

What We Owe Our Students: *The Good Place*, Pedagogy, and the Architecture of Engaged Learning

Shala Mills

State University of New York at New Paltz
New Paltz, New York, USA
millss@newpaltz.edu

Darrell Hamlin

Fort Hays State University
Hays, Kansas, USA
dahamlin@fhsu.edu

ABSTRACT

Pedagogy is the architecture of a learning environment. The discipline of philosophy has often operated according to a pedagogy of conversation, clarity, and reflection, certainly since the era of Socratic dialogue in the streets of Athens. We argue that *The Good Place* occupies that space, re-setting this pedagogy as an architecture of learning through entertainment associated with ultimate matters of eternal disposition. A critical character driving conversation, clarity, and reflection across four seasons of the story's arc is a philosopher – doomed by their own indecisive flaws – who teaches deep understanding of ethical development through a variety of relevant philosophic problems originating from intellectual history. Confronted with the complexities of an intricately connected world and highly motivated by the weight of ultimate choices, the protagonists bring a sense of how a well-constructed “classroom” can prepare students to meet ordinary challenges, extraordinary obstacles, and even existential crises. *The Good Place* is a classroom with a purposeful syllabus and highly motivated participants, structured for viewers to extract ethical insights of the highest consequence -- if they are willing to keep trying to get it right. By comparison, this article unpacks how the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' *Global Challenges* blended model course is a valuable example of high impact teaching practices which, like *The Good Place*, engage students through content connected to issues that confront them personally and professionally, providing them with opportunities for repetition and mastery.

Keywords: pedagogy, popular culture, wicked problems, Bloom's taxonomy, high impact practices, global challenges, *The Good Place*

INTRODUCTION

This article uses *The Good Place* to explore high impact teaching practices. We also present the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' *Global Challenges* blended model course as an example of a teaching approach, which, like *The Good Place*, engages students through content encounters designed to challenge them toward deeper learning and purposeful growth.

To understand the argument, readers must first have some familiarity with *The Good Place*, a four-season comedy series that aired on NBC from 2016 to 2020. In *The Good Place*, Eleanor Shellstrop awakens in the afterlife where her guide, Michael, introduces her to a heavenly utopia – a good place she has earned by living a good life. Eleanor, who knows she was not a good person, realizes there must be a mistake. She is subsequently introduced to a philosophy professor, Chidi Anagonye, to whom she confides her quandary. She asks him to help her become a better person by teaching her moral philosophy. In this good place, Eleanor's neighbors include Tahani Al-Jamil, a philanthropic socialite, and Jason Mendoza (aka Jianyu Li), an absurdly incompetent petty criminal who initially pretends to be a silent Buddhist monk. By the end of Season 1, we learn that the Good Place is not a heaven, but rather an invented hell designed by Michael to punish all four of these characters. When Eleanor and her friends discover the truth, Michael erases their memories, and they return to the beginning of their afterlife.

The protagonists proceed through myriad reboots. Although their memories are erased after each reboot, they always manage to band together again and discover the truth. As they learn and grow, so does Michael, who decides to help them escape the Bad Place and enter the real Good Place. Michael appeals to a judge who gives each of the four a test to see if they have earned their way to the Good Place. All but Eleanor fail the test. Michael appeals on their behalf again, and all four return to earth with erased memories.

Michael and his AI assistant, Janet, intervene to prevent the deaths of the four protagonists and to nudge them toward finding one another in life. The protagonists eventually learn the truth, and the judge discovers what Michael and Janet are trying to do. Although the protagonists are denied entry to the Good Place, they do endeavor to become better people and to help others find their way to the Good Place. When this team learns that it has been centuries since anyone has actually been allowed into the Good Place, they go on a quest to fix a points system that no longer takes into account the unintended consequences and complexities of modern life.

The final season of the series is a year-long experiment to determine whether humans can undergo moral improvement. The original points system is replaced by a system in which each human can be rebooted as many times as is needed in order for them to achieve moral development. All four of the protagonists finally gain admittance to the actual Good Place. Once there, however, they discover that an eternity of perfect happiness is boring. The solution to this dilemma is offering humans the option to end their existence by walking through a final door.

