Transcript

[0:01] (music)

Derek Bruff: [0:05] This is Leading Lines. I'm Derek Bruff. I'm very excited to have two very smart people on the podcast today. One is Derek Price, a PhD candidate in German studies and comparative media analysis in practice here at Vanderbilt University. You've heard Derek on the podcast before, back in episode 34, when we interviewed him and his collaborators about The Scholars at Play podcast they launched all about game studies.

[0:32] Last fall, I reached out to Derek, who is now dissertating in Oklahoma, to see if he would be interested in being a guest interviewer here on Leading Lines. I was glad he said yes because A, he's a fantastic interviewer and podcaster. And B, he interviewed the other very smart person on today's episode, Jesse Stommel.

[0:52] Jesse Stommel is an author, speaker, and teacher with a focus on education, critical digital pedagogy, and documentary film. He's the co-founder of the Digital Pedagogy Lab, a fantastic professional development workshop for those interested in critical digital pedagogy. He's the co-founder of Hybrid Pedagogy, the journal of critical digital pedagogy. And he is the coauthor of *An Urgency of Teachers, The Work of Critical Digital Pedagogy*. Jesse is an incredibly thoughtful and powerful voice in higher education. His work and writings have influenced so many educators and I'm thrilled to have him here on the podcast.

[1:30] Before Derek Price participated in our Online Course Design Institute last summer, he was pretty skeptical about online education. After the two-week institute, he approached online teaching and learning with a new enthusiasm, but also still a healthy critical eye. That was one reason we invited him to return to the institute as a facilitator. In fact, Derek was the only graduate student to serve as an institute facilitator last year. He and his cohort had some rich conversations about the role of grading and about a relatively new idea in higher education, ungrading. Those conversations led Derek to Jesse Stommel, who has written and

spoken extensively about ungrading. With that, I'll turn it over to Derek in his interview with Jesse Stommel, I think you'll find Jesse's comments about grading, ungrading and educational technology, both provocative and nuanced. (music)

Derek Price: [2:27] Jesse, welcome to Leading Lines. I had a quick just opening general question for you that I want to pose to you and I just want to ask you about a time when you realized that you wanted to be an educator.

Jesse Stommel: [2:40] Great, it's nice to be here having this conversation. It's a really cool question to start. And I have an answer that goes way, way back. When I was in high school, I starred in a theatrical adaptation of the book, *The Thread That Runs So True,* which is about a one room school house in rural Virginia, I'm fairly certain. And I was the lead actor. I had something like 500 lines that I remember after as people were coming up to me congratulating, doing a sort of congratulatory line. People said, "I can't believe you memorized all of those lines" and I'm like, gosh, if you think that memorizing lines is the hardest part of being up on a stage for two hours.

[3:25] But so it meant that for, for months I was playing this role of a teacher and playing this role of a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse is a really, really unique, unique situation. And speaking those words, speaking the words that he speaks and he sort of philosophizes about the work of being a teacher in this play. And speaking those words, I remember feeling like the words were mine. I had done lots of acting, but this is the part that I played where I actually felt like I was playing a version of myself.

[3:57] And in some ways I don't necessarily know that before that I knew that I wanted to be a teacher. I knew that teaching was a sort of a part of whatever I wanted to be when I grew up. But it wasn't clear to me that I definitely want to be a teacher. And speaking those words in this play was when I realized, when I realized that I was really speaking for myself.

Price: [4:19] That's fascinating. So the sort of, the sort of fictional sort of framework gave you the language to help understand something that you hadn't quite realized yet. That's really fascinating.

Stommel: [4:30] Absolutely. And it also I think has impacted and informed my pedagogy to this day because the idea of a one-room schoolhouse, while I don't necessarily think we should all go back to one room schoolhouses. There are specific things inside of the

pedagogy of a one room school house that really resonate with how I work as a teacher. I mean, one thing that's really important inside of a one-room schoolhouse is peer to peer learning. Because generally you've got people from six years old to 18 years old inside of these spaces and they end up teaching each other.

[4:59] And so this idea of students as teachers and students finding themselves as teachers is a real key component to my pedagogy today. And the other thing that I love about the one-room schoolhouse, which I wish was more fully realized in our educational institutions are particularly in our colleges and universities, is this idea that the class is not a container. That the class is actually permeable. That where one class starts and the next begins is fuzzy. And then in fact, when you're learning, you're constantly learning both inside, outside and between disciplines.

