

## ARTICLE

# **“I stay a little bit angry”: Portrait of Helen Lewis, Activist Teacher**

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**Libby Falk Jones**

Helen Lewis could easily be called the grandmother of Appalachian Studies. She taught the very first Appalachian Studies courses ever offered anywhere back in the 1970s while she was at Clinch Valley College (now the University of Virginia at Wise) and also hosted the very first Appalachian Studies Conference in 1971. She is so well known as a supporter of community activism that the Appalachian Studies Association, which she served as President in 2001-2002, has named their annual service award after her. She holds not only honorary degrees from Emory & Henry College and Wake Forest University but an earned doctorate in Sociology from the University of Kentucky and has taught at more than half a dozen Appalachian colleges and universities. She also served as Director of the Appalachian Center at Berea College in the early 1990s and on the staff of the Highlander Center before and after that. Characteristically collaborative, Helen Lewis is a co-author of several important books, including *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case* (Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978), *It Comes from the People: Community Development and Local Theology* (Temple University Press, 1995) and *Mountain Sisters: From Convent to Community in Appalachia* (University Press of Kentucky, 2003). Her many pamphlets include *Participatory Education and Grassroots Development* and *The Jellico Handbook: A Teacher's Guide to Community-Based Learning*. Now in her 80s, Helen Lewis lives in North Georgia where she currently directs oral history projects for the Byron Herbert Reece Society and for Fannin County. She also teaches courses at an off-campus center of Toccoa Falls College and for the Divinity School of Wake Forest University. In acknowledgement of her many contributions to the Appalachian region, Helen Lewis recently received Berea College's 2006 Service Award.

“I think of myself more as an organizer of students than a teacher,” says sociologist Helen Lewis. “I was never short of knowledge, but the knowledge had to be valuable, make people be better citizens or live

“I try to make the students angry, or as angry as I’ve been,” Lewis says. “Anger and love have kept me going. Love can be a real revolutionary. There is a sense in which you care about people and don’t like to see people hurt; you believe in equality. It’s also feeling angry about a country that does things that you feel betray its own potential: not being democratic, supporting dictators. There’s always this sense of outrage.”

Emotion should lead to responsible action, Lewis thinks. “You have to see that changing the world is a part of what you’re supposed to be doing. You aren’t supposed to sit back and be comfortable. You can’t get to be complacent or accept the kinds of violence we see daily on television—so much hurt, so much killing—it just makes me furious, it’s outrageous.”

Lewis believes that students need to be taught not simply how to get into existing systems and rise within them but how to improve systems, to change systems to better the lives of people. “If you have to go up against the agency you’re working for, you should be prepared to do that.”

Helping students open their minds is a challenge, Lewis has found. The first step, she believes, is acknowledging students’ beliefs. For example, she has helped Pentecostal students voice their ideas about holy practices, including snake handling. “In some other classes they would never admit to these things, you know. I make it okay to talk about being a snake handler. I say to the rest of the class, ‘you may think of this as sort of a primitive religion but these are the only real literalists in religion today.’ I put it in a context of discussing the differences between religious groups—how they started, where they come from, how people change, how you maybe move from one belief system to another, so it’s a way of validating where they are but saying it’s okay to move, it’s okay to change, it’s okay to grow.”

This openness to change may result in a loss of innocence. “I’ve had students say to me that I’ve made them lose their religion, but they say it in a positive way, that they have lost that inability to be critical about their own religion,” Lewis notes. She asks students to study their church practices, actions, dialogue, themes. Observations lead to critique. “I have sometimes worried about helping people lose that innocence. It takes the zip out of practicing a religion that you’re also being critical about, and you wonder if that’s a good thing to do.” Lewis concludes that education involves “moving out of the garden of Eden. The truth is you can’t go back.”

