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

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## Abstract

Students entering the workforce or college after high school must demonstrate both technical skills and highly sought-after durable skills in order to be prepared for college and careers. This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to study the lived experiences of 10 students who participated in a secondary Career and Technical Education (CTE) media production class using an alternative grading approach commonly called ungrading. This research addresses the gap in understanding how ungrading practices can impact the development of durable skills – particularly creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking – in a CTE media production class. After high school graduation, the study participants pursued college and careers related to media production industries. IPA methodology was used to explore an experience of significant importance to the study participants. The study found that participants valued autonomy and freedom of choice, a highly collaborative environment, and the safety of learning and participating in new experiences without fear of failure. Ungrading provides a foundation to simultaneously develop technical skills alongside life-long durable skills which are highly valued for success in any career.



*Keywords:* ungrading, grading, alternative grading, creativity, collaboration, risk-taking, career and technical education, media production, secondary education, assessment, durable skills, soft skills

## Dedication

To my parents, Charlie and Phyllis, who have always supported me as a student and creative.

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Dr. Regena Aye showed me what it looks like to create a class culture emphasizing engagement, organization, and positive leadership. Her passion for effective education and training is evident in all she does. I hope to be as prepared as she is for

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

In recent years, ungrading has emerged as an innovative and student-focused approach to education, challenging the longstanding reliance on traditional grading systems (Flaherty, 2023; Talbert, 2023). Although there is no single definition of the term, ungrading happens when teachers and students collectively question or reject the grading process, at least to the extent allowed by the systems and institutions in which they exist (Masland, 2023; Stommel, 2023; Talbert, 2023). At its core, ungrading is based on the belief that traditional grading might not capture the subtleties and nuances of the learning process. At worst, traditional grading may obstruct learning as students become mired in the desired outcome rather than the learning (Blum, 2024; Kohn, 2011; Stommel, 2023).

This chapter provides background information, the statement of the problem, the purpose and significance of the study, the study's delimitations and assumptions, and the research questions. Terminology that is unique to this study is included, and the chapter concludes with an overview of the study's organization.

## Background

Students entering the workforce or college after high school – perhaps especially those who have participated in career and technical education (CTE) – must acquire a unique and diverse skillset during their secondary education. College and career success is often the result of subject matter knowledge, personal motivation, and a collection of durable skills (sometimes called "soft skills," "21st Century skills," or "employability skills") that are sought after by employers (Cole et al., 2021; Husain et al., 2010). With

advances in technology and automation resulting in a rapidly changing workplace, career readiness requires "critical thinking and analysis as well as problem-solving, and skills in self-management such as active learning, resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility" (World Economic Forum, 2020, p. 5). In short, students need to learn much more than what's in the curriculum to prepare for post-secondary success.

Throughout the secondary school experience, durable skills are often not explicitly incorporated in curriculum design (Cinque & Kippels, 2023). Skills valued in media production industries – creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking (Arnold, 2023; Ball et al., 2010) – are sometimes called lifelong skills because they're never truly mastered (Claxton et al., 2016). As such, they are difficult to assess or incorrectly measured in a school setting (Claxton et al., 2016; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Laureta, 2018). While students may be able to gain vital durable skills in school, the traditional school experience can be more rewarding for students who are capable of doing what is expected of them rather than developing creativity, collaborative skills, and resilience through risk-taking (Blum, 2024; Fisher, 2021). As a result of the limitations of traditional assessment, educators have moved towards alternative assessment techniques such as ungrading (Talbert, 2023).

Educators can employ ungrading strategies to navigate the limitations of traditional assessment techniques as they relate to durable skills. Ungrading is "a philosophy of assessment that seeks to decenter grades (i.e., letters or numbers) in the learning process" (Masland, 2023, p. 89). One highly sought-after durable skill that seems inclined to flourish in an ungraded environment is creativity (Amabile et al., 1986; Hennessey & Amabile, 1987; Jackson & Sinclair, 2006; Robinson, 2006).

A single definition of creativity is difficult to discern (Fox & Smith, 2023), but creative thoughts and solutions must involve originality and usefulness (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). The importance of creativity as a durable skill is prevalent in research (Arnold, 2023; Ball et al., 2010; Cinque & Kippels, 2023; Claxton et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2021; Gaines & Mohammed, 2013), as well as highly sought-after in industry (America Succeeds, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2020, 2023). Alongside the development of creativity in an ungraded classroom, collaboration is another highly regarded durable skill that can benefit from an ungraded environment (White & Fantone, 2010).

In a classroom using ungrading, the primary focus is on critical feedback, revision, and collaboration (Stommel, 2023). This approach relieves stress and anxiety around grades (Fluharty, 2023; Gorichanaz, 2022; McMorran & Ragupathi, 2019). When grading practices reduce stress and anxiety, students develop a sense of freedom and naturally embrace failure as part of the learning process (Gorichanaz, 2022).

A willingness to take risks is closely aligned with acceptance of failure. Risk-taking, also described as intellectual courage, is "a readiness to persist in thinking or communicating in the face of fear, including fear of embarrassment or failure" (Baehr, 2022, p. 196). Educators can de-emphasize grades to provide a learning environment for encouraging and supporting failure and risk-taking. When grades are de-emphasized, as in an ungraded classroom, the class "feels safe to students," and they "are free to admit when they don't understand something and are able to ask for help" (Kohn, 2018, p. 202).

**Statement of the Problem**

Teaching creative subjects such as writing, theatre, film, graphic design, performing arts, and others demands a unique learning environment that cultivates

student creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking, supported by constructive teacher feedback. In traditional classrooms, where feedback comes with grades attached and teacher-driven assignments and rubrics prevail, the teaching and learning process often devolves into a transactional experience (Stommel, 2023). This transactional approach, where students acquire information from the teacher (Norman, 2022), is all too common in the educational system. Unfortunately, this transactional approach can impart a sense of prioritizing control and compliance over cultivating learning and developing durable skills (Fisher, 2021; Kohn, 2018) such as creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking.

Existing research studies suggest using an ungrading approach provides several positive benefits to students. Students benefit most from ungrading when they possess self-regulated learning skills (Koehler & Meech, 2022). However, students often describe classrooms with increased time for reflection and discussions with teachers and peers in ungraded environments (Blum, 2024; Gorichanaz, 2022). In addition, teacher/student relationships are improved (Gorichanaz, 2022; Hasinoff et al., 2024), and students describe greater engagement and motivation during the learning process (Spurlock, 2023; Turcotte et al., 2023). Finally, ungrading practices can create a more equitable classroom (Feldman, 2019; Rapchak et al., 2023; Stommel, 2023), benefiting students with diverse backgrounds and raising student achievement across a wide range of student populations.

Similar to the growing body of research on the positive effect of ungrading, there is an abundance of research and reports on the importance of durable skills in CTE (Boettcher, 2014; Deeds, 2017; Hargis, 2011; Klein, 2015). However, when researchers look at exemplary skills of working industry professionals, shortcomings are identified in the relevance of career preparation programs (Bridgstock, 2016). While this research

focuses on higher education, it suggests a need to address deficiencies of career and technical education programs when it comes to developing durable skills.

Despite both the research demonstrating the benefits of ungrading and the importance of durable skills in CTE, there remains a gap in understanding how ungrading practices can impact the development of these durable skills. Therefore, this study sought to address this gap by investigating the relationship between ungrading and the development of durable skills in a CTE media production class. This study could also resonate with the broader educational community as states and school districts move towards educational frameworks that emphasize career preparation, durable skills, and student-focused learning (America Succeeds, 2023; Crogman et al., 2023; Knowledge Works, 2022; Stanford, 2023).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate students' lived experiences within the context of ungrading in a secondary-level CTE media production class, focusing on students pursuing a media-related college or career pathway. Data collected for the study of the effects of ungrading on creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking – skills that are of particular relevance to college and careers related to media production (Arnold, 2023; Ball et al., 2010) – can guide educators towards assessment and instructional design principles that allow these durable skills to develop more fully. By examining the impact of ungrading on the perceived experiences of this group, the study sought to provide insights that can guide educators toward instructional practices that better prepare students for post-secondary academic and professional success.

## Significance of the Study

The significance of this research is in directly examining the student experience within an ungraded learning environment. The fundamental shift from conventional grading methods towards ungrading in this study is presumed to offer participants a distinctive and impactful experience compared to the bulk of their secondary school experience. An essential characteristic of this type of research is focusing on an experience that profoundly resonates with study participants (Nizza et al., 2021). This research adds new knowledge to the field from the perspective of those who experienced ungrading firsthand.

Creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking are valued "regardless of an individual's pathway, educational attainment level, or geography" (Cole et al., 2021, p. 5). Additionally, these skills (and others closely related) are routinely found among those valued by employers as they seek a skilled workforce for the future (World Economic Forum, 2020, 2023). By focusing on students' lived experiences with creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking in an ungraded environment, this study sought to identify how these essential durable skills can be grown and nurtured in a CTE media production course and beyond.

## Delimitations

This study established several important delimitations to guide the research. Delimitations, as described by Lunenburg and Irby (2008), are "self-imposed boundaries set by the researcher on the purpose and scope of the study" (p. 134). The first boundary imposed by the researcher was the focus on participants in a CTE media production class. Specifically, the study sample was limited to students enrolled in the researcher's Digital

Media Technology (DMT) class between 2021-2023, as these represent years in which the DMT course utilized an ungrading approach.

Additionally, the sample was purposefully limited to former DMT students actively pursuing post-secondary college and career options related to media industries. This delimitation is grounded in recognizing the research design's efficacy when exploring experiences of great importance to participants (Miller et al., 2018; Smith & Nizza, 2022).

The durable skills selected for the focus of this research – creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking – were chosen as they represent skills that are not only sought after by industry (World Economic Forum, 2020, 2023), but are valued by those participating in creative education (Arnold, 2023; Ball et al., 2010). The researcher also recognizes the value of these skills in media education. Still, the nature of qualitative research allows for the research participants to guide the discourse based on their experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Finally, smaller, relatively homogenous sample sizes are appropriate for this research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2022), so there were 10 research participants. The sample size, as well as the other delimitations described here, have been implemented to focus and refine the research and to ensure "full appreciation to each participant's account" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 9) of their experience with creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking in an ungraded media production class.

**Assumptions**

Assumptions are ideas understood to be true and accepted by the researcher throughout the research process (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). This study includes the

following assumptions: (a) the study participants shared their experiences honestly and to the best of their memory; (b) the study participants and researcher shared an understanding of the vocabulary relevant to the subject matter and course; (c) the study participants understood the interview questions in order to provide rich and detailed answers; (d) the study participants freely shared both positive and negative experiences with the researcher during the interview process.

## Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions (RQ) to determine what it was like to experience ungrading in a secondary CTE media production course:

**RQ1.** How does ungrading influence students' experiences with creativity in a secondary-level media production class?

**RQ2.** How does ungrading influence students' experiences with collaboration in a secondary-level media production class?

**RQ3.** How does ungrading influence students' experiences with risk-taking in a secondary-level media production class?

**RQ4**. To what extent do students believe that their experiences with ungrading in a secondary-level media production class contributed to their sense of preparedness for media-focused college and career pursuits?

## Definition of Terms

For clarity, terminology that may be unique to this study is described in the following list of definitions of terms. In some cases, the terminology will be more common than in others, but the context specific to this research is explained below.

***Basecamp***

Basecamp is an online and app-based project management platform utilized by study participants in this course. In DMT, Basecamp is the platform used for project management, to-do lists, communication, project feedback, file sharing, and publishing of audio/video portfolio work.

***Client-connected project***

This example of a market value asset (see below) allows students to work collaboratively to solve a problem or create a deliverable product (multimedia production) for an outside organization. Students (creatives) in DMT are expected to complete at least one client-connected project as part of the year-long course.

***Creatives***

Creatives is a term used to replace the word "students" in DMT, reflecting the students' consistent role as participants in the act of creativity. This term also helps emphasize a more professional, collaborative approach between students and teacher, recognizing the two-way exchange of ideas, learning, and inspiration in media production.

***Digital Media Technology (DMT)***

Research participants in this study took a half-day high school career and technical education-focused media production class called Digital Media Technology. The course focuses on a wide range of skills associated with professionally produced audio and video. While the course is designed as a year-long course, occasionally students enroll in the course a second year. The experience of second-year students might

best be described as an independent study with opportunities for collaboration with peers and frequent instructor feedback.

***Durable skills***

Durable skills (sometimes called "soft skills," "21st Century skills," or "employability skills") are skills that we use in combination with knowledge and job- or industry-specific skills. These skills, such as communication, leadership, teamwork, creativity, and problem-solving, are often broad and difficult to measure.

***Labor-based grading contract***

Also called contract-based grading or labor-based grading. This grading approach emphasizes feedback, discussion, and reflection throughout the work cycle related to the course's subject matter rather than assigning grades at each step of the process. Adapted from its original form utilized for creative writing by Inoue (2019), the labor-based grading contract used in DMT focuses on students gaining experience with various relevant media production skills.

***Market value asset (MVA)***

MVA is a general term that refers to an experiential learning opportunity beyond secondary school curricula that better prepares students for college and careers (Deeds, 2017; Real World Learning, 2023). Examples include college credit towards a degree, internships, entrepreneurial experiences, industry recognized credentials, and client-connected projects.

***Quests***

The term "Quests" or "Quests website" refers to the learning management system (LMS) used exclusively in Digital Media Technology. This LMS runs on a WordPress

website created by the researcher specifically for this class to facilitate project-based, personalized, self-paced, gamified, and ungraded learning. Content on the Quests website is a combination of modules that include teacher-created videos, written resources, and selected links to outside resources.

### *Sending school*

Since DMT is a half-day, off-campus course serving multiple school districts, students enrolled in the course also attend a traditional high school, are home-schooled, or go to a private school. These institutions are commonly referred to as the student's sending school.

### *Ungrading*

Ungrading is a broad term that refers to an assessment and evaluation format that does not emphasize points, scores, or letter grades. Instead, an ungraded course focuses on providing students with instructor and peer feedback with opportunities for revision, all while students self-evaluate and reflect on the learning process. In addition, students can often manage their workload in an ungraded class. If and when grades need to be assigned due to the nature of the institutional system, the final letter grade is generally determined through conversation between instructor and student, with student input taken into account (Stommel, 2023).

## Organization of the Study

This research study is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, significance of the study, delimitations, assumptions, research questions, and definitions of terms. Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical framework for this study, then reviews the relevant

literature. Chapter 3 describes the research method used in this study, including the research design, setting, sampling procedures, survey instrument, data collection procedures, data analysis/synthesis, reliability, researcher's role, and limitations. Chapter 4 presents the study's findings, including the primary themes aligned with the research questions introduced in Chapter 1, using the process described in Chapter 3. Chapter 5 summarizes the research study, including findings related to the literature review, implications of the findings for theory and practice, recommendations for further research, and conclusions.

# Chapter 2

## Review of the Literature

This chapter reviews the literature relevant to conducting research on students' experiences in an ungraded secondary CTE media production class. This study aimed to build on this research through a lens of the student experience with industry-relevant durable skills, specifically creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking, in an ungraded class. The following literature review begins by examining the theoretical framework from which this study was pursued, including critical pedagogy, social constructivist theory, and self-determination theory. The review of the literature continues with the historical context of grading systems, the emergence of ungrading, motivation in education, creativity in education, collaboration in education, and academic and creative risk-taking. Issues related to equity in grading are presented, as well as durable skills-focused instruction and essential durable skills. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

### Theoretical Framework

According to Lunenburg and Irby (2008), "a theory is an organized body of interrelated concepts, assumptions, and generalizations that systematically explains regularities in behavior" (p. 122). The theoretical framework section provides an opportunity to describe the theory or theories from which a study is pursued. In this study, a combination of three theories informed the research: critical pedagogy, social constructivist theory, and self-determination theory. These theories are described below, along with each theory's relationship to this research study.

### *Critical Pedagogy*

Underlying any attempt to modify significant characteristics of the education system such as grades, is an element of critical pedagogy, which aims to empower students through social justice and critical thinking. A foundational aspect of critical pedagogy upon which this research study is formed is a belief that education is more than just a one-way exchange of information from teacher to student. Criticized as a banking model of education by Freire (1970/2023), this misguided approach situates the teacher as the one who delivers information and the students as the ones who passively receive and attempt to memorize it. Similarly, hooks (1994) describes the process of educating for freedom, recognizing the importance of moving away from the "rote, assembly-line approach to learning" (p. 13). In short, this research study is situated around the fundamental principle in critical pedagogy that calls for solving the "teacher-student contradiction…so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (Freire, 1970/2023, p. 45).

Arguably, the moment during the teaching and learning process most fraught with an imbalance of power and lack of collaboration is when the teacher is tasked with assessing student learning and assigning a score, percentage, or final letter grade. Stommel (2023) describes the typical grading process as "reducing teaching and learning to a mere transaction" (p. 114). While this "transaction" may seem unavoidable in our current educational landscape, ungrading techniques have emerged as a response. Ungrading is not a specific set of teaching or assessment practices. Instead, ungrading techniques can vary from teacher to teacher and across institutions. The concept of ungrading, as described by Stommel (2023), consists of "an active and ongoing critique

of grades as a system and the decision to do what we can…to carefully dismantle that system" (p. 114). This questioning of the typical systems of education aligns this research study with critical pedagogy. The emphasis on disrupting systems of power, particularly through the two-way exchange of learning between teacher and student as described by Freire (1970/2023) and hooks (1994), naturally connects to the collaborative elements in social constructivist theory, another theory foundational in this research study.

### *Social Constructivist Theory*

Progressive approaches to education are not new. For the last hundred years, traditional and progressive approaches to schooling have been at odds (Blum, 2024). Another progressive theory foundational to this study is social constructivist theory, developed by Vygotsky (1978), which emphasizes the collaborative nature of learning. A central component of social constructivist theory is the Zone of Proximal Development, "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). By acknowledging the importance of mentorship and collaboration, the Zone of Proximal Development and social constructivist theory emphasize that an individual can only learn so much alone, but interactions with a teacher or peers have the potential to increase learning significantly.

The importance of teachers and peers to development and learning is a natural component of ungrading. This essential collaboration can flourish in a learning environment that minimizes a focus on grading and emphasizes the importance of each student's expertise in the collaborative learning environment (Kohn, 2018). Honoring

student experience goes a long way towards creating a positive classroom culture or a sense of relatedness. When combined with autonomy and competence, relatedness is a necessary component for intrinsic motivation according to self-determination theory, which is addressed in the following section.

### *Self-Determination Theory*

A fundamental assumption of self-determination theory is that "people are by nature active and engaged" (Deci & Ryan, 2015, p. 10). From that premise, self-determination theory identifies three psychological needs in learning: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Teaching approaches that support autonomy take into account student voices and needs. By understanding students' needs, teachers can understand student perceptions of competence. Finally, relatedness, which is enhanced by the same techniques that build autonomy and competence, is perceived by students when they feel supported and cared for in a learning environment. According to self-determination theory, when students have the fundamental psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in place, intrinsic motivation can thrive.

Intrinsic motivation is at the center of ungrading, according to the definition from Blum (2024): ungrading calls "into question conventional practices focusing on metrics, to focus instead on intrinsic motivation and on learning" (p. 75). Framing this research study within the three theories of critical pedagogy, social constructivist theory, and self-determination theory sets the stage for a research environment where the hierarchical systems are called into question, the focus is on collaborative experiences, and intrinsic motivation is foundational. It begins with questioning the process of grades and grading.

In order to understand the significance of that, one must first understand the history and context of grades.

## History and Context of Grades

### *Historical Context of Grading Systems*

Schneider and Hutt (2014) examined the history of the A-F grading scale, or what is typically referred to as traditional grading. The standardized adoption of this scale in K-12 and higher education in the United States only dates back to the mid-20th century. This uniformity was slow to transpire, as is to be expected in a non-centralized system. As an example, Yale "went through four different grading systems between 1967 and 1981, moving from a numeric system to an Honors/High Pass system to the A-F system and, finally, to an A-F system that also included pluses and minuses" (p. 215). Historically, grades were used as an internal measurement, a means of sorting and ranking, and a reward for student effort. In an effort to facilitate transitions from K-12 to higher education and subsequent employment, grades became used as a form of communication with parents, universities, and employers.

Communication and feedback between teacher and student are also noted as a primary purpose of grades. Interestingly, teachers rank the importance of communication with parents above student feedback (Guskey, 2002). Another hurdle to the notion that grades are used for feedback, especially at the secondary level, is the time it takes to provide detailed feedback. Because of this, descriptive feedback is used less frequently at the secondary level (Farr, 2000), which minimizes the value of grades in communicating what students have and have yet to learn (Brookhart et al., 2016). If communication and

student feedback are among the top characteristics of grades, one might expect some level of consistency across individual teachers and institutions.

Not only is there a lack of grading consistency across institutions and teachers, but this lack of consistency is also not a particularly new phenomenon. Over a century ago, research demonstrated a lack of reliability even if a teacher graded the same paper twice (Silberstein, 1922). Similar research done more recently reinforces the challenges with reliability. Brimi (2011) found that 73 teachers graded a single paper with scores ranging from 50 to 96 on a 100-point scale, covering all five letter grades. The conclusion of Brookhart et al. (2016), who looked at these studies and others in a survey of one hundred years of grading research, is that there is "large variation among teachers in the validity and reliability of grades, both in the meaning of grades and in the accuracy of reporting" (p. 835). It might not be surprising that teachers and students alike are "much more likely to complain about grading than to praise its accuracy or value" (Jaschik, 2009, para. 3).

The overall challenge with grades is that they attempt to exist as a means of promoting learning, as a means of communication, and, more broadly, as a universal way for schools to function as a complex system (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Some of these challenges can be overcome, but shifting students away from metrics and towards a focus on learning is at the core of the solution. One approach to shifting the focus from grades to learning is ungrading. When educators utilize ungrading techniques, they work with students to call into question the grading process, shifting the focus to feedback (Masland, 2023; Stommel, 2023). The emergence of ungrading is discussed in the following section.

### *Emergence of Ungrading*

The term ungrading, coined by Stommel (2023), is distinct from grading approaches such as "minimal grading, labor-based grading contracts, specifications grading" (p. 118), and others. Stommel (2023) describes minimal grading as grading less work, providing more frequent feedback, and reducing the grading scale from a 100-point scale to a three- or four-point scale. A primary characteristic of labor-based grading contracts is a focus on quantity rather than quality during the learning process, emphasizing feedback and revision (Inoue, 2019). Specifications grading provides multiple opportunities to meet clearly defined learning objectives (Nilson, 2014). While these and other approaches employ characteristics similar to ungrading, in the sense that the focus on grades is minimized, ungrading goes further. Stommel (2023) stresses that ungrading is "an active and ongoing critique of grades as a system" (p. 114). Educators who ungrade must work to dismantle systems that often cause inadvertent harm to students.

Gorichanaz (2022) found that this harm is minimized, as ungrading provides a "humane learning experience" (p. 2) while supporting students as they develop lifelong durable skills. The same study also revealed that an ungraded class provides an opportunity for more collaborative learning with less stress. As with any significant shift away from the known to the unknown, such as the shift away from focusing on grades, ungraded classes can still pose challenges for students.

In a study by Hasinoff et al. (2024), students reported more engagement, a greater focus on learning, and more learning overall, but results were mixed on stress levels and the sense of competition among peers. Additionally, this study confirmed results found in

prior research (Inoue, 2012; Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020) that ungrading might cause increased anxiety, particularly in marginalized groups, due to the unknown factors present in this type of grading approach. Stommel (2023) reflects on this criticism and concludes that the system of grades is still at the core of harm to students, and as such, ungrading provides the path toward equitable practices.

The notion of equity frequently arises as a premise for embarking on an ungrading practice, and associated research reveals participants' previous troubling experiences with grades. In a study by Turcotte et al. (2023), one participant, a non-native English speaker, revealed consistently receiving lower grades due to grammar and syntax problems despite efforts that were similar to peers. Participation in an ungraded course provided the same study participant with increased motivation and engagement. Still, motivation is one of several areas of concern when it comes to ungrading.

McMorran and Ragupathi (2019) found several challenges during a grade-free first semester designed to facilitate a smooth transition into higher education. Some survey respondents reported poor study habits and reduced motivation. Contrary to this finding, Spurlock (2023) found increased intrinsic motivation and students seeking challenges in an ungraded computer science course. Faculty – who were less enthusiastic about the ungraded approach in the first place – surveyed in the study by McMorran and Ragupathi (2019) noted a negative impact on student behavior, drawing attention to "tardiness, absenteeism from lectures, poor quality work, and other issues" (p. 933). One way to address these issues is to focus on student self-assessment as part of the ungrading process.

A focus on self-assessment helped guide the ungrading approach described in a study by Koehler and Meech (2022), where students completed four self-assessments throughout the course. The assessments were designed so that students were asked to address specific parameters, including the level of contribution, synthesizing course content, and issues related to timing, among other things. Course facilitators provided personalized responses to student self-assessments, including questions to encourage improved future self-assessments. Despite the level of detail in this approach, researchers found "little evidence of students using the feedback as a basis for reflection in subsequent self-assessments" (p. 86). A fundamental issue highlighted by these and other concerns with ungrading remains: educators "cannot easily undo decades of grade-centric thinking" (McMorran & Ragupathi, 2019, p. 936).

Attempting to undo the system of grade-centric thinking is exactly what Stommel (2023) emphasizes as an essential component of ungrading. One suggestion is to engage in in-depth class discussions about thoughts and feelings about grades and grading as a system. Stommel (2023) specifically points to Kohn (2011), whose critique notes grades' negative impact on motivation, leading to a preference for easier tasks and decreased depth of thinking. In addition to providing a more equitable grading framework, ungrading aims to improve teacher-student relationships, provide opportunities for collaboration, and perhaps most importantly, tap into intrinsic motivation. Blum's (2024) approach to ungrading emphasizes humans' natural curiosity and desire to learn as its foundation. Understanding how to foster this innate intrinsic motivation to learn is critical for effective teaching.

