

THRIVING *in* Academe

REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson (drobert@fiu.edu) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery (mflannery@nea.org) at NEA.

■ Overwhelmed? Are You Guarding the Wrong Tower?

The work of teaching, assessing, and supporting our learners may feel more challenging recently. New barriers have cropped up alongside existing ones. How can we replace counter-productive responses with inclusive and equitable ones?

BY TOM TOBIN

Founding member of the Center for Teaching, Learning, & Mentoring (CTLM) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

In addition to longstanding barriers like work schedules, caregiving commitments, and systemic racism, sexism, and ableism, we and our learners are facing new challenges: extreme weather events, tighter budgets, and a global health pandemic.

This uncertainty and unpredictability prompt us to re-examine evergreen topics in our field where there isn't yet broad consensus regarding paths, practices, and principles.

- Should we allow or ban laptops in the in-person classroom?
- How do instructors balance student agency against the need to cover required content?
- Are artificial-intelligence academic-integrity tools undesirable, panoptical policing or a realistic response to increasingly easier ways to act dishonestly?

- How can one person effectively teach a 300-person undergraduate survey course?
- Is it pronounced “gif” or “jif”?

Some of these questions will never have definitive answers. (Full disclosure, I am a ride-or-die member of Team “Jif”). When there are useful arguments across a spectrum of approaches, we must apply ethics and data-empowered decision making to support our own thinking and practices.

So, here's a provocative thought: those of us whose work involves teaching and learning— instructors, teaching center staff, lab managers, instructional designers, librarians, coders, multimedia creators, campus leaders—we have collectively erected two towers. And we've been guarding the wrong tower for a long, long time.



The Ivory Tower

Consider the ivory tower. This is the systemic structure of higher education, with its hierarchies and webs of knowledge, power, and political influence. In the ivory tower, we play very specific roles.

Those of us who teach are expected to ensure our learners are ready to move to the next phases in our systems of credentials. We design interactions to serve gatekeeping functions, ensuring learners conform to prescribed standards, and out-

comes. This approach prizes the structures themselves. It asks learners to fit into the forms we create.

The ivory tower has distinct advantages. Programs can be scaled. People know the boundaries of their work and relationships. Progress is clearly mapped, and credentials hold value among employer and industry communities. Most of us in higher education know the ivory tower well because it is the model within which we thrived. We were the good students, the fast learners, the people who worked well with deadlines,

clear goals, and regular affirmations of our worth in the form of good grades.

I still have my high school “highest math grade in 1988” plaque, along with a dozen others. They’re shiny.

The Guild Tower

The other tower harkens to knowledge-ways that pre-date the university: the guild tower. The guild system of knowledge construction was (and remains) collaborative, focused on learners’ own needs, skills, gaps, and goals. Guild milestones are fewer and more malleable than those of the ivory tower. Many paths can lead to the stages of guild work, focused more toward competency than the raw accretion of information.

Guild-style teachers ask learners to identify their strengths, challenges, and areas of open possibility. We ask them to stick with us through the tough stuff in order to reach ever-higher accomplishments. Our forms flex, respond, and adapt as we encounter the next set of learners to come through the door.

The guild tower has distinct advantages. It welcomes learners who come to us with a variety of life circumstances, levels of preparation, comfort with our spoken and written language, physical and mental abilities, and a host of other advantages and barriers—most of which we cannot see or intuit easily. Systems that are more one-to-few than one-to-many retain learners at much

TALES FROM REAL LIFE: SOME GIVE UP MORE TO BE INCLUSIVE

A caution: diversity, equity, and inclusion are never one-size-fits-all approaches. Practices like relaxing strict due dates, ungrading, and universal design for learning (UDL) assume that designers and teachers are coming from a place of established power and authority already—that we have power, agency, and respect that

we can give up or share with our learners. Consider a story like Monique’s.^{*1}

With a Ph.D. in English composition and rhetoric; Monique has been an adjunct instructor for five local universities and colleges since 2013. In recent courses, Monique, a Black woman, has encountered hostility from young White male students.

Negative student-rating comments say Monique is “too harsh” in her insistence on formalities such as being addressed as “Doctor,” and her adhesion to strict grading and late-work policies. Commenters point to tenured White male colleagues who students call by their first names and who offer do-overs and flexible due dates.

They don’t see that Monique’s carefully timed deadlines enable her to provide timely feedback to students across five different institutions. Her adherence to the college’s grading standards are a response to past academic dishonesty cases. And she asks her students to call her “Doctor” because she does not enjoy the automatic respect her

White-male colleagues assume.

So, as you advocate for inclusive approaches for learners, ask who is able to enact such practices, in that way. Respect that instructors with fewer markers of privilege will define their own balance between authority and flexibility. Be an ally: adopt stricter or looser approaches together.

¹ Monique’s story at a large Research-1 university is real. I’ve changed her name and some identifying details to protect her privacy.

BEST PRACTICES: UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

Based on the neuroscience of how humans learn, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for lowering barriers in the interactions that learners have with content, each other, instructors, support staff, and their communities.

UDL's aim is to create expert learners who are purposeful, motivated, resourceful, knowledgeable, strategic, and goal-directed. It is most often expressed in the three UDL guidelines:

- Provide multiple means of engagement.

- Provide multiple means of representation.
- Provide multiple means of action & expression.