[5:35] Because across a one-room schoolhouse, you're not only teaching students that are six to 18, but you're also teaching in a way that one discipline blurs into the next discipline. You might have specific class time set aside for one thing. But there's a real sense in which what you do in one class ends up informing another. And I wish that there was this sense in which what was happening in one English 101 class and what was happening in another English 101 class was somehow in conversation. And same thing with an English 101 class and then a Bio 101 class. If those students could talk to each other and talk to each other about what they are learning, I think it would be so valuable if we found more ways to create those communities that bridge classroom spaces that exist outside in a sort of third space at our educational institutions.

Price: [6:24] Absolutely. You know, I follow someone. I believe they work at UT Austin. Their name's not coming to me right now, but they do in a very sort of different way, they think about how through, using data, I think, actually, but they think about the ways that disciplines are kind of fake in a certain sense, that they're constructed in certain ways. That STEM doesn't actually resolve to anything necessarily coherent across everything that gets labeled as STEM. That actually the people who get involved in archeology and geology may in fact in some strange ways have more in common with folks in English than the current division of disciplinary and school-based system at so many institutions currently has us at.

[7:09] So I don't know, that just makes me think of this, the ways in which disciplinary boundaries are constructed, but also maybe a longing for something that changes that. And if I, if I may, you know, something that I pitched the idea of chatting with you to the team at

Leading Lines. And one of the reasons was because I had come across your work on critical pedagogy, critical digital pedagogy as well. And I really first heard about you and your work through this idea of ungrading as a practice, as a way of rethinking about assessment. As a way of, not only rethinking assessment, which is maybe a core part of ungrading, but also rethinking the relationship between students and teachers. And then ultimately maybe between the classes where learning happens in the institutions where that is occurring. I wondered if you would quickly just give us a sense of what do you think of as ungrading and, and what led you to sort of embrace this practice?

Stommel: [8:14] So ungrading, ungrading, for me, it's similar to what I was just talking about, about this idea of the containers for learning not being, so many of them we construct them so they're not permeable. I think, I think that's the same way that we approach assessment and grading is this idea that we can objectively sort students into these boxes or categories that then describe and define them and who they are. And I think the deepest problem with grades in my view is that they reduce human beings to these letters or these objective numerical markers as though a 92 and 93 mean something. When really, I mean, tell me what the difference between a 92 and 93 are. There is no difference except that a 93 is better than a 92.

[9:05] And so really so many of our grades, grading systems and assessment structures are built around sorting and ranking students. And I think sorting and ranking students is one of the most harmful things that you can do to learning and especially to intrinsic motivation, which I think is really at the heart of learning. And I also think it's something really harmful that we do to communities, communities of learners, and also the relationships between students and teachers. Because if you begin with this premise that students can be neatly sorted and compared to one another, one student's a 92, another student is a 93 that sets those students at opposition to one another.

[9:45] And then if you think about the power relationships between a teacher who is going to assign those numerical scores to students, that frustrates a relationship between student and teacher that goes both ways. It essentially puts all of the power over learning and over defining learning and deciding when learning is happening, describing at identifying it into the hands of the teacher. And takes away so much of that authority and control from students. And I think that we have to subvert that it doesn't necessarily mean throwing, it doesn't necessarily mean throwing grades out altogether. It means raising our eyebrow at grades. It means asking hard questions about grades, and it means making sure that it isn't

just teachers who are asking those hard questions, but it's also students, students wondering at what grades are and how they make meaning a, student not just being bewildered at what a 92 might mean, but actually talking to their fellow students about what it means.

[10:42] And I think what we end up finding is that our current systems are not objective. They're in fact arbitrary and deeply biased. And we also find that most of our current systems around grades aren't useful for learning. They're useful for one thing and that's accrediting learning. And if we all as a community want to agree, I certainly don't, that accrediting learning is the project of a school, a university, then certainly grades have some use. But if we decide that no actually motivation, genuine, authentic learning, creating communities of learners are our goal that actually grades as they currently stand frustrate most of those goals or ethics.

Price: [11:27] Absolutely. You know, it's really interesting the point that you make about how the process of grading removes agency from students and sort of locates all of it into the teacher. Because the truth is that the way I came to even really look at grading as a practice to even, I believe I just randomly saw one of your tweets once. And this was, I saw this in the middle of a semester where it was maybe my second or third semester as a TA. And I was just driving myself just out of my mind by because I was trying to figure out what grades really meant because students were coming to me as a TA for this course. And asking me like, well, why is this this grade and not this grade?