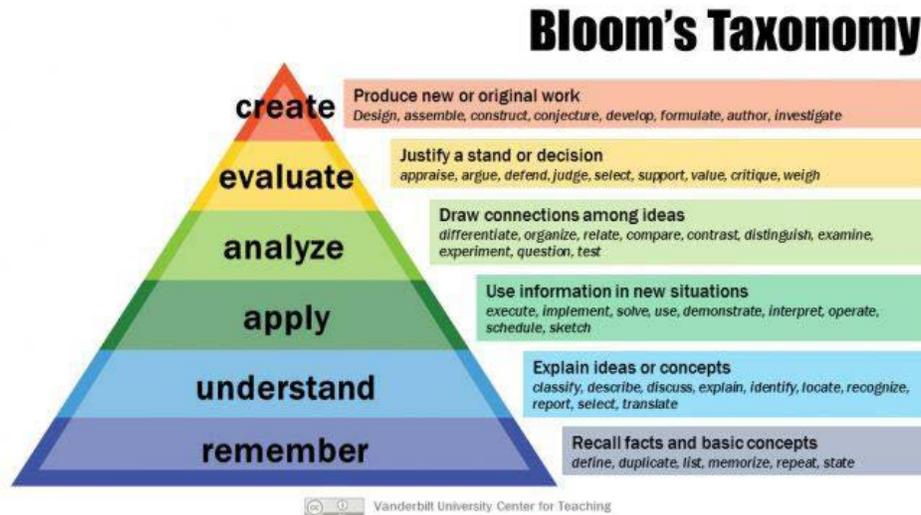
THE GOOD PLACE AS A CLASSROOM

Michael Schur, the creator of *The Good Place*, expressly uses the television series to teach its viewers moral philosophy. Professors of moral philosophy acted as consultants for the series, which covers a wide range of thinkers from Aristotle to Locke to Singer (Matthews, 2019). In interviews about the show, Schur referenced retired Harvard Philosophy Professor Tim Scanlon's work *What We Owe Others* as the "spine" of the series, not only making explicit references to Scanlon's work, but even using the book as a critical prop in season one when Eleanor rips a page from the book to leave herself a note to "find Chidi" (Matthews, 2019).

That the series is a "classroom" is obvious to any viewer. Early in Season 1, the philosophy professor, Chidi Anagonye, sets up a chalkboard and lectures his student, Eleanor Shellstrop, on moral theory. He gives

Eleanor a reading list, and the viewer joins her as she learns how to be a good person. By Season 3, as the entire group of protagonists accept responsibility for the moral improvement of others, viewers encounter overt and sometimes didactic lectures on moral philosophy from all the show’s protagonists. While these lessons on moral philosophy may be the point of the series, there is more to be learned here than moral imperatives, deontology, or nihilism. The series has something to teach us, as faculty, about the architecture of the classroom.

We can interpret the four seasons of the series as a climb up Bloom’s taxonomy:



(Armstrong, n.d.)

In Season 1, our protagonists are clueless new arrivals to the ethical classroom. Chidi gives Eleanor (and us) a class syllabus and we must learn a new vocabulary of moral ethics. Eleanor is at the bottom of Bloom’s pyramid, encountering these philosophical ideas for the first time and attempting to remember and recall the basic concepts. In Episode 2, “Flying,” Chidi knows his work is cut out for him when he begins to explain Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* to Eleanor, who’s favorite “book” is Kendall Jenner’s Instagram feed. He begins by telling her Kant’s book is “a treatise on the aesthetic preconditions of the mind’s receptivity to duty.” But she clearly does not follow. “It’s a book on how to act good,” he finally says (Yang & McDonald, 2016). Chidi’s initial reservations relate to his judgment that Eleanor is simply too self-absorbed to ever be a good person, yet as any teacher knows, you start where the students are. As Chidi introduces Eleanor to new philosophical concepts, he writes the vocabulary on the chalkboard and connects the new terms to specific philosophers and their conceptions of the ideas to which he introduces her. He assigns her readings where she can learn these basic philosophical frameworks, and in their classroom, he responds to her questions about the content (Muharrar & McCarthy-Miller, 2016).

In Season 2, our protagonists advance up Bloom’s taxonomy as Eleanor gains greater understanding of moral philosophy and becomes sufficiently equipped to discuss it with Chidi and apply it to herself and to other situations. In “The Trolley Problem,” Episode 19, we encounter the classic thought experiment used to help students grapple with moral dilemmas. In the series, the Trolley Problem comes to life as our protagonists find themselves on an actual trolley hurtling toward individuals on the tracks. Is it preferable to let one person die in order to save six? Does it matter what one’s motives are? This is an example of educational experiences where students are learning more than just the definitions of utilitarian or deontological ethics as they apply those definitions to circumstances to which they can relate. Viewers, like the protagonist ensemble, take away the lesson that choices can have outcomes with great moral weight (Siegal et al., 2017).

Choice is especially difficult for Chidi. He has mastered academic knowledge about moral philosophy, yet he remains paralyzed with indecision, overwhelmed by the application of concepts to his own life. Even drinking almond milk presents a moral dilemma, so how can he make a choice in the lived experience of the Trolley Problem? The viewer becomes a student who sees the insight: it is not enough for Chidi to have mastered intellectual content if he is incapable of navigating the implications in that lived experience. Hence, the true test of moral commitment is outside the classroom.