## Beginnings

Lewis first started teaching in the mid-1950s, in the coalfields of Virginia, where the companies were mechanizing and beginning to strip mine, changes that fundamentally affected coal-mining communities. Two-thirds of her students were from coal-mining families. "I was going to do what had been done to me: give out a syllabus and a whole lot of readings and give tests and exams," Lewis says. But having been an activist before she became a teacher, she got "really concerned" about what was happening in her community. Finding sociology "a perfect place to understand more about the world," she started asking her students to interview their coal-mining fathers. She also visited the United Mine Workers to find out what programs they had to help laid-off miners find other jobs. "They had nothing. I was very upset that the union was not doing anything," Lewis says. "I had at one time thought I would like to be a union organizer."

Though she continued to incorporate experiential learning into her classes, she did not initially adopt it as a primary means of teaching. "I still gave the same old tests and used textbooks and gave lectures and had some discussion." Meanwhile, she was asking her students to visit churches, do family histories and genealogies, and work to understand their own communities and their own lives.

In the next stage, "fighting a personal battle to get a real position," Lewis returned to graduate school to finish her doctorate. There she became "very disillusioned about college teaching. I hated the way I was treated. It was like I was a child again and I was feeble-minded. I had to take all these courses over though I had been teaching those subjects myself. I made my own observations from the other side of the desk: that's not the way to teach, that's not the way to treat students who are adults. I became much more conscious of trying to develop my own approach to teaching." When she went back to teaching, her first change effort was to initiate an Appalachian Studies class—the first in the region.

## Educating Beyond the Classroom

Lewis has found that higher education institutions may not be hospitable to her educational visions. In the late 1960s, after Lewis built a thriving social work program with sixty majors at Clinch Valley, she traveled to Wales for a year to study coal-mining communities. She returned to Virginia to find that Clinch Valley's social work program

had been abolished. Many of her majors had transferred. She was placed in the department of business/public administration with no telephone or budget and told that she could not take students off campus or bring outsiders into her classes. Lewis believes that a major gift from a coal company underlay these changes. "I was still hired but I said I'd rather grow turnip greens; I was driving to school crying every day. It was a great sense of relief when I left." Community outreach programs, such as those established at Highlander Center where Lewis served as acting director, are better sites. "The traditional classroom is not that sacred; it's not the only place to learn and certain things aren't learned well in the classroom."

Through changing her teaching site to the community setting, "way back in this little depot or little storefront in the community," Lewis began working with older women. "That was some of the most exciting teaching because here were these women who just had an eighth grade education. They were scared to death. They probably would never have gone to a real college—they couldn't face that." Her teaching helped the women "get a sense of who they were and apply this to community development work." She saw transformations, as the women saw their education improve their relationships with their children; they took books home to their kids, helped them with their schoolwork. "Education for transformation—that's what I like to be about."

Lewis finds adults in communities are eager to learn because they have a problem they want to solve. Her job is to help them confront their "preconceptions and prejudices and misinformation and wrong solutions to problems. They've got to rethink and re-analyze what's going on with them, which includes religious and political ideologies that have been barriers to really looking at things in a different way." She loves dealing with these challenges.

In education both within and beyond the academy, Lewis supports an issue-oriented curriculum—environment, or peace or justice—which integrates science, math, history, political science and so on. "I think it's possible to get facts and skills along with broader concepts and with a lot more relationship to the community." She believes that people wanting to make change must "consider the community—not just to manipulate but to participate in, be part of. You can't do funny things to the water to see if it's going to work—you can't poison the community—so being part of the community becomes a real way of tying responsibility into learning."

Lewis demands that students become creators, not just recipients, of knowledge. She designs assignments using primary, rather than secondary, research—interviews, observations. She also pushes students to tell their own stories and to recognize that their personal experiences can be valid sources of knowledge. “I was learning so much from my students—they were bringing in all this great history—this was something we had to share.” Lewis created books from students’ histories of communities during the 1950s and placed them in local libraries. Today these books constitute the sole record of small communities destroyed by strip mining. From histories, students “started getting more political.” Lewis tells of a student who took an adding machine into the local courthouse. “I want to look at your tax books,” he told authorities. “Boy, you don’t want to do that—it’s dangerous,” was the response. “I’m gonna do it,” he replied. The student sat for days with those books, figuring out land and mineral ownership. “It was world-shaking,” Lewis says.

