"Breaking Barriers in Teaching and Learning" - Bending Time and Space: Three Approaches for Breaking Barriers in the Honors Classroom

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Varying the typical format of the honors classroom is a great way to encourage creative thinking. When students become accustomed to what to expect from a class, they are often able to fulfill requirements with minimal effort. An unusual and challenging course experience requires students to focus, to think in new ways about their learning. This is part of why courses abroad are often so transformational: students constantly have to adjust to their new environment. The challenge for teachers like me who love leading courses abroad is how to create similarly engaging experiences at home. Using unusual course structures, meeting locations, and even changing the student population throughout the semester are all ways to keep students focused and prevent what Devon L.
Ford

Graham calls the “glassed-over look” (82). Here are three honors courses that use these approaches to engage students in novel ways.

**THE INTERSESSION COURSE:**

**THE NATURE OF TIME**

Many institutions feature an interim session, a short-term course that falls between regular semesters. At my own school such courses have largely disappeared, particularly in the winter intersession that falls between fall and spring. Student demand is low, faculty would prefer to have their break, and the challenges of compressing a full semester into two weeks that bookend Christmas and New Year’s Day are daunting. While a few departments still offer intersession courses (not to be confused, as students and some faculty often do, with intercessions, attempts to intervene in life-threatening situations), they are usually under-enrolled and struggle to remain viable and avoid cancellation. Honors intersession courses are a striking exception: they have been over-enrolled with a waiting list several years running. For students balancing the competing demands of a major or majors, a minor or minors, and honors—not to mention employment, an internship, and numerous campus activities, a two-week period without other classes or responsibilities offers an ideal opportunity for taking another honors course. The four-hours-per-day, five-days-a-week format is unique to the intersession and offers the perfect opportunity to test new assignments, subjects, and techniques. The format itself feels experimental since most students are accustomed to courses that meet for much smaller durations, usually fifty, seventy-five, or ninety minutes, once or twice a week. The experience is challenging for faculty as well because they must carefully plan a variety of activities to prevent each daily session from feeling like it is four hours long. Of all the intersession honors courses at Rogers State University, the most notable and effective is a course called “The Nature of Time.”

This interdisciplinary honors seminar studies the problem of time from as many perspectives as possible. It includes philosophical
reflections on time; psychological accounts of the nature of memory; and time-travel literature and films, with mind-bending classics such as Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Alan Lightman’s *Einstein’s Dreams*. It is a great course, a joy to teach. The subject is conducive to a number of powerful assignments that focus on each student’s individual experience and conception of time. Early in the course, the first of these assignments is keeping a personal Time Log of every activity.

The students track and record both what they do and the duration of these activities. I remember completing a similar log when I was a first-year student in college many years ago. Back then it was basically just an account of major activities designed to highlight how much time I should spend studying: if Monday has four hours of work, five hours of class, an hour of meals, and eight hours of sleep, then I am spending six hours on my own that I should be studying. Modern technology has transformed people’s lives, complicating and making this task a very different proposition, in that an accurate Time Log will typically be two minutes of doing this, one minute of checking social media while also watching YouTube in the background, and then three minutes of more multitasking. Listing out exactly how the student is spending every minute of a single day highlights how much of modern time is wasted—whether the ideal is productivity, personal desire, or something more meaningful like an ethical or purposeful goal. Seeing on paper how they are spending their time leads most students to reflect seriously on their choices.

The next major assignment builds on this Time Log. Students choose one activity that they wished they had spent more time doing in a particular day and one activity that they would have wanted to do less. At this stage no standard is given for how to make the decision. Once students have briefly written about their two choices, the assignment for the next day is to do exactly that: to spend significantly more time on the first activity and significantly less time on the second. Afterwards, they reflect on paper about the results and about how their decisions changed their day. At this point I prompt students to make explicit the kind of standard they
used to evaluate the activities in their Time Log and to examine the advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of standards. A number of students have anecdotally cited this assignment as one that genuinely changed their lives, transforming who they are—just the kind of transformational learning that is at the heart of great teaching and learning.