The architecture of learning in *The Good Place* illustrates the value of enriching students' conceptual mastery with applied learning experiences. Experiential learning is one of the cornerstones of The American Association of Colleges and Universities' High Impact Practices (Kuh, 2008). Relying on George Kuh's work, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (2008) AAC&U describes this sort of learning by explaining: "The idea is to give students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community. A key element in these programs is the opportunity students have to both apply what they are learning in real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences" (Kuh, 2008). While the AAC&U high impact practice focuses on community-based and service-learning activities, it encompasses a broader argument for experience and application as being essential to deep learning. Indeed, applying learning, analyzing situations, and evaluating options is central to growth in Bloom's taxonomy. In the "classroom" of Season 2, we see powerful examples of how moving up Bloom's taxonomy through application, analysis, and evaluation are critical for deep understanding of complex problems and their solutions.

Season 3 involves even deeper advancement along Bloom's higher levels of learning as Eleanor, Tahani, and even Jason find themselves applying ethical thinking to their own actions, analyzing and evaluating situations as they actively seek to live better lives on earth. Even after they discover that they are eternally doomed, the ensemble redoubles their efforts at moral improvement, channeling their energies towards saving their family and friends (see e.g., Murray & Asher, 2018; Miller & McCarthy-Miller, 2018). As a refreshingly clear example of a meaningful "group project," the learning reaches such levels of proficiency that the protagonists take on teaching roles to enlighten others. Season 3 has many didactic moments in which it teaches us about virtue ethics, consequentialism, deontology, and nihilism. In Episode 31, *Jeremy Bearimy*, in particular, provides carefully constructed examples through the protagonists embodying these different philosophical frameworks. Breaking down under the stress, Chidi tells his students in real life, "The actual ethical system that you should all follow is nihilism. The world is empty. There is no point to anything, and you are just going to die. So do whatever." But while Chidi is consumed by nihilism, Tahani gives \$2 million dollars to the Sydney Opera anonymously (virtue ethics), Eleanor goes out of her way to return a lost wallet (deontology), and Tahani and Jason give away money to people in need (consequentialism) (Amram & O'Donnell, 2018).

As educators, we know that the deepest learning occurs when students care acutely about their own learning. In Season 3, the protagonists' learning deepens because they are finally coming to grips with the consequences of their choices and the choices of their family and friends. Their learning is not an ivory tower conversation detached from their own lives, but is, instead, deeply personal. They understand why their learning matters, and that understanding provides the motivation necessary for mastering moral philosophy. As educators, many of us have had the experience of standing in front of a classroom talking about some topic of deep disciplinary interest to us, but of little interest to a classroom of bored students. Ideally, we can also point to moments when the classroom was alive with energy and enthusiasm for the topic at hand. What contributed to those more engaged learning environments? Was it our eloquence as the sage on the stage? Or was it, perhaps, when the students were, themselves, engaging the content and applying it to something that mattered in their own lives? It is this that is at the heart of AAC&U's *High Impact Practices* (HIP). Most of

the HIPs are aimed at engagement with others and/or application to the student's personal and professional goals through learning activities such as first-year experiences, learning communities, collaborative projects, ePortfolios, internships, service-learning, and capstone projects (Kuh, 20008).

Season 4 takes us to the highest Bloom level, where our protagonists create solutions to the ultimate challenges, providing a path for all humans to make progress toward ethical improvement. In the original version of Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) "evaluation" was at the pinnacle of the taxonomy. In 2001, a team of scholars revised that taxonomy, putting "create" at the peak (Anderson et al., 2001). Indeed, academics greatly value the creation of new knowledge as the pinnacle of scholarly achievement. In Season 4, when confronted with the brokenness of the point system in the context of a hyper-connected and complex world, our protagonists reject the old models. Judge Gen suggests just scrapping the entire human experiment, but our protagonists offer, instead, a new vision for the future (Schur, 2019-20). They create a solution to the problem. Chidi, rebooted for the final time, gains the benefit of all his past reboots. Possessing the full breadth of the lessons from hundreds of life reboots, Chidi synthesizes his experiences with his academic knowledge. Chidi realizes that there are no objective right and wrong answers to the complex problems that have bedeviled him throughout his life. In Episode 48, "The Answer," he grasps that meaningful relationships are what ultimately matter. Finally, he is confident and decisive (Schofield & Migliassi, 2019). Chidi helps create a solution whereby humans will have unlimited opportunities to "pass the test," rebooting as often as they need (perhaps eternally) to make it to the Good Place. Eleanor becomes a star student when, in Episode 12, "Patty," (Amram & Sackett, 2020) the protagonists discover that the real good place is not an especially happy place. With an eternity of whatever it is that each individual may desire stretching out before them, existence has no real meaning anymore. Eleanor proposes the ultimate solution, and Michael creates a door through which anyone in the Good Place can pass when they are ready to close their existence. Thus, our classroom experience ends with our protagonist students having used their moral education to create the ultimate solution with systemic reform.

