Experimenting with Effort in Educational Experiences:
Reflections on Gwen Bradford's Structure of Achievement

Vikramaditya (Vik) Joshi

Teachers College, Columbia University

One of the joys of philosophy is encountering treatments of commonplace terms that give form to their nature, beyond their colloquial usage. Gwen Bradford's account in *Achievement* opens with a precautionary note: "[this] project is not an account of how we use the term 'achievement' but rather the business of sorting out the key characteristics of achievement."[1] With this in mind, Bradford proposes a structure for all achievements, and it goes like this: there is a *process* and a *product*. The product may be distinct from the process (for example, publishing a paper), or the two may be fused together (for example a theatrical or dance performance).

This structure is useful for a variety of reasons. First, it delineates the boundaries of the concept itself—an achievement has a beginning and an end. If there were to be no end, then how would an achievement ever be realized? So, the process culminating in a separate product or being realized through an enactment of the skills honed during the process helps us describe an achievement and evaluate whether an action is indeed an achievement. Second, this structure accommodates asymmetries between the process and the product. A process may take years of a life—such as devoting oneself to curing cancer—but the failure to find the cure does not violate the structure. This is because Bradford acknowledges the role of progress in pursuit of an achievement, especially in such cases when a goal chosen by a particular person may need many lifetimes to be realized. The issue of climate change, as an enduring and seemingly intractable example of a problem requiring multi-generational commitment, has suffered from an approach to achievement that has been asymmetrical—failure of achievement in a single generation of effort has sometimes been seen as grounds to dismiss the *entire* endeavor of moving to sustainable forms of supporting life on Earth.[2] Therefore, asymmetries, such as the absence of a product or failure to achieve this product, can comfortably fit within Bradford's proposed structure of achievements. With these two strengths of the structure

in view, we can now explore one of its limitations.

During the reading group, many participants wished to understand how education would be treated if placed within Bradford's process-product architecture for all achievements. Education *qua* education is a process that does not easily submit itself to the bounds of Bradford's structure. Graduations mark not an achievement of education but rather an achievement of satisfying the requirements set by the degree-granting institution.[3] Grades indicate the faculty's perception of a range of factors: performance in assessments, effort in educational activities, and (in some cases) the growth across the semester in terms of capacities such as reading, writing, and oral communication. But are grades an achievement of education or of satisfying the requirements set by a particular educator? The distinction between education and schooling—in which students perform particular tasks in service of the grade, not the learning objectives—illustrates that education may be an *accidental* achievement in systems of formal schooling.[4] Fortunately, Bradford's account is sensitive to these concerns, and her recently published work on "self-propagating goals" demonstrates a few key accompanying premises we must keep in mind when superimposing education onto her structure of achievement.[5]

Considering processes, such as education, Bradford explains that the pursuit of a goal is distinct from the ultimate product. Therefore, we can infer that a person's purpose when pursuing, in Bradford's formulation, an "unimaginable goal"—such as actualizing world peace or erasing poverty—emerges independently from the successful realization of the aim.[6] Consequently, the structure of an achievement does not, by necessity, need a product of independent value to have objective worth. The "challenge" of the process itself can imbue a person's life with meaning.[7] In this way, the structure of the achievement contains a goal that expands "as one approaches it."[8] If one makes progress toward unimaginable goals, which are replete throughout students' educational journeys, the pursuit *expands*. These goals are self-propagating; in other words, the standard for success evolves as progress is achieved during the process.[9] The key development Bradford makes in the initial structure of achievement explained above is that this structure can accommodate self-propagating goals. Education is a quintessential example of the self-propagating goal.

In the remaining portion of my commentary, I will return to a critique I raised during the reading group. As Bradford acknowledges in her account of achievement, we categorize a course of action as an achievement if it is difficult. Difficulty is a concept that consists of effort made by the agent in service of the goal. While there is no absolute sense of difficulty—it is relative owing to context-dependent factors—difficulty is a characteristic of all achievements.[10] Difficulty is tied to the exertion of effort, and, therefore, effort is a necessary component of all achievements. Although Bradford thoroughly explores effort and its relation to achievement in detail, I will be focusing on the role of effort in educational assessment.

