?

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:31:44] I’ve started to be much more explicit because I think even though I was trying to take grades off the table as much as possible and have these conversations, I realized, when I looked at the documents where I expressed my approach to grades, I realized that I was still trafficking in just a little bit of mystery that would be a motivating force for students; they wouldn’t know for sure that they were going to succeed or get

an A. Ultimately, I realized, why not just tell them all? And so, my syllabus now says something very directly: everyone in this course will get an A, if you do X, Y, Z; and the X, Y, Z is simple, finite, clear. Sometimes contract grading, I feel like can center grades even more, because you end up with three different full-length sheets of paper. And this isn't contract- grading at its best. But this is what is sort of possible in the language of contract-grading: full sheets of paper; one that says here's all the things to do for an A, here's all the things to do for a B, here's all the things to do for a C. Lots of words spent on stipulating all of these things. And I thought, can we just boil this down and say you're gonna get an A, if you do these three things. Engage, decide what engagement looks like for you and do it, and not instructions about how one might engage; suggestions. Here's some possible ways to engage: do the work of the course, what doing the work looks like for you might be different from what it looks like for someone else. That's okay. And so just really simple, clear, straightforward, and also taking out the B and the C and the D. So currently, my self-reflection says: Write a letter, give yourself a grade, and I allow students to give themselves an A, and I allow themselves to give themselves a B. And then I say: If you want to give yourself any other grade, you have to have a conference with me, inverting how we would normally think about that, like you would have a conference with a student who was struggling and trying to get to an A. For me, it's the opposite. Like, if you feel like you're not succeeding, and you're not doing well, and you can't champion your own learning and your own process, talk to me. And why talk to me? Because I might be able to help give you the language to do that. And the other thing is, oftentimes students underrepresent their performance, they don't grade themselves higher than they would otherwise get. They're more likely to grade themselves lower. And the students who are most likely to grade themselves lower are the most marginalized students: women, LGBTQ students, students of color, Indigenous students, disabled students; students who have been told throughout their entire educational career that they're good, but just not good enough.

DERRITT MASON: [00:34:23] I really love this, and you know, it's making me reflect a lot on what I'm doing in my own classes, especially with contract grading at the undergraduate level. I do have currently relatively detailed contracts about what students have to achieve. And I think that's in part from remnants of my own anxiety, but also policy that requires a statement in the syllabus: The instructor reserves the right to x, y, z, right? A student has to know a certain percentage of their grade by a certain point in the term, but I love "engage and decide what engagement means to you". It's so clear and so simple and also, I think, really, importantly, starts from a position of trust with the student. If they want to engage in the class, they will find pathways for engagement and be able to describe them to you and reflect on what that looks like for them.

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:35:11] We can't snap our fingers and wake up tomorrow and completely change the way that we talk about teaching. For example, I had a version of a sentence that said: "I reserve the right to", and it was only 20 years, more than 20 years into my teaching that I looked at that sentence and said to myself, that isn't a sentence I enact. And it doesn't sound like me, that sentence. So why is that sentence there? I mean; ultimately, that sentence was there because I had it drilled into my brain that a syllabus is a contract. A syllabus isn't a contract. It isn't a legal document. It's a social document. It's a document that forms a community. And so, you ask yourself, what does that kind of language, which is really about power, and it's about holding on to a little piece of power that we don't want to give up. Ultimately, to me, it's not about holding onto power, it's about setting boundaries. As teachers, we should still set boundaries. And that means we are still agents. And we can say: What do I expect of myself? How do I expect you to treat me? Those are things that are important, but we don't have to hold on to power in order to enact those things. Especially not bureaucratic power. Personal power, energetic power, boundaries, those are all good, but we don't need a lever to make those things happen.

DERRITT MASON: [00:36:30] I could talk to you about ungrading all day. Thank you so much for this conversation. [Music in] I really appreciate you being here. And I know our listeners will really, really benefit from all of your experience and wisdom. So, thank you.

JESSE STOMMEL: [00:36:41] Thank you.

DERRITT MASON: [00:36:44] 3QTL is recorded at the University of Calgary, which is located on the traditional territories of the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta. The City of Calgary is also home to the Métis nation of Alberta region 3. This episode was produced by Xenia Reloba de la Cruz, edited by Tarini Fernando, and features additional editing and sound design by Eric Xie, who also composed our music. Our consulting producer is Stacey Copeland. Support for 3QTL is provided by the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning at the University of Calgary and a generous financial gift from the Flanagan Foundation. I'm Derritt Mason, 3QTL's host and executive producer. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you again soon.

[Music out]

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai> and copyedited by Xenia Reloba de la Cruz and Derritt Mason.