### Love of Learners, Love of Learning

Listening to students and helping them find their voices—central to Lewis’s teaching—stems from her own experiences in school. “I think I’m very sensitive to the students who come from a real rural background or feel inferior in college, who may be shy to participate because they don’t think their experiences amount to anything, because I was one of those students. I remember being in college classes with students who had been to the wonderful high schools in Atlanta; they had read newspapers and books and novels and kept up with what was going on in the world. The teenage culture I grew up in didn’t give me that background so I felt quite the country bumpkin, inferior in terms of my education and I really resented the fact that I had to make up so much.

“Of course we had always had newspapers, we also had a few magazines, and I read a lot at the library. And there were one or two teachers who were real inspirational and pushed me in terms of reading and literature. And my parents pushed me into a lot of things. I took piano. I had a music teacher who would take us to opera, so I wasn’t completely in the backwoods. I was one of the more sophisticated students, I was not from back up the holler. I was a town student and that made a difference there and of course we were the ones who went to college. But our background was definitely different from urban students’ backgrounds.”

Sharing students' backgrounds gives Lewis a teaching advantage. "I remember one of my students when I was first teaching. He came out of one of the poorest communities in the country. One of the other teachers bought him clothes to go to school. In my sociology class, I got to talking about social class distinctions in school and how kids from hollers were treated differently. And he started telling incredible stories. He was very shy. I helped him understand that he knew something from having suffered through this class discrimination and that that understanding was helpful in this class—this validated his painful learning experiences. He became a social worker in southwest Virginia and is still a friend of mine."

Lewis emphasizes concepts and understanding more than memorization of facts or figures. "There are libraries, I say. Here's where the census is; you might want to remember some basic things, have a sense of chronology about things. But I will not ask those kinds of memorization questions in place of thinking about relationships between things. I give a lot of open book exams, open book questions, give them the questions ahead of time and say I want thoughtful well-developed answers, I don't want something off the top of your head, you have a chance to think through these questions. This is not an exam where you sit down and scribble out what you remember right now. That's been a hard thing for me to talk students into."

### Teaching Influences

Lewis's aversion to memorization dates to her first term in college. Along with three other students planning to attend college, she had learned "some Latin but not much" in high school. Though Lewis planned to study Spanish or French in college, at registration she encountered the college's Latin teacher, who told her, "Of course you'll come into Latin class because you've had two years of Latin in high school." Lewis registered for Latin, "absolutely terrified. I called home and said, 'Send me my Latin books.' They came in the mail and I sat in the closet at night with the light on, because we had lights out, this was a woman's college way back in the 1940s, and I memorized my Latin books and ended up memorizing half of Cicero's orations to pass the exam at the end. The minute I walked out of that class I said, 'I will never memorize anything again.' And to this day I can't memorize. It's like it just wrecked my ability to memorize something. I always have to look up things—if somebody says what's the population of Appalachia, I say wait a minute, I have to look that

even memorizing and remembering my telephone number.” Lewis grins. “Now I still use some of the Latin—the Latin has proved to be helpful with crossword puzzles.”

Lewis’s strong determination helped her succeed in her education. “I was required to take stuff that just terrified me, you know, that I didn’t want to take. And I worked my tail off. I would work and make A’s in it just to prove that I could do it.” She attributes her determination to her family’s dedication to her education and their high expectations for her. Until fifth grade, Lewis attended a three-room country school in a small town of three hundred people in Georgia, with no electricity, no paved roads, where her father was a letter carrier. Her father “took a transfer to another town, in order to be in a place where we could go on to school, because he knew that after the sixth grade I would have had to go to boarding school. This was in the 1930s; there was no high school in that end of the county at all, and no commuting for 15 miles in those days. I just always had that sort of a family that made you feel like there were really no limits to what you could do. My parents just expected you would succeed—you were smart and you would do well.”