The Good Place models effective teaching. For an educator, this learning gains power through the example of a professor plagued by self-doubt and hampered by his own flaws. Called to teach, despite personal and pedagogical flaws we may bring to the classroom, we struggle too, so our students may learn. If we are fortunate, as Chidi learns from Eleanor, we learn from our students; some of our students, like Tahani, will answer a call to be architects of the learning environment themselves. As educators, we must enable our classes to advance skillfully through Bloom's levels of learning. Our goals should be clear and recognizable: students must understand and remember basic concepts, apply those concepts to new facts and to their own lives, analyze and synthesize information in order to evaluate best approaches and, ultimately, to use their deep knowledge to create solutions for their personal and professional lives.

WICKED PROBLEMS AND AASCU'S GLOBAL CHALLENGES AS A MODEL

A reality all educators encounter is the limitation of our ability to engage students who do not desire engagement. At the beginning of Season 1, when Eleanor arrives in the Good Place, she is not a model student. She has lived a vapid, self-centered life. She quickly suspects that she does not belong in the Good Place and only takes up the study of moral philosophy as a means of saving herself from eviction. Her goal is, like her goals in life, self-centered. That egocentric goal is motivating for her, and she does make intellectual progress, yet the truly passionate engagement in the learning process does not happen until Season 3. At this level, the group throws itself into the project of moral improvement, not to save themselves as individuals, for they understand that their eternal fate is set. Rather, they engage in the project to save others. In Episode 32, "The Ballad of Donkey Doug," Jason heads to Florida with Tahani and Michael to try to get Donkey Doug, and

later Pillboi, to abandon crime and pursue a legitimate line of work (Murry & Asher, 2018). In Episode 33, “A Fractured Inheritance,” despite her anger at learning that her mother faked her death and her resentment that her mother, Donna, has become a real mother to her stepdaughter, Eleanor helps her mother commit to a better life, and Tahani travels to Budapest to make amends with her sister (Miller & McCarthy-Miller, 2018). In short, each of the protagonists discovers their deepest motivation of making a difference in the lives of others. This offers us educators an important insight into the motivations of students.

In “Challenging the First Year of College: Old Models and New Imperatives,” Mills and Mehaffy argue that the traditional first year college experience and general education curriculum fail to engage our students. Faculty often feel it is the students who are unprepared for success, but Mills and Mehaffy ask whether our students may be unprepared because the traditional first year curriculum is typically presented to them as “a set of disconnected experiences, described in an arcane and unfamiliar language, which appear[s] to have no relevance to their lives” (Mills & Mehaffy, 2016). Drawing from the work of George Kuh (2008) they argue that “Engagement occurs when people are interested in what they are doing and are involved in and passionate about their work and its meaning. Engagement results when academic programs connect to a student’s core concerns, life experiences, and deeply held values” (Mills & Mehaffy, 2016). Mills and Mehaffy offer the American Association of State Colleges and Universities’ National Blended Course Consortium, and, specifically, its Global Challenges curriculum as a new model for engaging students.

Global Challenges: Promise & Peril in the 21st-Century is a blended model course created by a team of Global Engagement scholars assembled from more than a dozen state comprehensive college members of the American Association of State Colleges & Universities (AASCU). The framework for the course was inspired by a 2006 presentation by Erik Peterson, then Director of the Global Strategies Institute at the non-partisan public policy think tank Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS). Before an AASCU conference audience, Peterson’s talk focused on what CSIS had identified as the seven key drivers of change – 1) population, 2) resources, 3) technology, 4) information, 5) economies, 6) security, and 7) governance.

Initially, the Global Engagement scholars focused on sharing teaching strategies using the Seven Revolutions framework at institutes and workshops and through the publication of *Teaching Seven Revolutions: A Tool Kit for Educating Globally Competent Citizens* (Falk et al., 2016). Later, the scholars developed a model course/eBook, now available through Inspark Education. The model course/eBook uses an interactive adaptive learning approach where students experience a customized version of the course materials due to their making their own choices about the order in which to complete assignments, and the immediate feedback they receive in response to their answers to embedded assessments. Student engagement in the course is heightened by an approach that urges them to perceive the influence of these key drivers of change in their personal and professional lives. It draws attention to the crises associated with many of these seven global challenges, and goes further by offering approaches for students to effect change in response to these sometimes frightening drivers of change.

