

It is April 2022. I am nearing the end of graduate school, emerging from two-plus years of COVID-induced hibernation, and probably the most anxiety-ridden about the future as I have ever felt. It has sometimes been hard in recent months to summon the will to get up every morning and return to the classroom, and I know that some of my co-workers feel the same. Student attendance has been abysmal all around, the rapport I have often felt with my students is in short supply, and the gains few and far between. I know that so many of our students are experiencing their own struggles, and often so much more dire than my own. Yet I find myself questioning my competence in my chosen profession; questioning the passions of my colleagues, the dedication of my students; questioning the good intentions of my superiors. Questioning, in fact, the very purpose of the entire endeavor.

It is striking to me that despite the age and maturity of the higher education sector in the United States, despite the vast public and private resources devoted to it and the concentration of some of the world's greatest minds within its halls, we still seem to have limited societal consensus on its purposes. Who exactly is higher education for, at what cost, and to what ends? Even the definition of "learning," seemingly the most commonsense rationale for the existence of higher education, cannot generally be communicated to the public in a straightforward way (Merriam et al, pp. 83, 103). Lacking a clearly articulated, agreed-upon purpose makes it exceedingly difficult to evaluate institutions' effectiveness at achieving those ends, leading to the "stalemate," as Gelber describes it, between the faculty and administration of higher education institutions, policymakers, and the public (pp. 4, 13, 136, 151).

I believe deeply in the public purpose of higher education; that, as Lagemann and Lewis argue, it is about more than just "aggregated individual economic benefits" (p. 9). Rather, higher education shares the responsibility for cultivating "civic literacy" (Lagemann & Lewis, p. 30). My own undergraduate institution, Berea College, exemplified that ideal: taking low-income Appalachian folks of "high promise" and providing them a free, quality education that not only offers them greater economic potential but also opens the world to them, develops their notions of culture, citizenship, and sustainability, and offers opportunities to give back to their community. It is the yardstick by which I have measured all other educational institutions that I have been a part of to-date. Needless to say, I have at times been disappointed.

The two public higher education institutions that I have been most closely associated with since Berea are captive to deeply entrenched political interests, ideologues who place the values of the "free market" above all else. These interests actively work to curtail education about diversity and other civic values in our classrooms, undermine workplace democracy, and have systematically pauperized our public institutions (Lagemann & Lewis, p. 40; Gelber, p. 13). These and other trends have led to a retail mentality that treats students as customers,

educators as expendable laborers, and education as a product available to an increasingly elite populace (Gelber, p. 140; Clegg, p. 95; Saunders & Ramirez, p. 397). Nonetheless, by the standards of today's educational marketplace, both institutions are highly regarded. One is a "top five" ranked public university, and the other was recently awarded the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. As discussed by Scott Gelber, however, reputational rankings such as these are widely reviled by many faculty, including myself, and do little to offer concrete direction on improving student learning outcomes (p. 107). Instead, they too often serve to reinforce existing inequities (Gelber, p. 109).

Yet, while my critiques of our current context continue to mount, and I endeavor to be part of larger-scale change at these institutions over the long term, it too often feels overwhelming and Sisyphean. Perhaps, for my own mental health and the immediate wellbeing of my students, I should, as Gooblar advises, "be an activist in the realm where [I] have control" (p. 179). Or, as a mentor sometimes likes to remind me: "plan for success, failure can take care of itself." That means striving to be an exemplary instructor, one who has clear ideas of what student success looks like and who works every day to achieve those goals by every means within my reach.

In recent years, I have spent time in classrooms from pre-K all the way up to the graduate level. Adult learners are my chosen population to work with. Up until this semester, I presumed that there was something unique about this particular group of learners. Despite all of my professional development in the field, and the fact that I interact with other adult educators on a daily basis, this semester was the first time that I have ever encountered the notion of andragogy being challenged (Merriam et al, pp. 85-92). Though my conceptions of the relevance of andragogy will undoubtedly continue to evolve, where I have landed after evaluating Merriam's ideas is that:

- of Knowles's principles of andragogy, the "self-concept" and "reservoir of experience" of most adult learners is distinctly different from that of most children and must be taken into account in the classroom (Merriam et al, p. 84); and
- many of the "implications for practice" that are taken from Knowles's theory can be utilized in nearly any classroom, regardless of the age of the student (Merriam et al, p. 92).

