Bonni Stachowiak [00:00:01]:
Today, on this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed, we're doing something different. Emily Pitts Donahoe, an associate director of instructional support at the center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and Lecture in Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Mississippi, has joined me to set up and then listen to and reflect on a conversation that I got to have a few months back with our daughter. I'm so grateful to Emily for joining me for this experimentation. Production Credit: Produced by Innovate Learning, Maximizing human potential. Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm Bonni Stachowiak, and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to improve our productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students. Emily Donahoe, welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:01:16]:
Thanks so much, Bonnie. I'm really excited to be here with you.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:01:19]:
Allow me to thank you right up front for experimenting with me. We are doing something that has not been done prior on teaching in Higher ed, but you've allowed yourself to get creative with me. Before we embark on our little adventure today, I know that myself and many listeners will benefit from a little bit of a refresher. Would you give us a little refresher on the grading for Growth framework from Robert Talbert and David David Clark?

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:01:55]:
Yes, absolutely. So Robert Talbert and David Clark wrote a book a couple of years ago called Grading for Growth. And that book, one of the things they did in the early chapter was they introduced a framework that attempts to identify the common features of alternative grading systems, or what they call kind of grading for growth systems that are meant to prioritize student growth and student learning over just kind of grades and performance. And so I think their framework isn't the only way to think about alternative grading, but it's one really

good way to think about it. And when I listened to the conversation that you were so gracious to share with me, one of the things that stuck out to me is how that conversation had a lot of things to say about the four pillars of alternative grading or grading for growth that Robert and David identified. And those four pillars are marks that indicate progress, reattempts without penalty, clearly defined standards, and helpful feedback. I think those are maybe in a slightly different order than they introduce them in the book, but that's the order that we are going to talk about them. And so I'm going to challenge readers, as you're listening to the conversation with Hannah, that you be on the lookout for how these Pillars are or aren't in operation or in how she's talking about and responding to them.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:03:13]:
Because I think there's some really interesting complexities in the conversation around those things. And I'm excited to talk about them further with Bonni and to get also listener reactions to it after the fact.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:03:25]:
So, listeners, we are about to go back in time to a conversation I had with my daughter Hannah. I thought it was going to be a two minute conversation about a made up grade that she told me about on a drive home from school. It turned out to be a far lengthier conversation than that, as you'll hear. And I'm excited for Emily, myself and all of you to get to take a listen to the conversation now from the past. And Emily will help us dissect what we might take away from it into our own futures as it relates to grading for growth and alternative grading systems. Here we go to our conversation with my daughter Hannah and myself. All right, so you in your life are starting to have more grades at this point. You're in fifth grade?

Hannah [00:04:22]:
Yeah, fifth grade.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:04:23]:
Okay. It's good that I remembered that. And if there was a kid younger than you that needed to understand grades and what they are and maybe even what they're good at and what they're not good at. Describe grades.

Hannah [00:04:37]:
I would describe grades as like a mark of your progress in a specific subject and in school. And I think grades are very important.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:04:47]:

And how are they important?

Hannah [00:04:49]:
They're important because they show progress. And it's very important to know your progress in school because obviously you can't learn if you don't know how you're progressing and what you need to learn and what you've already learned.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:05:03]:
And have you ever had any kinds of strong emotions when you saw one of your grades?

Hannah [00:05:10]:
Sometimes in writing I feel like I'm not very great at writing because I don't often get very high grades during writing.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:05:19]:
And what would be a not high grade in writing?

Hannah [00:05:22]:
So we have four or five grades at our school. We have E for emerging, D for developing, B for benchmark, which is like average score. And then above benchmark, which would be like above average. And Normally I get Ds and I am not proud of that.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:05:42]:
You get Ds. Remind that's developing.

Hannah [00:05:45]:
Yes, developing.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:05:47]:
It's interesting because there I think are a couple of different kinds of ways you might see grades. So there's grades as you are going and then there's the grades that they show your parents. Cause I don't think I've seen any Ds? Not that I would be horrified had I seen them, but I think maybe you get them on your early assignments and then you work hard. Maybe. I don't know. Do you think that happens sometimes?

Hannah [00:06:09]:
I think sometimes I get, like, some Ds, and then sometimes I get, like, benchmarks, but most of the time I just get Ds. But in my early test of the year, I

feel like I get more Ds than. Because we do our grades each by, like, portion of writing. So, like, we have one for transitions, one for, like, story arc and, like, storyline and craft. So I feel like most of the time in the early tests, I get these, and I get more benchmarks in the later tests of the year.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:06:47]:
Yeah, so you are. They're actually showing you your progress, which is what they tell you that they're designed to do. How would you make grades better so that they maybe didn't discourage you the.