Although goals are usually set by the agents pursuing them, educational experiences in schools and universities involve the setting of goals by educators. Furthermore, students receive grades in a course, which are perceived as a reflection of their effort in the course. Recent studies on grading and perceptions of effort in high school and college courses have illustrated that students consider the grade to be the fundamental achievement in a class.[11] Educators, who have the responsibility of supplying these grades, are the arbiters of a student's achievement.

This raises a few troubling consequences that I hope Bradford can address in relation to achievement and education. To begin, educational assessments across disciplines tend to converge on common forms of evaluation—essays in the humanities and written examinations in the natural sciences.[12] If students treat grades as the primary achievements in a course, then the optimal methods to achieve these grades prioritize conformity, not experimentation. Studies have shown that students tend to either explicitly ask professors and teachers to offer insight on the methods needed to receive the highest grades or conform to "tried and tested" methods when completing their assessments.[13] What does this mean for education and achievement? Students are not encouraged to experiment with their effort when considering the assessments created by the educator.[14] If expanding on one's notes taken during class lectures yields the highest grades because doing so mirrors the educator's perspective, then students are not developing their own methods of study. They are instrumentalizing their effort in service of an externally imposed goal. This sort of grading system, in light

of Bradford's account, does not support education as a self-propagating goal. But the enduring question remains: what changes can we make to the grading system to realize student achievement that aligns with Bradford's structure of achievement and preserves education as a self-propagating goal?

The second concerning consequence of student perception of grades as the central achievement of a high school or college class is how educators scrutinize a student's culminating product to assign them a grade. The role of student effort when assigning a grade is treated as entirely contained in the product requested by the educator.[15] Within Bradford's structure of achievement, the process is linked to the product in one of two ways: a) the process and product are two distinct yet inextricably linked constituents of an achievement; or b) the process flows into the realization or enactment of the product. In educational assessments, educators predominantly privilege the product without any form of collecting narratives or accounts of student effort, thereby ignoring the *process* component of achievement I have wondered how Bradford would respond to the idea of educators giving students an opportunity to offer a narrative of their effort. How would educators' perceptions shift if they had students' own accounts of how they approached an assessment?

I come to this question with two motivating hopes in mind. Growing up as a student with dyslexia, I remember the day my physics teacher called my parents to school. I was unaware of the need for such a meeting as I was not failing any of my classes; however, that teacher—who was a keen observer of my habits and behavior—lamented the fact that my written scores were dwarfed by my oral assessments. She implored my parents to visit an educational psychologist. I was very young at the time and did not realize that the various word-games and activities the kind psychologist had me complete were forms of evaluation of my mental capacity. The forthcoming explanation of my dyslexia was met with internal stigma—I refused to accept that I was different because I conflated difference with deviance. However, learning about my dyslexia was the catalyst that permitted my shedding of the method of memorization with which I had trudged through school exams. In a literal sense, I had prepared for examinations by memorizing entire textbooks—a foolish and deeply torturous penance. With the license to leave that behind, I began experimenting with the

effort I could apply to my habits of study with a new goal in mind: learning. Instead of writing out every line of entire textbooks, I began speaking to myself, pacing around my room, and writing short commentaries in which I documented my understanding of each concept or idea. The autonomy provided by experimenting with my effort (in other words, the process) led not only to a drastic improvement in my academic performance but also, more importantly, to a shift from a narrow focus on schooling to education as a self-propagating goal.