## Motivation in Education

### *Autonomy and Intrinsic Motivation*

Chamberlin, Yasué, and Chiang (2023) note that student motivation to learn can be extrinsic or intrinsic, depending on the level of autonomy involved. Deci and Ryan (2000, 2015), who developed self-determination theory, identify autonomy and competence as the two most important elements needed for intrinsic motivation. They also note a third element essential for intrinsic motivation: relatedness, "when it is clear the child feels welcomed and cared for in a given context" (p. 22). Taking a cue from Blum's (2024) approach to ungrading that emphasizes intrinsic motivation, this section will explore the literature on recognizing intrinsic motivation's value.

Amabile (1997) defines intrinsic motivation as "the motivation to work on something because it is interesting, involving, exciting, satisfying, or personally challenging" (p. 39). Csikszentmihalyi et al. (2014) describe a peak state of intrinsic motivation using the term flow, coined by Csikszentmihalyi. A state of flow involves "a clear set of goals…a balance between perceived challenges and perceived skills" (p. 232), and consistent feedback. Creating an environment that invites high levels of intrinsic motivation or flow is a motivational challenge for educators tasked with meeting the needs of a diverse group of learners in any given class. In a traditional classroom setting, goals are often predetermined as learning outcomes on the course syllabus, challenges are frequently one-size-fits-all, opportunities for personalization are limited, and feedback is sparse or is deemed irrelevant when delivered alongside grades (Blum, 2024). The following section looks at how grading approaches impact motivation.

### *Grades and Motivation*

According to Blum (2024) traditional grading systems fail to foster intrinsic motivation. Crogman et al. (2023) take that idea and suggest wide-ranging changes to traditional grading and assessment. At the core of their argument is a shift towards grading students on their level of improvement. This concept aligns with previously noted research on intrinsic motivation (Amabile, 1997; Chamberlin et al., 2023; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2015), ensuring the difficulty level matches student competence and that students continue to see opportunities for growth. Another important aspect of the reform suggested by Crogman et al. (2023) is emphasizing student autonomy through personalized learning. Finally, meaningful feedback is encouraged to support intrinsic motivation and flow as learners experience individual goals aligned with their skill levels.

Another grading approach that supports intrinsic motivation is using grading contracts, which is a technique explored by Fluharty (2023). Citing grading contract frameworks by Danielewicz and Elbow (2009) and Inoue (2019), Fluharty (2023) notes the implementation of contract-based grading relieves stress associated with traditional grades. With contract-based grading, students have autonomy in their workload, and the reduced stress no doubt leads to a sense of relatedness, as described by Deci and Ryan (2000, 2015), both essential components to intrinsic motivation. Contract-based grading also helps students feel a sense of competence. When students are faced with work that may cause a sense of incompetence, motivation all but disappears (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2014).

When it comes to feelings of incompetence, ungrading can positively impact motivation by providing students with ample opportunities to demonstrate their understanding over time (Spurlock, 2023). For example, giving students an opportunity to demonstrate understanding over time is evident in grading techniques common in medical schools (White & Fantone, 2010). Specifically, a pass/fail grading system can improve students' ability to self-regulate their learning during the class and beyond, fostering a necessary sense of lifelong learning (White & Fantone, 2010). This ability to self-regulate learning is closely aligned with the autonomy needed for intrinsic motivation. Similarly, in an ungraded learning module for a course in a creative media degree, Williams (2020) noted an increase in student engagement and motivation. This ungraded module focused on class, individual, and group feedback and was not without its challenges. Williams (2020) acknowledged the challenges because of students' reliance on grades for progress monitoring and motivation, but ultimately, the "students loved the feedback and did not miss the grades" (p. 4). It is clear that feedback is an essential component of the learning process.

### *Feedback and the Impact of Extrinsic Rewards*

Understanding the importance of feedback, Butler and Nisan (1986) explored the impact various methods of grading and feedback had on motivation. Providing only written feedback produced more motivated learners than those who received a grade but no feedback or a grade alone. Wilson (2023) investigated the results of feedback-focused contract-based grading but could not confirm some of the advantages of ungrading when it comes to motivation. Possible explanations for this lie in the course level and delivery

mode for the course associated with this study. Motivation is complex, with incentives and deterrents impacting each student differently.

To this point, Kohn (2018) makes the case that grades are a type of extrinsic reward detrimental to intrinsic motivation when it comes to learning. Rheinberg and Engeser (2018), on the other hand, observe that the research on what they note is called "the undermining effect" (p. 589) of extrinsic rewards does not exist in real-world experiences. However, Rheinberg and Engeser (2018) cite Calder and Staw (1975) in one instance when the undermining effect seems to occur: when individuals already experience enjoyment while doing the activity. Enjoyment and a state of flow often overlap activities that tap into creativity. The following section examines creativity in education.

## Creativity in Education

### *The Importance of Developing Creativity*

In the most widely viewed TED Talk of all time (TED Conferences, 2024), Robinson (2006) makes the case that schools are not only failing to foster creativity in students but are actively squandering it. Fisher (2021) writes that educators often extol the virtues of school as a place to develop creativity and critical thinking, but the reality is quite different. Instead, Fisher (2021) argues students' success or failure depends less on creativity and problem-solving and more on their ability to follow directions and meet teacher expectations. Fisher (2021) and Blum (2024) both suggest that if schools were designed around curiosity, creativity, and love of learning, they would look nothing like most schools today. Meanwhile, creativity continues to be a highly sought-after durable

skill not only in creative fields (Arnold, 2023; Ball et al., 2010) but across all industries (America Succeeds, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2020, 2023).

The relevance and value of creativity are evident, but further complicating its development in education is the lack of a consistent definition (Fox & Smith, 2023). From their systematic literature review, Fox and Smith (2023) identify a frequently used definition from Runco and Jaeger (2012): that creativity must be both original and effective. Csikszentmihalyi (1997/2013) notes three common traits when describing creative individuals: they exhibit unique and original thoughts, look at the world in new ways, or make significant contributions to society. Csikszentmihalyi (1997/2013) further argues that external factors surrounding creative individuals are a requisite component of whether the individual can contribute significantly to a discipline or field of study. These external factors demonstrate the link between creativity and motivation.

### *Motivation, Rewards, and Creativity*

Like Csikszentmihalyi (1997/2013), Amabile's (1997) definition of creativity emphasizes the importance of external factors on motivation and that motivation is closely connected with creativity. In a collection of studies designed to measure the effect of external rewards on creativity, Amabile et al. (1986) found interesting results. In one study, elementary-aged children were tasked with creating something from art supplies that "made them feel silly" (p. 16), to write a short story to accompany a book with only pictures, and to complete a relatively easy but creative problem-solving challenge. Students were randomly assigned to groups where they either received a reward or no reward. The storytelling of students in the non-reward group was evaluated as more creative than that of the reward group, and participants in the non-reward group were

more likely to describe the activities as play instead of work. Similar findings were consistent in additional studies and held true across different ages, genders, means of creative expression, or whether the rewards were money- or activity-based.

Expanding on this research, Hennessey and Amabile (1987) bluntly described how educators could effectively eliminate creativity: have students work for an expected reward, emphasize competition, focus only on evaluation, use surveillance, and limit student choice. Ultimately, they argue that intrinsic motivation and creativity can be fostered in an environment where control and compliance are minimized. Ungrading provides several opportunities to limit some of the hindrances to creativity, such as removing externally imposed controls, minimizing external rewards, providing more choices, and abandoning surveillance altogether. When it comes to competition in particular, ungrading is uniquely positioned to encourage its opposite, collaboration. The following section will address the importance of collaboration in learning.

## Collaboration in Education

### *Fostering Collaboration Over Competition*

Collaboration is a key element to learning, whether it is the two-way collaboration between teacher and student described by Friere (1970/2023), the Zone of Proximal Development theorized by Vygotsky (1978), which suggests that learning is most significant with the help of mentors and peers, or the idea that collaboration along with choice and content supersedes punishment and rewards as an element of motivation as described by Kohn (2018). However, despite the recognized value of collaboration, a sense of competition arises in a typical classroom. When teachers use grades to rank and sort students, even if the expected aim of grading has nothing to do with pitting students

against each other, students are keenly aware of the implicit competition in the system (Blum, 2024; Kohn, 2018; Stommel, 2023). It seems unavoidable that a sense of competition evolves from being ranked against one's peers.

The competitive atmosphere between peers prevalent in schools contrasts with the skills valued in the workplace. Empathy and active listening, skills associated with collaboration and teamwork, are highly valued in the workplace (World Economic Forum, 2023), just as they are in the classroom. Networking, collaboration, and communication are key skills developed through market value assets (MVA). The MVA framework, created by the Real World Learning collaborative in the greater Kansas City (MO) area, recognizes the value of graduating from high school with experiences beyond the curriculum. Experiences that emphasize collaboration and communication are client-connected projects, internships, and entrepreneurial experiences (Real World Learning, 2023, 2024). Much of the research on collaboration and associated durable skills is aligned with classroom frameworks emphasizing teamwork, including design thinking, project-based learning (PjBL), problem-based learning (PBL), and authentic learning.

### *Approaches to Collaboration*

Design thinking was the focus of action research by Rayala (2022), who engaged a small global team of educators to consider innovation and inquiry in education. Similar to challenges noted by advocates of ungrading, this research highlighted concerns with the oppressive system of education, outdated instructional models, and a focus on standardized instruction and assessment among the obstacles to innovation in education. Rayala (2022) cites research by Aflatoony et al. (2018) demonstrating increased teamwork and collaboration during design thinking projects. To that same end, Rayala

(2022) noted increased empathy in study participants (and their students) during the design thinking process. Innovative approaches like design thinking, as well as PjBL and PBL approaches, can have a positive impact on collaboration. These approaches to instruction have collaboration at their core, with students working on critical thinking and problem-solving skills with the teacher acting as a guide (Bell, 2010).

Comparing PBL with traditional instruction, White (2005) interviewed medical students at different levels of their higher education journey at two different institutions. One university used a PBL approach, while the other was described as more traditional. A significant finding in this study is that students in the traditional medical school environment experienced greater challenges transitioning through the levels of medical school, while the PBL university students had consistent expectations throughout these changes. Not surprisingly, students from the PBL-based university spoke about their consistent experiences with collaborative learning from the start of their first year and beyond. The PBL college experience was preparing students for careers as lifelong learners on collaborative teams. White (2005) notes the irony in grading systems that engender a sense of competition even as students will be expected to work in teams throughout their careers.

Educators and industry value the importance of collaboration, which can be developed in part through innovative approaches such as PjBL and PBL. However, these minimally guided instructional techniques are not without critics who note the lack of research supporting instruction with minimal guidance (Clark et al., 2012; Kirschner et al., 2006). Absent from these critiques is the impact problem- and project-based educational approaches have on collaboration and other skills essential for developing a

lifelong love of learning. Ultimately, appropriate direct instruction should support PjBL and PBL instructional approaches to facilitate the exploratory nature of the project-based work in which the students are engaged (de Jong et al., 2023; Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

A common thread to student-focused learning experiences like these is a supportive learning environment. In an ungraded classroom, there is a greater sense of community as students and teachers build relationships around the common goal of learning the course content (Gorichanaz, 2022), laying a foundation for effective collaboration. This environment also alleviates some concerns around failure associated with taking academic risks, addressed in the following section.

## Academic and Creative Risk-Taking

### *The Relationship Between Academic Risk-Taking and Creativity*

Academic risk-taking is defined by Clifford (1991) as "student selection of school achievement tasks that vary in probability of success and are accompanied by feedback or the expectation of feedback" (pp. 276-277). Intellectual courage is a similar term, used by Baehr (2022) to describe risk-taking as "a readiness to persist in thinking or communicating in the face of fear, including fear of embarrassment or failure" (p. 196). Fear of failure is one of many persistent negative emotions experienced by students at all levels during their school experience (Blum, 2024).

Overcoming a fear of failure and the desire to take risks are closely intertwined with motivation and creativity. When students face an extrinsic motivator like a grade, their willingness to take risks diminishes as they are likely to choose the easiest possible task (Kohn, 2011). This choice, far from being an example of laziness, makes perfect sense when students are constantly reminded of the importance of grades. Freedom to

take risks and be creative are integral to the labor-based grading contract approach since "failure at writing is vital to learning how to write better" (Inoue, 2019, p. 140).

### *Embracing Failure*

When it comes to challenges in the workplace as it relates to failure, Amabile (1999) employs an analogy of a maze. While it may be efficient and risk-averse to travel the most worn path of a maze from start to finish, there may be more creative options. When it comes to creativity, the solution that might be deemed most creative might also take longer and have more failures along the way (Amabile, 1999). If school aims to be a place where students can take the path less traveled, thus taking time to understand their learning even while making mistakes, then attention must be paid to the classroom culture.

Restructuring a class to allow more time to consider mistakes and work on solutions is one suggestion from a study by Smith and Henriksen (2016) that looked at failure as an essential part of the creative process. In this case, students in a graduate-level education technology class had opportunities to explore, play, and reflect on mistakes while sharing these strategies with their own students. Smith and Henriksen (2016) encourage educators to provide students with opportunities to take risks by embracing ambiguity and "giving learners permission to interpret criteria in a personally meaningful manner" (p. 10). In an unwritten nod to ungrading, Smith and Henriksen (2016) note the challenges in risk-taking regarding assessment and suggest focusing on process over product in grading, awarding marks for revisions and effort. Supporting students in their efforts is a key feature in developing students who are inclined to take risks.

### *Creating a Culture of Risk-Taking*

Risk-taking is central to a report from Sharma (2015) of an earlier study (Sharma et al., 2011) where students completed lessons in statistics. An important element in developing students who are comfortable taking risks is whether classroom norms are in place to encourage risk-taking. As part of the learning process, students were tasked with collaboratively listening, discussing, and critiquing statistical information. Groups were expected to hear all voices, thus building community. During presentations, each group member stood and presented together. In short, the students in this study stressed the importance of relationships with the teacher and other students in helping them feel confident in taking risks. A class with a positive culture is just as important as an individual's positive emotions as part of recovering from risk-taking and failure.

Taking risks and failing in school is no doubt stressful. In a series of studies to determine the impact of resilience on the ability to rebound from a stressful experience, Tugade and Fredrickson (2004) found encouraging results. In one study, participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups as they prepared for a speech, an activity that is generally understood to be stressful. One group of participants was given instructions that positively framed the task, focusing the participants on the mindset of overcoming a challenge by preparing the speech. The other group of participants was given instructions that focused on the final evaluation of the speech, framing the speech preparation task as a threat. The study's results showed that focusing on the challenge instead of the threat allowed study participants who were less resilient to recover from the stressful experience just as someone more resilient. It is clear that focusing on the

learning process and its associated challenges can provide a better learning environment than focusing on the process of assessment and final evaluation.

This shift towards focusing on process over product aligns closely with the characteristics of ungrading, which emphasizes revisions, reflections, and the learning journey rather than focusing only on the outcome. In addition, ungrading provides support for students as they engage in challenges and failures and is a means of supporting creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking in education. Finally, it offers an opportunity to acknowledge and repair shortcomings in equity, which is addressed in the next section.

## Equity in Grading

### *Pillars of Equitable Grading*

In recent years, equity has become a surprisingly controversial topic, particularly when bracketed by the words diversity and inclusion. This section of the literature review will specifically address issues around equitable grading practices. Feldman (2019) establishes three pillars of equitable grading: grades should be mathematically accurate, bias-resistant, and motivational. Each of these pillars has a driving principle and associated grading practices shown in *Table 1*.

**Table 1**

*Equitable Grading Practices*

| Pillar | Driving Principle | Grading Practices |
|---|---|---|
| Accurate | Our grading must use calculations that are mathematically sound, easy to understand, and correctly describe a student's level of academic performance. | • Avoiding zeros<br>• Minimum grading<br>• 0-4 scale<br>• Weighting more recent performance<br>• Grades based on an individual's achievement, not the group's |
| Bias-Resistant | Grades should be based on valid evidence of a student's content knowledge, and not based on evidence that is likely to be corrupted by a teacher's implicit bias or reflect a student's environment. | • Grades based on required content, not extra credit<br>• Grades based on student work, not the timing of work<br>• Alternative (non-grade) consequences for cheating<br>• Excluding participation and effort<br>• Grades based entirely on summative assessments, not formative assessments (such as homework) |
| Motivational | The way we grade should motivate students to achieve academic success, support a growth mindset, and give students opportunities for redemption.<br><br>The way we grade should be so transparent and understandable that every student can know her grade at any time and know how to get the grade she wants.<br><br>Equitable grading distinguishes and connects the means for learning effectively the "soft skills," the practice, the mistakes, from its ends- academic success, and utilizes the broad and diverse universe of feedback and consequences, of which only one part is a grade. | • Minimum grading and 0-4 scale<br>• Renaming grades<br>• Retakes and redos<br>• Rubrics<br>• Grades based on standards scales, not points<br>• Standards based gradebooks<br>• Emphasizing self-regulation<br>• Creating a community of feedback<br>• Student trackers |

*Note.* Reprinted from *Grading for equity: What it is, why it matters, and how it can transform schools and classrooms* (p. 72), by J. Feldman, 2018, Corwin

Feldman (2019) describes the application of equitable grading practices and the rationale behind adopting them while acknowledging that some can be used alone. That said, Feldman (2019) notes it is likely that adopting any of the equitable grading practices will lead to implementing even more over time as these grading practices "collectively transform a classroom or school to be a more equitable and caring learning community" (p. 229).

### *Contract-Based Grading and Equity*

A caring learning community is one of the key characteristics of the equity-focused grading approach adopted by Inoue (2019). The labor-based grading contract described by Inoue (2019) stressed quantity of work over quality, removing teacher-centered judgment and replacing it with student-focused expectations and supportive, often collaborative, feedback. This contract-based grading approach is considered an ungrading method and is modeled partly on concepts from decades before. A student-centered grading approach from Mandel (1973) emphasizes trusting students. Mandel (1973) described the student-centered, judgment-free grading in a way that honors and supports student voice and experience. The only prerequisite disposition is a desire to learn, but Mandel (1973) goes further to support and encourage those "who, for reasons they are entitled to, cannot avail themselves of the opportunities to learn" (1973, pp. 629-630). Inoue (2019) is clear to also include a critique of traditional grading as "a racist and white supremacist practice" (2019, p. 5). This language is purposefully and carefully used to elicit a sense of urgency toward the system's problems and the need for broader change.

### *Critiques of Contract-Based Grading*

While the labor-based grading contract approach aims to foster equity and inclusion, there are concerns about going so far as to label such an approach as anti-racist. While not against contract-based grading per se, Craig (Summer 2021) believes this approach ignores systemic racism in the broader university system and has concerns about how students should engage with contract-based grading alongside more traditional methods. Blum (2024) echoes Craig's concerns, citing work from Carillo (2021), which specifically addresses inequities of labor-based grading contracts. Blum's (2024) criticism instead focuses on the connotations of the word "labor," wondering why learning needs to be described in terms associated with "childbirth and forced labor" (p. 161). When faced with broad questions of inequity in grading, particularly in grading techniques that fall under the umbrella of ungrading – a term coined by Blum (2024) – Stommel (2023) returns to the argument that grades are the source of inequity and, as such, should be abandoned.

### *Critiques to Equity-Focused Grading*

The final critique of equitable grading practices, particularly those described by Feldman (2019), comes from a report by Coffey and Tyner (2024). Their argument highlights concerns related to practices they identify as equity focused. The concerns are related to a lowering of standards as a result of pass/fail grading, no penalties for late work, no punishment for cheating, and lowered graduation requirements. Coffey and Tyner (2024) note that leniency – a term that frequently occurs in their report but is not a term used by those in the ungrading or equity-focused grading communities – in grading ends up hurting the students it aims to help.

In a conversation with Hess (2024), Feldman (2019) discusses the critiques in detail, noting the concerns expressed by Coffey and Tyner (2024) are similar to those expressed by skeptical educators and parents. In short, the practices described by Coffey and Tyner (2024) are not considered equitable grading practices as described by Feldman's (2019) pillars of equitable grading. In further criticism, Coffey and Tyner (2024) take aim at the practice of separating behavior grades from content mastery grades. They note that modern online grade platforms already distinguish the two. Feldman (2019) emphatically notes that the failure of grades is that, in the end, what was at one time granular and perhaps quite descriptive ultimately gets reduced to a single letter. Issues of equity in grading are challenging for educators and students to navigate, but at the very least, these issues invite an opportunity for a new approach that differs from traditional grading.

### *Combining Grading for Equity and Ungrading*

In a sense, grading for equity shares much with progressive approaches to grading such as ungrading. Both aim to honor each students' individuality, spark intrinsic motivation, grow durable skills in a relatable environment, and prepare students for a life of continued learning. In contrast to the aims of grading for equity and ungrading, Feldman (2019) notes that typically "at each stage of schooling we find ourselves portraying the next stage of school as harsh and inflexible" (p. 211). This negative portrayal is an effort to constantly emphasize the importance of preparing for the real world.

The phrase "real world," when used in this sense to mean "adult professional world" (Feldman, 2019, p. 209), unintentionally dismisses the very real experiences

students have in their lives while simultaneously misrepresenting the experience of adult professionals, which is often much more nuanced than anything experienced in school. A central focus of ungrading is to capture more of this nuance while supporting students in their individual learning journeys. This will be addressed in the final section of the literature review, which focuses on preparing for post-secondary experiences by cultivating durable skills.

## Post-Secondary Preparation

### *Durable Skills-Focused Instruction*

This literature review began by framing the study in three educational theories: critical pedagogy, social constructivist theory, and self-determination theory. It seems somewhat at odds with critical pedagogy in particular to conclude the literature review by focusing on preparation for post-secondary options by emphasizing the development of durable skills that are highly valued in the workplace (America Succeeds, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2020, 2023). A criticism along these lines was delivered sharply by Giroux (2004), who noted that "education is increasingly being vocationalized, reduced to a commodity that provides privileges for a few students and industrial training for the service sector for the rest, especially those who are marginalized by reason of their class and race" (p. 40). As such, this study acknowledges the dichotomy between educating for critical thinking and social justice while also preparing students for careers by fostering durable skills. Recent research addresses a similar educational challenge in higher education.

Higher education institutions, not unlike CTE institutions, have a duty to prepare graduates to be more than just passive future employees. Recognizing the concerns of the

"employability agenda" (Arnold, 2023, p. 487) in higher education, in which the goals of the workplace take priority over the well-rounded education of the student, Arnold (2023) framed a study of skills related to the media industry by acknowledging the larger concerns but specifically focusing on students' understanding of career-related skills. This study on ungrading in a CTE media production class takes a similar approach, acknowledging systemic concerns while focusing on specific elements of classroom instruction.

In Arnold's (2023) study, a questionnaire was administered to graduates of an Irish media studies program to understand graduates' transitions from university to employment. Based on the results from this questionnaire, which demonstrated graduates had difficulty discussing durable skills (referred to as transversal skills in this study) related to employment, an intervention was instituted for current media studies students. The intervention consisted of a professionalism module aimed at, among other things, helping current students better understand the value of skills related to media industry employment. Both the graduates and current students largely recognized the value of practical skills. Still, the students who participated in the professionalism module were more likely to "identify a broader range of skills and suggest jobs and roles they could apply for" (p. 489). The results of this study suggest that an explicit focus on skills as part of the education process may prove valuable in preparing for post-educational experiences.

### *Essential Durable Skills*

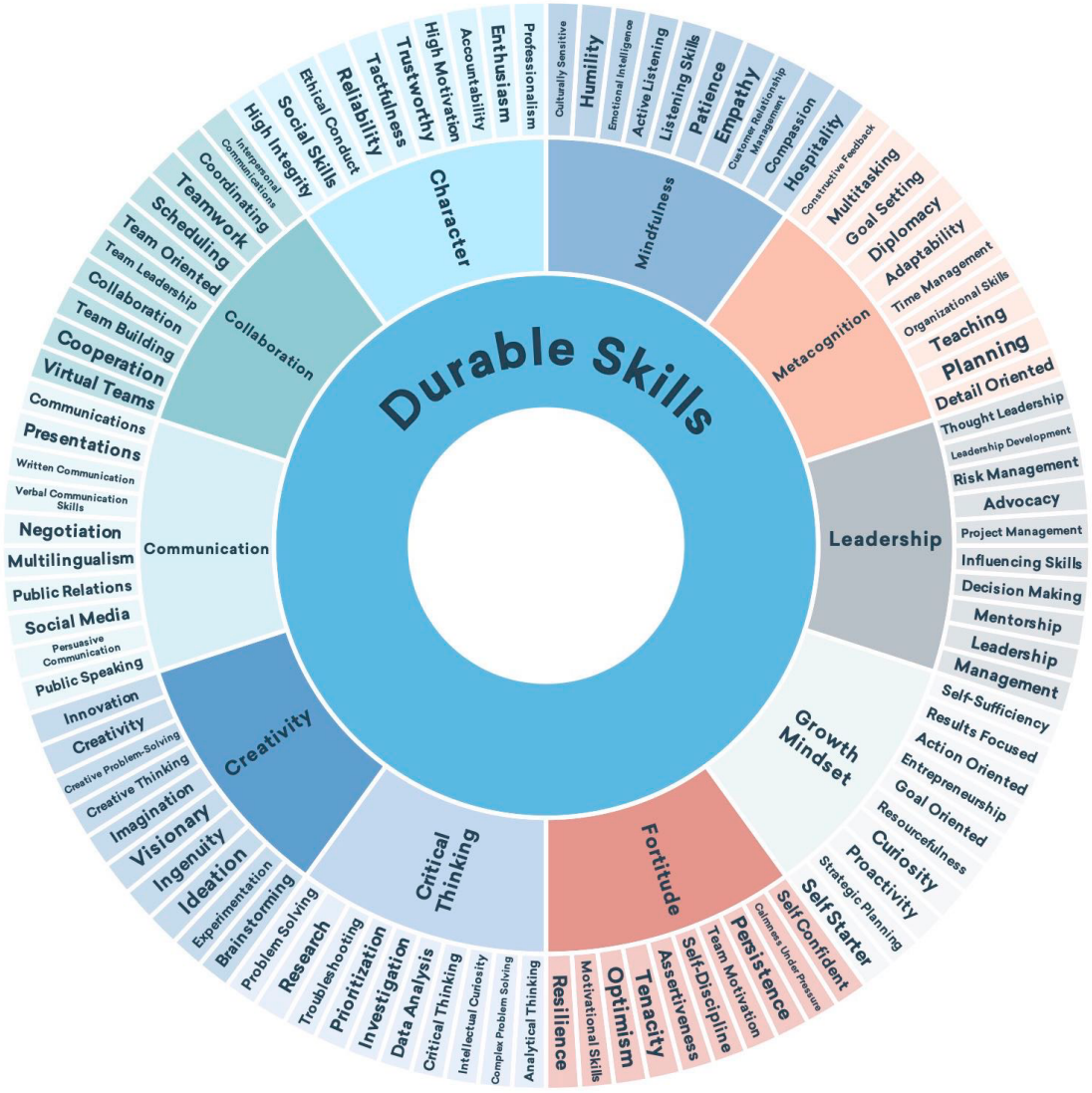
Creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking are consistently recognized as highly valued durable skills. The two most recent reports from The World Economic Forum

(2020, 2023) have these skills represented in the top ten most important skills if risk-taking is considered part of resilience. In fact, creative thinking is seen by businesses as trending towards more important than analytical thinking and technological literacy. Cultivating creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking in the CTE classroom should benefit student success regardless of career pathway.