Hannah [00:06:59]:
Way that you described, I think, grades, instead of being like, a mark, like, just saying, you're here. That's it. I think it should be like, you're here. But how to get up to this grade, you need to do this, this, and this. And that will probably help you reach getting higher grades. So, like, giving feedback of what you need to do to improve yourself instead of just saying that you need to improve yourself.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:07:26]:
And do you sometimes feel confused about what you need to do to improve?

Hannah [00:07:30]:
Yeah, sometimes. My teachers have not been very specific about what I need to do because it'll say, D transitions. That's it. And then I'll go up to my teacher and I'll be like, is there anything I can do to improve this? And I had one teacher that said, I don't know. You have to figure that out by yourself.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:07:52]:
Really? Not your teacher right now?

Hannah [00:07:53]:
No.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:07:54]:
I was gonna say, this does not sound like your teacher.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:07:57]:
Right.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:07:58]:
So you're thinking back more than just this year.

Hannah [00:08:00]:

Yep.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:08:01]:
All right. So you are going to tell us about something new that you and your friend made up about grades. You want to tell us about this?

Hannah [00:08:13]:
So we're sitting in class, and we're about. And we're, like, in a writing block, and we're about to have our writing assessment. It was, like, in a couple of days. And we're both, like. We both aren't very proud of the grades that we get in writing and would like to improve ourselves. So we were making a joke, and my friend was talking about how she wasn't proud of herself, and she was like, oh, I'll probably get an F. Even though that's not a grade we have. She was obviously joking.

Hannah [00:08:43]:
She did not think she was going to get an E. So we created this new grade, and we said, hey, we might get this grade. And we created ef, which stands for emerging failure.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:08:59]:
I just love that when you told me the story in the car, I just laughed so hard because I have been told before in my life that I didn't fail enough. And I was so insulted. It was when I was pretty new in my career, and that was what somebody told me at my performance review, is that I hadn't failed enough. What a funny, funny thing to say to someone. But I do realize that sometimes if you haven't failed enough in your life, it could be because you haven't taken as much as many risks, or maybe you haven't learned as much as somebody else who has failed more. Does that make sense?

Hannah [00:09:40]:
Yeah.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:09:41]:
So when you said emerging failure, I thought, that's just so spectacularly good because we can learn so much from our failures and imagine what might emerge. But I'm still confused, though, because if you asked me if somebody was asking me, like, oh, how does Hannah do in school? I would never have said that you get bad grades in writing. That's interesting that you think that.

Hannah [00:10:03]:

Well, they're not like bad grades. It's more like kind of below average, but not terrible. Terrible like you need support. It's like you're working on it. You're working to get average. But it's not like this needs urgent. You need to seriously step up your game. People.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:10:24]:
I think a lot of people would say there's a problem with the word average. Do you think there's a problem sometimes with the word average, especially when talking about someone's writing?

Hannah [00:10:33]:
I think it depends the scenario in grades. I don't think there's a problem with it because if you get 100 people and 75 people get a B for benchmark, that's going to be the average. The average is B. It's like percentages. It's not like your improvement, the average of improvement. It's the average percentage of the people who get that grade. So I don't think there's a problem with it in writing.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:11:03]:
Yeah, I don't know. I don't teach writing, but a lot of the people that I've had on this podcast teach writing. So I'm trying to channel their. Their wisdom at this moment. Something as creative and unique and as much of being human as writing. It's really hard to say what. What on Earth would be average because a lot of. Well, a lot of writing is thinking.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:11:29]:
It's taking what's in your mind, and then it's putting it into words and communicating it. So it's hard to. It's not like a math where you.

Hannah [00:11:38]:
Say, you know, what's 7 times 9 is 63?

Bonni Stachowiak [00:11:44]:
Yeah, it doesn't. Writing's really hard to do that with, you know, So I don't know. People talk about there being a lot of subjective ratings for writing, and subjective things are, like, just opinions. They're not really grounded on consistent measures. So. But, I mean, it sounds like you got some feedback. Transitions. So coming from one, what, one paragraph to another paragraph, one sentence to another sentence.