The second hope I have for pedagogic progress that integrates narratives of student effort stems from Jennifer Morton's powerful work on a group of students she calls "strivers."[16] This group of people, who are *pursuing* a better life for themselves, enter higher education. This entrance into higher education often requires leaving behind the communities in which they grew up. The fundamental dilemma for strivers, who are typically socio-economically constrained and often first-generation students, is that this pursuit of upward mobility through education and the subsequent vocational and career pathways that open from this choice can come into conflict with "remaining closely tied to their family, friends, and community."[17] To lose these meaningful and formative ties to one's community—"ethical goods" in Morton's parlance—is part of the ethical costs of striving.[18] While it is true that students from various walks of life will confront such ethical costs in their journeys, strivers are consistently faced with such challenges that are exacerbated by histories of institutional structures with embedded logics of racism, sexism, misogyny, transphobia, and ableism, to name a few. I worry that educational assessments that prioritize the *conformity* of student effort to reliable methods of securing a grade acutely impact the epistemic horizons for strivers and, ultimately, circumscribe their educational experiences in ways that require pedagogic change.

From an educator's perspective, education is an activity where the achievement of those in your care is itself a laudable achievement. However, the nature of student achievement and the means for its realization is in our hands. We certainly are not in the business of defining our students' achievements, but to use our "engaged voice"—as the late bell hooks reminds us—is to work insurgently within systems of assessment and evaluation that are designed to manage student effort.[19] As Kirsten Welch's commentary below

beautifully articulates, if the goal of an education is to help students exercise certain capacities to a high degree of excellence, then we must create activities to foster such excellence. But, if excellence is about *orienting* students' reason and will toward the achievement of ethical goods, then how must we, as philosophers, educators, and scholar-practitioners, meet this worthy aim? It is vital to remember that Bradford's structure of achievement involves a process and a product, but education as a self-propagating goal involves a recursive process, where the pursuit of learning is a product that recedes from view the closer we approach it. This is not cause for Sisyphean anguish but grounds to reimagine the environment we wish to create for students with a will to achieve.

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1 Gwen Bradford, *Achievement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

2[2] Dominic Lenzi, "The Ethics of Negative Emissions," *Global Sustainability* 1 (2018): 1-8.

3[3] Cara E. Furman and Cecelia E. Traugh, *Descriptive Inquiry in Teacher Practice: Cultivating Practical Wisdom to Create Democratic Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2021).

4[4] David T. Hansen, *Ethical Visions of Education: Philosophies in Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2019).

5[5] Gwen Bradford, "Achievement and Meaning in Life," in *The Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life,* ed. Iddo Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 58-73.

6[6] Bradford, "Achievement and Meaning," 60.

7 Bradford, "Achievement and Meaning," 60.

8[8] Bradford, "Achievement and Meaning," 61.

9[9] Bradford, "Achievement and Meaning," 61.

10 An example Bradford gives to illuminate the context-dependency of difficulty is the act of tying a shoelace. Successfully tying a shoelace does not count as an achievement for many people because it is not difficult for them, but it might count as a genuine achievement for someone with certain

physical disabilities that *do* make performing the act difficult. See Bradford, *Achievement,* 27.

11 Alison C. Koenka et al., "A Meta-analysis on the Impact of Grades and Comments on Academic Motivation and Achievement: A Case for Written Feedback," *Educational Psychology* 41, no. 7 (2021): 922-947.

12 Koenka et al., "A Meta-analysis on the Impact of Grades," 931.

13 Koenka et al., "A Meta-analysis on the Impact of Grades," 932.

14 Vikramaditya Joshi and Amra Sabic-El-Rayess, "Interrupting the Pathways of Hate, Radicalization, and Misinformation: A Pedagogic Response," in *Education and Misinformation,* ed. Lana Parker (New York: Palgrave, 2023), forthcoming.

15 John Dunlosky et al., "The Role of Effort in Understanding Educational Achievement: Objective Effort as an Explanatory Construct versus Effort as a Student Perception," *Educational Psychology Review* 32, no. 4 (2020): 1163-1175.

16 Jennifer Morton, *Moving Up without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 7.

17 Morton, *Moving Up,* 21.

18 Morton, *Moving Up,* 32.

19 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).