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CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE (UNIVERSITY EDITION)

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My contribution brings the meaning of success from one academic's perspective into conversation with some of the other definitions included in this collection, before broadening the discussion to consider how students' individual circumstances and struggles might be addressed in the current context of UK higher education. I briefly outline a decolonizing approach, among other possibilities, as a way of making university education more inclusive of students' diverse experiences and interests. While this may require academics to step outside their established expertise and their 'comfort zone' as educators, it can be at least as rewarding an experience as undertaking academic research.

As a child, I was fascinated by the 'Choose Your Own Adventure' book series, in which every few pages the reader was asked to make a choice about where they wanted the story to go next and turn to the corresponding page. In the same way, students are 'reading' for a degree, and their syllabus and curriculum should allow them to make choices and contribute to what they want to learn based on their individual identities, interests, and expertise. It has been a privilege to encounter the wide and diverse range of students' reflections in this collection, both academic and creative, on what success means to them and how their university experience could better contribute to that success. It is harrowing to learn that for some, success means simply surviving. For others, financial independence is the primary, practical aim, which they know will not be easy to achieve. Still others aspire to belong, or suffer from ongoing imposter syndrome, and there is sometimes a sense of despair about whether they will ever get to the end of their degree. In different ways, these experiences show that a basic human need for security is not being satisfied. It is hard to think about coursework, employability, and self-actualization when you don't feel safe and secure.

I am also grateful for this opportunity to reflect on what success means for me as an academic, because my personal professional persona is very much bound up with student success. While I have long advocated for the value of self-reflection among both staff and students—for example, to help students identify the transferable skills they are developing through their studies—I have only recently encountered it as a form of structured assessment in my subject (though I know it is widely used across many applied disciplines). As I begin to mark students on the quality of their self-reflection, my long experience of giving anonymous feedback takes on a new dimension, and I gain insight into students' individuality and personality. Yet I also question how well placed I am to judge their work against the assessment criteria, given my necessarily partial understanding of the struggles they face.

More generally, I wonder how academics like me can best connect with students and their needs in the sprawling network of administrative, teaching-related, and research activities that govern our professional lives, many of which students never get to see. I also consider the context of the

current UK higher education sector and universities as large organizations characterized by marketization, centralization, and specialization. If I sometimes find it hard to make my way through the labyrinth as an experienced academic, I understand how students can feel lost and bewildered in an unfamiliar, opaque environment full of expectations, deadlines, and regulations. Looking back, I realize that I spent the first 12 or so years of my career working out what academia was all about, pursuing publications, promotion, and management positions as the most obvious pathways to follow, without really considering whether they were what I wanted or valued.

During a COVID lockdown in 2020 I contacted a few people with whom I had lost touch for a long time. In the ensuing correspondence, which I remembered and dug out for this piece, I reflected on my job as follows:

“I find meaning in engaging with students, in talking about teaching, and in helping academics have an easier job through good organization and management, although I’ve probably done enough quality assurance work now for one lifetime!”

If there is any such thing as a typical academic, I am probably atypical in that I do not derive very much of my professional identity from the research that I do. Having worked in a range of leadership positions at departmental, faculty, and university levels over the last decade, I am finally able to reach a conclusion about where I am best placed to make a difference to students’ learning. The conundrum remains how to ensure that no student has to struggle to succeed, when some academics are themselves struggling with their workload and other personal and professional pressures. The pockets of expertise and activity that individual students may need to access throughout their time at university are increasingly compartmentalized, and the concept of ‘personalization’ in higher education seems to be primarily associated with data-driven interventions. In other words, a student’s experience may ultimately boil down to the happenstance of whom they first approach and that person’s networks and ‘insider’ knowledge about ‘when to refer’ students to specialist services. This observation also very much applies to centralized information points, such as Northumbria University’s central service, Ask4Help.

As several student contributors point out, an important first step towards change is for universities to recognize that they are sites of inequality and oppression, just like society at large. That is, universities themselves could do with being more self-reflective around the academic standards they set, the kinds of knowledge they impart, and the student outcomes they engender. By this, I do not mean the data-driven exercises that currently occupy a great deal of management time, which can feel alienating to academics and are usually reactive to student surveys and outcomes, as opposed to engaging in a collaborative reflection on what needs to change. Rather, I am referring to co-creation with students of curricula, assessment, and even learning outcomes. As one contributor points out, the academy is not a museum that says, ‘do not touch.’ Indeed, UK museums are perhaps further advanced than universities in investigating how knowledge hierarchies are created and how they can be reworked.

The decolonizing agenda is one obvious means of pursuing this aim in a way that does not ‘cancel’ existing expertise, but rather complements it with other perspectives, cosmologies, and voices. The research-led education paradigm used in many universities already allows for this,

but much more could be done to embed so-called ‘authentic’ assessment, decolonize the curriculum, and exploit hybrid modes of learning in partnership with students. To continue the museums analogy, this does require academics to become curators of knowledge alongside students, and to relinquish the role of ‘sage on the stage.’ It also requires all participants to be very clear about the parameters of the learning journey they are embarking upon together, not only for the benefit of neurodiverse students, as one contributor powerfully points out, but for the benefit of all. It emphatically does not require academics or universities to lower standards or jettison classic texts or thinkers. Rather, and in the spirit of enquiry which academics apply to their research, it should encourage them to examine the foundations on which their expertise is built and to enrich and expand it. Speaking from personal experience, this is very intellectually rewarding!

Academics are constantly reading and learning, critiquing, and contributing to their field of knowledge in their role as researchers—and students should be doing the same—but lack of time or training may make academics less likely to do so as educators. Rethinking one’s approach to teaching and responding to student suggestions and challenges also entails a certain vulnerability, which less senior academics in particular may be reluctant to show for fear of tarnishing the professional identity they have worked so hard to achieve. It took me several years of teaching to realize that my role was not to regurgitate the knowledge I had acquired, only for students to recite this back at me in essays and exams, but instead to develop the confidence to relinquish some control of the curriculum and the classroom. It also took me a long time to feel comfortable identifying and sharing the parts of my own educational experience to which students might relate.

My limited and ongoing experiments with student-led activities, different forms of feedback, decolonizing the curriculum, and authentic assessment have been some of the most rewarding and engaging ways of learning about students’ individual identities, interests, and expertise, alongside their peers. Writing an academic essay is nothing like a ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ novel; the reader should know what to expect! At the same time, learning structured academic writing, critical thinking, and all the other transferable skills students assimilate at university can be part of an adventure, which should in turn support a lifelong curiosity to learn. This is how I would like to see all students succeed—on their own terms.