Another assignment that was particularly significant for students was the day without screens. The day without screens is exactly what it sounds like: each student is required, as homework, to go twenty-four hours without using technology that involves a screen. No cell phones, no computers, no televisions, and no movie theatres. The assignment developed because so many students (roughly 90% of the class) cited some form of screen use as the activity they wished they did less. After much discussion, the class agreed that answering or placing a call on a cell phone was acceptable, but texting obviously was not. Even checking to see who was calling before answering was ruled out. The whole endeavor was voluntary, and it was up to the individual student to monitor his or her own personal use although several reported seeing and confronting classmates whom they observed using screens. A few students shared afterwards that they simply could not make it through the twenty-four hour period, and many others reported how challenging the activity was. This assignment highlighted for everyone how central such screens are to modern life and how much these screens occupy our time.

Another assignment from the Time course requires personal reflections on memories. Students must write about a memory of a time that they would love to experience again and again and of another time that they would give anything not to experience again. They then present either one to the class. These presentations are often emotional because a fair number describe times with loved ones who have died. Students often discuss their negative experiences with illness and injury as well as other painful moments. As difficult as these can be, the memories help students focus on the course’s central questions: what is time and how do I want to spend the time that I have? For students spending four
hours per day in a classroom instead of on Christmas vacation, the
questions can be particularly poignant. That the students happily
do so is a sign of how successful these courses have been. In fact,
several students have taken an honors intersession course in each
of their four undergraduate years. Intersession courses, in general,
and “The Nature of Time,” in particular, are a great opportunity to
engage students in new ways.

THE TRUE HYBRID:
HONORS CINEMA

I am often disappointed with online education, and I am resis-
tant to offering honors courses online. Given the choice, I always
prefer an in-person course to an online one, but sometimes no
option is available. I have taught more than twenty-five online
courses over the years and served as a peer reviewer for several oth-
ers. Despite the logistical advantages of the format, the experience,
in my view, is almost never as compelling or engaging as a good
traditional class. Even hybrid courses, which promise to combine
the best of in-person education with the convenience of online
classes, rarely match the billing. Some subjects, however, are per-
fectly tailored to the hybrid format. “Honors Cinema,” for example,
is a course that presents intriguing possibilities. Carefully planned,
it features the best of both formats.

The basic idea of the “Honors Cinema” hybrid is for faculty
and students to watch and discuss films together in person while
completing all the written work online: short responses, essays, and
exams. One way to accomplish this is by scheduling the course as
a true hybrid, which at my institution means meeting at a design-
nated time each week for half the number of normal class meetings
for a fully face-to-face course. In other words, a three-hour class
would meet once a week for seventy-five minutes instead of the
usual two times a week. The idea is that online work replaces the
other class meeting each week. The advantage of this arrange-
ment is that all students know the scheduled meeting time each week
and include it in their plans; the disadvantage is that seventy-five
minutes are insufficient for most major films, and so a film is divided across multiple meetings. That dilemma is not unusual for a cinema course, but it is also not ideal. Fitting a film and its discussion into a single longer meeting may be preferable to needing multiple class periods to complete the screening of a film. Another option is scheduling this course as an online course, with optional film viewing sessions. For a largely captive population such as honors students, this arrangement is usually a good option. In a recent semester I worked for eight weeks to schedule a viewing at a time convenient to as many students as possible. This process was a logistical nightmare because I had to poll the students about times and then schedule a meeting at short notice. For the second half of the semester, we identified Thursday evenings as the one time that worked for most people and just stuck with it for eight weeks. Unfortunately, that time slot left some students out in ways the variable meeting did not, but longer-term planning was much easier. With both approaches, the offer of extra credit was enough to get most of the students attending and participating. The addition of pizza, popcorn, or other snacks some weeks was another incentive to attend.

