

Transcript

Episode 103

Grading for Proficiency | Book Club: The One World School House

The A&P Professor Podcast

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Introduction

Kevin Patton (00:00):

The educator Salman Khan once wrote, "It is the connections among concepts or the lack of connections that separate the students who memorize a formula for an exam only to forget it the next month and the students who internalize the concepts and are able to apply them when they need them a decade later."

Aileen (00:25):

Welcome to The A&P Professor, a few minutes to focus on teaching human anatomy and physiology with a veteran educator and teaching mentor, your host, Kevin Patton.

Kevin Patton (00:40):

In this episode, I offer a new book club recommendation and I tell my story of an experiment with proficiency grading.

Book Club: The One World School House

Kevin Patton (00:49):

I've mentioned a few times the HAPS Book Club, which I've really been enjoying when I can and I'll never forget one of the first book clubs I ever participated in. It was something new at my college and this was quite a while ago and it was meant for faculty to discuss important and sometimes controversial books that might help us grow as educators. The first assigned book in this newly established faculty book club was by Salman Khan, that guy that started Khan Academy. It's titled *The One World Schoolhouse: Education Reimagined*.

Kevin Patton (01:42):

Now, to me, it seemed like it was going to be more about elementary education than college education, and therefore, maybe not the best choice for our book club, but it wasn't up to me. The committee or somebody decided that it was a good book, so why question it? It's out of my hands. But really, is that the best book for us? I don't really remember why I thought that, because even back then, I had already realized that there are a lot of amazing strategies in K-12 education that import easily to higher ed. As a matter of fact, that's my own background. My original exposure to education was at the secondary level.

Kevin Patton (02:28):

When I was an undergraduate, I came out with not only a bachelor's degree in biology, but a certification to teach high school biology and middle school and freshmen, high school general science and so I had done my student teaching. I'd taken all the teaching and education courses. I knew how to do a lesson plan. I knew how to develop a course. I knew what learning objectives were and how to write them. I knew all of this stuff and I had done practice and then be judged on it and so on. When I started teaching in higher ed, I just brought all that with me and realized that many of the people around me didn't know how to do that and it really made a difference in my teaching and so I already kind of knew that.

Kevin Patton (03:18):

But another thing about the book that put me off a little bit is I'm not really one to be drawn to books by famous people, telling us how they lifted themselves up by their own bootstraps and made it big, all on their own. Nobody helped them, which of course is ridiculous. Nobody who has been highly successful has done it on their own. There are many, many people, many of whom they're not even aware of that helped them get where they are. So those kind of books just don't appeal to me at all. So I thought, "No. Okay, he's the Khan Academy guy. I don't care." You know what I mean? I like Khan Academy, just fine, I think it can be very, very helpful for students, but I don't need to read his life story. I don't think.

Kevin Patton (04:04):

Well, it wasn't a book like that, as it turns out. There were some snippets about why he did what he did and the steps that he took along the way, but it was mostly background as to how he arrived at the ideas that he was imparting and that's kind of the book I like, is the kind of book where it has ideas, especially ideas that are unfamiliar to me, maybe even challenging to me. To me, that's fun. To me, that's interesting. So luckily, it turned out to be that book. And you know what? I could hardly put it down. How many times can you say that, "Oh, here's a book about education. I could hardly put it down"? Well, you know what I mean? I love education. I love learning about education, but I can't always say that all the education books are page turners, but this one was. I thought it was.

Kevin Patton (04:56):

Another reason I did it before I even knew is a page turner, I just always wanted to be part of a book club, I've never been and I always like talking with my peers and my friends about teaching, so there was that to draw me in. So yeah, I was willing to give it a go. And like I said, wow, it just drew me right in. It's such a forward-thinking book that really resonated with some things I'd already been experimenting with in my own courses and found to be effective, things I've already talked to you about and things that I'll soon be talking to you about on this very podcast.

Kevin Patton (05:40):

And it challenged me with ideas that didn't resonate so well with me, things I didn't agree with, things that rubbed me the wrong way because they were either new to me or because they were in such opposition to what I thought I knew about teaching and learning, but I was having a hard time getting past that threat to my own idea of the world. But as I've mulling them over, I started to see where he was coming from and started to become more and more willing to see his perspective. I still don't agree with everything he said, but at least I see why he said it. I see the logic in it. I see the history behind it. And maybe someday, it'll break through to me and I'll say that, "You know what? He was right all along and I wasn't," or, "He was right in this way at least."