These ideas make sense to me based not only on consideration of this semester's readings, but also on my own lived experience as a student. When I consider the three distinct phases of my education: K-12 (ages 4-18), undergraduate (ages 21-30), and graduate (ages 45-48), it is clear what a different person I was at each stage, how my life situation and needs had changed, and what the classroom had to offer me. So, these insights in hand, how can I best construct a classroom that helps to ensure success for my adult students?

This semester's readings on best practices in teaching have offered significant wisdom and practicality. I hope to return to and build upon these lessons throughout my time as an educator and have distilled a few of the most personally meaningful into what Macfarlane has classified as the "pre-performance, performance, and post-performance phases of teaching activity" (p. 56):

- **Pre-performance:** I will strive to become aware of my students' personal goals and interests as much as practicable (Gooblar, pp. 63-5), remaining mindful that, as Gooblar instructs us, "the students are the material" (p. 4). I will always work to align my teaching materials, curricula, and assessment with my student learning objectives (Bain p. 162; Saroyan p. 88).
- **Performance:** The pre-work I have done getting to know my students will better enable me to build upon their experiences and interests during our time together and will aid in their knowledge construction (Tiberius & Tipping p. 121). It is also critical that I facilitate the creation of safe and welcoming learning environments (Bain p. 131; Gooblar pp. 24-7) and help students build a sense of community amongst themselves (Gooblar, pp. 26 & 118; Tiberius & Tipping p. 122).
- **Post-performance:** Perhaps my biggest takeaway from this course has been the importance of constructive formative assessment (Bain p. 153; Gooblar pp. 131-45). So much of my own classroom experience, particularly in the sciences, was built around summative assessment. I was an excellent undergraduate student because I could successfully memorize and regurgitate large amounts of information. But my most rewarding educational experiences involved projects in which I was not afraid of failure; indeed, where learning from my mistakes was the point.

This issue of formative assessment brings me to my final point: how will I know if I have succeeded in my work? To some extent, it is pretty clear cut with my students. They pass their GED or they do not; they make measurable gains on their Test of Adult Basic Education or they do not. So, our program is very much assessment based. But there are also a sizable proportion of our students who never make it to their testing date, who often inexplicably leave our program or whose attendance and participation is so sporadic that they never realize any gains. Have we failed them? And if so, what could we have done differently?

Of the different assessment methods addressed by Gelber: teacher evaluations, student course evaluations, testing, rubrics, surveys, rankings, and accreditation; student evaluations most resonated with me. Partly that is because it comes back most closely to that "realm where I have control" (Gooblar p. 179). There is nothing stopping me from making regular inquiries of my students as to their experience in our program more broadly and in my classes specifically. By creating and administering my own student evaluations on a regular basis, I can engage in

the formative self-reflection that has been shown to be of such great value to our students (Bain p. 153; Gooblar pp. 131-45). I can ask them very granular questions about specific assignments, specific lectures, class activities, as well as larger questions about how they are feeling. Do they feel safe and welcomed in my classroom? Do they have a sense of community with their fellow students? What are the barriers from their perspective that are getting in the way of their success? In short, I can, as Clegg suggests, “co-construct” what success looks like in our specific context (p. 101).

This semester I was fortunate enough to take two excellent but also very different courses that converged in a way few courses have for me. One focused on the past, requiring me to critically examine my assumptions about adult education, its purposes, history, and methods of assessment, among other topics. The other course was grounded in the future, in the evolving fields of interaction design and user experience. One of the catch phrases of the user experience, or UX movement, is to “fight for the user.” The history of higher education informs us that there are many causes worth fighting for, and many battlefields on which these causes can be championed. But the UX movement offers an opportunity to “fight for the user” within our own learning spaces, working progressively toward classrooms that are effective, inclusive, and nurturing.

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