[12:21] And, you know, and then I would say, okay, well, we need to have rubrics for the next thing or we need to figure. I would talk to my instructor, the instructor of record, and we would sort of figure things out. And then like it's almost like once we solved the grading problem here, it like re-manifested somewhere else, right. Well then students were like, well, they were looking at the math on all the categories. And they realized that like if they did just attendance and blog posts and some other thing that actually they could get a C. It was like they were starting to, that all of the, all of these, these problems started arising because students were trying to make sense of a system that just didn't allow them to have any control or agency over their own learning.

[13:02] And it turned them into people who wanted to try and find, you know, the sort of quickest path to satisfying the requirements of the course. And what was such a bummer to me is that there were students who had real interest and excitement in the course topic. But it was, it was, it felt like it was being siphoned away from them because all of a sudden, they

realized they needed to be thinking about their grade and they had to do this sort of internal strategizing.

[13:30] So one thing that I've really realized, especially in the past year, is that the contradictions in grading of the difference between like, oh I am or am not learning something I do or do not understand it. I do or do not like something or have a genuine interest or want to join some sort of community of learning about this topic versus I have received this quantification of that thing. They can't possibly be ignorant of this contradiction. And it was actually sort of trying to deal with this, with this, what would seem to me at the time, a problem, but I realized it wasn't a problem with the students. It was a problem maybe with grading.

[14:12] I mean, this was the path that took me to look for other ways of thinking about assessment and just education in general that would, I don't know, somehow escape from that, that paradigm. And, you know, it was ungrading was the first step in helping me get beyond that.

Stommel: [14:30] A lot of teachers talk about wanting their students to feel genuine interest in the subjects. And they, I think they reasonably complain or understandably complain about students just wanting the points or students gaming the system or a term that I absolutely can't stand and I'm only going to use in order to deride it, students acting as grade grubbers. And if we think about this, the complaint that students are gaming the system, well, we've set a system that feels like a game. So why wouldn't they learn how to game the system extraordinarily well?

[15:14] And if we think about, I mean, there's something really important about how we measure. And this is that there's a great chapter in Cathy Davidson's book, *Now You See It*, called "How We Measure." And it talks about this among lots of other interesting things. But the idea that "How We Measure" shows what we value. And if we think about what our current systems of grading show that we value, well in fact, we value students collecting points. We value students thinking about grades as a sort of currency and like honestly, how is that useful to the learning process?

[15:54] Because the second that grades become currency, they suddenly have a translation rate. You know, they have an exchange rate. And then all of a sudden, students are then put into a position where they're bartering with grades. So they're less worried about how much

they're learning or how interested they are in the subject. And they're more interested in exactly what you said, if I do these six things, then I will get this grade. If I get this grade in one class and I get this grade in another class that will combine to equal a GPA of this.

[16:29] And so you immediately start to have people ask questions. Since you ungrade and most of your colleagues grade, does that mean your students suddenly stop doing the work for your class because all of a sudden, they're collecting currency in their other classes, but they're not collecting currency in the same way in your class? And honestly, I find the exact opposite to be true, because it's not that the currency has 0 value in my course versus someone else using traditional grading. My course is just thinking about learning in a completely different way. It lives in a different universe from the other courses.

[17:04] Which isn't to say that students aren't making hard choices, they do. For example, yes, my students absolutely sometimes don't work on an assignment for my course because they have a high stakes assignment for another course using traditional grades due at the same time. So they might spend, they might start by doing the work for that other course. But that seems to me like a smart thing to do. That course is using high-stakes assessment, that grade does have a currency. And so they might start by spending all of their time working on that project.

[17:36] But what I find is that students will finish that project and then they will spend more time, be more interested, be more devoted in the work for my course. And so I do have to flex around a system that has grades within it. But I end up finding that, that it's more productive, more pedagogically sound, and frankly more fun to be trafficking in things like fun play, authentic learning, rather than points, scores, grades, currency.

Price: [18:12] Absolutely. You know, this summer, I mean, this past year has been, you know, bad. It's been a tough year for a lot of folks. But one of the opportunities that I had at Vanderbilt, there was an Online Course Design Institute that our Center for Teaching was leading, had the chance to have some really fascinating conversations with my colleagues there, not just about online teaching, right, as it was a sort of summer course to sort of prepare folks for the fall. Really great. Thank you, Center for Teaching, you all, they're the best. It was really good.

[18:49] And it enabled, it enabled conversations, right? Not just about online teaching, but just about pedagogy in general, right? There was, I think there's always a moment there. I

think they set the course up in this way as an opportunity for everyone to just like let's actually just think about pedagogy again. Let's just think about how and why we teach one more time. And one of the interesting conversations that came up in that with a couple of colleagues through a forum post, actually, not through, through live chat, actually. It was a, it was really meaningful forum exchange was another colleague who, who's been thinking about pedagogy for very long time.