Kevin Patton (06:41):

So here I am at my very first book club, all excited and I had read a book that I turned out that I really liked and I really wanted to talk about and really wanted to debate about because there's lots of meat in there to debate about, things I knew that people want to argue about and argue in a good sense, that is the debate sense. So there we were at around table small enough for me here, everyone. And I found out that a small table where you can hear everybody is a luxury in higher ed because I found out that in higher ed, it's usually only the students who get accommodations for their challenges, in my case hearing impairment.

Kevin Patton (07:26):

So that was nice to be in a situation where I wasn't in a big auditorium where I couldn't hear anybody because nobody was using a microphone. They'd always look off to the side and say, "Can everybody hear me?" Well, if I can't hear you ask that question, how am I going to answer it? And all they need is one yes and they're, "All good. Okay, we're going to start talking." So there, I just started going down a rabbit hole, I didn't mean to, but by golly, let's be better about that in education regarding faculty and staff. So there I was at the small enough table and I was looking forward to actually hearing everybody's viewpoints on this book and maybe getting into a juicy debate. And so I started things off because I so excited.

Kevin Patton (08:11):

I said, "Well, what's your overall reactions to the book? What did you guys think about this?" And you know what? It turns out, as the only person there that had read any of the book. I'd read the whole thing. And my peers had read, well, no thing in the book. I can still feel that sinking of the heart even now, as I retell this story. Interestingly, or maybe I should say appallingly, nearly everyone had some criticism of the book. They all had something to share. It was all knocking down the author of the book, but they didn't even read the book. They even read a paragraph of the book. I'm not even sure they read the dust jacket of the book and here they were criticizing it like, "No, no, no, none of that's right. He probably said this and he probably said that."

Kevin Patton (09:17):

And I'm like, "Wait a minute, having read the whole darn thing, that wasn't in the book. I knew that wasn't in the book," but they were saying, "Well, it was probably in the book." No, really, it wasn't. Well, they're not going to listen to me, because number one, they didn't even really care about it. Not that they didn't care about me and they weren't rude to me, it was just clear they weren't interested in this book and they weren't really that interested in talking about it. But they felt obligated to do it because they were there ready for a required meeting, even though this part of it wasn't required and didn't have anywhere else to go, I guess, I don't know or they were waiting to meet their friends for lunch or something, I don't know.

Kevin Patton (10:02):

It just immediately disassembled in the conversations about other topics and the book club was over. And when I say it was over, I mean over. We were never given another book to read because that was probably going on at other tables too like, "No, I ain't reading that book because it's probably says this and that. So yeah. No, we're not going to do that." Anyway, back to the book, I find it to be something that really got me thinking about how we do education, how students learn and how I should be teaching or coaching students, how I should be active in assembling the infrastructure in my course and the infrastructure of my college and the infrastructure of just higher education in general, that I need to be an agent in that and what are

some better ways that we can do that, how can we create a situation that enables students to learn for themselves.

Kevin Patton (10:56):

Because that's the only way it can work, right? Is for them to learn it. We can't learn it for them. We can't tell them what we learned. We can and that might be partially helpful, but in the end, they have to learn for themselves. After reading that book, I really felt encouraged to explore things outside the ordinary. So that explains a lot, doesn't it? If you listen to some of the things I talk about in this podcast from episode to episode, there are things outside the ordinary and this book was one of those that got me to think about how I could make my coursework in ways that facilitated learning rather than simply following a recipe for making a suitable course.

Kevin Patton (11:38):

"How do you make a course?" Well, let me look it up. You do step A, step B, step C. Here's a template for this, that and the other thing and now I have a course" Well, I could do that and that might work out okay, but I was starting to learn more and more things were, "Wait a minute. There's a world way beyond that and this book was part of that, what got me there." And that book club experience taught me that not everyone else is ready for abandoning their favorite recipes for some experimentation with upside down ways of teaching. Speaking of upside down, didn't we all start to embrace eventually flipped learning. That's still not the universal thing and I can remember when it was first proposed under that name, flipped learning. I think it's always been around, but that name flipped learning is relatively recent and a lot of people just rejected it out of hand at first.

