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Saving Honors in the Age of Standardization

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I went to my first National Collegiate Honors Council conference just this last year and was sitting in a session on national scholarships when the phrase “learning outcomes” came up. I turned to the woman behind me with whom I’d been briefly chatting before the session began and asked if this kind of evaluative structure was being implemented at her university.

She rolled her eyes. “We’re all just sick of it,” she said. “When I list my ‘learning outcomes’ on my syllabuses, I just want to say, ‘I have no idea what we’ll learn.’”

It is no secret that educational institutions across the nation have in recent years been encouraged, urged, and forced to adopt a lexicon that seems better suited to the worlds of corporations and governments. In fact, according to Charles Miller, the business executive heading up the presidentially-appointed Commission on the Future of Higher Education, “levers” like the accreditation process can and should be used to push educational reforms that will utilize standardized testing to measure student learning at all levels of higher education. At the same time that my colleagues in the English Department have decried the use of terms like “clients” and “customers” to describe our students, our upper administration has adopted a “scorecard” to rate our ongoing progress as an institution and, for purposes of state accreditation, a “quality enhancement plan” or “QEP” to articulate, guide, and evaluate our educational successes and failures. (Our adherence to and success with our QEP will decide our future accreditation; clearly, as Miller hopes it will, accrediting bodies are already being used as levers to force such educational “reforms.”)

Designed in part to reassure the public—now paying more than ever for higher education—that they are indeed getting their money’s worth, such plans in part require professors to provide greater “clarity” in determining what students should learn in their classes and to follow through on that by testing them more closely for those pre-defined items. According to Steffen Pope Wilson and Rose M. Perrine, “Because of concerns that higher education was not meeting the needs of American society, the assessment of student learning, or *outcomes assessment*, was deemed necessary for the development of ‘excellence’ in undergraduate education”(27). According to other researchers, the primary need that higher education in the United States has not been fulfilling in recent years is a salary for its graduates proportionate in size to the debt they have incurred accruing that education—a situation brought about by a steady increase in tuition due to an inadequate growth (and at times a decrease) in funding for higher education at the federal and state levels.¹ Certainly

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these are linked concerns, and I can't help but feel the resonance of the premise that James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield put forward in *Saving Higher Education in the Age of Money* that, rather than a means, money "is becoming the chief end of higher education" (2).

Means and ends are subjects in which my honors students are particularly well versed. Certainly the vast majority of them in the University Honors Program where I am now Associate Director do not pursue what Engell and Dangerfield might call the "unmonied fields"—fields like English and philosophy and anthropology. Even though they may spend their spare time writing novels, their "end" in medical school is of generally greater significance to them than the "means" of the time they spend studying to get there. They keep a close eye on the "ends" of their specific classes as well—what will be on their tests, what they really have to read in order to ace them, and what they'll end up with on their MCATs. Wilson and Perrine also indicate a concern with means and ends regarding outcomes assessments. As they note, "there must be a focus on the *ends* or the results of learning more than the *means* or the process and resources that can promote student learning" (27). My students don't seem to have any difficulty with that at all. Those of us who teach, though, often do.

I want to suggest that honors education—or what I have learned about it both from my experiences as a new administrator in it and as a student in an honors program myself when I was an undergraduate—represents a pedagogical antithesis to the kind of teaching such outcomes-assessment-based education promotes. I want to suggest that, while outcomes assessments lend themselves to greater standardization and presumably therefore more accurate data collection regarding what our students have actually learned in our classes, the pedagogy that most clearly defines honors education is one that spurns such standardization and predictability, promoting instead an education more closely based on individual initiative than university mission, on surprise and pleasure rather than predictability and presupposed knowledge.ⁱⁱ When a university pushes to create and sell a quantifiable knowledge product while simultaneously claiming to model itself on honors initiatives, that university is in reality working directly counter to the pedagogical aims honors courses, programs, and colleges strive to achieve.

It's important to return to the reason behind all this—namely, the skyrocketing costs of higher education. It's important because I believe the reason those costs are shooting up has little to do with the quality of education our students are receiving and much more to do with a changing model of bad business practices employed by our largest and most cumbersome universities—that and the fact that our federal and state governments have increasingly turned their backs on their responsibility for supporting higher education.

I recently spoke with a professor teaching one of our honors seminars who said he was going to administer a pre-test to his seminar students that he would then refashion as an exit exam of sorts in order to try out this idea of learning outcomes—to see if his students indeed had gained the knowledge he had claimed they would gain when he put together his syllabus for the course. Certainly this model of education—where one decides in advance the "content" one's course will cover and then spends that course's class time covering it, finalizing the class with a test that

measures how much of that information has been absorbed—is anything but uncommon. It guides most large lecture-based courses out of practicality as well as pedagogical imperative; it guides our K-12 public educational system and their school boards, concerned about federal funding tied to student test scores. Increasingly, it could guide the bulk of our public institutions of higher education if the Commission on the Future of Higher Education has its way. But it is, to my way of thinking, precisely what Paulo Friere talks about in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* when he describes the “banking concept of education,” a system in which “the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (72).ⁱⁱⁱ