Cole et al. (2021) present a framework for organizing and categorizing workplace-relevant durable skills. The durable skills framework organizes 100 durable skills required by "every job in every sector" (p. 11) into ten competencies. Creativity and collaboration are identified as core competencies. Risk-taking, while not specifically identified as a core competency in this framework, would fall into the core competency of fortitude, which includes such durable skills as tenacity, resilience, and persistence. Cole et al. (2021) point to several other organizations working on durable skills in education. While each organization classifies and names skills differently, creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking remain relevant across them all. To understand the landscape of durable skills, the full Durable Skills Framework is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Durable Skills Framework*




*Note.* From *The High Demand for Durable Skills* (p. 11), by L. Cole, S. Short, C. Cowart, and S. Muller, 2021, America Succeeds (https://americasucceed.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AmericaSucceeds-DurableSkills-NationalFactSheet-2021.pdf)

The current means of preparing students for post-educational success in media careers differs from industry professionals' experiences. Bridgstock (2016) interviewed eight successful Australian professionals in the media production industry, discussing

their thoughts on the role of higher education, industry-relevant skills, and the value of informal learning. The study revealed several themes, including the shortcomings of traditional media production education amid a rapidly changing landscape and the preference for embracing informal learning strategies. The results of Bridgstock's (2016) study echo elements of social constructivist theory as teammates collaborate to solve a relevant problem and self-determination theory, as much of the work of improving one's skillset involves autonomous, self-guided learning.

While formal education at both the secondary and higher education levels often fall short when striving for relevance, emphasizing durable skills like creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking offers a way to bridge the gap between education and career. At the secondary level, there are growing trends to shift towards more student-focused instruction and assessment practices such as personalized learning (Knowledge Works, 2022), with district visions being guided by a durable-skills-focused description of student success known as "Portrait of a Graduate" (Stanford, 2023). Within and beyond these approaches, ungrading is uniquely positioned to foster student success by focusing on durable skills within the curriculum while setting goals, learning, and reflecting on the process.

**Summary**

This chapter reviewed the literature relevant to this research study on the lived experiences of juniors and seniors in an ungraded secondary CTE media production class, focusing on industry-relevant durable skills of creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking. It explored the theoretical framework rooted in critical pedagogy, social constructivist theory, and self-determination theory, which leads to the upending of traditional grading,

a focus on collaboration between student and teacher, and a focus on igniting intrinsic motivation. A section on the history and context of grades emphasized the opportunity for improvement in this traditional approach, suggesting ungrading as a solution to challenges associated with grading. The subsequent sections described motivation, creativity, collaboration, and academic and creative risk-taking in education. While this literature review addressed these topics separately, there are also considerable overlaps between them, creating a challenging network of characteristics that impact learning. Finally, this chapter addressed issues related to grading for equity and post-secondary preparation. The following chapter addresses this study's methodology.

# Chapter 3

## Methods

This research study aimed to explore the lived experiences of high school juniors and seniors who participated in an ungraded CTE media production class, focusing on the four research questions stated in Chapter 1. This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand the lived experiences of the study participants. This chapter begins with a description of the research design, the setting of the study, and sampling procedures. The subsequent sections describe the instrument, data collection procedures, data analysis and synthesis, the methods to ensure reliability and trustworthiness, and the researcher's role. The chapter concludes with an acknowledgment of the study's limitations, followed by a chapter summary.

### Research Design

Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe a wide variety of qualitative research designs, noting their effectiveness when seeking to explore and understand an experience or phenomenon, particularly when it is of an understudied group or sample. Cohen et al. (2007) summarize three paradigms of phenomenological research design: normative, interpretive, and critical. Normative researchers attempt to validate existing theories through research, while interpretive researchers instead begin with a focus on the individual experiencing the phenomenon. Researchers using a critical approach to phenomenological research often focus on how political and social power dynamics shape behavior.

Alternative grading techniques, such as ungrading, are student-centered by nature. Therefore, this study uses an interpretive paradigm, specifically IPA methodology, to

understand the lived experiences of juniors and seniors in a CTE media production course called DMT. Stommel (2023) quotes Fast (2016), stating, “The saddest and most ironic practice in schools is how hard we try to measure how students are doing and how rarely we ever ask them.” This quote highlights the need to truly understand students’ lived experiences in assessment and learning by centering their expertise through experiential qualitative research.

This study follows previous studies on student-focused learning and grading techniques that used qualitative or mixed methods research (Hasinoff et al., 2024; Turcotte et al., 2023; Virtue & Hinnant-Crawford, 2019) and is closely modeled after an IPA study by Gorichanaz (2022), which focused on ungrading in higher education courses in computing and informatics with a similar focus on developing skills that will facilitate learning experiences beyond the course.

IPA is a type of experiential qualitative research method that provides an opportunity to focus on what the research participants “have done, think, or feel” (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 6), in this case, about the experiences with industry-relevant durable skills during the ungrading experience in DMT. IPA offers a chance to understand participants’ “major life experiences” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 1) directly rather than through pre-existing frameworks (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

IPA research utilizes a small sample size (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2022) in order to engage in a deeper understanding of the individual’s experience with the phenomenon. In alignment with the research questions, the researcher selected IPA methodology since the primary objective of this research was to understand the concerns and experiences “made salient by participants” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 41).

Finally, the study focused on the expertise of the participants (Smith & Nizza, 2022). It aimed to understand the participants' thoughts and feelings related to durable skills as they navigated the unique life experience of participating in an ungraded CTE media production course.

**Setting**

The research took place through semi-structured interviews hosted and recorded remotely using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Utilizing remote interview procedures allowed study participants from a wide geographic area to participate. Each interview lasted roughly an hour and took place in July of 2024. The qualitative data collection for this study centered around in-depth semi-structured interviews that aimed to capture the depth and nuances of participants' experiences with durable skills within the ungrading framework of the DMT course.

**Sampling Procedures**

The sample for this study consisted of 10 participants who were former students who participated in the researcher's CTE media production class which utilized an ungrading approach. This study used a purposive homogeneous sample strategy (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008) to ensure a shared experience among participants. To facilitate the necessary "time, reflection and dialogue" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 47) inherent in IPA research, the sample size was held to a small number. The sample consists of three participants who identified as male and seven participants who identified as female.

Participants were former students at Horizon Institute (a pseudonym), a secondary CTE school serving students from over 30 different high schools in the suburban, urban, and rural areas surrounding the school district in which it is located. All study

participants were enrolled in the DMT class between 2021 and 2023. Participants are pursuing various post-secondary options, however, in keeping with the homogeneous sampling approach, all participants continued in college and careers related to arts, audio/video technology, and communications following high school.

**Instruments**

This IPA research study utilized a semi-structured interview to collect data. The researcher carefully designed the interview protocol according to guidance from Smith and Nizza (2022). It is suggested that the interview protocol be designed in such a way as to allow participants "to be able to tell their story freely, on their own terms, taking the time to reflect and think about what to say and to express their thoughts, feelings, and concerns without feeling judged" (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 19).

The interview protocol included demographic questions, general questions, and questions aligned to the research questions listed in Chapter 1. The interview began with a brief informal discussion in order to help put the participant at ease, and it was followed by an opening script. The semi-structured interview opened with demographic questions followed by general questions adapted from Blum (2020). These general questions helped frame the discussion on research participants' unique experiences in DMT. The interview continued with specific questions modeled after interview protocol suggestions from Smith et al. (2022) and aligned with the study's research questions. These questions were created by the researcher and guided by research from the literature review and the researcher's knowledge of the shared experience being investigated. The primary focus of the interview protocol was to use "open and expansive" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 56) questions to allow participants to discuss their experience in-depth.

In detail, the semi-structured interview protocol includes five demographic questions followed by 17 open-ended questions, which included three general questions, three questions aligned to RQ1, three questions aligned to RQ2, four questions aligned to RQ3, and three questions aligned to RQ4. Finally, the interview made extensive use of follow-up probes for deeper discussion. Interview script, questions, and example probes can be found in Appendix A.

**Data Collection Procedures**

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) form was submitted to Baker University for review on June 24, 2024 (see Appendix B). This study met the requirements for expedited review (Office for Human Research Protections, 2021) and was approved by the IRB on July 2, 2024 (see Appendix C).

A recruitment message (see Appendix D) was sent to potential study participants through email, posted on Instagram and LinkedIn, and shared on Facebook on July 2, 2024. The recruitment message included a link to a questionnaire (see Appendix E), which was open for submissions from July 2 to July 6, 2024. The recruitment questionnaire yielded 16 eligible respondents and two ineligible respondents. Eligible respondents were sent a link to sign up for an available 75-minute interview timeslot using the online scheduling platform Calendly. Of the respondents who were eligible for the study, the first 10 who scheduled an interview were accepted for participation to facilitate scheduling efficiency. Informed consent was obtained by sending the study participants an interview consent form (see Appendix F), which was completed and returned digitally by each participant prior to the interview. Participants were informed of the following at the beginning of the interview:

1. Participants were informed that the video interview was being recorded in order to facilitate data transcription and analysis.
2. Participants were asked to verbally confirm consent of participation in the study.
3. Participants were informed that the audio/video recording of the interview would be deleted after the data was transcribed, edited, and analyzed in order to ensure the confidentiality of their responses.
4. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study.
5. Participants were asked to state and spell their name, their school year(s) in DMT, and their current status as a student or job role.
6. Participants were informed that they may choose not to answer any question that they feel may be uncomfortable to answer.
7. Finally, before beginning the semi-structured interview, participants were made aware of the goal of in-depth responses and encouraged to spend time with each question (Smith et al., 2022) and anticipate follow-up probes aimed at a deeper understanding of their experience.

Interviews took place between July 5 and July 18, 2024. The average length of each interview was 55 minutes, not including a brief opening conversation.

**Data Analysis and Synthesis**

The following research questions guided the study:

**RQ1.** How does ungrading influence students' experiences with creativity in a secondary-level media production class?

**RQ2.** How does ungrading influence students' experiences with collaboration in a secondary-level media production class?

**RQ3.** How does ungrading influence students' experiences with risk-taking in a secondary-level media production class?

**RQ4**. To what extent do students believe that their experiences with ungrading in a secondary-level media production class contributed to their sense of preparedness for media-focused college and career pursuits?

After the semi-structured interviews, transcripts of the recordings were created using Transcriber, a desktop app on Mac OS. To ensure the accuracy of the qualitative data, the automatically-created transcripts were manually proofread and carefully edited to ensure the integrity of participants' narratives. To protect their privacy, participant names as well as any mentions of names of other classmates were replaced by pseudonyms during the data analysis process.

Transcripts were imported into Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis program that provides tools for coding, organizing, selecting, and exporting interview data. The data analysis process began with one participant's transcript and involved seven steps as outlined by Smith et al. (2022) as follows:

1. Reading and re-reading: The researcher spent extended time with each interview, taking notes and recalling key moments.
2. Exploratory noting: Interesting elements from the interview were noted during the reading and re-reading process.
3. Constructing experiential statements: The researcher converted notes into concise statements about the interview subject's experience.

4. Searching for connections across experiential statements: In this phase of the process, the researcher organized and identified consistent interview themes aligned with research questions.
5. Naming the personal experiential themes (PETs): each participant's experiential statements were clustered together to form the basis of their PETs.
6. The process was repeated with additional research participants.
7. Group experiential themes (GETs) by examining areas of convergence and divergence across cases.

Smith et al. (2022) provided this overview of the analysis process in IPA but recognized the necessity for flexibility. These practical steps allow a novice IPA researcher to feel confident in the analysis process, limiting unnecessary anxiety and confusion, according to Smith et al. (2022). For this study, the steps were used as a guideline while the focus was on analyzing each transcript in detail, identifying personal experiential themes individually before repeating the process on subsequent transcripts, and concluding with a discovery of common and unique themes when comparing across the entire group.

**Reliability and Trustworthiness**

Cohen et al. (2007) describe reliability in qualitative research as "a fit between what researchers record as data and what actually occurs in the natural setting that is being researched" (p. 149). Creswell and Creswell (2018) encourage the researcher to clearly document each step of the research process to confirm reliability. However, one of the strengths of qualitative research is the ability to study a unique phenomenon that cannot be precisely replicated in some other setting (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell &

Creswell, 2018). With these considerations in mind, the researcher used qualitative reliability procedures suggested by Gibbs (2007) and described by Creswell and Creswell (2018). These reliability procedures included carefully checking transcripts to ensure there were no mistakes and carefully defining and checking codes against the qualitative interview data.

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative data, the following techniques were employed by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018):

1. Member checking was used to ensure the accuracy of the qualitative findings as the researcher shared identified PETs and associated quotes with each study participant via email to confirm the accurate interpretation.
2. The researcher focused on "rich, thick description to convey the findings" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200).
3. A personal statement (Smith & Nizza, 2022), written prior to the data collection process, is included with the research findings (see Appendix G) to frame how the study findings may have been shaped by the researcher's background and relevant experience.
4. When appropriate, the researcher was careful to include information from the research that ran counter to the main themes.
5. The research utilized a peer debriefer to review the entire report, helping to ensure the trustworthiness and relevance of the study to a wider audience.

Stahl (2020) examines the four criteria from Lincoln and Guba (1985) that determine trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is determined by how closely the findings

represent reality, which is achieved as participants engaged in member checking by reviewing the research findings. Transferability is a challenge as, by design, qualitative research "does not (cannot) aim for replicability" (Stahl & King, 2020, p. 27). To aid in transferability, the research report provides detailed information about the methods, time frames of data collection, and other detailed contextual information. Dependability refers to the researcher's trustworthiness and is obtained through acknowledging the researcher's beliefs and assumptions via the personal statement (see Appendix G) and through peer review. Finally, confirmability is achieved by getting as close as possible to objective reality.

**Researcher's Role**

The researcher has been working in secondary public school education for twenty years, the last seven of which as a full-time CTE educator. The research participants, who are pursuing college and post-secondary options related to media production, were former students of the researcher.

Smith and Nizza (2022) describe both the virtues and pitfalls of IPA research as an insider – one who "shares some aspect of the experience they are investigating" (p. 13). Researchers should thus be mindful of the improved rapport with the research subjects and the potential to have strong feelings about the subject matter being investigated. Smith and Nizza (2022) suggest that the researcher write a personal statement outlining personal experiences relevant to the study before the research begins. They suggest the researcher consider answers to "the questions of an investigator and summarize your possible responses in this account" (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 13). This personal statement from the researcher can be found in Appendix G.

The researcher was careful to approach this study with an acknowledgment of being an insider. The close connection to the research participants provided valuable insights into their lived experiences, and the researcher entered the process as a learner with an open mind – this overall approach aimed to facilitate the researcher's personal growth and professional development.

**Limitations**

Limitations are factors outside of the researcher's control that may impact study interpretation and generalization (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). The following limitations were identified:

1. By focusing on research participants still pursuing media production beyond their secondary CTE experience, this research does not have the perspectives of those who may have struggled with media production in the studied research setting.
2. The findings of IPA research are, by nature, difficult to generalize to other populations and settings (Smith & Nizza, 2022).
3. Due to the limited time available for research and the challenges inherent in scheduling across time zones and busy schedules, some potential and qualified study participants may not have been able to schedule an interview with the researcher.
4. Since the experience studied in this research happened in the past, study participants' memories of these events may be imprecise or incomplete.

**Summary**

This chapter outlined the methodology used in this IPA research study, which explored the lived experiences of high school juniors and seniors in an ungraded CTE

media production class, focusing on the durable skills of creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking. The chapter presented an overview of the research design, sampling procedures, survey instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis process. This chapter also described the steps taken to ensure study reliability and trustworthiness and the researcher's role in this research methodology. The chapter concluded with an acknowledgment of the study's limitations. Next, Chapter 4 provides the research study findings aligned with the four research questions introduced in Chapter 1.

# Chapter 4

## Findings

This study consisted of semi-structured interviews that explored the lived experiences of 10 study participants who were previously high school juniors and seniors who participated in the researcher's ungraded CTE media production class. The open-ended interview questions focused on the research questions introduced in Chapter 1. This chapter begins with background information on the studied environment and an overview of the study participants, followed by a report of the research findings with identified GETs that align with the four research questions. The chapter concludes with a summary.

### Background

Students in DMT refer to themselves and their classmates as creatives, a distinction that acknowledges the ever-present possibility of creativity while subtly disrupting the typical student-teacher paradigm. The 10 former DMT creatives who participated in this study were in a half-day secondary CTE media production course for one or two years. Seven of 10 participants took the course for two years, indicating a strong affinity for media production. Second-year creatives in DMT have a uniquely autonomous experience, not unlike an independent study, as they work on personal projects, client-connected projects on behalf of the school, and assist first-year creatives in project work. This takes place while these second-year creatives continue to grow and refine their media production skills. The experience of a second-year DMT creative is the closest possible to a completely ungraded course, as their work is highly self-guided and focused on feedback.

Because of the iterative nature of teaching, especially around developing new class policies that take time to evolve and significantly vary from the status quo, these creatives each had a slightly different experience with ungrading depending on the year(s) they attend the course. The DMT curriculum is based on a collection of audio/video preproduction, production, and post-production skills with additional general skills in professionalism and equipment safety. The course concludes each year with a culminating capstone project and portfolio. The capstone project is a personal video production such as a music video, documentary, narrative short film, or commercial.

Throughout the year-long course, creatives work on short projects in teams to develop their skills. There are opportunities and expectations for creatives to participate in client-connected work and outside competitions. Over the period of time the study participants were in DMT, the grading system ranged from minimally graded work focusing on completion to fully contract-based grading with final grades determined through one-on-one conferences. Creatives were actively involved in setting goals and reflecting on their work through personalized learning, which was facilitated by a custom LMS that allowed information to be presented asynchronously and untethered to gradebook columns or a calendar in the school district-approved LMS. In each case, a final grade was a component of the experience because of institutional requirements.

### *DMT Creatives Sharing Experiences*

Over the years, it is common for former DMT creatives who have pursued college and careers in media production to return to present to the class. As any teacher will tell you, these opportunities are often very impactful. Participants in this study volunteered to participate with the same type of vigor as creatives who presented their experience to the

class. The culture of sharing knowledge and information was palpable during the semi-structured interview process as study participants shared their experiences in DMT, knowing that their experiences – both positive and negative – would contribute to the DMT body of knowledge and impact future DMT creatives.

**Participants**

Due to the phenomenological nature of this study, the participants' lived experiences formed the basis of the research (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The following demographic summary provides basic information about each study participant to frame their experiences in greater context. Since the research environment was an ungraded CTE media production class, study participants had a variety of experiences and goals related to the arts and audio/video production industries. All study participants are currently enrolled in college. To protect their privacy, names, as well as any mentions of names of other classmates, were replaced by pseudonyms throughout the report. Demographic and background information for the study participants is shown in *Table 2*.

**Table 2**

*Participant Demographic and Background Information*

| Participant | Gender | Years in DMT | College and Major |
|---|---|---|---|
| Charlee | Female | 2 | Attends a private university on the East Coast, studying recorded music with an unofficial minor in business |
| Jackson | Male | 2 | Attends a private university in the Southwest, studying business management with a minor in film production. |
| Harper | Female | 2 | Attends a public university in the Midwest, studying film production with a minor in business marketing |
| Luka | Male | 1 | Attends a public university in the Midwest, studying film production |
| Eric | Male | 2 | Attends a public university in the Midwest, studying digital media production |
| Nia | Female | 1 | Attends a public university in the Midwest, double majoring in journalism with an emphasis in broadcast and film studies with an emphasis in film production |
| Paige | Female | 2 | Attends a public university in the Southeast, studying film production with specializations in directing and editing |
| Taylor | Female | 1 | Attends an urban public university in the Midwest, studying communications with an emphasis in digital journalism |
| Sam | Male | 2 | Attends a private university on the West Coast, studying film and TV production |
| Steffani | Female | 2 | Attends an urban public university in the Midwest, studying film and media arts |

*Note.* Pseudonyms used throughout the study in place of real names to protect participants' identity and privacy.

***Participant #1 - Charlee***

In high school, Charlee was driven to succeed and had her sights set on attending an elite university. Grades were important to her, and she knew she wanted to attend college outside the Midwest. She added, "I think just a sense of self-achievement as well – beyond striving for career/college advancement. I think just wanting to feel fulfilled in the grades that I had." Her goals entering her first year of DMT were "just wanting a place to record my music and learn as much equipment as I could." She also recognized the value of collaboration, saying she wanted to "make friends with people that were also interested in the same things I was interested in and wanting to be able to collaborate with other like-minded young professionals." In her second year, she continued to grow skills in other areas beyond just music production.

***Participant #2 - Jackson***

Jackson never had "concerns or issues with grades." Coming from a family of educators, Jackson knew the importance of success in school. He didn't want to worry about getting into college and recognized the value of a good GPA for this goal. His attitude towards grades was casual, saying, "Going in, you take a test, you do well, and just move on with your day." His goals entering his first year of DMT were to learn about the industry, having been self-taught up to that point. He appreciated having access to equipment so he could engage in hands-on learning. The decision to attend DMT a second year allowed him to focus on "learning more that I hadn't really had access to before" – essentially developing more media production skills that were underdeveloped in the first year.

***Participant #3 - Harper***

Harper only needed a few credits to graduate after moving from private to public school. She described grading in private school as "super intense." She had "a great GPA," and the flexibility in her high school schedule allowed her to attend DMT for two years. She had no prior experience entering DMT, so her initial goal was to make a music video. About that project, she said, "I totally don't want to do that ever again." She shifted her goals to focus on narrative short films in her second year of DMT. The result of this focus allowed her to create a short film for a local competition and sparked her passion to pursue film in college.

***Participant #4 - Luka***

Luka admits he didn't "try as hard as I could have in high school," but he "passed pretty much every class." His overall feeling around grades can be summed up when he recalls his disdain for "regurgitating information on a piece of paper," and describes his anxiety around tests. He transitioned from private to public school and attended DMT without knowing much about the course, but he knew the career field interested him and was something he wanted to do. His goal entering DMT was broad and career-focused, saying, "That's stuff I've always kind of really wanted to do, but just didn't know how to get into that field." After DMT, Luka spent one semester at community college before ultimately pursuing his film production degree.

***Participant #5 - Eric***

Eric recognized the value in earning good grades while in high school. He earned mostly straight-A's and, because of weighted classes, graduated with a GPA above 4.0. He knew that good grades would "lead to scholarship money" as well as making it easier

to get into college. Coming from a family of educators, it was natural for him to focus on success in school. His goals entering his first year of DMT were focused on sports media and live production, fostered by his experience in his high school broadcasting program. In his second year, he developed a greater interest in photography, graphic design, and marketing – interestingly, not specifically part of the DMT curriculum.

***Participant #6 - Nia***

School and good grades came naturally to Nia, as she "never really struggled" in school. She was the "kind of student that just got straight A's." She quickly noted that science was challenging for her, but for the rest of school, she could just show up and do the work. Nia had experience in broadcast production as part of her high school experience. She did everything by herself in these projects and felt like she never got to do "full fleshed out creative project, especially with other creative people." As such, her goals in DMT were to learn as much as possible about film, including terminology and technical skills, and to collaborate with other like-minded creatives.

***Participant #7 - Paige***

Paige described her experience with grades as "not necessarily positive, but not necessarily fully negative." Paige is a self-described perfectionist and spent most of her school experience – "all the way back to elementary school" – struggling with this before being diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder her junior year. She always had good grades, but was able to learn to cope better following her diagnosis. She added, "It's still something that I'm dealing with and trying to balance." Her overall goal entering her first year of DMT was "to try to see if I could realistically find a career in this creative space." She continued her DMT journey for a second year, adding this experience to her

video and broadcast experience at high school. She believed that DMT gave her the opportunity to "try to get better at the skills that I had started at [high school] and just have more of a free space to practice those skills."

***Participant #8 - Taylor***

Taylor credits her family values as a strong influence and motivating factor in getting good grades and working hard in school. She noted that she has "always been raised to believe that grades matter." She acknowledged that she did not feel particularly challenged by the work at her sending school in a small town, summarizing the experience as "the bare minimum." Taylor was already a talented photographer entering DMT and wanted to build on her technical skills. She said, "I think most of us already had an artistic/creative talent and vision for things, but I think a lot of us needed help growing our technical skills."

***Participant #9 - Sam***

Sam's grades were mostly A's in school. He remembers when he received a B, it felt out of his control, noting that each time was the result of "left field things from teachers, or left field things from an assignment or something that I physically could not have changed." His experience, for the most part, was that "if you put in the minimal amount of effort, you can get an A." In his first year of DMT, his goal was to "go in and just absorb as literally as much as I could." His first year was focused more on learning and skill acquisition, while his second year gave him the opportunity to set bigger goals, such as having "a bigger project for a client" and recognizing the need to plan his final capstone project well in advance of the deadline.

***Participant #10 - Steffani***

Steffani was a student who always put a lot of pressure on herself to get good grades. When it came to grades and success in school, she said, “It was always a very big stressor for me, personally.” When her grade dropped, it was always very “upsetting.” Steffani’s goals shifted significantly between her first and second years in DMT. She entered the course in her first year with the goal of learning skills to further a career as a music therapist. Over two years in DMT, she reflected, “While music will always definitely be a love for me, film was just – it was something that I picked up really quickly and that I just immediately fell in love with.”