Kevin Patton (12:36):

Now more and more people are seeing some value in it and getting over their hesitancy in trying it and dipping their toes in that water. I knew then that I'd be on my own as somebody who, because of that book and some others, was now becoming a little more open than I had been before about doing things differently. And I'm so glad that I have gotten on that track. It is so much more fun for me and I think my students are so much better off for doing that. Now, it turns out that my peers have supported me, so I

don't want to give that impression. Even if they never read that darn book, but I know you. You're the kind of educator that wants to read this kind of book. So here it is. Let me know your reaction when you're done, okay?

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Kevin Patton (13:30):

A searchable transcript and a captioned audiogram of this episode are funded by AAA, the American Association for Anatomy. Throughout the year, AAA provides an incredible amount of support in the form of awards and grants to educators from early career to late career and I think some of them even applied post-career. If you need support for your work or your professional development or if you want to recognize a peer for their contributions or just, I don't know, check out what's going on, simply go to the American Association for Anatomy website at anatomy.org.

Does Averaging Grades Measure Proficiency?

Kevin Patton (14:21):

Now something I want to talk about now dovetails into what I've been talking about in the previous episodes, 99, 100, 101, 102. Now we are in episode 103 and there's still some more things regarding testing and grading and so on that I want to talk about and I'm not going to be able to get it done in this episode either. I'm going to start interspersing more other kinds of ideas in between there because I don't want it to become an entire year just on one topic and this only peripherally relates to that anyway, so I think we're good to go. And it certainly relates to the other segments of this episode because it's something that I got on the track on, is a pretty direct result of reading Salman Khan's book, *The One World Schoolhouse: Education Reimagine*, which is a selection of The A&P Professor Book Club that I talked about in an earlier segment of this episode.

Kevin Patton (15:28):

And it also relates to a topic I brought up in the previous episode when I talked about the term "mastery," that it has these colonial slave-master connotations that I think it's best that we avoid because it can distract at the very least and cause harm at the very worst if we use that kind of terminology. So up until recently, I called the topic I want to discuss right now, mastery learning and now you know why I'm not going to call it that and why I'm going to explain why I'm not calling that because I really believe in what I talked about in the last episode. And if you didn't hear that segment, the last episode, I really encourage you to listen to that. Whether you agree with me or not, I think it's something that we all need to hear.

Kevin Patton (16:17):

Anyway, proficiency grading or proficiency learning is an idea that we need to sort of get to a certain level of proficiency before we can say that we've passed the course. At least, that's what I've come to believe. Something I mentioned in the previous episode when I was talking about statistics of how my online grading scheme worked or didn't work as the case may be and I mentioned this as an aside and said I'd be talking about it later and now here it is later and I'm bringing it up and that is this idea of averaging

grades. To students, grades are often a game and it's a game that they must win. If they want to go to medical school or stay in medical school or pass their boards or get into the program they need to get in, nursing or whatever, they need to B or better to get in their program, so they need that grade.

Kevin Patton (17:12):

So it's a game they must win or at least place the final round and that's how they see it. They're not really seeing it as a reflection of their learning, at least not in a very direct and meaningful way. I don't think. I think there are some studies that bear that out, but I can't speak to those right now because I haven't brushed up on them, but my belief at least is that that is the case for students. And so my challenge in my courses is to get students to think about their learning, right? So how can I do that? Another thing I want to mention about the averaging grades is this, okay? You want to get a B or better, let's say, in my course.

Kevin Patton (18:02):

"So here's how many tests I have. Here's how many other kinds of assignments I have. Here's how many points each of them is worth." I start laying out all these grids, right? Just like someone in sports might do so well, "How many games do I need to win to get into the semifinals or the quarterfinals, then the semifinals, then the finals and then the championship? What is it going to take to get me to postseason play?" And I'm going to keep track of that all season long to see where I am in the stats and how close I am to getting that championship because that's what I need to get my bonus or to get my scholarship or to keep my scholarship or to stay on the team or stay in my position or whatever it is.

Kevin Patton (18:45):

So getting back to the game attitude toward it and there's nothing wrong with games or sports, but that's not what we're doing in A&P and maybe we shouldn't think about it entirely that way, at least not in this regard. So we're thinking about it as a game. We're thinking about it as numbers. We're thinking about getting that golden number, at least that golden number we need to get into our program or keep my scholarship or whatever. So what

am I going to do? I'm going to watch those numbers right? And so, "Oh, man, on this test, test one, I really messed up. I got a D. So I'm going to try some things in test two. I failed that one. Can I even pass the course?"