[19:25] And he said he has tried a million different things. He has tried a sort of portfolio style. He's tried peer grading. He's even done a sort of like experimental. I think he said he didn't think of it as ungrading at the time, but it was sort of, turns out it was something that would fit into that sort of way of thinking about assessment. And something that he had encountered in a sort of very practical sense was that even when you remove the grit and this is a sticky problem and this is maybe the entire reason why I wanted to chat with you because this is the thing that I just I don't know what to do and I think maybe it's a problem that goes beyond assessment, even maybe beyond pedagogy. But I really wanted to hear your opinion on this.

[20:12] My colleague, he relayed that even when the grades were removed from the week to week or even from all the tests or something like this. There was always, he always had this uncertainty. So at the end of the semester, you do have to assign a grade. Most folks do work at institutions where that's necessary. And he had this anxiety or concern that he couldn't get away from. Am I ungrading? Am I sort of removing these symbolic structures which dominate the actual valuable liberating education? Am I actually getting rid of them or have I simply deferred them all into one sort of negotiation conversation at the end or some sort of rubric that I've created? Have I actually just externalized or hidden the grades, instead of sort of abolishing them from the classroom?

[21:02] And so I guess the question for me is what, I guess it's sort of two questions like, can we really fully ungrade in systems that still ultimately require us to assign some sort of grade at some point? And a sort of partner question to this is, what else do we need besides ungrading for us to sort of realize the liberating potential that inspires ungrading as a practice?

Stommel: [21:35] Well, I mean, I guess I will start by saying I have a quote somewhere in one of my pieces of writing that says, "grades are an elephant in every room where conversations about education are underway." And essentially, I've just noticed over many, many years of

doing faculty development, I've been doing faculty development work since 2003. And I don't know that I've ever had a conversation about pedagogy, about learning, about education where grades didn't come up.

[22:08] And I also would say that in almost every one of those instances where grades came up, grades ended up being the sticky problem. They ended up being the thing that frustrated our conversation. What I would say is that the reverse is also true that every time we talk about grades, we're actually talking about just about every deep, difficult conversation that we could have about teaching and learning. So I didn't necessarily mean for my career to be talking about grades all the time. If anything, I think about myself as a pedagogue. I want to talk about pedagogy and grades is just one small piece of that. On the other hand, I would say that talking about grades has led me down so many different interesting rabbit holes and into so many interesting conversations.

[23:00] And to sort of circle back around and answer your question more directly. I don't think currently that we can just remove grades from the table. It's one of the reasons why, there are reasons that I like the phrase or the term ungrading and there are reasons I don't like it. I don't like it because I feel like it's a buzz word and I really can't stand buzzwords. I can't stand when we try and take a really complicated, interesting thing and throw it into a buzzword. Because all of a sudden it becomes something that you can just pull off a shelf and suddenly I can ungrade in my classroom.

[23:34] It also has the problem of imagining that there's something that Jesse or Derek do in their classrooms that if only I did it exactly like they did it, there ends up being this kind of pedagogical guru thing, which isn't how teaching works. Ultimately, teaching is deeply idiosyncratic and it's one of the reasons why I say that I never proselytize for particular pedagogies because I don't want people teaching just like me. I don't want people teaching just like you. I want people to figure out the organic way that teaching happens for them with their students, in their disciplines, in their specific cultural moment, at their specific institutions, even in the idiosyncratic, physical, and digital rooms we find ourselves in.

[24:20] So I guess I would also say that because of how deeply entrenched grades are in our system, we can't just get rid of them. And this is the reason I like the term ungrading because it doesn't imply just taking grades off the table. What it implies for me is a questioning, a looking at grades, askance, or raising our eyebrows at grades and asking hard questions about grades. Because the students who come to my class, where they're being quote,

unquote ungraded, and where they're doing a lot of self-evaluation and self-reflection. They're being graded in all of their other classes, or the vast majority of them, graded in traditional ways.

[25:02] They are also, as you pointed out, receiving a grade at the end of the course. And they've come from high school systems and elementary systems that are becoming increasingly quantified. So when they're in my class, the grade is still hovering in the middle of the room, influencing and impacting everything that we do inside of that room. So I would say that the best we can possibly do is recognize that it's there and talk frankly about it and acknowledge it. And every other week lookup again and see that it's still actually hovering and still impacting what we do.