**Report of Research Findings**

PETs for all study participants are included in Appendix H. The working transcripts of the interviews include all imperfections, false starts, filler words, and natural elements of conversation. Following guidance from Oliver et al. (2005), quotes from the interview transcripts included in the following report were modified slightly to facilitate readability. Much of the conversational mechanics are left intact to capture the interview pacing as closely as possible. Brackets and ellipses are occasionally used to facilitate context or maintain privacy. When participants mentioned the school’s name, it was changed to the pseudonym Horizon Institute, or the abbreviation “HI.” If it did not disrupt the context or meaning of the quote, the acronym DMT was used, as study participants occasionally referred to the school and course interchangeably. A discussion of the GETs as they relate to the four research questions follows.

### *Emerging Themes from Research Question 1*

**Freedom and Choice Inspire Creativity.** When it comes to experiencing creativity, all study participants spoke in one way or another about the freedom they felt in DMT. A natural freedom arises when there is a shift away from teacher-created work towards projects that the students create. DMT has its fair share of teacher-created projects, to be sure. However, the focus is always on demonstrating skills, and there is a great deal of flexibility in how creatives might choose to accomplish that.

Freedom was experienced in several ways by the study participants. One key feeling experienced by Harper, Steffani, Sam, and Paige was how it contrasted with a traditional school experience. Sam said:

> In school, you're given parameters and you're supposed to do something. In Digital Media, you have maybe these key things you need to hit, like mess with the exposure triangle, use this piece of tech, other than that, go wild. And that created very different mentalities to where I was excited for Digital Media.

Harper recognized the inherent stress in creating a project on deadline but appreciated the creative freedom:

> I think that definitely helps with less pressure. I think it's not as stressful, because at the end of the day, you're meeting a deadline…And that itself is already stressful…But because, you know, you didn't have to follow a specific formula, it gives you a lot of creativity – creative liberty over what you want to do without having someone over your head saying, 'Hey, I don't like this.'

Paige went further to contrast her experience in a similar class in a traditional high school setting with the freedom and choice available in DMT, saying, "I want to take

some time to dive into it, to practice it, to see what it's like versus at [high school], here's a curriculum, here's the stuff that everyone has to do." Interestingly, the skills she was growing and developing in DMT were just as applicable to her work in a traditional high school broadcast/film program, but it was only in DMT where she "felt safe enough and supported enough to practice those things that I would implement at [high school]."

Generally speaking, teacher-created projects are occasionally used to motivate and encourage student work. When students have control, their motivation must come from somewhere else. Sometimes, a sense of personal accomplishment is all it takes. This is especially true when the finished product will not result in a score in the gradebook. Eric and Nia spoke to the motivation to see their ideas come to fruition.

Eric said, "Whenever I was doing projects, I guess I would say I was more worried about making the project to what I wanted it to be and not as necessarily worrying about what the grade would be." Nia spoke to the motivation to tell a story, saying, "I'll definitely say when it comes to being creative, if I see a story that I think needs to be told, that kicks into gear, like, my creative thinking." Similarly, Steffani and Harper felt a sense of pride and accomplishment upon completing a project. Steffani said, "I had learned all of these skills, and I was finally able to put them all together and make something that I was really, really proud of."

Charlee, a particularly driven and successful two-year DMT creative, appreciated the freedom and took full advantage to focus on the work that resonated with her. Her recollection of her experience is one of complete freedom, saying, "You kind of just show up and do what you want, which was awesome. I loved that." Naturally, more

structure might be beneficial for some, and Charlee acknowledged this was true for her at times:

> Do I feel like there could have been a little bit more structure? Yes. I feel like there were some times when I felt like I could just sit in the back and do homework for the day and I would still get credit for being there. And looking back, I wish I'd been more incentivized to focus on a specific task, but I do appreciate the free rein that Horizon Institute provided.

There are multiple ways to provide students with autonomy, but providing autonomy to the extent that they are occasionally able to do homework from another class without punishment is a level of control that most students are not accustomed to. No doubt the homework from the other class is fully graded and of urgent importance. Or there may be an important test later in the day. No matter, when students are allowed to decide how to prioritize their time, they're learning how to manage their schedules and handle multiple tasks simultaneously. The trust and flexibility that accompany this autonomy are the same that provide a foundation for trusting students to work together collaboratively, which is another key theme that emerged related to creativity, discussed in the next section.

**Collaboration is Key to Creativity.** Study participants were quick to discuss the value of collaboration when it comes to creativity. As current college students, many recognized the significance of collaboration as part of the wider media production industry, a distinction that was probably not as obvious to them during their time in DMT. Collaboration in DMT took place across a wide spectrum of the media production

process – from brainstorming and writing to production and editing – and culminated in collaborative capstone projects at the end of the year.

Nia described the collaborative experience in DMT as "a breath of fresh air," expressing relief that she did not have to do all the creative work alone. Jackson noted, "I feel like collaborating is one of the biggest things you can do as a creative…there's really no debate." Luka said, "Some people can do things solo, but I think the best things are when it's a – I mean, it always has to be a team."

Collaboration provided an opportunity to improve the quality of work for Eric who said, "Having people around you that you can go to and send them your stuff, or maybe showcase some of your stuff to them and then [they can] give you feedback – that is always a great thing to have." Sam put it succinctly, saying, "I could not be as creative without other people around me."

The best classrooms, no matter the subject or grade level, are no stranger to collaboration. What makes the experience special in an ungraded environment, especially around creativity, is the fluidity with which collaboration can take place. Eric describes creative inspiration and collaboration that took place organically:

> I would say another positive aspect is just having peers around you to be able to help you with that because the amount of times I've been working on a project and somebody walks over and says, 'Hey you should maybe try this,' and I put it in there and it makes the project so much better.

Taylor enjoyed the creative confidence others had in her:

> It was so fun to help my friends in their final projects and allow me to express my creative passions and stuff, but also obviously their structure because we're

> helping them with their project. So it was just nice to have them give me feedback, have them tell me, 'Hey, I trust you do whatever you feel is right here.' And I think that was really fun to not only grow our friendships, but put our skills to work that we worked so hard for over the year.

Jackson was a sought-after collaborator since he owned and operated a unique piece of gear. He recalled, "We kind of helped others with their projects, too. So I remember – I think it was Eli – made a really great short [film]. It was awesome. He asked me to do some drone [video] stuff for him." This loosely organized collaboration – pseudo-freelance work within the class structure – can thrive when the teacher does not rigidly prescribe the project groups and parameters as part of the collaborative process.

Despite the value of collaborative experiences when it comes to creativity, some participants noted that, occasionally, group dynamics could have been better. Sam said, "I feel like mostly when people don't disagree within a respectful manner is mainly when I struggle creatively," noting that collaboration can sometimes stifle creativity. He describes a project that was not as successful as it could have been, saying, "That was probably the hardest project for me to complete because we disagreed for a longer time than we should have." Harper remembers being in "not the best group" with a team who was not "interested in the project," emphasizing there is always a possibility for a challenge when working with others in a creative environment.

Even though creative disagreements and conflicts arose just as they do in any collaborative environment, resolving them takes on a new shape when the end product is not graded in a traditional way. Instead, the focus shifts to working through the conflict for its own sake.

Collaboration will be discussed again later in this chapter, but its value in the creative process is evidenced by the enthusiastic statements made by study participants. Charlee was inspired by "the people around me and the experiences in life," and adds, "I don't think you can be creative without collaborative help." Harper "likes making things with my friends." Steffani drew inspiration from "day-to-day life, especially from my friends and people who are in my life." Nia found joy in getting "to work with other people that understood what I'm saying and understood my visions and my goals." Lastly, Taylor emphasizes, "Having a good group of people around you definitely helps keep that [creative] mindset." These creative collaborations found opportunities to grow through new learning experiences in media production, discussed in the following section.

**Novelty and Variety Spark Creativity.** The final theme that emerged from discussion of the creative process was the novelty and variety of skills learned in DMT. Media production was completely new for some. Harper had no previous media production experience, while Luka had experience with music and was eager to work in media production. Before attending DMT, Steffani was involved in music and Charlee was involved in music and theatre. Paige, Nia, Sam, and Eric had taken courses in broadcast or related topics in a traditional high school setting. Taylor attended a small school and had done freelance photography, and Jackson dabbled in music at home and learned some video skills from what he referred to as "YouTube University." The study participants represent a range of prior knowledge and the DMT experience would stretch that knowledge by covering a wide array of topics in audio and video production.

Jackson had some understanding of the scope of the course, but recognized there is more to it than he initially thought. His recollection of entering DMT is a common one:

> I was kind of going into it thinking, 'It's going to be mainly video production,' but it was kind of everything, which I really liked. And I feel like, for a high school student, that you don't really know what you want yet necessarily, I think it's great to be exposed to all those different things. And then you might find yourself liking something that you didn't know, you know, going into it that you would enjoy.

Not only is the breadth of topics in media production a surprise to some incoming students, but the depth of topics can be surprising too. Luka spoke about the opportunities to navigate complicated skills in sound design for film:

> Doing, like, Foley for stuff was new for me. I'd never done that before. And I didn't even realize that that was a common thing really. Or just, like, voiceovers for scenes [in which] the audio was messed up. I'd never done that before or realize that that was a thing that happens often.

Jackson and Luka's experiences encapsulate the potential for creativity through exploration. Surprisingly, several study participants spoke to feeling unusually creative when embarking on new challenges. Paige, who had some previous experience with music, but had never used music production software, found her creativity sparked by exploration in audio:

> I think that the project I felt the most creative for me were the trailer video, things where we're sound designing, purely because sound is a space that I was not very comfortable or familiar with…So whenever we got into that project and we were

> just playing around with the different sounds and just seeing beat mapping and all that kind of stuff, I think that's where I felt the most creative, just because it was the most unknown to me.

Sam echoes those thoughts, saying, "It felt really creative because we literally went into depth on most things I had not done prior," and Charlee recalls the variety of projects she got to apply herself to creatively: "television commercials, podcasts, music videos, short films, PSAs, EP album recordings, producing audio- and video-related projects for clients." The wide range of skills and projects fosters curiosity, especially when grades are not a primary concern.

Admittedly, the DMT curriculum is broad and pushes the limits of scope and sequence, even for a half-day year-long CTE course. However, this variety provides an opportunity to expose students to new areas of media production. Steffani recognizes that DMT "wasn't strictly one thing," and that, no doubt because of ungrading, students could work to "achieve their goals rather than to check a box for the school district." The flexibility and constant variety helped develop creativity and new technical skills in study participants. While developing and using these skills, study participants discussed the ways that collaboration flourished in DMT, which is discussed in the next section.

### *Emerging Themes from Research Question 2*

**Collaborative Environment and Culture.** The overall impression of the DMT experience was that of a highly collaborative one. Many things contributed to this collaborative feel including the physical space, which has ample room for students to spread out and work in small teams, but also the fact that DMT project work attempts to simulate collaborative workflows from the media production industry. Taylor said:

> Digital Media is just simply collaborating with people. I mean, there's no Digital Media without collaborating. And I think being on a team, because you were always on a team for the most part, it was never a solo thing.

Charlee notes, "Most of the projects I did were collaborative. I think [DMT] was a huge help for me there. I think collaboration is essential," and Jackson said, "I think collaboration is huge." Harper found motivation in coming to school each day, in part because of collaborative project work, saying, "I enjoyed going to DMT every morning. Like, it was good. It was cool. 'Cause every day it was like, okay, we're working on a project. This is going to be so exciting." The positive experience with collaboration in DMT is sometimes at odds with experiences in traditional classrooms.

Steffani describes a typical experience with collaboration in other classes, saying, "I feel like while everyone has their strengths, it's usually just one person doing the majority of the work." Luka described an experience that might have been collaborative in theory but was more like parallel work, saying, "Each of you write half of the paper or something, like, you guys decide on an idea, and then you just split up the work individually." Sam said, "I don't like group projects as much because I feel very restricted into what I can do," and Nia had similar feelings, saying, "In school – not a fan of group projects because most of the time I ended up doing the heavy work." While these challenges in collaborative work contrast the bulk of the DMT collaborative experience, collaborations in DMT were not flawless. Working through these challenges seemed to be another aspect of the collaborative culture.

Steffani described challenging issues with group members this way:

> I think just – you kind of have to just work through those problems and, like, I think get to a point where maybe you don't like each other, but you still are very civil with each other and you still work really well together.

Harper acknowledged challenges as well:

> It can be hard. You know, you just kind of have to keep practicing because, you know, you can't have control over an entire project with people. And so, I think that learning how to communicate properly especially for projects like these is super important. And that is something that should be totally focused on because you will work with other people in the film world.

In both cases, collaborative challenges are navigated as part of a more authentic experience because the end goal is product-related instead of grade-related. They're describing work in a very professional sense, the way one might describe resolving a conflict with a co-worker. As creatives work through these challenges, communicating and problem-solving, there is no lasting impact of a detrimental grade that adds additional animosity between group members.

Even with challenges like those mentioned by Steffani and Harper, the overall culture of DMT was one where collaboration is central, as Luka noted, "That's the only way to make things that are really going to stand out…if it's a group of people working together."

Within DMT, collaboration thrives when both teacher and students can avoid focusing on grades. It is more than just the unique and creative subject matter that provides this opportunity. In a similar high school class, Paige found collaboration lacking:

> I remember when I started the film program at [my high school], the upperclassmen were not like that. Whenever I started as a freshman, the juniors and the seniors, they could not care less. 'Just do your job and, like, don't talk to me.' But, in Digital Media, the people above us, they were very helpful. They're like, 'Oh, yeah, I went through that. Let me show you what I learned.' So that was something that I really carried with me not only whenever I became a senior in the program, but something that I tried to carry with me beyond Digital Media.

While many factors likely contributed to the culture described in Paige's high school film class experience, her DMT experience is an example of supportive informal collaboration. Helping others was commonplace because it was understood that the class was not a competition to earn the highest grade or make one's mark by being "the best." These kinds of informal collaborative experiences among study participants will be discussed in the next section.

**Informal Collaboration Opportunities.** When a multi-talented group of creative students are assembled in the same ungraded class, informal collaboration happens naturally. Broadly speaking, the class consists of those who are focused on music and those who are more interested in film. Across that spectrum and within each area, there's a wide variety of preferences and abilities. Eric noted what this looked like on a day-to-day basis:

> That's a big part of the Digital Media class is being able to ask questions, go to other people, accept that you're not the best at everything, and be able to go to other people and try to get help and try to grow your skills as you're going.

Steffani described a similar willingness of many classmates to help when a project need arose. Even though there is some sense of creative competition, it does not supersede the desire to help others:

> We were creating these things, these projects, and there was something we needed an actor for, and we asked the class and multiple people were so willing to help…it's just really nice to see people helping out and seeing these people so willing to help everyone succeed, because in the end, we're all trying to make something great and everyone wants to be a part of that.

Taylor recalled that the final projects seemed to involve everyone in the class, saying:

> I think there was a lot of collaborating in the final projects, whether they were really on the team or not. I think there was a lot of behind the scenes that we didn't really notice until it was over.

The experiences described by Eric, Steffani, and Taylor, where there is a blur between groups, where anyone can seek or provide collaborative help from anyone in the class, would be next to impossible to maintain in a points-based grading system. As Taylor said, it was difficult to know who helped who until the dust settled. Perhaps grades in this setting could be determined using observed qualitative data, but then the students would constantly be aware that their actions are being evaluated. Instead, collaboration is genuine, and the positive energy is tangible, especially when someone may be inclined to seek more help to bring their skills to the level of their peers.

If two people have – or more likely are perceived to have – vastly different skill levels, informal collaboration can be complicated. Harper described this dynamic:

> At first it was kind of like, you know, disheartening because everyone seemed to know what they were doing and everyone seemed to know how to frame a shot or how to use the exposure triangle and all of that. I just didn't have a clue. So I didn't want to, like, you know, seem like I was just mooching. That's not the right word, but, you know, I wanted – I wanted to feel helpful, but I also didn't want to feel annoying.

Ultimately, Harper experienced a welcoming environment despite feeling like her skills were inferior to those of her classmates. Her reflection emphasizes the sometimes-painful emotional impact of trying to navigate learning in school:

> [In DMT], I never had an issue with anyone bullying me because I didn't know how to do something. I never had an issue with being ridiculed because I didn't know how to do a certain thing because I feel like everyone was also, like, learning, but everyone might've had, just maybe, a minor step up from me because I literally didn't know how to do anything.

It is not difficult to imagine how this experience might have played out in an environment where Harper might have been ridiculed for what she did not know. In a less supportive environment, most likely, she simply would not have sought the assistance of her peers in an effort to protect herself from embarrassment. Instead, Harper could learn from her peers while bringing her unique skills to the table, such as writing, script revision, storyboarding, and shot composition, saying, "I was super helpful in that case."

The recognition that everyone had unique skills and could contribute in unique ways was evident when participants sought to learn new information, but also when sharing information with others. Luka said, "I knew more than most people when we

were working with Logic Pro [audio software] because I had done that before a lot." Similarly, Sam noted he was more likely to help others with cameras, saying, "I had spent a lot more time helping people learn how to use the exposure triangle, things like that." Eric and another classmate became the go-to experts on a particular piece of gear after putting in a lot of work – "probably two and a half class periods." They were proud of their work. In a traditionally graded class, there may be concerns about cheating or fairness, but when there are no grades on the line, the focus is on learning and helping others. Eric recalled:

> I felt pretty confident using the gimbal, and then when other people wanted to use the gimbal, I was like, 'Hey, if you ever have any problems with it, just let me know. I feel like I'm pretty good at it now.'

Remembering the skills and talents of her and her classmates, Taylor jokingly reflected, "I had my specialty, like I said, Chad would not come ask me to help him with audio. That's for sure." Instead, skills were developed as needed. She would "bring in a friend to help" with recording audio, while she would help others with camera settings and photography. The combination of these unique skills is the final theme related to collaboration, which will be discussed in the following section.

**Combining Different Skills and Experiences.** A characteristic that sets DMT apart from broadcast journalism, film, sports media, music technology, photography, graphic design, animation, or similar programs –whether in a traditional high school or a CTE environment – is that DMT is sometimes all those courses in one. Granted, the DMT curriculum focuses on audio and video, but it is much easier to adapt elements of a course to fit the student than it is to ask a student to adapt to a rigidly defined course.

Students enter the class enthusiastically no matter their skill level when they know it is possible to engage in many areas of media production. The resulting energy with those combined creative skills is noteworthy. Charlee recognized it this way:

> I think it helps because everyone's skill set is different. Everyone brings something different to the table. I think that's something that DMT helped me learn, because one thing I loved about DMT was the animation, film, music…I don't think those should be separate programs. I think the fact that they were all kind of merged into one is awesome.

Charlee's recollection could have been more accurate. Animation is not part of the DMT curriculum. The closest skill to animation in the curriculum is keyframing in motion graphics. Charlee thought that animation was part of the curriculum because someone in her class loved animation and included animation in many projects throughout the year.

Allowing students to embrace their passions, whether in the curriculum or not, while working together in a collaborative environment can create meaningful experiences. Jackson had skills in drone videography and helped make an original music video with his classmate, a talented musician and songwriter. Jackson said, "That was one of the biggest things for me. It was just being able to work with other people like Eli." The team for that project was relatively small, but Harper worked on a project with a big team of creatives with various skills. She said, "We were super excited, and all of us were super motivated about that project, too." These projects are examples of ungraded work that left a lasting memory with the creatives while providing a sense of pride and intrinsic motivation. They also represent a trend with other study participants.

A partnership developed between Charlee and Taylor, who often worked with another creative to collaborate on projects. Charlee had musical expertise, while Taylor had expertise in photography. About this collaboration, Taylor recalled:

> It was great to have these minds work together – me, Charlee, Sarah – because I think we had the same vision for each project…I think that's why [we] worked so well together, because we would finish each other's sentences, we could see each other's visions when the other couldn't.

Charlee noted that their collaborative learning continues to this day, beyond the high school experience, saying, "I have a drone and a professional camera now, which Taylor is helping me learn how to use." A creative collaboration between people with different skills, which began in high school and continues similarly years later, is a testament to the collaborative learning skills they developed in an ungrading environment.

Long-lasting partnerships also developed when skills were more aligned. Nia spoke of "creativity flowing from every corner" when working with Annie, who also had previous experience in broadcast journalism. Their partnership worked and continues beyond high school for various reasons. For one, Annie could carefully edit a film written by Nia. Also, Nia described a shared creative vision. But, perhaps most importantly, Annie could keep Nia's ideas in check, as Nia recalled:

> I think me and Annie work really well together because like, I may come up with a really good idea, but it may not be fully grounded. So I take it to Annie and she's like, 'Okay, this is good, but we've got to kind of get back down to Earth and realize, like, we only have one camera, no lights. Like, we have to get this

together.' So that's another way we work well. I have the big idea, and then she pulls it down to a practical idea.

The experiences of the study participants, immersed in an environment with a group of creatives with various skills, were impactful. Charlee is trying to bring the same level of collaboration to her college, saying, "I'm actually working on that at school right now, because music and film are so separate…It's kind of annoying and it's hard to collaborate." Her description of siloed departments at the university level is not uncommon. Still, it is not representative of the media industry, and it is a missed opportunity to prepare students for success in creative fields.

Paige was succinct when recognizing the importance of cross-discipline collaboration through a wider lens, saying, "You can bring something different to the table than what I can bring. You can attract this audience, or this client, and I can bring someone else." The benefits of these types of collaborations are numerous, but one significant outcome is that creatives often find themselves trying and doing new things as a result. The following section addresses the study's findings related to trying new things and getting outside one's comfort zone, particularly looking at taking risks in an ungraded environment.

### *Emerging Themes from Research Question 3*

**Environment of Safety and Support.** Findings related to safety and support in the ungraded DMT classroom have emerged previously through commentary on creativity and collaboration. The safety and support that study participants feel in DMT directly relates to their eagerness and willingness to try new things and get outside their comfort zones. Study participants variously described a sense of freedom, support, and

safety to try new things in their project work. Taylor recognized, more importantly, that this safety and support extend beyond the projects and school-related work:

> I use the word freedom and safe space. I think from day one, we felt this energy from you that this is a safe space in all aspects of life…you wanted us there to express our creative freedom. You wanted us there to do our own thing. Obviously, you want us to learn skills from you and listen to you to some extent, but also we're there to be our own people, express our own ideas, grow more ideas. And I think the freedom of that class was just, I mean, that is Digital Media. I mean, you encourage us to be ourselves.

Most educators recognize failure as an important part of the learning process. However, when a class is traditionally graded, failure often has a long-lasting effect, both in terms of the gradebook but also in terms of how a student feels about the experience. Steffani said:

> I don't know. It just feels good to be, like, in an environment where it's safe to make something that's not great, but you're still proud of it because you put in effort, and it comes out with something that is cool.

When a great deal of effort on a school project is ultimately reduced to a number on a 100-point scale, it can be challenging to find positive takeaways. A student who felt good about the process and finished product might be able to reflect on what worked well, but a student who felt bad about the experience in the first place might find it difficult to bounce back. Harper spoke of a project that she attempted but did not want to repeat:

> The first project I worked on – the music video – like, me singing…Never again. But, that was something I tried and attempted and…I've learned very quickly that music is not my thing, and I'm okay with that. I've accepted that. I'm better at other things.

Ungrading makes space for this kind of leap outside one's comfort zone. The lack of a grade provides an opportunity to try something completely new, to share it with the teacher at least – DMT creatives are never required to share their work with the class – and ultimately decide it is not something to be repeated. That is the end result, and there are no residual consequences.

Not only is failure an essential part of the learning process, but it is blatantly evident in the way the process works when ungrading is used. It is difficult enough to be a high school student trying to learn something like Harper did in DMT, to then also have to contend with the emotions that come from struggling to maintain a satisfactory grade. Stress and anxiety were still present even in creative environments where the study participants thrived.

Audio production proved to be an area where anxiety in learning ran high. Steffani wanted to record music for her first-year capstone project and said, "It was very stressful. I remember that. Like, I was freaking out." Nia had a similar experience with audio production, saying, "I was so scared to make sure I didn't break anything or mess anything up." Paige admitted, "I remember with the soundboard, that thing terrified me." Steffani and Nia attended the DMT course at a different time than Paige, so they are describing different hardware but curiously using similar language. These memorable experiences – where anxiety and stress in learning are heightened – would surely get

worse with the added tension commonly experienced due to grades. In short, learning can be stressful enough without grades amplifying the negative experience.

All three of the study participants who experienced anxiety and stress during their audio production work found success. Steffani sought help from a classmate to record her project. Her recollection of the experience continued, "…coming out with something that was at least semi good for my first time, it was just such a sigh of relief. I have a new skill, and I feel pretty good about it." Nia commented on how that experience with audio helps her as a young professional, saying, "I'm glad I know it now so I can understand what people do." Paige felt no need to temper her feelings of relief, as she shared, "I set it up one singular time, and I was like, 'That's it. Give me my medal. I did it!' Now I can say that I've done it at least once." These audio projects were seen to fruition not because of a strict class requirement or a desire to earn a particular grade. Instead, they were completed because their creative ideas required the work to be done. The safe and supportive environment allowed them to persevere over their challenges. Overcoming challenges was the next theme identified and will be explored further in the following section on resilience, adaptability, and learning from mistakes.

**Resilience, Adaptability, and Learning from Mistakes.** Mistakes are inevitable, especially in the world of media production. Learning how to navigate a mistake is an essential skill that study participants describe. Occasionally, it was simply finding resilience to recover from setbacks and keep the project moving forward. In some cases, study participants demonstrated adaptability as factors outside of their control shifted during the creative process, causing them to pivot on the fly. Often, study participants

described mistakes as an opportunity to learn, and they looked for ways to apply that lesson to the next project.

While the description of setbacks from study participants indicated they were taken in stride, these setbacks were still difficult to process. Luka described his experience with mistakes and setbacks like this: “It definitely sucks…I feel like all the work I put in was just, like, all for nothing.” Likewise, failures in Digital Media are particularly rough for Eric, as he recalled, “I honestly feel worse in Digital Media, if I’m being honest, because I was normally way more confident in that…I was really bummed about it. There was [*sic*] definitely some days where I was like, this sucks.” Jackson reflected on setbacks by adding a positive experience, saying, “I felt very defeated at times…but you kind of just have to push through it.” Pushing through a challenge or turning a setback into a positive is not easy, but Jackson was in good company with Luka, Eric, Nia, Paige, and Steffani.