Hannah [00:12:10]:
I think writing is probably one of the harder subjects to grade because there's so much possibility in writing. Like, you can't just go up. And it's not like a math test

where it's really easy to grade because you just have this answer key with you. You can't really see the improvement in, like, a math test because it's not really, like, a test that shows your improvement. But writing is, like, one of those tests that does show your improvement. And, like, there's so much more that you need to grade, like craft and transitions and detail, and there's so many more things that you need to grade. So I think just statistically, you're going to get lower grades in writing than you are going to get in math because there's, like, a higher standard for writing than there is for math.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:13:02]:
And what's something that you wrote this year that you feel is really representative of both your craft of writing now, but also your potential as a writer?

Hannah [00:13:15]:
So one story we did was. This was, like, a couple days ago, we're doing this story about, like, holiday stories just for fun. And I chose when we're opening presents, and me and my brother, we got a present to go to Disney World. And I felt like you just had to be really specific because it was a really important moment. And, like, you need to be extra descriptive so that way people can really feel like you're in the. Like, they're in the element and that, like, they can really picture what was happening.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:13:51]:
Yeah.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:13:51]:
And what were some important details about that moment that you remembered?

Hannah [00:13:56]:
So I remember opening the wrapping paper and just seeing a blue box that said, like, Disney 50th anniversary. And that's when it clicked for me that we were getting a trip to, like, I thought we were gonna go to Disneyland. We went to Disney World. And it's like, that was, like, a really important detail. Cause if I just put there was a blue box, sure, it would have been more suspenseful, but it wouldn't have actually been true. And, like, it's very important to, like, retell what actually happened.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:14:28]:
And you are. Someday. Do you think that someday you're gonna go to college?

Hannah [00:14:33]:
Yes, definitely.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:14:35]:
And so give advice to your future writing professors in college for how to encourage you specifically, and then maybe how to encourage other future writers, like, to.

Hannah [00:14:49]:
Always give feedback and, like, not go to someone and be like, you're not doing this well, and just leave it at that. Like, be, like, more specific and be like, you really need attention in author's craft. Because, you know, it's just blah, blah, blah, the end. Instead of, like, first it was this, and then later that day and hours passed. Instead of, like, just being like, I opened a box. I got a trip to Disney World. That's two sentences. That's boring.

Hannah [00:15:25]:
No one wants to read that.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:15:28]:
Tell us about some of the most helpful feedback that you have received from a teacher.

Hannah [00:15:33]:
So this happened this year. My teacher said, like, she was saying how my stories, like, they kind of weren't, like, long enough, and she felt like I was rushing them. So she said, just reread your stories more and pay more attention to, like, your spelling and stuff, because I sometimes have trouble with spelling. And she was, like, really helpful. And she wasn't like, this is spelled wrong, and this is spelled wrong. She was like, you have some spelling things that you need to fix. And she was, like, gentle and kind to me when saying it. And some of my teachers have not been as kind when saying this.

Hannah [00:16:13]:
Like, my fourth grade teacher, she's kind of strict. And she would also be like, this is spelled wrong. And she would tell me, like, kind of, like, every word that was spelled wrong. And she wouldn't really, like, challenge me to go, like, reread it and figure out what was spelled wrong. She would just tell me what stuff was spelled wrong instead of having me go and look and see what was spelled wrong. Which I think it's really important to, like, make sure that, like, students can, like, reread it and stuff, because that's a really important skill to have. And I've learned that a lot in writing.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:16:48]:
I'm hearing you say two things. The first one I learned a lot about from someone named Sarah Rose Kavanagh. And she talks about how we as teachers, as professors, should show compassionate challenge to students. And what that means is. And I heard you say this in your story you're challenged by your teacher to become more effective in your writing. And she was telling you essentially to check it more and slow yourself down and to catch those things yourself. But she was challenging you, but also doing so compassionately. So that was the first thing that I heard you say in your story.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:17:29]:
And then the second thing, which I think is so important. There are some times where teachers and professors think that you have to catch every mistake. This is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong. Especially on things like spelling and grammar. And some of my close friends, I mean, they've thought, like, this is so important because I want this person to become a nurse. I want this person to become a teacher, whatever it is. And it seems like they think they're helping them by catching every mistake, but it actually is less helpful. Can you imagine why it's less helpful if somebody catches every mistake than what your teacher did for you?

Hannah [00:18:09]:
Because it doesn't, like, help your brain develop. Like, I could see how that could help your curiosity and, like, your attention to detail and being able to observe things really well. And it, like, it helps you grow. Like, it's very important to help you grow. But like, just saying, oh, this is wrong, this is wrong, and this is wrong, that doesn't really help your brain grow because you just have to go back and fix it. Like, there's no challenge in fixing it. It's just, you have to fix it. There's no challenge in that.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:18:40]:
Yeah. One thing I'm noticing about you as a speller is that you will write a word and you'll notice that it's spelled wrong. And that's just part of growing as a writer and a speller. I say this as someone who doesn't all spell other words right, but when I look at it, I can tell you that it's not spelled right, even if I don't always fix it. And part of the problem, by the way, is that the autocorrect, when we're typing in words because, you know, I type so fast, that doesn't help us learn how to spell words any better either, if it fixes it for us.