[25:38] So the idea of ungrading as just sort of taken them off the table. To me, what ends up happening is what you said. It just, it takes the visible goal posts and turns them into invisible goal posts. One of the worst problems of suddenly turning all these visible goal posts into invisible goal posts is that that has a huge negative impact on marginalized students, especially first-generation college students who already were struggling to find the visible goal posts. If you make them all invisible, then those students are struggling even more. If instead what you do is say, no, no, the grade is still there, it's still right up there hovering over our classroom. Let's talk about it, let's inspect it. Let's turn it over. Let's look at its underside. Let's talk about how we can take this thing and make it our own.

Price: [26:22] That's really fascinating and it connects up with something else that I've been thinking a lot. I like. I think I had this implicitly my brain, but I hadn't sort of thought about it in the way that you have just articulated. But I find very useful, which is that this is a sort of process that grades sort of as this omnipresent central kind of tension touch on so many different aspects of our teaching that ungrading might look like slowly changing many different parts of your way of teaching, of how your classroom is structured and how students interact with each other and you. Instead of just saying, toss them out the window, much as we might want to. And I really like this idea.

[27:10] Another thing that what you just said makes me think of is that I was thinking about like why ungrading appealed to me so strongly when I first sort of discovered this topic, this idea. And I think it's the idea of ungrading to say that you want to try something. And in this vein of ungrading to want to go through the process of sort of rethinking what grades mean in your class is, it's attractive because it's such, it's so radically different than the primary

school and sort of through high school experience that students have of education. For most students, education up until they're 18 means quantification. Now this is, as you pointed to in with, with some good references, a historical process, one that has changed recently, it has become more quantitative.

[28:00] And yet, I think, I guess the, I guess the thing that is so attractive about ungrading is that it is such a, it's a radical idea to imagine, oh, actually no grades aren't going to be the most important thing here. And actually, we're really going to have as our goal, finding other ways to relate to each other. That seems to me to be, I don't know if there's a reason why it has become sort of a buzz word or some sort of topic that lots of people are attracted to, it's because it's a really first great step towards re-imagining in a radical way, like what it is, what is happening between us and our students when teaching and learning is happening.

Stommel: [28:41] And I would say, I guess one of the other reasons why I would say at this particular moment ungrading has become so centered in a conversation. I mean, I've been doing this work for 21 years. I mean, I started quote unquote ungrading without, without using that word to describe it back in 1999. And so these conversations are ones I've been having a long time. If I think about like what is key about this moment that makes this conversation so vital and so necessary. And ultimately, I would say that it's trauma.

[29:15] Students are experiencing trauma and they're experiencing trauma in a lot of ways, for a lot of reasons and not just because of the pandemic or the pivot to online, but also because of the prevalence of food and housing insecurity among students, because of the student debt crisis. There's so many things leading up to this moment that ultimately are about acute and chronic trauma that students are experiencing. And frankly, teachers as well.

[29:46] Nobody when I asked the question, how does it feel to grade? How does it feel to be graded? When I ask those questions at workshops to students, to faculty members, no one says, oh, I love to grade. I've never heard it in 18 years of doing faculty development never heard it. Or I love to be graded. It's such a pleasurable part of the educational experience. I never heard it. And so grades are a source of trauma. And so at this particular moment what we're trying to do is trauma informed pedagogy. Pedagogy that's driven by compassion. We're trying to focus on things like trust, trusting students, trusting faculty, trusting each other, working together to help ourselves through this present moment and grades.

[30:31] Everyone is looking around and saying, wow, grades are really in our way at this

particular moment. And that's why at the beginning of the pandemic, we saw so many discussions about alternative grading approaches. I'm extraordinarily sad to have seen that institutions did experiment with some alternative grading practices, they almost immediately pivoted back, the first second that they could. And that's because change is hard. And that's because grades are so centered within our systems that what ended up happening is people at one institution changed the way they grade. And then Harvard said, nope, for our law school, for our medical school, we're not going to accept those classes. And then an accrediting agency said, oh, what about your accreditation?

[31:18] And then transfer students, community colleges. And I talked to many, said we can't have a compassionate grading policy because then our courses won't transfer. And transfer is so crucial. So what we ended up finding was that the system is not just about what's happening in your classroom, but it's this giant nested ball that we've created, where something that's happening in one part of the system is then rippling out an echoing throughout the system. Honestly, if grades are currency, and you take those away, you're taking money from people. I mean, you're taking value, currency, stuff that has an exchange rate. When, when institutions started to do alternative grading policies, students cried out, but then wait, what about my GPA? And it really showed how sort of locked in we are and how difficult it is to make change within the system.