Luka kept his focus on the next project: “There will usually be a next time, and you just have to look forward to that silver lining,” while Eric recognized the iterative nature of learning, saying, “It’s always a step-by-step process. You just can’t let that deter you from making future creative aspects to your projects.” Nia described irritation and frustration but added, “I’m going to have to step back out of that for a minute and, like, find a solution. ‘Cause I am a flexible person.” Paige’s view on setbacks in creative projects reflected a positive mentality, as she noted, “I just kind of see it as a learning experience. See it as, like, ‘Okay, I did my best. What can I do better next time?’ And then move on from there.”

Steffani described a unique experience with a setback. Instead of a mistake or personal challenge, Steffani had to learn to adapt while working through a challenge with an outside client. The client's creative vision for the project seemed to morph over time, expanding to a project scope that was insurmountable with the time and resources available to Steffani and her teammates. She described the experience like this:

> It was just something that was super frustrating. And just like, having clashing ideas with the client is something that is just incredibly hard to work through, because you know one thing will be better, but you also want to be able to, like, execute the client's vision. So working through that is just particularly frustrating, but I think it's really helpful to learn how to do that young.

As a second-year creative, Steffani was working on this client project on behalf of the school district. Not only was there nothing about this project that was graded, but it required a certain amount of effort outside of school. In the end, the project was partially completed to the client's expectations, with the decision to continue working on the project in subsequent years with a new group of DMT creatives. Returning to the lesson learned from this challenging client project, Steffani shared a major takeaway from the DMT experience, "I think learning that this is a service industry…is one of the most important things that you can get out of this class."

Sam shared an interesting example of how ungrading can impact adaptability when setbacks arise on a project. If a project has an associated column in the gradebook, it is difficult to escape the consequences of not finishing it. To navigate creative differences, a few members of Sam's team separated from the group and completed a different project. Sam recalls:

> I know when we did the short film…we had disagreements, but then at that point, there were a handful that took charge and there were a handful that didn't end up sticking with the project for most of it.

Ungrading allows students to make decisions that are not typical in a traditional classroom. Sam and his classmates, including the ones who did not stay on Sam's project, were creating work that was ultimately submitted to a local media competition. This is another example of the theme of student autonomy, which is woven through the findings and, in this case, is a way to adapt to personal challenges. Sometimes, it is okay to move on. Paige describes how these kinds of unusual decisions can still have an impact even though punitive grading is not an option. She said, "If someone doesn't do their work, it has its natural consequences. That doesn't necessarily always mean an F, but there's a problem that they have to go and solve."

When it comes to solving problems, Taylor makes it seem easy, saying, "We figured it out, whether I needed to call a friend, make a list, do a little Google search." Being resourceful, like Taylor, in order to work through a challenging project – specifically, taking charge of one's learning – is the final theme connected with risk-taking, which is discussed in the next section.

**Embracing New Learning and Challenges.** One of the riskiest things to do in school is to try new things. The risk is compounded when trying something in front of your peers, and even more so when there is a chance the consequence of failure will follow you in the gradebook until the end of the semester. Study participants revealed a propensity for getting outside their comfort zones and trying new things, sometimes with success, and sometimes not.

Paige, Charlee, Luka, and Steffani had a sense that the new things they were learning would help them be successful as they continued their journey beyond high school. It is interesting to witness the long-range vision high school students can start to develop when the structure, trust, and support they are feeling in school seems to foreshadow the expectations they have for college and careers. Paige developed a certain empathy for future collaborators by growing her skills in new areas:

> I think something about me as a creative is that I like to be at least a little bit knowledgeable in a large variety of things, just that whenever I ask other people to do that for me, I'm not asking them to do something I wouldn't want, or I haven't put the time in to learn myself. So when it came to audio, I was like, you know, Digital Media is not just video. There's a large part of it that is audio and the things that we hear….So, I really wanted to expand my horizons and be able to do for other people what I would ask them to do for me.

Charlee sought to learn new things to grow personally and professionally. This personal journey meant a lot to her because she led the way, knowing the risk of failure was minimal compared to traditional school experiences. She recalled:

> I think when trying something out of my comfort zone…a lot of times I found that I liked it. And it taught me a lot about entertainment, about myself…I think stepping out of my comfort zone with projects allowed me to be more holistic in my education rather than just focusing on music or just focusing on film.

In both cases, Paige and Charlee were able to look at the bigger picture, often in a way that would be difficult for a teacher to help conceptualize for each individual. Students have unique goals for the future – some they express and others that go

unspoken. Luka had a way of looking at learning new information that recognized its value to increase future success. Whether or not he had this same feeling in high school, it is a lesson that he carries with him:

> I feel like most like production companies aren't going to hire someone for just a specific – like, I only know how to operate cameras. There's definitely going to be someone that comes along and is like, 'Yeah, I can do cameras and I could do audio,' and it's like, 'Oh yeah, well here you have the job.'

Steffani spoke of a client-connected project that allowed her to use new learning as a chance to feel better prepared for a creative career:

> Just feeling more prepared for my job with [understanding audio production], or for any job that I go into in the creative field, just knowing how to work a recording board, learning how to use mics correctly, and doing all of that was so exhilarating.

Learning new things can be challenging. Nia appreciates a challenge and has developed strategies to solve problems when she needs help understanding something. She said:

> I like a challenge. I will do something so many times until I can get it right. So even if I may mess up the first time where I'm just not getting it, I'm hitting YouTube, and I'm going to figure it out where I'm going to like try to take some other latchkey way to like fix something if it's not, like, technically what it's supposed to be.

Jackson's frustration with learning new things was a result of not only a topic he was not familiar with but also comparing himself to someone else. He shared a story of learning about motion graphics:

> I remember we did like a couple little – it was like a logo or something, that I want to say that we did. I think it was a [video] logo. And I just remember being, like, so confused. 'Cause I remember looking over at [another student's] computer and she had some crazy animation made and I'm like, 'What the heck am I doing wrong?'

Jackson described continued frustration with motion graphics programs, but he is still growing and learning after high school. He has yet to give up and will occasionally text this classmate for advice. He reported that he recently used motion graphics skills as part of a successful internship application with a major league sports team. Taking skills, both technical and durable, from secondary education into college, internships, and careers is the goal of CTE. This will be explored further in the final section of Chapter 4, which looks at the three GETs that emerged concerning preparation for college and careers.

### *Emerging Themes from Research Question 4*

**Durable and Technical Skill Development.** The findings of this study, as reported thus far, have revealed the various ways the study participants have built and found success as they navigated their unique post-secondary journeys. All 10 study participants currently attend college. They spoke about various ways they felt prepared for college, careers, and internships because of their experience in DMT. The first theme related to college and career preparation is the development of skills that have proven

beneficial. Study participants mentioned a variety of skills, both discreet technical skills and more broad durable skills.

Some basic technical skills were immediately useful as study participants entered college. Sam had a foundation of basic skills he could rely on while developing new skills in film school:

> So Digital Media taught me, here's the exposure triangle. Here's the settings you want to know how to use. Here's maybe the framing, the one-thirds rule or stuff like that – that stuff applied. But then I still had to, on top of it, learn a different camera, learn how to use it, learn maybe like the environment I was in, the lighting, different things like that.

Jackson mentioned how valuable it was to know how to properly wrap a cable, saying, "You'd be shocked at how many people don't know how to cable wrap when you walk in even like, professional settings, like, it was mind boggling to me." Something as simple as cable wrapping might seem benign to those outside the media production industry, but a recently graduated high school student having that as a technical skill can prove valuable. Sam recognized it as a useful skill as well and said, "One of the greatest examples, and you're going to be happy to hear this, is that cable wrapping actually came back up." For those in the media production industry, cable wrapping is an example of a life-long technical skill. DMT creatives also developed life-long durable skills.

Paige spoke about the durable skills learned in DMT that are helpful to her in film school. The durable skills she developed in DMT included advocating for herself and asking for what she wanted. Also, being comfortable with the learning process:

> [Don't] be afraid to say when you don't understand something or don't be afraid, like, to take that extra time to learn because that will only make you, like, a more valuable asset. That'll only make you a better teammate…also, it's okay to get out of your comfort zone, and it's okay to not be the best whenever you go out of that comfort zone, just as long as, you kind of learn something and you take note of the things that, like, didn't necessarily go so well so that if you do it again next time, you can do it better.

Taylor spoke of the value of collaboration and other durable skills:

> Creative thinking, project management, communication skills, because we managed a lot with the public. We were on projects with different companies, things like that. As 17-, 18-year-olds, it was kind of daunting to send a professional email to this company. So I think it really prepared us for the real world as far as like collaborating with not only people in our class, but communicating our ideas to real world people out there.

Communication skills, especially when they take place with actual clients and not just within the confines of the classroom, are tough to measure and assess for grading. In an ungraded environment, communication skills are grown organically and for their own sake, rather than to meet a requirement in the gradebook. Other skills have a chance to develop as well.

Adaptability and collaboration skills – both mentioned previously in this chapter – were keys to Charlee's success in college. Instead of performing music in front of the microphone, she leveraged her DMT experience to move into the engineer position for recording sessions. She said:

> I still want to collaborate with these people, but my artistry skillset is not what theirs is at all. So how can I adapt my skillset to be able to collaborate with these people? So I think that was a huge springboard for me was knowing how important collaboration is, especially in bringing together different areas of entertainment.

Charlee demonstrated such expertise at the college level that she quickly became a resource for younger students, saying that professors emailed other students to tell them to sit in on her recording sessions. She discussed the similarity between her DMT experience and her experience studying recorded music at an elite university, saying:

> It's very similar to Horizon Institute in the sense that I can go in, use the console, things like that. And I really admired that about HI was our ability to just check out a camera, check out a laptop, go make a project.

Charlee and others appreciated access to industry-aligned equipment and studio spaces, combined with the collaborative group of like-minded peers who could work on important projects together. These factors made DMT a place where creatives felt like young professionals. In a sense, they were able to "try on" the experience of being a professional in media production industries to see if it would be a good fit for a future career. This exposure to career possibilities during DMT is discussed in the next section.

**Career Exposure and Preparation.** CTE, by nature, has career exposure at its core. As discussed thus far, study participants felt their experience in DMT provided an opportunity to engage with a wide range of knowledge related to media production careers – many of which were new experiences – and to do so in a highly collaborative environment. For Harper, her two-year experience in DMT provided her with the

evidence she needed to pursue a career in media. While she had always been interested in media production, following YouTubers like so many teens do, it was not until her time in DMT that she was convinced a career in media production could be for her. She said, "I started seeing, like, the different jobs that go into digital media, like, especially sports." She has since worked on the production crews for several college and professional sports games. She has goals to go even further in sports media, saying, "Honestly, the goal is to start flying Skycam because that would be really cool."

Contrary to Harper's experience, Jackson found his experience in DMT caused him to pursue a major outside of media production while continuing to minor in film. He said:

> I think DMT had such an influence on what I learned going into college that I was actually in film school to start. So I was going to do the major and everything. And then I got to a point my sophomore year, I was like, you know what, I am essentially doing over DMT right now.

As a two-year creative in DMT, he had a lot of time to develop skills, but it is telling to think that he felt the experience at Horizon Institute was comprehensive enough to match his college experience.

Luka had a similar experience, saying, "I just took a class last semester that was called, like, intro to digital media. And I was like, 'Oh, this is going to be so easy.' And it was, like, I knew everything he was already trying to teach everyone." Like Harper, Luka's DMT experience guided him towards his college major. He emphasized, "I'm not even, like, exaggerating. My life would be so much different if I did not take that class.

Like, I have no clue what I would have been doing." The DMT experience led to significant life changes for Harper, Jackson, and Luka, starting with projects in DMT.

Eric noted that DMT projects can form the foundation for a portfolio that can lead to college acceptance and internships:

> When you're in Digital Media, you build a portfolio and having that portfolio I can send to different people. Like, I feel like one of the big reasons I got the internship at [my college] was my portfolio I had built while I was in Digital Media with all of the photography stuff I had done at events and the graphics I had been making.

Eric is speaking about a list of skills that are not represented in the DMT curriculum, yet he was able to include them – photography and graphic design – on DMT projects and, more importantly, as part of his internship application, securing a position in social media marketing before even starting his first year of college.

Nia spoke to the value of the skills she learned in preparing her for an internship. She went further to emphasize just how her DMT skills paid off, saying:

> It's kind of unheard of for a sophomore to be an intern at a news station – like, that's not normal, especially because I've never worked in a news station before. But I had those skills that could transfer over for me to be successful.

Of course, she credited her internship acceptance to her experience in DMT, saying, "I had a lot of things on my resume that I had done during Digital Media."

Paige attributes her journey to film school entirely to DMT, contrasting her experience at Horizon Institute with that of her film experience at a traditional high school:

> I 100% believe that if I did not go through DMT, I would not be a film major. And the reason why I say that is because even though I had a lot of great experiences at my normal high school film program, I did not feel like I was a creator. I felt like I was just being given a prompt and I was just, like, expected to take specific steps to get there. And I didn't really feel, like, the support that I need as a creative. At least I didn't feel that support until, like, senior year. And if it wasn't for the experiences I had in Digital Media, as in, like, going on the field trips to see, like, the different kind of careers that are possible, meeting people that I wouldn't otherwise meet, being, like, this sounds, like, so bad, but being forced to do things that I wouldn't otherwise do, like, I don't think that I would have the love for, like, this sphere that I have.

Although not explicitly stated, the contrast between traditional grading and ungrading lingers below the surface of Paige's remarks. She feels so strongly about the experience in DMT that she has taken the story of the experience halfway across the country while at college:

> I do not shut up about DMT. Like, everyone knows that Paige went to another school in the morning where she studied Digital Media. She loved it. Like, because I truly believe that, like, I owe a lot of my experience and my love and my passion to DMT.

There is a clear passion for the DMT experience from Paige and others, a passion that started when they were able to develop their skills in an environment that simulated a real-world media production workplace. The final theme aligned to college and career

preparation concerns the professional environment and real-world experiences described by study participants, which is discussed in the final section of this chapter.

**Professional Environment and Real-World Experiences.** The professionalism of the DMT experience as described by study participants applies to the real-world project work, the physical spaces in which they engaged in the work, and the class systems that provided them with autonomy and trust. As a half-day off-campus high school program, there is a natural sense of professionalism that arises as students have more time to engage in the creative process. With regard to the project work, there is a district initiative to engage in real-world work with outside-of-school clients as students across the district work to earn additional credentials beyond high school credits through the completion of Market Value Assets (MVAs).

This type of client-connected project work resonated with Eric, who appreciated the opportunity to learn communication skills beyond the classroom, saying, "We want to make the clients happy. And so, being able to communicate with them to what exactly they want in their project. That's a big skill I feel like I learned in this class."

Sam and fellow creatives worked on a client-connected project for the school district, chronicling a day in the life of a service dog at one of the elementary schools. When speaking of the DMT experience on the whole, Sam said:

> I like the idea of being able to try different things…I like the freedom, I don't like restriction. So it helps a lot. I feel like it's a lot more professional in that I can learn to work with other people without eyes watching me all the time. And that gives you the real-world experience you need to go and apply it to college or whatever you're doing work or elsewhere.

The sense of real-world experience came to life when Sam's project was added to the agenda of a school board meeting, as Sam recalled, "I was freaking out when I found out that [our video] went to the school board. I did not know that was happening." When project work is delivered to a client outside the classroom, there is no need for a grade and the excitement of this real-world experience usually exceeds the value of traditional assessment anyway.

Charlee worked on a cross-curricular project that required outside of class commitments. The project combined students from other disciplines such as engineering and software development, and once again, was submitted to an outside source. This project was integral to Charlee's college application:

> One of my professors who's on the admissions board said that he loved reading about that project on my application. So that was a huge thing for me. And I think that was also something that helped me get into school. I think most of my application, if not all of my college application, came from Horizon Institute.

Luka's most impactful experience came from a creative short film rather than a client-connected project. His description of this ungraded project shows a sense of self-discovery and immense satisfaction. He recalls:

> I mean, the creative projects in your class was [*sic*] like literally the reason why I want to do what I'm doing now. I mean, it was – I learned the most about myself through those and the most about like, what I'm good at, what I'm not good at in that aspect of things. And like the infamous short film that my group worked on, that was like the most fun I've ever had working on anything. I love doing that. And even though it was definitely – it could have been better. I mean, it was still,

> it was like our first thing, my first thing, at least. And it was just like, it's really fun doing that. And I, yeah, I loved that. It was awesome.

The short film that Luka described was the same project in which Harper, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, described a team that was "super excited" and "super motivated" to work on. The project was submitted to an outside competition and it did not win any awards. In fact, Harper recalled, "We broke, like, a couple of rules and they gave us feedback about that," but the project seems to have had a profound impact, starting both Harper and Luka down the path towards careers in film and media production.

It is impossible to know if this project would have had a different impact had it been traditionally graded, but it is hard to conceive how a grade could have had any kind of positive impact on this experience. Assigning a grade to this project would be misplaced at best, as the creatives got everything they needed from the experience itself.

It was the day-to-day experience that resonated with some study participants. Jackson said, "I feel like those places where you can get hands-on experience are some of the best teachers, at least for people like me." Steffani recognized that the physical space did not feel like a traditional classroom. She said, "I always really appreciated, like, the actual physical aspects of the Digital Media classroom with it being lower lighted and, like, the LED lights where it's just not so harsh on your brain." Nia valued having always-available resources to empower her to solve problems on her own, saying, "I know I always had the book out – the binder – every single time, because I got to make sure I hit all the steps."

Paige and Taylor both had reflections on the overall professionalism they experienced in DMT. Paige said:

> The fact that even though in our projects you were there, like, to help us when we needed it, it felt like a very hands-off approach for everything that we did…And I think that prepared me specifically for this college I'm in because…I'm not dependent on [a professor] to be holding my hand and tell me exactly what to do. It gave me the space to kind of be more of an independent thinker and a problem solver. Like, this is the end goal, this is what we're starting with, how do we get from point A to point B? And I think that that was very helpful, especially, again, because in the film industry, or in the creative space, there's really not a right and wrong way to do something, there's just the end product, really.

Finally, Taylor described the professionalism and creative freedom as the factors that had the most significant impact, particularly as she and her fellow creatives continued their passions beyond high school:

> I just think the creative freedom that we experienced in Digital Media has significantly impacted – I think – all of us. I mean, I talk to Charlee and Sarah mostly, but I just see people's Instagram stories or something, how they're just – they just keep going. They just keep starting new ideas, new little projects, new little small businesses or something like that. And I just think it's so good that we evolved in such an empowering safe space there. It's encouraged us to explore new ideas and that it's OK to fail with those new ideas. It's OK to take those risks. And we want you to express your unique creative visions. And I think these experiences not only enhanced our artistic abilities, but also prepared us for future

challenges in college and life or in our career in general. But I think that freedom from Digital Media class has played a vital role in shaping all of us as humans in general.

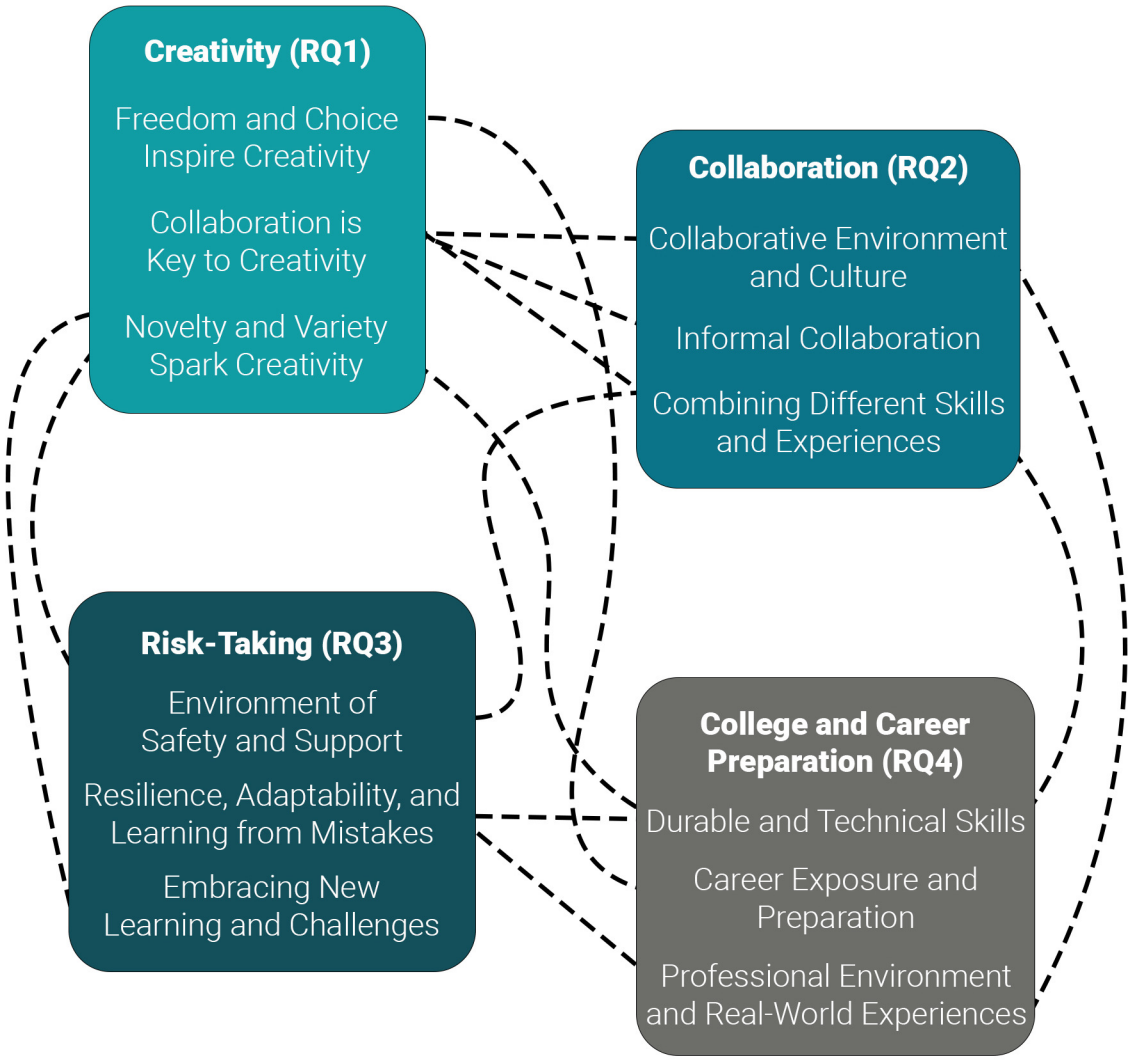
Ultimately, the goal of any classroom – particularly in the creative arts – is to nurture, foster, and support the development of learning and passions both during school and beyond. As Taylor describes, creative passions often continue beyond DMT, sometimes leading to college and careers in the arts and sometimes to other paths. The ungrading approach used in DMT provided a structure upon which emerging young creatives could grow their unique skills, develop new ones, experience real-world projects, and do it all in a highly collaborative environment.

### *Summary of GETs*

Figure 2 summarizes the findings presented in this chapter, showing the GETs associated with each research question as well as the connections between creativity, collaboration, risk-taking, and college and career preparation.

**Figure 2**

*Summary of GETs Showing Interconnected Themes*




*Note.* Each box contains the GETs associated with RQ1-RQ4. Dashed lines show general connections between creativity, collaboration, risk-taking, and college and career preparation.

**Summary**

This chapter presented the findings of 10 semi-structured interviews with study participants who were previously high school juniors and seniors who participated in the

researcher's ungraded CTE media production class. The chapter began with background information on the studied environment, followed by a summary of the participants. The chapter continued by presenting GETs aligned with research questions. For RQ1, GETs focusing on collaboration, freedom, and novelty were discussed. For RQ2, GETs related to class culture, informal collaboration, and the combination of diverse skills were discussed. For RQ3, GETs associated with safety, resilience, and embracing challenges were explored. Finally, for RQ4, GETs focused on skill development, career preparation, and learning in a professional environment were addressed. The following chapter summarizes the study, provides an interpretation of the study's findings related to the literature, and suggests recommendations for future research.

# Chapter 5

## Interpretation and Recommendations

This chapter begins with a summary of the research study, then expands on the themes and findings described in Chapter 4 as they relate to the literature review discussed in Chapter 2. The chapter concludes with implications for action and recommendations for further research.

### Study Summary

Students preparing for college or entering the workforce in media production-related fields require more than just subject matter knowledge. They need a broad set of durable skills such as creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking. Traditional grading systems often fail to provide a classroom environment where these skills can be developed and nurtured, leading some educators towards alternative grading techniques. One such type of alternative grading is called ungrading, which prioritizes feedback and collaboration over traditional grades. This study explored the lived experiences of high school juniors and seniors who participated in an ungraded CTE-focused media production class, focusing on creativity, collaboration, risk-taking, and college/career readiness.

### *Overview of the Problem*

Creative subjects such as media production benefit from a classroom environment that fosters creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking. Traditional classroom environments are often dominated by teacher-driven assignments that provide little room for creativity. When collaboration is present, it rarely resembles the kind of collaboration that takes place in a creative workplace. Additionally, taking risks in the classroom is often

punished instead of rewarded. Ungrading – characterized by a de-emphasis on grades and a focus on feedback – provides an alternative to traditional classroom grading. There remains a research gap in understanding how ungrading impacts the development of durable skills of creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking, as well as college and career preparation in secondary CTE media production.

### *Purpose Statement and Research Questions*

This study explored students' lived experiences in an ungraded classroom, focusing on developing the durable skills of creativity, collaboration, risk-taking, and preparation for college and careers. The study addressed the following research questions:

**RQ1.** How does ungrading influence students' experiences with creativity in a secondary-level media production class?

**RQ2.** How does ungrading influence students' experiences with collaboration in a secondary-level media production class?

**RQ3.** How does ungrading influence students' experiences with risk-taking in a secondary-level media production class?

**RQ4**. To what extent do students believe that their experiences with ungrading in a secondary-level media production class contributed to their sense of preparedness for media-focused college and career pursuits?