This Global Challenges curriculum covers much of what Mills and Mehaffy describe as the “nutritional” value of general education learning outcomes, but it does so in the context of addressing the world’s daunting challenges. This, they argue, provides content that is “urgent, relevant, and clearly connected to the students’ professional and personal lives. Students can readily see why they need knowledge beyond the confines of their major in order to address these global challenges. While discovering what the world of their future will look like, they consider, in reflective, value-laden ways, who they want and need to be in that world” (Mills & Mehaffy, 2016)

As members of the AASCU Global Engagement Project, we have been deeply involved in the creation of this model curriculum, publishing, with other members of the AASCU Global Engagement Scholars team, an array of related scholarship (see, e.g., Falk et al., 2014; Falk & Hamlin, 2015; Falk et al., 2012; Falk et al., 2016;

Hamlin & Whitaker, 2010; Mills & Mehaffy, 2016; Mills & Sun, 2014; Shapiro & Mills, 2012; Zappile & Mills, 2015; Zappile & Mills, 2018). The project offers a number of examples that highlight pedagogical architecture, but here we begin by exploring the central hook that the AASCU Global Challenges curriculum employs – using “wicked problems” to establish imperatives like those that Eleanor, Tahani, and Jason face in *The Good Place*. Rittel and Webber first wrote about the idea of “wicked problems” in their 1973 article, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” noting that policy problems are especially challenging in a pluralistic society where the causes of a problem are complex and where there are no definitive and objective solutions (Rittel and Webber, 1973). By focusing the content on seven of the greatest challenges facing the world today (the wicked problems of population, resources, technology, information, economies, conflict, and governance), the course confronts students with ultimate questions, bringing relevance and urgency to the task of learning to engage those daunting challenges. If educators aim to engage students in the way that led Eleanor and the other protagonists in *The Good Place* to be committed to their learning, one way to do so is by applying academic knowledge to real world issues that students understand to be most pressing for the professional and personal lives they will live. The Global Challenges curriculum works towards that end. For example, General Education students have noted that this course was powerful because, unlike their experience with other General Education courses, they could readily see how the course helped them to think about the world they would be living in, and how their major course of study and ensuing life choices would impact -- and be impacted by -- the knowledge they were acquiring. To make our students hungry to learn, we must make their learning relevant and urgent.

Wicked problems are a hook to engage students. Beyond entertainment or philosophic exercise, *The Good Place* teaches about *wicked problems*. Through a narrative arc driven by what it means to be “woke,” the consequences of connectedness explored in the series can be underlined. In Season 3, for example, the protagonists discover that no mortal has advanced to the actual good place in centuries. And why is this? It is because the world has become so complex and interconnected that the simple act of giving your grandmother roses for her birthday gives rise to myriad ways in which harm comes to others through a massive “carbon footprint” of unintended consequences. Even when one wants to do something “good,” one is constantly engaging in a long series of unintended bad actions (Gersten & Whittingham, 2019) The character of Doug Forcett illustrates this impossibility of navigating the consequential nature of his choices. In Season 3’s Episode 35, “Don’t Let the Good Life Pass You By,” (Law & Holland, 2018) Michael and Janet pay a visit to the legendary hero of the Good Place, the human who first understood the workings of the afterlife, in the hope that Doug may be a model for others, but they soon realize that he is anything but, because he has become a “happiness pump.” This term is a criticism of utilitarianism: Doug is so obsessed with earning enough points to be accepted into the Good Place that it leads to an absurd life in which he lets others behave abusively toward him.

Hence, the series presents the viewer with a lens for considering moral motivation. What are the limits to our capacity for ethical action? Should humans be culpable for all unintended consequences, whether or not they were aware of them? Does “wokeness” make us more culpable? Once we have information, for example, about our own privilege compared to the poverty of others, do we now have an even greater duty to others? *The Good Place* reminds every educator to consider such questions with learning structured through a pedagogy of engagement. Using the Global Challenges curriculum, one professor has illustrated this reality with a lesson related to cell phones. Drawing the students’ attention to how many of them, himself included, live with a cell phone dependency for information, entertainment, and connection to the larger world, the lesson highlights disturbing realities involved in the production of this technology, such as dwindling reserves of finite precious metals, the abuse of already poverty-stricken laborers, and the effects of inequality, among others. Awakened to this underlying truth of cost in this context, the discussion proceeds to consider the personal and social responsibility that should attend the convenience of a cell phone.