Price: [32:20] That just brings me back to the idea that and this was the final thought that I had when I had that exchange with my colleagues over the summer is that it seems that on the one hand, ungrading doesn't have to mean throwing grades out entirely. But on the other hand, it seems like whenever we let them in a little, they just mess everything up. And they, they remain sources of trauma and a sort of form that reinforces a system which promotes inequality, refuses to let people actualize and also be stable in a material sense, to meet their basic needs and defined forms of work that are that meet those basic needs, but are also satisfying and to grow beyond any sort of specific job-related skills. So yeah, I guess there's still part of me that wants also an ungraded, which also really does mean get them out here, for good, but I guess that's something that is pedagogy and is also more than pedagogy.

Stommel: [33:29] Well people often talk about, well, you're going to be graded later in life. And so I'm going to grade you and as a way of sort of teaching you how to live the rest of life where you're also going to be graded. First of all, that's very untrue. There are no systems, no employment structures, nothing else in the world that resembles how often, how much, how

quantitatively we grade students. Sure you'd get an evaluation at your job. You're lucky if you get one per year. And usually it's not structured around quantitative scores. There might be a scoring aspect to it. Most jobs it's a conversation you're having with your boss. And even if it is a quantitative score, there's a big difference between getting a score one time per year and being scored weekly by five different courses. And then having to add up all of those scores in a giant matrix in order to get a percentile score and having that constantly reported to you by a Learning Management System.

[34:31] There's a sort of fetishization or a sort of obsession with grades to the point where it's almost like a tracker that we wear on our wrist, where you're getting constant updates, you know, our learning management system reporting to you every time that a grade gets put it and you get a notification and you look at your watch. Oh look, today I'm a 92.

Price: [34:52] Look there's how much I'm worth. It's so nice to be able to just see it right there.

Stommel: [34:57] Yep. And so ultimately, gosh, we can make a lot of impact just by moving a little bit away from that. A lot of impact with a little bit of change in movement. It's one of the reasons why anyone telling me, but I can't change the way that I grade because of this or that I say, well research Peter Elbow's idea of minimal grading. And so it's then it's not about, not grading. It's about grading less often and grading more clearly so that students can actually make sense of a grade.

[35:27] So he argues for having, for example, maybe a three-point scale where you get a check, a check plus, or a check minus versus a 100-point scale or forbid a 1000-point scale where people are getting like a 96.4% and another student has a 93.2%. So tell me if you got a 93.2% and I got a 96.4% what does that actually mean? If you got a check plus and I got a check that actually conveys something. So making sure that the way that we grade actually communicates. Because if grades are meant to be a feedback tool which some people argue that they are, they're a really terrible feedback tool for the most part.

Price: [36:07] Yeah, you know. That is so true. And one thing that, you know, thinking about putting the LMS on the table here is a conversation point and also thinking about ungrading as part of a broader set of maybe trauma-oriented pedagogy as a pedagogy oriented to deal with a situation of trauma, to lessen trauma to heal maybe or at least be more caring and attentive to trauma. Have you what sort of, I really wanted to ask

you about a sort of a specific practice. Leading Lines is an education and technology podcast. And I am taking, I'm doing the classic media studies thing where we just anything can be technology, anything can be media. So I wanted to ask you about a sort of specific practice, tool, or sort of method or any sort of thing that you've learned and picked up over these last ten months, going on a year here of sort of emergency pandemic teaching that actually was something you didn't see before this time period and something that will actually carry forward and inform your pedagogy going forward.

Stommel: [37:17] I'll think about that as I, as I mull with something that you suggested early, which was this idea of technology and what's the connection between grades and a conversation about educational technology. And I would say that there's many different connections. One being that grades themselves are a technology. And I don't even think that we have to think too hard to imagine how they function as a technology. And then I also think that our technologies are enabling some of our worst impulses as educational institutions. The LMS is the perfect example.

[37:54] And I guess one of the things I would say is something that I've noticed and this is to answer your question in the negative, although I'm also mulling what I've gotten excited about or what I've seen, open up potentials. But I've never been a fan of the learning management system. I've used almost every major learning management systems. I've taught within them. I'm not a person who is unwilling to use them. I don't like them and where I can avoid using them, I do.

[38:21] What I've noticed is that increasingly all roads lead back to the gradebook inside of all of the major learning management systems, the actual architecture of the system is structured around the gradebook. If something can't feed the gradebook or be fed by the gradebook, it is increasingly not supported and or not developed by the learning management systems' companies. And certainly, the discussion forum is something that can feed the gradebook. But it's interesting to look how much work a learning management system, like Canvas has done on the gradebook and how little work they've done on their discussion forum. Their discussion forum looks no different than Blackboard did 20 years ago. It looks no different than web CT. It looks no different than any other discussion forum aside from tiny minor tweaks.