Kevin Patton (19:30):

I go to the instructor. They say, "Well yeah, if you get this level of score or better on each of your next assignments or tests or whatever, then yeah, you'll squeak by with that B+ that you want." And there's all kinds of different scenarios where that works out, but the idea is that you can mess up at least to some level in most courses, not all courses are like this. Some courses have a policy that if you get below C on any test, you can't get a grade any higher than whatever it is and so on. But I think most of us just too simple, adding up a points or averaging up points, so that you can have weak spots here and strong spots here and it all averages out. You get your B or better and you're on to the next step.

Kevin Patton (20:18):

Now, there's some advantages to that because we know that there are things that are out of our control, out of anyone's control that can affect people. They might be in a flood or a fire or an earthquake. They might have medical challenges. I don't know, an epidemic might come up that affects them. There might be certain challenges that they've always had, that they really need to work hard to overcome. There could be all just any one of a variety of things happening that is forgivable, that is not meant as something that should harm us, that shouldn't harm a student, shouldn't keep them from passing our course.

Kevin Patton (20:56):

I guess theoretically that is a way to handle those like, "Okay, you can have a couple of scores that aren't so good, that are actually pretty bad and you can still pass this course. It's okay. We can still make it work. And you'll get out and can continue on and we'll pat you on the back and hope the best for you," and be truly sincere in doing that, but there are other ways to do that, to take care of that problem. And so that's part of what I want to talk about as well. But before I do. We're going to take a quick break and then we'll be back for more.

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Kevin Patton (21:35):

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Importance of Foundational Concepts

Kevin Patton (22:20):

Getting back to that averaging thing, the pitfall in that is that, let's say there's no prerequisite for the course which is the A&P that I'm used to teaching. There's no prerequisite. Well, I shouldn't say that. It's high school biology or its equivalent within the last five years. Some programs I know don't even have that level of prerequisite, but it's challenging because there's a lot of cell biology, there's a lot of biological chemistry, there's a lot of stuff that students need to know before they come into our A&P course. They need to know pretty well. They need to understand to be able to apply this stuff before we can just dive right in, say, "Okay, our first system is this and now our next system is so on."

Kevin Patton (23:09):

So I always take some time at the beginning to refresh students on, "What is a cell? What are the cell parts? What do they do? How does the cell work together as a system? Why is the cell even important in A&P? Why are we talking about the cell? Isn't that old news? Didn't we start that in the fourth grade and never really learned it all the way through? What's going on with that?" We want to do that and my point here in telling that or in explaining that is that if the students fail that first test that's reviewing maybe cell and basic chemistry, they fail that test and then they get to the next topic, how well are they going to understand all these ions we're talking about?

Kevin Patton (23:53):

If they couldn't follow the basic chemistry, how are they going to follow what we're saying about vitamin D production in the skin? How are they going to follow when we're explaining the difference between these proteins of the extracellular matrix and these carbohydrates of the extracellular matrix and how some of them are joining together into glycoproteins, for example, if they don't even know the first thing about that term glyco or what glucose is or what a carbohydrate is or what proteins are made of and how they're different from glucose or other carbohydrates? So if they don't know any of that, how can they really be expected to do well in the next thing?

Kevin Patton (24:38):

And let's say they're still getting their footing and they do badly on that first test, let's say it's on the skin and now they're on two bones. If they didn't get how the dermis and epidermis work, how they're built, how they function, how are they going to understand how bone is formed and how that tissue functions? I don't know that they can very easily. It's going to be a bigger stretch than just starting on uneven playing field. Now in proficiency grading or proficiency learning, a learner really is going to have the opportunity to get a B or better on that first test. And they can keep working on that, those concepts, and keep taking tests until they get a B or better. Now they are ready for that next one and then they can get a B or better on that and then the next one and the next one.

Kevin Patton (25:35):

Now, this works especially well in something like math where you have skills that build one on the other. If you can't do basic multiplication, how are you going to do algebra. It's not going to work. It just doesn't work. You really have to be proficient to a certain level in multiplication before algebra even begins to start to make any sense. So not so much an A&P. There are some levels like that, like I just described. There's those initial levels of basic chemistry and cell biology and maybe some basic histology and things like that, that really do form a basis. And then, we have to move on to the next thing.

