

# Teaching and Learning in Honors

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## TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HONORS

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A Publication  
of the  
**National Collegiate Honors Council**



Citation:

Edman, Laird. "Conclusions." Teaching and Learning in Honors. National Collegiate Honors Council, 200.

103-11.

## CONCLUSION

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A little learning is a dangerous thing;  
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:  
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,  
And drinking largely sobers us again.

(Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*)

The purpose of this monograph is to provide honors educators with information and ideas concerning honors pedagogy. As is clear from the chapters included, honors pedagogy is not one thing, but many, just as honors students are not one kind, but many. However, there are themes that run through honors education which we hope this monograph has helped elucidate. There are techniques and approaches that seem to show up repeatedly in honors course descriptions, goals and objectives that are a regular feature of honors program mission statements. These common characteristics are all designed to help those students called "honors" go beyond the shallow draughts so frequently offered in our information-rich age and to drink deeply at the spring of learning.

The depth of learning honors programs hope to foster may include a depth of knowledge within a particular field of inquiry — a kind of undergraduate graduate education, complete with research and presentation opportunities, or it may focus on a kind of breadth often unavailable outside of honors education. Often honors programs and courses broaden traditional fields of inquiry for students in order to enable them to make more connections, use divergent ways of understanding issues, and move beyond the artificial boundaries of academic disciplines to the deeper understanding Larry Crockett (this volume) refers to as wisdom. Honors pedagogy tends to try to move students from "who," "what," and "when" to "why," "how," and "to what end." Honors pedagogy nurtures and challenges students to become self-motivated, self-regulating engaged thinkers.

### **Honors Pedagogy?**

This monograph presents some of the ways honors courses do this. However, Larry Clark's chapter on honors student characteristics is an indication of the difficulty of making well-defined distinctions

between honors pedagogy and non-honors pedagogy. It is difficult to characterize "the honors student" because different honors programs use different criteria for inclusion into honors. Honors programs are as diverse as the institutions which house them — colleges and universities that are public and private; two-year, baccalaureate, and graduate-degree granting; single-sex and co-ed; secular and sectarian; highly selective and open admission. And the variety of honors programs possible is dwarfed by the variety of students involved in those programs.

Because of this diversity of institutions and programs, defining the post-secondary honors student is probably more difficult than defining the primary or secondary school gifted and talented student — and defining gifted and talented students in the primary and secondary schools is not without a great deal of controversy. As Sam Schuman notes in *Beginning in Honors*, another NCHC monograph, honors students are identified as such within particular contexts, in particular colleges and universities, and one institution's superior student may be another's average pupil. Whatever the institution, however, almost every campus has a group of roughly five to 10 percent of its highest achieving students who may not be fully challenged by the regular curriculum and who benefit significantly from honors work.

Therefore, each college and university must define the population of students targeted by its honors program, and that program must be shaped by that student population and the mission of the institution in which the honors program is housed. The curriculum and pedagogy appropriate to honors in a small sectarian liberal arts setting may be different from that appropriate in a large land-grant university or from an urban community college. Some programs focus on honors within the major, offering research and internship opportunities usually unavailable to undergraduates. Some programs offer team-taught interdisciplinary seminars which seek to make connections across disciplines. Some programs have alternative core curriculum requirements. Some programs have accelerated honors sections of large multi-section courses. Some programs offer opportunities for students to "contract" to do more within a regular course, thus turning the course into an honors course for that student. Most programs engage in at least one of these approaches to honors curriculum, and some offer all of them. What is common across programs is an intolerance of mediocrity and a desire to cultivate academic excellence. Perhaps what characterizes honors pedagogy is its focus on challenging superior students in the best ways possible

— a focus on doing collegiate education as well as it can be done, within the particular contexts of particular places.

If honors pedagogy can be distilled into doing collegiate education as well as it can be done, then the question arises: is there such a thing as honors pedagogy? Isn't it simply the same type of teaching college instructors seek to do in all of their classes, assuming college instructors in general seek to do collegiate education as well as they can in whatever circumstances they find themselves? Could we simply have titled this monograph "Good teaching practices"?

Perhaps. I said at the outset of this conclusion, however, that there were common themes to honors pedagogy, common trends and approaches that appear over and over again in honors programs in diverse settings and with diverse students. These common themes and approaches have been tested and used to great effect in programs across the country, and one need not attend very many National Collegiate Honors Council Conference "nuts and bolts" sessions to discern some of what characterizes honors teaching. The honors director or instructor designing and teaching honors students can learn a great deal from the wisdom and research of others in honors.

### **Common Features**

Larry Clark's chapter on honors student characteristics indicates a tendency among those students who participate in honors programs to be able to function at higher levels of abstraction in their thinking, and to prefer doing so. This ability is reflected in the many honors courses that tend toward "big picture" issues and analysis. This tendency leads directly into Larry Crockett's discussion of the DIKW hierarchy and the need for honors pedagogy to focus on Knowledge, and especially Wisdom, rather than Data and Information. Among honors directors in the NCHC, there is a bias against the approach to honors that sees the honors course as an opportunity to cover twice the material in half the time. The experience of honors directors and the preferences of honors students point toward covering course material differently, with more depth and more connections and deeper understanding, rather than simply covering the same material faster.