The hybrid course has several advantages over the traditional version. For one, I was able to screen many more films than usual. Rather than screening ten to twelve films in a traditional face-to-face course, we had sixteen different viewing sessions that featured a major film or multiple short films. I always struggle to narrow the list of films I want to show, and so including several more allowed me to construct a much more satisfying experience. Another advantage was that I was able to accommodate thirty-seven students in a course that is normally limited to twenty-five. Although that increase could severely harm the educational experience in other courses (and it certainly aggravated my grading workload), for Honors Cinema the strategy worked. The discussions were just as rich and engaging as in the traditional course. Given that the structural challenges at Rogers State University involve being able to offer enough honors courses and making the best use of the few sections available for faculty to teach in honors, the hybrid
approach was a real plus. A third advantage of the hybrid format was that it encouraged students who are less vocal or shy to participate through the various online forums and discussions. It also made it more natural for us to attend local screenings of both classic and new films several times during the semester because the class was already comfortable with meeting at strange times. Finally, the hybrid course provided a way for our honors program to test the waters of online education. While I still prefer the on-ground experience, the Hybrid Cinema course helps to make the case for when online honors education can work and when online is inappropriate.

THE TEMPORARY COMBINATION: JOINT HONORS SEMINARS

The third approach that the Rogers State University Honors Program has implemented to challenge the usual classroom experience is to combine different courses for brief periods throughout the semester. Every fall, three required Honors Seminars for different populations (first-year, sophomore, and junior) are scheduled at the same time. Twice a month, the three courses meet together in a Joint Seminar instead of meeting separately. Since each seminar typically has approximately twenty students, the Joint Seminar means close to sixty students will gather in a lounge space that seats twenty-five. The students must transition from a small, organized class where they know each other well and usually sit in the same seat every time to being part of a massive, seemingly chaotic mess where they will barely know a third of their classmates. The disruption is significant, but it has become a signature feature of the honors experience, and it provides distinctive opportunities for building teams, presentation skills, and relationships across classes.

The experience is exciting for everyone involved, and to keep it from falling apart requires careful faculty planning and organization. After a brief welcome at the first Joint Seminar, we quickly divide the large group of students into four-person teams. These teams involve at least one person from each class and a variety of
majors. We have tried various ways to divide the teams, from letting students select to having the combined faculty carefully sort the students. The best years have been when students form their own teams in response to some arbitrary ice-breaking challenge, such as forming the team whose members have the most distance between their hometowns, or having prizes for the team with the most letters in their last names and the team with the fewest. Having a brief competition like that leads to tremendous interaction right away and gives the students a chance to mingle and move around before settling down into the academic activities that follow.

While these Joint Seminars sometimes feature a brief reading assignment that is distributed in advance, most of the time they focus on the nature of honors education and the honors program itself. Reviewing the NCHC’s “Basic Characteristics,” its “Definition of Honors Education,” or the learning outcomes of other honors programs are all great ways to push students to reflect on what their own program does well and what it might do better. I would not want the whole semester to focus on the nature of honors, but these intermittent joint sessions provide a logical venue for critical reflection on honors education.

These Joint Seminars are also an excellent space for team-building and developing relationships with students in different classes. These are teams, not just groups, and they are assigned definite tasks as homework. The teams meet outside of class several times per month, and they present their work late in the semester. The assignment varies—one year each team created a commercial for the honors program, while another year each team wrote and performed a skit that would be worthwhile for a first-year orientation program. What is most important is that students are engaged and excited to be working with students from other classes. A common complaint in honors is that upper-class students rarely know the younger students, and these Joint Seminars are a great way to combat that problem. We have tried longer periods of interaction, such as Joint Seminars that meet together a month straight or even all semester, but that is too much of a good thing. Once or twice a month for four months is enough to build strong teams and
complete meaningful tasks without undermining the home course or having these students tire of their teammates or the assignment.

The Intersession course, the Hybrid, and the Joint Seminar are three different ways of approaching the same issue: how to vary students’ experiences so that they are constantly engaged and learning. Providing a variety of formats, combinations, and classrooms stretches the boundaries of honors education, but, admittedly, it is often more work for the faculty. Fortunately, faculty take on these extra tasks because of their commitment to honors students. This variety engages students in new ways, providing distinctive opportunities for transformational teaching and learning.

WORKS CITED