Early in the Global Challenges project, faculty associated with the course discovered that the content was often depressing to students. Like Chidi in the “Jeremy Bearimy” episode, some students’ response to the content was nihilistic – we might as well eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow we will all die (or, as Eleanor lies to the bartender, “Now give me another drink, tomorrow’s my birthday”) (Amram & O’Donnell, 2018). To counter this demoralizing byproduct of understanding the daunting – even paralyzing – dimensions of the wicked problems facing humanity, the project team added civic engagement elements to the course to connect students with opportunities for individual and collective work to create solutions to global challenges. Like the protagonists in *The Good Place*, the curriculum offered students engagement pathways for the common good, with a resulting increase in their sense of self-efficacy (Mills & Sun, 2014).

POINT SYSTEMS

In Season 3 of the series, we learn about the brokenness of the points system by which humans can theoretically enter the Good Place. No one gets to the actual Good Place because the deductions from all the unintended consequences always outweigh the good deeds of humans. The point system is thus flawed. In Season 4’s Episode 47, “The Funeral to End All Funerals,” even Judge Gen agrees that the world is broken. She notes that although the “system has been in place since the dawn of time,” it does not accurately judge how good or bad people are because people are always capable of improvement. Her solution is to scrap the entire human project and start earth all over again (Siegal et al., 2019). Ultimately, in Episode 49, “You’ve Changed, Man,” our protagonists create a new system in which everyone has the opportunity to be continually rebooted until they pass the test and are able to gain access to the Good Place, no matter how many reboots it takes to get it right (Murray & Asher, 2020).

What does this point system have to say to us about pedagogy? This group project of the protagonists’ in *The Good Place* leads us to focus on the advantages of a more adaptive model for deeper learning in a pedagogy of engagement. Consider, for example, how we traditionally evaluate our students. A syllabus typically includes some sort of point structure to represent achievement towards learning objectives. Students gain or lose points according to their performance on a series of assignments the professor gives throughout the semester. *The Good Place* suggests this might not be the best way to encourage student development or measure their growth. When we focus on points, we are not directing students towards learning. Indeed, we turn students into “points barons” who become so preoccupied with the marks available for an assignment that they miss the learning within it. We teach them to amass reserves of points early in the course, incentivizing them to take important assignments set at the end of the term less seriously. Conversely, we also incentivize minimal point accruing behaviors for those who just want to get through the class with an average or passing grade. Neither approach represents a way to achieve deep learning in a course or become a good person in one’s life. A more adaptive model, like the protagonists in *The Good Place* devise, provides the opportunity to continue learning through repetition until the content is mastered. In a pedagogy of engagement, students are encouraged to meet learning objectives rather than points objectives whereby form should follow function.

Evidence-based research indicates that the adaptive model in *The Good Place* works in the classroom as well. In “Using quizzes to enhance summative-assessment performance in a web-based class: an experimental study,” experiments were designed in which students had the opportunity to receive feedback, after which they could retake quizzes in an online platform. Student performance improved with repeated attempts, with improved achievement on subsequent exams as well. The authors of the research noted that “The present experiments thus provide some of the strongest evidence to date that taking quizzes with feedback can positively affect student learning outcomes in college-level courses . . . , and even when the quizzes are on-line and unsupervised” (McDaniel et al., 2012). Faculty using the Global Challenges curriculum have experimented

with low stakes repeatable online quizzes to similarly successful effect. The Global Challenges faculty who used this strategy observed, just as McDaniel, Wildman and Anderson noted, that one possible explanation for this approach being successful was that the repetitive testing served to identify “for students content that is not yet well learned and that merits further study” (McDaniel et al., 2012). Like our protagonists in *The Good Place*, repetition served students with an opportunity to learn until they achieved mastery.

This is at the heart of current work around adaptive learning, which is yet another way in which the Global Challenges curriculum has attempted to design an effective learning environment. As McGraw Hill explained in “What is Adaptive Learning Anyway?,” adaptive learning is a mastery-based approach.

[M]astery-based instruction places the emphasis on mastery rather than seat-time, which generally leads to higher proficiency and engagement levels for all learners. For those who are unfamiliar with the concept, “mastery-based” learning has a few basic tenets: progression through a course of study should be based on proficiency rather than hours spent; learners cannot give up; learners must achieve proficiency in order to progress and complete the course; learners can spend however long they need to master concepts. The thinking is fundamental to a more learner-centric model of education. (Posner, 2017)

The most recent iteration of the Global Challenges course is presented on an adaptive learning platform where students have some control over the learning experience through choice points. This enables them to determine the topic they wish to cover next. Further, they are unable to move to the next learning activity until they have successfully completed a prior activity, even if that means they have to encounter repeated variations on that earlier activity. Thus, an adaptive learning approach, like the point system reform in *The Good Place*, provides valuable opportunities for students to master the material, with each student progressing through the content at their individual pace and with as many repetitions as it takes to achieve success.