### *Review of the Methodology*

This study used IPA methodology to understand the lived experiences of juniors and seniors in a CTE media production course. IPA focuses on participants' personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings about a significant life experience (Smith et al., 2022,

p. 1). In this case, semi-structured interviews focused on industry-relevant durable skills during the ungrading experience in a secondary CTE media production course. Interview data was transcribed, analyzed, interpreted, and exported for inclusion in the previous chapter using Atlas.ti. The researcher ensured the study maintained credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

***Major findings***

For RQ1, participants shared that their experience in an ungraded CTE media production course was one where they felt free to choose their own experience, which provided intrinsic motivation for ungraded project work. Participants also spoke about the importance of collaboration in creativity, drawing inspiration from peers and the people around them, and sharing and generating ideas among fellow DMT creatives. Finally, creativity was sparked by new learning experiences with hardware, software, and elements of the media production industry that participants had no or minimal experience with before participating in the ungraded DMT course.

For RQ2, participants spoke about the collaborative environment they perceived in the ungraded course, noting the culture of collaboration was threaded through everything they experienced in DMT. Participants emphasized the value of informal learning and collaboration opportunities that took place organically during all phases of the media production process. In this case, participants described various ways they shared information with others while also seeking help from their fellow creatives. Additionally, participants noted the diverse skill sets among their fellow creatives and recalled how the ungraded framework of the DMT course facilitated collaboration across these various abilities.

For RQ3, participants described a class culture of safety and support as a key feature. Participants spoke about their experiences developing resilience, adapting through project challenges, and finding learning opportunities among mistakes and setbacks. Study participants also sought new learning opportunities, freely exploring new challenges during their time in DMT. The participants approached these new learning opportunities and challenges by understanding that their grades would not suffer because of failure.

Finally, for RQ4, study participants described a rich depth of preparation for college and careers. Participants noted specific skills that were useful as well as durable skills that they can use as they continue their post-secondary journeys. Participants valued the exposure to the full spectrum of media production-related careers and felt better prepared to collaborate with others in college and beyond. Participants spoke about the overall professional experience of DMT, noting the physical environment, class policies, and real-world project work that prepared them for their future college and careers.

**Findings Related to the Literature**

The literature review presented in Chapter 2 examined the theoretical frameworks from which this study was pursued, which include critical pedagogy, social constructivist theory, and self-determination theory. Chapter 2 reviewed the historical context of grading systems, the emergence of ungrading, motivation in education, creativity in education, collaboration in education, academic and creative risk-taking, issues related to equity in grading, and finally, essential skills in media production and ungrading as post-secondary preparation. The research revealed a gap in understanding how ungrading

impacts the development of durable skills, particularly in secondary CTE media production. The following sections describe emerging themes from the semi-structured interviews and their relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

***Emerging themes from Research Question 1***

One of the most profoundly revealing and unsettling aspects of this study is how closely the findings align with decades-old research on creativity, bringing into sharp focus how little has changed in education regarding creativity. It would be a disservice not to highlight the comparison between the participants' experience in this study to that of a pamphlet published for the National Education Association (NEA), authored by Hennessey and Amabile (1987). Not only is this publication over 35 years old, but it draws on research from the decade preceding its publication.

Participants in this research overwhelmingly spoke to the value of collaboration and choice in an ungraded environment as factors that positively influence their creativity. Hennessey and Amabile (1987) highlight these factors as key elements to creativity, yet school persists in cursory collaboration and minimal opportunities to engage in meaningful choice. Hennessey and Amabile (1987) focus on rewards and evaluation as additional elements that diminish creativity. Schools cannot escape the negative impact of rewards and evaluation when a grade is assigned at every step of the way. In addition to freedom of choice, study participants spoke about the experience of freedom they experienced while being trusted as young professionals.

Sam said of the ungraded experience in DMT, "I feel like it's a lot more professional in that I can learn to work with other people without eyes watching me all the time." While student safety is of utmost importance and never taken for granted, Sam

is speaking to the type of surveillance experienced in a traditional classroom, which Hennessey and Amabile (1987) also note is detrimental to creativity.

The freedom of choice, aligned with motivation rather than creativity, is a theme that arose in ungrading research by Hasinoff et al. (2024). Participants from that study recognized that "choice and flexibility in these courses provided more motivation because it offered them multiple paths to succeed" (p. 9). One could make the case that identifying multiple paths to success is a way of expressing the ability to take a unique and creative path toward a positive experience.

Finally, Kohn (2018) identifies choice as a central component of motivation along with collaboration and content. Collaboration, central to RQ2, will be discussed in the following section.

***Emerging Themes from Research Question 2***

The Zone of Proximal Development, theorized by Vygotsky (1978), describes the potential to expand the depth of learning when collaborating with mentors or more experienced peers. Study participants described this phenomenon as a primary theme of their experience in an ungraded CTE media production class. In addition to providing an opportunity to deepen learning, collaboration is essential to learning according to Kohn (2018), who combines collaboration alongside choice, discussed in the previous section, and content. These three combine to form the "three C's" and are primary factors in intrinsic motivation. Study participants described the collaborative environment as being of utmost importance.

The informal collaboration described by study participants also calls to mind characteristics associated with critical pedagogy, where collaborative learning becomes

so commonplace and omnidirectional that it blurs the line between teacher and student (Freire, 1970/2023). Although not specifically addressed in this study, the researcher can confirm that the teacher is also a student, constantly learning and keeping up with current trends. This level of collaboration reaches new heights in an ungraded environment.

Study participants in this research described a collaborative learning environment similar to that described by Gorichanaz (2022), who noted, "participants reported feeling like they were working together and learning together" (p. 9). In both Gorichanaz's (2022) research and this study, the ungrading framework allowed study participants to engage in collaborative learning in ways that are difficult to accomplish in a traditionally graded classroom.

A participant in Gorichanaz's (2022) study remarked that in an ungraded classroom, "there's kind of a common goal" (p. 10). Similarly, in this study, Steffani described the creative project experience: "We're all trying to make something great, and everyone wants to be a part of that." Not only is the learning collaborative, but the bigger goals of the course can feel collaborative when no discrete grade will ultimately be applied to the project and other coursework.

The sense of community that can be fostered in an ungraded environment creates a unique opportunity to tap into the motivational element of collaboration. Additionally, when collaboration can thrive in a safe environment, the willingness to take risks can flourish, as identified in themes related to RQ3.

### *Emerging Themes from Research Question 3*

Baehr's (2022) definition of academic risk-taking is "a readiness to persist in thinking or communicating in the face of fear, including fear of embarrassment or

failure" (p. 196). Blum (2024) details a list of emotions experienced by "students at every level of schooling" (p. 33) that includes fear, dread, feelings of inadequacy, imposter syndrome, and shame, among others. No educator would intentionally subject a student to these feelings, yet it is difficult to deny their prevalence in school. These emotions often result when attempting to bridge the ever-present educational gap between not knowing and knowing.

In the previous chapter, Harper spoke about the ungrading environment, which provided her with the safety to avoid feeling "bullied" or "ridiculed" for what she didn't know when collaborating with her peers. This presents an interesting paradox: in an environment where fear of failure, embarrassment, and ridicule are nearly eliminated, is it still possible to feel like one is taking a risk? Naturally, Harper still felt like she was taking a risk.

Harper's experience compares to that of a participant in research by Turcotte et al. (2023). Harper entered the DMT course perceiving her skills were distantly behind her peers. In a traditionally graded course, Harper, with less skill and experience than her peers, would more often than not receive a lower grade on her work than her more experienced peers.

In the study by Turcotte et al. (2023), a non-native English speaker shared an experience similar to what might have transpired with Harper had the DMT course been traditionally graded. As it is, both the participants in this study and the study from Turcotte et al. (2023) could speak to the value of ungrading when it comes to fairness, which no doubt leads to minimizing some of the emotions outlined by Blum (2024) at the start of this section.

Interestingly, Harper entered DMT with no prior experience, proceeded to build her skills over two years in an ungraded environment, and subsequently found success in college and early career pursuits. The alignment of this study to existing literature focusing on college and career preparation is addressed in the following section.

### *Emerging Themes from Research Question 4*

When it comes to college and career preparation, participants in this study spoke about practical and technical skills but also described durable skills that helped them succeed beyond high school. Study participants' self-recognition of the value of durable skills highlights an interesting contrast between the participants in this study and those in the study by Arnold (2023) of graduates of an Irish media studies program.

While the participants in Arnold's (2023) study mainly spoke of the importance of practical skills in employment success, the participants in this research quickly acknowledged the value of durable skills. Arnold's (2023) study included a follow-up intervention administered to enrolled students. The intervention consisted of a professionalism module intended to convey the value of transversal skills (referred to as durable skills in this study) as they relate to employment. The module was designed to "help students to reflect on and self-assess their learning to date and to understand the relevance of their skills and learning beyond their studies" (2023, p. 488). The professionalism module was partially successful, however, study participants maintained a strong sense that practical skills were more closely related to employment.

The intervention implemented by Arnold (2023) contrasts the experience participants in this research study had. There were no modules aimed at self-reflection on durable skills as part of the studied environment; there was only deliberate work in which

the durable skills were developed and engaged. Developing durable skills is noteworthy, as is the participants' recognition of their value when it comes to a successful career in media production.

The final connection to literature associated with career preparation concerns acquiring knowledge and skills. The media production industry is fast-paced and ever-changing. As such, those who aim for long and successful careers must be adept at learning. The intrinsic motivation required to learn new information successfully connects with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2015), as individuals must develop tools and autonomy to learn independently. This phenomenon was noted in a study of media professionals from Bridgstock (2016).

Bridgstock's (2016) study concerned the relevance of university education in media production considering the learning strategies required of media professions. Bridgstock (2016) concluded, "Universities must stop gatekeeping knowledge, and start facilitating access to it, supporting the development of critical capabilities required to filter and synthesize information effectively" (p. 314).

This insight directly aligns with the findings of this study, in which secondary students in CTE media production had access to knowledge and resources as well as the time and space to make sense of them in a collaborative environment. The ungrading format used in DMT provided a foundation that will continue into the study participants' careers, empowering them to develop into lifelong learners in the media production industry, as they will be consistently called upon to learn new skills and techniques in media production.

### *Other Emerging Themes*

The findings of this study support previous research that recommends significant changes to traditional assessment strategies. Crogman et al. (2023) suggest experiential learning opportunities as a way to encourage engagement while also introducing equity and collaborative elements into the assessment process. Participants in this study spoke highly of the experiential learning opportunities in DMT. Additionally, Crogman et al. (2023) emphasize the value of personalized learning and grading student improvement. This mirrors the experiences of participants in this study, who felt empowered to improve their skills through these approaches while engaging in authentic project-based work.

## Conclusions

This study used IPA research methodology to understand the lived experiences of juniors and seniors in a CTE media production course, focusing on the durable skills of creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking and participants' perception of preparation for college and careers in media production-related industries. The study's findings addressed gaps in the literature regarding research on durable skills in CTE. The following section addresses gaps in the research with recommendations for further research studies.

### *Implications for Action*

Grading and assessment are at a turning point. The Success Ready Students Network (SRSN) represents a small collection of districts in Missouri. SRSN is developing a new accountability system and they aim to "use a competency-based mind-set to personalize learning in ways that ensure every student has the knowledge, skills and dispositions they need to be high school, college, career and workplace ready"

(Success-Ready Students Network, 2024, para. 2). While ungrading is a significant leap beyond competency-based learning, this student-focused approach described by SRSN represents a possible positive change on the horizon for students in Missouri.

On the surface, it is not easy to apply the findings in this study to a broad range of subjects and grade levels in education. Qualitative research is not meant to be replicated, especially in this case, where participants experienced a unique phenomenon by participating in an ungraded secondary CTE media production course. Participants also demonstrated a deep passion for the subject matter as they pursued college degrees in related industries. However, looking a little deeper, some aspects of this study's findings can be applied to the broader educational community.

For educational administrators, the study offers insight into the value of supporting student choice, particularly if there are existing movements towards personalized competency-based learning as described by SRSN. This study sheds additional light on what it might look like if student choice goes beyond just being able to choose what is available in the pre-existing curriculum. Instead, it shows what student choice might look like when it is allowed to supplement and extend the curriculum. Shifting the focus towards students and reimagining assessment is of particular importance considering the prevalence of artificial intelligence. Supporting and encouraging these endeavors is one way to foster student motivation and engagement.

When it comes to curriculum, educational institutions should move towards curricula that foster durable skills with as much emphasis as specific course-related skills. The district in which this study was based has a durable-skills-focused description of student success known as "Portrait of a Graduate" (Stanford, 2023). This broad

description of student success includes such durable skills as “builds positive relationships” and “thinks innovatively.” The researcher would hazard a guess that very few educators in the district use the Portrait of a Graduate as part of their daily instruction. In education, it is often said that “what is tested is taught.” Not surprisingly, there are no assessments for durable skills; thus, their acquisition is often a by-product rather than a focus. Contrary to this approach where durable skills are secondary, the Intellectual Virtues Academy (2024) is one such institution that is teaching rigorous course content while emphasizing durable skills from Baehr’s (2022) research. School districts could adopt a similar approach to prioritize durable skills in education. However, if the outcome remains tied to traditional grading, the development of these skills cannot flourish, as described by participants in this study.

For teachers, the study can guide decisions emphasizing collaboration and student autonomy. Collaboration is common in most classrooms, however, the collaboration revealed in the findings of this study is unique. In a sense, the study showed the value of cross-curricular collaboration. Study participants were in the same curricular course but brought various experiences from within the discipline.

Blum (2024) outlines a cross-curricular concept for higher education that could apply to education at all levels. Blum’s (2024) vision, which has yet to come to fruition, describes a group of students from various disciplines working with a faculty mentor to tackle a big problem. No doubt, any teacher who has ever done a collaborative project with another class can speak to the value of that experience, and students likely found the experience memorable. Alas, finding the time and space within the curriculum to support these kinds of collaborations across disciplines is challenging.

Autonomy is a powerful tool for motivating and engaging students, but it can take time and patience to implement. School has a way of providing only superficial versions of things like autonomy, choice, and collaboration. Still, the study provided insight into what a deeper level of autonomy might look like. Teachers could look for ways to support this in their classroom and, more importantly, find ways that do not result in a score being applied to student work, instead focusing on feedback and reflection.

Ungrading is undoubtedly an unusual departure from the norm in education. It is difficult to convey what it is like when a classroom culture is built on autonomy, while fostering creativity and collaboration, and maintaining a focus on learning without getting mired in the minutiae of grading. This study revealed that such an environment was highly impactful for study participants. If a fraction of this experience could be applied to more educational settings, it would significantly shift the focus towards students, prioritizing their learning, well-being, and humanity.

### *Recommendations for Future Research*

Future research into the impact of ungrading and students' experiences with durable skills would aid in understanding how to best prepare students for college and careers. While this study focused on past experiences with ungrading using the IPA methodology, future research could study the impact of the experience of an ungraded course during the course rather than after. Additionally, utilizing a mixed methods approach to gather quantitative data alongside qualitative data could add value to the findings. Extending the study to a longitudinal study would be particularly valuable, revealing the impact of the ungrading experience from high school through college into professional careers.

While this research did not reveal significant negative experiences with ungrading, additional research could address the experience, focusing on those who may prefer traditional grading.

Further research could investigate how ungrading can be implemented into other educational approaches discussed previously, namely collaborative approaches to learning such as PjBL and PBL.

Given the somewhat divisive nature of ungrading, research that explores the perspectives of teachers, administrators, and parents would provide an understanding of the challenges of implementing ungrading in practice.

Finally, because of the nature of this IPA study, a purposive homogeneous sample strategy was used. A deeper understanding of the experience could be uncovered using a broader population of students, including students who chose not to pursue media production careers and those who the experience may have less positively impacted.

### *Concluding Remarks*

Countless factors surrounding the unique experiences described by participants contributed to the findings of this study. To begin with, it takes a certain amount of courage, drive, and intrinsic motivation to enroll in an off-campus CTE program in the first place, let alone commit half of your high school experience to such a program, as seven of the 10 study participants did. As such, these study participants were and remain passionate about this experience that has shaped their journey into college and careers related to media production.

Study participants spoke at length about the value of collaboration, the ability to engage in appropriately challenging work, and the safe, supportive environment in which

they engaged in the work. These findings emphasize the possibility of education being powerful and life-altering, even when it is done without traditional grades – a component that seems all but unavoidable. Though the study participants knew nothing of the theoretical frameworks guiding this study, they reinforced them in recalling the ungraded experience.

Study participants described a learning environment unrelated to the banking model of education described by Friere (1970/2023), demonstrating that they were just as much teachers as they were learners as described in critical pedagogy. Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development was evident as study participants sought collaborative experiences to grow their skills and improve their projects, continually seeking help from and sharing with peers. Finally, the study findings reveal all three elements of self-determination theory existed in the ungraded environment as study participants described freedom of choice and a supportive classroom that allowed them to grow their competence, regardless of their level of expertise.

The traditional frameworks for grading and assessment cannot and will not be overhauled in the blink of an eye. Instead, educators would do well to provide meaningful, student-led collaboration opportunities while embracing – at the very least – equitable grading practices or elements of ungrading. Doing so would surely empower students and foster their love of learning, which is, after all, our superpower (Blum, 2024). While this study does not and cannot seek to be replicated (Stahl & King, 2020), an emphasis on authentic collaborative experiences focusing on intrinsic motivation, meaningful learning, and genuine support should be achievable in any grade level or discipline.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Script and Interview Protocol Aligned With Research Questions

Opening script:

[Begin with a brief conversation to reconnect and set the participant at ease.]

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. As a reminder, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of high school juniors and seniors in a CTE media production class. The interview should take about one hour. Please feel free to share as much detail as possible throughout the interview. Rich and detailed information from your experiences is valuable for this study.

Before we proceed, I would like to provide you with more information about your rights as a participant:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary, with minimal risks involved.

- The interview will be recorded to facilitate data analysis, and your privacy will be protected by removing any personal information from the resulting report.

- You may opt out of answering any questions you deem uncomfortable.

- You have the right to stop the interview at any point.

Based on that information, I have a few questions:

1. Do you understand the information surrounding the parameters of this study regarding confidentiality, privacy, and your participation? YES/NO

2. Do you consent to participating in this study, as validated by your signed consent form? YES/NO

3. Are you okay with being recorded for this interview? YES/NO

Thank you. Do you have any questions for me before we begin? YES/NO

I will begin recording if you are ready. So that we have this on record, can you confirm that I have your permission to record? YES/NO

Thank you. We have five demographic-related questions and 17 open-ended questions designed to explore your experiences in-depth. Are you ready to begin? YES/NO

Great! Let's begin.

Question purpose/alignment

| Question purpose/alignment | | Interview Protocol |
|---|---|---|
| Demographic questions | 1. | Can you begin by stating and spelling your full name please? |
| | 2. | To ensure this study is inclusive and respectful of all identities, could you please share your gender identity? You can describe it in any way that feels right for you, or let me know if you prefer not to answer. |
| | 3. | Can you please share your current status? Are you employed, attending college, or both? |
| | 4. | If you are employed, could you please tell me briefly about that? |
| | 5. | If you are attending college, could you please tell me your institution and major? |
| General questions | 1. | How would you describe your relationship with grades in high school? |
| | 2. | What was your initial reaction to the lack of focus on grades? |
| | 3. | How would you describe your goals entering DMT? |
| RQ1. How does ungrading influence students' experiences with creativity in a secondary-level media production class? | 1. | Can you share your experiences with creative projects in school? In DMT? |
| | 2. | Can you tell me about some factors that influence your creativity, both positively and negatively? |
| | 3. | Can you talk about a DMT project or experience in which you felt particularly creative? |
| RQ2. How does ungrading influence students' experiences with collaboration in a secondary-level media production class? | 1. | Can you talk about your experiences with group or collaborative projects in general? |
| | 2. | Can you tell me how you feel other DMT creatives thought about you when it comes to collaborative projects? |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 3. | Can you describe a time when you shared skills or knowledge during a creative project? |
| | 4. | Can you tell me about a DMT project that involved teamwork and collaboration? |
| RQ3. How does ungrading influence students' experiences with risk-taking in a secondary-level media production class? | 1. | Can you describe what it feels like to try new things in school, especially when things don't go as planned? |
| | 2. | How do you feel after experiencing setbacks on a project or assignment? |
| | 3. | Can you share an example of trying something new on a project in DMT? |
| | 4. | Can you talk about a time when you stepped outside your comfort zone in DMT? |
| RQ4. To what extent do students believe that their experiences with ungrading in a secondary-level media production class contributed to their sense of preparedness for media-focused college and career pursuits? | 1. | What knowledge or experiences, if any, from DMT do you continue to use in college (or career)? |
| | 2. | We've talked about your experience while in DMT, but can you tell me about any college or career-related work that you've found impactful? |
| | 3. | How would you feel your experience would be different without being in DMT? |
| Examples of possible question follow-ups to be used throughout the interview | 1. | Can you tell me more about that? |
| | 2. | How did that feel? |
| | 3. | What made that experience meaningful? |
| | 4. | How would you describe that? |
| | 5. | Can you tell me what you were thinking? |

Closing script:

That concludes my interview questions. Can you think of anything else you would like to add [PAUSE], or do you have any questions?

As a reminder, this interview was recorded, and after analysis, I will delete the recording. Your information will remain anonymous to protect your confidentiality.

Thank you again for your time today and for your willingness to participate. It was great catching up with you, and I appreciate your help with this study. Have a wonderful remainder of your day!

# Appendix B: Baker University IRB Request

BAKER UNIVERSITY

**IRB Request**

Date 06-24-2024

IRB Protocol Number _____
(IRB use only)

**I. Research Investigator(s)** (students must list faculty sponsor)

Department(s) School of Education, Graduate Department (IDPT)

| | Name | Signature | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Shawn A. Harrel | Shawn A. Harrel Digitally signed by Shawn A. Harrel Date: 2024.06.24 15:25:25 -05'00' | Principal Investigator |
| 2. | Dr. Wendy Gentry | Digitally signed by Wendy Gentry Date: 2024.06.24 15:46:48 -04'00' | ☑ Check if faculty sponsor |
| 3. | Dr. Kyunghwa Cho | Digitally signed by Kyunghwa Cho Date: 2024.06.24 15:19:15 -05'00' | ☐ Check if faculty sponsor |
| 4. | | | ☐ Check if faculty sponsor |

Principal investigator contact information

Phone 312-488-9673

Email ShawnAHarrel@stu.bakeru.edu

Address [redacted]

Note: When submitting your finalized, signed form to the IRB, please ensure that you cc all investigators and faculty sponsors using their official Baker University (or respective organization's) email addresses.

Faculty sponsor contact information

Phone [redacted]

Email

**Expected Category of Review**: ☐ Exempt ☑ Expedited ☐ Full ☐ Renewal

**II. Protocol Title**

Exploring the lived experiences of high school juniors and seniors in a career and technical-focused media production class: a study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

**III. Summary**:

The following questions must be answered. Be specific about exactly what participants will experience and about the protections that have been included to safeguard participants from harm.

A. In a sentence or two, please describe the background and purpose of the research.

Students entering the workforce or college after high school must acquire a unique and diverse skill set during their secondary education. This research aims to explore the impact of alternative grading techniques, specifically ungrading, on the development of durable skills such as creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking in secondary education students in a career and technical education (CTE) media production class.

B. Briefly describe each condition, manipulation, or archival data set to be included within the study.

This study will use an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand the lived experiences of study participants. No conditions, manipulations or archival data will be part of this study.

**IV. Protocol Details**

A. What measures or observations will be taken in the study? If any questionnaire or other instruments are used, provide a brief description and attach a copy.

The researcher will email potential participants a description of the study, participation qualifications, and a link to a Recruitment Questionnaire (see attached). The researcher will also share these details on social media (see attached Recruitment Communication). The questionnaire will allow potential participants to confirm their willingness and qualifications to participate. An Informed Consent Form (see attached) will be provided to eligible participants no more than two weeks after the initial communication or when ten eligible participants are identified. Data will be collected using a semi-structured interview via Zoom following an Interview Protocol (see attached).

B. Will the subjects encounter the risk of psychological, social, physical, or legal risk? If so, please describe the nature of the risk and any measures designed to mitigate that risk.

Subjects will not encounter any psychological, social, physical, or legal risks. Subjects may opt out of answering any questions and may withdraw at any time.

C. Will any stress to subjects be involved? If so, please describe.

No stress to the subjects is anticipated in this study.

D. Will the subjects be deceived or misled in any way? If so, include an outline or script of the debriefing.

There will be no deception or misleading in this study.

E. Will there be a request for information which subjects might consider to be personal or sensitive? If so, please include a description.

There will be no request for or discussion of personal or sensitive information. Study participants are free to decline to answer any question for any reason.

F. Will the subjects be presented with materials which might be considered to be offensive, threatening, or degrading? If so, please describe.

The subjects will not be presented with materials that might be considered offensive, threatening, or degrading.

G. Approximately how much time will be demanded of each subject?

The Recruitment Questionnaire (see attached) should take no more than five minutes to complete. Semi-structured interviews for this study (see attached Interview Protocol) will take approximately one hour.

H. Who will be the subjects in this study? How will they be solicited or contacted? Provide an outline or script of the information which will be provided to subjects prior to their volunteering to participate. Include a copy of any written solicitation as well as an outline of any oral solicitation.

The sample for this study will be participants who were former students in the researcher's CTE media production class. All study participants will be over 18 years old. Recruitment communication, both email and social media, is attached.

I. What steps will be taken to insure that each subject's participation is voluntary? What if any inducements will be offered to the subjects for their participation?

The Recruitment Questionnaire (see attached) asks potential participants to verify their decision to participate (by asking, "If selected, do you consent to participate in this research study?"), study participants will be asked to complete an Informed Consent Form (see attached), and verbal consent will be obtained during the semi-structured interviews. No inducements will be provided.

J. How will you insure that the subjects give their consent prior to participating? Will a written consent form be used? If so, include the form. If not, explain why not.

Subjects will be provided an Informed Consent Form (see attached) to be signed prior to participating in the study. Verbal consent is also included in the Interview Protocol (see attached).

K. Will any aspect of the data be made a part of any permanent record that can be identified with the subject? If so, please explain the necessity.