Hannah [00:19:12]:

I enjoy the autocorrect because I don't have to work as hard, but it's obviously not as good for my brain. And sometimes to my friends, when we're. Cause we have to type all our essays out on, like, I think it's like Google Docs or something. I don't know. But like, the autocorrect, I'm so grateful for that autocorrect. It has saved me, like, so much time. I cannot express how much time autocorrect has saved me. I love autocorrect, but it's also not as good for my brain.

Hannah [00:19:46]:
So sad.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:19:50]:
I want to start by thanking Hannah for being willing to share her thoughts about grading at her school and her experience of it with Bonnie and with me and with all of the listeners. And I want to thank you, Bonni, for allowing me the honor and privilege of participating in this special episode. And I'm excited to reflect on Hannah's thoughts and experiences with you.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:20:14]:
I'm excited about you sharing on this pillar one, the marks that indicate progress. And I know you have such richness to share with us. I do want to let listeners know who are less familiar with the word marks. In countries outside the United States, they often use this term marks. But I find in the United States, we tend to call these things grades. But so marks or grades that indicate progress. What do we have to learn from Hannah's examples and story as it relates to this pillar one, Marks that indicate progress.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:20:49]:
Yes. So I have a lot of thoughts about this. Hannah described grades as, and I'm going to quote her here, a mark of your progress in a specific subject in school. And then she goes on to say that grades are important because you can't learn if you don't know how you're progressing. And, of course, she is absolutely right. One of the most important functions of grades or marks given on individual assignments is to communicate to students and sometimes to their parents or other audiences about how they're progressing in a certain subject. So grades or marks aren't the only way to do that, but they're something that we use as a shorthand. Right.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:21:21]:
And so the issue is that traditional grades don't serve this communicative function very well. So say I get like, an 82 on an assignment. What does that mean? Well, it might mean that I understood or Learned kind of 82% of what I was supposed to or that I learned everything. 82%. Well, whatever that means.

Right. It might mean in one class that I am proficient in the learning goals for that assignment, whereas in another class, maybe it means that I'm not quite there. I would have to get an A to have fulfilled the learning goal.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:21:53]:
Right. It might mean that I did really excellent work, but that I had points docked off for turning the assignment in late. Or it might mean that I did really poor work, but I was in a class full of students who also did poor work and had my grade curved up Right. So what I'm saying is that an 82 or a B minus or an 8 out of 10 or a lot of the points and letter based grades that we use don't actually give us much information about whether and how we're progressing. And so that's why David and Robert recommend that if we have marks, and maybe we don't have to, but if we do have them, they should indicate progress. And so the question then is, what does it mean to indicate progress? I think, for one thing, and this is maybe more implicit in the framework, they mean that grades should be criterion referenced rather than norm referenced, which means that students are being assessed or graded on the extent to which they're meeting criteria or reaching a standard, rather than in comparison to other students. Right. So having criteria and reference grades is one thing.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:22:52]:
Right. It helps clarify kind of where students are in their learning as opposed to just how they stack up against everybody else. But the main thing that we mean when we talk about marks that indicate progress is that marks should clearly communicate to students where they are in a feedback loop. So, for example, instead of a B or C or 100 or 80, we might mark a student's work as satisfactory or needs revision. Right. Or we might say that it is excellent, proficient or developing. Right. Or some other skill that clearly communicates to students whether they have met the criteria for that assignment or whether they should keep trying.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:23:25]:
So in the case of Hannah's school, it sounds like they do use marks that indicate progress. So students kind of start at the level of emerging and then move to developing, or they might hit benchmark, which I think would mean that they've fulfilled the learning goals or they could even exceed that and be above benchmark. And what I like about this is that it seems to be engendering some maybe more healthy attitudes about grades. So Hannah says that a developing grade doesn't mean that you're a failure or that you need to step up your game. Right. It means that you're working on it, that you're still improving. And that's the kind of attitude that we want students to take toward their grades, even when they are quote, unquote, below benchmark. Right.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:24:09]:
But one thing that I think was notable about Hannah's comments is that even though she has this healthy attitude about improvement, it still doesn't keep her necessarily from thinking herself as a bad or below average writer. And I think this is complex because on the one hand, it's good for learners at any age to be able to recognize their shortcomings. So so they could improve their work. But on the other hand, we have to be really careful, especially with writing and especially at vulnerable ages, that students don't develop and internalize the idea that they're inherently bad at a subject and that they're not thinking of themselves always in comparison to their peers, right as below average. I've had conversations with some people who think that it's okay or even good that students kind of know where they rank or stack up, because that can be good information. And maybe that's helpful for some students who do take a healthy attitude toward ranking. But I think for most, or at least a lot of students, those students we would consider low performers are more likely to be demotivated or discouraged by that ranking. And the ones that we consider to be kind of high performers can often develop an attitude of competition or of perfectionism from that.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:25:21]:
And I don't think either of those things are healthy. So all of this is just to say that I think it's a great idea to use criterion reference grading and to have marks that indicate progress. And I think it's an important part of making assessment more clear and effective for students and for teachers. But it also doesn't magically solve all of the problems that we have with grading and our communication about grading. We also have to think about how to shift the culture in our classrooms and kind of our attitudes about grades and school as a society more broadly. And I think we'll continue to talk about that more as well in our subsequent conversation.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:25:57]:
I don't think I mentioned this earlier, Emily, but I was very shocked by this conversation. I did mention I was shocked by how long we had a conversation to begin with. But we don't really have conversations like this about grades in our household. Both my husband and I tend to really want to focus not on grades. We want to focus on learning and on developing, aspiring towards some further levels of mastery, when we're also recognizing we're never done learning in our lives. So when she comes out with that, like such a precise definition of a grade, which is better than probably I could have done off the cuff, I was really. So it's clear to me that there are discussions about grades that are happening not just