CONCLUSION

As educators, we should bear a great responsibility as we “burden” our students with information, especially when the resulting knowledge conflicts with, and necessarily displaces, existing perspectives. We work in Plato’s cave, introducing our students to new heights of awareness, yet often forgetting the discomfort of light that ensues on their unconditioned eyes. As Richard Rodriguez described in his memoir *Hunger for Memory*, (Rodriguez, 1982) education changes the student; to teach, at times, is to alienate them from family, friends, and others still shackled to the experience of the shadows on a cave wall. A pedagogy of engagement, like the one developed by the AASCU Global Engagement Project, charges us to awaken students and build skills for purposeful work to solve wicked problems. *The Good Place* is television that within a syllabus connects theory to practice. Encountered in the cave of home entertainment, *The Good Place* stimulates a vision of teachers and students, struggling together to make enlightened choices of ethical consequence. In this sense, we are mindful of words attributed to the late poet Maya Angelou. “When you know better, do better” (Winfrey, 2011)

REFERENCES

- Amram, M. (Writer), & O'Donnell, T. (Director). (2018, October 18). Jeremy Bearimy (Season 3, Episode 5) [Television series episode]. In M. Schur, D. Miner, M. Sackett, & D. Goddard (Executive Producers), *The Good Place*. NBC Studios.
- Amram, M. (Writer), & Sackett, M. (Director). (2020, January 23). Patty (Season 4, Episode 12). [Television series episode]. In M. Schur, D. Miner, M. Sackett, & D. Goddard (Executive Producers), *The Good Place*. NBC Studios.
- Anderson, L. W., Bloom, B. S., & Krathwohl, D. R. (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. Longman.
- Armstrong, P. (n.d.). *Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching*. <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/>
- Bloom, B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals*. David McKay.
- Falk, D. R., Domagal-Goldman, J., & Hoerrner, K. L. (2014). The AASCU Global Engagement Initiative: Educating Globally Competent Citizens. *EJournal of Public Affairs*, 3(3), 7-22.
- Falk, D. R., & Hamlin, D. A. (2015). Global engagement: Educating globally competent citizens. *EJournal of Public Affairs*, 4(1), 1-6.
- Falk, D. R., Mills, S., Domagal-Goldman, J., & Orphan, C. M. (2012). Introduction. In Elliott-Gower, S., Falk, D.R., & Shapiro, M., *Educating globally competent citizens: A toolkit* (2nd ed., pp. 5-16). American Association of State Colleges and Universities.
- Falk, D. R., Shapiro, M., Mills, S., Elliott-Gower, S., & Hips, M. (Eds.). (2016). *Educating globally competent citizens: A toolkit* (3rd ed.). American Association of State Colleges and Universities.
- Gersten, K. (Writer). Whittingham, K. (Director). (2019, January 10). The Book of Dougs. (Season 3, Episode 11). [Television series episode]. In M. Schur, D. Miner, M. Sackett, & D. Goddard (Executive Producers), *The Good Place*. NBC Studios.
- Hamlin, D., & Whitaker, B. (2010). Surviving the future: The Seven Revolutions Initiative as a strategic model for curricular and institutional innovation. *Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University*, 2 (4). Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ts/vol2/iss1/4>.
- Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Association of American Colleges and Universities. <https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips>.
- Law, A. (Writer). Holland, D. (Director). (2018, November 15). Don't Let the Good Life Pass You By. (Season 3, Episode 9). [Television series episode]. In M. Schur, D. Miner, M. Sackett, & D. Goddard (Executive Producers), *The Good Place*. NBC Studios.
- Matthews, D. (2019, July 24). *How The Good Place taught moral philosophy to its characters - and its creators*. <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2019/9/26/20874217/the-good-place-series-finale-season-4-moral-philosophy>.
- McDaniel, M. A., Wildman, K. M., & Anderson, J. L. (2012). Using quizzes to enhance summative-assessment performance in a web-based class: An experimental study. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 1(1), 18-26. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2011.10.001>
- Miller, K. (Writer). McCarthy-Miller, B. (Director). (2018, November 1). A Fractured Inheritance. (Season 3, Episode 7). [Television series episode]. In M. Schur, D. Miner, M. Sackett, & D. Goddard (Executive Producers), *The Good Place*. NBC Studios.
- Mills, S. A., & Mehaffy, G. L. (2016). Challenging the first year of college: Old models and new imperatives. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2016(145), 57-65. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20175>.
- Mills, S., & Sun, J. (2014). Assessing AASCU's global challenges blended model course. *EJournal of Public Affairs*, 3(3), 23-49.