Some of the ways of covering the material differently are spelled out in the articles in this monograph. Honors courses are quite often issue and question-centered classes, in which real classroom discussion occurs (as opposed to the teacher-centered, semi-

monologues or the student-centered bull sessions that often pass for the dialectic of good classroom discussion). Primary texts are often the source of entry into an issue. Honors students are expected to take more responsibility for their education, and thus are expected to take the material further, to engage in more sophisticated questioning and research, to teach themselves and each other, as well as enlighten the instructor. Honors instructors more often serve as mentors and guides in the classroom, rather than as "the sage on the stage." The classes are usually smaller, and the increased difficulty of the work involved is often due to its focus on primary texts and higher orders of abstraction. And while the tendency is toward discussion-oriented, participatory, multi-disciplinary courses, some honors courses are lecture oriented. Those which are, however, are so usually because the lecturer is a distinguished scholar or widely regarded expert or leader. (Which I think is entirely appropriate. If I am in a class with a Nobel-laureate as an instructor, I want to listen first, ask questions later.)

Because of the nature of honors programs and the often smaller class size of honors courses, the creation of a community of learning within a course and within a program is also a theme running through honors pedagogy. Linda Rutland Gillison's article on community-building in honors argues for the need for a community that can lead honors students to engage in critical self-examination and examination of their own traditions, broaden their viewpoints, and expand their understanding and appreciation of diversity. The trends toward cooperative learning, service learning, group activities, and linked courses with stable classroom cohorts are all a part of this desire to create a community of learning within a class and program. While one of the goals of many honors programs is to foster academic independence in students, honors classroom pedagogy tends toward group discussion, group processes, and group projects. Student independence often comes out of the group responsibilities they have exercised and the independent research opportunities available in other components of the courses and program.

The community of learners created in honors courses can help students overcome another common characteristic of honors students that we have not yet mentioned in this monograph: the impostor phenomenon. High achieving students, especially when identified as such and invited to join an honors program or college, often see themselves as "impostors," as having been placed somewhere they neither belong nor deserve. Particularly with first- and second-year students, this feeling of being an impostor at the academic game ex-

presses itself as a self-imposed pressure to succeed, a fear of failure, and a fear of being "found out" as not up to the expected academic standards. These students are often very concerned about their grades and reluctant to take on new challenges. Building a solid and safe community of learning in an honors course can diffuse the impostor phenomena in honors students. And of course, it helps if instructors do not deride their students, saying, "I thought you were honors students!" when those students balk at difficult work or worry about their grades. Instead, instructors should use such opportunities to help the students understand the nature of academic work; develop the appropriate attitudes toward that work; and learn to accurately appraise their own preparation, ability, curiosity, and motivation in order to overcome their feelings of being "honors impostors."

### **Grading and Assessment**

One of the issues in teaching honors courses with which all experienced honors instructors have had to cope is the concern honors students have for grades. For a variety of reasons, including impostor syndrome reactions, long training in grade hyper-consciousness, concerns about fellowship, graduate and professional school applications, and concerns about current scholarship requirements, honors students tend to be quite anxious about grades. Honors students tend to think it unfair if they believe their GPA is being penalized because they are in the honors program, yet tend to disrespect an honors program that does not challenge them. Some honors programs and instructors grade honors courses to higher standards than they grade other courses, and others tend to give automatic A's in honors courses for all students who complete the required work. The issue of grades is an important one for instructors and programs to consider, and no single approach will be appropriate for all courses or programs. In some cases criterion-referenced grading is appropriate, in other situations norm-referenced grading is called for, and in still others mastery learning is the preferred approach. What is always inappropriate, however, is to discount students' concerns about grades and ignore the issue. We are part of an academic system which pays close attention to grades, and honors program participation is often GPA-driven. Listening to student concerns and carefully considering grading policies should be a part of any good honors pedagogy.

The issue of grades and student concerns about grades brings up another issue in honors pedagogy: assessment. Assessment is obviously an important part of the honors course, as it is in any course. The honors instructor should understand assessment as far more than giving grades; it is how we give our students feedback, and feedback is essential in good teaching. As I mentioned in the article on teaching critical thinking in this monograph, unless students learn to self-assess, learn what they know and do not know and how to judge the difference, they have not learned much in our courses that will transfer out of those courses. Assessment is the key way in which students are taught to evaluate themselves.

Is honors assessment different from assessment in non-honors courses? Probably only in so far as the course being taught is different, and the most obvious way honors courses are different from non-honors courses is that they tend to consist of smaller groups of honors students of whom the instructor typically has high expectations and who may have higher expectations of themselves and each other. This setting can lead to superb opportunities for students to engage in exercises in self-assessment as well as in helping each other assess her or his own work. The honors instructor should provide opportunities for the type of non-grade centered and non-grade driven assessment that is most worthwhile for teaching and learning.