in a single class, not just with a single teacher. And it's clear that some healthy, as you said, some healthy outcomes are resulting.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:26:51]:
But you mentioned in your comments just this. I think you said vulnerable stages of growth and development. And that was. I really. I. As the words are coming out of her mouth about her being a bad Writer. I thought. I instantly thought, like, I'm not sure that I am prepared to, like, have this get shared.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:27:10]:
I also. I guess I just want to comment because I feel a little weird about it. Like, we're also definitely a household that believes that because we feel one way on a particular day doesn't mean that we're going to feel that way forever. And when we can get discouraged, sometimes all of us can take on more of that fixed mindset. And because we heard Hannah at a particular time on a particular day, I don't know if I asked her to. How she felt about herself as a writer. And I didn't. So I didn't want to make this, like, some universal part of her identity, because I think those things can then I know for myself, my gosh, like, they can really get reinforced in ways that are super unhealthy.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:27:52]:
So for anybody concerned about her, I certainly was con. Concerned on that day, but I also recognize that was just a slice of her life on that day. And I'm not necessarily seeing patterns that I'm overly concerned about as someone who cares a lot about her development, particularly as a writer, since she is such a vibrant, wonderful communicator. So I did just kind of want to mention that before. Yeah. Before we go on to pillar two.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:28:19]:
I think her vibrancy and communication skills really came through in that conversation. And it's clear that there's a lot of really great stuff happening to help Hannah develop that kind of vibrancy and those healthy attitudes around grades kind of at home or at school. School. I think writing is one of those subjects. Like, this happens a lot in math, and it also happens in writing, where people start to develop early identities around being bad at something. Right. And I totally fear that on any given day, like, sometimes I think I'm a bad writer. I'm a writing teacher.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:28:53]:
And on a given day, I might be like, this is horrible. I should just quit my job. But, yeah, I do think it's one of those subjects that we have to be careful about. And also, to be clear, I don't know what specifically is a vulnerable age. Probably

every age is a vulnerable age for developing writing identity. But I think it's important to keep in mind, especially when we're thinking about grades.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:29:14]:
All right, we're on to pillar number two. And this again from David Clark and Robert Talbert, reattempts without penalty. What did you hear in our conversation about this pillar?

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:29:27]:
So another cool thing about the grading system that you and Hannah discussed is that Hannah talked about getting lots of developing grades in writing. And it sounded like maybe you were surprised by this because she's potentially bringing her report cards with, like, higher grades. Is that right?