[39:15] And this is the worst part, Canvas' discussion forum looks no different than it did the day that Canvas was born, aside from a tiny few tweaks, no consideration about how

communities form no consideration about what's actually worked and not worked. Everyone accepts that discussion forums are awful and they just move on as long as they can feed the gradebook, whatever. Meanwhile, they've done so much innovation in their gradebook, spent so much money, so much time talking to faculty about what they need in a gradebook.

[39:46] And so I guess that I would say in this moment of the pandemic, it's become more and more clear to me that if we're trying to create compassionate pedagogies. If we're trying to center trust. If we're trying to utilize trauma informed pedagogies, those things can't happen in a learning management system. The learning management system, as a place, is actually hostile to those activities. I wrote a piece that the title is somewhat tongue in cheek. I wrote a piece a few years ago called, "If bell hooks Made a learning management system."

[40:18] Ultimately, I argue that two things. One, bell hooks wouldn't make learning management system and it's not really my place to imagine what it would be if she did. But the title was a way of thinking about like, how do we take our best pedagogical intentions and how do we have them live, breathe inside of our technological tools? And really ultimately, I decided that there's no space for critical pedagogy inside of a learning management system.

[40:50] And so at a moment like this, we have to actually make the hard decisions that if I can't actually see my students, be with my students, support my students, trust my students inside of this space, I have to find a different kind of space. And what I've been really interested to see is a lot of teachers coming up with home-grown solutions to the problem of connecting with their students. I've seen a lot of teachers utilizing things like text message and e-mail. I mean, think about innovative email pedagogies. It's not something that I would have been talking about a year ago, but in this particular moment because of how quickly so many people have had to change the way that they engage with one another, I have seen innovative email pedagogies.

[41:35] And honestly like I was trying to figure out how to do advising with students. And ultimately, I decided I would try and do advising via text message. And so I gave my students the option, meet me in Zoom or let's do the advising by text message. What I ended up finding is that I had a better time and made more of a real connection and helped the students better when we did our advising meetings via text message. It gave me the chance to be looking at the screen they were and they were tinkering away trying to create their schedule. We didn't have to try and have a 15-minute conversation in real time. I could help

them as they were working through the process.

[42:14] Interestingly, I think I gave them more help because I helped them at the beginning, the middle, and the end. But I actually spent less time because the total amount of time I was spending text messaging with them was probably less than a meeting. So I think those lo-fi solutions is what I've been really excited to see teachers using and really kind of creatively in the moment coming up with. It's the thing you can't do in a learning management system, if you want to move the chairs inside of a learning management system, how do you do it? If you want to drag a beanbag into your learning management system, how do you do it? On the other hand, when you're relying on tools like text message or email or certain social medias that aren't hostile to humanity. Those kinds of things, that kind of improvisation becomes possible.

Price: [42:59] I think that's so important. And thinking about lo-fi tech as a, not only, I mean, basically access becomes much less and less of a problem, right? The tech needed to send a text message or to send an email is much easy to do it on your phone or any sort of laptop that exists right now. Instead of looking for ever more increasingly powerful systems that need cloud technology and like need overlapping layers of platform and management from both internal to your class, but then also kind of displaces some of your expertise and ownership over the tech onto some like a help desk person who may very well be trying to do their best, but ultimately gives you less control over the tools you're using to teach. I really like that as an idea, sort of embracing something that's lower tech, that also then is just more accessible to more folks at the same time.

Stommel: [43:55] It also, it's more, it's more human. It resembles the kind of relationships we want to develop with our students. You know, for example, when we go back to the conversation about grades, if grades don't change the way that we engage and talk to students, if thinking critically about grades doesn't change the first sentence of our syllabus, then that's not really ungrading. I mean, ungrading is about thinking about how this ripples out into everything that we do and something I've really been pushing for, and harder and harder as more classes are moving online and more classes are living inside of the closed space of a learning management system.

[44:27] As I ask this question, where do you say hello in your course? Where do you greet students? If hello isn't the first words that they see, then there's something wrong. There's something wrong with the system. And so even making sure that every page of my, like I

actually have a syllabus, I try and make it as simple as possible, because I don't want students hunting and pecking for things. So on the web, simple web page, my schedule is one-page, my syllabus is another page, everything they need for the course is all at one hyperlink. The first words of that are hello. And increasingly maybe they should be hello, how are you? That to me is a trauma-informed pedagogy, not just greeting someone, but recognizing that they live in a world that's complex.