Kevin Patton (26:21):

Now the order in which we study the systems, they aren't quite as critical. I think there's still some criticality there because we're putting together a story in a certain order in our course and it may vary from the way other people do it in their A&P course, but for us, it's the story of our course. So we're thinking through the logic of it, and so for us, the skin really is the basis for understanding bone and understanding bones and joints and how that all works together really is the basis for understanding muscles. At least that's the story I tell them the way I tell it.

Kevin Patton (27:01):

Now you can do it different. You might start with membrane potentials earlier in the game to prepare them for that discussion on muscles. In which case, if they don't understand membrane potentials and you've already taught that topic and you get to muscles, there's going to be some elements that students just aren't going to get because they still don't get those membrane potentials. They don't know the difference between a local potential and an action potential and how that transmits information along the membrane of a cellular structure. So that's not going to work too good, but if you have proficiency learning where you can get up to speed to a certain level and I think a B+ or better is really where you want to hit it.

Kevin Patton (27:46):

Let's get students way up there, if not an A, close to an A and then keep working on it. So when students have challenges and so on, well, we can just give them some time or/and we can let them retake tests. We can help them with their learning. We can help them find resources and tutors. We can tutor them ourselves, depending on the situation, how many students we have and what resources are available. There are all kinds of strategies to use. And I think part of this comes from my background, largely with community colleges, although I've worked at private universities and high schools, I've mentioned. There's all kinds of strategies, but in the community college movement, an attitude that I've come to embrace is the idea that, "Yeah, okay, open enrollment here, where anybody can be part of our college. Anybody who is capable of learning can come."

Kevin Patton (28:48):

I like that. I like that, because some students, they can learn on their own, they don't need to have a job, but there's some students who are challenged and I like that challenge. That's one of the many things I enjoy about teaching is taking those students who feel like they're a failure, students who have significant challenges and find ways for them to succeed. So I think that at least theoretically and I think practically too, honestly, any student can get a B or better in my A&P course. It might take an awful lot of work on my part and a whole bunch of other people and especially on that student, but I think that's possible. I truly do and so proficiency learning enables that.

Kevin Patton (29:36):

When we come back from this quick break, I'm going to give you an example of how all of this proficiency stuff can work.

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Kevin Patton (29:47):

Marketing support for this podcast is provided by HAPS, the Human Anatomy and Physiology Society, promoting excellence in the teaching of human anatomy and physiology for over 30 years. I recently participated in the September virtual meeting and I got to say it was awesome. Hey, there's another one coming up in November and you certainly don't want to miss that one. To find out more go visit HAPS at theAPprofessor.org/haps, that H-A-P-S.

Example of Proficiency Grading

Kevin Patton (30:26):

So I experimented with this proficiency stuff. You probably know me by now, if you've listened to any of the other episodes of this podcast. I'm an experimenter. I like to try experiments. The Wilder and crazier they are, the more likely it this Kevin has tried it. And I've mentioned this course before. I teach a pre-A&P course which covers those basic ideas that students really need to know. I have 10 modules where I break up cell biology, I break up things like metabolism and getting energy and things like biological chemistry, basic chemistry, introduction to histology, different things like that, so there's 10 different modules, and in a later episode, I'll go through the course proper and show you how it's all put together, but that's not my purpose here.

Kevin Patton (31:23):

My purpose here is to say that this was an opportunity for me and especially because it was a preliminary course. So this is a course that students can take at my college where if they haven't met the prerequisite five years, or excuse me, high school biology or its equivalent within the last five years, then maybe it's been six years and they feel like they're good to go. But how can they challenge that? Well, they can take my course, and if they pass my course, that's the prerequisite. Now, they're not going to pass my course probably if they really don't have a background in any of this stuff because it's meant to be a refresher course.

Kevin Patton (32:01):

And actually, a lot of students who take it don't need the prerequisite. They're taking it because they've heard A&P is tough and they want to be in the best possible position to do well in A&P and not have to take it over again. So they're in there to make sure that they really are starting at the starting gate, not way far behind it. And so they do these modules and I wanted to design an open entry open, exit course and nobody in my college could really figure out a way to do that and still get around to the various rules related to attendance and financial aid and things like that. And so we

offer them in a short, in all the little short mini-mesters and we allow it to be self-paced within the course.