Bonni Stachowiak [00:29:46]:
Well, yes. And also, we don't pay. I don't pay that much attention to it. So it's not like she brings home one developing. And I think the earth has just, you know, crashed in itself.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:29:56]:
Well, what that indicates to me is that maybe we're not working in a system where those developing grades are being, like, averaged together. Or if, like, she gets four developings and three benchmarks, she's going to get a developing on her report card. No, we're working a system where students have multiple opportunities to reach the benchmarks for the course, and then in the end, their grade reflects whether or not they reach those benchmarks kind of eventually in the class, not whether they got it immediately or in the first half of the class. And so those early mistakes or weaknesses or challenges are not being penalized or factored in as long as students are fulfilling the learning goals of the classes. So I think with reattempts without penalty, it seems like it's at least partially in operation here. And what I'd recommend for college professors is to think about whether or not your grading system is penalizing students for early missteps, and then see if there are ways that maybe you could mitigate that. And so easy ways to do this might be just dropping one low test grade. Maybe if you have a student who struggles early on but does really well on a cumulative final, consider having that final grade replace whatever their average grade is, since it's probably the best demonstration of what a student's actually learned in the class.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:31:10]:
I think you have to be careful about that because some students have really high test anxiety, which can kind of skew the results. But just thinking of ways that

those early mistakes don't factor in, I think another kind of even more learning focused application of this would be to build in opportunities for students to revise or retake or resubmit their work throughout the semester so they're able to directly learn from the mistakes that they made. One thing that I often hear, which is a totally valid objection, is that who has time for this? A caveat that I'd like to share with this is that reattempts, as Robert and David point out, reattempts without penalty doesn't mean reattempts without limit. Right. You want to create a sustainable practice, and grading unlimited reattempts may not be sustainable for you, right? For me, Adding more opportunities for students to revise their work means that I scale back on the number of assignments I ask students to do so that they can focus on that revision work. But the main thing is that we want to give students an opportunity to learn from their attempts and from the feedback that we provide, often really diligently and at great expense to ourselves. So, you know, trying, failing, trying again is the whole process. Right.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:32:23]:
And so if that's what we want students to do, we need systems that not only allow for, but really prioritize.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:32:29]:
That on this next pillar. You've actually combined the next two pillars into one because you notice so much in between them. So pillars three and four, the clearly defined standards and helpful feedback. And without me even realizing, I probably provided a nice segue for you. As I was mentioning stuff about feedback.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:32:49]:
I was thinking that, yes, all of these pillars are so closely interrelated. Right. It's hard to talk about any one of them on their own. Reattempts without penalty means that students have to have helpful feedback. But in this case, when I was thinking about Hannah's story, I was thinking about her thoughts on feedback and how closely related, in this case, helpful feedback was to clearly define standards. So one of the things that it seemed like Hannah appreciated when she received feedback for teachers is that there was a clear sense of what kind of standard she was working on. Right. I don't know if they're called standards in her school, but she called out things like transitions and story arc and craft and details.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:33:24]:
Right. And she also appreciated when teachers gave feedback that was both kind or compassionate. Right. Delivered in the tone of a coach rather than a judge or evaluator, which is what I suspect your students appreciate about your