No data collected will be part of any permanent record that can be identified. Video recordings will be deleted after analysis. Subjects privacy will be protected by the removal of any personal information in the resulting reporting or publication of this research.

L. Will the fact that a subject did or did not participate in a specific experiment or study be made part of any permanent record available to a supervisor, teacher, or employer? If so, explain.

Subject participation will not be made part of any permanent record.

M. What steps will be taken to insure the confidentiality of the data? Where will it be stored? How long will it be stored? What will be done with the data after the study is completed?

The interviews will be transcribed and stored on a password-protected personal computer and will immediately removed from both at the conclusion of the study.

N. If there are any risks involved in the study, are there any offsetting benefits that might accrue to either the subjects or society?

There are no risks involved in the study or offsetting benefits that might accrue to the subjects or society.

O. Will any data from files or archival data be used? If so, please describe.

No data from files or archival data will be used in the study.

# Appendix C: Baker University IRB Approval

*Baker University Institutional Review Board*

July 2, 2024

Dear Shawn Harrel and Wendy Gentry,

The Baker University IRB has reviewed your project application and approved this project under Expedited Status Review. As described, the project complies with all the requirements and policies established by the University for protection of human subjects in research. Unless renewed, approval lapses one year after approval date.

Please be aware of the following:

1. Any significant change in the research protocol as described should be reviewed by this Committee prior to altering the project.
2. Notify the IRB about any new investigators not named in original application.
3. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents of the research activity.
4. If this is a funded project, keep a copy of this approval letter with your proposal/grant file.
5. If the results of the research are used to prepare papers for publication or oral presentation at professional conferences, manuscripts or abstracts are requested for IRB as part of the project record.
6. If this project is not completed within a year, you must renew IRB approval.

If you have any questions, please contact me at skimball@bakeru.edu or 785.594.4563.

Sincerely,

*Scott Kimball*, PhD
Chair, Baker University IRB

Baker University IRB Committee
Tim Buzzell, PhD
Steve Massey, EdD
Jiji Osiobe, PhD
Susan Rogers, PhD

## Appendix D: Recruitment Communication

**Email Communication**

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Research Study on Digital Media Technology Experience

Greetings,

I hope you're doing well! I am currently conducting a research study on the experiences of former creatives who participated in Digital Media Technology (DMT) between 2021-23.

As a former DMT creative, your insights are invaluable to understanding the impact of this experience on students' lives. I would like to invite you to participate in this study by sharing your experiences through a roughly one-hour Zoom interview.

I have prepared a brief questionnaire to confirm your eligibility and willingness to participate. The questionnaire will help us ensure that your experiences align with the focus of our study. Your responses will remain confidential and will only be used for research purposes.

Here is the link to the questionnaire: https://forms.gle/nc9144WxfGAQisLB8

The questionnaire consists of seven questions regarding your participation in DMT and your willingness to participate in an interview. Please take a few moments to complete the questionnaire at your earliest convenience.

Not all eligible participants will be selected. Should you be selected, your participation in this study will contribute to our understanding of the impact of DMT on students' post-secondary education and career pursuits in media technology-related

fields. Your insights will help inform future educational practices and curriculum development.

Thank you for considering this invitation! If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

**Social Media Copy**

I'm conducting research about the experience of former students in Digital Media Technology for my dissertation. If you were a DMT creative between 2021-2023, you're eligible for the study. Not all eligible participants will be selected, but those who are selected will be selected based primarily on scheduling availability for a one-hour Zoom interview.

If interested, please complete this brief questionnaire: https://forms.gle/nc9144WxfGAQisLB8

Thank you!

## Appendix E: Recruitment Questionnaire

# Digital Media Technology Research Recruitment Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire!

This questionnaire consists of six questions to confirm your eligibility and willingness to participate in a roughly one-hour Zoom interview discussing your experiences in the DMT class. Your responses will remain confidential and will only be used for research purposes.

Please answer the following questions honestly and to the best of your ability. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at shawnharrel@gmail.com

Thank you for your participation!

**shawnharrel@gmail.com** Switch account

Not shared

* Indicates required question

To ensure compliance with relevant requirements for human subject research, could you please verify that you are 18 years old or older? *

- ◯ Yes, I am 18 or older
- ◯ No, I am not yet 18

Were you a Digital Media Technology (DMT) student at [redacted] during 2021-2023? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Are you currently pursuing post-secondary education or working in a career in arts, audio/video technology, communications, or related industries? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Would you be willing to participate in an approximately one-hour Zoom interview discussing your experiences in the DMT class?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Please indicate your preferred availability for an interview during the month of June and July: *

Your answer

What is your preferred communication method for information related to this study? *

Your answer

*

By providing the above information and submitting this form, you confirm that you have read and understood the information provided about the study. If selected, do you consent to participate in this research study?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Submit Clear form

## Appendix F: Participant Research Interview Consent Form

Exploring the lived experiences of high school juniors and seniors in a career and technical-focused media production class: a study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

• I, _____, voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

• I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

• I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

• I understand that participation involves answering semi-structured interview questions involving experiences in Digital Media Technology.

• I understand I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

• I agree to have my interview recorded via Zoom software and that the recording will be deleted after the study concludes.

• I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name, assigning a numerical identifier, and eliminating personal data.

Researcher: Shawn A. Harrel, Doctorate Candidate at the School of Education, Baker University, ShawnAHarrel@stu.bakeru.edu

Advisor: Dr. Wendy Gentry, wendy.gentry@bakeru.edu

For questions, concerns, or comments, please contact the researcher at ShawnAHarrel@stu.bakeru.edu

*Signature of research participant:*

_____ _____

Signature of research participant Date

*Signature of researcher:*

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study.

_____ _____

Signature of researcher Date

## Appendix G: Personal Statement

Smith and Nizza (2022) suggest the researcher write a personal statement before beginning the research process. A personal statement allows the researcher to consider beliefs and understandings related to the research topic. This personal statement addresses how my learning experiences were shaped by grades and ungrading and how those experiences, in turn, shaped my teaching philosophy. Also, I will address my experience with creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking in learning.

### The Limitations of Traditional Grading in Creative Subjects

I spent most of my teaching career splitting my day between high school music and a CTE media production class for juniors and seniors. I've taught CTE media production full-time for the last eight years. As an educator in a creative subject matter, I have found that grades have a limited ability to convey student learning and even less ability to convey student potential. This holds true for students in my class and those who apply to participate in my class. It is common for students to enter their junior and senior years of high school with a passion for music or media production and little else offered at school. Not surprisingly, grade point averages vary widely depending on students' engagement across school subjects. Those students who know enough to play the game of school may look better on paper, as far as grades are concerned, while those who are less motivated by external factors – often deemed less compliant – might have lower grades overall.

The opening sentences of Clark and Soutter's (2023) research captured the sentiment succinctly:

> We celebrate artists who dare to innovate, leaders who challenge the status quo, and activists who have the courage to stand up for what they believe. In schools, we know how important it is for students to develop intellectual courage and to take intellectual risks in ways that are aligned with these kinds of visionaries. However, we also know that many school structures and teaching methods lie in opposition to these visions of success. (p. 24)

I believe, and it is the essence of Clark and Soutter's (2023) research, that grades are a primary factor in preventing schools from deeply fostering the characteristics society values in creatives, collaborators, and leaders. After much evolution during my 20 years of teaching, I have concluded that grades are of little value, especially in creative subjects.

**Personal Experience with Grades and Learning**

I was passionate about music as a secondary student. I knew I wanted to be involved in music education at that age. I did well enough in my other classes and, as a general rule, had a good sense of how to play the game of school. I understood that my grade in any assignment was often based less on my creative expression and more on how close I could match the teacher's expectations.

I recall many times during high school and college when I advocated for extra credit or sought opportunities to see my grade rounded up if it was close to the next letter grade. I offered to do additional work or resubmit work if I might get a higher grade. In short, I was often more focused on the final grade than the learning process.

In some subjects, I can vividly recall the satisfaction I felt upon completing a difficult test that I had studied for, earning a satisfactory or rewarding letter grade, and

feeling a great sense of relief that I wouldn't ever have to engage with that information again. I could forget it without penalty. Again, I was focused on the outcome rather than the learning.

**My Experience with Ungrading**

I had my only experience with true ungrading as an undergraduate in education. I made a special effort to switch from a different section of a class to the section with the professor who, according to what I had heard from others, "let you pick your grade." I didn't know the term ungrading at the time, and the professor didn't use the term. I didn't realize then that I would return to this teaching approach decades later.

I vividly recall my disbelief when the professor asked us to take out a piece of notebook paper, write our names at the top, and write the grade we would give ourselves for the class. This happened on the second day of the class. He said he didn't much care for grades and would "put those in the gradebook and not worry about it anymore." I looked around the classroom at the other students, sharing a similar sense of disbelief. I wondered if anyone would write anything other than "A." I admit to glancing at other papers when we passed them in. Not everyone listed an "A." Even then, I recognized challenges when implementing ungrading in higher education, particularly attendance. I made an effort to make sure my attendance was flawless as I understood the unique opportunity in front of me. That wasn't the case with some of my peers.

I embraced the learning in this class and have vivid memories of the experience, even though it was over 25 years ago. Our tests were based on class discussion on the unit topics. For accountability, we would write our names on a yellow legal pad when we contributed to the discussion, passing it to the next person who added to the discussion.

We spent a great deal of time learning about the variety of scenarios educators might encounter when educating children with disabilities. The professor's most significant lesson was clear: each situation we would experience in our professional careers would be unique. As such, we would be called upon to access various resources to solve the problems in front of us as educators.

While my experience with ungrading remained an oddity during my undergraduate and graduate school experience and the first decade and a half of my teaching experience, I would be remiss if I didn't pause to acknowledge that a dissertation is, by nature, ungraded. The process of writing a dissertation is focused exclusively on feedback and revision. There were so many times along this journey that I doubted my knowledge and understanding, but I never once had a grade assigned as a label to sort and rank my work on a five- or 100-point scale. I always had an opportunity to seek feedback and apply my knowledge to the next draft. I was able to focus on the process rather than the result. This process has allowed me to grow tremendously as a researcher and scholar.

**My Background Before Ungrading**

Even though it took me nearly 20 years in secondary education, I have adopted a teaching philosophy that aligns with ungrading. I believe, like Blum (2024), that I can't make students learn, that I can "only create conditions in which [students] want to learn, and then in which it is possible, even relatively easy, to learn" (p. 108). Educators often say that we prepare students for problems and careers we don't yet know or understand. There's no better way to do that than to focus on teaching students how to learn and *want* to learn. Students should have ample opportunities to set and achieve personal goals

related to the subject matter – regardless of what that subject is – with discussions and reflections during and after the ongoing learning process.

However, I must admit that I have not always embraced the concepts central to ungrading. Like many educators, I've clung to grades for any and all reasons one can imagine. I've given my fair share of zeros and automatic – often overly punitive – deductions for late work. Like so many skeptics of ungrading, clinging desperately to the last bit of control – or at least perceived control – I have over student motivation. I once thought, "If there are no grades, how are we supposed to get students to do the work?"

I have some of the same concerns now, but I recognize that the answers are more nuanced.

***Zeros***

I like to think I provided ample compassion and grace throughout my career. I would often drop the lowest score or two at the end of the semester, effectively erasing zeros for some and generally helping increase everyone's final grade. Now, my thoughts on zeros are a little more complicated. I have two thoughts in particular. My first is a reflective question: What exactly is it that I am assigning that students feel is so irrelevant that they don't complete the work? Perhaps the content needs to be reevaluated for its relevance.

My second thought is based on what I've witnessed as a parent. Just because a student doesn't turn in the work doesn't mean they didn't do some of it. Shame and embarrassment continue to be strong emotions in school. These emotions often keep students from submitting some of their work, asking clarifying questions, or calling attention to their struggles. Sometimes, it is just easier for them to take a zero. If there is

even a fraction of a chance that any student did some of the work that was not turned in, I can't give a zero to anyone in good conscience.

***Late Work***

I understand the value of deadlines and teaching students their importance, especially when preparing students for creative careers where it is common to work for clients or collaborate with others. That said, not every deadline has equal urgency, as is common in schools. Now, I'm flexible with many deadlines and encourage early and clear communication if an important deadline will be a challenge. Most of the projects that have hard deadlines also have a connection to something outside the class and school. How many school assignments have been submitted just before 11:59 PM on a Sunday, thanks to the automatic due date time assigned by the LMS, only to be viewed or graded Monday afternoon or, worse, later in the week? Turning in a school project on time is quite different from having a project completed before an event where the project will be shared publicly.

School projects are building blocks to growing competence for hitting deadlines outside of school. One of my student projects, which I proudly share with visitors to my class, was turned in late. Really late. But it's also good. Really good. This student wanted to keep working and was working at a level of detail unparalleled by others. I can't imagine teaching in an environment where it's impossible to let a passionate student – or stressed-out student, busy student, confused student, etc – have more time to complete the work when appropriate. Meanwhile, I recognize that I'm taking advantage of additional time to complete this dissertation.

### *Motivation*

Finally, when it comes to motivation, earlier in my career, I admit to wielding grades and points to get students to comply with course requirements – with *my* requirements. I still struggle with getting students to embrace work they may not understand or value. Now, I firmly believe that if a student feels forced to do something, the quality of the learning will probably suffer as a result. It's my job to demonstrate the work's importance and relevance and connect it to something that resonates with them.

Through self-determination theory, we know three things are needed to tap into intrinsic motivation: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. I was first introduced to these ideas in the popular leadership book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. Reading that book is like holding up a microscope to my motivation. I'm implored to create a learning environment that provides students with the same learning conditions I would want, as described by Pink (2009): autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Whether I use self-determination theory or the popularized version from Pink's (2009) book, I still end up with a classroom that provides student choice, with carefully aligned learning challenges and meaningful experiences in a supportive environment.

## My Journey to Ungrading

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the obvious. I teach an elective class. Students apply to participate. I admit to taking advantage of the unique experience of having a classroom full of students who generally want to be involved in the learning. This allows me to take risks as a teacher, which I can do for various reasons, not the least of which is my building leadership embraces innovation.

At the beginning of the 2019 school year, my school began a journey towards personalized competency-based learning (PCBL). Like any major shift in educational approach, this was designed to be a multi-year effort beginning with clearly defining course competencies and leading to supporting students in developing personalized plans within each class. Not surprisingly, some teachers embraced PCBL while others bristled. For me, it provided a framework to shift further than PCBL towards ungrading.

Ungrading in DMT began in part because of PCBL but was made more urgent by the COVID-19 pandemic. At about the same time, I was drawn to the book *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, edited by Susan D. Blum. Finally, my two sons were in high school, struggling to navigate a variety of compliance-focused grading systems across their classes. It may be an understatement to say it was a perfect storm that caused my shift away from traditional grading. I embraced alternative grading and do not plan to look back. Using a contract-based grading approach provided the most straightforward connection to the building-level goals of PCBL, but in reality, ungrading was what was happening under the surface.

**Ungrading in Digital Media Technology**

I am the only teacher in my district who teaches a CTE media production class. This gives me the flexibility to try new things and to build a syllabus that aligns with my teaching philosophy. Also, as noted by Stommel (2023), Blum (2024), and others, ungrading is often only possible when an educator has some degree of privilege. The privilege could be as a tenured professor or teacher who enjoys a certain amount of job security or, in my case, as a cisgender white male who may get the benefit of the doubt and institutional support when embarking on unusual teaching practices. I like to think I

established a level of professionalism and trust over my nearly 20-year career before ungrading. Still, I can't ignore the other factors that make alternative grading techniques possible in my teaching practice.

The ungrading approach used in DMT was adapted from the equity-focused grading contract described by Inoue (2019) and loosely aligned with PCBL. The contract-based grading approach used in DMT evolves slightly each year. The following is an example of the DMT grading contract for the year-long course, edited slightly for clarity and brevity:

A Grade (95%+)

- Meet expectations as described in the student handbook
- Complete a capstone project and full portfolio
- Complete a client-connected project
- Complete a DMT project and project for your sending school
- Submit a project to a competition
- Complete and log at least 12 hours of real-world work
- Demonstrate experience with all DMT skills

B Grade (85%+)

- Meet expectations as described in the STA Student Handbook
- Complete a capstone project and full portfolio
- Complete a client-connected project
- Complete a DMT project *or* project for your sending school
- Submit a project to a competition
- Complete and log at least 6 hours of real-world work
- Demonstrate experience with 85% of DMT skills

C Grade (75%+)

- Meet expectations as described in the STA Student Handbook
- Complete a capstone project and portfolio
- Create a project for a competition, complete a client-connected project, or complete a DMT or school project
- Demonstrate experience with 75% of DMT skills

In this contract, skills are the course competencies aligned to learning outcomes in audio/video production and post-production, storytelling, live events, equipment safety, professionalism, and portfolio work. There are considerable opportunities to experience DMT skills in a collaborative environment. Students can learn through hands-on experiences and a platform hosted outside the district learning management system to facilitate self-paced personalized learning. Finally, despite the details in this contract-based grading guide, grades are always determined by a conference with the student, which provides some flexibility within the contract-based approach.

## My Experience with Durable Skills

Smith and Nizza (2022) encourage the researcher to include a summary of answers to the interview questions as part of the personal statement. Since this research focuses on the durable skills of creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking, I'll address each in the following sections, summarizing the interview questions as I might have answered them about various learning experiences as a student.

### *Creativity*

One of my most creative projects had nothing to do with school assignments or grades. As an undergrad, I was a music education major. I enjoyed composing music, particularly jazz. I would eventually pursue a master's degree in jazz studies, but one of my most prolific and creative times as a composer happened not as part of school but as a passion project.

I composed several pieces of music in my junior year of college, not for an assignment but for fun. I did get to use one of the pieces as a class project, but that was because the professor was particularly generous and recognized the work I was doing

demonstrated skill in the course he was teaching. The end goal of this project was to record an album of my original music.

I coordinated a recording session at a local studio with a full jazz big band consisting of fellow students, professors, and professional musicians I knew from around the state. This recording session is easily one of my most significant projects, even decades later. Not considering the creativity that went into composing the music, I also had to carefully prepare it for printing, print and organize it, schedule the studio, book the musicians, organize and direct the band during the session, and so much more.

I find that I never work harder for something than when I'm passionate about it, it's an idea of my own, and I'm not beholden to anyone other than me throughout the process. The things I learned during this personal project ended up being the foundation upon which my master's degree was built.

The resulting recording session from this project became my portfolio for entrance into graduate school. If I'm honest, I probably would have done much worse at preparing a portfolio if I set out to create one. Instead, I made a project I was passionate about, and it became something I could proudly share.

Time and again during my educational process, I find my creativity somewhat stifled when I'm asked to create something for a class or as part of an assignment. It may be why I never set out to pursue a career as a composer but instead opted to pursue a career in education. Of course, I chose to teach for many reasons, but I knew then and continue to believe that I would rather keep my creative passions separate from my financial livelihood.

Another important aspect of this recording project is the creativity involved. Composing music is more often than not a lonely act, but performing music with a full big band of up to 20 players is the essence of collaboration.

***Collaboration***

Collaboration is essential for musicians, and it makes music fun, particularly in jazz settings. Shifting this personal statement to more traditional classes and topics, though, collaboration can be fun or unnecessarily stressful.

When I think about times when collaboration stressed me out, it was always when a final grade was involved. I was often worried about something I did that would have a negative impact on someone else. While thoughtful teachers try their best to ensure fair scores for group projects – think color-coded group writing projects, individually graded group presentations, and carefully designed group project rubrics – it's still difficult to work collaboratively when you know there's a grade involved. Graded team projects are difficult, as a teacher or a student, plain and simple.

My favorite group projects are ones where the team members can evaluate each other's skills and lean into individual expertise to get the job done. Even better is when group projects provide time to get to know other team members, collaborate, and learn from one another.

I'm reminded of a group project as part of the doctoral coursework where I invited my teammates to meet in person to produce videos for our project presentation. This project stands out in my memory as one of the more enjoyable projects of the degree, partially because it was a group project and partially because it was a unique

experience to meet with the whole team despite participating in an online Ed. D. program.

I got to dig deep into my unique skills while collaborating with others who got to emphasize their strong skills. I love the generosity that arises when a team member gets to call on a unique set of skills and put in a little extra effort for the team.

When teammates are grouped with me, they feel confident knowing I can help easily navigate media-related challenges and audio/video deliverables. When I work with others, I lean into their ability to plan, write, and work ahead of schedule in a way that sometimes challenges me. Another challenging aspect of education is learning to take risks.

***Risk-Taking***

So many factors influence the experience of taking risks, trying something new, or getting outside one's comfort zone. There are nerves, anxiety, embarrassment, and shame, to name a few. When it comes to risk-taking in education, to say I'm averse to it might be an understatement.

To me, there simply is no reward for taking a risk in a graded class among peers. When I think back to my school experience, the last thing I wanted to do in class was try something with a high likelihood of failure or even an unknown outcome. Setbacks or failures that arise as part of the normal work process through a project are not as bad.

When I think of the project that has had the most setbacks and is perhaps most outside my comfort zone, I can't help but think about this dissertation. The biggest challenge about the dissertation process is not having a sense of what the work is supposed to look like until it's already happened. While there's nothing easy about a

dissertation, I feel like other people have made it through the process with fewer failures, setbacks, and risk-taking. This is the nature of comfort zones and risk-taking. It's most unsettling when one begins to compare oneself to others.

I'm wondering if I'll ever be able to shake the feeling that this process has taken me longer than it was supposed to. I'm at the home stretch of the pinnacle degree in my field, and I still have a sense of self-doubt about the failures and setbacks I've experienced. Ultimately, I know it won't matter once I'm done, but I think back to my experience as a student and wonder if this reluctance to take risks and experience failure is something that I've always struggled with.

These experiences with creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking have helped shape me as a student and, more importantly, helped shape my teaching philosophy and this research study.

**The Data and Next Steps**

As I embarked on the doctoral program in Instructional Design and Performance Technology at Baker University, I had one end goal: to be the best educator I could be. I've come full circle with the research in this dissertation. My goal with this research is to find out about students' lived experiences in my class to help me improve the class in years to come. While challenges are inherent when the researcher is this close to the experience of the research subjects, it's necessary in this case to facilitate detailed and in-depth conversations about the experience.

Each former student who participated in this study built a relationship with me as their teacher for one or two years in a half-day media production course at a secondary CTE-based high school. Due to my focus on a collaborative classroom environment, I

hope students feel comfortable sharing honest opinions about their experiences with me. Creating a collaborative class culture was central to the teaching and learning they experienced in my class. I recognize at the outset and embrace that some of the themes arising from this research may be less relevant across a broader population. I am eager to take the findings of this research and work them into improved teaching practice for myself and future creatives.