Kevin Patton (32:51):

And as long as they've submitted at least one attempt at one exam, they're counted as being attending and so they might work on test one that is the test for module one for a long time. They might do five, six 10 attempts before they get a B or better and they have to get a B or better because they can't move on to the next module. That next module does not unlock. It's locked in the learning management system. It automatically opens as soon as they hit that point of B+ or better, excuse me. They need to get 85% or better to get into the next module. Then they need to get 85% or better on that test before they can move to the next one and the next one and the next one.

Kevin Patton (33:40):

So they can't move on to biological chemistry until they pass basic chemistry. And in some modules, they take one attempt and they're good to go because they really do remember it and it's all coming back to them. And they're open tests, so they can go review if they need to. And I have all kinds of review materials and what have you and so that's available for them to do and then they move to the next one, the next one, the next one. So that means by time they get to the final exam, so they've done 10 module exams, now they're at the final exam and they're all cumulative by the way, so they're being tested on everything that they've had in the course every time they take a test, and then when they get to the final exam, of course, that's comprehensive or cumulative.

Kevin Patton (34:24):

And so they do that and students tell me, most of them find that to be really easy because by them there's very little new information on there because they've been tested on it again and again and again. So there they are at the final exam and when they walk out, the feedback I get from students is they feel really prepared. They can feel the refreshing because they came in thinking they already knew this or it was going to be a breeze and they got challenged and probably at many points along the way where they got held

back a little bit until they could get the grade and then they moved on and then they get maybe got breezed through one or two and then they're getting held back here, "I have to do a bunch of attempts," and then they move on again. And so when they get to the end, they feel like, "Shoo, I didn't know it as well as I thought I did, but by golly, now I know it."

Kevin Patton (35:18):

I also need to clarify that my pre-A&P course is a pass/fail course. I know. I know. That seems weak, doesn't it? At least when we look at it through the lens of the system that we're used to. But really, if each of my students has gotten a B or better on every single module test and the comprehensive final exam, maybe it's stronger than a B grade in my regular A&P course where there might have been a D or two on a task or assignment mixed in there and they still somehow pulled the B, meaning there's some major concept group that the student may be never did really learn very well, if at all. So what I'm saying is there are no weak spots like we would see in an ordinary course like every other course I've ever taught where other grades get either totaled or average because there are no modules where a student gets less than a B+.

Kevin Patton (36:31):

So when they get to the end and it's a pass/fail course, well, yeah, they passed, but what that really means is that they've gotten a B or better on every single module of the course and on the comprehensive final exam and that has really worked well for me and my students tell me it has really worked well for them. And I have some stats and I'll be sharing those at a later date, the specifics, but it's basically they get a little bit better than half a letter grade better in A&P 1 if they've taken the pre-A&P course. So that's comparing all students, that is all students who took the pre-A&P and all students who didn't take the pre-A&P and does not account for any other variable in there and that is a statistically valid number that we had that that is the average increase to expect in your grade that you'll do half a letter grade or actually a little bit better than half a letter grade better in A&P if you've taken that refresher course first which I think makes sense. I don't think anybody would be surprised that that's the case.

Kevin Patton (37:51):

And also I think, if it doesn't exactly support my idea of proficiency grading or proficiency learning, at least it doesn't work against it. It doesn't disprove it, I don't think. So that's what I mean by proficiency grading. Now, I've never tried this in a regular A&P course and I'm not teaching a regular two-semester A&P course right now, so I don't really know whether that would work or not. But if any of you have tried that or something like it, I sure would love to hear from you and I think the rest of us would love to hear from you. So get in contact with me and let's talk about that. Maybe you can come on the podcast or maybe you can call in and in relate your information or write in or whatever, but something to think about, at least just to look at the way you do your grading and the way you average your grades and so on, it might be worth looking at.

Staying Connected

Kevin Patton (38:47):

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Aileen (40:00):

The A&P Professor is hosted by Dr. Kevin Patton, an award-winning professor and textbook author in human anatomy and physiology.

Kevin Patton (40:13):

All listeners are required to wear masks unless you are not required to wear a mask.