Price: [45:15] Mmm, yeah, that's fantastic. Well, Jesse, this has been a really fantastic interview. I really want to thank you for your time. I don't know if there's anything that you want to shout out, anything you're working on at the time, but feel free to drop any projects or things that you think listeners of this podcast might enjoy related to this topic or not.

Stommel: [45:34] I'm always working. I'm always working on 16 things at once. So I could probably spend five minutes talking about all the things I'm interested in and reading and curious about. But I guess I would suggest two things. One is the new book edited, a new edited collection called *Ungrading*. I have a chapter in there, but also some other really amazing folks putting a lot of different perspectives on this topic that just came out. And then also, I edited a collection called *Critical Digital Pedagogy: A Collection*.

[46:08] And the, I really feel like it's interesting because as I look through the table of contents for that book, a lot of the chapters aren't at surface value about technology or even really about the digital and digital pedagogy at all. But I mean, I really think that when we have these conversations, we need to recognize that the digital doesn't just live on its own as a thing, critical digital pedagogy, it's three words each inflect our conversation in different ways. And so when we're talking about grades, we are talking about the LMS. When we're talking about the LMS, we're certainly talking about grades. So recognizing that these things, it's one of the things that a lot of institutions have, like an Ed Tech unit that lives separate from conversations about pedagogy. And I'm like, that isn't, that just isn't how technology works.

[46:57] Ultimately, these conversations have to be happening in the same room. So whatever we can do to draw ourselves together and stop thinking about, well, I'm a technologist, well I'm a faculty member, well, I'm an administrator. I'm a student. We have to be talking together.

Price: [47:11] Excellent. Well, thanks for your time. And it was great speaking with you.

Stommel: [47:15] Thank you, great to talk to you too. (music)

Bruff: [47:22] That was Jesse Stommel, senior lecturer in digital studies at the University of Mary Washington and co-founder of the journal Hybrid Pedagogy, among many other things. Jesse was interviewed by my Vanderbilt colleague, Derek Price, who's currently finishing his dissertation in German studies and comparative media analysis and practice. Thank you so much to both Derek and Jesse for sharing your time with Leading Lines.

[47:46] One thing I didn't mention about Derek Price at the start of the podcast is that he and I were co-organizers of the Learning at Play symposium at Vanderbilt in 2019, a one-day conference on games and learning. I think because I had Learning at Play on my mind while listening to Derek's interview, Jesse's comment about play stuck out at me.

[48:08] He said his students respond well when he is "trafficking in things like fun, play and authentic learning, rather than points, scores and currency." I was reminded of all the board games I play that feature points or scores or currency that I find quite fun. These games are highly structured, often competitive, and use points as currency in the way that Jesse used that term, but are still playful. The courses we teach can also be highly structured and competitive and use grades as currency. And yet why aren't they more fun for students?

[48:45] I tweeted about this question and received almost immediate conjectures from a couple of colleagues. Betsy Barre, one of our guests on the last episode of Leading Lines, noted that with board games, to quote Drew Carey, the points don't matter. The stakes are much higher for students in the courses that they take, which can affect their sense of fun and play. And Susan Bloom, editor of the volume on ungrading that Jesse mentioned, noted that people can choose to play a board game or not. But students aren't able to freely choose the courses they take or how they're graded. I have to agree with both of these factors.

[49:21] The consequences of low grades and the lack of student autonomy certainly undermine any sense of play that students might have. I was also struck by Jesse's comment that no one says that they love to grade. I wanted to be a contrarian and say that I do love grading, but I realized that I only love some parts of grading. I like giving students useful feedback, sure, but I could do that without assigning a grade. The board game analogy though, helped me see another aspect of grading that I think I do enjoy. I like designing a course and indeed a grading scheme that directs students' attention and effort toward

interesting questions and interesting work. This is, I think, a bit like the ways a game designer constructs a game and uses points as currency to direct player's attention and effort towards interesting interactions with the game and with each other.

[50:14] In this way, I do kind of like grading, at least in the sense of using grades to direct students towards deeper learning. This is why I really appreciate how Jesse Stommel talks about ungrading. It's a way into a much richer conversation about the roles that grades play in learning and in higher education and how we as educators can be more intentional in how we navigate and shape those roles.

[50:35] Leading Lines is produced by the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching and The Jean and Alexander Heard Libraries. You can find us on Twitter @leadinglinespod and on the web at leadinglinespod.com. This episode was edited by Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes maybe the first and third Monday of each month. I think we're almost back on our regular publishing schedule. I've been your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening and be safe. (music)