Examples of that type of assessment can be found in the one-on-one tutorials proposed by Stuart Justman in his article on honors composition, in the types of authentic assessment proposed in some of the courses reviewed in the previous chapter, and in some of the recommendations given in the chapter on teaching critical thinking in the honors classroom. The use of web-based discussion and research groups can also be a part of giving timely feedback to students. Requiring students to write down a few questions they have every class period can be a powerful way of helping them learn to assess themselves, and commenting on the quality of the questions in class can help the students learn to formulate good questions (I have also required students, if they do not have any questions, to write down that they just are not thinking well today).

However the assessments are carried out in a course, it is essential that the purpose of any assessment be clear to the instructor and the students. Assessing simply in order to give a final grade in a course wastes a very important teaching opportunity. The core of assessment is feedback, and the purpose of feedback is to acknowledge achievement and provide direction for improvement. Honors

instructors should plan their assessments carefully, provide explicit criteria to enable students to assess themselves, assess often, and time the assessments appropriately. Timely feedback is essential to good teaching.

An important part of the assessment process should also be assessment of the course and the teaching. Often such assessments are provided only once, at the end of the semester, on a brief, anonymous paper-and-pencil form. These teacher-course evaluations which are required at most institutions for promotion and tenure decisions are actually very poor ways of improving courses. Honors instructors should allow students a greater part in the course assessment process, calling regularly for student feedback, and holding students responsible for giving accurate, thoughtful feedback to the instructor and their peers. Course goals should be clear to the students so that students can assess how well those goals are being met. There are ways in which technology can be used to provide a course feedback forum (a web-based or e-mail-based discussion-group) which can allow the instructor and the students to discuss how well the course is doing what the instructor wants it to do. Allowing students greater and more regular opportunities to give the instructor feedback serves not only to help the instructor improve the course, it also reinforces for the students that ultimately they are responsible for their own education, and the honors course and honors program is *theirs*.

### **Focusing on Faculty in Order to Focus on Students**

There is a great deal of research now available concerning student learning outcomes, teaching methods, assessment practices, and critical thinking pedagogy. A brief time on the ERIC lists makes this clear. However, most of the research in education concerns primary and secondary education, and comparatively little research has been done in post-secondary education. This is especially true in honors or talented and gifted education.

Honors instructors and program directors may wish to avail themselves of what is being done by subscribing to several educational research journals, such as *The Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, *The Roper Review*, or *Theory into Practice*. An honors program library could be started into which pedagogical books and journals and other education research materials are collected. There are numerous ERIC titles and books from publishers such as Jossey-Bass which should be added to such a library.

However, for most faculty, keeping up with one's own field while teaching is difficult enough. Therefore honors directors could offer short teaching seminars for honors instructors, provide materials such as this monograph, and perhaps most importantly honors directors could provide faculty mentoring/workshops for honors instructors. Honors faculty could examine and critique each other's syllabi and course materials. They could sit in on each other's courses and discuss common (and uncommon) pedagogical problems and issues. Honors faculty could be assigned to small faculty teaching groups in which faculty work with each other over a course of several semesters to help each other become better teachers. In short, honors faculty could practice what they preach to their students. Any faculty member who thinks he or she has nothing more to learn about teaching or nothing to learn about teaching from other teachers, may not be appropriate faculty to teach honors.

Providing such faculty growth opportunities could make the honors program or honors college the center for teaching excellence in the institution in which it is housed. This would increase the teaching effectiveness and quality not only in honors courses, but across the institution and curriculum. This would add force to the stated understanding that honors programs and colleges are teaching centered and committed to providing collegiate education as well as it can be done. Such a focus on teaching excellence can serve the entire academic community.

Ultimately, regardless of the curriculum, the syllabus, the teaching strategies used or philosophy of education incorporated, good teaching depends upon good teachers. If what truly differentiates honors courses from non-honors courses is the people involved more than the curriculum, then that includes not only the students but the faculty. If we say honors students are (or should be) more curious and motivated, and thus more committed to their learning than their non-honors counterparts, honors faculty should be so as well. The core of any honors program is honors teaching, and honors teachers should be intensely committed to teaching and to making their teaching better. An instructor who is not passionate about her or his topic will not impassion students about the topic. A professor who does not exhibit critical thinking skills or dispositions in the classroom will be unable to teach those skills and dispositions to students. Honors pedagogy almost always includes a sense of passion, of wonder, of curiosity, of engagement, of respect for and delight in the world of ideas. Honors faculty should exhibit these characteristics as well.

The goals of most honors programs and honors colleges include helping students to become better critical thinkers and more articulate communicators, to recognize commonalities and appreciate differences between people, to learn both how to collaborate and work independently, and to grow in both intellectual curiosity and humility. These goals can only be achieved if the faculty who teach honors courses value these things. And when it works, it is glorious. This is what is honorable about honors, and this is what honors pedagogy usually seeks to accomplish.