

Introduction to Gwen Bradford's *Achievement*: Commentaries and Reply

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When writing my first course syllabus, I was leafing through samples generously shared by my peers. I was eager to begin crafting the guiding document that would offer my students a glimpse into their course experience. Finding the title and writing the course description were relatively straightforward. Although selecting texts and building a reading schedule took considerable time, I was pleased with the outcome. However, I realized I had missed a small but by no means insignificant section of the syllabus: course objectives. I was perplexed. How was I to determine or decide what students would successfully learn by the end of the course? I was afraid of constraining my students' epistemic horizons by asserting particular objectives, so I changed the section title to "course achievements." On the first day of class, I distributed the syllabus and purposefully left this section blank with the hope of asking students to offer a brief piece of writing on their achievements after the last class. One precocious first-year student raised her hand and asked: "What is an achievement?" I began to talk about successfully completing a task but then realized, later in the day, that my spontaneous account of achievement accommodated *any* action that fulfils its stated aim. Although I did not rectify my deficient account of achievement, I was surprised to find no philosophical examination of achievement until I came across Gwen Bradford's *Achievement*, which won the American Philosophical Association's 2017 Book Prize.¹

In this rich account, Bradford offers a response to the question raised by my student: "What is an achievement?" Using a perfectionist framework, her exploration begins with the claim that "achievements of one kind or another are one of life's greatest sources of meaning."² Building on this foundational premise, Bradford joins her exploration of the nature of achievements with a question concerning the value of achievements: the *descriptive* and *value-theoretic* strains of her inquiry. Her rigorous and meticulous account captured the attention of the North Eastern Philosophy of Education Society (NEPES),

whose Executive Board voted to select *Achievement* for the Annual Spring Reading Group. Across three meetings in March and April 2022, several members of NEPES—educators, scholars, practitioners, and graduate students—met to discuss the book. Although the text was not written for the philosophy of education community, it became increasingly clear that Bradford's account is not only germane to questions at the intersection of philosophy and education but also offers conceptual resources to broaden our understanding of the nature and value of achievements in educational experiences. For the final session, Bradford graciously joined the reading group to field questions, offer points of clarification, and share future directions for this ongoing work. This concluding session was energetic and meaningful, characterized by thoughtful critique and exploration of significant passages in the text. Joy Dangora-Erickson, President of NEPES, recognized the value of continuing the conversation between Bradford's account of achievement and the reading group participants. With her encouragement, I proposed the idea of soliciting commentaries from readers and a response from Bradford alongside a deeper exploration of her work's implications for education. Tyson Lewis, with his characteristic attentiveness, supported this idea for inclusion in *Philosophy of Education*, and here we are.

The first commentary below, which I have authored, focuses on Bradford's structure of achievements along with the attendant elements that constitute an achievement, such as difficulty and effort. The second commentary, written by Kirsten Welch (Teachers College, Columbia University), addresses the bearing that Bradford's account of the value of achievement has on education. Bradford replies to both commentaries and offers further insights into the nature and value of achievement in responding to these commentaries.

Thank you to Bradford as author and Welch as critic in this endeavor. Special thanks to NEPES President Joy Dangora-Erickson, the NEPES Executive Board, members of the Spring Reading Group, Tyson Lewis, and the leadership at the Philosophy of Education Society (PES) for their commitment to caring and engaged scholarship.

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

2² Bradford, *Achievement*, 2.