The push to provide “accountability” in our learning models by virtue of a system like outcomes assessment sounds appropriate and right and helpful to the general populace, but it also necessarily promotes a pedagogy that I think is not only reductive, but ultimately repressive and socially regressive. In his argument for a “dangerous literacy,” Patrick J. Finn makes it very clear that the most empowering model of pedagogical practice is also the most self-propelled and unique—and the most unpredictable. He refers to a study by Jean Anyon of fifth grade classrooms in New Jersey in which she describes the vastly different learning environments created in differently class-marked schools. In what she terms an “affluent professional school,”

work was creative activity carried out independently. It involved individual thoughts and expression, expansion and illustration of ideas, and choice of appropriate methods and materials. . . . In the affluent professional school, work was not repetitious and mechanical, as it was in the working-class school; it was not knowing the correct answers, as it was in the middle-class school; it was being able to manipulate what Anyon termed *symbolic capital*. (18,19)

Finn’s study goes on to argue for a “literacy with an attitude” for teachers of working-class children that models the practices and behaviors of schools with more elite class markings.

When I read this book, I was moved to contact three of my former teachers who practiced this kind of dangerous literacy at the rural Ohio high school I attended. While I have very little memory of what I did in most of my classes on a day to day basis, the things I do remember are the kinds of self-empowering activities that Finn and Anyon describe and that shaped me to the point where I actually embraced an “unmonied degree” and then went on for a graduate degree and a career in education. These were projects, not assignments, and many of them were extracurricular, not part of the school’s primary coursework at all. (I’m thinking about projects I did for our school’s Science Fairs and its humanities equivalent in my home state, History Day.) Without the involvement of these teachers and the very active support of my parents, I would have had no such experience. But because of these pedagogical anomalies, I went on to attend a university honors program that perpetuated a similar model. I remember taking a 1-credit-hour honors course in “War and Peace” for

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which I undertook a ridiculously ambitious research project that had little transcript value but tremendous personal reward, a project that moreover connected what I was learning in that class to my own life in college—another key difference between the empowering school environments in Anyon’s study and the more compliant and disempowering ones. There is simply no way that an instructor could have predicted what we were going to learn in those classes and test us to make sure we had learned it because what we learned was self-motivation and the drive to research—the drive, in other words, to find out something that was significant to us and communicate those findings to someone else. When my acquaintance at NCHC said she wanted a learning outcome that was simply open, with no preordained idea of what her students might learn, she wasn’t being flippant or cranky. She was expressing a pedagogical premise that to me is foundational to the idea of honors education.

At this year’s NCHC conference, I also experienced my first City As Text© assignment. My Birmingham partner in crime, Donna Andrews, and I took the city bus into St. Louis to find—something! What a great idea, I thought—simply making the exploration of a place the very object of intellectual endeavor. And it’s even more significant to me that City As Text© is the signature pedagogy for the National Collegiate Honors Council; such explorations are nothing if not the best example of what we mean by “active learning,” the kind of attitude and empowerment and intellectual claim that the children in Anyon’s affluent professional school were not simply encouraged but expected to enact. To me (and this is really yet another answer to the question posed by the last forum in the most recent issue of JNCHC [6.2]), honors education is precisely about this kind of intellectual ownership and pedagogical independence.

In her introduction to the “What Is Honors?” issue of JNCHC (6.2), Ada Long notes that “the most prestigious universities, such as Harvard and Stanford, and honors programs and colleges” are still areas of exception to “the national trend toward standardization and accountability”(10). This may or may not still be true—or be so only to varying extents at different institutions and in different areas of the country. But with any luck, we’ll dodge the bullets of outcomes assessment and the kind of standardization on which its successful data collection depends. And if we do, I can’t help but wonder what it will say about the rest of public higher education in this country. As the role of a college education replaces what was once the role of a high school diploma in the United States, so the strategies that have been used to make public education “accountable” are the same that are now creeping across our college campuses. What kind of classed public university educations will these models perpetuate? What kind of collectively acquiescent rather than individually exploratory students—and faculty—will it create? And if that does happen, what will those of us in honors programs and colleges do? If we do nothing but count our lucky stars, we will surely compromise our integrity and undermine our mission to encourage excellence in higher education so that, in the end, we might wind up with nothing worth saving at all.

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ENDNOTES

- ⁱ See, for instance, Annette Kolodny and James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield.
- ⁱⁱ Carol T. Christ refutes even this supposition: she claims that "when members of the government, the news media, or the public call for greater accountability from our colleges, they are rarely complaining that students are not learning enough. At heart they are concerned about which students have access to learning, at what price, and whether and when they graduate. They want to know about students' success in the job market, not how much they have learned about literature, astronomy, or anthropology."
- ⁱⁱⁱ One can argue, of course, that a writing class, simply by virtue of its focus on writing, presents an institutionally housed opposition to this kind of learning. But we can't forget the reign of the useful, but nevertheless limited 5-paragraph essay, a form that has an iron grip on our students—particularly those who got really good at it in high school and therefore don't trust writing in any other way. I had a student in our fall honors interdisciplinary course who was completely stymied when I told her that it didn't matter to me if she had two points or five points to support her thesis in her literary analysis for the course. Flummoxed, she just kept repeating, "But don't I have to have three points?" The whole reason for using evidence in the first place was lost to her. Worse, the use of writing as an exploratory intellectual tool was lost on her.

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