- Muharrar, A. (Writer). McCarthy-Miller, B. (Director). (2016, September 22). Tahani Al-Jamil. (Season 1, Episode 3). [Television series episode]. In M. Schur, D. Miner, M. Sackett, & D. Goddard (Executive Producers), *The Good Place*. NBC Studios.
- Murray, M. (Writer). Asher, R. (Director). (2018, October 25). The Ballad of Donkey Doug. (Season 3, Episode 6). [Television series episode]. In M. Schur, D. Miner, M. Sackett, & D. Goddard (Executive Producers), *The Good Place*. NBC Studios.
- Murray, M. (Writer). Asher, R. (Director). (2020, January 9). You've Changed, Man. (Season 4, Episode 10). [Television series episode]. In M. Schur, D. Miner, M. Sackett, & D. Goddard (Executive Producers), *The Good Place*. NBC Studios.
- Posner, Z. (2017, January 11). What is adaptive learning anyway? from <https://www.mheducation.com/ideas/what-is-adaptive-learning.html>.
- Rittel, H., & M. Webber, M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4(2), 155-169. Retrieved August 22, 2021 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4531523>.
- Rodriguez, R. (1982). *Hunger of memory: The education of Richard Rodriguez*. David R. Godine Publishers.
- Schofield, D. (Writer), & Migliassi Collins, V. (Director). (2019, November 21). The Answer (Season 4, Episode 9.) [Television series episode]. In M. Schur, D. Miner, M. Sackett, & D. Goddard (Executive Producers), *The Good Place*. NBC Studios.
- M. Schur, D. Miner, M. Sackett, & D. Goddard (Executive Producers). (2016-2020). Season 4. *The Good place*. [TV series]. NBC Studios.
- Shapiro, M., & Mills, S. (2012). Educating globally competent citizens: An AASCU red balloon project. *Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University*, 4(1), 55-67. <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ts/vol4/iss1/6>.
- Siegal, J., & Morgan, D. (Writers), & Bell, K. (Director). (2019, November 14). The Funeral to End all Funerals. (Season 4, Episode 8.) [Television series episode]. In M. Schur, D. Miner, M. Sackett, & D. Goddard (Executive Producers), *The Good Place*. NBC Studios.
- Siegal, J., & Morgan, D. (Writers), & Holland, D. (Director). (2017, October 19). The Trolley Problem. (Season 2, Episode 6). [Television series episode]. In M. Schur, D. Miner, M. Sackett, & D. Goddard (Executive Producers), *The Good Place*. NBC Studios.
- Winfrey, O. (2011, October 19). The powerful lesson Maya Angelou taught Oprah. <http://www.oprah.com/oprahs-lifeclass/the-powerful-lesson-maya-angelou-taught-oprah-video>
- Yang, A. (Writer). McDonald, M. (Director). (2016, September 19). Flying. [Television series episode]. In M. Schur, D. Miner, M. Sackett, & D. Goddard (Executive Producers), *The Good Place*. NBC Studios.
- Zappile, T., & Mills, S. (2015). AASCU's global challenges: Promise and peril in the 21st century course. *EJournal of Public Affairs*, 4(1), 30-55. <https://doi:10.21768/ejopa.v4i1.59>.
- Zappile, T., & Mills, S. (2018). Global challenges: Promise and peril in the 21st century. Smart Sparrow.

AUTHOR BIOS

Shala Mills, Associate Provost for Academic Planning & Learning Innovation at State University of New York at New Paltz, was formerly Chair and Professor of Political Science at Fort Hays State University (Kansas). She is the recipient of numerous teaching and advising awards. She has taught courses in the areas of law and the courts, current political issues, sustainability, food and politics, and global challenges. She served as one of the AASCU Global Engagement Scholars, was the National Coordinator for the AASCU Global Challenges Project, and was the 2017 recipient of AASCU's Barbara Burch Award for Faculty Leadership in Civic Engagement. Her most recent publications have been in the areas of academic assessment and leadership and global challenges.

Darrell Hamlin, Associate Professor of Political Science at Fort Hays State University (Kansas), is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Civic Leadership at FHSU and Managing Editor for the *eJournal of Public Affairs*. He previously served as Associate Professor of Criminal Justice at FHSU and as Assistant Professor of Political Science at Spring Hill College (Alabama). Hamlin was one of the original AASCU Global Engagement Scholars, and his scholarly interests relate to the culture and politics of democracy.

SUGGESTED REFERENCE

APA

Mills, S., & Hamlin, D. (2021). What we owe our students: *The Good Place*, pedagogy, and the architecture of engaged learning. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, 8(2). (link will be added later)

MLA

Mills, Shala, and Darrell Hamlin. "What We Owe Our Students: The Good Place, Pedagogy, and the Architecture of Engaged Learning." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2021, (link will be added later)



All papers in *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* are published under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-Alike License. For details please go to: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/>.