## Appendix H: Personal Experiential Themes by Participant

PETs for Charlee

### A. CREATIVITY THROUGH COLLABORATION

**Sought out collaborations and partnerships**

*"I wanted to make friends with people that were also interested in the same things I was interested in and wanting to be able to collaborate with other like-minded young professionals."*

**Developed skills in a wide range of topics**

*"So television commercials, podcasts, music videos, short films, PSAs, EP album recordings, producing audio and video related projects for...clients."*

*"Lighting. That was such an experiment. And I loved it."*

**Experienced creative flow**

*"I think what made me the most creative there, when I tried to make a plan about it, it didn't flow as well...when I turn my mind off and let it just kind of move. It ended up being pretty cool."*

### B. THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATION IN CREATIVE WORK

**Creative Inspiration Through Peers**

*"I don't know if I could have been creative and completely imaginative on my own. I think it was the people around me...that allowed me to be creative and innovative."*

**Interdisciplinary experience in and out of class**

*"Working outside, collaborating with people from other departments outside of hours, I felt like I was choosing to do that. No one was forcing me to do that."*

*"It's such a diverse environment of people. Everyone has a different skillset."*

### C. LEARNING AND GROWTH THROUGH CHALLENGES

**Importance of seeking help**

*"I think on collaborative projects, if you have a setback or a challenge, you shouldn't be afraid to ask for help."*

**Thriving in the unknown**

*"I think when trying something out of my comfort zone at HI, a lot of times I found that I liked it. And it taught me a lot about entertainment, about myself."*

## D. PROFESSIONAL PREPAREDNESS AND ADAPTABILITY

### Similar professional structure to college

*"[College] is very similar in the sense that I can go in, use the console, things like that. And I really admired that about HI was our ability to just check out a camera, check out a laptop, go make a project. And it didn't feel like I cared about grades."*

### Professional adaptability for college and career success

*"I still want to collaborate with these people, but my artistry skillset is not what theirs is at all. So how can I adapt my skillset to be able to collaborate with these people?"*

PETs for Jackson

**A. FREEDOM AND EXPLORATION**

**Brought personal ideas and projects into class**

*"I just remember if I had an idea or something or I was doing something outside of class, I'd bring it to you or something. We'd find a way to make it work for the course."*

**Explored a wide range of skills**

*"You have the editing side, you've got like the storytelling side, you've got all these different aspects and pieces...I feel like after the first year, I was like, 'Oh, I want to learn more about this.' So I came back again."*

*"I think it's great to be exposed to all those different things. And then you might find yourself liking something that you didn't know, you know, going into it that you would enjoy."*

**Learned through trial and error**

*"There's definitely those things that I'm just learning, you can't really necessarily prepare for until they come, you just kind of have to adapt."*

*"I feel like there was a lot of trial and error, which I think is huge. Because like, for me personally, I didn't learn editing without failing."*

**B. ENJOYED WORKING IN A COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT**

**Highly values collaboration**

*"I feel like collaborating is one of the biggest things you can do as a creative. I think it's, in my opinion, there's really no debate. I think it's just one of those things that just it's needed."*

*"I think collaboration is huge."*

**Appreciated working with peers with different skills**

*"We kind of helped others with their projects too. So I remember one of, I think it was Alex, made a really great short. It was awesome."*

*"...knowing that everybody had kind of their own little niche…their own thing they were good at."*

*"I feel like especially at [DMT], specifically, that was one of the biggest things for me. It was just being able to work with other people."*

**C. FELT ENCOURAGED TO TAKE RISKS**

**Found learning opportunities from challenges**

*"...just being able to try new things without feeling the pressure of like, if I fail, then it's not the end of the world."*

*"...just being able to kind of take little points and just kind of build off them."*

**Learned through collaboration**

*"I had to ask around, like, how do you do this? Any pointers and how to learn this?"*

*"A couple other students that came back for that second year and just kind of seeing how they improved in a year and how we were able to collaborate and help each other and work on projects was, it was great."*

**D. HANDS-ON LEARNING**

**Felt extremely prepared for college and employment**

*"I was like, I am essentially doing over Horizon Institute right now. Like, everything we had done that first year, I think we covered in just a few months at HI."*

*"I feel like those places where you can get hands on experience are some of the best teachers, at least for people like me to that are hands on people."*

**Experienced a wide range of skills**

*"I love that it wasn't just like generalized to one thing. I was kind of going into it thinking, 'Oh, it's going to be mainly video production,' but it was kind of everything, which I really liked."*

PETs for Harper

**A. FREEDOM TO DEVELOP CREATIVE CONFIDENCE**

**Grew from starting with no prior knowledge**

*"I walked into this thinking that it was just gonna be fun. I was like, okay, why not try it?"*

*"I did walk into the studio not knowing how to turn on a Mac. I literally turned to Alex the first day and I said 'Dude, how do you turn this thing on?'"*

**Developed confidence through effort-based grading**

*"It's art at the end of the day. So, I mean, it's not like you can really give it a fair grade."*

*"I didn't know how to work equipment that much. I was always asking other people how to do it, but when it came to like writing things...I feel like I had a pretty good eye for that."*

**Appreciated opportunities for creative liberty**

*"[My short film] is still on my portfolio, because I still like that short film. I'm still very proud of that short film."*

*"We wanted to make something sad because we had done happy go lucky stuff the whole entire semester. We're like, okay, let's just try our hand at doing something sad."*

**B. FELT SAFE AND SUPPORTED IN A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

**Learning from peers without negative feelings**

*"I never had an issue with anyone bullying me because I didn't know how to do something. I feel like everyone was also like learning, but everyone might've had just maybe a minor step up from me because I literally didn't know how to do anything."*

**Experienced the importance of communication and teamwork**

*"You will work with other people in the film world, you always will unless you're independent. But you can't do it on your own."*

**C. FELT ENCOURAGED TO TAKE RISKS**

**Grew through initial uncertainty**

*"I think music I've learned very quickly that music is not my thing. And I'm okay with that. I've accepted that. I'm better at other things."*

**Developed resilience and adaptability**

*"I thought making a music video would be super fun. So, we did try that. And then I realized that I don't, totally don't want to do that ever again."*

*"We're so excited to make this, like, it's going to be so great. And even though like, you know, you learn and it wasn't like the best, like you still take that and apply it to the next thing."*

**D. ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR COLLEGE AND PROFESSIONAL WORK**

**Progressed from beginner to emerging professional**

*"Everything is, like, building blocks."*

*"I've been doing a lot of media work and television work...for the football games."*

**Gained independent thinking and problem-solving abilities**

*"I learned how to make sure scheduling goes fine and the days and who's going to be on your set and who's going to be where. And that kind of set me to think, you know, I think I could do this with enough planning."*

PETs for Luka

**A. FREEDOM TO EXPLORE CREATIVITY**

**Fostered a passion for creative projects**

*"That was like the most fun I've ever had working on anything. I love doing that. And even though it was definitely, it could have been better."*

**Explored unique interests**

*"I was kind of like in charge of choreographing the fight scenes for the movie, the short film we did."*

**Showcased learned concepts freely**

*"I definitely excel in creative situations, and being graded on how well I'm showcasing these concepts that we learned was really good to hear that that was how it was going to go."*

**B. CHERISHED THE COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCES**

**Learned respect and teamwork**

*"I think we just, like, perfectly all fit together, even though all of us were kind of different in various ways, but our ideas were very similar."*

*"So, yeah, that was definitely very, very group intensive because if one person wasn't there, I mean, it's kind of hard to do the whole thing because we all were holding it together."*

**Loved the creative experiences in collaboration**

*"The only way to make things that are really going to stand out. I feel as if it's a group of people working together."*

*"I mean, it always has to be a team. And yeah, my experience, my group was great and I cherish every moment we all had."*

**C. OVERCAME CHALLENGES AND ENJOYED DEMONSTRATING SKILLS**

**Embraced new challenges**

*"I didn't even realize [Foley] was a common thing really. Or just like voiceovers for scenes that the audio was messed up in or stuff like that. I'd never done that before or realize that that was a thing that happens often."*

**Learned resilience and problem-solving**

*"The next time that you just have to think about next time, really like there will usually be a next time, and you just have to look forward to that silver lining."*

*"I learned the most about myself through [creative projects] and the most about like, what I'm good at, what I'm not good at in that aspect of things."*

**D. DEVELOPED A PASSION FOR A CAREER IN MEDIA**

**Recognized value in a wide range of skills**

*"I feel like most like production companies, I guess, like, aren't going to hire someone for just like a specific, like, I only know how to operate cameras."*

*"I can do cameras and...I could do audio and it's like, oh yeah, well here you have the job."*

**Gained confidence in career pursuit**

*"I just took a class last semester that was called intro to digital media. And I was like,*

*'Oh, this is going to be so easy.' And it was."*

*"My life would be so much different if I did not take that class. Like I have no clue what I would have been doing."*

PETs for Eric

## A. FREEDOM TO PURSUE INTERESTS AND NEW SKILLS

### Developed skills through exploration

*"I really wanted to get into the studio and just really try to learn how the Trident works so that I could feel comfortable that if I needed to walk in there and just set up a few mics, I could do that or set up a Logic project, I could do that. And even if I'm not the greatest at it, I could at least be somewhat able to look at it and be like, "This is what the steps I need to take to be able to set it up.'"*

### Engaged in creative projects beyond the curriculum

*"I think that shows how much people want to learn and want to participate in those projects. To be able to get a lot of things out of it, you give your time to those people, you give your energy, but you get a lot of skills out of it, you get a lot of experience out of it that we can't get just from sitting in that class and doing all that stuff, you get that real world experience."*

## B. LEARNING FROM PEERS

### Grew creatively through informal peer feedback

*"I'm not a great audio person and I can go to Nick and be like, 'Hey, Nick, can you help me with Logic?'"*

*"The amount of times I've been working on a project and somebody walks over and says, 'Hey you should maybe try this,' and I put it in there and it makes the project so much better."*

### Developed leadership and teamwork skills

*"Sometimes maybe I was the person that needed to kind of lead the group to where it needed to go."*

*"I felt like me my junior year I kind of was the person who wanted to step back a little bit and let other people kind of take the role. But, then as a senior, I felt a little more confident trying to be the person that was going to like try to push the group to where I think the project should go."*

## C. EMBRACED CHALLENGES

### Found that open-ended projects fostered willingness to take risks

*"I felt like instead of trying to, like, force people to do certain things, it was way more like of an open book."*

*"I always knew that as long as I try my best on it and I really work to try to do what I know I can, that I'll get the grade that I want."*

**Valued learning from failures and adapting projects**

*"Just trying to learn from each project to project and trying to take old things from previous projects and try to reinvent them in new projects is always something I try to do."*

**Took on projects outside comfort zone to grow and gain confidence**

*"I had never made a music video before, never attempted it, never really wanted to 'cause I wasn't a music person. And then I got there and I was like, I'm going to try to make a music video. Um, and I wouldn't say it went the greatest...I definitely learned from that and learned I need to do way more storyboarding."*

**D. PREPARING FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER**

**Showcased projects and skills for future success**

*"You build a portfolio and having that portfolio I can send to different people, like, I feel like one of the big reasons I got the internship."*

**Adapted to different skill levels and continued learning in diverse environments**

*"I feel like once the final product kind of comes out you always feel like you were able to put your skills to the max they could and even if you couldn't put them to the max you thought you could always get better."*

**Learned to take constructive feedback**

*"I'm always trying to take feedback because it's a real environment. Like there's real people we're sending these pictures to."*

*"It's better to take the time to get the perfect shot than getting a mediocre one and the client being mad at you. Um, we'd rather them be mad at us at the shoot than mad at us later for their picture being bad because we're taking too long."*

PETs for Nia

**A. FREEDOM TO CREATE**

**Focused on growing and improving without worrying about grades**

*"I kind of wasn't worried about like, 'Oh, I think I'm going to do terrible in this class.' I was just showing up and ready to do a project."*

*"I focused a lot more on creative projects than any other thing in school. Like, I think definitely my senior year I put everything aside and just focused more on digital media so I could grow in that space."*

**Pursued creative projects collaboratively**

*"But this time I got to work with other people that understood what I'm saying and understood, like, my visions and my goals."*

*"I would definitely say it was a breath of fresh air 'cause then I realized, 'Oh, I don't have to do this all by myself.'"*

**Drew creative motivation from personal experiences**

*"If I see a story that I think needs to be told, that kicks into gear, like, my creative thinking."*

*"But when I get the space to just have fun... like when I just get the space to have fun and be creative and see a story that's like, 'Oh, that hasn't been told,' or, 'Oh, that's really cool,' or 'That's something that people should know about.' Then I'm full on."*

**B. FOUND VALUE IN COLLABORATING WITH LIKE-MINDED CREATIVES**

**Pursued creative projects with others, building unique bonds**

*"Every time we want to do a film idea, it's me and Annie, it's not just me. And it's like, it's nice to know that I can write something and Annie can edit it and we can both shoot it together. And we can both like get actors that actually understand what's going on when we're shooting stuff, like everything about it, it just feels way calmer and it makes me love being creative even more when there's other people around."*

**Engaged in unique outside-of-class collaborations**

*"But the [musical] project was more collaborative 'cause I was helping with the graphics. I think we were more collaborative on how everything was going to look and everything. So yeah, that one was a pretty good one, especially 'cause I had to be messaging them and I didn't even see them."*

## C. FELT ENCOURAGED TO TAKE RISKS AND DEVELOP AUTONOMY

### Tried new things to foster adaptability

*"I'm like, I need to get my project done. But once I got to sit down and think about something that I really wanted to do, I changed my whole idea...I changed my whole idea and that one did a lot better than the last one."*

*"So this was my first chance to really learn the techniques and learn the words. I didn't know any film terminology. I didn't know anything. So I was just, like, wanting to get those technical pieces out of Digital Media."*

### Setbacks as opportunities

*"So it might be a little heartbreaking, but at the end of the day, if a project got done and sometimes I come up with a new idea that may be better than the last one. And when I come up with that new idea, then I'm way more excited."*

*" I do feel defeated. 'Cause, like, if something doesn't go as I planned it in my head, I do feel a little irritated...I'm going to have to step back out of that for a minute and find a solution."*

## D. FELT PREPARED FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER

### Developed passion and autonomy for media work

*"It didn't feel like a job, but it kind of felt like a hobby. Like, if I got paid, but I didn't get paid...It felt like freelance. I don't know how to explain it...I chose to put myself in and not something that I had to do, but I did enjoy it. So it didn't like bear down on me at all. The weight of the work."*

### Developed professional skills

*"I think the camera techniques have helped me a lot, too, in my internship."*

*"There's just a whole bunch of things I put on my resume that were definitely from Digital Media to show my skills. And I feel like I would probably know so much less."*

*"It's kind of unheard of for a sophomore to be an intern at a news station, like, that's not normal."*

PETs for Paige

**A. FREEDOM TO EXPLORE AND CREATE**

**Focused on developing skills and new interests**

*"Coming into Digital Media, that was mainly my goal, just to try to get better at the skills that I had started at [high school] and just have more of a free space to practice those skills."*

*"I like to try at least one small thing new every time I do a project."*

**Exposure to new skills enhanced creativity**

*"We were taught so many different ways to be creative, like on the video side and on the audio side, and then how to put those two things together. And at times, I was kind of forced to do things I wouldn't regularly choose to do. When it came to the trailers or more sound-oriented things, I kind of had to do that stuff, but it wasn't in a way where I felt negatively forced."*

*"I think that the project I felt the most creative for me was the trailer video – things where we're sound designing, purely because sound is a space that I was not very comfortable or familiar with."*

*"I think that's where I felt the most creative, just because it was the most unknown to me."*

**Experienced new creative freedom**

*"It was very much like, 'Here's the project, do what you want within the confines of this project.' It's not necessarily like, 'Here's a project, here's exactly what you need to do for this project. And there's a right and wrong.' It felt very open-ended."*

*"It was at Digital Media where I felt safe enough and supported enough to practice those things that I would implement at [high school]."*

**B. LEARNING THROUGH OPEN COLLABORATION**

**Exchange of knowledge with peers**

*"So you have the time to think, you have the time to communicate, have the time to really listen to each other's ideas and find different ways to implement them, because you just have that time. So yeah, overall, I just felt really – build on top of things."*

*"And just, like, the idea that, I could say or do something that would help someone understand something was just, like, a really fun experience."*

*"In Digital Media, with the people above us – they were very helpful. They're like, 'Oh, yeah, I went through that. Let me show you what I learned.'"*

**Developed ideas together through teamwork and collaboration**

*"It felt very open-ended. It felt very collaborative in a way that I wasn't necessarily used to."*

*"This kind of creative realm as a whole, is inherently a collaborative space. It's very hard for you to get through, in my opinion, this kind of line of work without creating those natural bonds, creating those natural mentorships, especially because everyone is doing very similar things. But you can bring something different to the table than what I can bring."*

**C. FELT ENCOURAGED TO TAKE RISKS**

**Safe space for experimentation and occasional failure**

*"I felt like it was okay to make a mistake because I had the time to really look at it and then re-evaluate and then try it again when the time was right."*

*"I think it's because I don't really necessarily think of specifically the creative space as a positive or negative, because even if something is bad, I can learn from it and turn it into a positive."*

**Stepped outside her comfort zone and embraced challenges**

*"When it came to audio, I was like, you know, Digital Media is not just video. There's a large part of it that is audio and the things that we hear. And that also goes with filmmaking, like filmmaking is as much sound as it is video. So I really wanted to expand my horizons and be able to do for other people what I would ask them to do for me"*

**Explored new areas of media technology**

*"So whenever we got into that project and we were just playing around with the different sounds and just seeing beat mapping and all that kind of stuff, I think that's where I felt the most creative, just because it was the most unknown to me."*

*"I remember with the soundboard, that thing terrified me. And, like, I remember for one project, I set it up one singular time, and I was like, 'That's it. Give me my medal. I did it!'"*

**D. DEVELOPED PROFESSIONAL SKILLS**

**Felt treated as a professional, preparing for a career in film**

*"I think just – not just the creative freedom in Digital Media, but the physical freedom...Let's go upstairs to one of the spaces up there. Like, just the feeling that we're adults...in Digital Media, you trust us. If you're going to leave this space, you're going to keep doing your work."*

*"It gave me the space to kind of be more of an independent thinker and a problem solver, like, 'This is the end goal, this is what we're starting with, how do we get from point A to point B?' And I think that that was very helpful, especially, again, because in the film industry, or in the creative space, there's really not a right and wrong way to do something, there's just the end product, really."*

**Valued real-world projects**

*"I feel like every time we were doing something...it was building up to something bigger that would extend beyond the classroom."*

*"Whenever we did client projects, that really prepared me for how to talk to actual people who don't know the ins and outs of what we do... having that experience through Digital Media, like a safe space for me to try and maybe fail sometimes, really benefited me."*

PETs for Taylor

## A. EXPERIENCED CREATIVE FREEDOM WITH STRUCTURE

### Balanced structure and flexibility, allowing for creative exploration

*"I mean, since day one, you just kind of gave us creative freedom to kind of do what we want. There was still structure to it. But for the most part, you would kind of let us choose our specialty and help others and just allow us to express our creativeness in pretty much every project that we did."*

### Collaborative creativity enhanced by a supportive group environment

*"I think I realized that when we would be on projects together, even if we weren't working on projects together, I think having Sarah and Charlee say, 'Hey, Taylor, come over here. When you get a chance, can I get your opinion on that?'"*

*" I think it, it took, it takes a team to make a project like that, no matter how big, no matter how small, it takes more than one person. And I think having a supportive class like that really helped us make these projects, whether they turned out good or not, it took a team."*

## B. VALUED CREATIVE COLLABORATION

### Recognized collaboration as integral

*"Having a good group of people around you definitely help keep that [creative] mindset."*

*"Digital Media is just simply collaborating with people. I mean, there's no Digital Media without collaborating."*

*"But sometimes, you know, we got stuck and we couldn't think outside the box. So we had others to kind of help us and give us their ideas."*

### Valued informal collaboration

*"It was so fun to help my friends in their final projects and allow me to express my creative passions and stuff, but also obviously their structure because we're helping them with their project. So it was just nice to have them give me feedback, have them tell me like, 'Hey, I trust you do whatever you feel is right here.' And I think that was really fun to not only grow our friendships, but put our skills to work that we worked so hard on over the year."*

*"I think the final projects involved the whole class. We would get thoughts and opinions from our classmates."*

## C. VALUED SAFE SPACE FOR RISK-TAKING

### Embraced the opportunity to take risks and try new things

*"I think that class often encouraged creative problem solving, thinking, I mean, Digital Media is thinking outside the box, how can we do this better?...And I think this creativity kind of...helped me develop unique styles and ideas, because we were forced to think outside the box in Digital Media."*

*"Digital Media provided an environment where it's safe to experiment. It's safe to experiment with new ideas, new techniques, without the fear of failure...This freedom allowed us to kind of push our creative boundaries and discover our unique style and passion."*

### Recognized failure as a growth opportunity

*"And sometimes, it is scary to take a risk and fail. That's life. It happens. But I think Digital Media helped us with problem solving and creative thinking to help us get right back on our feet."*

*"I think it's good to embrace failure. I think that's what ultimately grows us. And embracing the possibility of failure and viewing it as a learning opportunity, as we all have heard in life. It can be empowering, honestly."*

### Experienced and provided support

*"Sometimes you just have to be in your feels and take your time. And then one morning, you'll just kind of wake up and be like, you know what, it's okay. Life is hard enough. You cannot be hard on yourself. And also it just helps to have supportive people."*

*"I know some people would just get down on themselves. And I'd be like, 'It's okay that you don't have an idea right now. Just give yourself time.' And then maybe I could help them get through that."*

## D. VALUED HANDS-ON LEARNING

### Gained practical skills for freelance and college work

*"I mean, Digital Media taught us everything, technical skills, project management, communication, attention to detail, adaptability. And I think that was something that I would have had to learn on my own and that would have been scary."*

*"We were on projects with different companies, things like that. As 17, 18-year-olds, it was kind of daunting to send a professional email to this company. So I think it really prepared us for the real world as far as like collaborating with not only people in our class, but communicating our ideas to real world people out there."*

**Developed resilience and grew professional confidence**

*"I think even if I enter a space that I don't feel is the most welcoming or that would kind of encourage my failures, I'm more open to stepping into that space, even if it's not as positive as Digital Media was, just because I know it's going to be OK and I know that failing is OK."*

PETs for Sam

## A. FREEDOM TO EXPLORE AND CREATE

### Experienced memorable creative freedom without pressure

*"It felt really creative because we literally went into depth on most things I had not done prior, which was, I got to do most of the camera work I was excited for, we got to mess around with a drone, which was interesting because we had never done that before. We went costume shopping for the first time that year, so that was different. It's just, we got to all jump on the project in different ways and say, 'This sounds fun. Let's do this.' And that kind of just blossomed into a really fun project that we all three really enjoyed and still joke about to this day."*

### Gained confidence to try new things and created projects with pride

*"There's a lot of resources that I have available. And I kind of just went in with the mindset of, I'm going to do whatever I can as much as I can until the end of the year. And the second year when I went back, I was basically just like, okay, now that I have these skills, I want to make a project I'm proud of by the end of the year."*

### Valued the professional and creative space

*"We also had our own little space where we were locked in on specifically, 'What do we need to do? When do we need to do it? What equipment do we need?' And it kind of helped us become more efficient, especially second year, where we found our spots in the room where there was a lot less noise, and we could just discuss purely what was going on."*

## B. VALUED CREATIVITY AND COMPROMISE IN GROUP PROJECTS

### Recognized the importance of collaboration for creativity in the film industry

*"I could not be as creative without other people around me. It's not possible, especially in the film industry specifically. I feel like there's a lot of times where you're locked into one mindset. And if someone doesn't bring something else up, you're never going to change that mindset. Especially when it comes to filmmaking, you need a lot of people on team."*

### Grew by overcoming team challenges

*"...our group initially could not agree upon what we wanted to do. And one person disagreed with us, three people unanimously were like, 'We kind of want to lean this way.' And we had to compromise, which I agree is a really good skill to have, and I'm glad we went through that because it would not have, I would not have been the same. But at the same time, that was probably the hardest project for me to complete because we disagreed for a longer time than we should have."*

*"...you have to meet the person, understand their mindset and then change accordingly. You can't just disagree with them and say, I'm going to do it this way. You're never going to finish a project."*

**C. FELT ENCOURAGED TO TAKE RISKS**

**Motivated to try new things**

*"My first year I had not messed with the soundboard a lot. And when it came down to, we needed to do something audio, video, everything for the capstone, I had to go out of my comfort zone to learn it because I wanted it to be a project that had everything in it."*

**Appreciated the opportunity to experiment**

*"In Digital Media, you have maybe these key things you need to hit, like mess with the exposure triangle, use this piece of tech, other than that, go wild. And that created very different mentalities to where I was excited for Digital Media."*

**Recognized that making mistakes was part of the learning process**

*"It didn't turn out the way that anyone wanted to because we didn't plan it enough. And the [location] was very, like, awkwardly placed in the building. But there was a lot of collaboration in that group because it was so large. There was a lot of different mentalities and a lot of different ideas and a lot of people wanted to do different things. And we couldn't have even produced the project in general, regardless of whether or not it had turned out. We could not have done it without sitting down and at least trying to plan something because of just everyone's different mentalities and the way they work."*

**D. GAINED ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER**

**Developed and grew foundational skills**

*"I said, 'Let's start earlier because trust me, it will be crunch time later.' And that helped tremendously. We spread out our project across over a month and it turned out to be one of my favorite and best projects I've worked on because I was ready for it."*

**Valued real-world projects**

*"It felt more like an opportunity. The comfort zone kind of changed there in that the second year I felt a lot more comfortable with my skills so I could go out outside of school and say, 'Okay, I have these skills. What can I offer you that you would like to be proud of?' And then you can show other people."*

PETs for Steffani

**A. FREEDOM TO EXPLORE AND CREATE**

**Drew inspiration and motivation from collaborative work with peers**

*"I find a lot of inspiration in my day-to-day life, especially, like, from my friends and the people who are in my life as well as just, like, the world surrounding me, like, nature."*

*"I think with like, that less structured grading path, there's a lot more room for creativity. And there's a lot more room for building relationships and building soft skills."*

**Appreciated opportunity for personal projects on important issues**

*"I think probably being allowed that more freedom to make more mature, creative decisions, if that makes sense. Like ,if you're struggling with mental health, you're able to express that in a film and then add in something, like, to help others to get help, like, add the suicide hotline at the end or whatever."*

*"Most of the projects in school had super strict deadlines, or not deadlines, guidelines. And it was harder to express the things that I wanted to express through those types of projects just because it wasn't always what I wanted to do."*

**Expressed creativity through various mediums like music and film**

*"It helped us to – it helped me to learn how to express my words better, just express everything I was feeling a lot better...And it was so much more creative in a way that, with the medium, whatever, because you can use music or film or whatever you wanted, really."*

**B. VALUED THE COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT**

**Developed collaborative skills by working with others and sharing knowledge**

*"I never felt like I had to do most of the work. And if I did, it was because people were trying to learn from me. And I didn't really mind that. But, like, working on camera movement projects, we all took turns. Like, with the crane, we all took turns with the glider, learning how to use it, learning how to set it up. And we all worked together to, like, figure out how to do it best and, like, show what we wanted to show with the camera movement."*

**Emphasized the importance of compromise**

*"I think just – you kind of have to just work through those problems and, like, I think get to a point where maybe you don't like each other, but you still are very civil with each other and you still work really well together."*

*"So in a creative field, there's sometimes where you won't necessarily see eye to eye with another person. But learning how to work through those differences…you know, meet in the middle."*

**Appreciated the supportive community**

*"We were creating these things, these projects, and there was something – we needed an actor for it. And we, like, asked the class and like multiple people were so willing to help...it's just really nice to like see people helping out and seeing these people so willing to help everyone succeed because in the end, we're all trying to make something great and everyone wants to be a part of that."*

**C. FELT ENCOURAGED TO TAKE RISKS**

**Found trying new things exciting rather than anxiety-inducing**

*"I think learning how to use Logic for the first time, recording, like, my own jazz song for my capstone project was super intimidating. But it was, it was really cool to learn how to do such a unique skill. And just feeling more prepared for my job with that, or for any job that I go into in the creative field, just knowing how to work a recording board, learning how to use mics correctly, and doing all of that was so exhilarating."*

*"With Digital Media, I never really felt that way. Like, obviously, I felt intimidation, but I didn't feel like so much anxiety around it. It was more like excitement versus anxiety with traditional school."*

**Valued making mistakes and learning from them**

*"And even if it turns out not great, then I at least you tried."*

*"I don't know. It just feels good to be, like, in an environment where it's safe to make something that's not great, but you're still proud of it because you put in effort, and it comes out with something that is cool."*

**D. DEVELOPED VALUABLE SKILLS AND CONNECTIONS**

**Valued connections and relationships**

*"I met some of my best friends in that class. And it's like, it's just hard to imagine life without them, without like film and everything in it, because it's just all been so impactful for me. Like, I just, I feel like I wouldn't have a personality without it. That might be an exaggeration, but it's okay."*

*"But those relationships that you make with people, the connections, learning how to build like networking and everything is just incredible. And it's like, you find the people who think like you. And it's just you help each other out. And it's such a collaborative thing. I'm trying to think how to word this. A lot of the time, going into creative fields, you know that you're going to have a lot of egos and everything. But actually being there and seeing how willing people are to help you with things or how willing you are to help other people with things. It's just, I think, a really positive environment. "*

**Developed important skills on real-world projects**

*"...having clashing ideas with the client is something that is just incredibly hard to work through, because you know one thing will be better, but you also want to be able to, like, execute the client's vision. So working through that is just particularly frustrating, but I think it's really helpful to learn how to do that young."*