## Beyond Barriers

Lewis deliberately gave up “the high road” as an “academic intellectual” in favor of “making my name and getting my rewards by taking more of an activist’s and community educator’s route.” As a woman, she faced particular barriers in academe. In the early 1960s, Lewis was invited to teach a summer class in criminology at the University of Virginia. It was the first time “all these young men who played like Virginia gentlemen” had been taught by a woman. “A lot of them did not like it and some of them were even very harassing.” Their behavior bothered the women students in the class, one of whom retaliated by reporting on sex in prison. “She went into explicit detail about how prisoners bored holes between the floor and lifted themselves on swings to have sexual intercourse through the floors. I knew exactly after she got started what she was doing.” Lewis also experienced male disapproval of her coal-mining research, an unusual topic for a woman.

In her scholarly work, Lewis typically argues for new interpretations of existing data. She gives a “revisionist’s twist” to materials, with the goal of making people “stop and look in a little different way, make it useful to them, let them move on their little new understanding

of something.” She chose to publish her influential article on the colonization of Appalachia—an interpretation challenging the prevailing cultural poverty model of Appalachia—as an article in *Mountain Life and Work* rather than waiting for book publication. “I was already talking this stuff and it was making a difference,” Lewis notes. “I wanted people to really get that interpretation, to make it available so people could start using it, to deal with the whole system rather than picking up pieces of anti-poverty work.” In other research, Lewis challenged the stereotype of fatalism among coal-mining families. “These people don’t sit and rock on the porch—resistance movements have been a big part of the region. And sometimes sitting on the porch and refusing to move is an act of resistance; a lot of what we call traditional culture and the ways in which it’s practiced are really a statement against the industrial system.” She acknowledges that her research has “a political agenda” but argues that it is “an honest but different way of looking at a situation.”

### Education as Dance

Lewis sees herself as a choreographer of students’ learning. Whether teaching in college or community settings, she brings in “powerful things”—books of photographs of Appalachia, for example. “I pile them on the desk and say, now see if you can find any differences among these photographers. It throws the students off. I feel like creating a little chaos and a little confusion sometimes—it opens students up.” Then Lewis looks for ways to analyze what students discover. She works to animate students, to get them to see her as a resource for learning something they want to learn, a resource that cares about them.

Lewis notes that some students resist her approaches. “They won’t give you themselves. They won’t tell you anything so you can’t make a book.” Often she is able to overcome this resistance. “If they write you some real things about themselves and you are able to use that and make them come forth and share some of those things and add to the conversation, then they begin to see themselves as participants. They get hooked.”

In addition to analysis and critique, Lewis believes education includes attention to emotion and the spirit. “As we talk about religion, students’ beliefs come out. Also I try to make them emotionally identify with these things so that they learn emotionally at the same time they are learning intellectually. I play music, I show

films, I do art, I have poetry and fiction readings, peoples' stories, field trips. I want them to see a strip mine, not just intellectually read about it but really see it, hear people talk about it." Lewis may take her class to the town of Cyprus, KY, to see a strip mine and speak with company officials, then to Red Fox to lunch with a Black woman—a native, recently retired as a social worker in New York City—who's fighting the gas and oil drilling, then to Begley to visit the general store, a site for documentation and protest against strip mining. Lewis will play Jean Ritchie's "Black Waters" and encourage students to do a project using poetry or to make a video as well as writing a traditional research paper.

Lewis de-emphasizes the latter exercise. "Students need to know how to do research, how to find things out, how to find the answers to problems. That's important. They also need to learn to write a good research paper but I think my class is not a place that they need to do that. Now if every teacher says that, they're in trouble, aren't they?"

Humor is another important component of Lewis's educational philosophy. "I laugh at myself and the subject matter. I don't treat it in a sacred way. Students don't have to be in love with everything that I throw out there. It's good to make people question stuff, to shake them up—so I don't take myself or the subject matter too seriously.

"There's something very serious about life and these topics, but you're not going to solve them all," Lewis notes. "You have to rest, you have to celebrate. You can't stay angry all the time. You have to enjoy the struggle, enjoy the fight, keep a sense of humor, realize that it's not all your responsibility to change the world."