feedback. Right. But also challenging. So you brought up compassionate challenge at one point, I think, during the conversation. Sarah Rose Kavanaugh's term, and she, Hannah, appreciated that that feedback was challenging in that it helped her, invited her to come into that improvement process on her own so that she could work on certain things rather than having her work edited for her.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:33:59]:
But she also gave an example of a negative experience, which was a teacher who let her know the area that she had shortcomings in, which was, in this case, transitions, but not what she could do to improve, and said this is something that she had to figure out on her own. I think this incident might be an example of both standards that are not very clearly defined in feedback. That's not particularly helpful because it's clear what the standard is about, but it's not clear what meeting that standard would look like or what evidence Hannah would need to provide to show that she had met the standard. So I'll add that providing clear standards and giving helpful feedback doesn't mean we have to give students the answers or have ultra detailed rubrics or stifle in some way students creativity and problem solving. It just means that we have to think carefully about what our goals for an assignment are, what success would look like, and then clearly communicate that to students. One thing that I encountered when I was thinking about this was an assignment that my colleague Maze Imad was talking about in a conference session recently. And Maze is brilliant. She mentioned an assignment that she does with her students where she asked them to interview the ocean.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:35:07]:
She doesn't tell them exactly how to go about interviewing the ocean or what a good ocean interview would look like, but I suspect that she does does tell them that the point of this exercise is to be creative and to connect with the natural world in a creative way or a way that works for them, and maybe even to kind of reflect on that after the fact. And I expect that she assesses students work on that, not with a rubric of best practices for ocean interviewing, but by asking questions about whether or not they engage creatively with the natural world. So if the goal is that kind of engagement, you don't have to have a list of complicated standards or rubrics. The main thing is that you're communicating to students what you're looking for in their work, what successful engagement means for a particular assignment, and making this an ongoing conversation, because there's always going to be misunderstandings or miscommunications that we didn't anticipate. So I think remaining open and actively trying to elicit students questions and concerns about this is important.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:36:04]:
Yeah. All right. So you get to close this part of our conversation with your favorite part of our talk.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:36:12]:
I was so struck, as you were, by the notion of emerging failures that Hannah and her friends came up with. And that's because I think the idea of an emerging failure as a grade very wittily sums up some of the challenges that we face around grades in our education systems and our social systems really broadly. And so here's what I mean. What Hannah and her friend are doing here, in part, is that they're kind of satirizing or lampooning in a very good natured way, the marks that their school uses or the grades their school uses. They start off by saying, I'll probably get an F, which they know is not a grade that's offered, and then turn the idea of that F into the idea of an emerging failure, which fits more closely with the verbiage that their school uses. That verbiage is designed to help students see grades as marks of progress, as we discussed, rather than fixed statements about their capabilities or lack of capabilities. The idea of an emerging failure here is funny because it pokes fun at the fact that these grade designations are in some ways meant to soften the blow of Cs, Ds, or Fs. And it also acknowledges that no matter what you call them, low grades are still often read as failures by students or by parents or by society at large.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:37:32]:
And so even when you tell a kid that they're emerging, they think like, yeah, I'm an emerging failure, right? So this is, I think, a funny and honest look at how grading systems that we use actually operate in the real world. Even in an environment where the school is taking a thoughtful approach to grades and promoting healthy attitudes about them. Students see through a lot of the rhetoric, I guess, for lack of a better term, and they know that if they were to, say, apply to college or to a job with a transcript full of ease for emerging, somebody on the other side of that would make a mental calculus and say, oh, that means F, right? And they might have a hard time getting into school or getting a job because there's a mismatch between how their teachers want them to think about grades and the way that people think about grades beyond the school. They perceive a conflict. Students are smart, right? They know that there's a conflict between the learning focused uses of grades that we have in our classroom or the ways that grades are meant to help them see their progress in the ways that those grades are then used to rank and sort them beyond the classroom. So I'm taking a few things from this. The first is that if you're using alternative grading, or even if you're not, it's good to start a conversation with students about those various conflicting purposes of grades.

Jesse Stommel, who's one of the biggest advocates of ungrading, says that the first step really is just talking to students.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:39:02]:
But the second thing that I'm drawing from the story is that changing the way that we grade in our own classrooms is a great first step, but it only goes so far. So we can try to shift the focus from grades to learning all we want. But at the end of the day, we are still assigning a grade that's going to be used to rank and sort students by people that we don't know and who don't know our students, but who control access to their future opportunities. So I guess in tandem with the changes that we're making on an individual level, we have to think about systemic change and not just change in how institutions award grades or how employers and admissions committees use them, but the way that our society thinks about them and the way that we operate. We have to get away from a competitive zero sum system in which your success means my failure or your opportunity means my lack of opportunity, or where the primary goal of our schools is to cull and weed out students to determine who has access to the best opportunities. I think grades are a necessary evil right now because we live in a society of artificial scarcity and we're absolutely obsessed with ranking and sorting people to figure out what they deserve instead of making sure that everybody has what they need and everybody's able to thrive. So I think our immediate mission is to support individual thriving in our classrooms, but our long term goal is to. Is to do that on a societal level so that school can be about learning and growth and not about ranking and sorting.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:40:31]:
That was probably a really long winded.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:40:33]:
No, I'm sitting fluffy. I was literally just about to say, and I have goosebumps on my arms. But I didn't want to sound like I was. I mean, truly that. What a powerful statement you just made. And as you were sharing those words, Emily, I wanted to tell listeners, just before we get to the recommendation segment, I'm going to pretend forecast a future recommendation and a future visit from Emily back to teaching in higher ed. Emily is working on two books right now. One of the books is going to be, is going to be or is being co authored with Josh Eyler about grades.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:41:05]:
And so as you were sharing those incredibly powerful words there at the end, I just kept, I had a big smile on my face and I kept thinking and I get to talk to her again, like she's coming back. This is so fun. So we're actually going to move

now into the recommendations segment and. And Andrew, our podcast editor, through the magical powers of podcast editing, is going to share what my recommendation was from way back then, when Hannah and I had that conversation a few months back. And then also her recommendation. And then we're going to close out the episode with Emily's recommendation, which you're about to hear. And then if you want to hear more from Emily, please know that she'll be coming back. So here we go with Hannah and my recommendations and then we'll close out with Emily's.