A first best practice is to simplify this to “plus one” thinking: if there is one way for learners to interact now, create one more. While not the entirety of UDL practice, adopting a “plus one” approach helps us narrow our scope in order to prioritize our actions while still lowering barriers for as varied an audience as possible.

Second, start with the “pinch points” that learners encounter

in their interactions. Where do learners ask the same question every time you engage in a particular topic? Where do you have to re-teach because almost everyone got confused about a topic on a test or exam? Places where things are already not going as planned—repeatedly—are excellent starting points for applying UDL in order to see the largest effects most quickly.

A third, higher-level best practice: adopt the emerging–proficient–approaching–expert model in the UDL Progression Rubric. For example, when you are working on optimiz-

ing individual choice and autonomy (Checkpoint 7.1), beginner learners benefit from you offering them choices, while proficient learners might find options themselves, and near-expert learners should create their own paths through materials toward goals.



higher rates. Your offerings with the highest failure and withdrawal rates likely cluster in the giant-lecture-hall intro courses, not in the capstones and seminars. While multiple-path designs are more challenging for instructors because they aren't the same from term to term, they are also more energizing for instructors and learners for that same reason.

Shifting Your Guard

As we begin to take steps beyond the emergency mentality of responding to the global pandemic, it can be tempting to reclaim a sense of control and order. COVID-19 put us through a stressful and uncertain series of events where we all lost control over where learning took place, how we assessed it, and how we ensured that our credentials remain meaningful in the wider world. We clamped down on attendance, leaned heavily on artificial-intelligence remote test proctoring, and required our learners to have their cameras on for our Zoom sessions.

That is guarding the wrong tower.

One need not look far to find colleagues who felt perceived as “less than” when they asked for temporary disability accommodations, learners made anxious during remote exams because the algorithm didn't “see” their skin color as human, and co-workers clinging to late policies and attendance

requirements to establish a Potemkin sense of normality.

Under stress and anxiety, we all reach for certainty, stability, control. Paradoxically, doing so actually contributes to our sense of disorder, stress, and trauma—and for our learners, as well.

It isn't easy to shift our guard from one tower to the other. All of us have invested our careers into following paths that were rewarding to us. We've created materials, interactions, whole systems that run almost automatically. Moving to a different way of thinking and doing requires intentional, hard, and complex work.

Coming back to principles.

I am heartened to see more of us are coming back to questions of principle. Why are we doing our work, and for whom? That answer is nearly always “for our learners.”

Once we get away from the task-level what-ifs and how-tos, we start to recognize that while we may not be able to get rid of large-enrollment lecture courses single-handedly, we can advocate for more inclusive approaches, start small to do the work of lowering barriers, and strive at a systemic level to offer our learners voice, choice, and agency wherever we can.

I haven't answered the questions that began this essay. I have my own thoughts about how I approach them, and I try always to base my work on information about how people actually learn, including asking my own students and my colleagues' students about their experiences. All the readings in the world about trends and best practices aren't worthwhile if we don't make the effort to lower the barriers to access and participation for the people right in front of us.

Yes, you have to earn your paycheck, and yes, there are only so many hours in the day. So, keep the rigor of your subject matter high. Tell your learners you teach a challenging subject, and you are there to help them to understand, master, and apply it. Think back to those times when you felt engaged with your own area of expertise, and how those who supported you acted. Model your own work on the supportive people who helped you along your path, and pay it forward to as many people as you can.

That's a tower worth guarding.

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Meet Thomas J. Tobin



Thomas J. Tobin, PhD, MSLS, PMP, MOT, CPACC is a founding member of the Center for Teaching, Learning, & Mentoring (CTLM) at the University

of Wisconsin-Madison, as well as an internationally recognized scholar, author, and speaker on technology-mediated education. His books include

- *Evaluating Online Teaching: Implementing Best Practices* (2015).
- *The Copyright Ninja* (2017).
- *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education* (2018).
- *Going Alt-Ac: A Guide to Alternative Academic Careers* (2020).
- UDL for FET Practitioners: Guidance for Implementing Universal Design for Learning in Irish Further Education and Training (2021).

Find him on Twitter @ThomasJTobin, and at thomasjtobin.com.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER: THE CLOCK AS A BARRIER

Early internet-based teaching and learning aimed to address geographical barriers, serving learners who lived too far away from the physical locations of schools, colleges, and universities. Until very recently, the concept of school was tied exclusively to place-based gatherings of instructors and learners.

Today, the primary barrier facing learners isn't distance, but time. No longer do students immerse themselves in higher education as the sole focus of their activities.

"Non-traditional" students—with jobs, with children, with other responsibilities—are the majority of our current learners, cramming their studies into an already complex mix of other commitments.

If you're guarding the ivory tower, you lament that your lazy students aren't doing the readings you assigned, aren't engaged in class sessions, and can't meet assignment deadlines.

There is no such thing as a lazy student.

Our students' experience of schooling is, by and large, one of reward and punishment based on how they behave in classroom settings and how well they earn numerical grades on activities. Quiet students who keep their heads down and do just enough to earn passing marks are being practical in the face of mounting demands on their time beyond course work.

The biggest shift in our own mindset is turning from what happens during our class-meeting times to what hap-

pens beyond them. The more you make content, collaboration, question-asking, and support accessible to your learners beyond your formal interactions with them, the more smoothly and successfully your together-time will go. Help your students find 20 more minutes for study in their packed days—it can be the difference between struggling and keeping up.