Hannah [00:41:52]:
I recommend Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, which is the third book of Harry Potter. So basically the story is Harry Potter is at his third year of Hogwarts and he lives in London. Like London's going gone crazy because Sirius Black, who is a murderer, he escapes. And the people at Hogwarts are very concerned. And it's a very good storyline. I think it was like. Like the ending of the book was really surprising to me. I didn't expect a lot of the things that happened and it was a very interesting book to read.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:42:33]:
So for my recommendation, I may need a little bit of your help because you were there with me. But first I want to mention that I saw the musical Wicked at the Ahmanson Theater in Los Angeles with my dearest friend from college. Her name is Michelle. And so we had gone up and seen it and you were I think maybe two or something, three, something like that. So you would have for sure been too young to go, but Luke was just too young to go. But I thought he would have loved to see it because it had so many special effects in the production with the smoke. And I mean, it was just such a marvelous, marvelous production. And so I always had thought it would be so great to go see it as a theater, but it just has never worked out for us to go and then, dun, dun, dun, what happened in November of 2024?

Hannah [00:43:24]:
So our whole family went to see the Wicked movie, which was a very incredible movie.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:43:30]:
Yeah. And when we're talking about like the movies of Harry Potter versus the books, I tend to not want to watch any of the movies because, I mean, I've seen the first one. But like, I get bummed because I just would rather see the pictures in my own mind and make my own movie in my own mind from the books. And so between the musical on stage and the movie, I thought I would be disappointed by the movie and I was so wrong because it was incredible. The

movie is also a musical and it was just incredible. And by the way, if you've not seen it, it's wonderful. Hannah and I would both suggest it, but it's part one of two. So the next one is coming out in.

Hannah [00:44:10]:
It's Thanksgiving 2025, and there are only two parts. There are not like three or four. There are only two, so don't worry.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:44:18]:
And in our family, we are all very, very unique. And so when it comes to food or music or movies, we tend to have different tastes. And so it was so fun that all four of us loved it and all four of us can't wait until the next one comes out.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:44:37]:
I would like to recommend a book that I just finished and that came out earlier this year and the book is called More Everything AI Overlords, Space Empires and Silicon Valley's Crusade to Control the Fate of Humanity by Adam Becker. I think it's a fabulous title. So the book is a really illuminating, which is important since these people have largely been given the keys to the kingdom here in the US So to speak. If you've ever heard the term effective altruism but don't really know what it means, or if you wondered about why the rich are obsessed with living forever and going to space, or if you want to know what's behind the conversations about artificial general intelligence and what that means, this is a great book for you. I didn't know a lot about any of these things going into the book, but I have a much better understanding of where these ideas come from and I think the way that they're poisoning our attempts to build a more humane world. And actually, I think this book pairs really well with a title that may be more familiar to a lot of people and that I've been reading with it concurrently, and that's Braiding Sweet Grass Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants by Robin Wall Krimmerer, and I think that's been recommended on the podcast before. The vision presented of the earth and our place in it and our responsibilities toward our fellow beings in Braiding Sweetgrass embodies, I would say, like the spiritual and ideological opposite of the philosophy or more like fantasy of tech billionaires as told in More Everything Forever. So More Everything Forever is my recommendation, and I suggest that it pairs especially well with any texts that share with us some indigenous wisdom that can help us think more about the ideological water we're swimming in here in the US and question our assumptions about what the world is and what it could be.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:46:24]:

Emily Pitts Donahoe, thank you so much for your generosity in today's conversation, for all your wonderful writing on about alternative grading and for the next time that we get to talk and these forthcoming books. You can tell there's a lot of eagerness for me and just so grateful for you and your time together today.

Emily Pitts Donahoe [00:46:44]:
Thank you, Bonni. I'm already looking forward to next time.

Bonni Stachowiak [00:46:49]:
Thanks once again to Emily Potts Donna Ho for joining me on today's episode of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast. Today's episode was produced by me, Bonni Stachowiak. It was edited by the ever talented Andrew Kroeger podcast Production support was provided by the amazing Sierra Priest. It if you've yet to sign up for the weekly Teaching in Higher Ed update, you could be receiving the most recent episodes, show notes, and some other resources beyond those links. Head over to teachinginhighered.com/subscribe to start receiving those updates. Thank you so much for listening. Thanks once again to Emily for experimenting with me, and we'll see you next time on Teaching in Higher Ed.